Crack Music: Representations of the Drugs Trade in New York Hip-Hop

Andrew Duncan

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Department of American and Canadian Studies

Supervisors: Dr. Nick Heffernan and Dr. Vivien Miller

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Abstract

This thesis offers the first in-depth analysis of Hip-Hop lyrics from New York that discuss the drugs trade. I argue throughout, that Hip-Hop lyrics constitute a discourse of "Black vernacular neoliberalism," and examine the ways in which performers narrativize the trade in illegal drugs and simultaneously evidence and codify exemplary neoliberal behaviours. New York is the birthplace of Hip-Hop, and the city has frequently found itself at the centre of various drug 'panics' from the early twentieth century to the present day. Its status as a major site of financialization has necessitated its close relationship with systems of neoliberal governance. One key policy initiative in this arena has been the ongoing "War on Drugs," which has disproportionately targeted New York's black communities. These are often the communities which produce the city's most famous MCs. As such, Hip-Hop lyrics emerging from this context are adroit at discussing and documenting the business of selling drugs, as well as reflecting on the nature and changing mores of the city as a whole. Central to this process is the figure of the 'hustler,' whose consistent and extensive engagement with notions of entrepreneurialism form much of the basis of my analysis. Many rappers seek to collapse their two known businesses – the drugs trade and the music business – arguing that one is a simple reflection of the other. Thus, they claim to be able to move with ease between the illicit and legitimate economies. I examine this frequently utilized rhetorical device in my thesis to understand its accuracies and inaccuracies and unpack the ways in which dealing drugs constitutes an economic education which some individuals are able to segue into extremely successful legitimate ventures.

The methodology of this thesis is close textual analysis of song lyrics and their accompanying musical compositions. This analysis is augmented by extensive and wide-

ranging interdisciplinary reading on the sociological and criminological realities of the drugs trade in New York between the early 1980s and the early 2000s. This juxtaposition examines the songs as literary texts, exposing and understanding their artifice and construction, but also scrutinizes their claims to be documentarian. Authenticity is loudly and frequently proclaimed within Hip-Hop lyrics, and I seek to understand how accurate the portrayal of the business of selling drugs in these songs is.

Introduction

"Thinkin' of a master plan": How Hip Hop, drugs and neoliberalism intersect.[1]

Saturday 11th August 1973 is commonly cited as the date that Hip-Hop culture was born. It is not strictly the case, but like much in Hip-Hop, the facts do not matter so much as that this story speaks to a kind of general 'truth' which represents, or encapsulates, the competing forces and narratives that would make up a far more comprehensive, but messier and less cohesive, truth. The neat and now familiar narrative of Kool Herc's 'Back to School' party is recounted evocatively in Jeff Chang's seminal *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (2005) and it is of importance to this thesis because of its reminder of where Hip-Hop came from.[2] The small, handmade flyer for the party taking place at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx, carried a pricing system of: "25¢ for ladies and 50¢ for fellas."[3] Nearly half a century later, *Forbes* magazine heralded JAY-Z as the first billionaire rapper under the headline "Artist, Icon, Billionaire" (2019).[4] The embrace of the principles of neoliberalism is a central part of the story of this economic journey. Not just for JAY-Z, an archetype of the drug dealer-turned-rapper phenomenon, but also for the genre itself. Through the embrace of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, many Hip-Hop stars became "paid in full," to cite a phrase central to the Hip Hop lexicon. By exploring the concept of the lyrical hustler and his economic education, this thesis analyses how Hip-Hop responded to and came to internalise and valorise many of the central precepts of neoliberalism. Particular

[1] Eric B. & Rakim, "Paid in Full," *Paid in Full*. 1987. Island Records.
[2] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (London: Ebury Press, 2007), Loc 1234, Kindle.
[3] Rebecca Laurence, "40 years on from the party where hip hop was born," Culture, *BBC*, October 21, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130809-the-party-where-hip-hop-was-born.
[4] Zack O'Malley Greenburg, "Artist, Icon, Billionaire: How Jay-Z Created His $1 Billion Fortune," *Forbes*, June 3, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2019/06/03/jay-z-billionaire-worth/?sh=4d8f74d73a5f.

focus is given to the music's complex relationship with the informal street drug trade. As Coke La Rock reflected three decades later: "Me and [Kool] Herc were to hip-hop what Nicky Barnes and Frank Lucas were to drugs." La Rock used the parties to sell marijuana, claiming that he could "make $1,200 to $1,700" on a good day. He recalls how "I was never worried about Herc paying me for my services, because I was getting hustling money."[5]

Hip-Hop is rhizomatic, an accretion of diverse and interconnected artistic forms and practices which constitute the building blocks of many cultures, of which Hip-Hop is just one. It is rhizomatic in the way that, according to leading Hip-Hop commentator Nelson George, it "jes grew."[6] Hip-Hop's birth is often explained as an organic reaction to constrained socioeconomic conditions and a recapitulation of diffuse late-twentieth-century Black and immigrant cultural practices defined and shaped specifically within America.[7] The venerated "Teacha" and performer KRS-One writes his own version of this genesis story at the opening of his religious text *The Gospel of Hip Hop* (2009). Verse twenty of the book "A New Covenant" recounts how:

> For when all seemed hopeless and oppression seemed permanent, a caring, protective, nurturing creative force independent of all the World's political, business, educational and religious institutions, swept through our hearts and homes and we were rescued from sickness, hatred, ignorance and poverty with a behavior that we eventually began to call Hip Hop.[8]

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[5] Michael A. Gonzales, 'The Holy House of Hip-hop,' *New York Magazine*. Sept 22nd 2008. 40th Anniversary - How the Rec Room Where Hip-hop Was Born Became a Battleground for Affordable Housing -- New York Magazine - Nymag Accessed 16/09/2017.

[6] Jim Fricke & Charlie Ahearn*, yes yes y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade* (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2002), vii.

[7] Havelock Nelson & Michael A. Gonzales, *Bring the Noise: A Guide to Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991), xvii, 1.

[8] KRS-One, *The Gospel of Hip Hop: First Instrument*, (New York: powerHouse Books, 2009), 8.

The Gospel of Hip Hop is a peculiar work, written in a tone that is often hard to decipher. Its enthusiastic proselytizing of the virtues and possibilities of Hip-Hop occasionally convinces the reader that KRS-One is writing earnestly. At other times, it reads more like a work of idealised nostalgia which depicts a bygone utopia against which we might judge the current fallen state of Hip-Hop culture and attempt to reclaim some of its initial promise depicted in the quotation above. Whatever the intention, in this thesis I fundamentally disagree with the premise, laid out by KRS-One, that Hip-Hop is (or ever was) a force independent of political and business institutions. Through close reading of Hip-Hop lyrics which reference the drugs trade and their accompanying soundscapes, I argue that many of the most celebrated and commercially successful Hip-Hop songs of the period studied constitute a discourse of what Paul Gilroy terms "Black Vernacular Neoliberalism."[9]

It is necessary here to unpack and contextualise what I understand the concept of black vernacular neoliberalism to be, and its use and relevance to this study. Michel Foucault, the great codifier and definer of what neoliberalism is/was described its creation, in his lecture "14 March 1979," as an opposition to "three elements – Keynesian policy, social pacts of war, and the growth of the federal administration through economic and social programs."[10] At its most basic level, neoliberalism grows from the premise – originally credited to Adam Smith – that the market is the best, most logical and most efficient organizing principle of human life and society.[11] Its original proponents advocated that governments should minimize their level of mediation or interference between the market

[9] Paul Gilroy, "We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under ... Fragments for a History of Black Vernacular Neoliberalism," *New Formations*, no. 80 (2013): 23-38.
[10] Foucault, "14 March 1979," in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmilan, 2008), 217.
[11] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, (London: Verso, 2014). 20.

and individual. The post-War period was typified by what Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy called "a compromise between the ruling classes and salaried workers."[12] These compromises yielded rewards for the workers which included "rising real wages, social welfare benefits, the right to work and trade union rights." This "Keynesian promise" is incompatible with the preferred conditions of neoliberalism and New York's fiscal crisis (discussed below) precipitated a deliberate undoing or diluting of many of the features of interventionist government housed within that notion.[13] Dardot and Laval caution against discussing neoliberalism as an agent of change which is imposed from above:

> We shall not understand the scale of the deployment of neo-liberal rationality, or the forms of resistance it encounters, if we regard it as the imposition of a mechanical force on a society and individuals who are its external points of application. As we have seen, the power of this rationality stems from establishing situations that force subjects to function in accordance with the terms of the game imposed on them.[14]

The 'terms of the game' will be expanded upon throughout this thesis but their most fundamental component is the promotion and necessity of choice and choosing. Thus making individual players in the market responsible for their own destinies via a panoply of choices. Within this thesis when the term 'black vernacular neoliberalism' is employed it is taken to mean the exposition of opinions or outlooks which bear strong resemblance to, or

[12] "Neoliberalism: The Crime and the Beneficiary." *Review - Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations 25* (4). Fernand Braudel Center, Binghamton University, 2002, 395.
[13] Phillips-Fein, Kim. *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2018. 24-5. See also Freeman, Joshua B. *Working-class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II*, New York: Free Press, 2001, 258.
[14] Dardot, Pierre & Christian Laval. *The New Way of the World*. London: Verso, 2014. 281.

advocate for, conditions and strategies of neoliberalism but couched in the language of "the street."

If we consider this quote from Michel Foucault on the realities of constrained or inadequate choice:

> if we consider all of the things which can be seen as indicators or facilitators of accruing 'human capital'; education, health, social adjustment, broad life experiences then people from these 'ghettoized' areas are at such a disadvantage that it seems unlikely they could ever gain enough human capital to compete in the regular, legitimate job market. In this way, structural racism of institutions forces them into an illegal sphere of economic 'work' with its own neo-liberal influences.[15]

We can see the striking similarity between Foucault's words and the estimation of his own opportunities offered up by Curtis '50 Cent' Jackson:

> I lived in the 'hood and I knew my school wasn't all that great. But let's say I worked really hard and got into college. I'd come out with $100,000 worth of debt and a job that would pay me no less than $30,000 a year, but no more than, what, forty-five grand? . . . it didn't add up in my head. […] Getting into selling wasn't a moral decision for me, it was just an economic one. By giving me those drugs –telling me to sell them, come cop more, and stack the profit-- [the dealers] were empowering me.[16]

The notion of dealing drugs being an avenue for empowerment is made explicit within 50 Cent's discography and has its roots in his own lived experience. 50 makes clear to the

[15] "14th March 1979,"
[16] Jackson, Curtis. *50 X 50: 50 Cent in His Own Words*, New York: Gallery Books, 2007, 24.

reader that he didn't view that dichotomy as much of a choice at all, and that it was an "economic decision" to begin selling drugs, almost making it seem like a common-sense choice. In this way, he articulates Foucault's narrative of restricted choice but deploys his own autobiographical experiences to make it more accessible to the reader. When he further converts these experiences into vernacular song lyrics such as "It's like the rich get richer and the poor don't get a fucking thing" they become even more readily consumable for his audience. When artists such as 50 Cent then go even further and extol the virtues of selling drugs as a means by which they increase their "human capital" they create popular, and highly lucrative, discourses of black vernacular neoliberalism.

In his work on the "The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics" (2012), Lester Spence links the presence of neoliberal themes and practices to "racial geography" which "shapes the how, where, and when neoliberal policies appear."[17] In the chapters that follow, this thesis explores the relationship between the trade in illegal drugs – a racialised and spatially concentrated marketplace – and the embrace of neoliberal selfhood within Hip-Hop lyricism through three key overlapping thematic strands: business, violence and masculinity. These strands form the narrative mooring of many successful Hip-Hop songs; they are entwined so firmly and intimately that they almost come to stand as guarantors for each other. For example, the rapper who boasts about his capacity for violence or his business acumen simultaneously evidences his masculine credentials. Within the tales of drug dealing that I analyse below, the most vocal proponent of such vernacular neoliberalism is the figure of the hustler. The hustler is an aspirational archetype which draws upon storied and celebrated African American folk narratives of rebellion, self-sufficiency and cunning. Not all

[17] Lester Spence, "The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics," *Souls: Austerity, Neoliberalism, and Black Communities* 14, no. 3-4 (2012): 139-59.

hustlers are drug dealers, but all drug dealers are hustlers. Each chapter of this thesis explores the representation of drug dealing in Hip-Hop via the prism of the hustler-rapper and his proclamations on aspects of the entrepreneurial self.

Studies of drug use and the 'War on Drugs' focus on the production, consumption and trade in illegal drugs and primarily fall in to one of three categories of study: scientific; urban impact; or punitive. Their focus is on the pharmacological, sociological or carceral consequences of drug use.[18] They generally do not engage with Hip-Hop music even though it provides the most vocal and vivid cultural document of the experience of drug users and sellers. They are referenced in this thesis to provide context to the claims made in the artistic output of Hip-Hop performers. By contrast, it is impossible to ignore the impact of the drugs trade and its policing within Hip-Hop scholarship and thus it is given attention in several major works. For example, leading Hip-Hop scholar Tricia Rose foregrounds what she terms "the generational impact" of "crack, unemployment and community destruction" in her work *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008), but does not examine how these experiences fostered what I argue is a particularly neoliberal form of entrepreneurialism within Hip-Hop.[19] Dan Charnas' *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (2010), makes explicit reference to artists and entrepreneurs transferring learned behaviours from hustling drugs on the streets into their endeavours within the legitimate music business.[20] Charnas outlines in comprehensive detail the growth of Hip-Hop into a multi-billion-dollar industry and the actions of key figures in driving that growth. Yet Charnas' status as an industry insider and

[18] Joseph F Spillane, *Cocaine* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Wayne H. Morgan, *Drugs in America: A Social History 1800-1980* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1981). Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine eds., *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice* (London: University of California Press, 1997).
[19] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 47.
[20] Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (London: Penguin, 2010).

his presence at some of the moments he recounts, means the book focuses more on personal interactions and strategic corporate manoeuvres than on a socio-political analysis of entrepreneurialism couched in an overarching philosophy or ideology.

By contrast, texts such as Emma Bell's *Criminal Justice and Neoliberalism* (2011) and Dawn Paley's *Drug War Capitalism* (2014) offer detailed and illuminating insight into the intertwined triad of "narcotrafficking", attempts at interdiction and the global economic system.[21] These all form the background to the kinds of experiences which rappers describe vividly in their songs, but these texts do not consider cultural representations of drug dealing as a constitutive part of their analysis. Similarly, texts which examine the influence and rhetoric of neoliberalism, such as David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007) or Phillip Mirowski's *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste* (2014), touch upon notions of culture only fleetingly as an addendum to their analysis of the philosophical, ideological and political aspects of neoliberalism.[22]

Bell's work offers a definition of neoliberalism as "a simultaneous rolling backwards and forwards of the State," a paradox which exposes its impact beyond the economic sphere. She writes:

> It would be a serious mistake to reduce neoliberalism to the mere practice of *laissez-faire* (Dardot and Laval, 2009). Neoliberalism is in practice much more than that – it is a *system*, an entire *raison d'etre* which reserves an active role for the State as

[21] Emma Bell, *Criminal Justice and Neoliberalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014).
[22] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*

> promoter of market solutions and facilitator of competition between rational, free-thinking individuals.[23]

One of the most potent ways the neoliberal ideal of competition manifests itself is in the form of what Michel Foucault – a central figure in the analysis of neoliberalism – calls "substitutable choices": that is, the allocation of finite resources to competing causes which "cannot be superimposed on each other." Foucault describes how, in neoliberal theory, the "starting point and general frame of reference for economic analysis should be the way in which individuals allocate these scarce means to alternative ends."[24] KRS-One describes the process evocatively, stating that "[r]ap was the final conclusion of a generation of creative people oppressed with the reality of lack."[25] This lack was both basic – in so far as his generation of minority inner-city youth were deprived of musical education, equipment, opportunity and validation – and also complex, in so far as they lacked political leadership, a sense of direction, and future prospects.

The advent of neoliberalism, Foucault argues, fundamentally changed the nature of economic analysis:

> Economics is not therefore the analysis of processes; it is the analysis of an activity. So it is no longer the analysis of the historical logic of processes; it is the analysis of the internal rationality, the strategic programming of individuals' activity.[26]

On a vernacular, everyday level this rationality is expressed in Hip-Hop more overtly than in any other art form. This is why I have chosen to study the way Hip-Hop lyrics depict the drug

[23] Bell, *Criminal Justice and Neoliberalism*, 140.
[24] Foucault, "14 March 1979," 222-3.
[25] Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), xiv.
[26] Foucault, "14 March 1979," 223.

trade and its 'legitimate' mirror image, the music business, through the lens of neoliberalism. One of the most striking examples of this occurs at the opening of Eric B. & Rakim's iconic track "Paid in Full" (1987). Following an explanation of why the duo are in the studio and who they are working with, Rakim launches into one of the most celebrated verses in Hip-Hop with the following lines:

> Thinkin' of a master plan
>
> 'Cause ain't nothin' but sweat inside my hand
>
> So I dig into my pocket, all my money spent
>
> So I dig deeper, but still coming up with lint
>
> So I start my mission, leave my residence
>
> Thinking, "How could I get some dead presidents?"[27]

This song will be analysed in greater detail in Chapter 2, but it is an example of how Hip-Hop lyrics foreground and celebrate the kinds of "internal rationality" that Foucault described. The clear cause-and-effect narrative of "Paid in Full" is recapitulated endlessly throughout Hip-Hop music and can broadly be summarised as the narrator showing the audience: 'these are my unsatisfactory circumstances, these are my limited options, this is what I've chosen to do about it.' What is of particular interest for this study is that the latter column of that triumvirate – the remedial action chosen by the narrator – frequently melds together the act of selling illegal drugs and the practice of making music. Most commonly this takes the

[27] Eric B. & Rakim, "Paid in Full."

form of the narrator detailing how he formerly sold drugs but has now progressed into making music as it is safer, more legitimate, or more lucrative.

This thesis argues that a critical understanding of the theory, premises and practices of neoliberalism serves as the most effective framework for understanding and interrogating the attitudes and behaviours of rappers and Hip-Hop acolytes. Neoliberalism is an ideology which has had – and continues to have – a profound impact on the structure and rhetoric of American political discourse.[28] In this thesis I argue that its fundamental concepts, primarily its approach to organising human behaviour through the market, have just as profoundly shaped Hip-Hop. We see this most clearly in rappers' lyrical descriptions of business, individualism and success. Neoliberalism is often said to trade on its status as a system of "common sense," in which it becomes self-perpetuating by prescribing more of itself as a solution to social problems of its own making.[29] In a similar way, Hip-Hop's constant invocation and exaltation of the drug trade as a career choice is so prevalent as to become a seemingly common-sense response to poverty. Neoliberalism and the illegal drugs business have confluence in their position as accepted and often under-interrogated aspects of the political and economic worldview of rappers. This is not accidental or coincidental; from its inception in the mid-1970s Hip-Hop has grown alongside (or more accurately, within) the expanding influence of neoliberalism.

As explained in the first chapter of this thesis, New York functioned as the birthplace and as a key site for the development of neoliberal governmentality within the United States. The city's position and influence as a seat of financial power ensured that it was at

[28] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* Paley, *Drug War Capitalism*.
[29] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 39.

the forefront of issues of neoliberal implementation and restructuring from the fiscal crisis in the 1970s through to the present day.[30] Moreover, New York's geographic and economic position as an eminent international port means that is has always been a key site within the United States for the importation, sale and consumption of illegal drugs. Throughout the twentieth century drugs from abroad came into America via New York, with the famed "French Connection" of heroin from Europe being one of the most notable examples.[31] As Blumstein and Wallman explain: "[a] focus on New York City is easily justified by its bellweather role in national drug and violence trends and its hugely disproportionate numeric weight in those trends."[32] New York is not unique in experiencing the effects of neoliberalism but its location as the spiritual home of Hip-Hop, coupled with the emergence of major acts in the period studied make it a logical focus for this study.

From Hip-Hop's birth in the 1970s to its explosion as a creative and commercial force in the 1990s and early 2000s, New York underwent a substantial transformation of civic life. Post-war New York City was characterized by liberalism and what Chronopoulos & Soffer call the ideals of "socialism in one city."[33] Its struggles and subsequent financial crisis in the 1970s saw the focus of government intervention narrow to change New York from a city which (supposedly) aimed to help all to one which, under the guidance of Mayor Ed Koch, unashamedly prioritised the concerns and wellbeing of the middle class. Writing in a *New*

[30] See Eithne Quinn, "Occupy Wall Street, Racial Neoliberalism, and New York's Hip-Hop Moguls," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1, March 2016, 75-99.
[31] Eric C. Schneider, *Smack: Heroin and the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 8-10.
[32] Ed. Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman, ed., *The Crime Drop in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.
[33] Chronopoulos, T., & Soffer, J. (2017). "Introduction. After the Urban Crisis: New York and the Rise of Inequality," *Journal of Urban History*, 43(6), 856.

York Times open letter to his successor David Dinkins on the eve of his leaving office, Koch opined:

> The City of New York cannot be in the business of the redistribution of wealth. A Mayor cannot throw the middle classes to the wolves by saying that only the poorest of the poor should have their needs and concerns addressed with the limited funds we have available."[34]

The breadth of who New York's political system aimed to served was constricted further by the election of Michael Bloomberg as Mayor in 2002. Bloomberg, a billionaire businessman, served three terms and sought to reshape the city as a "playground for the 1%."[35] He brought attitudes and behaviours from the world of business into the running of the city. On the campaign trail in 2001, before his first victory, he was warning of a looming financial crisis and proclaiming he would "approach City Hall the same way he would approach his company if it faced fiscal difficulties."[36]

Utilising the market in all facets of civic life is a key neoliberal touchstone and one which will recur throughout my analysis of New York rap lyrics. As we can see from Bloomberg's comments above, it was also an idea that had a foothold within New York's chief political office at the turn of the twenty-first century.[37] It is this dialectic which is of interest to my analysis. How were rappers conveying ideas and opinions which shared aspects of neoliberal ideals? Were these ideas complicated and interrogated by rappers?

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[34] "HOW'D I DO?: ED KOCH EVALUATES HIS OWN PERFORMANCE IN AN OPEN LETTER TO DAVID DINKINS," *New York Times*, Dec 31, 1989. 27.
[35] Chronopoulos, T., & Soffer, J. "Introduction. After the Urban Crisis: New York and the Rise of Inequality," 856.
[36] Nagourney, Adam. "Bloomberg Portrays Himself as a Leader for Hard Times: Bloomberg Portrays Himself as Best Suited to Lead in Hard Times." *New York Times*, August 01, 2001, 2.
[37] As will be touched upon later, Bloomberg's predecessor Rudi Giuliani was also a proponent of policies with clear neoliberal overtones.

Were Hip-Hop lyrics consciously reflecting what they saw as unfolding within the city or were they just articulating what they saw as common-sense strategies of survival and advancement? Within this process it is important to resist the characterisation of neoliberalism – here meant as the growing symbiotic relationship between business and City – as somehow imposed from above by the ruling elite.

Benjamin Holtzman's excellent work *The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism* (2021) comprehensively documents this process and the response of regular New Yorkers.[38] Demonstrating how "residents sought solutions that looked beyond government."[39] In so doing they substituted the actions of private citizens and private enterprise into the void left by the withdrawal or constriction of city services. Holtzman makes explicit that this was not necessarily done out of any great ideological fervour, but rather out of necessity, as New Yorkers sought to maintain the standards of living to which they had become accustomed. The unintended consequence of these actions was that they demonstrated how easily, and successfully, private/public co-operation could work. They inadvertently paved the way for more of the same. Holtzman says of these actions:

> They reveal a process that percolated up through local contestations, often in ways unintended, rather than one that was simply imposed by conservative elites. Instead of explicitly pro- market ideologies coming first in the ascent of market- based policies in the late twentieth century, The Long Crisis illustrates how for many New Yorkers experiments came first, ideology second.[40]

[38] Holtzman, Benjamin. *The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
[39] *The Long Crisis*, 236.
[40] *The Long Crisis*, 3.

That New York was experiencing a 'percolation' of market-based solutions and had an accompanying art form, Hip-Hop, which narrated and rationalised these experiences makes it the logical choice of subject to study.

In the preface to his book *Smack: Heroin and the American City* (2008), Eric C. Schneider argues for "the power of the spatial to shape human actions". Of New York he observes:

> The neighbourhoods in which city residents live are the physical expressions of social relations, the reflection of economic decisions made about the investment or withdrawal of capital, social decisions made about the clustering of racial and income groups, and political decisions made about the provision of social services. This combination of physical environment and social effects has a profound influence over the decisions and actions of area residents, including the decision to use heroin.[41]

Within this thesis I embark on a similar process of untangling, seeking to expose and understand the ways in which neoliberalism and the drugs trade influenced the artistic output of rappers and producers from Hip Hop's inception in 1973 to the early 2000s. Where Schneider sees neighbourhoods as "the physical expression of social relations," I seek to read lyrics as the sonic expression of socio-economic relations. I argue that Hip-Hop lyrics reflect the entrepreneurial impulses and learned behaviours of their speakers. The combination of physical environment and social effects has a profound influence over the real and imagined actions of Hip-Hop's lyricists, including the decision to sell drugs. Not only do many Hip-Hop performers claim to have sold illegal substances, but the way in which

[41] Schneider, *Smack,* xiii.

they conceptualise and narrativize those claims is heavily influenced by the notions of social conservatism, self-reliance and neoliberal entrepreneurialism which dominate the culture within which they move. I remain mindful of the status of lyrics as art, with accompanying tendencies of exaggeration and embellishment, but examine their repeated and consistent advocacy of vernacular neoliberalism as a way by which rappers express their status as successful actors within the marketplace of human capital.

The chosen texts for my analysis are Hip-Hop lyrics from New York acts released between the early 1980s and early 2000s. This timespan includes what is commonly referred to as Hip-Hop's 'Golden Age.'[42] The Golden Age is a label often associated with a diverse, Afrocentric, and politically progressive Hip-Hop culture which, in the popular narrative of Hip-Hop history, was usurped by the commercial success of 'Gangsta' rap in the 1990s.[43] The vast majority of the songs studied in this thesis could be typified as part of the Gangsta – latterly Mafioso – sub-genre of rap music. The reason for this temporal focus is that drug dealing came to be a central concern in many of the most successful and critically acclaimed works of prominent New York artists in this period. Far from being a passing fad, these kinds of narratives have endured and have become so entrenched within the canon of Hip-Hop lyricism that they have become an essential part of rap lyrics, along with the familiar features of braggadocio, competition, and word play. Tales of drug dealing reveal to us attitudes towards dealing drugs and the practicalities of that business but they also demonstrate consistent engagement with the concepts and ideals of neoliberalism.

[42] Mikey Hess and Jessica Elliot, Mikey Hess ed., *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music and Culture Vols 1 & 2* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 163, 285.
[43] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness,* Loc 2671

The period from the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s constitutes the time when the trade in crack cocaine had its largest and most devastating impact on the city of New York. Crack use reached its height around 1989 and most legislative efforts concerning crack were implemented around 1989 and 1990. This legislation, coupled with social exclusion of crack addicts, spiralling violence, and the embracing of marijuana use by what Johnson, Golub and Dunlap call the nascent "BluntGen" led to a gradual decline in the profitability of crack cocaine markets.[44] As the 1990s ended and the 2000s began, Hip-Hop culture began to shift its focus and other drugs – which did not have the same market structure or pharmacological effects – usurped crack cocaine's pre-eminence within Hip-Hop.[45]

The two existing academic works closest in scope to this thesis are Dimitri A. Bogazianos' *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs* (2012) and Lester K. Spence's *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-hop and Black Politics* (2011).[46] Bogazianos studies Hip-Hop lyrics which reference the trade in crack through the lens of "crime and punishment."[47] His work "examines the profound *symbolic* consequences of crack's paradoxical punishment structure, although it does so from 'outside' of policy."[48] Bogazianos' work deliberately eschews the application of pre-existing theory to the chosen song lyrics; rather the author utilizes his own methodology which is laid out in an accompanying essay and through which he seeks to understand crack as "a sociolegal logic

[44] Bruce Johnson, Andrew Golub, and Eloise Dunlap, "The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs, Drug Markets, and Violence in Inner-City New York," in *The Crime Drop in America,* 184-5.
[45] Ethan Brown, "The X Factor," *Vibe,* September 2000, 199-206, https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=_icEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false.
[46] Dimitri A. Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), Kindle. Lester K. Spence, *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), Kindle.
[47] Bogazianos, *5 Grams*, Loc 3090.
[48] Bogazianos, *5 Grams*, Loc 101. Original emphasis.

grounded in blood."[49] As such, Bogazianos does not engage with neoliberalism as an organising principle for his analysis. By contrast, Lester Spence makes prescient and extensive comment on the inculcation of neoliberalism within black politics and its dissemination within Hip-Hop music. He devotes the first chapter of his work to outlining the various ways "rap reproduced neoliberalism within the black parallel public" by examining the lyrical representation of neoliberal precepts within Hip-Hop songs. [50] This process is underpinned by a statistical quantitative study of rap songs assigned to various "nodes" depending on their content or style. Spence then uses these nodes and their implications to study the effects that consumption of Hip-Hop music has upon the political views and outlooks of "the black parallel public."[51] Spence's work studies "a random selection of records and music videos," and he states at the end of his book that "future work should examine the work of artists across time."[52]

The critical intervention of my thesis sits between the work of Bogazianos and Spence: where the former declines to apply a specific interpretive framework to Hip-Hop lyrics, I choose to use the theory and practice of neoliberalism as a lens through which to study them. Where Spence picks songs at random to show the ubiquity of neoliberal themes within Hip-Hop, my research examines a range of songs which exist and were produced in a specific cultural, social, spatial and historical context. The context being New York City in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. This context was chosen to see how ideas of self-reliance and hustling – which are innately tied to the neoliberal conceptions of self and human capital – are reinforced and occasionally problematized by artists with many shared characteristics.

[49] Bogazianos, *5 Grams*, Loc 3082.
[50] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, Loc 196.
[51] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, Loc 394.
[52] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, Loc 2667.

The tracing of these themes across time also provides scope to analyse their acceptance or rejection in direct correlation to the socio-political conditions against which they are produced and disseminated. Similarly, the geographical focus of New York diminishes the potential for ambiguity as a result of regional difference.

The opening chapter, "'You Can't Knock the Hustle:' The origins of Hip-Hop's competitive entrepreneurialism," considers the roots of what became the multi-million-dollar industry of rappers talking about selling drugs. By understanding what the first wave of lyrics that discussed drugs sounded like, this chapter establishes the context out of which Hip-Hop's narratives of entrepreneurialism, self-reliance and hustling grew. It seeks to provide an explanation of why Hip-Hop provided fertile ground and a willing corpus of performers for the adoption of neoliberal ideas about freedom and autonomy in the marketplace and economic advancement. It examines the approach and moral position towards drugs adopted by the first wave of commercially successful MCs. This includes their interaction with the notions of "Just Say No" personal responsibility mobilised in the Reagan administration's War on Drugs and mimicked by rap duo Audio Two in their song "Get Your Mother Off the Crack" (1990).[53] Alongside this, a focus on the genus of competitive individualism within the music highlights the primacy of the self in Hip-Hop even before drug dealing, gang banging and gun play were staple features of its episteme. Competing against such individualism are vestiges of the Civil-Rights-era mindset of collective racial uplift engaged with by acts such as The Treacherous Three. The shift in tone and content from the work of The Treacherous Three to that of the Notorious B.I.G is partially summarised in Michael Eric Dyson's assertion that:

[53] Audio Two, *I Don't Care: The Album*. 1990. Priority / Atlantic.

> The key contrast between hip-hop's narrative of success and social transformation and the civil rights generation's narrative of upward mobility is that hip-hoppers do not equate social mobility with escape but embrace the ghetto as a site and source of social identity.[54]

The purpose of the opening chapter is to map those changes and establish the context upon which the subsequent chapters build.

The first of three chapters of thematic analysis, "'Rap Game / Crack Game:' Neoliberalism, Drug dealing and Hip-Hop," focuses on representations of the hustler and the twin hustles of selling drugs and making music. Seeking to understand the allure and promise of emancipatory advancement that the drug trade seemingly holds, close attention is given to the positives and negatives of drug dealing within the lyrics. The hustler's status as an outsider or outlaw figure is examined, and the notions of independence, stoicism and power which underpin the subsequent chapters on violence and masculinity, are introduced. Lyrical descriptions of the business of selling drugs are studied to ascertain their crossover with aspects of the legitimate music business. This culminates in an extended analysis of the "Rap Game / Crack Game" dialectic typified by the JAY-Z song bearing that name.[55] Real-world examples of entrepreneurial strategy learned on the streets being put to work in legitimate business are also analysed to ascertain how accurate, successful, or possible, rappers' claims to be able to move from one to the other are. The central argument of this chapter is that by immersing themselves in the unregulated and highly competitive space of the drugs trade – an illicit form of entrepreneurialism – individuals gain

[54] Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, ed., *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's* Illmatic (Basic Civitas: New York. 2009), Loc 315, Kindle.
[55] JAY-Z, "Rap Game / Crack Game," *In My Lifetime Vol 1*, 1997. Roc-A-Fella.

an economic education fitting for the neoliberal era. These lessons in entrepreneurialism are internalised and reproduced in their lyrics and business practices once they progress into the legitimate music industry. Their songs then constitute a discourse of black vernacular neoliberalism which bears striking similarity to more formal academic and philosophical theories of neoliberalism which emphasize the benefits of the free market and the importance of developing human capital. This entrepreneurial outlook is summed up in a catechism from *The Gospel of Hip Hop:* "I am the entrepreneur who presents expert negotiating that repeatedly escapes poverty's routine experiences […]. In my time I am self-created and self-sustained."[56]

The third chapter, "'There's a war goin' on outside no man is safe from:' The Link Between Drugs and Violence," seeks to understand the omnipresent spectre of violence within Hip-Hop lyrics and its origins within the drugs trade. Investigation is structured around the principles of competition which neoliberalism consciously promotes and venerates.[57] The hustler, as outlined in Chapter Two, exists and functions as a figure whose self-worth is predicated on the impulses of entrepreneurialism and success in the game-like space of the illegal or semi-legal economy. When challenges to this success present themselves, what strategies do Hip-Hop's narrative hustlers use to defend what is theirs? Frequently they turn to violence as both a competitive tool and a form of discipline within the drugs trade. Theorized through Foucault's *The Punitive Society* (1973), I examine the gun as a technology of neoliberalization, a phenomenon which becomes so central to the

[56] KRS-One, *The Gospel of Hip* Hop, 7.
[57] James Crotty describes the "Neoliberal era" as one of "coercive competition" between companies. See "Structural Contradictions of the Global Neoliberal Regime." *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 32 (3). Elsevier Inc: 364.

hustler-rapper that it comes to be represented as an extension of the physical body.[58] This chapter also engages with Hip-Hop's status as an (occasionally unreliable) narrator of contextual circumstances by considering the real-world changes in drug violence alongside those documented in song. These changes primarily involve the increased availability and lethality of firearms, a shift driven by the twin forces of drug market restructuring and the consumer society. In an extended analysis of Nas' song "I Gave You Power" (1996), I argue that this narrative of the rapper/hustler as an anthropomorphised gun is an allegory for the dissatisfaction of the precarious worker within the neoliberal labour market.[59] The lyrical dynamism of interpersonal violence so prominent in these songs is situated within the contextual "slow violence" of neoliberalism to contextualise rappers' violent acts as a microcosm of the neoliberal society at large.[60]

The final chapter, "'I'm a business, man:' The masculine self-entrepreneur," focuses on representations of masculinity within the drug dealing rap of this period. It interrogates the construction and dissemination of what I term the "code of the streets" as a blueprint for masculinity. One which has its origins in the trade in illegal drugs. Behaviours which are useful for the entrepreneurial self in its guise as a drug-dealing hustler are taken up as indicators of a rugged, authoritarian masculinity. This masculinity replicates key features of neoliberal discourses of selfhood such as self-reliance, a willingness to utilize violence and the capacity for self-governance. As well as the contextual chaos of the trade in illegal drugs, these conceptions of masculinity also show extensive engagement with older, more established codes of masculine behaviour. This is expressed through constant veneration of

[58] Michel Foucault, "10 January 1973," in *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972-1973*, ed,. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 26.
[59] Nas, "I Gave You Power," *It Was Written*, 1996, Columbia.
[60] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), ProQuest Ebook Central.

the power of the African American masculine voice, a narrative trope which seeks to become self-fulfilling: in talking about the transformative power of their utterances rappers use them to alter their material circumstances.[61] Rappers also show consistent admiration for the aesthetics and sensibilities of Italian-American organised crime, often seeking to depict themselves in a transracial imaginary world where they inhabit the role of a generic mafia boss or even a specific individual like John Gotti. These representations are examined to unpack the allure of 'the mob' and why it is so powerful as to spawn a new sub-genre of the music known as Mafioso rap.[62] Towards the end of this chapter, I evaluate the reporting on the murder of former Run-DMC band member Jam Master Jay to demonstrate how notions of intrinsic masculinity, formed in relation to musical output and Gangsta posturing, can have real world consequences, even after death.

The thesis concludes by drawing together the findings of the previous four chapters to present a composite picture of what the hustler represents within Hip-Hop lyricism and how he reflects and reproduces key aspects of neoliberalism. I contend that the songs I analyse, while artefacts of a specific time and place, nonetheless still hold value and resonance for listeners today because they speak to aspects of the neoliberal experience which have grown in importance, influence, and mainstream acceptance in the intervening three decades. KRS-One writes in his quasi-religious text: "To all my hustlers, thugs and gangstas trying to survive in these mean streets, this is YOUR gospel!"[63] I argue that the discourse of black vernacular neoliberalism which these songs construct and celebrate

[61] Kris Ex offers his own summary of this process in a *Vibe* cover story on JAY-Z from 2000: "This is a cat who went from pissy projects to posh Hampton estates on the strength of his ability to marry beats, rhymes and life." Ex, Kris. "Jayhova's Witness," Vibe Dec. 2000, 130.
[62] Ogbar, Jeffrey O. G. "Slouching Toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1999, 167-8.
[63] KRS-One, *The Gospel of Hip Hop*, 7.

constitutes a kind of secular 'gospel' of neoliberal subjection and subjectivity. Viewed against the contemporary economic system, which has greater similarities to the unregulated space of the drugs trade than ever before – precarity, the 'gig' economy, the diminished power of collective labour solidarity, the emphasis on competitive entrepreneurialism and on treating the self as 'human capital' perpetually to be upgraded and invested in – these songs offer comment on aspects of "hustling" or "grinding" that those operating in what Tatiana Thieme calls "the hustle economy" will recognise intimately.[64] The activities of Hip-Hop moguls such as JAY-Z, 50 Cent and Diddy, and their positioning of themselves as both rentier capitalists and lifestyle coaches is scrutinised to understand how their youthful embrace of street entrepreneurialism has continued and developed as they matured. As oligarch and Wall Street speculator Warren Buffet recently said of JAY-Z: "Jay is teaching in a lot bigger classroom than I'll ever teach in. For a young person growing up, he's the guy to learn from."[65] Finally, I consider avenues for further study in light of what Cornel West has provocatively described as, the "end" of neoliberalism.[66]

[64] Tatiana Adeline Thieme, "The hustle economy," *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol 42. 538.
[65] O'Malley Greenburg, "Artist, Icon, Billionaire: How Jay-Z Created His $1 Billion Fortune."
[66] Cornel West, "Goodbye, American Neoliberalism. A new era is here," *The Guardian,* November 17, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/17/american-neoliberalism-cornel-west-2016-election.

Chapter One: "You Can't Knock the Hustle:" The origins of Hip-Hop's competitive entrepreneurialism.[67]

If the 1970s was the decade in which Hip-Hop was birthed, the 1980s was the decade in which it grew up. This maturation was reflected in its content, with themes becoming increasingly dark, adult and at times, overtly political and also in its development from an intensely localised community culture towards an international industry. Acts like Kurtis Blow, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Run DMC and Eric B & Rakim found great success rapping about hardship, poverty and scraping by.[68] These accounts of deprivation were reflective of lived experiences for many Americans, particularly those most vulnerable to the deleterious effects of a deep and sustained recession.[69] In the face of such hardship, MCs and rappers offered alternate strategies for uplift and survival. For some, an attempt was made to recreate or invoke the collective unity of civil rights movements which were still recent history.[70] Others moved in the opposite direction and embraced a philosophy of self-help which asked them only to rely on their own capabilities and resources. The concept of African American self-sufficiency is a long standing political and intellectual touchstone, which often has significant overlap or confluence with conservative notions of "bootstrap" uplift. In the 1970s and 80s, these decisions were also influenced and shaped by nascent neoliberalism, a system of thought which necessitated some of the same impulses that

[67] JAY-Z, 'Can't Knock the Hustle.' *Reasonable Doubt*, Roc-A-Fella. 1996.
[68] 'The Breaks' (1980), 'The Message' (1982), 'Hard Times' (1983) and 'Paid in Full' (1987).
[69] *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* p.23 (original emphasis)
[70] The work of The Treacherous Three is examined to this end within this preface.

conservatism historically encouraged: personal responsibility; entrepreneurialism; self-improvement.

The advent of neoliberalism shifted the paradigm on notions of 'responsibility': "whereas the 'reciprocal individualism' that underpins social democracy focuses on *mutual* responsibility, the 'egotistic individualism' of neoliberalism focuses on *individual responsibility*."[71] This egotistic individualism is reflected forcefully in Hip-Hop music of the 1980s as MCs' personas and lyrical content shifted increasingly towards a competitive, antagonistic form of oratory. This competitive spirit was one specific feature by which Hip-Hop marked itself as diverging from much of the storied and celebrated black music of preceding decades. Individualistic tendencies in the music were both a result of, and provided fertile ground for, the adoption of neoliberal precepts such as investing in the self and embracing the world of risk. Many MCs would detail their engagement with risk and risky behaviours through the exposition and celebration of illicit, yet profitable, behaviours, primarily the selling of drugs. This was not an instant adaptation, as will be seen in the analysis below, but the overall trend within Hip-Hop was one towards an embrace of an underground street economy which had the trade in illegal drugs as its engine. Accompanying this were various codes of behaviour, modes of thinking and attitudes toward money, labour and selfhood which will be unpacked in the later chapters of this thesis. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how it was that some of these ideas found their way into mainstream, commercial Hip-Hop lyricism. Many of these processes were gradual, and some turned on the production or reception of a single totemic song; but they contributed to the growing individualism present within Hip-Hop lyrics. This individualism

[71] Emma Bell, *Criminal Justice and Neoliberalism*, p.166

would latterly find its most striking and concentrated expressions in the Gangsta and Mafioso rap of the 1990s.

In 1981, Afrika Bambaataa and the Jazzy Five released 'Jazzy Sensation,' a song riffing on a sample of a popular contemporary song and providing a space for its lyricists to engage in playful boasting.[72] By the end of the decade, N.W.A released 'Straight Outta Compton' (1988), and Public Enemy released 'Night of the Living Baseheads' (1988), two songs about drug dealing and its attendant crimes, ills, and behaviours: one song provocative, celebratory, and lurid, the other conspiratorial, condemnatory, and plaintive. Their release reflects how quickly, and forcefully, the drug trade came to be a central theme within Hip-Hop music. JAY-Z claims that tales of scheming and profiting, which often centre on drugs, filled an obvious gap in Hip-Hop lyricism which had become apparent by the early to mid-80s:

> We heard Melle Mel's hit "The Message," with its lyrics about *broken glass everywhere*, and we heard about Run's *big long Caddy*, but what was missing was what was happening in between those two images – how young cats were stepping through the broken glass and into the Caddy. The missing piece was the story of the hustler.[73]

The story of the hustler is at the heart of Hip-Hop; it functions as JAY-Z's episteme and it is a central concern of this thesis. It clearly, and proudly, embraces the neoliberal ideal of *homo economicus*, the concept of the self-entrepreneur, the individual who can appraise and increase their own human capital in competitive pursuit of financial capital. Michel Foucault

[72] For a detailed analysis of 'Jazzy Sensation,' see Shea Serrano, *The Rap Year Book* (New York: Abrams Image, 2015), 22.
[73] *Decoded*, p.10 original emphasis.

stated that "Homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself," and rappers conform to this categorisation, utilising their experiences to create saleable art.[74] As JAY-Z succinctly states on "U Don't Know" (2001), "Put me anywhere on God's green earth, I'll triple my worth."[75] The purpose of this chapter is to outline how themes around drug dealing and drug taking emerged and were framed in early Hip-Hop records, how those attitudes reflected and responded to the rise of neoliberalism, and how the lyrics which followed were building upon a narrative foundation that began in the mid to late 80s.

"I hold the microphone like a grudge:" Battle rap and competitive individualism[76]

One of the first genre-defining shifts in Hip-Hop lyricism was born, fittingly, out of conflict. The arena for this conflict was the stylised and performative space of an MC convention which took place at the club Harlem World in 1981. The competitors were Busy Bee Starski, a renowned party-style MC and the future star of 1982's *Wild Style*, and Kool Moe Dee, the chief lyrical performer in The Treacherous Three and one of early rap's most influential innovators.[77] On the night in question, Busy Bee Starski invited audience participation by asking attendees to voice their affinity for a list of restaurants including Burger King and Wendy's; their zodiac signs; "sex and more sex"; and how much they love their mothers. All of these are subjects of conversation that one would recognise and expect to arise as common teenage topics, reinforcing the notion of the Hip-Hop party as a safe space of youthful adolescent revelry.

[74] Sam Binkley and Jorge Capetillo-Ponce ed., *A Foucault for the 21st Century* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 5.
[75] JAY-Z, "U Don't Know," *The Blueprint*, Roc-A-Fella, 2001.
[76] Eric B. & Rakim, 'I Ain't No Joke,' *Paid in Full*.
[77] Dir. Charlie Ahearn. *Wild Style*, Submarine Entertainment. 1983.

Yet Starski had one piece of crowd interaction which hinted at more adult concerns. Early in his performance the MC asked, "Is the cocaine crew in the house?" exhorting the audience to shout "blow" in response. The crowd duly responded with a repeated "blow, blow, blow", marking themselves out as part of the "cocaine crew." This use of the drug as something to self-identify with, in a seemingly positive association, suggested that Hip-Hop, in moving to club spaces such as Harlem World, had left behind the innocence (whether real or imagined) that Kool Herc claimed was part of the appeal of his parties back in the early to mid-seventies. Could this be the result of the fact that those teens who were attendees back at Sedgwick in '73 were now nearly a decade older and into their early twenties? The skit also reflects the status that cocaine held in the popular imagination at this point, being an informal status symbol that was widely associated with the disco music scene and a hedonistic celebrity culture. Given the cost of powder cocaine, whether many of the attendees at Harlem World could have afforded to use the substance is doubtful. What is important is that they wanted to be seen publicly as initiates and participants in the cocaine lifestyle.[78] Whipper Whip and Melle Mel, two of the first Hip-Hop performers to make large sums of money from Hip-Hop club gigs, openly discussed their embracing of this lifestyle, heading after performances to popular clubs such as Disco Fever in the South Bronx and blowing their newly acquired cash on parties fuelled by champagne and cocaine.[79]

Once Busy Bee had finished hyping the crowd by reminding them of things they liked or wanted to have, Kool Moe Dee shunned this traditional method and instead attacked Busy Bee's credentials and talents as a rapper. Whereas Starski used his six minutes to

[78] Wu-Tang Clan member Raekwon describes the status of the drug and how "In them early 80s, cocaine was a rich-nigga high." XXL Staff, 'Raekwon: The Making of Only Built 4 Cuban Linx.' *XXL*, August 1, 2010,
[79] *Yes Yes Y'all* p.243

generate a feel-good, party atmosphere inside the club, his opponent used his to battle and confront his adversary lyrically. Kool Moe Dee set out his stall early in his verbal assault, crediting Starski's ability to energise the audience but immediately disparaging that skill as inferior to the creative artistry needed to write poetic and impactful rhymes.[80] From this mission statement, the rapper established his objective for this competition. It was not just enough to outperform Starski; he aimed to destroy him by dint of damaging his supreme asset: his reputation. In this moment, the whole nature of battle rapping changed, and MCs facing off became about more than just who had the best rhymes, it became about damaging and debasing your opponent. The game shifted from lexical gymnastics, where victory was decided by who could best manipulate words and sounds, to a gladiatorial performance art where you not only had to best your opponent, you had to beat them. As Grandmaster Caz, who was present at the event, surmised: "Busy was rocking the crowd, Moe Dee was rocking Busy."[81] He tells his opponent to "put that bom-diddy-bom bullshit on hold," mocking the kind of nonsensical, beatbox, jazz-skit style which Busy Bee employed and which also opened the first rap hit, the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight."[82] The notion that this sort of fun and light-hearted sound play was now "bullshit" provides an insight into the chief point of Moe Dee's attack, specifically that Busy Bee was not actually saying anything of any worth.

Kool Moe Dee's lyrics progressively chipped away at various aspects of his opponent's credibility, claiming that Starski can't really rap, that he bought rhymes from

[80] 'Busy Bee vs Kool Moe Dee, 7 min 11 secs, "Kool Moe Dee vs Busy Bee Starski Dec 1981 Harlem World," Tape Deck Wreck, *YouTube*.
[81] Grandmaster Caz, 'Kool Moe Dee Upped Standard for Battle Rap.' *YouTube*, June 14, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HN8wCgO3gUE
[82] Kyra Gaunt claims that far from being "nonsense" the skatting on 'Rapper's Delight' is actually a cryptolect which has origins traceable back to slavery. See "Girls' Game-Songs and Hip-Hop: Music Between the Sexes." *Parcours Anthropologiques*, no. 8, 2013, pp. 97–128.

other performers (namely Spoonie Gee), that the contests that he wins were rigged, and that he stole his moniker from famed Hip-Hop figure DJ Lovebug Starski.[84] These accusations all gained their power from a similar register: they claimed to unveil a falsehood or an inauthenticity about their target. They are the types of criticism, or diss, that are repeated perpetually through Hip-Hop's long history of lyrical confrontation, with rappers forever claiming to expose other rappers as frauds, fakes or busters. In later years, as will be seen, when the default persona for rappers comes to be a type of gangster, a drug-dealer-turned-lyricist figure, these claims become less about authorship (although this is still prevalent) and more about not being from the streets, or from a particular gang, or having not done the things that one references in song. The key conclusions from this battle were that competitive individualism now meant destroying the opposition, and the best way to do that was by attacking their authenticity. These two interlinked concepts had major implications for later confrontations in Hip-Hop and underpin much of what came to be termed 'beef' in the 1990s. At this point though, Kool Moe Dee did not need to do any more than criticise Busy Bee Starski's lyrical chops. This is partially because Starski's reputation was founded upon him being a party performer and not built on any kind of rugged, masculine bravado, and because of his claims that he was the best rapper around. Kool Moe Dee countered this self-proclaimed pre-eminence in verse, by detailing and exposing his lies, and in practice by outperforming him lyrically.

This kind of superior lyrical ability is the second reason that this rap battle is so important to the history of the Hip-Hop MC. Kool Moe Dee beat Starski so comprehensively because he appealed to both the hearts and minds, or more accurately the ears and minds,

[84] Grandmaster Caz, 'Kool Moe Dee Upped Standard for Battle Rap'

of the assembled audience. His lyrics not only had shock value, because they were directly addressing his competitor in a derogatory way, they also had great wit, skill, and artifice. Similarly, Moe Dee's delivery in verses two and three, where he employs the relatively new practice of speed rapping, further enhances his claims to be performing at a level above Starski's.

The third verse, where Moe Dee raps the following fifty words in thirteen seconds, is an example of his virtuosity with rapid delivery:

Now that "ba-ditty-ba-da-dang-da-dang-dang"

Sound pretty good, but it ain't no thang

I'm the super scooper, party pooper

Man with all the super-duper

Disco breaks, have what it takes

A man who never makes mistakes

Can rap it low, I'm not a bore

Baddest man you ever saw

Money-makin', earthquakin'

Man-who-gets-the-party-shakin'

The irony here is that in these rapid-fire sections of his performance, Kool Moe Dee doesn't really say anything of any substance, but he does it in such a way that it sounds fresh and exciting to his audience. This, offset against the earlier slower delivery where he takes Starski to task, makes for a balanced performance which successfully melds shock factor,

novelty, technical skill, lyrical ingenuity and a nuanced manipulation of the beat, in which he is duly aided by his DJ, LA Sunshine. This becomes the blueprint for future MCs, and it moves Hip-Hop performers away from the figure of fun, hype-man style performance that was begun initially by acts like DJ Hollywood and then taken up by figures such as Busy Bee Starski, the self-styled Chief Rocker. In an interview for Peter Spirer's 2003 film about Hip-Hop battles, *Beef*, KRS-One stated that Kool Moe Dee's criticism of Busy Bee changed the demands an audience placed on performers, with the new attitude being: "You now have to make sense for us to give you power."[85] The implicit lesson that the result of this rap battle taught was that an MC should seek to balance style and substance.[86]

Making the 'New' New York a seat of neoliberal power

MC Kool Moe Dee's place in Hip-Hop history is secure because of this era-defining battle, but his work a year earlier with Spoonie Gee as part of the Treacherous Three ensemble would have also ensured his name was preserved in the annals of Hip-Hop lore. Through collaboration on tracks such as "The New Rap Language," "Heartbeat," and "Yes We Can Can" the group produced hits which shaped the sound and content of early 80s Hip-Hop.[87] "Yes We Can Can" is of particular importance for this study as it highlights many of the tensions that Hip-Hop performers of the period were experiencing. Situated at a remove from the purportedly transformative gains of the Civil Rights movement, many artists struggled to continue the notions of racial uplift and brotherhood which characterised and

[85] Excerpt from *Beef* (6.45), "Beef 1-Busy Bee vs Kool Moe Doe," bazzgiar102, *YouTube*, December 6, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wipb37LGe4U
[86] *Beef* (7.25)
[87] The Treacherous Three, "Yes We Can Can," *Whip It*, Sugarhill Records, 1982.

energised popular black music of the 1960s and 70s. The song's opening lines depict a relatively bleak reality, enhanced by the synthesized, almost robotic voice that the lines are delivered in:

Eve of destruction, tax deduction

Price inflation rocks the nation

And, unemployment's on the rise

It's all the final compromise

And if it lasts like this for a long enough time

It will lead to nothin' but a higher level of crime

This establishes a clear relationship of cause and effect between a lack of opportunities in legitimate society and the motivation to commit crime. This explanation sits at odds with the work of neoliberal economists such as Gary Becker and Joseph Stigler who argued that "all criminals are rational individuals who choose to commit crime depending on the relative costs and benefits incurred."[88] The tension here is between the individual viewed through the prism of neoliberal thought—as a rational actor with the choice between committing crime and not committing crime—and the lyrical description of a society which constricts and limits those choices. Throughout the song the group display aspects of a political viewpoint influenced by both the radical collective ethos of black political mobilisation in the 1960s and 70s and the personal responsibility, self-reliance tradition of more conservative strands of organised black politics. In these lines the group present crime as a response to a defective society, one in need of repair and intervention

[88] *Criminal Justice and Neoliberalism* p.164

and a greater safety net for the unemployed. This opinion was not shared by incumbent President Ronald Reagan, who was in the midst of trying to implement sweeping social security and tax reforms.[89] Philip Mirowski summarises the motivations and implications of these kinds of neoliberal restructuring in vivid detail:

> it requires ethico-political work on the self, and individualization involving a mix of responsibility, guilt, hypocrisy, and distrust. When social rights (unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, healthcare, etc.) are transformed into social debt and private debt, and beneficiaries into debtors whose repayment means adopting prescribed behaviour, subjective relations between 'creditors,' institutions which allocate rights, and 'debtors', who benefit from assistance or services, begin to function in a radically different way.[90]

The key watchword to take from the above quotation in relation to neoliberalism is "individualization," for it forms the (dis)organising principle by which those figures who adopt neoliberalism as a political philosophy seek to mould and shape societies. In the space of four months in 1981 the Reagan administration proposed substantially cutting the early-retirement benefit and the $122-a-month minimum benefit for the poorest recipients, as well as imposing a three month freeze on the annual cost of living increase.[91] These three actions all placed the burden of reforming the governmental system of social security on its primary users: members of society on the periphery of the work force either by dint of age

[89] Paul C Light, "The Crisis Last Time: Social Security Reform," *Brookings*, March 5th, 2005. https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-crisis-last-time-social-security-reform/.
[90] Philip Mirowski*, Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* (London: Verso, 2014), 127-130. For the power of debt within the neoliberal system see Dumenil and Levy, "Neoliberalism: The Crime and the Beneficiary," 396 - 8.
[91] In "The Crisis Last Time: Social Security Reform" Light states that there was no clear bipartisan concord that the social security system of the early eighties needed reform.

or economic and employment status.[92] This policy disproportionately affected black citizens, with the rate of unemployment for African-American men around two-hundred percent higher than the rate for white men throughout the decade.[93]

This is of particular importance for the study of Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop lyricism as the tradition of black self-reliance and bootstrap conservatism created fertile conditions for the adoption of neoliberal ideology and behaviours.[94] Hip-Hop performers and the drug dealing narratives they so frequently utilise both draw upon ideas of entrepreneurialism, self-help and salesmanship. These are concepts which have historically been extolled by black capitalists and conservatives and which become desirable, and almost essential, under a system of neoliberal governance.[95] Reagan's position as the instigator in chief of the Republican position on this issue reflects his adherence to the ideology and tenets of neoliberalism.[96] He began implementing these changes within months of taking office, suggesting they were a priority of his tenure. Yet whilst the roll out of these types of policies – policies which saw the withdrawal of the state, both physically and financially, to be replaced by big business – were nascent on a national scale, New York had been a testing ground for their implementation from the mid-1970s onwards. As early as 1973, the same year as Kool Herc's fabled "Back to School" party in the Bronx, New York was becoming a powerful centre of the global neoliberal project. The OPEC oil embargo worried the U.S.

[92] "The source of living's going up / Wage increases going down / Reaganomics and atomics / Messing all of us around / While the rich get richer / The poor get poorer" (verse 14). 'Yes We Can Can'
[93] Jonathan Simon, *Poor Discipline: Parole and the Social Control of the Underclass, 1890-1990* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 104.
[94] The concept of bootstrap uplift has its foundations in African American political discourse in Booker T. Washington's famous Atlanta Compromise speech of 1895. See Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939,* 112. It still holds political currency, see Alridge, Derrick P. *The Black Intellectual Tradition : African American Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 215.
[95] For the enduring political legitimacy of self-help black conservatism see Ikard, David H, and Martell Lee Teasley. "Pull Yourself Up by Your Bootstraps." In *Nation of Cowards*, 103-136.
[96] Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, 103.

government so significantly that they were preparing an invasion of several Gulf states to maintain supply. Under such pressure Saudi Arabia agreed to funnel its petrodollars through American investment banks located in New York.[97] The coffers of these banks swelled to an unprecedented level and they needed operations to finance with the newly acquired capital, which they found in the form of developing nations in dire need of credit to fund infrastructure and civic growth. The U.S. government campaigned (alongside the WTO and the IMF) throughout the decade to loosen the legislation on international trading and financial markets. This allowed the financiers to loan money to nations, particularly nations that the U.S. wanted to align ideologically in places like Latin America, at rates highly favourable to the New York investment banks. In this way, New York, with its preeminent financial institutions, became a key seat of power for neoliberalism.[98] Money both flowed in, and out, exerting political and economic pressure internationally as a part of a broader U.S. diplomatic strategy which was informed by the Cold War and the threat of emerging economies in Asia and Europe. The elements of neoliberalism that are more commonly highlighted in relations between the state and individuals, such as the threat of violence, discipline, deregulation, utilisation of businesses as replacement for state apparatus and the establishment of creditor-debtor relationships, can all be seen in this process.[99]

Sustained deindustrialisation and economic flight were symbiotic problems plaguing many cities in the industrial north in the mid-1970s. They occurred as a result of de-regulation and the increasing financialization of the U.S. economy as jobs moved away from

[97] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 27-29.
[98] Mayor Ed Koch called New York "the international center of finance." Koch, Ed. "HOW'D I DO?: ED KOCH EVALUATES HIS OWN PERFORMANCE IN AN OPEN LETTER TO DAVID DINKINS," *New York Times*, Dec 31, 1989. 27.
[99] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 64-5. For reporting on deregulation of the financial services market see Blumstein, Michael. "Banks Bid for New Powers: Consumerism Aspect Argued." *New York Times*, Jun 08, 1984.

the unionised north to the far less unionised south.[100] Financialization and the increasing influence of finance capital placed greater emphasis on profitability which demanded the cutting of operating costs by moving production to areas, both intranational and international, with cheaper labour.[101] Between 1970 and 1975, conservative estimates put the number of lost jobs in New York at over half a million, with over 300,000 people having left the city in the same period.[102] This reduced the tax base and coupled with the increase in joblessness and a national economic recession placed strain on the city's budgets which it was unable to resolve. Following a short period of intervention from Wall St. banks, private support was withdrawn, and the city faced a financial crisis. Leading figures in the world of brokerage, such as David Rockefeller of Manhattan Chase, Elmore Patterson, chairman of Morgan Guaranty Trust, and Citibank's Walter Wriston refused to service the city's debt and essentially allowed it to fall into bankruptcy.[103] They met with Republican Senator James L. Buckley and forcefully advocated to President Ford that the best policy was to do nothing. Buckley argued that his policy of non-intervention was a way of maintaining the very fabric of the United States, and that to intercede would pave the way for an increased involvement of the federal government in local affairs. His critics cited his voting record, and his prior opposition to "mass transit, minimum wage, Social Security, vocational rehabilitation and other programmes to help the people of New York City."[104] It is clear from these public exchanges that the issue was being framed as a class confrontation between

[100] For a comprehensive history of this phenomenon see Greta R. Krippner "The Financialization of the American Economy." *Socio-Economic Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2005, pp. 173–208.
[101] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 26. By "financialization" I mean Greta R. Krippner's definition: "accumulation in which profits accrue primarily through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production." Krippner "The Financialization of the American Economy" 174.
[102] George Will, "Selective 'Urban Death' For New York?" *The Washington Post*, Nov 11, 1976, p.A15
[103] Martin Tolchin, "BUCKLEY OPPOSES U.S. INTERVENTION IN CITY'S CRISIS," *New York Times* New York, 24 Sep 1975, 1 & 93.
[104] Tolchin, "BUCKLEY OPPOSES U.S. INTERVENTION IN CITY'S CRISIS," 1 & 93.

'the people' and 'the powerful,' both financial and political, as well as a debate about the very future of the country. As Kim Phillip's Fein observes in her 2018 work *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*: "The struggle over whom the city government would serve, and on what terms, echoes the deepening conflict over the future of the United States as a whole."[105] Ultimately, President Ford sided with the class of businessmen and financiers. The *New York Daily News* ran its now famous FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD headline and the city's finances were restructured to reduce spending, reduce the power of labour unions and provide opportunities for speculation by private enterprise.[106] In reality, Ford was not telling the whole of New York to "drop dead," only parts of it, and with it certain ideas about what a city could or should do for its inhabitants. As Phillips-Fein explains, "[f]or the President, as much as for the nation, New York City stood for urban liberalism, an example of the central role that government might play in addressing problems of poverty, racism and economic distribution."[107] By allowing the city to fail, the President was demonstrating that post-war liberalism was at an end and that governments (both local and national) would not take responsibility for ameliorating the problems of those in need. The *Washington Post* acknowledged this the following year in a piece which advocated wholeheartedly for "a policy of selective urban death" as recommended by New York Housing Commissioner Roger Starr.[108] It cited "the desolate ruins of the South Bronx, and parts of Brooklyn" as locales upon which this civic death had already been visited.

[105] Phillips-Fein, Kim. *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2018. 7.
[106] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* 45-8.
[107] *Fear City*, 2.
[108] Will, "Selective 'Urban Death' For New York?" A15.

Under these conditions, it is hardly surprising that the MCs, B-Boys and DJs who were emerging from these necropolises responded by trying to make some noise and forge a culture of defiance. Citizens of New York—especially its poorest boroughs—were among the earliest Americans to experience first-hand what neoliberal governance looked and felt like. The initial refusal and subsequent punitiveness of the bail out in 1975 were the opening salvo of a class war which has been quietly raging in American politics ever since. New York was intended as an example to the rest of the country. President Ford's Secretary of the Treasury William Simon, stated that the terms of the bail out should be "so punitive, the overall experience so painful, that no city, no political subdivision would ever be tempted to go down the same road."[109] This painful, punitive experience was not so powerful as to decimate the social fabric of the city altogether, Suleiman Osman writing in the journal *Labor* (2018) detailed how:

> As the "public" city receded, a new "people's city" emerged speckled with DIY experiments with a radical mix of left-libertarian, conservative, and even anarchist impulses. New Yorkers were creating alternatives on the ground to the social democratic vision of the previous generation. This was not just the antigovernmentalism of Milton Friedman and Gerald Ford, however. It was also the antistatism of Jane Jacobs, Gordon Matta-Clark, guerilla architects, punk bands, and early hip-hop artists.[110]

<u>'Yes We Can Can:' The decay of collaborative politics</u>

[109] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* 45-8.
[110] Osman, Suleiman. 2018. "Neoliberalism in New York City from Below." *Labor (Durham, N.C.)* 15 (4). DURHAM: Duke University Press: 107–11. doi:10.1215/15476715-7127322. p.109

When The Treacherous Three wrote 'Yes We Can Can' the national neoliberal turn in American politics was still in its relative infancy, with Reagan having only taken office the previous year, but in New York it was already a decade old. Tellingly when the group go on to offer a solution to the issues which they outline in their opening lines, it claims to eschew the central concept of rampant individualism which Hip-Hop, influenced by neoliberalism, would so forcefully draw upon over the next few decades. In the song's second verse they suggest:

> Stop and think a second, put the grievances aside
>
> And if it's hard to do that then just swallow your pride
>
> Because now is the time for everybody to unite
>
> All the blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chinese, Indian and white
>
> We gotta make this world a better world
>
> For the upcoming kids, the boys and girls
>
> Because we can, I know we can-can
>
> Yes we can-can, why can't we if we wanna yes we can-can

The song's hook "Yes we can-can," which is repeated with almost religious zeal throughout, is taken from a 1970 single and album by Lee Dorsey of a similar name.[111] Dorsey's version begins with the line "Now is the time for all good men to get together with one another" and advocates tolerance and unity over the brassy, bass-heavy stylings of backing band The Meters. The composition, devised by famed New Orleans funk maestro Allen Toussaint,

[111] Lee Dorsey, "Yes We Can Pt.1," *Yes We Can*, Polydor, 1970.

gives Dorsey's pared back vocals added character and soul as he asks the listener "to try to live as brothers." The song achieved minor R &B chart success for Dorsey, but its cover by The Pointer Sisters in 1973 far outstripped the original and was the group's first major success, peaking at number 11 on the *Billboard* chart.[112] It is this version which The Treacherous Three engage with, in the same way that they sampled Taana Gardener's "Heartbeat" as a kernel around which to riff ideas and grow their own lyrics and song from.[113] The chant "Yes We Can" had functioned in the 1970s as the slogan of the United Farm Workers and became a key campaign slogan for Barack Obama in his Presidential campaign of 2008. Its legacy at that point was acknowledged by *The New Yorker*, which, on the eve of the election predicted an Obama victory and highlighted the history of the phrase and its origins in the "pro-brotherhood funk" of Dorsey and its further popularisation by The Pointer Sisters.[114] The kind of unifying, transracial appeal which the phrase (and songs) evoked was central to Obama's positioning of himself as not simply a black candidate for the Presidency but rather a candidate who would govern outside of narrow racial politics or any form of ethnic nationalism.[115] The pluralism or inclusivity of the phrase "Yes We Can" is the source of its power. On first listen, The Treacherous Three's version of the song plays heavy on this pluralism, but a closer inspection reveals that it lacks much of the 'brotherhood funk' of the original and foreshadows individualistic and isolationist tendencies which would increasingly come to the fore in Hip-Hop.

[112] Dorsey's version reached #46 on the R & B chart. Joel, Whitburn, *Top R&B/Hip-Hop Singles: 1942–1995* (Wisconsin: Record Research Inc, 1996), 121.
[113] Taana Gardner, "Heartbeat," West End, 1981.
[114] Culture Desk, "Yes We Can, A History," *The New Yorker*, November 3, 2008, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/yes-we-can-a-history.
[115] See Jim Sleeper, *Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990) Kindle.

In the lines quoted above the group seemingly urge contemplation and cooperation, a transracial alliance and consideration of the state of the world for future generations. This is all capped off by a two-line affirmation that this seemingly utopian vision is possible. The previously robotic voice is dispensed with and this call for a better showing of humanity is delivered in a more persuasive and human tone with a hook performed in tripartite harmony. The type of work that the group calls for in these lines evokes the spirit and approach of the civil rights movement as embodied in New York City for decades by organisations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) whose Brooklyn chapter, founded in 1960, had a membership which "reflected an array of racial, religious, class, and political backgrounds."[116]

This civil rights spirit develops in verse five into a concomitant position on personal responsibility and the dangers of trying to navigate this seemingly decaying society:[117]

Now there is one conclusion I come to without a doubt

That's if you're looking for a shortcut there's no easy way out

And if you think the street's a way out, just use your head

You see three-quarters are in jail and half the rest are dead

Because surviving on the streets, there ain't too many who can

[116] Brian Purnell, *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 36.

[117] The phrase 'Civil Rights spirit' is used here as emblematic of the "Long Civil Rights movement" paradigm that Purnell lays out in his book *Fighting Jim Crow in the Country of Kings*, 3. It is not tethered directly to what is commonly referred to as the Civil Rights Movement (a narrow conceptualisation of African-American struggles for equality which is overly centred on the 1960s) but rather the constant, often small scale, acts of solidarity, campaigning and disruption that have characterised black civic life in America since the abolishment of legal slavery.

And the only one who can is a real lucky man

There aren't too many of us lucky from the start you see

Because there's heavy odds against all minorities

The verse's simple anti-crime message echoes the civil rights ethos of respectability and responsibility in which racist oppression and feelings of alienation are channelled into positive, prosocial action.[118] The idea of "no easy way out" suggests an outlook which highlights the merits of hard work and personal responsibility as opposed to anti-social solutions. But these solutions—self-belief, hard work and determination as the cornerstones of survival and progress—carry interesting new and neoliberal overtones. As verse five states:

Although there's heavy odds against us I still have to say

That when there's a will, there's a way

But the strong will survive and the weak will die

And the only ones who make it are the ones who try

These lines contain a Darwinian outlook towards survival as an evolutionary process which clashes with the civil-rights-style unity and cooperation which the song calls for. Given the stark warnings that were detailed above about the dangers of falling into a life of illicit activity these lines may seem to undercut or negate that previous message. Many subsequent Hip-Hop performers have depicted the ghetto as a space of survival of the

[118] Manning Marable in *Race, Reform and Rebellion* describes how this concept of personal responsibility influenced the actions of Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement in general. Loc 1195 He also describes how this concept was a key strategy of the Nation of Islam in its recruitment drives within low income, urban, black neighbourhoods. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America 1945-1990 2nd Edition* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002) Kindle. Loc 818.

fittest where the strongest, canniest, least emotional and most violent prey on the weaker members of society. It would be easy to assume that The Treacherous Three are doing the same here, but the issue is complex. The song continues, over many verses, to detail how the temptation to engage in criminal activity is understandable but that it is not the best way out of the current situation.[119] It carries a strong anti-violence and anti-weapon message, discouraging confrontation and the use of knives.[120] Alongside this advice is a verse on the merits of staying in school and the perils, both personal and economic, of dropping out.[121] It also states how the group would "rather make a dollar just rhymin' to the beat / Than hustling and scuffling out on the street" and utilise their music as a way to improve their own personal circumstances:

> Once a nobody from the neighborhood
>
> I take a hop to the top cause I knew that I would
>
> Excel over the rest because I make progress
>
> Don't consider it luck because I'm not blessed
>
> Got my life altogether, love the way that I live
>
> Go to school, really cool and I think positive
>
> Cause it's alright to have fun, lots of pleasures and joys
>
> But it's the brain that separates the men from the boys

[119] Verses 8 – 12
[120] Verses 15-16 "Half the hoodlums have a knife / Won't hesitate to take your life / So try to live it real cool / Or risk losing it to a fool."
[121] Verse 20 "And if you try to be cool by dropping out of school/ When you're older and you're wiser you'll see you were a fool"

In contrast to the dire proclamations regarding what awaits those who choose a life of nefarious activities, the trajectory here from being a neighbourhood nobody to a successful and happy individual seems relatively straightforward. The closing line of the verse reinforces the notion that masculinity is defined by good decision making and intelligence, not violence and bravado.

These kinds of political statements sit at odds with the tenor and message of Dorsey's original song. Instead of Dorsey's collaborative, transracial politics of unity, much of The Treacherous Three version of the song is given over to advocating a conservative and even neoliberal politics of personal responsibility, self-improvement and hard graft. Vestiges of the civil-rights spirit of collaboration are present in the song's positive opening. But as the track progresses the lyrics become preoccupied with bellicose thoughts of oppression, violence, nuclear war and Reaganomics. The hook which asks, "Why can't we, if we wanna?" is seemingly answered by the litany of problems and obstacles that the group detail throughout the song. Declarations that, "the strong will survive and the weak will die," do not suggest unity but rather disunity bordering on anarchy. In its own way, the song sits as a mini allegory for the post-Civil Rights development of black politics and their representation within black music. What begins as a positive, plural message comes up against the harsh realities of the time –the social realist depictions of Reaganite America – and the notion of personal responsibility shrinks from being responsible for one's own small part within a greater movement, to being responsible for the self only. In musical terms, the song mimics some of the journey from The Impression's "People Get Ready" (1965) via James Brown's "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968) to the Philadelphia International Allstars' "Let's Clean Up The Ghetto" (1977). This journey would be continued by Hip-Hop

performers who enthusiastically took up that growing vein of individualism and personal responsibility in the most solipsistic sense of the word.

In spring of 1981, *The New York Times* ran an article on the disaffection and pessimism of black New Yorkers with regards to electoral politics. The piece quoted statistics showing that black voter registration, participation and candidate numbers had all fallen as well as David N. Dinkins' blunt appraisal that "we are worse off than we were some years ago."[122] At the time, Dinkins was City Clerk having briefly served in the New York state assembly in the 1960s.[123] He would go on to become President of Manhattan in 1985 and subsequently become New York's first black Mayor in 1990.[124] This disengagement from electoral politics reflected disillusionment with the post-Civil Rights era black leadership and their ability to move beyond legislative victories toward socio-economic equality. In the face of this plateauing political energy, many African Americans turned their transformative efforts inwards and returned to the kind of self-help, self-improvement ideology that was advocated historically by the likes of Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X. This notion is certainly present within the Three's rendition of "Yes We Can Can," with the civil-rights notions of personal responsibility and prosocial action modulating into a sense of competitive individualism which asks listeners to invest in their own human capital by staying in school and developing marketable skills, and even cashing in their musical talent as an individual ticket out of the problems faced by their community.

[122] JOYCE P, "New York Blacks Say They've Lost Political Power: Blacks Lose Political Power in the City" *New York Times,* Mar 29, 1981, 1. ProQuest
[123] "Dinkins, David." In *A Dictionary of Political Biography*.
[124] "This Week in Black History." *Jet*, Nov 07, 1994, 20.

This ethic of personal responsibility is not a new concept within black politics and had its vocal proponents within New York at the time.[125] In his work on the history of post-war liberalism in New York, Jim Sleeper highlights how "moral discipline" underpinned even "the most revolutionary of black leaders."[126] Much of The Treacherous Three's distinction between acceptable and unacceptable conduct is based in a retrograde notion of shame, censure and community judgement of transgression and morality. This kind of attitude would be largely eradicated in much mainstream Hip-Hop within a few years by the advent of Gangsta rap and then the even more lurid violence of Horrorcore. This shift was innately tied to an overwhelming apolitical individualism in the music which reflected the growing centrality of individualism in neoliberal politics. If the only real judge of someone's worth is the market, then the only personal judgement is to be undertaken by the self in the name of self-improvement. This notion would reach its apotheosis in phrases such as "Only God can judge me," which formed the title of a song for Tupac and which JAY-Z quoted in his seminal "PSA" on *The Black Album.*[127] For The Treacherous Three however, their perspective was still informed by the prevailing political outlook of their childhood and their parents' generation and as such the song seems to be at war with itself about what its real message is. The political shifts seen in the song's narrative are mimetic of the way black politics developed in the post-civil rights era. What starts with a call for unity and transracial collaboration is then stymied and derailed by the contextual problems of Reaganite, neoliberal, governance which encourages and cultivates individualism, and closes with self-

[125] Interpretations of personal responsibility were varied and provocative, whilst some of the acts studied in this thesis considered a life of crime to be 'taking responsibility' for their own fortunes, other young New Yorkers saw it as their remit to take responsibility for policing their own neighbourhoods against these novel criminals. See Hillyer, Reiko. "The Guardian Angels: Law and Order and Citizen Policing in New York City." Journal of Urban History, vol. 43, no. 6, 2017, pp. 886–914.
[126] Sleeper, *Closest of Strangers,* 38.
[127] Tupac, "Only God Can Judge Me," *All Eyez on Me*. Death Row, 1996. CD.
JAY-Z, "PSA," *The Black Album*. Roc-A-Fella Records, 2003. CD.

help and self-improvement as the only ways to survive or thrive. In the space of seven minutes The Treacherous Three move from asking their audience to "make this world a better world" to the self-exultation of "I take a hop to the top cause I knew that I would." In this can be seen the growing influence of neoliberal concerns centred around the primacy of the individual and the need to undertake what Mirowski calls the "ethico-political work on the self."

As the song develops, the group use the language of luck and chance to discuss life and position success or failure as the result of a kind of game, one which involves judicious and calculated actions. This notion is a central tenet of neoliberalism, which constantly asks individuals to expose themselves to risk. The ability to gauge and mediate risk is a central quality of the neoliberal self. As Foucault theorised: "The Entrepreneurial self cannot be passive but must move strategically in a world rife with risk. Hence, reward and punishment are accepted by the agent as the outcome of calculated risks."[128] The Treacherous Three use the song to robustly eschew the temptations of 'the streets' and the associated risks of that lifestyle, and instead make a living for themselves by utilising their creative flair and their intellectual capabilities. Interspersed with the various instructive, cautionary, and inspirational verses are choruses that attempt to galvanize the listener into believing that change is possible: "Because we can, I know we can-can"; "Yes we can-can, why can't we if we wanna, yes we can-can." The repetitiveness and positivity of these choruses evoke not just civil-rights style optimism but also the kind of declamatory affirmation that one might expect to find in a self-help seminar or book. The rhetorical question "why can't we if we wanna, yes we can-can," further enhances this feeling by positioning success and failure as

[128] *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*. p.96

directly related to desire, the inference being that if 'we' want something hard enough, then we can make it happen. This concept imbues the listener, and the individual, with the power to change their circumstances and portrays them as an active agent in the world. What began as a call to collective effort ends by becoming an neoliberal nostrum about the self-help potential of cultivating human capital.

'The Message': documenting neoliberalism's effects

The Treacherous Three show civil rights discourse modulating into neoliberal rhetoric in the formative years of Hip-Hop. But if any one group took on these notions and made a conspicuous commercial success of them, it was Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five.[129] There existed two main points of difference between the music of The Treacherous Three and Flash and the Furious Five: firstly, the latter group had the eponymous Grandmaster of DJing providing their backing tracks; second, their songs did not contain the kinds of moralising didacticism which we can see in songs like 'Yes We Can Can.'[130] It is uncontroversial to say that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five have enjoyed a more storied and more enduring legacy than The Treacherous Three.[131] These primary differences, one aesthetic, the other conceptual, have contributed to their different places in pop-culture history. If "Yes We Can Can" represents a somewhat jarring bridge between the Civil Rights activism of the 1960s and the neoliberal urban environment of early 1980s New York, then songs like "The Message" and "Vice" offer only the second half of that

[129] The group went through many revolutions. In this instance I am referring to the collaborations of the performers known as Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel, Keith Cowboy, Kidd Creole, Rahiem and Scorpio.
[130] Shea Serrano describes it as "insightful without being preachy" *The Rap Year Book*, 30.
[131] Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were the first Hip-Hop act to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007. In 2019, Grandmaster Flash received Sweden's Polar Music Prize, popularly known as the 'Nobel prize' of music.

equation. They presented visceral vignettes of urban decay and whilst they referenced contextual events and macro-forces which had caused the degradation of communities and individuals, they did not offer advice or uplift to the listener. This enhanced their realism. They were not concerned with telling the audience how a better society or self could be created, only with shining a light on what the current situation looked like. The release of "The Message" in 1982 was the zenith of this concept and it has remained one of the most popular and important Hip-Hop songs of all time.

"The Message" is often dubbed "the first socially conscious rap song" which is inaccurate; that accolade should probably belong to a track released two years earlier: Brother D with Collective Effort's 'How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise.'[132] Brother D's track wasn't a hit in its own time and it is unclear whether Flash and the group were aware of the song's existence when they recorded "The Message."[133] Nonetheless, rather than "The Message" being the genesis of conscious rap, it is closer to the mark to say that it is the first rap record of sustained social commentary that was commercially successful. It is this commercial success which is important as without it Hip-Hop may have continued to be a genre which produced party music aimed at a young ostensibly carefree, or careless, crowd. "The Message" added greater nuance to Hip-Hop, encouraging artists to use their lyrics to both excite and educate and creating a division between the two schools of 'party and bullshit' rap on the one hand and literal 'message' rap on the other. The appearance of this track marked a major shift in the address of Hip-Hop lyricism: from speaking to the

[132] Not only does the Brother D track predate Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's release of "The Message," it is also far more strident in its commentary and its radical call to arms. Brother D with Collective Effort, "Dib-Be-Dib-Be-Dize / How We Gonna Make The Black Nation Rise?" Clappers, 1980.
[133] Similarly, the song is not available on the major streaming services: Apple Music; Spotify; Tidal and is only accessible via YouTube or hardcopy single. The claim that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were unaware of the song in 1982 is stated in *Classic HipHop Magazine.*

inhabitants of neighbourhoods in which the culture was birthed, to attempting to speak for, or from, those neighbourhoods to a wider audience. This was not an immediate process and the conceptual power of this transition is intimately linked to the changing demographics of listenership and Hip-Hop's move towards mainstream acceptance which would unfold over the course of the decade.

It is tempting to think that given the success that ever more realistic, nihilistic and negative subject matter has garnered in Hip-Hop that this type of content was the next logical developmental stage of a form which is from 'the streets.' Yet this was not how the idea was perceived by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five at the time that the song was presented to them by Sylvia Robinson of Sugarhill Records. Flash felt that people wouldn't want to "bring their problems to the disco," and that it was Hip-Hop's feelgood, carnivalesque escapism that was its primary appeal for inhabitants of areas like the South Bronx.[134] Unusually, the song was an in-house creation with specially designed music rather than being a remix or interpolation of a pre-existing disco or funk song, such as The Treacherous Three's use of "Heartbeat." The man responsible for the concept and the sound of the song was 'Duke Bootee' (Edwin Fletcher) who worked for Sugarhill Records as a house percussionist.[135] He not only devised the song's soundscape, but also wrote the verses, the only exception being Mel's iconic "A child is born . ." fifth verse which was added to the song after its composition when Mel agreed to perform on it. This verse was re-cycled from an earlier record, 1979's 'Superappin'.'[136] Duke Bootee presented his composition to Sylvia Robinson who in a moment of visionary instinct, felt that a song which deviated from

[134] Duke Bootee's qtd in Damien Love, "*Rap Moves On: The Making of The Message by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, An Oral History,*" *Uncut*, August 2013.
[135] Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Songs* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), Kindle, Loc 5949.
[136] Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, "Superappin," Enjoy Records, Vinyl 12". 1979.

the frivolity of songs like "Rapper's Delight" and the various DJ set party cuts that were being produced would be a commercial success and its innovation welcomed. Even so, the song languished for a few years at Sugarhill and became an object of fun amongst the label's performers as a symbol of the sort of record that nobody wanted to touch.[138]

Grandmaster Flash was the member of the group who provided the most opposition to recording "The Message":

> We were into DJing, talking about women, the party thing. Sylvia had this feeling that America was ready to hear social commentary lyrics and we were the only ones in the company that could pull it off. We dodged it for a year or two and then she cornered us.[139]

He reveals here his anxiety at being made redundant; when he says "We were into DJing" he refers to himself rather than the group as a whole. Flash was the DJ in the group; the other members were performers, MCs, rappers, even dancers. Bootee's composition didn't call for a DJ and the fact that the track was already complete meant that for Flash there was nothing to do. Alongside this feeling of being superfluous is the notion of the song being incongruous with their brand or style. This idea is supported by the group's previous releases: "Superappin''' (1979); "Freedom" (1980); "The Birthday Party" (1981); "It's Nasty" (1981) and perhaps most importantly, "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" (1981) which was a space for Flash to show his unparalleled virtuosity as a DJ.[140] All of these records were composed via the, by now, tried and tested method of cutting

[138] *33 Revolutions Per Minute* Loc 5976
[139] *33 Revolutions Per Minute* Loc 5971
[140] The caveat to this being that the song's most iconic verse was borrowed from one of their existing songs,"Supperappin.'' Unrelated, but as a point of order, "Superappin'" was an Enjoy release, the rest were all released by Sugarhill Records.

together beats and samples, rhyming over them and trying to move the crowd. To depart from that seemed like an unnecessarily risky move to Flash. Melle Mel's attitude to the song was far more pragmatic. As he saw it, Robinson was the boss, Sugarhill Records was her label and she had the group under contract; if she wanted them to do the song then they would do it.[141] Ultimately Melle Mel is the only member of the group to appear on the song at all, the other five members made no contribution to the track. Sugarhill still released the song under the Furious Five's name as they wanted to cash in on the group's reputation and existing fan base.

Flash describes his objection to the record as a matter of artistic freedom, stating that the "biggest problem" he had with the record was that it did not allow him to display any individuality or creative energy.[142] Melle Mel pours scorn on Flash's principled objection:

> I wish I could've been on every record and didn't do nothing and there was just 'Melle Mel' on the record. People saying, 'what did you do?' 'I didn't do a fucking thing but I'm famous, eh.' You know what I mean, 'could you write me a cheque?'[143]

While Flash articulates (whether truthfully, or as a result of a bruised ego) the position of the creative, who wants authorial control so that he can be proud of the art which bears his name, Mel offers the perspective of the hustler who sees music as an avenue to make money. On the song itself, Mel performs lines that he didn't write – a potential area of inauthenticity – but does so in such a way that the record is hailed as one of the most

[141] "Qtd in *33 Revolutions Per Minute* Loc 5973
[142] Interview with Bootee, Mel & Flash at 11.45 in "BIG BANK HANK, DUKE BOOTEE, MELLE MEL & OTHERS SPEAK ON RAPPERS DELIGHT & THE MESSAGE & PLANET ROCK," The Foundation, *YouTube* July 9, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QItUpVW63NA
[143] "BIG BANK HANK, DUKE BOOTEE, MELLE MEL & OTHERS SPEAK ON RAPPERS DELIGHT & THE MESSAGE & PLANET ROCK," interview with Bootee, Mel & Flash 12.00.

authentic and realistic of all time. This is where Hip-Hop begins to become the multiverse of contradictions and idiosyncrasies which make it such a fascinating study. The label, Sugarhill, is telling the artists, The Furious Five, what the content of their music should be. Rather than the "dumbing down" conspiracy theories which would become so widespread as to be accepted as truth in the 1990s and onwards, the record label is trying to persuade the group to add more gravitas and a political edge to their work—albeit as a commercial novelty rather than out of ideological or social commitment.[144] The group's main architect and talent, Flash, objects to this on the grounds of his artistic autonomy, even within the context of the professional collective, and abstains from participation. The frontman, Mel, agrees in order to honour his contract and get paid. As a result, the group and the record label engage in a protracted legal battle which results in the acrimonious dissolution of the group.[145] "The Message", despite its socially conscious content, thus shows Hip-Hop becoming increasingly riven by individualism, its recourse to the legal system as a means to solve disputes, and the idea that culture is a commodity which can be created and sold like any other good or service. It is interesting that it is this song, the song which is heralded as being the moment in which Hip-Hop 'went political' and showed itself to be capable of a comment on the state of American culture and society, that animated many of these concerns and tensions.

These tensions were productive and the personal and professional angst that the group and Sugarhill experienced over the song were rewarded both financially and critically. The song was certified gold within eleven days of its release and received the maximum rating of five stars from *Rolling Stone*, where Kurt Loder called it: "[T]he most detailed and

[144] Chuck D was a particularly vocal proponent of this theory. See Samuels, Allison, N'GAI CROAL, David Gates, and Alisha Davis. "Battle for the Soul of HIP-HOP: Is rap—increasingly Driven by Sex, Violence and money—going Too Far?"
[145] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 88.

devastating report from underclass America […] since Marvin Gaye took a look around and wondered what was going on."[146] Its success extended beyond New York, and even beyond America. In Britain, the *New Musical Express* called it "the first really big political record since James Brown's 1970 "Say it Loud.""[147] The song's lyrics were admiringly printed in the highbrow publication *The Paris Review*.[148] Financially, the song was so successful that Sugarhill Records boss Joe Robinson worried it would shine a light on his unscrupulous management of the label's star act, the anxiety being that the group would realise how successful the song was and wonder why so little of the money which was obviously being made was ending up in their hands.[149] Duke Bootee claims that Robinson told him "this record is gonna be too big. Its gonna cause a problem."[150] Much of the acclaim for the record centres on the idea that it was offering what Loder accurately calls "a report from underclass America." This is a role which Hip-Hop music has often provided for its (now) majority white middle-class audience, with lyricists performing from a position of social marginalisation narrating and embodying one angle of the black, working-class, urban experience in America.

Dorian Lynskey sets the song in the lineage of some of the most storied and celebrated black music of the preceding decades:

> It was the record that critics, especially white ones, had been waiting for, placing hip-hop in the socially conscious bloodline of Stevie Wonder, Curtis Mayfield and Gil

[146] Steve Hager, *Adventures in the Counterculture: From Hip-Hop to High Times* (Los Angeles: High Times Books, 2002), 88.
[147] Charnas, *The Big Payback* p.88
[148] Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute* Loc 5903
[149] -Hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa dubbed Joe and his wife Sylvia the 'Rob-a-Nigger's. *The Big Payback,* p.60
[150] Both Qtd in an interview with Jay Quan, JayQuan, "GET FUNKY, MAKE MONEY & YA DON'T STOP: THE STORY OF DUKE BOOTEE AKA ED FLETCHER," *Tha Foundation*, February 2007, http://www.thafoundation.com/dukebootee.htm.

> Scott-Heron. This offspring of the Bronx slums wasn't just the most exciting party music in the world; it finally had something to say.[151]

The idea that Hip-Hop only had "something to say" once it began narrating the deleterious effects of inner-city degradation is somewhat problematic as it assumes that the narrations of joy and partying which preceded it, are, by definition, nothing. Yet Lynskey holds "The Message" in high esteem by placing it in exalted company and acknowledging its cross-over appeal. Artists such as Stevie Wonder and Curtis Mayfield managed to narrate and comment on the black experience in America whilst achieving popularity amongst white audiences. Of these artists' output, "The Message" is compared most frequently to Wonder's "Livin' For The City" from his 1973 album *Innervisions*.[152] But where the bleakness of Wonder's song is balanced by surrounding album tracks like "Higher Ground" and "Jesus Children of America" which invoke civil-rights-style collective uplift, and by Wonder's own civil rights activism, "The Message" offers no compensating solace. It documents the devastating effects of the restructured economy on poor communities but without the vestigial notions of collective uplift that still lingered in "Yes We Can Can." Instead, what "The Message" shows to the listener is an overwhelming impression of powerlessness, forcefully driven home by the narrator's isolation and the act of suicide which he narrates. The allure of the ghetto entrepreneur is documented, and indeed criminal entrepreneurship is positioned as the only possible response to the neoliberalization of urban life. Themis Chronopoulos and Jonathan Soffer have detailed how "the lack of waged jobs, the decline of welfare, and the new emphasis on entrepreneurship manifested in the expansion of the informal economy, from unlicensed day care to more violent businesses, such as the

[151] *33 Revolutions Per Minute* Loc 5903
[152] Stevie Wonder, *Innervisions*, Tamla Records, 1973.

marketing of cocaine." [153] The solution, it would seem, to the problems caused by living under neoliberalism is to adopt and embrace neoliberalism.

On 'The Message,' Duke Bootee uses sound effects to dial up the visceral register of the song. The first line of verse one, booms "Broken glass, everywhere" as Mel's sonorous voice grabs the listener's attention.[154] There is no preamble, a sound effect of smashing glass underscoring the point and the narrative continuing as the opening couplet is closed with the image of "People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care."[155] From this startling beginning, the verse continues in the same vein:

I can't take the smell, can't take the noise

Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice

Rats in the front room, roaches in the back

Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat

I tried to get away but I couldn't get far

'Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

The key trope here, and one which will be central to the analysis and understanding of Hip-Hop lyrics in this thesis, is a fixation on the human body. These lines, and indeed the song as a whole, reflect an obsession with the body and its simultaneous strength and fragility. In just eight bars Mel identifies to the listener seven different health hazards that he (in the guise of the narrator) must navigate as part of his daily life. These threats compel him to

[153] Chronopoulos, T., & Soffer, J. (2017). "Introduction. After the Urban Crisis: New York and the Rise of Inequality," *Journal of Urban History*, 43(6), 857.
[154] Mel performed these lines but they were written by Fletcher (Bootee).
[155] The lyrics referenced throughout this thesis are taken from Genius. For this song, they have been verified by group member Rahiem, https://genius.com/Grandmaster-flash-and-the-furious-five-the-message-lyrics.

seek escape but he cannot afford anywhere else, and even the temporary respite of driving away is denied due to vehicular repossession. This lack of a vehicle implies the failure of the body, as he "couldn't get far" without it. The depiction of the "junkies" links drug use to violence in a way less commonly seen in later records. Firstly, Mel's narrator gives no indication of any involvement in the drug trade; the "junkies" are just presented as another environmental hazard, similar to rats and roaches. Secondly, the violence associated with the taking of illegal drugs is associated with its users here, rather than its sellers or pushers as it is in much subsequent Hip-Hop. When the narrative of drug dealing becomes centralised in Hip-Hop lyricism, the representation of violence shifts more towards its use as a disciplinary, competitive tool. Here, Mel's narrator links violence and drugs through the threat that drug users pose to his own personal safety, rather than any bigger endemic violence associated with the drugs trade itself. Invoking three of the five senses, the song conveys an atmosphere of enclosure and confinement which sets up the tension and pressure that Mel articulates in the famous chorus:

> Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge
>
> I'm trying not to lose my head
>
> It's like a jungle sometimes
>
> It makes me wonder how I keep from going under

The odd and unsettling staccato laugh which follows the end of the last line of the chorus suggests to the listener that the narrator may already have 'gone under' and begun to lose his sanity.

"The Message" predates the emergence of gangsta rap by several years, but it played a part in laying the foundations for it by offering up shocking and disreputable images of life in America's metropolitan centres. Duke Bootee and Melle Mel wrote and performed their rhymes as a way of offering the audience their own, first-hand perspective with which to view neighbourhoods such as Mel's South Bronx or Bootee's Elizabeth, New Jersey.[156] Hip-Hop helped these kinds of narrative become the nexus around which complex issues of black political and artistic freedom circulate. Images of African Americans engaged in degrading or immoral activities run counter to much of the established black political thought which rose to the fore throughout the twentieth century and its grounding in the bourgeois notions of respectability and propriety.[157] Often these ideas were underpinned by a religiosity which inherited and propagated Anglo-Saxon norms of acceptable social behaviour through the vehicle of Christianity. Hip-Hop emerged after these movements had their brightest moments and achieved their greatest successes, the merits of which are often questioned and interrogated by radical black intellectuals and hip-hop performers alike. Rather than making music against the national economic boom times of the 1950s and 60s, accompanied by organised and committed black activism which was garnering attention on an international scale, Hip-Hop was created in an era of stagnation. This stagnation was both economic and political, with the energy that had typified the often oppositional and divided black politics of the preceding decades (the SCLC, the SNCC, the Nation of Islam and the OAUU, the Black Panther Party) having dissipated.[159]

[156] Qtd in an interview with Jay Quan, "GET FUNKY, MAKE MONEY & YA DON'T STOP: THE STORY OF DUKE BOOTEE AKA ED FLETCHER."
[157] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, Loc 2704
[159] The discriminatory practices of many unions kept African American workers towards the bottom of organised labour structures. The prosperity of these industries though contributed to an optimistic national mood as economic prosperity became tied to a gradually increasing acceptance of racial equality and between

The effects of this stagnation are highlighted in verse three of the song which opens with an act of intrafamily crime:

My brother's doing bad, stole my mother's

TV Says she watches too much, it's just not healthy

All My Children in the daytime, Dallas at night

Can't even see the game or the Sugar Ray fight

The bill collectors, they ring my phone

And scare my wife when I'm not home

Got a bum education, double-digit inflation

Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station

Neon King Kong standing on my back

Can't stop to turn around, broke my sacroiliac

A mid-range migraine, cancered membrane

Sometimes I think I'm going insane

I swear I might hijack a plane!

The lyrics continue the obsession with the diseased or damaged body culminating in mental illness. The narrator (now Duke Bootee) details his "broken sacroiliac," caused by the pressure of a "neon King Kong" on his back.[160] This implies that the pressure of existing

"1947 and 1974 Americans at every level of the economic spectrum had seen their situation improve a little every year." Harold Meyerson, "The Forty Year Slump," *The American Prospect*, November 12, 2013.

[160] There is conjecture about this line, see the song's genius page: https://genius.com/18800

under the weight, or stress, of living in a city geared towards consumption and excess is deleterious to one's health.[161] This physical decay mirrors the damage to familial bonds which opens the verse, and a sense of national paralysis. The "double digit inflation" suggests economic stasis and atrophy, whilst the "strike at the station" leaves the individual unable to move.[162] This replicates the feeling of entrapment that repossession of the narrator's car evoked in verse one. Piece by piece the song builds the sense of pressure and tension which underpins the terse hook and the claustrophobic, bewildering feeling of being lost in "a jungle."

"You'll grow in the ghetto living second-rate:"[163] Criminal aspirations.

The economic pressures which are pervasive throughout the song appear again and the opening couplet suggests the betrayal of a sacred bond in favour of financial gain. The author's brother steals their mother's TV, and the T.V. shows which the narrator misses—*All My Children* and *Dallas*—are dramas about wealthy and successful families, reflecting both the universal nature of familial disfunction and the aspirational quality of these programmes. This distinction, between the wealthy Ewings of *Dallas* – whose family

[161] The word "neon" brings to mind the gaudy advertisements of Times Square while the reference to King Kong fuses that with the iconic images of him atop the Empire State Building at the denouement of the 1933 film *King Kong* or the World Trade Centre in the 1976 remake. Either way, the yoking together of these two images suggests that advertising has run amok and taken over the city in the way that the mythical beast did. Dir. Merian C. Cooper & Ernest B. Schoedsack, *King Kong*, RKO Radio Pictures: 1933. Dir. Dino De Laurentiis, *King Kong*, Paramount Pictures: 1976. For other film representations of the stress of living in a changing New York see Corkin, Stanley. "Performing the New Economy: New York, Neoliberalism, and Mass Communication in Late 1970s Cinema," *Jump Cut*, vol. 54, 2012.

[162] It also refers to the contextual assault on organised labour that had begun with New York's fiscal crisis in the mid-70s and was being continued by President Reagan. Exemplified most forcefully in his treatment of striking air traffic control workers in 1981. See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 23-5.

[163] 'The Message,' verse five.

dynamics concern the management of a vast fortune and play out on the silver screen – and the narrator's family, whose disputes lead to the theft of a T.V. set, establishes a dichotomy between two very different Americas. This notion of a divided polis was particularly important in the age of deindustrialisation which characterised much of the seventies and eighties.[164] Deindustrialisation is a key influence, politically and aesthetically, in the formation of Hip-Hop.[165] It contributed to much of the economic instability and financial hardship that is so prevalent in the lyrics quoted above. Hip-Hop's earliest and most foremost scholar, Nelson George, summed up the effect of this economic instability upon the New York of his youth:

> A sense of despair and decay emanated from a poorly run City Hall, strike and corruption wracked municipal services, and the city was pervaded by the sense that it (and perhaps all big Northeastern cities) were essentially unlivable.[166]

George's portrait of a city in degeneration mirrors the image delivered from the ground by Melle Mel and Duke Bootee in "The Message." This notion of an "unliveable" space also contributed to Hip-Hop's earliest themes of partying and frivolity, a kind of defiant joy as if to revel was to rebel, a way to find a pressure release valve. In the youthful party culture of early Hip-Hop, teenagers who were struggling to find work and living with the reality of economic hardship could forget those problems for a few hours. It was for this

[164] Millions of manufacturing jobs were lost across these decades and the devaluation of the dollar led to an influx of cheap consumer goods which precipitated a shift from manufacturing to service and sales roles. Nelson Lichtenstein, "A Fabulous Failure: Clinton's 1990s and the Origins of Our Times," *American Prospect*, January 18, 2018.

[165] See Robin D.G. Kelley essay: 'kickin' reality, kickin' ballistics: gangsta rap and postindustrial los angeles,' in William Eric Perkins ed., *droppin' science: critical essays on rap music and hip hop culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) 117-159. See also, LaMonda Horton-Stallings. '"Im Goin Pimp Whores!": The Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip-Hop Neo-Slave Narrative,' *The New Centennial Review*, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2003, 189.

[166] Fricke and Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all,* vii.

reason that Grandmaster Flash did not want to record "The Message." As well as the content or tone of the early music, deindustrialisation and the post-modern aesthetic which it fostered also influenced the creation of Hip-Hop music. Grandmaster Flash satisfied his love of technology and audio equipment by scouring through the discarded broken T.V. sets and radios which littered his neighbourhood's many abandoned lots.[168] Flash picked through the fragments of broken equipment and then used this methodology, along with the other 'godfathers' of Hip-Hop, Herc and Bambaataa, to deconstruct music in the same way. Songs became assemblages of fragments to be dissolved and then interpolated, repurposed in new and exotic ways.

This sense of dissolution applied to the music, but also to the broader society, with traditional structures seemingly failing irreparably. The city of New York had made clear its feelings about the viability and sustainability of areas such as the South Bronx, whilst the optimism of the advances made two decades earlier by the civil rights movement had dissipated. The economic turmoil which wracked the nation was being brought to bear most forcefully upon those towards the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. "By the end of the decade, the South Bronx had lost almost 40% of its population. Touring the rubble in 1980, Ronald Reagan compared the neglected neighbourhood to London during the Blitz."[169] A sense of lawlessness and otherworldliness (whether real, imagined or imposed) was associated with the South Bronx. Its reputation as a kind of frontier between the rest of America and a dystopian future was reinforced by the designation of the police station there

[168] Dorian Lynskey. "Grandmaster Flash: "Hip-hop's message was simple: we matter,'' *The Guardian*, August 7, 2016.
[169] Lynskey, "Hip-Hop's Message Was Simple: We Matter."

as 'Fort Apache.'[170] In the absence of strong civic structures, un-orthodox and often illegal power bases offered citizens who felt cut adrift ways to belong. Street gangs and organised crime offered jobs, a sense of ownership and participation, and paradoxical legitimacy to disaffected youth.[171]

The post-industrial society, with its radically altered job market, presented a vastly diminished range of work options for young men, particularly those of colour.[172] The transition towards a service and financial services economy excluded many young men because of their appearance, accent, demeanour, or educational status as well as traditional gendered conceptions of roles in restaurants, bars, or department stores. Conversely, many of these poorly paid, low level, insecure jobs were not appealing to young men due to take their first steps into the job market.[173] The fiscal crisis had the effect that policing budgets were slashed: whilst the scourge of heroin was plaguing the Bronx and Harlem in the 70s, the budget for the special narcotics prosecutor was more than halved. This resulted in a situation whereby:

> The lack of employment for minority youth made gang culture and, later, hip-hop posses (where kids could be MCs, DJs, dancers, graffiti artists, or security guards) quite attractive. The lackadaisical criminal enforcement policies of the '70s

[170] This idea was sufficiently strong to warrant the making of a movie entitled *Fort Apache, The Bronx* starring Paul Newman. Grandmaster Flash grew up on Fox Street, in the vicinity of this police station. Dir. Daniel Petrie, *Fort Apache, The Bronx*. 1981. 20th Century Fox.
[171] Again, New York's predicament in this regard was immortalised in a movie. 1979's, *The Warriors,* documented the violent and spatial nature of gang conflict in a near-future version of the city. Dir. Walter Hill, *The Warriors*, Paramount Pictures. 1979.
[172]Simon, *Poor Discipline,* 149-15.
[173] See Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2005.) Kindle. Loc 1203 -1211.

> encouraged the experimentation that was eventually organized into the hip-hop industry."[174]

This illustrates how neoliberalism formed a self-perpetuating system whereby its implementation at the macro level of governmental or municipal budgets necessitated its adoption at the micro/personal level by fostering entrepreneurialism and the capitalisation of the self, or one's own culture in order to survive. Or, in some cases, thrive.

Hip-Hop performers, predominantly rappers, would prove particularly adept at this new mode of thinking, in no small part tutored in this mindset by experience of, or proximity to, elements of the informal inner-city economy that adopted a particularly neoliberal style of business model: the trade in illegal drugs. They would collapse the notion of their work, or their labour, into themselves, defining and modelling their artistic and creative personas in direct relation to their ability to 'work' and make money. We have already seen how the tentative early stages of this adoption were evident within Hip-Hop in the work of The Treacherous Three. Their work contains traces of the collaborative, potentially radical politics of the Civil Rights movement which are mixed jarringly with a self-help mantra of personal responsibility and personal improvement, inflected with notions of human capital and self-investment. Yet, not all acts (or indeed, all people) responded to these pressures in the overtly socially conservative and righteous way that The Treacherous Three proposed in "Yes We Can Can." As the 1980s progressed, more acts would detail and narrativize the trade in illegal drugs as a way to escape the strictures and economic oppression of the ghetto. Undertaking ethnographic research amongst drug dealers and

[174] Fricke and Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all,* viii – ix.

users in Spanish Harlem in the mid-to-late 80s, Phillipe Bourgois summarised the turn towards illegal substances as a form of "self-harm."[175]

Bourgois argues that illegal or destructive behaviours are an understandable if desperate response to the environment. This is directly contrary to The Treacherous Three's call for greater personal responsibility and a simple call to reject the allure of the 'street life.' In "The Message," the lyrics of Duke Bootee and Melle Mel narrativize and demonstrate the psychological angst that the "street-bound inner-city resident" experiences in trying to live a healthy, productive life under these pressures. What is of particular importance is the song's failure to identify with either The Treacherous Three's mantra of personal responsibility, or any alternative political standpoint; rather, it displays passivity, a seeming embodiment of Bourgois' "structural desperation."

"You got to have a con in this land of milk and honey": enter the ghetto entrepreneur

Mel's verse is long and tells the story of the short life of someone born into a neighbourhood such as his own. He claims that the narrative is a composition of his own experiences of the temptation and dangers of illegal activities – he was arrested and spent a night in jail for robbing an undercover police officer – and those of a friend who was more deeply involved in a criminal lifestyle.[176] If we divide the verse in two, the first half details youth and adolescence "in the ghetto":

A child is born with no state of mind

[175] Reinarman and Levine eds., *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, 62-3.
[176] "Melle Mel on "The Message," Jay-Z, Biggie, Eminem, KRS-One, Willie D (Full Interview,)" djvlad, *YouTube*, March 29, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxXQfkCFYCA.

Blind to the ways of mankind

God is smiling on you, but he's frowning too

Because only God knows what you'll go through

You'll grow in the ghetto living second-rate

And your eyes will sing a song called deep hate

The places you play and where you stay

Looks like one great big alleyway

You'll admire all the number-book takers

Thugs, pimps and pushers and the big money-makers

Driving big cars, spending twenties and tens

And you'll wanna grow up to be just like them, huh

Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers

Pickpocket peddlers, even panhandlers

You say "I'm cool, huh, I'm no fool."

The idea that the child is born tabula rasa suggests that it is their environment and the accompanying deprivation – to use KRS-One's term, "the reality of lack" – that cultivates "hate." In an environment of economic hardship, impressionable youth admire the individuals who have and overtly display their wealth, a coterie of characters who operate on the borderline of, or in direct opposition to, the rule of law.

These individuals range from the borderline respectable "number-book takers" to the violent and destructive "thugs, pimps and pushers." That all of these are distinct from "the big money-makers" reflects the pyramidal structure of organised crime, where the vast majority of workers are at a low (street) level with a few powerful individuals situated above them. The allure that these figures hold is based upon their subversion or defiance of the hardships the song has detailed up to this point. Whereas in an earlier verse the narrator couldn't get to his job because public transit was incapacitated, these figures work in the community.[177] Whereas Mel rapped as someone whose car had been taken from him, these figures drive impressive vehicles. They have visible disposable income, in larger denomination bank notes. They are everything which the narrative voice is not: financially solvent, active participants in consumer culture, employed, and independent. Independence is particularly important. Whereas the narrator is dependent on other people to be able to go to work (for someone else) and earn money to provide for his own dependents, these illicit workers are self-sufficient. The triumvirate of "Thugs, pimps and pushers" also contains key notions of masculinity and machismo: the ability to display and use violence; the sexual and social subjugation of women; and the ability to talk slickly and persuasively to push a particular product, most likely drugs. These ideas would go on to become essential to Hip-Hop narratives throughout the 1980s, 90s and into the new millennium, as will be detailed in the following chapters. Through engaging with them subsequent generations of MCs increasingly sought to become "big money-makers." As Mel states, "And you'll wanna grow up to be just like them," reflecting the allure of characters who exist above the problems which constrain people in the inner city.

[177] That their work itself damages and in part, destroys, the community does not seem to be a barrier to admiring them.

The "number took takers" are runners for the policy, a neighbourhood lottery introduced by West Indian immigrants in the early 1900s which had huge popularity within New York's black communities throughout the twentieth century.[178] Technically, it was illegal, but in practice the community gave it both financial and cultural capital which ensured that it prospered and remained an institution in African American communities for much of the twentieth century. At the birth of Hip-Hop the numbers were still a profitable operation. One study in Brooklyn's Bedford Stuyvesant – birthplace of JAY-Z and Biggie Smalls – found that as recently as 1972, wagers on the numbers totalled $300 million annually.[179] The numbers' status as an employer in neighbourhoods which were beset by disproportionate unemployment – particularly during the years immediately following the great depression – is one substantive reason why it was so integral to black day-to-day life.[180] As well as employing thousands of individuals, policy financiers and the money that they generated from the enterprise provided the community with a source of financial assistance which they were not able to secure elsewhere.[181] The heads of policy banks acted as informal financial institutions, providing charitable donations to aid societies as well as small loans to businesses and individuals, and creating greater liquidity in communities which could not use the services available to others as a result of the racist policies of major banks. Rufus Schatzberg and Robert J. Kelly in *African American Organized Crime: A Social History* (1996) state that "numbers bankers constituted the largest investors in ghetto real estate and the chief source of funding for African-American businesses."[182] In this way,

[178] See Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1968, 108 and E Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States*, New York: Collier Books, 1962, 174.
[179] Schatzberg, Rufus & Kelly, Robert J. *African American Organized Crime: A Social History*. New York: Rutgers University Press, 1996. 73
[180] McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* p.182
[181] Schatzberg & Kelly, *African American Organized Crime,* 69.
[182] Schatzberg & Kelly, *African American Organized Crime, 75.*

policy came to resemble a parallel government or society. Even though its provision was only financial, and it could not wholly replicate the services of the state, the actions of policy bosses filled a void created by the neglect of impoverished neighbourhoods. This concept is at the crux of how and why the numbers game was so accommodated in black communities.

The lack of direct moral comparison between legitimate and illegitimate occupations is one of the rhetorical advantages that "The Message" has over a song such as "Yes We Can Can," insofar as it does not lecture its audience. Mel acknowledges and empathises with the temptation that illegitimate pursuits hold but undermines them by placing them in concert with an undesirable activity such as panhandling and demonstrating how quickly a life on the streets can remove the individual's supposed agency:

> But then you wind up dropping outta high school
>
> Now you're unemployed, all null and void
>
> Walking 'round like you're Pretty Boy Floyd
>
> Turned stick-up kid, but look what you done did
>
> Got sent up for a eight-year bid
>
> Now your manhood is took and you're a Maytag
>
> Spend the next two years as a undercover fag
>
> Being used and abused to serve like hell
>
> 'Til one day you was found hung dead in the cell
>
> It was plain to see that your life was lost
>
> You was cold and your body swung back and forth

But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song

Of how you lived so fast and died so young, so...

The quick transition in these lines from aspiration to degradation, embodies the idea of a slippery slope, one which promises financial independence and self-esteem but actually removes agency and liberty. That Melle Mel can use the name of a famous criminal such as Pretty Boy Floyd as a by-word for a certain bearing and image reinforces the earlier concept of the celebrity nature of infamy or notoriety.[183] Indeed, in 1970s and 80s New York, drug kingpins such as Nicky Barnes and Frank Lucas were celebrities, with far from condemnatory coverage in the mainstream media.[184] Yet in "The Message" this potential acclaim turns into the loss of freedom through incarceration and then emasculation as the subject becomes a victim of prison rape.[185] Prison rape stands as the antithesis of what those alluring illegal activities seemingly represent: autonomy, masculinity, self-sufficiency, and potential freedom. The life of crime as an escape from a dire financial and social situation can lead to circumstances where the individual is unable to escape an even more damaging physical and personal situation. This is the kind of warning and instruction that The Treacherous Three attempt to give on "Yes We Can Can" with their line "It's the brain that separates the men from the boys." Yet, theirs is a different register of advice; it asks the listener to do something for positive affirmation and to be better. Mel instead shows an un-reported side of what can happen if it all goes wrong. That this is presented in a documentary style,

[183] This notion is discussed extensively in Einreinhoffer Jr.'s piece ''Success' as a Narcotics King" where he describes Frank Lucas as a "contemporary Horatio Alger." William Einreinhoffer Jr. "'Success' as a Narcotics King," *New York Times* May 15, 1977; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.
[184] Barnes was featured on the cover of *New York Times Magazine* in a piece which touted his organisational genius and position as "Mr Untouchable," *New York Times Magazine*, June 5th, 1977.
[185] Despite being an endemic and widespread problem in U.S. correctional facilities, prison rape is a rarely discussed subject within Hip-Hop lyrics.

without overt persuasion, and with repeated use of the pronoun 'you' has a more direct, visceral impact on the listener.

The verse both acknowledges the allure of a life of crime in its first half and offers discouragement from that life by showing what may happen as a result, in the second half. Crucially, it imparts these lessons via a narrative which is empathetic to the emotions and experiences of its central character. The verse is bookended by two references to the subject's eyes; at first, they sing of "deep hate" and latterly they "sing the sad, sad song" of his early, untimely death. This double use of the eyes draws attention to the notion of perspective and observation. The song itself is positioned and marketed as bearing witness to the perils of life in the inner-city during this period. This is reinforced by the reviews, which place it in the lineage of other great protest music. The perspective assumed in the song is intimate and switches between first and second person narratives to maintain this sense of immediacy and authenticity. This notion of self-reliance and selfhood even extends to the subject's death via suicide. Sick of being "used and abused" by other people, he ultimately takes his own life: a moment of transgressive self-harm and finite violence but also a tragic reclamation of selfhood. The power to give and take life is supreme and it becomes central to concepts of authority and power in Hip-Hop's later narratives; in this instance the victim exercises the only power he has left, the power to end his life. In this way the narrative is a microcosm of the "self-destructive practices" that Bourgois discusses; committing a transgressive act imparts a feeling of agency and self-determination to the oppressed individual. Again, "The Message" revisits the idea of the fragile or damaged human body as a site of physical abuse and psychological distress.

LaMonda Horton-Stallings explains the sustained obsession with the body in Hip-Hop as "at once the result of a loss of place and space, politically and socially, but at the same time the practice of corporeal freedom."[186] "The Message" stands as an early example of this, with its detailed account of the pressures of urban life both testifying to the trying conditions of 1980s New York, but also showing survival and creation within those conditions. Even as Melle Mel describes the hanging body to the listener he is repurposing the tragic circumstances in two main ways, firstly as a form of gritty entertainment and secondly as an implicit morality tale which warns of the potential consequences of following the same path. This notion of resilience, of continuing and striving, despite an inhospitable environment, is at the centre of the song's enduring appeal. Mel felt that its themes and perspective were so universal as to have transcended the genre:

> It wasn't necessarily even a hip-hop song. People compared it with Bob Dylan, with Stevie Wonder's "Living For The City," with The Temptations' "Masterpiece." Great songs with the same bloodline. It was bigger than Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five. It was bigger than hip-hop. It was everybody's song.[187]

As well as the simple, effective music, the song's content chimed with people who were experiencing the perils of inner-city life or who enjoyed hearing about it. It depicts prostitution, violence, drug dealing, rape and a litany of other crimes. This raises the possibility that white listeners responded positively to the song because it reinforced preconceptions of black urbanites as wretched and maladjusted. This notion falls in line with the prevailing institutional appraisal of black life in America's cities in what became

[186] Horton-Stallings, "Im Goin Pimp Whores!" 188.
[187] Love, "*Rap Moves On: The Making of The Message by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, An Oral History*."

colloquially known as "The Moynihan Report" (1965) which had outlined this case nearly twenty years prior, in which time its author had progressed to become US senator for New York.[188] Melle Mel rejects this conclusion by reflecting that it is the universalism of the song which made it so popular, in particular the staccato hook, delivered through gritted teeth: "Don't. Push. Me. Cause. I'm. Close To. The. Edge":

> At that time, anybody could have said that. Y'know, at that time half the people in America probably wanted to say that. And then when the record came out it was like 'somebody said this shit, here it is!'[189]

Yet despite the track's commercial and critical success it ultimately proved disastrous for the group's long-term prospects. The divisions which the making of the record had created were irreparable and Grandmaster Flash reflects on the period as one of dissolution and despair:

> I fought Sylvia and I cried & cried, and that's when I got into drugs to escape reality. A stranger came in and divided and conquered basically. When I lost the love & belief of Mel there was no way it could properly survive. We couldn't relate, couldn't sit in the same dressing room. […] Then came the ugly court battle & [Robinson] stuck [the title] 'Grandmaster' on Mel & the pain continued. This is how I feed my children; as great as Mel is, he don't have to put 'Grandmaster' on his name for the sake of a record company that don't like me.[190]

[188] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 67.
[189] "BIG BANK HANK, DUKE BOOTEE, MELLE MEL & OTHERS SPEAK ON RAPPERS DELIGHT & THE MESSAGE & PLANET ROCK," interview with Bootee, Mel & Flash, 9.08.
[190] JayQuan, "GRANDMASTER FLASH INTERVIEW," *Tha Foundation*, accessed June 11, 2019, http://thafoundation.com/flint.htm.

It is telling that one of the key consequences mentioned is the loss of love, and the loss of belief. Fraternal love and a kind of brotherly solidarity are important concepts in the formation of masculinity, and masculine relationships, which is central to Hip-Hop in this period. The proliferation of rap groups, posses and collectives and their bivalent relationship to street gangs as reflections and rejections of each other will be discussed in detail later in the thesis.[191] It is important to note that for Flash, it was the breakdown of his relationship with Melle Mel which seems to hurt him as much as anything else. Similarly, the idea of the title Grandmaster being bestowed upon someone else is highlighted as a provocation. This exposes some of the tensions created by the 'entrepreneur of the self' mantra, which is central to neoliberalism and, by turn, to Hip-Hop. If one commodifies and monetises the self – in this instance by utilising a fictitious title which reinforces a brand – then the self (or elements of the self) can be bought or co-opted like any other commodity and then bestowed upon others. As Flash says, Sylvia "stuck Grandmaster on Mel" as if it were jewellery or clothing or any other consumer good. He was clearly aggrieved by this and given the differences in outlook highlighted in his and Mel's reaction to the concept of recording "The Message" earlier, maybe this aggravation was born from his commitment to artistic or personal freedom, though the phrase "this is how I feed my children," suggests financial as well as authorial concerns.

Flash also highlights the precariousness that he felt with regards to his financial situation, a reminder that for many of Hip-Hop's pioneers, success as a musical act was not the golden goose it has now become. [192] Similarly, his openness about his emotions and his

[191] One of the key figures in this process is Afrika Bambaataa, whose Zulu Nation was seen as a way to channel youths in the Bronx away from gangs and into positive collective activities.
[192] As early as the mid-70s, when he was still in his teens, Flash had two children and "at least two girlfriends" who were financially dependent on him. Andrew Purcell, "All Hands on Deck," *The Guardian*, February 27, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/feb/27/grandmaster-flash-interview.

turning to drugs as a way to obviate the pain that the experience with "The Message" caused him is somewhat unusual in Hip-Hop's narratives of self-sufficiency, braggadocio and often conservative personal politics. As we will see in later chapters, many artists seek to draw clear distinctions between themselves as sellers of drugs and the people who choose to use them. This is done by disparaging users as 'addicts', 'fiends', 'crackheads' and a host of other dehumanising terms. It is a rhetorical strategy which is startling in its similarity to that used by agents of the state who seek to label users of prohibited drugs as somehow deviant or immoral. This strategy attempts to assuage any guilt felt about the treatment of users by those who supply them. For the pusher turned rapper this may be in relation to incidents of violence or sexual exploitation or the specific act of selling the drug and the caustic effect it may have on users' health and the broader health of the community. For the legislator or the narcotics hawk, it may be a way to make it easier to justify increasingly draconian and severe punishment towards these individuals.[193] In both regards, these derogatory labels applied to drug users demonstrate the absorption of and subscription to the neoliberal primacy of 'personal responsibility' on behalf of the labeller. If drug use is the personal responsibility of the user, harsh legal penalties are legitimised. But this view also works for the drug dealer. They are taking responsibility for themselves by doing what they can to improve their situation through entrepreneurial activity, regardless of legality. Dealing thus constitutes a good risk in neoliberal terms. By contrast the customer—especially those addicted to drugs—does not have agency or the ability to take neoliberal

[193] In 1986 alone, examples of this rhetoric included occasions when Los Angeles police chief Daryl Gates seriously advocated shooting occasional drug users. And during a radio talk show, Drug Czar William Bennett stated he did not have a moral problem with 'beheading' drug dealers." Reinarman and Levine ed., *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, 231.

'personal responsibility' and change their own behaviours and is thus worthy of contempt.[194]

'White Lines (Don't Do It!)': Drugs and Hip-Hop in the 1980s

"The Message" paved the way from the mid-1980s onwards for a number of rap songs to deal explicitly with drugs and their impact, and as the decade progressed it became increasingly common for rap songs to reference and confront the taking and selling of drugs.[195] The trend towards greater prevalence of drug themes in music mirrors the shifting thematic waves within Hip-Hop that occurred across decades, with Gangsta and Mafioso rap being the most important movements in relation to the explosion of drug narratives. In the broader societal context it reflects the mainstreaming of discussions around drug use spurred by the Reagan administration's concerted 'War on Drugs' media drive.[196] In the 1980s, some of the most high-profile 'drug' records were those which, like "Yes We Can" and "The Message" itself, carried an explicitly anti-drug message. These primarily focussed on preventing or discouraging usage rather than on selling and key among them were tracks like "White Lines" (1983) by the newly anointed 'Grandmaster' Melle Mel, "Monster Crack"

[194] This is a perception which has endured regardless of whether addictive behaviours are ascribed to a behavioural, or biological causation. It is a concept discussed in Sally Satel, and Scott O Lilienfeld. "Addiction and the Brain-Disease Fallacy." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 4. LAUSANNE: FRONTIERS MEDIA SA: 141–141.

[195] Berkeley University Associate Professor Denise Herd analysing this phenomenon found that drug mentions increased from appearing in 4% of the most popular songs from 79-84', to 45% in the early 90s. Herd's study is particularly specific insofar as it only considers "artists who are African American" and primarily based in Manhattan. Sarah Yang, "New study finds glamorization of drugs in rap music jumped dramatically over two decade," UC Berkeley News, April 1, 2008, https://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2008/04/01_rapmusic.shtml.

[196] "Beginning in 1986 and continuing into the early 1990s, major American institutions – churches, schools, media, political organizations, voluntary groups, advertisers, foundations – carried on what amounted to a huge national educational campaign about drugs in general and crack in particular. [...] virtually all these institutions took up the tasks of promoting the policies of the War on Drugs and of single-mindedly and simple-mindedly demonizing illicit drug use." Reinarman and Levine eds. *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice,* 3.

(1987) by the aforementioned Kool Moe Dee and towards the decade's close 2Night of the Living Baseheads" (1988) by Public Enemy.[197] In the long history of Hip-Hop, these songs are now viewed as outliers and as lyrical themes progressed, vilification and caricaturing of users or dealers as 'monsters' became less common and increasingly the *business* of drugs was the reason for their role in the narrative.

Among the most important of the mid-80s 'anti' drug songs was 1984's "White Lines (Don't Do It)" which despite being released by Sugarhill under the ambiguous title of 'Grandmaster & Melle Mel' was essentially a Melle Mel solo record. The confused branding was an attempt by the label to suggest that Flash was involved even though the group's acrimonious split had occurred many months earlier.[198] This sets the tone for a song which is aesthetically, conceptually, and methodologically conflicted. The song's creation involved a blatant utilisation of the song "Cavern" (1983) by New York funk-art group Liquid Liquid with the track being covered and modulated by Sugar Hill's in-house band, but not made sufficiently different to prevent its creators from suing the label for copyright infringement. This legal action rumbled on for well over a decade amid claims that Sugar Hill executives tried to use their connections to organised crime to intimidate Liquid Liquid's label, 99 Records, into withdrawing their complaint.[199] Over the top of this hotly contested backing track Melle Mel raps what ostensibly is an anti-drug song but which simultaneously glamourizes and exoticizes the taking of cocaine. By a peculiar twist of fate, Grandmaster Flash was on his way to buy freebase when he heard the song for the first time; and he

[197] Released respectively on: 12" single by Sugarhill Records, 1983; the self-titled album *Kool Moe Dee* released on vinyl by Jive Records, 1987; 12" single released by Def Jam, 1988.
[198] "Five Rare and Collectible Classic Hip Hop LPs." *Goldmine*, vol. 41, no. 6, Spring, 2015, 22.
[199] Peter DiCola & Kembrew McLeod, *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 113.

recalls that he felt as if Melle Mel was talking to him directly.[200] It is a funky party record, with instrumental breakdowns to facilitate break dancing, that carries a serious message of restraint and dire warnings of the effects of drug abuse. Mel himself was a frequent and long-time user of cocaine which adds another layer of irony, or hypocrisy, to his "don't do it" message. That this message is parenthesised in the song's title is important as it suggests its separation from the main thrust of the narrative. The song is about white lines of powder cocaine, with an instruction against taking cocaine added in parentheses as if it is an afterthought or a requirement, akin to a film certification. Despite this, it is a song which has remained popular and well regarded: *Rolling Stone* ranked it the 55th "Greatest Hip-Hop Song of All Time" and *Pitchfork* chose it as the 122nd best song of the 1980s.[201] "White Lines" was taken at face value by many listeners, including the *New York Times* critic Robert Palmer who believed that the song was attempting to dissuade listeners from taking recreational drugs.[202] In the biography of Melle Mel for his induction into The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame the song is defined as "*the* anti-cocaine rap."[203] In reality, the song is far more ambiguous.

The first word uttered on the track is "base," which cuts in over the top of a funky guitar chord and the chamber music style "aaaah" of the backing singers and precipitates the beginning of the first chorus. The word is said in a matter-of-fact tone by Melle Mel and in the context of a music ensemble it sounds as if it is a frontman or a band leader calling for the bass section of his accompanying band to join the track. But as the rest of the song

[200] Purcell, "All Hands on Deck."
[201] Rolling Stone, "100 Greatest Hip-Hop Songs of All Time," *Rolling Stone*, June 2, 2017, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/100-greatest-hip-hop-songs-of-all-time-105784/snoop-doggy-dogg-gin-and-juice-101565/ & Pitchfork, "The 200 Best Songs of the 1980s," *Pitchfork*, August 24, 2015, https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9700-the-200-best-songs-of-the-1980s/?page=4.
[202] Robert Palmer, "What Pop Lyrics Say to Us Today: What Pop Lyrics Say to Us Today," *New York Times*, February 24, 1985, 54.
[203] Rob Patterson, "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five," *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*, https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/grandmaster-flash-and-furious-five.

shows, Mel is actually stating "base" – a shortening of "freebase" – as a signifier for cocaine; it is a feature of the track which he revisits throughout and it provides the structure for the instrumental breakdowns catering towards b-boys, b-girls, and dancers.[204] The pre-chorus before the first verse begins with a dialogue between the collective backing group, parenthesized below, and Mel himself:

> (White Lines) Visions, dreams of passion
>
> (Blowing through my mind) And all the while I think of you
>
> (High price) A very strange reaction
>
> (For us to unwind) The more I see, the more I do
>
> (Something like a phenomenon) Baby!
>
> (Telling your body to come along, but white lines blow away)
>
> (Blow! Rock it! Blow!)

This exchange establishes the track's schizophrenic atmosphere with the high, ethereal voices of the singers juxtaposed against Mel's booming and efficient delivery. The singing voices are long, high and languid and their words are elongated as they harmonise; it takes them longer to sing "white lines" than it does for Mel to close out the line with his four words. The effect of this is that each line contains its own crescendo as the singers build melodically through the keys until Mel snaps in and delivers his line. This effect mirrors the rush or euphoria of a cocaine high and the sharp come down or break from a period of elevation or ecstasy. The end of these selected lines where the ensemble voices dreamily

[204] That these 'breakdowns' were still a feature of the track's composition highlights its liminal position between old school Hip-Hop and the golden age of the late 80s and early 90s.

stretch the word away into a harmony and then curtail it with the staccato delivery of "Blow! Rock it!" is particularly effective in this regard.

These shouted words re-appear during the song's breakdowns and all reference cocaine, with some also being terms for breakdancing postures, moves or poses: "Blow," "Rock It," "Freeze," "Rock," "Cane," "Sugar." Mel's invoking of the term "freebase," dates the song as appearing before the so-called 'crack epidemic' or at least before its popular acceptance as a contemporary phenomenon.[205] Freebase was an important forerunner to crack as a smokable form of cocaine, and it had been used as a method of consumption for cocaine vapours for at least a decade.[206] The major difference between freebase and crack is in its method of production: both involve dissolving cocaine hydrochloride into a liquid base, driving off the water and then smoking the resulting substance but freebase involves an additional final purification, typically involving heating the alkaloidal cocaine with ether.[207] This purification is done by the user themselves as the final product is unstable and not suitable for extended storage. It is a process which involves some technical skill and is extremely dangerous due to the potential for ignition and explosion. This danger was brought into the public consciousness in 1980, when the comedian Richard Pryor accidentally set himself on fire whilst preparing freebase in his home. [208] He suffered third degree burns and nearly died, having taken just two weeks to become addicted to the

[205] There are a number of conflicting 'first sightings' and crack cocaine first appeared somewhere between 1981 and 1985. Regardless of where it was first found, it did not become commonplace in drug markets and on the streets of American cities until the mid-80s.
[206] Alyssa Beaver, "Getting a Fix on Cocaine Sentencing Policy: Reforming the Sentencing Scheme of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986," *Fordham Law Review* 78 (5). NEW YORK: FORDHAM UNIV SCHOOL LAW: 2540.
[207] John P. Morgan and Lynn Zimmer, "The Social Pharmacology of Smokeable Cocaine: Not All It's Cracked Up to Be"in *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, ed., Reinaman and Levine, 133-4.
[208] Stephen Farber. "Success Holds no Laughter for Richard Pryor: For Richard Pryor, Success is Serious." *New York Times*, July 12, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/12/arts/success-holds-no-laughter-for-richard-pryor.html.

substance according to his then-wife Jennifer Lee who described how "the drug had moved in and it had become his lover and everything. I did not exist."[209] The Pryor incident demonstrates why freebase was so easily and enthusiastically replaced by crack cocaine. When 'crack' cocaine appeared, it removed both major logistical problems that cocaine smokers experienced with freebase. Crack could be prepared, or 'cooked', by drug-dealers rather than users and because it did not need to be dissolved again; the addition of baking soda produced hard pellets or 'rocks' which were easily transportable and readily smoked. Despite not being as pure as freebase – a result of the omitted final purification – crack provided a smokable form of cocaine vapour which produced the same instantaneous rush with the added benefits for the user of safer, easier and eventually cheaper, obtainability.[210] These were also important advantages for drug dealers, making crack a far more profitable, accessible and saleable product than freebase. Its innovation sparked a major democratisation of drug markets which will be explored primarily in the chapters two and three.

That Mel uses freebase, rather than 'crack,' as one of the staple features of "White Lines" reinforces the song's position on the cusp of the rapid transition into the crack era. In November 1985, *The New York Times* ran a story entitled "A New, Purified Form of Cocaine Causes Alarm as Abuse Increases."[212] The piece acknowledged that crack first appeared in the Bronx the previous year (when "While Lines" was released) before spreading to the other boroughs, a process similar to that of Hip-Hop's expansion from the projects of Bronx

[209] Chris Summers, "The demons that drove Richard Pryor to make us laugh," *BBC*, August 25, 2013, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-23724276.
[210] Morgan and Zimmer, "The Social Pharmacology of Smokeable Cocaine: Not All It's Cracked Up to Be," 131.
[212] Jane Gross, "A New, Purified Form of Cocaine Causes Alarm as Abuse Increases." *New York Times*, November 29, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/29/nyregion/a-new-purified-form-of-cocaine-causes-alarm-as-abuse-increases.html

River and Sedgwick Avenue over a decade earlier.[213] The article carries quotes from a number of experts in both drug treatment and drug policing which mark crack cocaine out as something new, something different and something far worse than anything they have seen before. Chief amongst their concerns appears to be the effect that "freebasing" crack (as the article, somewhat confusingly calls it) has on adolescents and "reports of sexual degradation from women using crack." At the centre of the various claims that are made is the idea that smoking cocaine (both as crack and freebase) increases its addictiveness, which in turn leads to all manner of deviant behaviour to continue to source and smoke more cocaine. As one expert puts it "Unlike normal cocaine, people who free-base can't stop." These kinds of claims were made repeatedly throughout the 1980s, as part of the public front of the War on Drugs. President Reagan referred to the supposed super-addictiveness of crack cocaine in his infamous "Speech to the Nation on the Campaign against Drug Abuse" of 1986 when he claimed: "today there's a new epidemic: smokable cocaine, otherwise known as crack. It is an explosively destructive and often lethal substance which is crushing its users. It is an uncontrolled fire."[214] Yet there is no scientific evidence to suggest that one form of cocaine ingestion is any more addictive than another, and the theory that 'crack' was a substance at the apex of potential addictiveness has been widely and consistently discredited.[215]

[213] Fricke and Ahearn, *yes yes y'all*, 13.
[214] Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and The University of Virginia Miller Centre. Ronald Reagan, "September 14, 1986: Speech to the Nation on the Campaign Against Drug Abuse," Miller Center, accessed 10 February, 2018, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-14-1986-speech-nation-campaign-against-drug-abuse#dp-expandable-text.
[215] Morgan and Zimmer, "The Social Pharmacology of Smokeable Cocaine," 147.

Scholars Craig Reinarman, Dan Waldorf, Sheigla B. Murphy and Harry G. Levine reject the simplistic substance-led explanation for the reported popularity of crack cocaine, arguing instead that its use/abuse was the result of broader structural societal problems:

> The dominant discourse about crack and freebase consistently implies that this form of cocaine use is so overwhelmingly pleasurable that it is not only 'instantly' but universally addictive. […] Yet the fallacy of pharmacological determinism on which this view rests is exposed by the very unequal susceptibility to crack abuse across middle-class and impoverished communities. Historically, from the so-called 'gin epidemic' in the slums of the eighteenth-century London to the 'heroin epidemic' of urban America in the early 1970s, the worst drug problems have always been concentrated amid profound and pre-existing human suffering.[216]

This argument is supported by the anecdotal evidence contained within pieces such as the aforementioned *New York Times* article wherein the author claims that nobody knows if crack is being taken to the same degree in the suburbs as in urban neighbourhoods and speculates that this may be because it is consumed indoors. There is an overt misogyny and classism in the reporting on cocaine and drugs in this period. Another *New York Times* article which explores the "frightening" increase in cocaine use among Americans states that it was "once a drug used mainly by well-to-do men in their 20s and 30s" but that now "an increasing proportion of users are blue-collar workers and women."[217] With an estimated 25 million Americans having taken cocaine and 5 to 6 million of those regular

[216] Craig Reinarman, Dan Waldorf, Sheigla B. Murphy and Harry G. Levine, "The Contingent Call of the Pipe: Bingeing and Addiction Among Heavy Cocaine Smokers," in *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, ed., Reinaman and Levine, 90.
[217] Jane E Brody, "The Number of Cocaine Users is Escalating with Frightening Rapidity Across the Country." *New York Times*, May 23, 1984, p1.

users of the drug, it appears not so much how many people were taking cocaine but who was taking it that was the problem.[218] Donald J. McConnell, executive director of the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, discussing the changing demographics of powder and crack use, stated that cocaine "went from the champagne drug to the beer drug."[219]

Throughout his televised speech, Reagan sought to inculcate an opposition to drug taking that would be grounded in a politics of censure, self-restraint, and respectability. Using terse statements such as "(t)here's no moral middle ground" and "(i)ndifference is not an option," the President opted to make the rhetoric around drugs a binary choice between permissiveness and prohibition, between those for and those against, between right and wrong. This is merely the illusion of choice; people are unlikely to deliberately choose the side of 'wrongfulness.' We can see here one of the central tensions and crutches of neoliberalism, the perception and promotion of choice. To function as a system of governance, neoliberalism must construct an apparatus which facilitates and mandates constant choosing on the part of its inhabitants.[220] Owing to its mistrust and disavowal of governmental intervention, neoliberalism opts to atomise the broad societal responsibility of governance into millions upon millions of instances of governance of the self. In this way, the state is divested of its responsibility to make decisions for its citizens and the responsibility and weight of those decisions comes to rest upon the individual. It is a paradox in which by stepping back from intervening in the lives of individuals, neoliberalism's influence over those lives is intensified exponentially.[221] This works by forcing the individual, via the removal of state support and protection, to navigate the

[218] Brody, "The Number of Cocaine Users is Escalating" 1.
[219] Beaver, "Getting a Fix on Cocaine Sentencing Policy," 2538.
[220] Jason Read "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity." *Foucault Studies*, no. 6: 25–36. 2009, 6.
[221] Read, "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus," 6.

marketplace as an isolated self and make judicious decisions, or choices, which incorporate estimations of risk and investment with regard to themselves as human capital.[222] Reagan thereby presents drug taking as a choice in which abstinence confers societal acceptance and moral rectitude and partaking offers the opposite.

This strategy was part of the 'New Right' rebuilding of the Republican party, of which Reagan was a key architect.[223] This attempt to restructure the party and the country around seemingly lost 'traditional family values' shifted responsibility away from society and towards the individuals. We can see here the synergy between conservatism and neoliberalism on the subject of 'choice.' Both ideologies perceive success and failure to be outcomes in direct correlation to choice-making and personal responsibility. For conservative moralists, this personal responsibility takes the form of obeying societal, cultural and often religious commandments around behaviour and transgression. For neoliberals, personal responsibility is viewed via the prism of investment and entrepreneurialism of the self, cultivating human capital and making profitable and sound decisions. In both these regimes of thought, failure or disfunction is a choice in of itself, or the result of a series of poorly made choices. As Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine have summarised:

> The most basic premise of social science – that individual choices are influenced by social circumstances – was rejected as left-wing ideology […] Reagan and the New Right constricted the aperture of attribution for America's ills so that only the lone

[222] Financialization plays a key role in this process with individuals increasingly expected to be financially literate within an economy defined by finance. See Krippner, Greta R. "The Financialization of the American Economy." *Socio-Economic Review* 3 (2), 173.
[223] Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine, "The Crack Attack: Politics and Media in the Crack Scare," in *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, ed., Reinaman and Levine, 37.

> deviant came into focus. They conceptualized people in trouble as people who make trouble [...] they made social control rather than social welfare the organizing axis of public policy.[224]

This political position relies on a process of cognitive dissonance to fashion its supposed 'solutions' to what it perceives to be a drug epidemic so severe it is a threat to the national fabric. The perpetual invocation of personal responsibility has its logical conclusion in First Lady Nancy Reagan's infamous 'Just Say No' approach to the dangers of drug use.[225] This simplistic mantra meant that the President could in his speech to the nation use apocalyptic language to describe the addictiveness, dangers and impact of crack cocaine, and his wife could simultaneously tell listeners to "just say no." This cognitive dissonance prompted Robert Morales to include the First Lady's message in *Vibe* magazine's "Ten Hard Steps to Hip Hop."[226] The magazine described the ten steps as a summary of "the most pivotal non-musical hip hop moments of these last hundred calendars." The list placed the 'Just Say No' moment alongside the Watts riots, Jesse Owens gold medals and the Harlem Renaissance in terms of its importance. Morales claims the moment was a driving force in Hip-Hop, as "minority youth" responded to Reagan's "naked hostility and the administration's hypocrisy by tuming a raised middle finger into a multimillion-dollar industry."

This tension between the supposed addictiveness of cocaine and the apparent simplicity with which it could be defeated ('Just Say No') resulted in both the substance and

[224] Reinarman and Levine, "The Crack Attack: Politics and Media in the Crack Scare," 37. Reinarman and Levine's estimation is supported by Themis Chronopoulos in his work on the utilisation of the "broken windows" theory of policing in New York. See Chronopoulos, T. (2020). The Making of the Orderly City: New York since the 1980s. *Journal of Urban History*, 46(5), 1099-1100.
[225] The three-word phrase was first said by Nancy Reagan in 1982 and it was well known by the time 'White Lines' was recorded in 1984. *Vibe* magazine included it
[226] Robert Morales, "Ten Hard Steps to Hip Hop," *Vibe*, Dec.1999-Jan2000, 107.

those who could not 'resist' it being demonized; and this is an idea which Melle Mel subversively mimics in "White Lines" when he says:

> Athletes rejected, governors corrected
>
> Gangsters, thugs and smugglers are thoroughly respected
>
> The money gets divided
>
> The women get excited
>
> Now I'm broke and it's no joke
>
> It's hard as hell to fight it, don't buy it!

The notion that it is very difficult to resist cocaine is immediately followed by an instruction to resist it. Across the song itself this idea is reinforced by the various exotic and exciting ways in which the substance is described, such as "a million magic crystals, painted pure and white." These enticing, intoxicating vignettes are juxtaposed with staid notions of self-policing as when Mel says, "And if you get hooked, baby / It's nobody else's fault, so don't do it!" There is obviously truth in the idea that each person is responsible for their own actions, habits and what goes in their body, but the proximity established in the lyrics between the allure of the drug and calls to restraint highlights the complexities of intoxicants and potentially addictive substances and the inadequacies of a public policy of abstinence as an effective form of harm prevention.[227]

[227] *Scientific American* explained the ways in which the policy failed American youth in Scott O. Lilienfeld and Hal Arkowitz, "Why Just Say No Doesn't Work," *Scientific American*, January 1, 2014. A variation on the theme of 'Just Say No' can be found in an advert for the "Whats your anti drug" campaign in *Vibe* magazine from December 2000 which asks readers a serious of questions including what "is the thing you choose to do instead of doing drugs?" The advert positions drug use as a choice and ends with an instruction for readers to "stay strong, much respect." *Vibe*, December 2000, 131.

The song also takes aim at a notoriously controversial aspect of the War on Drugs, the 'Rockefeller' drug laws. The laws, passed in 1973 and named after their proponent, Governor of New York Nelson Rockefeller, are noteworthy for the severity of the penalties they introduced for drug offences.[228] The laws made selling heroin a 'Category A' offence, comparable to first degree murder, and imposed mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines which tied the hands of judges and forced them to dispense uniformly harsh justice. This severe attitude to drug prohibition had unintended consequences:

> Adults, in order to avoid the stringent mandatory minimum sentences imposed by the law, hired adolescents, who continued to be sent to juvenile court, to handle street-level sales. [...] The Rockefeller law began the 'juvenalization' of drug trading, which became even more apparent in the 1980s with the rise of the crack cocaine market.[229]

It also precipitated a national move towards increasingly severe laws against drug possession and drug distribution. As with the advent of neoliberalism as fiscal and social policy, New York would prove to be the bellwether for late twentieth century narco-policing. Melle Mel highlights the inherent unfairness of this policing with the lines:

> A street kid gets arrested, gonna do some time
>
> He got out three years from now just to commit more crime
>
> A businessman is caught with 24 kilos
>
> He's out on bail and out of jail

[228] See Kohler-Hausmann, Julilly. ""The Attila the Hun Law": New York's Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Making of a Punitive State." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2010, 71–95.
[229] Schneider, *Smack,* 185.

And that's the way it goes, raah![230]

The juxtaposition of the street kid's three year stint in prison, which indicates a relatively minor offence in relation to drug dealing or selling, and a 'respectable' perpetrator being "out on bail" despite being caught with a major amount of drugs, suggests that it is class and status that determine the individual's fate, rather than the offence they have committed.[231] The use of "street kid" reinforces the notion of a young salesforce in the ever-expanding drugs trade and his comparison to a businessman with "24 kilos" also demonstrates the pyramidal nature of drug conspiracy. Most individuals selling drugs are at the street level, make money via numerous small transactions with users who are buying for personal use. Further up the criminal ladder are wealthier individuals or organisations who can buy wholesale and distribute downwards to an army of sellers or street dealers. As drug themes proliferated in Hip-Hop songs in the wake of "The Message" and "White Lines", so many popular acts would claim to be wholesale drug 'kingpins' that it would skew this representation away from reality and hint at the fantastical nature of their boasts.[232]

Two years after "White Lines" was released, Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. The act introduced a now infamous 1:100 sentencing disparity for powder and crack cocaine which disproportionately targeted lower-class Americans as a result of crack's affordability and obtainability relative to powder cocaine. Alyssa Beaver observes that the

[230] Verse 3

[231] Many internet commentators claim this is an oblique reference to businessman John DeLorean who was embroiled in a drug-selling controversy but ultimately faced no sanction. See the annotations on the genius page and the YouTube comments for the song's extended cut: https://genius.com/93009 & "White Lines (Don't Don't Do It) Original Long Version - Grandmaster Flash & Melle," Kenneth Wagner, *YouTube*, May 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bCdrDhUjPo.

[232] "You had to ask yourself how it was possible that every rapper out could be a former or current narcotics kingpin or gang leader with multiple bodies on their belt, but that's what the new fan base was demanding." Rakim, *Sweat the Technique: Revelations on Creativity from the Lyrical Genius* (New York: HarperCollins: 2019), Loc 2621.

act was passed "in an atmosphere of panic" which was exacerbated by Congress' relative ignorance of the make-up and effects of different types of cocaine.[233] Ignorance breeds fear and given the tenor of the reporting and official statements surrounding crack cocaine it was somewhat inevitable that many Americans would come to fear the substance as something superpowered and dangerous. Kool Moe Dee tackled the subject head-on on his eponymous debut solo album with a song titled "Monster Crack." [234] His take on the phenomenon, which involves an engagement with pop culture horror films, reinforced the notion that there was some kind of special malevolence about crack that marked it out as fantastic, ghoulish and dangerous:

1986 - return of the horror flicks

More deadly than "The Omen", a killer and a showman

Like the devil in "The Exorcist"

But this flick can cause a heart attack

Cause it's more than action-packed

It's alive and killing and the star is a villain

And his name is Monster Crack

The crack monster[235]

Critic Robert Christgau described this track as "dumb hyperbole," preferring instead the album's lead single "Go See the Doctor," a bawdy and playful safe sex song which has

[233] Beaver, "Getting a Fix on Cocaine Sentencing Policy," 2540.
[234] Kool Moe Dee, *Kool Moe Dee*, Jive. 1986. Cassette.
[235] https://genius.com/Kool-moe-dee-monster-crack-lyrics

sustained popularity to the present.[236] "Monster Crack" is indeed hyperbolic, but it is no more hysterical in tone than the anti-crack Public Service Announcements (PSAs) and official guidance on the substance. These PSAs were so commonplace and aesthetically bewildering that *Rolling Stone* magazine later collated their twelve favourite, most bizarre, anti-drug adverts of the 1980s into an article that mocked their alarmist tone.[237]

Kool Moe Dee's song does not appear to be mocking the prevailing anti-drug message but rather replicating it. The song recapitulates many of the phenomena already discussed such as: hypersexualised and desperate women; the dissolution of familial bonds; the decay of the body and the fleeting euphoria of a crack cocaine high. In the final verse Moe Dee goes even further and places the "crack monster" alongside apartheid and terrorism, saying people are trying to prevent another war but "There's already one right before your eyes." Kool describes the power of crack by describing it as "the king, more powerful than the rest." He conveys the notion of super-addictiveness by admonishing that: "It only takes one kiss and a deep, deep breath / Then you're hooked for life cause it's the kiss of death."[238] This is all strikingly similar to Reagan's rhetoric and there is virtually nothing in the way of a strategy to counter the allure or effects of this "monster." The only cautionary advice offered is a couplet in the second verse which advises: "You should stay away cause all he's about / Is just making you broke and stringing you out." We can see in this the same contradiction present in Reagan's speech and 'White Lines;' the audience is told about a super-addictive substance and then told to simply avoid it. Resistance to crack

[236] Robert Christgau, "Christgau's Consumer Guide," *Robert Christgau*, accessed June 1, 2019, http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cgv6-87.php.
[237] Beca Grimm, "12 Most Bizarre Anti Drug PSAs of the 1980s," *Rolling Stone*. May 25, 2017. https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-lists/12-most-bizarre-anti-drug-psas-of-the-1980s-194661/gene-simmons-gets-rad-195096/
[238] This notion of "Not even once," abstinence is still used in contemporary anti-drug advertising. See the work of the organisation *The Meth Project*, https://www.methproject.org/.

is formulated solely through mental resilience, as when Kool Moe Dee says: “The power of the mind should not be wasted.” This functions as a reason not to take crack – it will damage your brain – and similarly, having the mental fortitude to resist its persuasive advances is the only defence against it. Once again anti-drug rhetoric returns to the notion of personal responsibility. The image of crack as a pimp, turning women in to “the whoriest / Materialistic nymphomaniacs” shows the linkage between personal responsibility and conservatism. The simple advice being, do not take this drug or you will become sexually irresponsible, even insatiable.

The song also frames the deleterious effects of crack in terms of its financial impact and how drug taking functions as a kind of negative investment in the self. It positions neoliberal criticisms of drug taking alongside the more traditional conservatism above. Of the fiscal irresponsibility of crack, the narrator says:

> He wants your money, only your money
>
> He'll make you feel good for a real fast twenty
>
> The bill is passed and the dollars go fast
>
> The feeling is high but the high don't last

These lines suggest that crack cocaine is poor value for money, with the transience of the high foregrounded. Similarly, the notion that the anthropomorphised monster only wants “your money” implies there is some sort of deceit or con going on, whereby the unsuspecting user is being fleeced or gulled in to parting with their cash. This fixation on money is continued:

> You're killing your brain now, so later on it'll haunt you

You become insatiable, you can't get enough

When your money gets low, things really get rough

It's your only objective, you lose all perspective

The notion of a decision coming back to haunt the individual plays heavily on the neoliberal necessity of making good, informed, choices. The drug user addressed by the song has lost "all perspective" meaning they can no longer make these necessary choices. Likewise, they have wasted their money, but when "things get really rough" it will be their own fault. In the same way that positive investment in the self yields rewards, negative investment in the self decreases human capital and constrains choices and freedom. Even though in the final verse of the song Kool Moe Dee talks about collective social action to fight other scourges such as terrorism and apartheid, the only recourse against the crack monster is individual responsibility.

"Goddamn, this is the dope jam": Hip-Hop and the hustler's story go mainstream

From 1984 onwards, the commercial potential of Hip-Hop was understood by mainstream pop music and even 'blue eyed soul' musicians such as Barry Gibb, and Daryl Hall & John Oates were seeking to incorporate elements of Hip-Hop music into their new releases.[239] One of the songs which music critic Stephen Holden quotes as being an exemplar of this fusion between Hip-Hop and pop is Chaka Khan's chart-topping "I Feel For You" which featured rapping from Melle Mel.[240] As Hip-Hop became a significant cultural entity, its

[239] Stephen Holden, "Pop Records Turn To Hip-Hop," *New York Times,* September 23, 1984.
[240] Chaka Khan, 'I Feel For You,' *I Feel For You*, Warner Bros, 1984. The song reached #3 on the Billboard chart and sales exceeded 1 million across the U.S. and U.K.

proponents were largely offering a message regarding drugs that politicians and bastions of respectability would approve of. It was a message that said (or seemed to say) that listeners should take personal responsibility, and which repeated the exaggerated demonisation of drugs, in particular crack cocaine, which was endorsed by the highest office holder in the country, Ronald Reagan.

But a sharp change of direction was signalled in 1985, when Philadelphia rapper Schoolly D released "P.S.K. What Does It Mean?" on his own independent label and Hip-Hop's turn from condemnation to celebration of drug dealing began in earnest.[241] The lyrics contain the template for inestimable numbers of records produced since:

PSK we're making that green

People always say, "What the hell does that mean?"

P for the people who can't understand

How one homeboy became a man

S for the way we scream and shout

One by one I'm knocking you out

K for the way my DJ cutting

Other MC's, man you ain't saying nothing

Rocking on to the break of dawn

I think Code Money, your time is on

[241] Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang,* Loc 1608-1627.

This opening verse celebrates gang culture – PSK standing for Park Side Killas, a Philadelphia gang – the ascent from adolescence to manhood, the making of money and the power of competition and disciplinary violence. These concepts would grow to become key thematic concerns for the majority of rappers, particularly commercially successful rappers, across the 1980s, 90s and 2000s. One only needs to listen to future N.W.A. frontman Eazy E's debut single "Boyz n the Hood" (1987) to see how influential "P.S.K. What Does It Mean?" was.[242] In New York, the themes that Schoolly D had brought forward were taken up by artists like Kool G Rap and Boogie Down Productions (MC KRS-One and DJ Scott La Rock). Boogie Down Productions (BDP) released their debut album, *Criminal Minded*, in 1987 and were one of the most important early adopters of hardcore, violent themes in New York Hip-Hop.[243]

The song "9mm Goes Bang" from the album shows this shift most clearly and marks a significant departure from the likes of "Monster Crack":

Me knew a crack dealer by the name of Peter

Had to buck him down with my 9 millimeter

He said I had his girl, I said "Now what are you? Stupid?"

But he tried to play me out and KRS-One knew it

He reached for his pistol but it was just a waste

Cos my 9 millimeter was up against his face

[242] 'Boyz n The Hood' sounds almost parodic or testimonial in its similarity to Schoolly D's track. Eazy E, "Boyz n The Hood," Ruthless Records, 1987.
[243] Boogie Down Productions, *Criminal Minded*, B-Boy Records, 1987.

He pulled his pistol anyway and I filled him full of lead

But just before he fell to the ground this is what I said...

Whereas Melle Mel was an almost detached observer of the violence and danger that drugs cause in "The Message," and then a conflicted, and seemingly hypocritical, moralist in "White Lines," KRS-One is now an active participant, a self-confessed murderer. The song will be analysed in greater detail in chapter three below, but its content shows a clear embrace of a criminal lifestyle, enthusiastically embracing notions of competitive masculinity ("I had his girl"), disciplinary violence and drug dealing. The following year, Public Enemy would release 'Night of the Living Baseheads,' an anti-drug song and also an anti-drug glamorisation song which asks listeners to reconceptualise how they describe and view drugs.[244] That song began by acknowledging the new commercial and cultural profile of Hip-Hop as "the dope jam" of the moment then called for community action against drugs and the way they were increasingly glamorised in the music. Playing heavily on the notion of black music as a source of restorative racial uplift in ways that the ostensibly anti-drug songs of The Treacherous Three, Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel and Kool Moe Dee failed to do. That Public Enemy, one of the most politically strident acts in the history of Hip-Hop, felt it necessary to intervene against the new celebration of the drug hustler in Hip-Hop demonstrates this theme's increasing presence in the rap lyricism of the late 1980s. The following chapters will analyse the phenomenon Public Enemy identified and critiqued in their song. They will explore how songs such as "9mm Goes Bang" engaged with, absorbed, and amplified behaviours cultivated by the trade in illegal drugs and the attendant 'war'

[244] "And you say 'Goddamn, this is the dope jam' / But let's define the term called dope / And you think it mean funky now, no." Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam. 1988.

against it through the lens of neoliberalism and its moulding and economization of the self. This was not a one-sided process, and as "Night of the Living Baseheads" demonstrates, elements of push back and critique were also a feature of the music. These too will be examined, to show how Hip-Hop both celebrated the story of the hustler and occasionally resisted some of the neoliberal impulses driving him on.

The notion of personal responsibility that can be seen in anti-drug songs was taken up by the next wave of MCs, but responsibility in relation to drugs increasingly came to be associated more with drug dealing rather than drug taking. When later artists discuss substances like crack it is because they are selling them. If they eschew taking drugs it is to avoid mixing business with pleasure. This is most memorably encapsulated in the Notorious B.I.G.'s famous line – borrowed from the film *Scarface* (1983) – on "Ten Crack Commandments": "Never get high on your own supply."[245] Other artists even transgress this separation and write and perform songs which include them taking and dealing drugs simultaneously, such as Raekwon's audible cocaine sniffing on "Knowledge God" from *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* (1995.)[246] On "Ice Water" (a clear synonym for crack) from the same album, Raekwon calls on his listeners to: "Come on, sniff your brains out all my Al Capone, Al Pacino niggas."[247] These songs were released less than a decade after "Monster Crack," showing just how far the prevailing attitudes to drugs had changed in that time.[248] *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* will be examined in detail in the third chapter of this thesis as it is one of the

[245] Dir. Brian De Palma. *Scarface*. Universal Pictures. 1983.
[246] Loud Records.
[247] Raekwon has stated that he was a frequent cocaine user in his youth: "I didn't lie about damn cocaine. I was an addict. I never did freebase or nothing, but I sniffed mad coke as a kid growing up." Meara, Paul. 'Raekwon Reflects on How 'Only Built 4 Cuban Linx' Came Together on 20-Year Anniversary,' *Billboard.* 1st August 2015. https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/6649414/raekwon-only-built-4-cuban-linx-anniversary
[248] Calvin John Smiley traces this evolution in his article "Addict Rap?: The Shift from Drug Distributor to Drug Consumer in Hip Hop" in *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* (2017).

most influential albums in Hip-Hop history. A key reason for its sizable, and continuing, influence was its engagement with the aesthetic of Italian American organised crime. By contrast, the legacy of Kool Moe Dee's song is best reflected by the Roc Marciano line from his 2010 track "Thugs Prayer": "Uh, yeah, Monster Crack, remember that?"[249]

Hip-Hop performers did not abandon notions of personal responsibility and the neoliberal undercurrents of choice, risk and self-investment. These themes all continued to feature in the music and towards the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s they became even more pronounced, but they appeared in different avenues. Many rappers took personal responsibility on as a badge of honour, but instead of using it to reject drugs, they took it on as a means by which to extricate themselves from the kinds of grinding poverty and social malaise that Melle Mel articulated so powerfully on "The Message." Artists saw themselves increasingly as entrepreneurs, individuals who used their life experiences to create a saleable product (rap) which enabled them to change their economic status and become more active participants in the consumer economy.

[249] Roc Marciano, 'Thugs Prayer.' Fat Beats Records. *Marcberg*. 2010.

Chapter Two: "Rap Game / Crack Game:" Neoliberalism, Drug dealing and Hip-Hop[250]

In 1999 *Time* magazine ran a cover story on the "Hip-Hop Nation" in which they stated that, "Hip-hop is perhaps the only art form that celebrates capitalism openly."[251] The fixation on street hustling is one of the central themes of Hip-Hop, and one of the most resonant ways by which it celebrates the impulses and processes of capitalism. Hustling not only provides narrative content, it also forms the basis of Hip-Hop's – wildly complex and nuanced – notions of authenticity and even influenced its business model, as well as the attitudes towards accumulation for its most celebrated performers. Steve Stoute detailed how rappers' attitudes to consumerism and ostentation were shaped by "rules of the game lifted from drug dealers, pimps, and gangsters."[252] This is visible not just in the music but also in the print media which formed around Hip-Hop culture in the 1990s, most notably the magazines *Vibe* and *The Source*. Both publications had a significant proportion of their pages given over to advertising.[253] This advertising served a commercial imperative but it's pre-eminence also reflected how buying new products – particularly clothing – was an important part of Hip-Hop culture.[254] The proximity to criminal enterprise has profound influence on the ways in which Hip-Hop lyrics discuss and describe entrepreneurialism, business, and work. The consistent and extended engagement with neoliberal principles shapes these relationships and will be explored at length in this chapter.

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[250] JAY-Z, 'Rap Game / Crack Game.' *In My Lifetime Vol 1.* Roc-A-Fella. 1997.
[251] Christopher John Farley. "Hip-Hop Nation," *Time*. Feb 8th 1999.
[252] Steve Stoute, *The Tanning of America: How Hip Hop Created a Culture That Rewrote the Rules of the Economy* (New York: Gotham Books, 2011), *Loc* 836.
[253] The first 40 pages of *Vibe*'s Dec 1999 – Jan 2000 double edition are solely comprised of adverts, with dozens more peppered throughout the publication. *Vibe*, Dec.1999 – Jan 2000, 1-40.
[254] "Fashion" was a dedicated subsection of *Vibe* which appeared in each edition, usually with four distinct fashion segments or articles as well as dozens of adverts throughout the magazine. For a typical example see *Vibe* Dec. 2000, 176-195. *Vibe*'s main competitor *The Source* was also full of advertisements, see Shawan M. Worsley "Troubling Blackness: The Source Magazine and the Hip-Hop Nation," Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture, New York: Routledge, 2010, 96-97.

For this study, the most resonant aspect of the trade in illegal drugs is the democratization of drug markets which occurred as a result of the invention of crack cocaine in the mid-1980s. JAY-Z played an active role in the 'crack epidemic' as part of its juvenile salesforce, he reflected on a time when:

> I was part of a generation of kids who saw something special about what it means to be human – something bloody and dramatic and scandalous happening right here in America – and hip-hop was our way of reporting that story, telling it to ourselves and to the world.[255]

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the ways in which rappers reported the economic lessons that they learned during the crack era and beyond. Through their experience of, and engagement with, the economic rhythms of the drugs trade, many rappers evidence their position as exemplary neoliberal subjects, internalizing and then disseminating the virtues of entrepreneurialism, self-reliance, risk evaluation and individualism. The illegality of the drugs trade necessitates its status as a deregulated but highly competitive space within which the stakes of success and failure are amplified to extremes. Performers both practice neoliberal virtues in their business activities (some illicit, and many legal) and preach them within their songs. This constitutes what Paul Gilroy terms "Black Vernacular Neoliberalism," and is of particular importance for this chapter.[256]

Gilroy states that "the selfish pursuit of riches has been disseminated through the medium of hiphop culture where it has been combined with ruthlessness and an explicit

[255] JAY-Z, *Decoded*, p.18
[256] Paul Gilroy, "We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under ... Fragments for a History of Black Vernacular Neoliberalism," *New Formations* 80, no. 80 (2013): 23-38.

appetite for domination and manipulation that is also apparently a business asset."[257] The central character in Hip-Hop lyrics who speaks into reality this vernacular neoliberalism is that of the hustler. In his article "The Neoliberal Self," (2014) Jim McGuigan examines the construction of an idealized neoliberal subject which he likens to Max Weber's concept of an "ideal type."[258] McGuigan describes this ideal as "an artificial heuristic device," and this is a fitting description for many aspects of the hustler narrative within Hip-Hop. Due to the importance of braggadocio and competitive individualism within Hip-Hop many rappers call themselves 'the best,' or 'supreme' in a particular behaviour or activity. In doing so, they contribute to the construction of the trope of the hustler-turned-rapper. Weber explains this process:

> It is not a representation of the real, but seeks to provide representation with unambiguous means of expression... It is formed by a one-sided accentuation of one or several perspectives, and through the synthesis of a variety of diffuse, discrete, individual phenomena, […] subsumed by such one-sided, emphatic viewpoints so that they form a uniform construction in thought. In its conceptual purity this construction can never be found in reality, it is a utopia.[259]

Being as they are, works of fiction – even as they draw upon real events and perpetually claim their authenticity – Hip-Hop lyrics are well situated to offer up the overblown "perspectives" which Weber describes.

This concept, of the description of economic practice contained within Hip-Hop lyrics contributing to the construction of a neoliberal ideal, is further complicated by the fact that

[257] Gilroy, "We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under," 31.
[258] Jim McGuigan, "The Neoliberal Self," *Culture Unbound*, Volume 6, 2014: 223–240.
[259] Qtd in McGuigan, "The Neoliberal Self," 232.

the men performing the lyrics are often in character themselves. When we consider that not only do they perform in character, but they frequently replicate the idealised neoliberal behaviours in their real-world commercial endeavours, the picture becomes even more layered and interesting. This chapter unpacks some of the key features which rappers extol as ideal hustler practice within their lyrics. The significant crossover between these celebrated behaviours and the tenets of neoliberalism results in Hip-Hop lyrics providing (whether intentionally or otherwise) an extensive neoliberal education: a form of Gilroy's black vernacular neoliberalism. These lessons in neoliberal subjectivity are frequently couched in their relation to, or extension of, behaviours learned or perfected within the drugs trade, thus highlighting its status as both a site of outstanding neoliberal practice and economic tutelage. Some of the key neoliberal touchstones which will be explored are: self-reliance; self-improvement; dissolution of social bonds; the mitigation and understanding of risk and a pre-occupation with the accumulation of capital.

At the opening of Michael Eric Dyson's 2019 book *JAY-Z: Made in America*, Dyson establishes a key framework for his analysis of JAY-Z's career and output which centres upon variations of hustling and the distinction between what he calls "bright" and "blight" hustling. For Dyson, "positive, legitimate, legal black hustling can be termed *bright* hustling," whereas "the illegal, illicit, underground dimensions of black hustling can be termed *blight* hustling."[260] This distinction is a productive one to have in mind when considering the interaction between the illegal business of selling drugs and the legitimate business of Hip-Hop. Many artists who experienced, or claimed to have experienced, the hustle of selling illegal drugs enthusiastically swapped that for the hustle of becoming a rapper, producer, or

[260] Michael Eric Dyson, *JAY-Z: Made in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019) Loc 290 & 311. Original emphasis.

Hip-Hop industry figure.[261] In Dyson's terminology, this would signal a move from blight hustling to bright hustling. In this chapter I unpack the ways in which Hip-Hop lyricists narrativize this relationship between selling drugs and selling music. I analyse their descriptions of 'blight' hustling in order to better understand how performers viewed and depicted the drugs trade and their role within it and evaluate how authentic some of the most popular drug dealing narratives in rap were. I also explore the relationship between the "rap game" and the "crack game," and how performers and Hip-Hop moguls moving from one to the other display neoliberal adaptability and plasticity, enabling them to transport lessons learned in an illicit enterprise into a legal trade. Inherent in this is the idea of culture as commodity, the reality that music can be commodified, processed into a product to be 'moved' to make money, complicating its status as an artistic, or even, journalistic outlet.

"You know my shit is fishscale, y'all niggas is cook up:" The allure of dealing drugs[262]

As discussed in the previous chapter, notorious drug dealers of the 1970s and 1980s were aspirational figures – bordering on folk heroes – in many urban neighbourhoods. This positioning of them as role models was influenced by the interconnected systems of capitalism and racism.[263] The view espoused in "The Message" that ghetto inhabitants would want to grow up to imitate the only image of (capitalist) success they encountered

[261] "I know the drug game but I chose rap, nigga." M.O.P. "Power," *Warriorz*. Loud Records. 2000.
[262] JAY-Z, "Rap Game / Crack Game."
[263] Speaking in May 1964, Malcolm X stated his belief that "You can't have capitalism without racism." Qtd in Frank Kofsky. *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1983), 258.

was, for many, true.[264] Dyson's dissection of hustling is not restricted to drugs; he goes to great lengths to show how the trade in illegal drugs is just one form of hustling among many, including his own work as an academic. He also emphasizes the heavy weight of class in determining who hustles:

> The hustle, the plight, the condition, is what black folk are caught in when their resources are depleted, their access to legitimate goods severely restricted, their ability to enjoy social and educational equality greatly curtailed. […] The hustler is determined not to suffer silently and turns distress to opportunity.[265]

JAY-Z conceptualizes his own adolescent impulse to become one of "these new little kamikazes, who simply called themselves hustlers" as "(f)uck waiting for the city to pass out summer jobs. I wasn't even a teenager yet and suddenly everyone I knew had pocket money. And better."[266] Money confers and, in Hip-Hop lyricism infers, economic and social freedom. Money is a means of escape, a panacea to the enclosure, despair, and powerlessness of Mel's narrator in "The Message." Amidst the contextual financialization of global neoliberalism the truism that money equated to power was proven to be accurate. Noam Chomsky, commenting on the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993, succinctly stated that "[s]tructures of governance have tended to coalesce around economic power. The practice continues."[267] The connection between NAFTA and Hip-Hop lyrics may seem nebulous, but there was significant ideological overlap in their concerns towards the

[264] For example, Damon Dash, JAY-Z's long-time business partner, who played an influential role in the formation of Roc-A-Fella records, idolised notorious Harlem drug dealer Richard Thomas Porter, the so-called 'Prince of Harlem.' Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 565.
[265] Dyson, *JAY-Z: Made in America,* Loc 266.
[266] JAY-Z, *Decoded*, 13.
[267] Noam Chomsky, "Notes on Nafta: `The Masters of Mankind.' (Cover Story)." *The Nation,* 256, 1993, (12): 412–16.

preservation of intellectual property; the use of the market to structure human life; the utilisation of biopolitics, and, most obviously, the desire to increase, guarantee, and codify, trade. The sudden, sizeable, increase in trade across the American-Mexican border that NAFTA enabled was also a boon for drug dealers as it provided greater cover for the smuggling of their products.[268]

This idea of capital as the focus of a lived experience was distilled to its essence in early Hip-Hop by Rakim on the track "Paid in Full," from the 1987 Eric B & Rakim album of the same name:

> Thinkin' of a master plan
>
> 'Cause ain't nothin' but sweat inside my hand
>
> So I dig into my pocket, all my money spent
>
> So I dig deeper, but still coming up with lint
>
> So I start my mission, leave my residence
>
> Thinkin', "How could I get some dead presidents?"

Rakim discusses in the track how he "used to be a stick up kid" but now eschews criminality because he's "righteous," a nod to his belief in the tenets of the Nation of Gods and Earths, also known as the Five Percent Nation, an esoteric offshoot of the Nation of Islam.[269] Few songs have depicted the desire to obtain money as poetically and smoothly as 'Paid in Full'

[268] "Thirty Years of America's Drug War, a chronology," *PBS,* accessed October 15, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/cron/index.html#43.
[269] Rakim, *Sweat the Technique*, Loc 1387.

does.[270] JAY-Z says of Rakim that in him "we recognized a poet and deep thinker, someone who was getting closer to reflecting the truth of our lives in his tone and spirit."[271]

That Rakim, for all of his venerated ability and lyrical dexterity, was "getting closer" but not completely detailing the life of JAY-Z and his peers speaks to his disavowal of illegal, or immoral, forms of hustling.[272] Rakim's idea that he "might just / Search for a 9 to 5" because "if I strive / Then maybe I'll stay alive" was anathema to the mindset of many young black, working-class men who were drawn to Hip-Hop at this time.[273] On the track "D'evils" from his debut album *Reasonable Doubt* (1996), JAY-Z offered a rebuke to the normative notion of working an ordinary job, for ordinary pay:

> Whoever said illegal was the easy way out
>
> Couldn't understand the mechanics
>
> And the workings of the underworld, granted
>
> Nine-to-five is how you survive, I ain't tryna survive
>
> I'm tryna live it to the limit and love it a lot
>
> Life ills poisoned my body, I used to say fuck mic skills
>
> I never prayed to God, I prayed to Gotti[274]

[270] In 2019 the BBC ran a global survey to determine the 25 best Hip-Hop tracks of all time. 'Paid in Full' ranked #13. TM Brown, "The Greatest Hip-Hop Songs of All Time," *BBC*, accessed October 8, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191007-the-greatest-hip-hop-songs-of-all-time.
[271] JAY-Z, *Decoded*, 16.
[272] JAY-Z sketches the rapid evolution in Hip-Hop lyricism from Rakim's intellectual seriousness to the laconic violence and gang banging of Dr. Dre's classic album *The Chronic*. *Decoded*, 16-17.
[273] It is, however, reminiscent of the advice meted out by The Treacherous Three on 'Yes We Can Can.'
[274] JAY-Z, *Reasonable Doubt*, Roc-A-Fella, 1996.

The notion of "living to the limit" suggests JAY-Z is maximising his capabilities, constrained only by his reserves of strength or the depth of his intellect and experiences. The title, "D'evils", an obvious play on the word 'devils' and a portmanteau of 'the,' or 'de,' evils, signifies the purpose of the narrative. It is intended to show how caustic the hustler's mentality can be. According to JAY-Z, "you don't need some external demon to take control of you to turn you into a raging, money-obsessed sociopath, you only need to let loose the demons you already have inside of you."[275] The idea that the "demons you already have inside of you" are inherently money obsessed suggests that – despite the meditative tone of the above statement – greed is a natural human impulse. Even as he cautions against the fixation on accumulation JAY-Z makes it legitimate by identifying its organic nature. He clearly makes the distinction that the obsession with money is an internal force, which does not necessarily need external influence to be let loose. This idea underpins the image of *homo economicus*, the natural entrepreneur, and is the foundation of much financial self-help literature which directs you to let loose or develop the innate entrepreneur within.[276]

On "Dead Presidents II" JAY-Z details the aspirational quality of accruing vast sums of money; it enables the hustler to buy expensive champagne as well as an impressive car, status symbols which make him more attractive to women and turn him in to an 'icon':

> You already know: you light, I'm heavy, roll heavy dough
>
> Mic-macheted your flow

[275] JAY-Z. *Decoded*, 51.

[276] For detailed explication of the link between neoliberalism and this kind of self-help material see Fernando Ampudia De Haro's article "'If We Don't Look after Ourselves, No One Will': Financial Self-help and Neoliberal Political Rationality." De Haro's article focuses on Portuguese literature but situates its characteristics in relation to neoliberal precepts and ideals. For an overview of American Financial Self-help literature see Ashley E. Faulkner's article "Financial Literacy Education in the United States: Exploring Popular Personal Finance Literature."

> Your paper falls slow like confetti, mine's a steady grow, perico
>
> Pay 580 for blow, better believe I have 1160 to show
>
> My dough flip like Tae-Kwon
>
> Jay-Z the icon, baby, you like Dom?
>
> Maybe this Cristals'll change your life, huh? Roll with the winners
>
> Heavy spinners like hit records: Roc-A-Fella
>
> Don't get it corrected, this shit is perfected
>
> From chips to chicks to strippin' a Lexus

Whereas the '9 to 5' might allow the worker to participate in a consumer culture or move from the fringes of society into the mainstream, the trade in drugs allows the once impoverished hustler to move into a rarefied world of high-end purchases and luxury. We can see here a bildungsroman from exclusion, to inclusion, to exclusivity. The individual unable to buy the things he wanted can now buy whatever he wants and seeks out new, obscure, objects to accumulate as status symbols. JAY-Z's Lexus is one such example of this.[277] As well as being an example of braggadocio, these vignettes of success and excess also serve an aspirational purpose, with the listener potentially wanting to emulate or experience the hedonistic world the narrator describes.[278]

[277] The Lexus is the most mentioned brand on the whole album, and one of the most frequently mentioned in his entire discography. See, Alyssa Bereznak, 'What Are the Most Mentioned Brands in Jay Z's Songs? A Chart,' *Vanity Fair*, 17/10/13 https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2013/10/jay-z-brands-song-chart

[278] In *The Tanning of America*, Steve Stoute lays out what he considers the 'Rules of Aspiration,' and explains why they are so central to the commercial appeal of Hip-Hop, Loc 392.

The phrase "dead presidents" as a metaphor for money evokes notions of representation, governance, legacy, and democracy. When JAY-Z used the phrase to title his song in 1996, Hip-Hop fans would have been well aware of its usage in Eric B & Rakim's song nearly a decade earlier.[279] Eric B & Rakim further underlined their fixation with the link between money and political power by having their album cover feature a background of dollar bills and releasing as the lead single from the album the song "Eric B is President." Put simply, the idea was that current politicians – Ronald Reagan was in the Oval Office in 1987 – did not represent people like Eric B or Rakim, only dead presidents, i.e. money, could. This shows a simultaneous lack of faith in elected officials, and an overwhelming faith in the power of currency to provide representation. It reflects a particular Hip-Hop inflection of the neoliberal strategy to dissolve the political into the economic. The effect being to minimise or diminish the power of the political class and replace their influence with financial services and systems. According to some contemporary commentators, this process was being implemented across New York with substantial success. Speaking in 1987, Father Leo Penta told an audience at St. John's Law School:

> We no longer live in a city, in any classic sense of the polis, but in a municipal marketplace…. The "producer" is the rusted but still functioning political machine—that corrupt trading network of contracts, jobs, receiverships, references, favors, etc. Its customers, aside from itself, are its major campaign contributors—corporate leaders who have flooded the public arena with money, shopping for favorable

[279] Rakim himself states that the phrase itself is far older than his usage and he first learned of it in childhood. Accessed June 1, 2020, https://genius.com/59469.

> decisions and speedy action on matters which, by the very nature of their enterprise, must be conceived as profit ventures."[280]

With this kind of estimation of the inappropriateness and unresponsiveness of the "political machine," it is easy to see why individuals would seek transformative redress elsewhere.

The "Dead Presidents" symbolism simultaneously offers a social critique on the neglect of black voters within the democratic system, and an image of internalized neoliberal thought whereby the market is substituted in place of the traditional system of governance or representation. This constitutes one of a triad of key developments which Lester K. Spence says, "accompany the neoliberal turn," that is, "rhetoric that emphasizes market-based initiatives and productivity over government programs."[281] The hook which opens JAY-Z's song, demonstrates this process:

> Presidents to represent me (Get money!)
>
> I'm out for presidents to represent me (Get money!)
>
> I'm out for presidents to represent me (Get money!)
>
> I'm out for dead fuckin' presidents to represent me (Whose...)

In four lines the narrator moves from looking to "Presidents" to "dead fuckin' presidents" as his representatives. What complicates this usage further, and made it particularly important for the 1990s Hip-Hop scene in New York, was that JAY-Z's rap was set against a sample of

[280] Qtd in Sleeper, Jim. *Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990. Kindle. 293. Father Leo J. Penta is a Catholic priest, community organiser, scientist and the director of the German Institute for Community Organizing (DICO.) He was interviewed by *The New York Times* in 1987 in relation to the "Nehemiah Plan" to build affordable housing in the city. See Sam Roberts' article "Despite Success, Housing Effort Still Struggling: There's the Perception that this Land is Too Good for Us."

[281] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness,* 13.

Nas' voice from a remix of his song "The World Is Yours" (1994). [282] The stated equivalence between money and power underscores much of the financial posturing that JAY-Z engages in across his debut album, so that when he states "Pay 580 for blow, better believe I have 1160 to show," he is, by selling cocaine, doubling both his money and his power. Once again this is a vernacular reproduction of a neoliberal truism that money equates to power. David Harvey explains how "money power" holds political influence in two divergent but intertwined ways. The first, is that "since access to the judiciary is nominally egalitarian but in practice extremely expensive (be it an individual suing over negligent practices or a country suing the US for violation of WTO rules) […] the outcomes are often strongly biased towards those with money power." Second, "the primary collective means of action under neoliberalism are then defined and articulated through non-elected (and in many instances elite-led) advocacy groups for various kinds of rights."[283] Thus, money enables the individual to challenge and influence legislation which can serve their desires. JAY-Z has become an active participant in this kind of work, co-founding the REFORM Alliance, an organisation whose mission is to "transform probation and parole by changing laws, systems and culture to create real pathways to work and wellbeing."[284]

In verse two, JAY-Z expands upon his financial power and even suggests himself as a "dead presidential candidate"—someone who might appear on a future currency note:

I'll make, you and your wack mans fold like bad hands

[282] *Illmatic*, Columbia Records, 1994. This usage sparked a 'beef' between JAY-Z and Nas that energised New York Hip-Hop and culminated in two iconic diss records 'Takeover' (2001) and 'Ether' (2001). These will be discussed later in this thesis to examine Hip-Hop performers' complicated relationship with notions of intellectual property and authorship. 'Takeover,' *The Blueprint*, Def Jam / Roc-A-Fella, 2001. 'Ether,' *Stillmatic*, Columbia Records, 2001.
[283] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* p.78
[284] https://reformalliance.com/meet-reform/shawn-jay-z-carter/

Roll like Monopoly, advance

You're coppin' me like white crystal

I gross the most at the end of the fiscal year than these niggas can wish to

The dead presidential candidate

With the sprinkles and the Presidential, ice that'll offend you

In due time when crime flees my mind

All sneak thieves and player haters can shine

But until then, I keep the trilliant cut diamonds shinin' brilliant

I'll tell you half the story; the rest, you fill it in

Long as the villain win

I spend Japan yen, attend major events

Key motifs to notice here are the use of games as analogies for the individual's control over the situation, or his peers. The image of folding a bad hand in a card game sits alongside the reference to Monopoly to evoke images of risk, calculation, and accumulation.[285] That these are primarily leisure pursuits, which teach – children in particular – skills which may be useful in the real world suggests that this is all a game to JAY-Z. This simultaneously diminishes the supposed seriousness of the drug trade and rap game in his mind, painting

[285] Mirowski highlights the virtue of risk within neoliberalism: "Embracing risk and taking chances is the putative mark of the entrepreneur, the only solid evidence that the agent has been actively engaged in pursuit of self-advantage, as opposed to passively accepting the lot that has been bequeathed him by others." *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, 119. This idea is supported by Dardot & Laval who state the centrality of risk to the concept of the entrepreneurial self: "To be a personal enterprise assumes living entirely in risk." *The New Way of the World* (London: Verso, 2014), 275.

them as trivialities, and exemplifies his purported pre-eminence in them. JAY-Z seemingly subscribes to Raekwon's idea that "Business is a combination of war and sport!"[286] By grossing "the most at the end of the fiscal year" JAY-Z signifies his supreme power, power that can make others fold. His exceptional accumulation is also referenced in verse one which he closes with the lines: "I dabbled in crazy weight without rap, I was crazy straight / Partner, I'm still spendin' money from '88, what?" His claim to still be spending money he earned eight years prior, when he was making money solely from moving "weight" rather than rapping, testifies to his success in the trade of illegal drugs.[287]

This insistence that he made himself rich before rap reflects JAY-Z's ambivalence towards the music industry. Having struggled to reach agreement with record companies for several years before his debut album was released, his early music was often at pains to explain that he didn't need rap to be financially solvent, as his original hustle, dealing drugs, had already secured that for him.[288] Even once he was a hugely successful and popular act he was still claiming that music was just a means to an end. In an interview with *Vibe* magazine in 2000 he claimed "We just used this music to get our foot in the door. We gonna go into films, fashion, everything. We gonna build a tree and let the limbs grow all kinds of different places."[289] For JAY-Z, Hip-Hop presented a newer, less risky, hustle, but one he would only go into if it could pay as well as his existing one:

> [W]hen I committed to a career in rap, I wasn't taking a vow of poverty. I saw it as another hustle, one that happened to coincide with my natural talents and the

[286] Instagram post, @raekwon. 26 September, 2019.
[287] The veracity of such claims, and others like it, will be examined later in this chapter.
[288] What provided JAY-Z with an unusual level of autonomy within the music industry was the establishment of an independent label Roc-A-Fella, which was seeded with 'street money' by a friend of Damon Dash's, Kareem 'Biggs' Burke. Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 569.
[289] "Jayhova's Witness," Vibe Dec. 2000, 130.

> culture I loved. I was an eager hustler and a reluctant artist. But the irony of it is that to make the hustle work, really work, over the long term, you have to be a true artist too.[290]

There are some mixed messages in this statement, which sees a vacillation from his being a "reluctant" artist to a "true" artist. Within this confusion, or tension, we can see the Janus-faced identity of many rappers, who want to be depicted as an artist with associated ideas of inspiration, creativity and occasional genius whilst simultaneously holding on to the cache, intelligence and quick wit which comes with being a 'hustler.' More than anything, what this quote shows is JAY-Z's confidence in his own adaptability and the transferable nature of the key skills which made him a profitable drug dealer.

JAY-Z embodies a self-conscious melding of the drugs trade, rap, and the hustle within a quintessential neoliberal package. Whereas Rakim, and The Treacherous Three and Melle Mel before him, disavowed the allure of illegal enterprise, JAY-Z stylishly and confidently celebrates it. Previous MCs asked, or even told, their audience to choose between the 'rap game' and the 'crack game' but JAY-Z collapsed them into the overarching notion of the hustle: one merely became an extension of the other. JAY-Z's music hustle is informed and shaped by the neoliberal principles he learned and refined in the drugs trade, in which he was so successful he claims he had no need to move into music for its financial rewards. He was not the first artist to make these kinds of statements in his music, but he was, and is, one of the most successful at it. His subsequent corporate endeavours testify to his exemplariness as an entrepreneur and he disseminated vernacular neoliberalism to his listenership in an entertaining and illuminating manner.

[290] JAY-Z, *Decoded,* 130.

"Rebel I outlaw, split second on the draw / Blow the door off the shit like bricks of C-4:" The hustler as outlaw trope.[291]

JAY-Z's career was heavily influenced by the work of another New York rapper, Christopher Wallace, known variously as the Notorious B.I.G, Biggie, Big, Frank White and a host of other sobriquets. Biggie wrote what is commonly considered the quintessential rags-to-riches Hip-Hop song, "Juicy" (1994).[292] One of the things that made "Juicy" so joyous for Hip-Hop fans was the narrative synthesis between Wallace's own struggles and success, and the development of Hip-Hop from humble beginnings into a mega-industry which was able to bestow riches upon a young MC such as himself.[293] The song articulates B.I.G.'s own version of Dyson's bright/blight hypothesis with the lines:

> And my whole crew is loungin'
>
> Celebrating every day, no more public housin'
>
> Thinkin' back on my one-room shack
>
> Now my mom pimps an Ac' with minks on her back
>
> And she loves to show me off of course
>
> Smiles every time my face is up in The Source
>
> We used to fuss when the landlord dissed us

[291] Wu-Tang Clan, ''It's Yourz.' *Wu-Tang Forever*. Loud. 1999.
[292] In the BBC poll of the greatest Hip-Hop songs, 'Juicy' was ranked #1. 'Juicy,' *Ready To Die*, Bad Boy Records, 1994.
[293] *Vibe* magazine hailed the album *Ready to Die* as "Hip hop's clearest articulation of the human dilemma by its greatest narrator." Morales, Robert, Harris, Carter. "The Vibe 100," Vibe, December 1999 – January 2000, 162.

No heat, wonder why Christmas missed us

Birthdays was the worst days

Now we sip Champagne when we thirsty

Uh, damn right I like the life I live

'Cause I went from negative to positive and it's all (It's all good, nigga)

And if you don't know, now you know, nigga

The song is filled with signifiers of wealth juxtaposed against hardship and Biggie's satisfaction that even though he was "[c]onsidered a fool 'cause I dropped out of high school" he defied the "[s]tereotypes of a black male misunderstood."[294] The triumphant song is underpinned by a hook which implores its listeners to overcome adversity and "reach for the stars."

However, this affirmative message is complicated by the opening lines of the song which are far more confrontational:

("Fuck all you hoes!" Get a grip, motherfucker!)

Yeah, this album is dedicated

To all the teachers that told me I'd never amount to nothin'

To all the people that lived above the buildings that I was hustlin' in front of

[294] Steve Stoute discusses the commercial importance of this kind of rhetorical signifying in *The Tanning of America,* Loc 816.

> Called the police on me when I was just tryin' to make some money to feed my daughter (it's all good)
>
> And all the niggas in the struggle

This positions the narrator in opposition to employees of the state, teachers, and police, as well as his neighbours, whilst trying to establish a rapport with those "in the struggle." The ubiquitous phrase "hustling" appears, with the apparent justification that it was motivated by a universal concern, the desire to provide for one's children. The image of a teacher belittling a student fosters antipathy and moves the listener towards sympathy for the narrator, while the context – that this message of rebuttal is being delivered in song, by a successful artist – shows how incorrect the teacher's estimation of Wallace's worth was. The song positions B.I.G. as failed by a system which is supposed to educate, nurture and encourage him; this is repeated by another kind of authority figure, the landlord, and even, by implication, a pop culture figure, Father Christmas, who seemingly overlooks the narrator and his family.

This image of the Notorious B.I.G. seemingly being failed by societal institutions is recapitulated elsewhere on his debut album *Ready to Die* (1994). On the album's opening skit, lasting a little over three minutes, the listener hears the artist's supposed life story up to that point. Beginning with his birth, then a fractious childhood with suggestions of domestic abuse and the threat of being sent to one of the city's notorious group homes, then moving on to robbing the passengers of a train carriage and a stint in prison.[295] The

[295] The track is just titled "Intro" on the album listing.

exchange at the end of the track, between Smalls and a prison guard (italicized below), highlights the deficiency of the criminal justice system:

Open C-74, Smalls

Mr. Smalls, let me walk you to the door

So how does it feel leaving us?

C'mon man, what kind of fucking question is that man?

Trying to get the fuck up out this joint, dog

Yeah, yeah, you'll be back

You niggers always are

Go ahead man, what the fuck is you hollering about?

You won't see me up in this motherfucker no more

We'll see

I got big plans nigga, big plans, hahahaha

Wallace himself had served nine months in prison in North Carolina for selling cocaine so there is a possible autobiographical basis to the narrative.[296] The guard's assertion that "you'll be back / You niggers always are" offers a clear view into the attitude towards Biggie, and young black men like him, from an officer within the corrections system. It is a dynamic replicated in JAY-Z's famous song "99 Problems" (2003), with the line delivered by a police

[296] Wallace's criminal record is detailed in the *New York Times* article reporting his violent death: Todd S. Purdum, "Rapper is Shot to Death in Echo of Killing 6 Months Ago," *New York Times*, Mar 10, 1997, A10.

officer to the narrator: “Are you carrying a weapon on you? I know a lot of you are." [297] These unsatisfactory experiences with institutions lay the foundation for the veneration of capital accumulation and neoliberal entrepreneurialism that was highlighted above in relation to JAY-Z’s “Dead Presidents II.” If schools, prisons, and the police cannot serve citizens as they should, perhaps money can instead. In Biggie’s narrative, this attitude undermines any notions of rehabilitation which prison supposedly holds, even if the soon to be ex-inmate himself expresses his desire not to return. The image of a potentially irredeemable criminal is another way in which the trade in illegal drugs appeals to rappers who want to portray themselves as hustlers.

The concept of becoming, or being, an outlaw is a common one in Hip-Hop of this period.[298] Contained within it are complex notions of reputation, power, and exemplariness. That Biggie chooses to depict himself robbing a train – like a bandit on horseback from an old Western movie – as the reason he is imprisoned rather than the more banal drug possession, shows his desire to be seen as someone different, a special type of criminal.[299] His accomplice reinforces this by responding to entreaties to participate with the incredulous line “Yeah, but nigga, it's a train, ain't nobody robbed no motherfucking train.” This evokes a classic trope of Western films, where the individual ostracized by society (as Biggie was failed by his teacher and disavowed by his neighbours) returns to exercise either violent revenge or a redemptive act of salvation towards the community which shunned him. This type of figure also has crossover and engagement with African American stock

[297] *The Black* Album. Roc-A-Fella, 2003. JAY-Z explains the importance of that line in a panel discussion with Cornel West, “JAY-Z Decodes 99 Problems,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSP7cY2uzPY
[298] Upon his release from prison in upstate New York, Death Row artist Tupac Shakur formed a group called ‘Outlawz’ and the group Bone Thugs-N-Harmony had a popular song titled “Ghetto Cowboy” on their album *Volume Two*, released in 2000 by Ruthless Records. Nas in the lyrics to ‘I Gave you Power,’ on *It Was Written* (1996), describes weapons amongst “the things that an outlaw hides.”
[299] It also reminds us of Hip-Hop’s primary function, entertainment.

characters such as 'Stagger Lee' / 'Stackolee,' and what Eithne Quinn terms "badman poetics."[300] The appeal of being seen as a 'badman' is clearly attractive to an artist whose professional moniker is 'The Notorious B.I.G.' and who was signed to 'Bad Boy' records. Describing his traumatic birth on "Respect," he claims that as soon as he was born, "The doctor looked and said, 'he's gonna be a bad boy.'"[301] On *Ready to Die*'s third track, "Gimme the Loot" – a schizophrenic song in which Biggie and his younger self commit robberies together – the song's chorus is a repeated instruction to prospective victims:

> Gimme the loot, gimme the loot (I'm a bad, bad, bad)
>
> Gimme the loot, gimme the loot (I'm a bad, bad, bad)
>
> Gimme the loot, gimme the loot (I'm a bad, bad, bad)
>
> Gimme the loot, gimme the loot (I'm a bad, bad, bad)
>
> (What's mines is mines and what's yours is mine)[302]

The repeated "bad" becomes increasingly muffled and distorted towards the end of each line as it bleeds hypnotically into the next shouted "Gimme." To further add to his self-styling as someone ready to commit crime without compunction, Biggie warns that he's "dangerous / crazier than a bag of fucking angel dust."[303]

[300] Stagger Lee is an African-American folk hero in the "bad nigger" archetype, his symbolism is unpacked and historicised in Chapter Four. Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, Loc 2747-2757.
[301] Notorious B.I.G., *Ready to Die,* Bad Boy, 1994.
[302] These lines are then repeated again for the second half of the chorus.
[303] Much like JAY-Z's line "You're copping me like white crystal," Biggie here uses drugs as a simile for his own characteristics, suggesting that he can be purchased or taken as a means to experience desired emotions or mind states.

On "Gimme the Loot," Biggie calls himself a "robbery expert," and robbery is a common feature of many Hip-Hop narratives about hustling and drug dealing. Queensbridge MC's Mobb Deep state on "Give Up the Goods (Just Step)"[304]:

Do what I gotta to eat a decent meal, brothers is starving

Don't try to find a job, son, it's all about robbing

So don't be alarmed when we come through

We supposed to, if you opposed to, get your face blown, dude

Off the map, 'cause I react, attack

A brother wasn't blessed with wealth, so I act like that

Drug dealing, only mess with shorties that's appealing

I'm frontin' on the world once I start 4-wheeling

Similar to JAY-Z's rejection of a 9-to-5, Mobb Deep advise against trying to secure employment. They also demonstrate a willingness to use violence against those that resist them, a key trope in the construction of the rugged, thuggish image that was the foundation of their act.[305] The fixation on violence in Hip-Hop's drug dealing narratives will be discussed at length in chapter three. Here it is useful to note within this verse the various strands which comprise the badman/hustler persona: ambition (line one); atypical forms of work or labour (lines two and seven); violence (lines four and five); womanising (line seven) and the desire to demonstrate success (line eight.)[306] What robbery and drug dealing have in

[304] *The Infamous*, Loud Records. 1995.
[305] See 'Thug Muzik' from their album *Murda Muzik*, 1999. Loud Records.
[306] The potency of the badman figure within Hip-Hop was not isolated just within rap. Shawan M. Worsley's analysis of a decade of *The Source* magazine shows how the publication sought to cultivate in its readership a

common is they are both activities which provide money outside of the normalised structures of the labour market and confer a kind of outlaw status. Their association with violence further enhances their cache as dangerous, risky endeavours. The immediacy with which money can be acquired by robbing people is an advantage over the slower process of selling, re-stocking, and the balancing of profit and expenditure involved in drug dealing. Conversely the functioning of the drug trade as a black market confers a quasi-legitimacy to its workers as it inculcates habits which are lauded in the legitimate economy: hard work, the maximising of profits, salesmanship, understanding of finances and economic systems. Hence the euphemistic notion of 'putting in work' as a drug dealer has positive connotations of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurialism.[307] The motivation for both is the attainment of money, often by acts who claim to have experienced the deleterious effects of life without it. Mobb Deep explain elsewhere on "Give Up the Goods (Step Off)" that they are willing to take these risks: "Cause having cash is highly addictive / Especially when you're used to having no money to live with."[308]

The corrosive social and environmental conditions associated with poverty are frequently and viscerally depicted throughout the long, and geographically diverse, history of Hip-Hop. In New York, as in many other urban settings, Hip-Hop's articulation of poverty centres on conceptual spaces of enclosure and confinement, like the projects, apartment blocks, their stairways, and the broader but no less restrictive space of the 'ghetto.'[309] As Nas articulated on *Illmatic*'s "N.Y. State of Mind":

"Hip-Hop Nation" populated by black antiheroes who demonstrated many key badman tropes. See "Troubling Blackness: The Source Magazine and the Hip-Hop Nation," 82.

[307] The importance and contradictions of these ideas of "work" will be examined in chapter four.

[308] The 'addiction' to money lacks some of the pejorative connotations of addiction to illegal substances.

[309] This is the great contribution of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 'The Message.'

Young bitches is grazed, each block is like a maze

Full of black rats trapped, plus the Island is packed

[…]

The fiends fight to get crack, I just max, I dream I can sit back

And lamp like Capone, with drug scripts sewn

Or the legal luxury life, rings flooded with stones, homes

I got so many rhymes, I don't think I'm too sane

Life is parallel to Hell, but I must maintain

And be prosperous, though we live dangerous

could just arrest me, blamin' us; we're held like hostages

Imagery such as mazes, rats, hostages, and the nod to the 'island' of Rikers, with its notorious jail, exemplifies this notion of stasis, stagnation, and entrapment. On one of the song's most famous lines Nas raps, "I never sleep, 'cause sleep is the cousin of death." Even the temporary restorative respite of sleep is denied to him, and with it the potential to escape through dreaming.

This absence of rest is a result of living in the 'city that never sleeps' which is 'full of villains and creeps,' with Nas's hypervigilance a response to constant and omnipresent danger. This association and fear of being caught unawares defines the city for him: "I think of crime when I'm in a New York state of mind." Nas's experience in the borough of Queens is markedly similar to the depiction of Staten Island on the Wu-Tang Clan's seminal track "C.R.E.A.M" from *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (1993):

Handcuffed in the back of a bus, forty of us

Life as a shorty shouldn't be so rough

But as the world turned I learned life is hell

Livin' in the world no different from a cell

Every day I escape from Jakes givin' chase

Sellin' base, smokin' bones in the staircase

Though I don't know why I chose to smoke sess

I guess that's the time when I'm not depressed

But I'm still depressed, and I ask: what's it worth?[310]

Inspectah Deck raps these lines and his notions of 'escape' are particularly interesting. The first, running from the police ('jakes') is an escape of necessity if he is to avoid capture and potential imprisonment. As he mentions earlier in the verse, he went to prison at the age of fifteen for selling drugs and is keen to avoid repeating the experience. This sounds thrilling, but the fact that he does it "every day" turns this from a moment of adrenaline-inducing novelty into an occupational hazard or grind. Similarly, his attempts to escape from depression by smoking marijuana fail. Physical and psychological escape is fleeting and ultimately unsuccessful. Herein lies the tension inherent in Hip-Hop's utilisation of drug dealing as a way for a hustler to 'escape' the ghetto, it rarely succeeds.

Biggie, Nas and the Wu-Tang Clan show that the aspirational quality of the hustler in Hip-Hop centres on the notion of escape, typified in Biggie's assertion that you "won't see

[310] Wu-Tang Clan, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, Loud Records. 1993.

me up in this motherfucker no more." The hustler who makes it out of his own conceptual – or literal – prison via rapping is potentially transported to new locations away from the signifiers of his old life and the dangers and depressions that inhabited it. In a crossover with the aspirational quality of sports for black youth, rapping offers a way out. On "Can't Knock the Hustle," JAY-Z states "all us blacks got is sports and entertainment."[311] Biggie, on "Things Done Changed" presents an alternative dichotomy: "either you're slinging crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot."[312] This triumvirate of sports, music, and drug dealing, is repeatedly presented in lyrics as the only way in which impoverished black urbanites can elevate themselves. It also inspired New York rapper Cam'ron who released an album entitled *S.D.E. (Sports, Drugs, Entertainment)*.[313] But sports and music differ from drug dealing as escape routes in two major ways. Firstly, the two bring legitimate recognition and wealth. Secondly, they involve constant movement, whether on tour or playing games, signifying the capacity to move out of the old neighbourhood. Both are incompatible with the hustle of selling drugs. A drug dealer, even a successful one, cannot escape the ghetto in the same way that a basketball player or a musician may be able to. This is one of the primary motivators for the cultivation of a hard or dangerous image amongst hustlers. If they cannot physically leave the spaces in which their money is made, leaving them vulnerable to its attendant violence and the aspirational confrontation of other players in the market, then a reputation of violent reprisal and unpredictability can serve as fortification against those potential attacks. This is one way in which the outlaw image is both useful and necessary. In Staten

[311] *Reasonable Doubt*
[312] *Ready to Die*
[313] Cam'ron. *S.D.E. (Sports, Drugs, Entertainment)*. Epic. 2000.

Island's Park Hill projects, where the Wu-Tang Clan was formed, the popular refrain stated, "You win the game when you get out the game."[314]

"Factions from the other side would love to kill me / Spill three quarts of my blood into the street, let alone the heat:" The dangers of the drugs trade.[315]

The counterpoint that Hip-Hop lyrics offer to the veneration of the drugs trade as a site of economic and neoliberal education is the omnipresent threat of violence. Like Nas's narrator who cannot sleep because of the threats which surround him, Mobb Deep's Prodigy tells the listener on "Survival of the Fittest": "There's a war goin' on outside no man is safe from."[316] This sense of vulnerability and constant vigilance has the effect of transforming neighbourhoods into battlegrounds. The effect of being surrounded by 'war' on all sides is debilitating, whether it be warring gangs, the police or the individual's own personal battles.[317] The maxim that innocence is one of the first casualties of war is a common trope among lyrics which engage with and narrativize the trade in illegal drugs. Reflecting the juvenalization of the drug trade precipitated by the mandatory minimums of the Rockefeller drug laws (as outlined in chapter three), many rappers detail their own adolescent involvement in the drug business or offer images of children caught up in it to demonstrate how it forces them to grow up fast.[318] On "C.R.E.A.M," Inspectah Deck talks of his drug dealing at fifteen and in the song's first verse Raekwon narrativizes his own teenage

[314] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 484.
[315] JAY-Z, 'Dead Presidents II.' *Reasonable Doubt*.
[316] *The Infamous*
[317] To further underscore this point about the police, in 1996 the NYPD were labelled, following an eighteen-month investigation by Amnesty International: "America's most brutal police force." Landas, Marc. "NYPD Blues," *The Source*, November 1996, 32.
[318] Schneider, *Smack*, 185.

hustling, including robbery and gunplay, described as "pulling out gats for fun." At twelve years old, when already working on the streets, JAY-Z shot his own crack-addicted brother for stealing his jewellery.[319] He says of childhood in the crack ravaged neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant:

> The feelings I had during that part of my life were burned into me like a brand. It was life during wartime. I lost people I loved, was betrayed by people I trusted, felt the breeze of bullets flying by my head. I saw crack addiction destroy families – it almost destroyed mine – but I sold it, too. I stood on cold corners far from home in the middle of the night serving crack fiends and then balled ridiculously in Vegas; I went dead broke and got hood rich on those streets. I hated it. I was addicted to it. It nearly killed me. But no matter what, it is the place where I learned not just who I was, but who we were, who all of us are. It was the site of my moral education, as strange as that may sound. It's my core story and just like you, just like anyone, that core story is the one that I have to tell.[320]

This encapsulates many of the key concerns that rappers articulate in relation to the hustle of selling drugs.

Within this evocative passage there are also slithers of neoliberal thought, glimmers of the experiences which JAY-Z took forward into his music and which shaped and informed his vernacular neoliberalism. His assertion that dealing crack cocaine was the place where he learned "who all of us are," is a clear invocation of the core neoliberal idea that a free market contains within it all the complexities and nuances of human life. The consistent use

[319] Alexandra Topping, "Jay-Z: I shot my brother when I was 12," *The Guardian,* November 19, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/nov/19/jayz-brother-shooting-interview.
[320] JAY-Z, *Decoded*, 18.

of the first person – aside from when offering insight into "who we were" – proclaims the self-reliance needed to bounce back from going "dead broke." The discipline and mobility needed to "stand on cold corners far from home" are further examples of entrepreneurial spirit. JAY-Z even neatly codifies the hustler-turned-rapper type for us by detailing his visceral experiences, based as they were in the simple supply and demand market of the drugs trade, and then his desire to tell that "core story" to his audience.

JAY-Z's assertion that he was betrayed by people he trusted is of particular importance. The hyper vigilance that the likes of Nas, and Havoc and Prodigy of Mobb Deep, detail can easily lead into paranoia and a mistrust of friends, family, and associates. This pervasive distrust echoes and reinforces the neoliberal primacy of selfhood and the dissolution of social bonds. Coupled with the competitive nature of Hip-Hop lyricism and the desire to be the best, many rappers produce lyrics which portray what Paul Gilroy terms the "hyper-individuation […] that the neoliberal mentality requires and generates."[321] As Harvey succinctly states: "Neoliberal concern for the individual trumps any social democratic concern for equality, democracy, and social solidarities."[322] Mirowski goes further depicting the neoliberal world as "a world where competition is the primary virtue, and solidarity is a sign of weakness."[323] The pervasive mistrust of competitors and even allies within the drugs trade, which Hip-Hop lyrics narrativize, bears resemblance to the social atomisation of neoliberalism.

Regarding friendship, JAY-Z says on "D'evils":

> This shit is wicked on these mean streets

[321] Gilroy, "We Got to Get Over Before We Get Under …", 25.
[322] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* 176.
[323] Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go To Waste*, 92.

None of my friends speak, we're all tryna win

But then again, maybe it's for the best though

'Cause when they're sayin' too much

You know they're tryna get you touched

The lines entail a kind of double disavowal of friendship. In the first instance we hear how friends are not speaking, a sign that the friendship is waning or is over. However, in the next lines we hear how the opposite, an overabundance of friendliness, could be just as bad as it might indicate an attempt to set you up, either to the police or rivals.[324] This sense is compounded in verse two where JAY-Z reveals the person he is talking about is his childhood best friend who is now a rival drug dealer: "The closest of friends when we first started / But grew apart as the money grew and soon grew black-hearted.". That some of these behaviours have crossover with neoliberal ideals and precepts further evidences the unique intersection between Hip-Hop and hustling as a place of, at times, exemplary neoliberal practice. The distinction, or lack of, between accomplices and adversaries is something which JAY-Z revisits elsewhere on *Reasonable Doubt* with a track titled "Friend or Foe."

On the Notorious B.I.G's second album, presciently titled *Life After Death* (1997), he takes this isolation one step further by disavowing his own family in pursuit of drug riches, depicting them as potential assailants.[325] "Ten Crack Commandments" issues a decad of

[324] Dardot and Laval typify the attitude of the hypermobile, entrepreneurial individual as one in which "The erosion of social bonds is expressed in the questioning of generosity, fidelity, loyalty and solidarity – everything that pertains to social and symbolic reciprocity in workplaces." *The New Way of the World* p.291.
[325] *Life After Death*, Bad Boy Records, 1997.

golden rules to be followed by those who want to be successful in the crack game, these include:

> Number 3: never trust nobody
>
> Your moms'll set that ass up, properly gassed up
>
> Hoodied and masked up, shit, for that fast buck
>
> She be laying in the bushes to light that ass up
>
> […]
>
> 7: this rule is so underrated
>
> Keep your family and business completely separated
>
> Money and blood don't mix like two dicks and no bitch
>
> Find yourself in serious shit

Whereas many moguls and entrepreneurs may wish to bring their family members into their business, to keep profits and trade secrets 'all in the family,' Biggie here advises strongly against it. His assertion that his mom would shoot him in the pursuit of money is at odds with the shoutout he gave to her on his biggest hit "Juicy." However, it offers the flipside of his depiction of their relationship on *Ready to Die*'s "Things Done Changed": "Back in the days our parents used to take care of us / Look at 'em now, they even fuckin' scared of us." On his first album, on a track detailing the increasing prevalence of guns and the spiralling violence of the drug trade and its young workforce, Biggie depicted parents afraid of their children. On his second album, on a track where he claims to have perfected the drug game and is able to offer a 'how to' guide for prospective dealers, he is now afraid of his family

bringing violence upon him in search of profit. Much like JAY-Z's double-edged mistrust of friendship, Biggie disavows familial ties in two separate but interlinking ways.

Frank Lucas, who had been a figure that up-and-coming drug dealers wanted to emulate throughout the seventies and early eighties, stood trial alongside his brothers for conspiracy to sell drugs. [326] Leroy 'Nicky' Barnes, Harlem's 'Mr. Untouchable' cited "a lack of trust and loyalty, and greed among his closest associates" as the reasons for his downfall.[327] Rich Porter, a famous Harlem crack dealer nicknamed 'Money Rich' and the 'Prince of Harlem' was murdered by his literal partner in crime.[328] Immediately prior to his death in 1990, Porter's younger brother had been kidnapped for ransom with the Porter family receiving one of his fingers alongside a demand for half a million dollars.[329] Porter was more than just a street level dealer; the *New York Times* reported that he sold, via his employees, around $50,000 of crack cocaine a week and threw a summer block party with free food and drinks. That these 'hood famous' figures, who were among the handful of black individuals who could be said to have made a major success of the trade in illegal substances in New York, were undone in such fashion provides an evidence-based rationale for the hustler's disavowal of filial and familial relations.

In an interview with *PBS* in 2000, former DEA Special Agent in charge of New York City Robert Stutman offered his view from the other side of the drug trade about the dissolution of familial structures in New York's drug devastated neighbourhoods:

[326] Lucas details the guilt he felt in seeing younger members of his family follow him in to the trade. Frank Lucas, *Original Gangster: My Life as NYC's Biggest, Baddest, Drugs Baron* (London: Ebury Press, 2012), Loc 3504.
[327] Rufus Schatzberg & Robert J., *African American Organized Crime: A Social History* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 41.
[328] Charnas, *The Big Payback* p.566
[329] James C. McKinley Jr. "Missing Boy: Drug Trade Hits again: Boy Abducted and His Brother is found Dead." *New York Times*, Jan 06, 1990.

> What crack did was make women into drug addicts, which meant that a society which was dominantly matriarchal no longer had a natural head of the family, because the natural head of the family became a junkie. And that caused unbelievable social changes in the inner city. […] Grandmothers were dealing with little kids, and a lot of times these grandmothers couldn't handle it. What it did to those families was horrible.[330]

Whilst Stutman's description primarily focuses on the effect of the drug upon its users rather than sellers, it appears that artists' estimation of a generational schism was recognised both inside and outside their communities. It also demonstrates communality between the experiences of the drug sellers – as represented in lyrics – and the drug takers, as families on both sides of the transaction were negatively impacted by it.[331]

These images of the hustler disconnected from the usual social support network of friends and family further emphasize the need for self-reliance, and the ability to appraise the benefit and risk of each individual relationship. John Read, in his work "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity" describes how the "model neoliberal citizen is one who strategizes for her or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options."[332] This strategic evaluation of social options is visible on Boogie Down Productions' 1990 album *Edutainment*, where the song "Love's Gonna Get'cha (Material Love)" problematizes familial, friendship and consumer relationships.[333] The narrator tells how he

[330] "Interview with Robert Stutman," *PBS*, accessed March 16, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/interviews/stutman.html
[331] JAY-Z does similar in the passage quoted previously: "I saw crack addiction destroy families – it almost destroyed mine."
[332] *A Foucault for the 21st Century,* ed.,Binkley and Capetillo-Ponce, 13.
[333] *Edutainment*, Jive, 1990.

was formerly strait-laced and studious but embarrassed by his family's lack of cash he allows himself to become recruited by a neighbourhood drug dealer and quickly becomes heavily involved in the drugs trade. His mother and sister, who are benefiting materially from his new 'job' are conflicted but do not intervene.

The narrator, KRS-One, and his brother become successful drug dealers with the attendant consumer goods to display their wealth. The drug dealer who recruited them, Rob, attacks them and the narrator's brother is shot and badly wounded. This causes the narrator to seek revenge, leading to a street shootout between two gangs; revenge is wrought against Rob and he is shot twice. KRS-One also accidentally shoots a police officer and the story ends with him trapped in his car, with the police having shot and killed his three accomplices and the probing question "Now tell me what the fuck am I supposed to do?" Given his work with the 'Stop the Violence' movement, it is reasonable to assume that KRS-One is telling this as a cautionary tale, rather than one which glamourizes or advocates the position of the drug dealer.[334] The chief moral to be taken from the story seems to be that over-attachment to material possessions can blind you to the risks being taken and the potentially fatal consequences of those decisions. It also, perhaps inadvertently, reinforces the notion of evaluating risk and reward with regards to relationships.

As a result of his love for his family, KRS-One's narrator feels a compulsion to bring in cash by illicit means. His relationship with his brother underpins the success of his drug dealing. The poorly judged professional relationship with the predatory 'Rob' causes his brother's shooting and the narrator's fraternal urge to protect and avenge leads to the shootout at the end. It evokes Foucault's concept of the neoliberal subject learning to move

[334] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 245.

judiciously in a world rife with risk. KRS-One's narrator makes bad choices; the decision to become involved in drug dealing – however understandable – is the foundational mistake upon which the narrative hinges. He may even trace it further to the 'love' of material possessions. His cautionary outro emphasizes this:

> So, for future reference, remember, it's alright to like or want a
>
> material item, But when you fall in love with it, and you start
>
> schemin' and carrying on for it, just remember:
>
> It's gonna get you!

By contrast, the neoliberal hustler's view espoused by the likes of JAY-Z, Mobb Deep and Biggie would be more inclined to blame the narrator's lack of understanding of the situation, his inability to appraise Rob's true character and the implicit weakness that he shows which allows Rob to feel he can attack him without consequence. [335] It is rare that rappers who inhabit the hustler/drug dealer persona caution against an over-attachment to money. Even on 'D'evils' where JAY-Z details the ways in which his attachment to cash has led him astray, he boasts in the last lines of the final verse, "For the love of money, son, I'm giving lead showers." Similarly Mobb Deep's most famous song 'Shook Ones, Pt.II' is dedicated to "all the killers and the hundred dollar billers."

These kinds of estimation and understanding of risk are tied into the ways in which Hip-Hop performers narrate the personally dangerous side of drug dealing. The primary forms of risk that drug dealers fear are grounded in the anxiety of being overpowered. From

[335] "It tags every possible disaster as the consequences of risk-bearing, the personal fallout from making 'bad choices' in investments […]" Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis, 92.*

the perspective of the criminal individual versus the punitive, carceral, state, this involves arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment. In the streets, this manifests itself in the threat of violence from competitors, ambitious associates and, as seen above, even friends and family. These fears are grounded in the reality of life for some of New York's most successful rappers as well as millions of young black men. Jonathan Simon, in his work *Poor Discipline: Parole and the Social Control of the Underclass 1890-1990* (1993) offers the shocking statistic that:

> In 1988 3.7 million adult Americans, one out of every forty-nine adults, were under some form of correctional custody. [...] For African-American men aged between the ages of 20 and 29 the proportion in 1989 was a staggering one out of four.[336]

Simon's work covers the crack epidemic, a phenomenon which not only changed the demographic profile of cocaine users but transformed the social structure of urban communities and increased the violence associated with the sale of cocaine. 1990 marked a watershed for murders in New York: "a third of the city's homicides were drug-related, and guns were used in two-thirds of the killings."[337] Many of the pre-eminent performers in Hip-Hop's golden age were adolescents or young adults throughout the height of crack's popularity. As JAY-Z explained above, their formative years crossed over with the worst excesses of crack cocaine, both from its users and its sellers, and they represent this in their work.

Between 1980 and 1992 the percentage of federal prisoners incarcerated for drug crimes increased from 25% to 58%. In 1990, whilst black Americans constituted roughly one

[336] Simon, *Poor Discipline,* 2.
[337] Donatella Lorch, "Record Year For Killings Jolts Officials In New York," *The New York Times,* Dec 31, 1990, 25.

fifth of drug users, they comprised over half of those arrested for selling drugs and due to mandatory minimums, which weighted crack offenses as worse than selling powder cocaine, they were given sentences which were on average 93% higher than for white offenders.[338] The threat of imprisonment was a very real one for low level drug dealers in this period. As a direct response to the proliferation of crack cocaine dealers, the NYPD's 'Operation Pressure Point' specifically targeted street-level sellers in the district of Manhattan known as 'Alphabet City.' Whilst this hitherto underutilised approach was lauded for its success in some quarters, its aggressive policy of arrest and prosecution of previously ignored small time dealers clogged up courts and impeded the criminal justice system.[339]

We saw how Biggie lyrically placed himself in prison to be able to immediately narrativize his exit and to demonstrate that he had "big plans." On "Respect," after the doctor has proclaimed that the baby Wallace is going to be a bad boy, B.I.G. narrates his life story including the prison experience discussed earlier:

> So school I didn't show up, it fucked my flow up
>
> Mom said that I should grow up and check myself
>
> Before I wreck myself, disrespect myself
>
> Put the drugs on the shelf? Nah, couldn't see it
>
> Scarface, King of New York, I want to be it
>
> Rap was secondary, money was necessary

[338] Troy Duster, "Pattern, Purpose, and Race in the Drug War: The Crisis of Credibility in Criminal Justice," in *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, Reinarman and Levine eds., 263 – 266.

[339] "Interview with Robert Stutman," *PBS.*

Until I got incarcerated, kinda scary

C74-Mark 8 set me straight

Not able to move behind the great steel gate

Time to contemplate, damn, where did I fail?

All the money I stacked was all the money for bail

This tone of reflective self-assessment feels uncharacteristically vulnerable when placed alongside much of the album's bravado, illegal business advice and violence. It demonstrates the complex relationship between individuals, their lived experiences, and their stage personas. With the three often pulling in different directions when it comes to the contested and vexed notion of authenticity.[340] These ideas are further complicated by the image and code of the hustler, how these all sit together will be discussed later in the chapter with a sustained analysis of "authenticity." These lines also demonstrate a potential motivation to leave behind the outlaw allure of the street life and to swap hustling drugs for hustling music, culture, and entertainment. The threat of prison, and the reality of life as a prisoner is "kinda scary." Even so, many of Biggie's other songs are about his supposed illicit activities and exemplary criminality. This casts doubt on his assertion that going to jail "set him straight." Either this line about his total rehabilitation, or the hundreds of other lines about his continued engagement in robberies, murders, and drug dealing, are a lie.

With the hustler figure standing as the archetype of neoliberal selfhood within Hip-Hop he can replicate and convey both the positives and negatives of the hustle. Chief among

[340] The overriding aesthetic of hyper-masculinity and these islands of anxious contemplation will be examined in the fourth chapter.

these negatives is the individualism necessary to become a self-entrepreneur. That self-entrepreneur is both, a one-man business who is able to sell drugs and then take the experiences of selling drugs and reform them into a new commodity to be sold again, and also, an entrepreneur of the self, someone who invests in their own human capital in order to increase their suitability within the economic system. As Biggie's unfulfilling interactions with civic services show: "neoliberal power works by dispersing bodies and individuals through privatization and isolation."[341] This push towards isolation finds fertile ground for adaption within a culture which obsesses over competition and winning, as well as forms of antagonistic competitiveness like battling, dissing and ciphers. Even though they occasionally warn against the caustic effects of hustling, rappers simultaneously laud its virtues and celebrate the riches it can bestow. The tension between an increasingly singular mindset, hyper-masculinity and the fear of violence from others do not sit neatly together and will be explored at length in the following chapters.

"Ain't tryin' to, kill 'em at first just, buildin' clientele:" The business of selling drugs.[342]

One of the main changes that occurred within the business of retailing illegal drugs was the dissolution of hierarchies that the advent of crack cocaine brought about.[343] Crack's appearance coincided with, and helped provoke, a shift away from the rigid, pyramidal structures of organised crime which had solidified as the trade in substances like marijuana, heroin and powder cocaine had been refined through the mid-to-late twentieth century.

[341] Read, "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus." 11.
[342] JAY-Z, 'Rap Game / Crack Game.'
[343] In the *PBS* interview, Stutman says: "Crack brought on a new kind of organization, which was a straight-up organization. Remember, almost all the other drug organizations were controlled from the top down. […] With the crack organization it started street up." This claim is corroborated in Schatzberg and Kelly, *African American Organised Crime*, 170.

Instead, crack cocaine leant itself to, and was eagerly taken up by, small clusters of entrepreneurs who with relatively little start-up capital could buy their way into the industry.[344] The impact of this was an increase in violence, as well as a reduction in the overall cost for consumers, both brought about by the diminished power of previously monopolistic cartels and established gangs. What this meant for sellers was that they were less likely to be able to work themselves all the way up from street seller to international drug kingpin in the way that an individual like Frank Lucas had done, because monolithic, corporate style structures were increasingly vulnerable as they were outmanoeuvred by newer, neoliberal enterprises.[345] This poses something of a problem for the rapper who wants to use his lyrics to relay a bildungsroman in the classic rags to riches style. Whilst large amounts of money could be made given the profitability and excellent return on investment that crack provided, the freelance nature of crack sales meant that there was no clear ladder of advancement to the positions of influence that many people sought.

Large, powerful, syndicates like those controlled by Lucas and Barnes in the 1960s and 1970s were no longer the direct employers of an army of street dealers as they had been in the decades around Hip-Hop's birth. If they had been, it is unlikely that the Hip-Hop of this period would have been so inflected with entrepreneurial spirit. African American gangsters like Lucas and Barnes came up in a period where Mafia control of the drug trade was the norm, as such they had to carefully manoeuvre around, and negotiate with, the Italian American organised crime systems that ran New York. Prior to Lucas' innovation in

[344] Geoffrey Canada in his autobiographical work *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* describes "a time before crack, [where] there was no money to be made hanging on the corner selling drugs." Geoffrey Canada, *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), Loc 735.

[345] Robert Saviano's widely heralded book *Gomorrah* (2008) demonstrates this phenomenon particularly well in relation to the traditional Italian and Sicilian mafia and its struggle against the upstart Neapolitan Camorra gangs. Roberto Saviano, *Gomorrah* trans. Virginia Jewiss (London: Pan Books, 2007).

establishing a direct connection to Southeast Asian heroin producers, La Cosa Nostra had a monopoly on the substance via their famed 'French Connection.'[346] This resulted in prohibitively high costs: "Only a handful of African-Americans possessed the resources to transact business with the Mafia on credit consignments and then only at the risk of their lives."[347] On "Ten Crack Commandments" Biggie's last rule is to never accept consignment unless you know you can sell that amount of drugs, because 'they,' the suppliers, will want paying regardless: "If you ain't got the clientele, say 'hell no!' / Cause they gon' want they money rain, sleet, hail, snow." By contrast, the start-up money to buy into the crack trade was around $1000 dollars for an ounce of cocaine.[348] This was then cut and processed into crack and sold in vials of ready to consume rocks for anything ranging from a couple of dollars a vial to ten or twenty dollars depending on the quality and strength of the product and various market forces.

The relatively small start-up capital needed to participate in the crack cocaine trade provided significant opportunity for new entrepreneurs to enter the marketplace. In doing so they became exposed to the risk and pressures which the political project of neoliberalism seeks to introduce into all aspects of society.[349] This entrepreneurialism conferred economic education which was internalised and then regurgitated in Hip-Hop lyrics. The 'freedom' provided by the diminished power of the once monopolistic crime families at the bottom end of the drug market is the kind of benefit which neoliberal advocates hold up as the great liberatory promise of neoliberalism as a socio-political

[346] Lucas, *Original Gangster,* 1470.
[347] Schatzberg and Kelly, *African American Organised Crime,* 127.
[348] Schatzberg and Kelly, *African American Organised Crime,* 162.
[349] Jim McGuigan quotes Foucault's explanation of this as "[t]he application of the economic grid to social phenomena." 'The Neoliberal Self," 229.

system.[350] In microcosm, the drug market was reproducing the move from Fordism to post-Fordism that was occurring in the society at large (and which had had such a deleterious effect on New York as a whole). Mirowski theorizes that the "independence" of entrepreneurialism constitutes "the economy's colonization of the Freudian superego," wherein the supposed increase of freedom paradoxically leads to "a greater and more intense dependence not only on institutions (business, the State, finance), but also on the self."[351] Those individuals who bought in to the crack trade were responsible for aspects of the business which, in a previous era as mere peddlers, they would never have been responsible for before. These included production, marketing, and distribution. At the opening of the Wu-Tang Clan song "C.R.E.A.M.," Raekwon can be heard hawking crack vials with the lines "Word up, two for fives over here, baby / Word up, two for fives, niggas got garbage down the way."[352] He simultaneously offers a discount for multiple purchase and disparages the product offered by the nearest competitors.

In New York, the advent of crack changed the dynamic of the city's long-established gang culture. Whereas gangs before had often been territorial, youth-led collectives, whose membership waxed and waned with the age and responsibilities of their members, the more democratic nature of the crack industry provided them with the opportunity to become profitable criminal outfits.[353] Across America those gangs with a more established hierarchy and long standing organisational structure of chapters or locations used this to franchise themselves, creating a central command and applying the strategies of corporate

[350] Harvey quotes the founding statement of the Mont Pelerin Society which outlines its desire to protect the "the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom." *A Brief History,* 20.
[351] Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis,* 94-5.
[352] Alan C. Page. *Enter The Wu-Tang: How Nine Men Changed Hip-Hop Forever* (Lone Gun Media, 2014), Loc 634.
[353] Schatzberg and Kelly, *African American Organised Crim*e, 10.

America to their endeavours.[354] Other, less organised, more casual collections of individuals sought to pursue local profits, acting on a smaller scale and utilising a loose organisational structure which often necessitated specific roles for members, but had a collective workforce of less than a dozen people.[355] New York Hip-Hop frequently details the latter kind of enterprise, situating its drug dealing on the street or in the project stairway, rather than discussing wholesale shipments of 'product.' Some performers seek to position themselves above this, aligning themselves with more traditional images of organised crime and incorporating elements, such as international conspiracy, which indicate their position as serious mid-level players in the drug trade.[356]

One obvious area of inauthenticity in New York rappers' lyrical descriptions of the drug trade from this period is their overuse of pop-culture images of gangsterism, particularly mob or mafioso type imagery. The Notorious B.I.G's self-styling as Frank White is lifted from Christopher Walken's character in Abel Ferrara's 1990 crime thriller *King of New York*.[357] JAY-Z's debut album *Reasonable Doubt* provides, via its cover art, a visual element to his homage to Italian American organised crime figures. The black and white image of JAY-Z dressed in suit, fedora and scarf with head bowed and his hand simultaneously holding a cigar and straightening his hat brim is laden with mafia inspiration. Jonathan Mannion was the photographer who arranged the composition and he "used John Gotti collections and Luc Sante's police surveillance and crime scene photographs from the 1930s

[354] Steven D. Levitt & Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics* (London: Penguin, 2006), 89.
[355] Schatzberg and Kelly, *African American Organised Crime,* 163.
[356] See JAY-Z and B.I.G.'s lines on 'Brooklyn's Finest' from *Reasonable Doubt*.
[357] Dir. Abel Ferrara. *King of New York*, Seven Arts. 1990. Biggie calls himself "the black Frank White" on 'The What ft. Method Man' from *Ready to Die*.

and '40s as inspiration points."[358] The motivation for this was to connect JAY-Z's image more closely with his home borough of Brooklyn, shunning the exotic imagery of an alternative suggestion, a Miami-inspired scene which paid tribute to the film most influential within Hip-Hop, Brian de Palma's epic *Scarface* (1983).[359] On the album itself, when JAY-Z teamed up with his lyrical 'older brother,' Notorious B.I.G for the song "Brooklyn's Finest," the two emphasized their mafia credentials when Biggie said he had "Mob ties like Sinatra."[360] Similarly, in his own song "Everyday Struggle," B.I.G. raps ""I'm seein' body after body and our mayor Giuliani / Ain't tryin' to see no black man turn to John Gotti," likening himself to New York's most infamous celebrity mob boss. He also intended to name his debut album *The Teflon Don* in homage to Gotti, before Sean "Puffy" Combs, head of Bad Boy Records, advised him to change the title to broaden its appeal.[361]

These instances of hyperbolic likening are best viewed as emblematic of the non-traditional nature of the hustler mentality. Whereas the general public's interest in figures like Gotti may be motivated by a kind of morbid curiosity, the hustler admires his Machiavellian "success" because it has been cultivated in a world whose rules exist outside (and often in spite of) the strictures of the mainstream, legal society. Gotti represented (and to some, still represents) an idealised image of what the hustler can achieve. This is why on "D'evils," JAY-Z "never prayed to God", he "prayed to Gotti." The notion that either JAY-Z or B.I.G could become John Gotti is fanciful and the fact it is so improbable transforms Gotti

[358] This description is provided by social media account @aintnojigga – a semi-official JAY-Z fan account and "Hovstorian" – and verified in Mannion's comments underneath the post. Instagram post @aintnojigga 25/06/2020.
[359] De Palma, *Scarface*.
[360] They both also reference business relationships with Peruvians, to further their credentials as serious importers of wholesale drugs.
[361] This story is relayed by Mister Cee in the tribute video "B.I.G 20 Years," on the official *Hot 97* YouTube channel. (5:30). "B.I.G 20 Years," HOT 97, *YouTube*, March 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5LveNSfB2Y.

into a totem, a synecdoche for hustling done well and stylishly. This is an idea that not only rappers were keen to exploit; 1970s New York drug kingpin Leroy 'Nicky' Barnes played up to his image as the 'Black Godfather' by dressing in a mafia-inspired style.[362] The irony that by the time these songs were recorded and released, Gotti was already serving life in prison matters less than his one-time image as an untouchable crime lord.[363] Like JAY-Z's deification of him, it's the faith that stories like Gotti's are possible that make them attractive to hustlers. The utilisation of these kinds of figures is a façade erected to cover the reality of drug dealing which is much closer to JAY-Z's image of standing on cold corners, or Inspectah Deck's running from police. Embracing their creative license, rappers seek to portray themselves as benefiting from the positives of the new economic structure – the ambition, savvy and self-reliance of the neoliberal entrepreneur – whilst reclining in the stylised splendour reserved for those who sat atop the old pyramidal structure of drugs conspiracy.

On "N.Y. State of Mind," Nas says of himself: "I'm like Scarface sniffin' cocaine / Holdin' an M16, see, with the pen I'm extreme." This simile places the rapper in the same position as Al Pacino's character in De Palma's *Scarface*, immediately prior to the film's violent denouement—alone, paranoid, propped up by drugs and ready to die in a blaze of glory. For Nas as a rapper, this imminent conflict will be constructed and fought out via his pen, another metaphor, this time for his lyrical power. These instances of rappers aligning themselves with mythical, even fictional, figures from the criminal underworld do two things in relation to the narrative of selling drugs: first, they work as acts of outrageous, entertaining braggadocio; second, they focus attention towards the higher echelons of

[362] Schatzberg and Kelly, *African American Organized Crime*, 37.
[363] Selwyn Raab. "John Gotti Dies in Prison at 61." *New York Times,* Jun 11, 2002.

criminal conspiracy, eliding the fact that most drug-dealing careers are devoid of glamour, documentation and notoriety. Stories like *Scarface* have several uses for the rapper-cum-hustler but the most important is their utilisation as a kind of dystopian American dream.[364] It is only because people believe in the dream, that they are willing to undergo the ordeals to try to get there. These images of rarefied, and nearly always temporary, success in the drugs trade are what encourage people (alongside unsatisfactory material circumstances and a dearth of legitimate alternatives) to persevere.[365] JAY-Z summarises this on "Dead Presidents II" with the lines "I tell you half the story; the rest, you fill it in / Long as the villain win." However, the fact that Raekwon has a song titled "Incarcerated Scarfaces" tells us that often the villain, however grandiose his self-perception, does not win.

Far from being like Scarface, situated in his mansion, the average street dealer earns less than minimum wage.[366] In fact, many people who begin to sell drugs do so to supplement jobs which pay minimum wage as a way to "make ends meet."[367] This is an example what Gilroy calls the "autopoiesis" of the neoliberal system: in this instance, insufficient worker protection forces workers to engage in illicit entrepreneurialism in order to meet their financial obligations.[368] Ryan King, studying "The Economics of Drug Selling" found that on average, "street dealers make less than $2500 per year," even when considering their unusual and irregular working hours "their pay level is still far below the

[364] See Lisa B. Y. Calvente, "From the Rotten Apple to the State of Empire: Neoliberalism, Hip Hop, and New York City's Crisis," *Souls*: Black Scenes 19, no. 2 (2017), 135,139 & Gilroy, "We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under …", 35.
[365] JAY-Z discusses this evocatively in *Decoded*, 76.
[366] This claim is made in Levitt and Dubner *Freakonomics*, 93, and supported and referenced by JAY-Z in *Decoded*, 75.
[367] Alyssa Stryker, 'Rethinking the Drug Dealer,' *The Drug Policy Alliance*, 2019, drugpolicy.org/drugsellers
[368] Gilroy, "We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under…", 26.

minimum wage."[369] As the leader of one Chicago crack gang is quoted as saying in *Freakonomics* (2005), wages are intentionally suppressed in an effort to maintain order. The dispensing of money is intricately tied to power and dominance, with each individual carefully meting out pay to the individuals below him, rewarding them for their work, but not overcompensating them so that they feel they are more powerful than their current status within the organisation.[370] The gang studied in *Freakonomics* is a chapter of the notorious Chicagoan gang the Black Disciples, a long-established organisation with in excess of 20,000 'staff' and a corporate structure replete with a board, a tiered management system and death-in-service benefits.[371] Owing to the highly organised nature of this enterprise, it does not correlate completely to the experience of all low-level drug dealers, particularly those in New York not affiliated with a major gang, yet JAY-Z quotes *Freakonomics* and testifies to its veracity in his own work *Decoded*.

What is important to note is the way in which a drug enterprise can function much like a legitimate business. Indeed, the reality of life as a low-level drug dealer exposes much of the lie about the "be your own boss" rhetoric of neoliberalism. Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner draw extensive parallels between the Black Disciples and the operating principles of fast-food chain McDonalds.[372] These include specialisation, compartmentalisation, poor working conditions and most importantly, a pyramidal structure of remuneration. Lester Spence states that neoliberalization increases inequality

[369] Ryan King. 'THE ECONOMICS OF DRUG SELLING: A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH.' *The Sentencing Project*, 2003. https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/the-economics-of-drug-selling-a-review-of-the-research/
[370] Levitt and Dubner, *Freakonomics,* 93.
[371] Levitt and Dubner, *Freakonomics*, 92-3.
[372] This is supported in *Smack* with the author describing roles in the crack cocaine salesforce as "underground (and dangerous) versions of 'McJobs,' with only the higher-ups earning any real money." Schneider, *Smack*, 194.

and that whilst the wealthiest Americans have gotten richer via its processes, by contrast "worker stability and mobility have decreased, worker wages have stagnated, worker benefits have decreased, even as worker productivity has increased." To further evidence the erosion of labour power, Spence quotes the statistic that in "1954 approximately 28% of all employed workers were members of a union. By 2002 only 11% of all employed workers were."[373] David Harvey sites the 1970s as a time when businesses began to act as their own class within the political system, advocating for themselves and securing successes for themselves and their shareholders with the defeat of bills concerning "consumer protection and labour law reform."[374] That rappers focus on the impossible successes of making it from street corner to "black godfather" demonstrates their inability to critique the falsehood of entrepreneurialism as freedom narrative.

On "Sweet Dreams," Nas articulates how individuals measure their worth in direct relation to the weight of drugs they can sell:

Street dreams are made of these

Niggas push Bimmers and 300 E's

A drug dealer's destiny is reaching a key

Everybody's looking for something

The "key" here plays on the homophone with 'ki-lo' as a unit of measurement. This is a common rhetorical device; on Philadelphia rapper Freeway's track "What We Do," JAY-Z

[373] Spence, "The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics," 141-2.
[374] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* 48. For contextual reporting on deregulation and a grassroots pushback against neoliberalism in the field of consumer rights see Michael Pertschuk, "The Case for Consumerism: CONSUMERISM," *New York Times*, May 29, 1983, 5

raps that "I move keys / you can call me the Piano Man."[375] However, Given Nas' sometimes disparaging attitude towards the crack trade his lines could also be read as a negative assessment, with keys being the counterpart to locks, connoting constrained mobility or imprisonment as much as ingress and egress.[376] The use of the word destiny also suggests incarceration as an inescapable reality.

On his critically acclaimed solo album, *Liquid Swords* (1995), Wu-Tang Clan member GZA details the highly spatial and territorial nature of drug selling. If the streets are where money is made, then protecting the streets that constitute one's market becomes a necessity and using violence to do so is inevitable.[377] The song "Gold," begins with lines spoken by fellow Clan member Method Man as he admonishes:

> Yo anybody get caught flinging over here
>
> I'm returning 'em, that's my word they getting blasted
>
> Anything from 220 to 140, that's mine
>
> Y'all need to step the fuck off
>
> Y'all niggas ain't crazy for real

He clearly marks out his territory and threatens violence if those boundaries are transgressed. GZA takes this energy into the song by launching into a violent verse about murdering interlopers and an undercover police informant:

> I'm deep down in the back streets, in the heart of Medina

[375] Freeway ft. Beanie Sigel& JAY-Z. 'What We Do.' *Philadelphia Freeway*. Roc-A-Fella. 2002.
[376] The comments attributed to Nas on the song's Genius page lend credence to the notion that he would be criticising, rather than praising the drugs trade. https://genius.com/Nas-street-dreams-lyrics
[377] GZA. *Liquid Swords*. Geffen. 1995.

About to set off something more deep than a misdemeanor

Under the subway, waiting for the train to make noise

So I can blast a nigga and his boys, for what?

He pushed up on the block and made the dope sales drop

Like the crash in the Dow Jones stock

[…]

I'm in the park setting up a deal over blunt fire

Bum nigga sleeping on the bench, they had him wired

Peeped my convo, the address of my condo

And how I changed a nigga name to John Doe

And while we set up camp, we got vamped

Put the stake through his heart, I ripped his fucking fangs apart

Snake got smoked on the set like Brandon Lee

The lines contain the allusions to martial arts figures and fantastic or comic book characters that are a Wu-Tang Clan staple, but they also show how the appearance of competitors on one's turf can damage sales in by taking potential customers away and by oversaturating the market, causing prices to go down.

The notion of an overabundance of product is reiterated on the song's hook where the GZA raps menacingly:

Fiends ain't coming fast enough

There is no cut that's pure enough

I can't fold, I need gold, I re-up and reload

Product must be sold to you

No neighborhood is rough enough

There is no clips that's full enough

I can't fold, I need gold, I re-up and reload

Product must be sold to you

The repeated dictum that "product must be sold to you" begins to expose the position of illegal drugs as just another consumable entity in American society. The drug trade is mimetic of the Dow Jones with its boom and bust, cyclical nature. Lessons learned from legitimate business can be applied to the trade, and vice versa. What they both depend upon is constant consumption from the populace, the continued exchange of goods and services for capital to keep the system moving. The direct address to the listener also draws attention to the relationship between artist and performer. Despite Hip-Hop music being couched in notions of documentary or autobiography, it is still a saleable product, one which is marketed to, and caters for, its audience. The GZA's claim that "no neighbourhood is rough enough" also functions on the desire from Hip-Hop listeners to be presented with ever more intense and realistic stories of drug dealing, violence, hustling and urban degradation. For those who listen to Hip-Hop as a gateway to vicariously partake in violent, murderous fantasy, "There is no clips that's full enough."[378]

[378] Clips being clips of ammunition and an image intended to evoke gun violence.

These lyrics reinforce that the drugs trade "shares many characteristics of other business enterprises."[379] The modus operandi of many street level dealers is akin to the 'lean and mean' model favoured by many businesses.[380] The poor working conditions, unsatisfactory pay and precarity experienced by low-level drug dealers is mimetic of their experiences within the legitimate economy. In an extensive study of young drug dealers, John M. Hagerdorn found that they had "very conventional aspirations; their core values centered on finding a secure place in the American way of life."[381]

"I sold kilos of coke, I'm guessin' I can sell CD's." Moving from drugs to music.[382]

"Somehow the rap game reminds me of the crack game." Nas makes this comparison, stated repeatedly in Hip-Hop, on "Represent" from his debut album *Illmatic* (1994).[383] It is a particularly concise example of the kind of yoking together of the drugs trade and the music business which rappers undertake frequently. This process of comparison, or even of going further and collapsing the two industries, provides MCs with a neat occasion to demonstrate their capacity to learn economic principles, invest in their human capital and then translate those lessons into a legitimate business. Furthermore, by undertaking such a process of translation MCs also demonstrate plasticity and flexibility as well as judicious decision making and an appraisal of risk. The song itself is an extended homage to Nas's

[379] King, "The Economics of Drug Selling," 1.
[380] Art Langer. 'Companies have tried to maximize profits using a 'lean and mean' business strategy. It blew up in their faces during the pandemic.' *Business Insider*, July 29, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/lean-and-mean-business-strategies-worsen-covid-19-crisis-2020-7?r=US&IR=T.
[381] J. M Hagerdorn, "Homeboys, dope fiends, legits, and new jacks." *Criminology*, Vol. 32, issue 2, May 1994. 197.
[382] JAY-Z, 'Diamonds from Sierra Leone (Remix.)' *Late Registration.* Def Jam. 2005.
[383] 'Crack Music' by Kanye West is another exploration of this theme. *Late Registration*, Def Jam. 2005.

borough of Queensbridge, which in Hip-Hop history was most famous for its beef between MC Shan and Bronx based BDP about the borough's status within the culture.[384]

Much of the track's lyrics are given over to the kinds of low-level criminality associated with street dealing. From "hanging out in front of cocaine spots" to "guzzling beers," the narrator tells us "Nas is a rebel of the street corner." In verse three, Nas provides detail on how the organisation of a small crack dealing enterprise works:

> Bokeem, my brother Jungle, Big Bo cooks up the blow
>
> Mike'll chop it; Mayo, you count the profit
>
> My shit is on the streets, this way the Jakes'll never stop it
>
> It's your brain on drugs, to all fly bitches and thugs
>
> 'Nuff respect to the projects, I'm ghost, one love

The division of labour is clear, with each named individual having a specific job. Not only does this streamline operations, but it also clearly demarcates responsibility. This kind of structure is known as "crime in association," an enterprise characterized by "entrepreneurship and non-hierarchical structure."[385] Reaffirming the GZA's representation of the spatial nature of drug dealing, Nas references the streets as the place where the trade occurs. His motivation for this, that it stymies police intervention (the Jakes), recapitulates rule number five from B.I.G.'s "Ten Crack Commandments": "never sell no crack where you rest at."

[384] Nas referenced this with the lines "Before the BDP conflict with MC Shan / Around the time when Shante dissed the Real Roxanne"

[385] Mangai Natarajan & Mathieu Belanger. 'Varieties of Drug Trafficking Organizations: A Typology of Cases Prosecuted in New York City.' *Journal of Drug Issues*; October 1998; 28, 4. p.1006

Amidst all this detail and narrative about street corner dealing, the reference to the "rap game" seems a little incongruous. Nas's estimation that it reminds him of the "crack game" appears in verse two alongside some standard hustler bragging:

'Cause life ain't shit but stress, fake niggas, and crab stunts

So I guzzle my Hennessy while pulling on mad blunts

The brutalizer, crew de-sizer, accelerator

The type of nigga who be pissing in your elevator

Somehow the rap game reminds me of the crack game

Used to sport Bally's and Cazals with black frames

Now I'm into fat chains, sex and TECs

Fly new chicks and new kicks, Heines and Beck's

Subjects covered here include sex, drugs ("mad blunts"), alcohol (Hennessy whisky; Heineken and Beck's beer), and consumerism (Bally's designer shoes and designer eyewear, Cazals). Situated alongside these are mentions of violence, anti-social behaviour, and an oblique reference to murder.[386] Yet the song hints that the connection between the Hip-Hop industry and the "crack game" is not only that both can bring extravagant rewards, but that both are dependent on the same workforce, with young black men disproportionately represented in both fields. This is further reinforced by the notion, and fact, that many individuals were active in both industries, on occasion simultaneously. The spatialised nature of drug dealing, with street transactions often concentrated into various open-air

[386] The notion of a crew 'de-sizer' means reducing the number of crew members by killing them.

markets also has crossover with Hip-Hop's foundational poetics of space and place.[387] This is exactly the sort of interplay which Nas engages in on "Represent," shouting out his neighbourhood and several of its inhabitants whilst simultaneously portraying it as somewhere dangerous, rugged, and hospitable to criminality. Nas is 'representing' Queensbridge in the street sense of the word by paying homage to it, whilst also 'representing' it in the documentarian sense by detailing the issues and systems which bedevil it.

On the *Genius* page for the song, Nas appears in a video giving commentary on the rap game / crack game dynamic: "It's all about getting a dollar, don't trust nobody, keep your eyes open. Focus on what you supposed to get out of it, this shit is dangerous, it'll take you down."[388] The fundamental difference one could argue, is that one is legal and the other is illegal, but this is an anathema to the hustler type of mindset that underpins the rapper/dealer relationship. In the mind of the hustler, they are both hustles, both involve the same process, making a product, marketing it as necessary and selling it to an expectant audience. As JAY-Z states in his feature on the remix of Kanye West's song "Diamonds from Sierra Leone," "I sold kilos of coke, I'm guessin' I can sell CD's."[389] This sums up the approach to business that Hip-Hop's hustlers bring from their experience of working in the streets. Through selling a product in a dangerous, highly competitive, deregulated market, drug hustlers internalise neoliberal principles and learn business skills which they can use to segue into legitimate enterprise. JAY-Z's next line on the remix is his iconic phrase, "I'm not a businessman, I'm a *business*, man." This phrase encapsulates the remodelling of the self

[387] See Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography*, CRC Press LLC, 2007. p.112
[388] https://genius.com/24000
[389] *Late Registration*

into a unit of enterprise that neoliberalism promotes; JAY-Z is no longer interested in how to successfully *run* a business; rather, he *is* a business.

JAY-Z's pithy turn of phrase could easily be the marketing strap line for neoliberalism as a political project. It encapsulates the internalisation of market forces which the neoliberal subject is required to accept in order to begin the necessary "ethico-political work on the self."[390] JAY-Z seems to suggest that he has completed what Maurizio Lazzarato calls the process of transforming the self into "a sort of permanent and complex enterprise."[391] That is, he has reached a point at which he is "being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings."[392] This notion of him as a stable corporate entity gives added insight to his line from "Dead Presidents II": "I'll make, you and your wack mans, fold like bad hands." As well as the obvious imagery of a poker game, once viewed through the lens of the individual as a business the threat to "fold" a rival takes on an additional hostile meaning. The concept of human capital requires constant innovation and dedication from the subject to continue the work on the self, refining their skills and developing profitable traits and behaviours. Elsewhere on "Dead Presidents II," JAY-Z states in relation to Roc-A-Fella records, "this shit is perfected," reflecting the culmination of much practice and hard work to reach the point of success. Similarly, on "Rap Game / Crack Game" he boasts: "You know my shit is fishscale, y'all niggas is cook up." Fishscale is particularly high quality, expensive cocaine whereas "cook up" is crack cocaine made in small batches to be sold as rocks. Evidencing his

[390] Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis*, 130.
[391] Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* trans Joshua David Jordan, (Amsterdam: Semiotext(e), 2012) Print, 91.
[392] Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis*, 226.

neoliberal adaptability JAY-Z is able to signify his pre-eminence with reference to both his lyrical and criminal endeavours.

"I live by the ten crack commandments:" Lessons from the drugs trade.[393]

One of the clearest lessons that is taken from 'the streets' into the music business is mentioned by Nas at the beginning of his unpacking of the rap game / crack game duality: "don't trust nobody." The general sense of paranoia and guardedness that pervades much early 90s Hip-Hop, especially in its narratives about drug dealing, can also be seen in its representation of the "industry." Even a group like A Tribe Called Quest, with its jazz-inflected, Afrocentric style, far removed from the thuggery and gangsterism of acts like Notorious B.I.G or Mobb Deep, articulated their distrust of those in the business of Hip-Hop. On "Check the Rhime," Q-Tip raps:

> Industry rule number four-thousand-and-eighty;
>
> Record company people are shady
>
> So kids watch your back 'cause I think they smoke crack
>
> I don't doubt it, look at how they act[394]

Even a group that were members of the Native Tongues movement depicted industry figures as crack users, with all the connotations of instability and untrustworthiness that came with it. That it is industry rule "number four-thousand-and-eighty" subtly tells the audience that there are myriad pitfalls and traps an artist must negotiate. This impression of

[393] Jadakiss ft. Diddy. 'You Don't Eat.' *Top 5 Dead or Alive*. Def Jam. 2015.
[394] *The Low End* Theory. Jive. 1991.

the record industry as malevolent or exploitative towards 'the talent' was reinforced by contemporary reporting in Hip-Hop publications such as *Vibe*. The August 1995 edition of the magazine claimed that "out of every album, CD, or tape sold, the artist gets only 5.7%, the songwriter, only 3%, but the recording company gets 43.4%, and the record store, 31.7%."[395] A Tribe Called Quest did not engage in the kinds of lurid, gangster tales that some of their contemporaries did, but that they chose the image of crack use to besmirch the reputation of 'record company people' demonstrates its status as a common signifier of degeneracy or deviancy. DEA Agent Stutman described the main effects of taking cocaine as "number one, the Superman syndrome" and "number two, the ascent of paranoia." These two features are highly visible in much of the music and potentially blur the lines between drug sellers and drug takers.[396] The notion that cash is addictive and the common yoking together of the music industry and the drug trade indicates how pervasive the lessons learned in selling illegal drugs became in Hip-Hop. The language, methodology and behaviours associated with slinging crack formed a kind of system for codifying experiences. In the same way that neoliberalism introduced the dynamics of the market into every corner of American life, in neighbourhoods where the crack trade was situated the business of drug dealing – which represented neoliberalism in extremis – also shaped and determined patterns of behaviour.

On his sophomore album *Liquid Swords* GZA takes the image of record labels as opponents or adversaries further than Q-Tip, depicting over a dozen different entities as warring gangs on the song "Labels." Using the kung-fu influenced imagery and

[395] "Who's zoomin' Whom?" p.67
[396] "Interview with Robert Stutman," *PBS*. This concept will be revisited in chapter four.

nomenclature of the Wu-Tang Clan, referring to the RZA and himself as the Abbott and the Master respectively, he promises to avenge mistreated rappers:

> So look out for A&M, the Abbot and the Master
>
> Breaking down your Pendulum
>
> As I fiend MC's out with a blow that'll numb the a-
>
> -ppendix, I'm holding more weight than Columbia,
>
> Index, Interscope, we RCA, clan
>
> That's coming with a plan to free a
>
> Slave of a mental death MC don't panic
>
> Throw that A&R nigga off the boat in the Atlantic

In line with the GZA's dense and intricate linguistic style – he is heralded as having the fourth largest vocabulary in Hip-Hop – the lines are packed full of internal rhymes, double entendre and puns.[397] The references to "blow," "weight" and the homophonic "Colombia" clearly evoke cocaine and because GZA is "holding more" than the record labels mentioned (A&M, Pendulum, Columbia, Interscope, Index, RCA), he has more power. He plans on using this power to "free a slave," an image which likens a recording contract to the bonds of chattel or plantation slavery. His threat to throw an "A&R nigga" (i.e. a record company official) into the Atlantic brings forward images of the middle passage and slave ships. This

[397] Killian Young. 'Aesop Rock, GZA Have Largest Vocabularies in Hip-Hop, Says New Study.' *Rolling Stone*, May 5, 2014, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/aesop-rock-gza-have-largest-vocabularies-in-hip-hop-says-new-study-231897/#:~:text=Aesop%20Rock%20has%20the%20largest,to%20old%20and%20new%20artists.&text=East%20coast%20rappers%20also%20comprise%20most%20of%20the%20top%20spots.

extreme language reflects GZA's frustration at his treatment when signed, as 'The Genius,' to Cold Chillin' Records, where his first album *Words from the Genius* was released.[398] The lead single to promote the album was a New Jack Swing-style track called "Come Do Me," an artistic compromise made in an attempt to craft a radio-friendly hit.[399] GZA's cousin, the RZA, had experienced the same frustration when signed to Tommy Boy Records as "Prince Rakeem." Like 'The Genius,' he released a formulaic rap single titled "Ooh I Love You, Rakeem" which is almost unrecognisable when compared to the work he would do later as the creative director of the Wu-Tang Clan.

The experiences of the two cousins, in being asked to soften and water down their styles to broaden their appeal, suggested to them that perhaps these established record companies were not for them. Yet they were not deterred entirely by this. As Alan Page explains:

> Even after the label botched the promotion of his single, RZA briefly considered approaching Tommy Boy about signing the Wu-Tang Clan, before his deal there fell apart. However, RZA changed his mind about that when he encountered legal trouble in the small Ohio town of Steubenville and Tommy Boy did not provide him with any assistance.[400]

The "legal trouble" that RZA experienced was in relation to selling drugs. His resultant experiences in the criminal justice system reinforced to him the hustler's neoliberal credo of self-reliance. Dissatisfied with his, and the GZA's experience with music labels, the RZA set up his own entity, Wu-Tang Productions. Despite having little record industry experience,

[398] The Genius. *Words From the Genius*. Cold Chillin' Records. 1991.
[399] Page, *Enter The Wu-Tang,* Loc 246.
[400] Page, *Enter the Wu-Tang:* Loc 280.

his own brief failure aside, the RZA promised the eight members of the group that within five years he would "take them to the top."[401] The way that he achieved this was by turning the standard format of industry negotiations on their head. The Wu-Tang Clan was an outlier in nearly every aspect. A collection of nine (later ten) MCs, who used obscure kung-fu samples in their music and hailed from the (in Hip-Hop terms) unimportant borough of Staten Island, they were always going to find it difficult to secure a record deal. RZA's strategy was to diversify the group's product with each constituent member of the Wu signed as a solo artist. After the independent release, and success, of their breakout single "Protect Ya Neck," various established record labels wanted to sign the group to an exclusive deal. The RZA instead, chose a relatively obscure label, Steve Rifkind's Loud Records which would meet RZA's non-negotiable condition—the removal of any 'leaving member' clause within their contract.[402] This meant that each member of the group was free to sign a solo contract with another label, without contravening the terms of their agreement as a member of the Wu-Tang Clan. By promoting and guaranteeing the interests of the individual, the RZA strengthened the power of the collective.

Almost as important, the RZA negotiated that the Wu-Tang Clan retain the rights to their brand, their merchandise, and their publishing. When members Ol' Dirty Bastard and Method Man signed to Elektra and Def Jam respectively for solo projects, the Wu-Tang Clan benefited. Promotion for each individual member was, by association, promotion which raised the profile of the Clan and transformed them from being an esoteric posse into a supergroup. As Dan Charnas explains:

[401] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 438.
[402] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 440.

> The members of the Wu weren't branded like property with label logos. Quite the opposite: the labels themselves sought out the mark of the "W." The Wu-Tang logo, like the "rough, rugged and raw" production style of the RZA, became a valuable emblem of authenticity, worth millions of dollars to any company that bought into the Wu franchise.[403]

A collection of young men who had hustled – both legitimately and illegitimately – since their childhoods were able to invert decades of industry practice by knowing their own worth and refusing to accept standard conditions and boilerplate terms. Instead of being contract workers, they became shareholders in a cultural entity – the Wu-Tang Clan – by which they could make money but still pursue their own ambitions.

These two innovations, the simultaneous promotion of the individual and the collective, and the insistence and reliance on clear, identifiable branding were lessons which had their foundation in the group's experiences in the streets. Growing up in Staten Island's notorious projects of Park Hill and Stapleton Houses fostered a sense of brotherhood between the members, underpinned by literal familial ties (several members were related to each other as cousins). Park Hill was nicknamed both 'Killer Hill' and 'Crack Hill,' by locals. This dangerous childhood environment may explain why members of the Wu were so keen to escape into the gaudy fantasy of Kung-Fu films. The RZA emphasizes their bond when he says: "We're one in the heart and one in the mind. That's the power of Wu-Tang."[404] This description of the 'power' of Wu-Tang is particularly important, as by fashioning a mythologized, quasi-religious or philosophical element to the group, the RZA moved them

[403] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 450.
[404] Page, *Enter The Wu-Tang,* Loc 1765.

from being just a musical act to being a cultural entity.[405] This made it easier for them to capitalise upon their success through merchandising; the Wu-Tang Clan weren't just musicians, they were a way of life. The unprecedented success of their clothing brand, Wu-Wear, changed the dynamic of artist endorsement in the music industry. Until the Wu-Tang Clan, Hip-Hop's biggest artist and brand tie in had been Run DMC and Adidas, a deal which "came just a year before the crew's cultural cachet evaporated."[406] By contrast, rather than attaching themselves to an established brand, Wu Wear clothes took their inspiration from the wardrobes of street hustlers. Inspired by iconic American brands like Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger – brands that young drug dealers wore as status symbols – they manufactured stylish but oversized items, a necessity on the street when carrying items such as guns, drugs, or cash, that needed to be concealed.

The Wu also licensed the 'W' logo to appear on clothes made by The Gap and trainers made by Nike. Sony even released a PlayStation game titled *Wu-Tang: Shaolin Style*.[407] This fixation with branding is reflected in their music as well. Indeed, the Wu adopted marketing strategies for their music that had been perfected in selling crack cocaine. Peppered throughout the Wu-Tang Clan's songs are references to 'blue tops,' a street practice of associating a specific colour with a given drug.[408] Red tops are for heroin, blue tops are for cocaine. These colours can be utilised as signifiers on both the packaging of drugs (making it easier for both seller and buyer to identify quickly) as well as on the clothes

[405] This self-fashioning was accepted by fans and journalists. Placing *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* in their list of the 100 essential albums of the twentieth century Robert Morales and Carter Harris wrote that "RZA's seven disciples fused rugged polysylabba, The Art of War's political coolheadedness, and the Abbot's murky, worn-out beats into the hip hop equivalent of grunge." See "The Vibe 100," *Vibe*, Dec.1999 – Jan.2000, 158.
[406] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 486.
[407] Page, *Enter The Wu-Tang,* Loc 1858.
[408] Examples include: 'Assassination Day,' 'Ice Interlude,' and 'Kilo (Remix) by Ghostface Killah; 'Wall to Wall' by Raekwon; 'Do the Same as My Brother Do' by the Wu-Tang Clan. West Coast rapper The Game also references them on his musical homage to the group, 'I Grew Up on Wu-Tang.'

worn by drug couriers, enabling potential customers to source their products more efficiently.[409] This innovation is also mentioned by Biggie Smalls on his collaboration with JAY-Z, "Brooklyn's Finest." JAY-Z's album *American Gangster* (2007) – created to accompany the dramatized biopic of Frank Lucas of the same name – has a track named after Lucas' legendary "Blue Magic" heroin.[410] Lucas himself says he's not even sure where the name came from, but that once it became associated with his high-purity produce, "The dealers who weren't selling Blue Magic were practically begging junkies to buy their stuff."[411] Thus the Wu-Tang Clan used marketing prowess they learned from dealing crack in the streets, to push culture, not drugs. The RZA's negotiation of a diversified portfolio of record labels for the Clan's solo careers meant that the group simultaneously had many different companies pushing their 'product.' He was thus able to further monetize the group, beyond the usual avenue of signing a contract to produce a stated number of albums. Rather than being workers, whose labour was sold and no longer their own, the Wu-Tang Clan retained the rights to their intellectual property and sought to position themselves as wholesalers of culture. Oliver 'Power' Grant, founder and CEO of Wu Wear, took the lessons of street hustling into the legitimate business world, where they fit perfectly with the reigning neoliberal ethos.[412]

If any one song can be seen to narrativize explicitly the relationship between selling drugs and selling records as neoliberal enterprises it is "Rap Game / Crack Game" from JAY-Z's album *In My Lifetime Vol.1* (1997).[413] The song samples two other rappers talking about the similarities between the two industries: Nas' line from "Represent," and a line by Andre

[409] Schatzberg and Kelly, *African American Organized Crime*, 41.
[410] *American Gangster*. Roc-A-Fella. 2007.
[411] Lucas, *Original Gangster,* Loc 2092.
[412] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 489.
[413] Roc-A-Fella / Def Jam. 1997.

3000 from Outkast's "Myintrotoletuknow." These samples mixed up with some JAY-Z adlibs, a high-pitched electronic sound and a DJ cutting and scratching, illustrate how music can be cut together in the same way that drugs can. From this frenetic opening, the first verse breaks down the similarities between music and drugs:

> We treat this rap shit just like, handlin' weight
>
> What they want we give it to 'em, what they abandon we take
>
> Hit a rapper with consignment, let him know it's at stake
>
> Put his ass in the studio, let him cook up a cake
>
> When it's hot, get on my money spot in every state
>
> Like the wiz in Camelot, the mom-and-pop's is the gate
>
> But first we scope shit, advertise in every area
>
> Let the fiends know hey, we got some dope shit
>
> Gon' need a middle man, so we look to radio
>
> Let 'em test the product, give 'em a promo show
>
> Just a breeze, not enough to catch a real vibe
>
> Then we drop a maxi single and charge 'em two for five
>
> Ain't tryin' to, kill 'em at first just, buildin' clientele
>
> So when the album drops the first weeks it's on sale
>
> But when demand grows it's time to expand yo

You don't want no garbage papi, it's ten grand per blow, fo' sho'

The process of drugs moving from producers to consumers is likened to the way in which music is recorded, produced, marketed, and sold. The reference to JAY-Z's ability to 'advertise in every area' reflects a particular site of influence from the streets with regards to Hip-Hop's ever evolving promotion of new acts and singles. Loud Records founder Steve Rifkind, who signed the Wu-Tang Clan, made his reputation by creating an army of street promoters, individuals who would hit the streets to promote new his client's music in areas which traditional advertising did not reach.

This innovation changed the dynamic of promotion, even for well-established brands like Nike, and demonstrated one advantage that Hip-Hop's entrepreneurialism had over traditional businesses: it intimately knew and understood its consumers.[414] Whilst Hip-Hop was not originally created in a lab as a product to be targeted at a youth market, by the early-to mid-1990s it had become a cultural phenomenon of immense earning potential. This is why JAY-Z likens it to the drugs trade. "Rap Game / Crack Game" demonstrates two key neoliberal features which underpin the rapper-hustler duality: the plasticity of self and the ability to commercialise culture. The first thing that JAY-Z does in his narrative is take a rapper and "put his ass in the studio, let him cook up a cake." Here a supposedly creative endeavour, making music, is linked to the production of crack cocaine which involves taking a raw organic product, diluting it, and processing it into an easily consumed and packaged substance. In this analogy, the raw substance would be the experiences, emotions, and opinions of the performer, reflecting the entrepreneurialism of the self.

[414] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 450.

This commercialisation of self creates significant problems when a line cannot be drawn between the individual and the product. As David Harvey observes, converting culture into a commodity is a feature of neoliberalism.[415] Russell Simmons, CEO of the iconic rap label Def Jam succinctly stated: "We don't make records, we sell records."[416] However, notions of appropriation and exploitation are complicated by the willingness of participants to engage in the process of commodifying their own culture, experiences, and creativity. In an extended blog post on the *Genius* site, original *Genius* contributor Zachary Schwartz describes the "rapper slash businessman" as a "unique cultural phenomenon."[417] Approaching the music industry with experience of trade or 'the hustle' empowered some performers to train a more critical eye upon how the industry worked. When Kevin Liles asked JAY-Z to perform for him as an audition with a view to being signed by Def Jam, JAY-Z replied "I don't rap for a record company. I own a record company."[418] The company in question was Roc-A-Fella records, and JAY-Z understood that by entering negotiations as a corporate entity, rather than an individual, he would have more power and gain more respect. In his verse on "Rap Game / Crack Game" JAY-Z portrays himself as the music mogul exploiting the work of a rapper, having him on consignment and threatening him with the consequences of failing to deliver on their agreement. These are lessons obviously translated from an illegal trade to a legal trade. Whilst the story suggests that the record industry is a racket just like the drugs trade, by having experience in the latter, JAY-Z can position himself more powerfully in the former. In his verse, he isn't the rapper, but the one higher up, pulling the strings. JAY-Z portrays himself as the idealised version of Foucault's

[415] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 160.
[416] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 546.
[417] Zachary Schwartz, "Trap Geniuses: Why Selling Rap is Like Selling Crack," *Genius,* May 2, 2013, https://genius.com/posts/1775-Trap-geniuses-why-selling-rap-is-like-selling-crack.
[418] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 563.

fabled *homo economicus*, an individual who has refined his skills, invested in his own human capital, and is now reaping the success of that investment by having others work for him. In his memoir *Decoded* he talks of how the streets were the site of his "moral education".[419] I would argue that they were also the site of his economic education in neoliberal principles and practices.

Hip-Hop lyricism offers a strong and largely consistent discourse of vernacular neoliberalism structured around its familiarity with the drug trade, with the hustler figure as its nexus. Acts like JAY-Z, Nas and Biggie describe evocatively the economic processes that the individual needed to understand to survive, or thrive, in the illicit trade of drugs. Moving away from the anti-drug didacticism of their forebears, these performers did not depict crack as an uncontrollable monster but rather a product to be moved. The profits from this product held emancipatory potential, and the process of moving crack was an opportunity to learn business skills and develop human capital. Whilst disseminating this 'street knowledge' in their songs, they promoted and extolled neoliberal virtues of self-reliance, entrepreneurialism, and personal development. The ever-fluid distinction between the drugs trade and the music business was frequently collapsed so that acts claimed to "treat this rap shit just like, handling weight."[420]

As well as yielding entertaining and illuminating vignettes of the underground economy, this concept of approaching both businesses with the same set of skills and economic principles was born out. Several Hip-Hop industry figures took the lessons they had learned in hustling and applied them to the legitimate business of making and selling

[419] JAY-Z, Decoded, 18.
[420] JAY-Z, "Rap Game / Crack Game."

music. This reinforces the status of the drugs trade as a site of exemplary neoliberal practice. Likewise, the adaptability they showed and the development of transferrable skills that made this adaption possible marked these individuals as successful neoliberal subjects. The process of selling drugs, and then selling music which relayed the story of selling drugs, is *homo economicus* writ large: an entrepreneurial endeavour – in an unregulated market – whose lessons are internalized, regurgitated, and sold again. This is a clear process of self-entrepreneurialism. The figure of the hustler – despite having its roots in older and more storied forms of non-traditional black work – proved the ideal character within which to house the neoliberal impulses of accumulation, individualism, and entrepreneurialism. Through Hip-Hop's combination of the hustler trope and the economic architecture of the drugs trade a particularly potent form of black vernacular neoliberalism was constructed.

The following chapter focusses on the depiction of violence within Hip-Hop lyrics of this period. Endemic violence is often viewed as an inevitable accompaniment to the trade in illegal drugs and the chapter analyses representations of that violence to better understand how the hustler (in his guise as a neoliberal exemplar) navigates the threat to business and profitability which violence poses. Likewise, how does the hustler-turned-rapper utilise violence himself – both lyrically, and on occasion physically – as a disciplinary and competitive tool? The chapter also explores the crossover between the drugs trade's attendant violence and the music business, seeking to understand how artists keep the two apart given their proclivity to claim that the two industries are so intimately linked as to reflect each other extensively.

Chapter Three: "There's a war goin' on outside no man is safe from:" The Link Between Drugs and Violence.[421]

With competition being the lifeblood and "primary virtue" of neoliberalism, rappers who – via their narratives of hustling – achieve some modicum of financial or accumulative success are hypervigilant for threats of dispossession.[422] Understanding that many of their competitors wish to have what they currently hold, they are guarded against having it taken from them by force. Foucault in his lectures on *The Punitive Society* (1973) theorizes this as a constitutive part of what he calls "a war of all against all" which occurs "essentially because men are equal in the objects and ends they set their sights on, because they are equivalent in the means they possess for obtaining what they seek."[423] In this way they are "substitutable for each other," and can, at any time, seek to replace the incumbent as the holder of what they desire. This "substitutability" as Foucault terms it, is key in supressing the earnings of low-level dealers within the drugs trade. "The fact that the job requires minimal skills, with a veritable army of reserves waiting to fill in any job opening, puts consistent downward pressure on wages for street level dealers."[424]

Foucault goes further to claim that "all possession is therefore precarious, precisely by virtue of this quasi-equality. Thus, there can never be property or enjoyment that does not include this dimension of distrust." This sensation is reflected forcefully within Hip-Hop with performers, in the guise of their hustler personas, training a watchful and suspicious

[421] Mobb Deep, "Survival of the Fittest." *The Infamous*.
[422] Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis,* 96.
[423] Foucault, *The Punitive Society,* 26.
[424] King, *The Economics of Drug Selling*, 2. Crotty claims that this "chronic excess capacity" is a key feature of Neoliberalism, see "Structural Contradictions of the Global Neoliberal Regime," 368.

eye on their competitors, their record labels, their friends and even their family. The thrilling nature of competition – with its neoliberal overtones of practice, refinement, execution and success – yields reward but accompanying these rewards are novel anxieties about holding on to them. Figures who win, in either the drug game or the music game, put their heads above the parapet of 'the struggle' and thereby making themselves targets to be shot at. The first of Biggie's "Ten Crack Commandments" states:

> Rule Nombre Uno: never let no one know
>
> How much dough you hold 'cause you know
>
> The cheddar breed jealousy 'specially
>
> If that man fucked up, get yo' ass stuck up

Three lines later he shows how he was formerly on the other side of this competitive 'war:' "I done squeezed mad clips at these cats for they bricks and chips." Biggie seemingly wants to guard against the kinds of armed robbery that he himself used to direct at others.

This utilization of violence, and the specific tool used to inflict that violence is of particular importance for this discussion. To return to Foucault, he theorizes the individual's need for what he calls "an additional power:"

> there is only one way to succeed in overcoming this distrust and halt this competition, which is that one of these perpetual combatants prevail over the others by something like an additional power, that is to say he appropriates not only an object of enjoyment, but, in addition, an instrument in order to capture this object, he increases consequently his own power in relation to the others and leaves the schematic status of equality given to individuals at the start; he has an additional

> power from which he expects precisely the effect that others will no longer seek to take his place and that he can peacefully enjoy what he has, that is to say, that he is respected.[425]

Within Hip-Hop's narratives of drug dealing and hustling, this "instrument" which confers power, respect and a modicum of security is the gun.

Rappers' obsession with narrativizing the power and machinations of gun violence is the central theme of this chapter. Not only does this violence extend and problematize the notions of competition unpacked by Foucault above, but it also functions as a technology of neoliberalization.[426] The repeated invocation – and lyrical usage – of firearms situates these works within their sociological context and helps the listener to further examine the connection between the drugs trade and the music business. Furthermore, the lyrical bearing of arms also comes to function as a particularly resonant and powerful form of consumer culture with rappers detailing ever more specific and rarefied weaponry to mark their difference from their peers. Foucault, drawing upon the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes states that:

> The increase in power introduces men into the system of signs, of marks, and the additional power is basically meant to establish this visible mark [of the] power of [one of them] into the relationships between men. Hobbes calls this will to impose respect "glory": the ability, through external signs, to keep in awe those who might claim to take his place.[427]

[425] Foucault, *The Punitive Society,* 26.
[426] The term technology is used here to mean a two-fold process of subjectivity and subjection as Lester Spence utilizes it in *The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*, 143. This will be unpacked fully within this chapter.
[427] Foucault, *The Punitive Society,* 26.

This concept, of the gun conferring "glory" is accepted within Hip-Hop, as will be seen when examining Nas' track "I Gave You Power" (1996.)[428] The gun is so absorbed into the constitutive character of the hustler-rapper figure that it comes to be seen as an extension of the self.

"A gangsta can't outrhyme a bullet. And real gangsters rarely outlive them."[429]

This pithy aphorism from Nelson George – addressing the death of Tupac Shakur – lays bare the fundamental tension at the heart of rappers' artistic relationships with violence. Many artists use tropes, metaphors, and expressions directly associated with violence in their work to shock, entertain and inject narrative tension, in the same way that writers, directors and painters have done for centuries. These acts of violence are frequently gruesome and gritty, occasionally moralistic, didactic, and often wanton, almost parodic, in their Dionysian excess. That these depictions of violence regularly occur in narrative settings constructed from the artist's own experiences and remembrances destabilizes their status as merely fiction. Once again, the Hip-Hop audience is forced to return to the seemingly bottomless well of contested authenticity to discern whether incidences of violence, so vividly and poetically described, are 'real' or not. This ambiguity has proved fatal for some artists, with the tension between their on-mic and off-stage personas (and perhaps most importantly, their capacities for violence) making them targets for physical harm.

Within Hip-Hop music, the spectre of violence looms incessantly; violence perpetrated in myriad ways, against, and by, innumerable people and for a multitude of

[428] *It Was Written*. Columbia.
[429] Nelson George, September 24, 1996, *Village Voice* commentary on the death of Tupac Shakur. QTD in *Callaloo*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring, 1999), 306-332.

reasons. In scale it ranges from biopolitical and carceral control against swathes of the population to violence against the self in the form of self-harm and drug abuse.[430] The motivations for committing and reflexively fearing this violence are multiform and complicated. This chapter examines the ways in which narratives of violence reinforce neoliberal concepts of competition, self-improvement, and human capital. Violence is frequently represented as a necessary behaviour, an outcrop of the hustler mentality which requires the individual to do what is needed to accumulate wealth. In addition to their purpose as entertainment, lyrics which recount violent acts also bear witness to the real-world violence occurring in New York, which was amplified by the trade in illegal drugs.

The litany of prominent Hip-Hop artists who have been murdered across its relatively short history as a cultural phenomenon is extensive and lamentable.[431] Since the shooting of Boogie Down's Scott La Rock in 1987 around 70 well known rappers have been killed and most of their murders remain unsolved.[432] Alongside these deaths, countless others have been shot and wounded, with several using the incidents to burnish their careers, perhaps none more so than Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson.[433] Hip-Hop and violence have a symbiotic relationship. As producer Jimmy Duval said recently: "The rap game isn't like any other industry […] There are a lot of guns and bullets flying around."[434] Many performers spent

[430] On violence as social control see 'Sound of Da Police,' by KRS-One. *Return of the Boom-Bap*. Jive. 1993. See Madvillain, 'Accordion' for the health risks of drug use. *Madvillainy*. Stones Throw. 2004. Dumenil and Levy even discuss the neoliberal "Violence of Figures" in relation to unsustainable interest rates in the 1970s. See ""Neoliberalism: The Crime and the Beneficiary" 396.

[431] See Williams, Melvin L., Justin K. Winley, and Justin A. Causey. "For the Dead Homie: Black Male Rappers, Homicide Survivorship Bereavement, and the Rap Tribute of Nipsey Hussle."

[432] XXL Staff, 'The Current Status of Every Murdered Rapper's Case,' *XXL*, November 17, 2020, https://www.xxlmag.com/current-status-murdered-rappers-cases/

[433] Other notable artists to have been shot and survived include The Game; Cam'ron; Timbaland; Fabolous; Li'l Wayne; Ol' Dirty Bastard and Tupac.

[434] Sirin Kale, "It's a war zone': why is a generation of rappers dying young?" *The Guardian*, January 31, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jan/31/war-zone-music-industry-confronts-a-generation-of-rappers-dying-young.

their foundational years in neighbourhoods beset by the gun violence which has plagued (and continues to plague) American cities. This violence is directly linked to the trade in illegal drugs. From the mid-1980s onwards, competition for drug markets coupled with the proliferation of cheap and available firearms saw levels of fatal inner-city violence increase rapidly.[435]

Crack dealers interviewed in 1988 subscribed to the idea of small-scale entrepreneurialism that is so vital to the neoliberal project. When outlining the positives of crack dealing, they cited the freedom that you could: "Be your own boss. Work your own hours."[436] Even the threat of incarceration and prosecution was not sufficient to discourage them, "police and criminal penalties were perceived by crack sellers as only a minor concern." By contrast "[so] many people were striving to make "crazy money" or to support their crack consumption that competition among sellers was the major problem."[437] The radically altered nature of the drugs trade that the advent of crack had precipitated was one of the main contributary factors to the increase in street violence.[438] Where once monolithic organisations of drug conspiracy had run an army of street-level dealers, there now existed hundreds of singular enterprises all vying for space. Whilst the prior monopoly of the trade was not hospitable to entrepreneurialism, the power of a handful of hierarchical organisations formed a stable buttress against street-level violence. The heroin trade of the

[435] Blumstein and Wallman eds., *The Crime Drop in America*, 8 – 10.
[436] Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap, "The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs," 178.
[437] Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap, "The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs," 179-80.
[438] As Latonya Kittles succinctly summarised in *The Source* magazine: "In the 1990s, the 'hood by definition, has become associated with chaos. The driving force: crack cocaine." "Burning Down the House," *The Source*, November 1996, 31.

1960s and 1970s rarely experienced the kinds of violence which became commonplace within the crack cocaine trade of the 1980s and early 1990s.[439]

Feeding the violent nature of the crack trade was the proliferation of cheap weapons, a direct result of a marketing drive by the firearms industry. With sales of firearms having slumped around 1983, the industry implemented a new marketing strategy designed to expand "expand the market beyond white males with the new target markets being women and youth." Central to this strategy was the production of new, more powerful weapons within the 'Saturday Night Special' class, a range of small, cheap handguns "affordable to poor youth throughout America." These guns were given "names that young people find enticing, like Viper."[440] The effect of this calculated process was that guns were "easy to buy on the black market even in New York, which had one of the toughest gun laws in the nation."[441] As Geoffrey Canada explains: "Where once handguns had been relatively scarce commodities, in a very short time they became ordinary."[442]

The rappers who had come of age in the 1980s and 1990s were part of what Canada calls the "handgun generation" which he typifies as "a whole generation who serve no useful role in America now and see no hope of a future role for themselves."[443] Canada's observations echo both JAY-Z's aforementioned line that people "hustle out of a sense of hopelessness," and Mobb Deep's "There's a war outside no man is safe from." Kool G Rap condenses this feeling into a couplet on "Take 'Em to War" (1995): "Shit ain't never gonna change (Fuck it!) / Time to load the clips (Then we take 'em to war!)"[444]

[439] Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap, "The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs," 173.
[440] Canada, *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* Loc 2166 – 2185.
[441] Canada, *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* Loc 2202.
[442] Canada, *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* Loc 1474.
[443] Canada, *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* Loc 90.
[444] *4, 5, 6,* Cold Chillin' Records.

The language of war has set the tone for the United States' approach to drug use, abuse and selling. This bellicose framing has begat violence, conflict, and destruction. Eric C. Schneider explains:

> Metaphors of war demand the identification of enemies, encourage the search for foreign threats, and lead to a self-perpetuating militarization of domestic and foreign policy. […] With only vaguely identified enemies and unclear goals, is it ever possible to declare victory in a metaphorical war?[445]

Attempts to police the drugs trade frequently serve to exacerbate, rather than reduce levels of violence. This is thought to be a result of increased pressure on supply chains which drives prices up and heightens the stakes of controlling territory and drug markets. Likewise, increased police presence necessitates quicker transactions between seller and buyer which invariably leads to mistakes, misunderstandings, and a greater opportunity to "short" the other party. Such incidences are commonly met with retaliatory violence.[446] The Drug Policy Alliance found that "A 2011 systematic review of the effect of drug law enforcement on drug market violence reported that 91% of examined studies found that an increase in the intensity of enforcement was associated with an increase in drug market violence."[447]

This lexicon of conflict is also present in Hip-Hop with its history of battling, challenges, and contestation. This spirit of competition, coupled with the experiences of urban black communities as both the battleground and target of the War on Drugs compels rappers to describe and dramatize the violence of the drug war. This violence occurs 'on

[445] Schneider, *Smack,* xv.
[446] See 50 Cent taking precautions against this on "Corner Bodega" from the bootlegged unreleased album *Power of the Dollar* (2000). He also discusses how "It ain't even safe to sell a pack at night / Got task ridin 'round the projects on Mountain Bikes."
[447] Stryker, "Rethinking the Drug Dealer," 16.

wax' between state agents and private citizens and, most commonly, between warring factions on the streets involved in the trade itself. Wherever Hip-Hop details the selling of drugs, violence often follows.

"Me knew a crack dealer by the name of Peter / Had to buck him down with my 9mm": Violence as an occupational hazard.[448]

If we consult official data, as Galea et al did in their study 'Drugs and Firearms Deaths in New York City,' we can see that between the years 1990 and 1998 there were just over eleven thousand firearm deaths in the city. Roughly ninety percent of these were homicides, the victims of which were, overwhelmingly, young men. Individuals aged 15-34 constitute two thirds of the total deaths by firearms across this period. Those killed in shootings were predominantly Black or Hispanic (48% and 35% of deaths respectively), and shooting deaths were highly spatialised, with double the number of homicides in Brooklyn than in Queens, for example. As we start to examine these overlapping factors, we can begin to build a picture of what the 'average' or 'typical' person killed with a gun might look like. Victims are predominantly young men of colour, the same group that are disproportionately represented in the drugs trade and in rap music. When we consider the further evidence, that just over half of homicide victims tested positive for drugs, and that nearly half of them were killed "outside," it becomes apparent that the trade in illegal drugs was contributing to the number of gun deaths in New York in the 1990s.[449] Victims testing positive for drugs and alcohol only tells half the story as it may be more interesting or indicative to know which

[448] Boogie Down Productions, '9mm Goes Bang.' *Criminal Minded*.
[449] The range of substances tested for included: cocaine (present in 24% of victims), opiates (9.6%), cannabis (19.5%) and alcohol (26.9%.)

substances (if any) the shooter had taken prior to the act taking place. Unfortunately, for most murders (and indeed all of them in this study) this remains fundamentally unknowable. What the data shows is that what was being reported in Hip-Hop lyrics was indeed happening on the streets of New York City. Young black men were being shot and often drugs were involved, to some degree, in the incident.

New York was not unique in experiencing this surge in violence. Across America firearm deaths of young adults and teenagers accounted for nearly all the marked increase in violence that was experienced between the mid-1980s and early 1990s. Garen Wintemute studied this rise in violence in order to understand its subsequent drop off and found that:

> By 1993, 90 percent of homicides among males ages 15 to 24 involved firearms, and the firearm homicide rate among black males ages 15 to 24 was 21 times that for the population as a whole. In many cities, a black male who turned 18 in 1989 had roughly a one in 20 chance of being murdered by 1995.[450]

This type of violence provides the narrative tension for Boogie Down Production's "9mm Goes Bang," a particularly resonant example of the violence as occupational hazard trope.

As referenced in the first chapter of this thesis, BDP's album *Criminal Minded* played an important part in beginning the shift towards gritty, first person gangsta narratives within New York rap. This song, with its titular reference to a particular model of gun, tells the listener much about the attitude toward guns and self-preservation:

> Me knew a crack dealer by the name of Peter

[450] Garen Wintemute, "Guns and Gun Violence," *The Crime Drop in America,* Blumstein and Wallman eds., 48.

Had to buck him down with my 9 millimeter

He said I had his girl, I said "Now what are you? Stupid?"

But he tried to play me out and KRS-One knew it

He reached for his pistol but it was just a waste

Cos my 9 millimeter was up against his face

He pulled his pistol anyway and I filled him full of lead

Most important is how KRS-One frames the acts of murder within the song as necessary, self-preserving behaviours. The lines tell us that he "*had* to buck him down," a notion reinforced in the second verse (detailing other, connected murders) with the line "They shot right through the door so I *had* to go for mine."[451]

This description of an unavoidable behaviour reinforces the primacy of the self, with the acts framed as self-defence. This – despite the supreme self being a feature of neoliberal rhetoric – is not necessarily an invocation to the neoliberal obsession with the self, it could simply be read as an attempt to provide some moral justification for several hugely transgressive acts.[452] This is in keeping with the findings of Decker and Van Winkle in their work *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends and Violence* who found the "common attitude towards violence was fatalism." [453] This fatalism is exemplified in phrases such as: "you gotta do what you gotta do"; "we don't go looking for trouble"; "we use violence when it comes to us.'" However, the lines are delivered with such glee that the audience is left in little

[451] Emphasis added.
[452] M.O.P provide such justification on their track 'Stick To Ya Gunz:' "If it happen the squad's cappin', I'm in the mix / And I'd rather be judged by twelve, than laid by six." *Firing Squad*. Relativity. 1996.
[453] Scott H Decker & Van Winkle, Barrik van Winkle, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 144.

doubt that KRS-One's narrator took some thrill or enjoyment from the shootout. The chorus, in which he playfully mimics the sound of his gun: "Wa da da dang" and asks the audience to "Listen to my 9 millimeter go bang!", reflects the pride in his murderous actions.[454] This is reinforced at the song's end, when recounting the tale to his partner Scott La Rock, KRS-One says that: "Scott just laughed, he said "I know they're all dead / And just before you pulled the trigger this is what you said..."

Key to the narrative enjoyment of this violent interaction are several hustler tropes about cunning, power, and competition. We hear how Peter "tried to play" KRS-One's character, and in the second verse he realizes that the unusual knock at his door "had to be a trick." By avoiding being duped, the narrator shows his smarts and his ability to appraise risk, a vital neoliberal concept. In fighting off multiple assailants, the individual demonstrates both his power and his bravery, as well as the maximising of his human capital. This ability to show fearlessness and utilize violence was a necessity for crack cocaine dealers in the late 1980s and early 1990s who: "became a prime target for robbers, and in turn, retaliated whenever they could lest they gain a reputation for vulnerability."[455]

The song reinforces this sense of an occupational hazard, verse three opens with the line "I gathered all the money and I ran up the block," suggesting dispossession is the real motivation for the attack. As Freddie Gibbs summarises on his 2013 interpolation of the song "9mm:" "niggas hustle, niggas murder for this dope and cocaine."[456] Due to its status as an illegal enterprise, crack dealers were "[f]orced to operate outside the civil dispute-

[454] See Quinn, *Nuthin' But a "G" Thang* for how killing for pleasure engages with "badman poetics." Loc 2919 – 2931.
[455] *The Crime Drop in America,* Blumstein and Wallman, eds., 9-10.
[456] *ESGN (Evil Seeds Grow Naturally)*. ESGN / Empire Distribution.

resolution system" so "the crack business became a focus of violence."[457] The unregulated nature of the market – which boosts its potential as a site of entrepreneurialism – means that violence is necessary in order to protect profits.[458] The dealer utilizes the gun as a source of Foucault's "additional power."

"I can introduce you to your maker / Bring you closer to nature:" The feared body and neoliberal subjectivity[459]

The physical, corporeal reality of the body is what makes it a key concern, and a site of perpetual anxiety, within neoliberal governance and subjectivity.[460] Whereas intellectual, political, and social phenomena can be packaged or portrayed as positives when shrouded in the 'reality' of neoliberalism, the body is not so pliable. Similarly, for the interlinking figures of rapper and hustler the body can provide a convenient arena for self-improvement but can also be a source of weakness in the face of violence. The conditions which are articulated in "The Message" of an urban environment in which traditional social structures are failing and where grinding poverty is an incapacitating reality can also be portrayed as conditions which foster entrepreneurialism and provide added motivation for work upon the self. Similarly, the slashing of social security budgets and scaling back of government assistance can be portrayed, through the lens of neoliberal thought, as a way in which to

[457] *The Crime Drop in America,* Blumstein and Wallman, eds., 9.
[458] JAY-Z condenses this into a couplet on 'Friend or Foe:' "You enterprisin' though, and I like it / But fuck with the big dogs, yo, I gotta bite ya." *Reasonable Doubt*.
[459] JAY-Z, 'Lucifer,' *The Black Album*.
[460] Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis,* 148.

provide responsibility, opportunity, and freedom to a class (or underclass) of prospective, but hitherto smothered, economic actors.[461]

Even if the reality is that few, if any, of the individuals targeted by such social engineering go on to participate successfully in the neoliberal economic system, it can be argued that neoliberal governance made it possible for them to do so or provided the conditions for them to do so. What would have been seen as a failure for a post-war liberal government, becomes a success for a neoliberal government, and perspective, rather than reality, comes to predominate. By contrast, a hungry, damaged, or vulnerable body is far more obdurate. Its sheer presence and appearance sufficient to testify to failure; whether personal, societal, or physical. The presence of rough sleepers in New York, for example, provides a caveat to its status as a major financial engine of the modern world, replete with a glamorous entertainment industry which holds the promise of success.

As Mirowski states, the "abiding somatic integrity of the self is the last great double truth of the neoliberal era."[462] Whereas *homo economicus* is depicted, and venerated, for its constant adaptability, this plasticity does not extend wholly to the physical body. Even though the body can be improved and worked upon, there remain moral barriers or judgments imposed upon utilizing it as a source of capital generation in the form of prostitution, for example. This concept is one which appears perennially in Hip-Hop lyricism and is used to articulate, often casually and inaccurately, dissatisfaction with industry terms

[461] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness,* 13. Before the 1996 Presidential election *Vibe* magazine ran a comparison piece on incumbent Bill Clinton and his opponent Bob Dole which placed their statements on a range of issues side by side. On welfare reform they were both quoted as stating their view that welfare payments be reconfigured to necessitate that recipients work. Also quoted was Republican Congressman J.C. Watts of Oklahoma who stated "I think the average young urban American out there that wants to open the gateway to the future for themselves or have an opportunity to accomplish the American dream. For them, I think Welfare reform will be a very positive thing." See Sefyu Hinds, Selwyn. "Decision '96: The Millenium Commeth," *Vibe*, November 1996, 95-98.

[462] Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, 148.

or the peculiar labour system of music production.[463] It is in relation to the physical body that lyricists articulate many of their most keenly felt anxieties and dissatisfactions with the neoliberal hustle. The body becomes a canvas upon which lyrical violence can be visited. From the unstoppable force of bullets to hypodermic needles piercing skin, the modes and motivations for that violence reveal key neoliberal principles and concerns occupying the minds of their authors.

The use of violence as a response to, and result of, the conditions of neoliberal governance will be explored in this chapter primarily through the bodily harm inflicted upon, and by MCs, in their lyrics. It is important to acknowledge though that this violence exists on a continuum, and that the overt violence which is described in entertaining – if sometimes shocking – detail by rappers is a particularly concentrated and dramatic form of violence. These incidents, as graphic and as narratively dynamic as they are, occur against a backdrop of slower large-scale violence which is less explosive, but which contributes to the conditions which promote and facilitate moments of interpersonal violence.

The concept of 'slow violence' has been discussed most prominently in relation to issues of pollution, toxicity, and public health, as in Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011).[464] Nixon describes environmental slow violence as being enabled by the deregulation and globalisation promoted by neoliberalism, with efforts to draw attention to it stymied by the fact that it is, by its very nature, 'spectacle deficient,' progressing continuously but with few climactic incidents for an arresting narrative to form

[463] Most commonly this is in the form of acts adopting a 'pimp' persona as discussed in the preceding chapter, but it also appears in lines such as the indignant "Work all week to let the bossman pimp me?" on Dead Prez's track 'W-4' from their album *RBG: Revolutionary but Gangsta*, Columbia. 2004.
[464] Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

around.[465] In their essay 'Slow Violence and Neoliberal Education Reform: Reflections on a School Closure,' authors Aggarwal, Mayorga and Nevel utilize Nixon's theoretical framework of slow violence to examine school governance in New York.[466] It entails:

> waves of urban renewal that silently—yet steadily—removed generations of working class families from their communities; it was fuelled as those with race and class privilege laid "rights" based claims to separate schools for their "community."[467]

Their argument being that this steady dispossession and removal of civic power from already marginalised people is a form of violence which is perpetuated by institutions in a gradual, insidious manner.[468]

It is important to highlight these processes within this discussion on violence as it reminds us that violence can take varying forms, can exist on wildly divergent scales, and can occur without immediate bloodshed. Hip-Hop performers often do not directly engage with the complex theoretical framework of issues such as slow violence, but they do frequently portray societal conditions as promoting or fostering an inherent, or endemic, violence. The most important condition in this regard is the trade of illegal drugs and competition with that trade. Similarly, despite attempts among certain ideological bases to depict Hip-Hop or rap as an irredeemably violent music, rappers do not have a monopoly on violence.[469] They both reflect the violence of society and neoliberal governance with their

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[465] Nixon *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 64.
[466] Ujju Aggarwal, Edwin Mayorga, and Donna Nevel, "Slow Violence and Neoliberal Education Reform: Reflections on a School Closure," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 18, no. 2 (05, 2012): 156-164.
[467] Aggarwal, Mayorga and Nevel, "Slow Violence and Neoliberal Education Reform: Reflections on a School Closure," 162.
[468] As early as the year 2000, economist James Crotty was arguing that neoliberalism naturally produced slow growth and that by doing so it perpetuated its own conditions, see "Structural Contradictions of the Global Neoliberal Regime," 361–68.
[469] Calvente, "From the Rotten Apple to the State of Empire," 135.

fixation on disciplinary and retributory violence and offer a way in which to see the effects of forms of slow violence such as gentrification and the war on drugs. As Ishmael Reed admonishes in the title of one of his essays in *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), 'Drug "Experts" Don't Live With Gunfire,' and as such mainstream or official proclamations on the drug war and its associated violence are always influenced by the overlapping prisms of class, race, privilege and (un)familiarity with the subject.[470] Hip-Hop lyrics, when they discuss incidences of violence which are associated with the drug trade can provide a unique insight into its triggers and uses, even if we must remain mindful of its primary purpose of entertainment rather than documentary.

"(Y'all niggas is homeless)": removing the economically undesirable[471]

In 1991, the *New York Times* ran an article documenting the American public's changing attitudes towards homelessness.[472] The author, Isabel Wilkerson, detailed how what was once broad sympathy towards the issue had hardened into scepticism as a result of "compassion fatigue." Making a direct comparison between attempts to tackle homelessness in 1980, when advocacy was viewed as "a badge of social responsibility," and a new raft of contemporary measures which criminalised and prosecuted the homeless, Wilkerson provided both a social and an economic explanation for the change in

[470] Ishmael Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (Massachusetts: Addison Wesley, 1993), 75.
[471] DMX, 'Where the Hood At,' *Grand Champ*, Def Jam, 2003.
[472] Isabel Wilkerson, "Shift in Feelings on the Homeless: Empathy Turns into Frustration: A Change in Feelings on Homelessness," *New York Times*, September 02, 1991.

approach.[473] She typified the early eighties as a time "before crises like AIDS and crack that competed for the nation's compassion had names and before two recessions made life tougher for everybody." The Reaganite restructuring of the economy is cited as a "root cause" of homelessness, having "eliminated entire classes of well-paying, low skilled jobs."[474] Identifiable here is the influence of neoliberal governmentality, both in the direct cause and effect of job losses and also with the implication that being homeless, having AIDS or using crack renders an individual a problem extraneous to state provision.[475] Rather than these be issues for the government to tackle, combatting homelessness or AIDS is seen as an issue of compassion. Action on a societal problem is devolved from a civic issue, to a personal one. Similarly, the notion of issues 'competing' for the public's attention and sympathy suggests that compassion and funds are finite resources, which must only be portioned out to those who are most deserving. This echoes Foucault's principle that economics is an analysis of the process "through which one or more individuals decided to allot given scarce resources to this end, rather than another."[476] The reference to a shifting economic structure is reinforced by the reason cited as to why many cities wish to hide or remove their homeless population, tourism.

The concept of wishing to vacate homeless people from major metropolitan areas is motivated by a desire to repurpose those areas as leisure spaces, places where people come

[473] See also Ariel Eisenberg's article ""A Shelter Can Tip the Scales Sometimes": Disinvestment, Gentrification, and the Neighborhood Politics of Homelessness in 1980s New York City," *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 43, no. 6, 2017, pp. 915–31.
[474] This claim is also made in Chapter 6 "The Governance of Homelessness and Public Space" in Benjamin Holtzman's *The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism*, 200-203.
[475] Another area of convergence between the issues of homelessness and AIDS is the focus on the damaged or diseased body: "In neighbourhoods across New York City—neighbourhoods that spanned the racial and socio-economic spectrum—homeless men were understood as a particular risk. Their bodies were associated with disease, addiction, and criminal and sexual deviance." Eisenberg, "A Shelter Can Tip the Scale Sometimes," 923.
[476] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 222-3.

to spend money and enjoy themselves, not just live and work. As already touched upon within this thesis, New York, as with many American cities, had transitioned from a site of major industrial production to one of financialization and service-sector work. Supplementing the market driven power of its financial centre was a growing, and carefully cultivated, recreational space which rescued New York from being a crime-ridden emblem of urban decay into a glamorous, aspirational place of consumption and leisure. The transformation of Times Square provided the ultimate example of this. As William J Stern wrote in the policy magazine the *City Journal* in 1999:

> Just a short while ago it was sleazy, blighted, and crime-ridden; today it is all but crime free, it has driven out the prostitutes and pornographers who made it so seedy, it bustles with tourists by day and night, and world-spanning corporations such as AMC, Disney, and Viacom prosper within it.[477]

Stern was head of the Urban Development Corporation (UDC) under Governor Mario Cuomo and in the mid-eighties devised a multi-billion-dollar plan to renovate Times Square and the surrounding area. By his own admission "almost nothing we planned ever came to fruition. Instead, Times Square succeeded [because it] allowed the market to do its work and bring the area back to life."

Central to this success in Stern's mind was an interconnected pushing out of undesirable elements and a pulling in of desirable ones. Undesirables include what he terms the "whole panorama of big city low-life," comprising "a pathetic assortment of junkies and pushers and johns and hookers and pimps." These figures, who by the way they use, sell, or

[477] William J. Stern, "The Unexpected Lessons of Times Square's Comeback," *City Journal* 9, no. 4 (09, 1999): 42-53.

stimulate their bodies, are rendered deviant, must be removed so that productive people, such as tourists willing to spend money and corporations who warehouse money, can feel secure.[478] To further entice these productive elements, alongside improving the overall feeling of safety, New York granted "special tax abatements, low-interest loans, and other subsidies to well-connected firms." Stern cited this as successful budgeting which demonstrated "the power of supply-side tax cuts" as "more than $2.5 billion in private-sector investment has poured into Times Square since 1995." Prior to these tax breaks, the UDC had spent over $300 million funding legal efforts and combatting lawsuits as they sought to close Times Square's notorious sex clubs – utilising the UDC's special powers to condemn as a result of economic blight – in order to pave the way for redevelopment of the area.

The area seemingly had to be cleared of human detritus and cleansed of the pollutants of immoral activities before legitimate business would take root there. It is important then to ascertain what it is about the people, and activities, which were removed that made them so undesirable. Stern claimed that he would walk through Times Square at night, accompanied by a state trooper, as a form of professional research. He claims that the only women he saw were prostitutes and that "90 percent of those who walked Times Square's streets were adult males. Times Square was haunted with them, like a circle of lost souls in Dante." This categorisation of them as damned is particularly enlightening, and somewhat accurate, for even if they were not biologically dead their undesirability resulted in a kind of social death brought about by exclusion and vilification. The pornographic and sexual entertainment industry which had existed there for decades was legally hounded

[478] See Spillane, *Cocaine*, 158; Schneider, *Smack*, 5; Reinarman and Levine eds., *Crack in America,* 37-8.

from the area and relocated to non-residential environs.[479] A key figure in this process was Rudy Giuliani who was elected Mayor of New York City in 1993.[480] Giuliani was heavily influenced by free market think tanks, including the one which published the *City Journal*. Giuliani said of his policies: "I think we plagiarized most of them, if not all of them . . . from the thinking and analysis of the Manhattan Institute."[481] Giuliani's tenure is almost synonymous with what Ariel Eisenberg calls "a growing phenomenon in urban areas around the country, where the removal of undesirable behaviors, bodies, and facilities was equated with the improvement of "quality of life."[482] When asked if it was "unspoken strategy that poor people should move to another city or state," Giuliani responded, "that's not an unspoken strategy. That's the strategy."[483] David Harvey cites this social purging as the state "taking revenge on behalf of an increasingly affluent Manhattan bourgeoisie tired of having to confront the effects of such devastation on their own doorsteps." [484] Harvey's assessment is supported by the fact that "of the six city-run homeless shelters in New York City in 1982, four were in majority poor, majority nonwhite neighborhoods, and one other was on Ward's Island, which had no residential population."[485]

[479] Steven Lee Myers, "GIULIANI PROPOSES TOUGHENING LAWS ON X-RATED SHOPS," *New York Times*, September 11, 1994.
[480] Eisenberg, ""A Shelter Can Tip the Scales Sometimes": Disinvestment, Gentrification, and the Neighborhood Politics of Homelessness in 1980s New York City," 917.
[481] Quoted in Holtzman, *The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism*, 235.
[482] Eisenberg, "Sometimes a Shelter Can Tip the Scales," 925.
[483] Quoted in Holtzman, *The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism*, 238.
[484] "The implicit lesson of this process being that "the role of government was to create a good business climate rather than look to the needs and well-being of the population at large." Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* 48.
[485] Eisenberg, "Sometimes a Shelter Can Tip the Scales," 924.

"I'm bigger than the city lights down in Times Square": The area's importance to Hip-Hop.[486]

Jeff Chang describes how "[i]n mourning the city's fallen glory, columnists had prattled on about the broken subway system and the prostitution in Times Square" using the same lamenting tone as when writing about the South Bronx.[487] The square was a place which many important Hip-Hop figures frequented, and even where some of the music's important contemporary events occurred. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were employed – unsuccessfully – as a support act for British punk band The Clash during their residency at Bonds in Time Square in 1981.[488] As elementary school students, future Wu-Tang Clan founders RZA and Ol' Dirty Bastard would trek to Times Square from Staten Island to watch double and sometimes triple features of kung fu films, when that genre was near the height of its popularity.[489] This genre became the central aesthetic influence upon the RZA's production style, his constant sampling of kung-fu films reflecting his "fantasy" to "make a one-hour movie that people were just going to listen to."[490] Those movies also influenced the dance element of Hip-Hop culture, with Tricia Rose describing how break dancers could be seen incorporating martial arts moves into their routines after watching "karate movies" in Times Square.[491] This stylized, choreographed and playful violence also contributed to the spirit of confrontation and contestation that is so embraced within Hip-Hop and its various cultural forms of 'battling.'

[486] Notorious B.I.G, 'Mo' Money Mo' Problems,' *Life After Death*.
[487] Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop,* Loc 314.
[488] Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, Loc 5,951, see Chang *Can't Stop Won't Stop,* Loc 2719, for a description of the hostility they faced from The Clash's white, punk, audience.
[489] Page, *Enter the Wu-Tang,* Loc 190 – 202.
[490] Gross, "RZA's Edge:The RZA's Guide to Kung-Fu Films."
[491] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), Loc 1048.

The area was home to one of the first graffiti art exhibitions, when Hip-Hop became a sub-culture of note, indicating that it might last longer than a brief flash. The widely reviewed show, put on by the Co-Lab collective, was housed in an abandoned massage parlour at the intersection of 41st Street and Seventh Avenue and introduced the likes of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring to the art world.[492] Hip-Hop culture appearing in Manhattan was important as it reflected acceptance or interest from the clique of influential bohemian figures who populated the arts and club scene at the time. This acceptance was hard fought, and certainly not given wholesale to graffiti artists or Hip-Hop itself. The city had spent hundreds of millions of dollars waging a war on subway graffiti in the 1970s. In a similar manner to the issue of homelessness, "the artists' subversive claims on public space threatened the city's official business-friendly image, wherein legitimate art was associated with the rarefied spaces of auction houses, museums, galleries, and private homes."[493] In moving down from the Bronx to Manhattan, Hip-Hop was showing its viability as a subculture which might become mainstream or have broader appeal.

That this art exhibition was housed in a former massage parlour bears witness to the square's long history as a place of titillation and gratification. In his youth, Malcolm X – whose politics are often invoked and bastardized in Hip-Hop lyrics – worked as a "steerer in Times Square, making connections with potential johns and placing them with white and Negro prostitutes working out of Harlem apartments."[494] Yet, Times Square was not solely a place for those shunned and criminalised by mainstream society, it also continues to house America's oldest and most famous Army recruiting office, which has been in use since 1946.

[492] Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, Loc 2560.
[493] See Miller-Davenport, S. (2024). The Cultural Center of the World: Art, Finance, and Globalization in Late Twentieth-Century New York. *Journal of Urban History*, 50(1), 131.
[494] Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), Loc 1324.

It is estimated to be the busiest in the country.[495] This office stands as a way in which the square produces notions of patriotism and service. With the area's transformation into a hub for capital and consumption, this patriotism is able to sit neatly alongside the ideals upon which late twentieth, and early twenty-first, century America is constructed. Spence says of this transformation:

> While I do not want to make the provocative argument that a vibrant pornography industry was better for Times Square and New York City than the vibrant multi-neoned monstrosity we now have, I do want to suggest that Times Square thirty years ago was arguably a more public and open space than it is now, and that in transitioning Times Square to the disneyfied thing that we know now, public officials made an explicit decision to transform the space for the sole purpose of commerce."[496]

"I used to work at Burger King / But after takin' orders / I used to take the PATH / to Latin Quarters 'cross the waters": The club that shaped Hip-Hop[497]

Prior to this transformation, Times Square was home to a famed club, The Latin Quarter, which supported Hip-Hop when the genre was still in its commercial infancy and provided both a home and a testing ground for new music. Artists such as LL Cool J, Afrika Bambaataa, Big Daddy Kane, Run-DMC, and KRS-One all played there during its high period

[495] Ruthie Weissmann and Laura Italiano, "Times Square Recruiting Centre Gets Patriotic New Look," *NY Post,* November 10, 2017, https://nypost.com/2017/11/10/times-square-recruiting-center-gets-patriotic-new-look/
[496] Lester Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (New York: punctum books, 2015), Loc 1195-1210.
[497] Queen Latifah, 'Jersey,' *New Jersey Drive Vol.1*, Tommy Boy, 1995.

between 1984 and 1988.[498] The club is referenced in Rakim's book *Sweat the Technique* as well as in song by the likes of Tupac, Slick Rick, Biz Markie, Gravediggaz, and Queen Latifah.[499] The club's history has been documented into a book, *No Half Steppin': An Oral and Pictorial History of New York City Club the Latin Quarter and the Birth of Hip-Hop's Golden Er*a (2017).[500] Claude "Paradise" Gray, one of the book's co-authors, describes how the Latin Quarter "birthed the Golden Era of Hip-Hop" whilst utilising:

> a new format of live shows featuring the best new artists and hip-hop music that […] went back into time and brought back dances, showmanship, and fashion reminiscent of fifty years earlier in the same building when the L.Q. was the Cotton Club, and Cab Calloway, the Nicholas Brothers, and the Berry Brothers owned the dance floor.[501]

There are two key points here, first is the impulse to move and dance, and how central that physicality and, the almost involuntary, corporeal response was to the success and popularity of the music.[502] We have seen this referenced before both in "Rappers Delight" and "Yes We Can Can." The second is the notion of calling back to previous iterations of African American expression and cultural practices. In his work on neoliberalism and black politics, Lester Spence terms this "temporal parallelism:" a process which he describes as

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[498] Davey D, "The History of the Latin Quarter During Hip Hop's Golden Era," *Hip Hop and Politics*, October 5, 2013, http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2013/10/05/history-latin-quarter-hip-hops-golden-era/.

[499] Rakim states that "back in the day, this was the club was known as the Cotton Club South." *Sweat the Technique* Loc 1542. Those tracks are: 'Old School,' 'The Moment I Feared,' 'Nobody Beats the Biz,' 'Blood Brothers,' and 'Jersey,' respectively.

[500] Gray, Claude "Paradise" Gray and Pipitone, Giuseppe "U.Net" Pipitone, *No Half Steppin*' (Wax Poetic Books. 2017).

[501] Gray and Pipiteon, *No Half Steppin*, 7.

[502] Robert Farris Thompson in his critical essay 'hip hop 101' is particularly good on this subject, drawing parallels between the African & Kongo influenced dancing documented by Charles Dickens when he visited the Cotton Club in 1842 and the contemporary dance moves of Tony Draughton and James Brown. Robert Farris Thompson, "hip hop 101," in *Dropping Science,* William Perkins ed., 212.

"the mirroring of ideas and practices across time."[503] This concept is of particular importance for Spence as he argues that rap reproduces "the *neoliberal narrative* across space and the most dominant aspects of black politics across space and time."[504] In this way, the Latin Quarter, as a key site of Hip-Hop's development in New York, has an important role to play in shaping which aspects of neoliberalism and black politics are promoted, or reproduced.

Which elements of Hip-Hop culture did the Latin Quarter (or the 'L.Q.' as it is sometimes referred to as) help develop or amplify? From the wide ranging and diverse sources whose oral history is recorded within *No Half Steppin'* the club seems to have acted as a testing ground in which many of Hip-Hop's now prevailing tropes were present, with some embraced, some rejected, and some, in the case of violence, omnipresent and inescapable. The club can be read as a microcosm of what the early years of commercial Hip-Hop were like. Artists had to prove themselves by performing in live spots and receiving immediate feedback which would ensure their re-booking and continued opportunities to develop and monetise their art. The reception which these acts received was obviously a reflection of the make-up of the crowd and their interests, experiences, and tastes. According to the testimony of those present, the club was highly integrated in terms of class and profession, KEO (TCD5) reminisces: "You had stars hanging out beside the regular kids; you would see Mike Tyson standing beside the guy from Whodini, right beside a stick-up kid from the Fort Greene Projects."[505]

[503] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness* Loc 199.
[504] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness* Loc 208. Original emphasis.
[505] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin,'* 37.

This shows the openness of Hip-Hop spaces in this period. As it was still a nascent sub-culture there was far less gatekeeping than there might be today.[506] The black athletic superstar (Tyson), music artists (Whodini) and criminal underclass (stick-up kid) could all be found in the same space due to the pull of the music. This also speaks to how black social conditions were more fluid, adaptable and less rigid than their white counterparts. This was often seen in the composition of 'black' neighbourhoods which were heavily integrated in terms of class, profession, and economic security.[507] In keeping with Hip-Hop's creation as a response to the exclusionary door policies and social etiquette of the discotheques, its early nightclubs were not regimented or ordered by class or social standing. If you could pay the door fee, you were welcome.

"They wanted to party and have a good time, they didn't want anyone to preach to them:" Class conflict on the dancefloor.[508]

The mixing of different characters and social circles that the club fostered was not without its tensions and flashpoints. Interestingly, alongside the interpersonal violence motivated by money and robbery, one of the most vehement confrontations was about the nature of the music which was played there. Some artists and most patrons still saw Hip-Hop in the mid-1980s as a music of frivolity, with the Hip-Hop club a carnivalesque space in which to escape from the drudgery or stresses of the weekday life. This clashed with the

[506] Kurtis Blow said of the L.Q. "It became a home for hip-hop. It was more than just a disco, a neutral ground where people could communicate." This sense of camaraderie is supported by veteran A & R manager Faith Newman's remembrance that "what was special about hip-hop in New York back then: the scene was still small and everybody knew everybody." Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin,* 91.
[507] Public Enemy frontman Chuck D discusses the benefits and sense of pride of growing up in one of these black communities – Roosevelt, Long Island – in his book *Fight the Power*, 29. Chuck D, *Fight the Power* (New York: Dell, 1997).
[508] KEO (TC5), Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin',* 83.

direction that some artists, most notably Public Enemy, wanted to move Hip-Hop in to. Public Enemy, with its 'Minister for Information' saw Hip-Hop as a didactic tool which could use entertainment to further the advancement of black people and call for greater equality and cohesion among African American and even global black communities. The reaction to their first gig at the Latin Quarter in March 1987 exposed this divide, Paradise Gray recalls how:

> As Chuck D, Flava Flav, and the S1Ws took the stage, no one had seen anything like the S1Ws onstage with plastic UZIs before. Grand Master Mele [sic] Mel ran out onto the dance floor, screaming, "What the fuck is this? This is not fucking hip-hop! Motherfuckers onstage with guns and shit! Cut this shit out!" […] We had to literally pull him off the dance floor. I tried to explain the Black Nationalist Revolutionary concept of Public Enemy to him, but he wasn't having it. [509]

This was only five years after Mel released "The Message" but it is amazing how quickly the genre/form seemed to be moving away from him and morphing into something he didn't recognise or appreciate.[510] His objection that this "is not fucking hip-hop" isn't strictly grounded in fact. The end of the movie *Wild Style* features a performance by two rappers on stage with Tommy Guns, and the same month as this performance BDP would release their hit album *Criminal Minded* featuring "9mm Goes Bang." Yet Hip-Hop had not yet become so intrinsically linked to tales of drug dealing, street warfare and violence that the suggestion was completely ridiculous. If someone offered the same objection today, that performers

[509] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin'* 81.
[510] There is some ambiguity here though, as Mel, Flash and the Furious Five appeared on Dutch TV in 1984 dressed in paramilitary garb for a performance of their song "Jesse" (1984) which supported Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign. "Grandmaster Flash & Melle Mel - Jesse • TopPop," TopPop, *YouTube*, December 18, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zq_E0ipZZs.

holding guns was “not hip-hop,” it would not compute. As if to underscore this sense of Hip-Hop’s older heads losing touch with the genre, five years on in 1993, *The Source* magazine ‘awarded’ Melle Mel the unwanted accolade of “WORST COMEBACK ATTEMPT” for his track “The New Message.” The publication described it as a “pitiful cover of the original hit devoid of funk and inspiration.”[511] As late as 1997 scholar Geneva Smitherman claimed, in *The Journal of Black Studies*, that “despite the 1990s' emergence of guns, violence, misogyny, and overused taboo language in rap music, the founding mission of rap remains that clearly reflected in Rapper Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 1982 hit song, The Message.”[512] Hers was increasingly a minority position.

Public Enemy struggled to gain recognition and acceptance at the Latin Quarter. Their music was booed and disdained, whether performed live by them, or by popular DJs like Red Alert. Public Enemy member Keith Shocklee put this down to geographic, as well as political tensions: "We were from Long Island, and our concept was not in the mainstream vibe. The L.Q. was that hard-core gangster spot. Public Enemy with their conscious sound didn’t really fit the L.Q. at that time.”[513] KEO (TC5) stated, further to his comments about acts ‘preaching’ to the audience, that “[l]ots of guys, they were still with a neighborhood mentality, they didn’t want to hear a lot of political, back to Africa, Malcolm X talk at that time.”[514]

Shocklee’s geographic concerns are legitimate. Far from homogenous, the different boroughs of New York not only had their own distinct musical styles but also their own reputations for violence and dangerousness. When Sean “Puffy” Combs first heard about

[511] ‘1992 Rap Bandit Awards,’ *The Source,* January 1993. p.98.
[512] “‘The Chain Remain the Same’: Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation,” 5.
[513] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin’*, 83.
[514] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin’*, 81.

an, as yet, unsigned, Brooklyn MC by the name of Christopher Wallace he felt unable, as a Harlemite, to travel to Brooklyn to try to seek him out and audition him. His fear of robbery was so great that he had to instruct an intermediary to ask Wallace to come to Manhattan for a meeting instead.[515] "Brooklyn niggas" as Combs calls them, and the streets they came from, had a reputation for being rougher and tougher than those anywhere else. Many inhabitants of Brooklyn frequented the LQ, making it as Shocklee says a "hard-core gangster spot." By contrast, the members of Public Enemy were college educated and attended Afrocentric summer schools where they learned about black history and began to develop their political consciousness. This extended to a rejection of the drugs trade, of which Chuck D said: "Black people are never going to win at the drug game. We've always been losers. We've never been players, we've all been victims."[516] Public Enemy's music and outlook was at a remove from 'the streets.' When they took to the stage with prop guns, they were channelling the Black Panther Party rather than the neighbourhood roughnecks. As a result, many in the crowd didn't feel that Public Enemy represented them or their personal politics.

This kind of visceral feedback, putting the act and its music into the crucible of the club and gauging the response, was a key component of Hip-Hop's development in the late 80s early 90s. KRS-One portrays this period as one of organic intellectualism, brotherhood, but also naivete before the influence of commercial conglomerates moved the direction and tenor of Hip-Hop.[517] Big Daddy Kane reinforces this concept of organic intellectualism and artistry. He claims that "there were people that weren't artists [at first, but] just hanging out

[515] Story recounted by Diddy in the documentary Dir. Emmet Malloy, *Biggie: I Got a Story to Tell*, Netflix, 2021.
[516] Chuck D, *Fight the Power,* 17.
[517] KRS-One, 'Hip Hop Knowledge,' *The Sneak Attack*, Koch Records, 2001.

in such an environment, [they] became artists."[518] This naivete does not correspond to gentleness, friendliness or even safety.[519]

"There was nothing sweet in the Quarters. There was nothing sweet in the streets. It was dangerous.": How the club reflected the violent metropolis[520]

The threat of violence is made clear in *No Half Steppin*' by the likes of Paradise Grey, Big Daddy Kane, MC Serch and a host of others, with a whole chapter given over to descriptions of the danger that existed within the club, and the city, at the time.[521]MC Delite recalls;"[t]here was one time I remember specifically when all the artists had to fight their way out. It was like a war. Everybody was stealing shit."[522] This last sentence firmly connects violence with theft, and the use of violence as a tactic which enables the forcible accumulation of wealth. This, for some, was the explicit motivation to attend the 'LQ,' as KEO (TC5) explains, there were "[…] guys who were there just looking for victims."[523] Whilst this was seemingly common knowledge (the book has dozens of anecdotes from performers detailing extreme violence, robbery, attempted robbery, and gunplay), there were still those who wandered into this dangerous atmosphere unaware of the potential harm they were exposing themselves to. Masta Ace attributes this lack of knowledge to their being out-of-towners:

[518] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin*', 92. Parentheses in the original quotation.
[519] See the comment from P.Allen underneath the video "The History of the Latin Quarter-Hip Hop's Legendary Nite Club (Breakdown FM)," mrdaveyd, *YouTube*, January 30, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h0c9EOo0GU.
[520] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin*', 111.
[521] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin*' "Brooklyn's in the House," 105-199.
[522] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin*', 11.
[523] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin*', 111.

> In ’85, ’86, this was high jewelry-snatching time. Anybody who wore jewelry at the L.Q. and didn’t know the right people, it was quite sure they would become victims. I remember a lot of out-of-town guys from Jersey and Connecticut – they would hear about the L.Q. They would come down wearing their nice outfits and jewelry and having no idea that was not the thing to do.”[524]

This juxtaposition, between those familiar with the club knowing how to minimise their risk, and those who are strangers being ignorant of the risk and even increasing it because of that ignorance signals a key attribute that inhabitants of any metropolis pride themselves on, which, for want of a better term, we can call street knowledge.

This concept is important for this discussion of violence, particularly in relation to the Latin Quarter, but also in relation to the discussion of masculinity which will form the basis of the following chapter. Having an abundance of local knowledge allows the individual to make judicious and informed decisions which can minimize the risks which they expose themselves to. This is an important skill both in business and, as we can see from the dangers inherent in attending the Latin Quarter, pleasure. The widespread violence of New York in the 80s and 90s increased the stakes of this risk-assessment. Those who misjudged or lacked the information to make an informed decision exposed themselves to getting shot, slashed with razor blades, attacked with a samurai sword, punched, or stabbed; among a number of other different modes of violence detailed to have occurred in this club alone. Similarly, the implicit lesson from this kind of behaviour is to be guarded about showing or flaunting your valuable items when in a hostile environment, further entrenching the already heavily codified notions of space in Hip-Hop. This guardedness even extends beyond

[524] Gray and Pipitone, *No Half Steppin*’, 111.

material possessions into emotions and expressions. Chuck D, upon returning from travels in Africa, observed:

> In the United States if you wave, or smile, or hug another brother it's considered some sissy shit. We're so guarded over here. We're always on the defensive and covering our souls, because we feel if we don't cover and protect ourselves we'll get raped again like we did before.[525]

The fear of violence, in this explanation sexual violence, has a profound impact on the ways in which the men in these environments converse, socialise and co-exist with each other. The interpersonal and artistic consequences of this will be discussed further in the following chapter, but it is important to establish the ways in which the increased lethality of street violence – a direct result of the vast numbers of guns appearing in the city due to the drugs trade – has impacts which extend beyond the obvious damage to the body or property.

"Turn your pages to 1993 / Niggas is getting smoked G, believe me:" Violence and generational schism.[526]

Earlier in this thesis, the lyrics to The Treacherous Three's "Yes We Can Can" (1982) were used to highlight the bridge between theories of racial uplift stemming from the 1960s and 70s and the kinds of bootstrap self-reliance that was beginning to take hold throughout the 1980s. Within that song was a strong anti-knife message, which advised listeners not to carry weapons. On "Things Done Changed" (1994) the Notorious B.I.G contradicts that message, from his perspective it is common sense to carry a weapon, to the point that to

[525] Chuck D, *Fight the Power,* 20.
[526] The Notorious B.I.G. 'Things Done Changed,' *Ready to Die*.

not do so is a sign of stupidity. The concept of the song is to map how his community of Bed-Stuy has changed since "back in the days" of his childhood, when "motherfuckers was all friendly." Biggie establishes a generational schism between his peer group, who have come of age during the crack-era and are now active participants in the trade, and the previous generation whose codes of behaviour are now dangerously outdated.[527] The primary distinction which he draws between the two eras is the difference in modes of violence. Whereas violence was formerly conducted hand to hand, it is now synonymous with guns.[528] As the chorus asks; "remember they used to thump, now they blast, right?" Whilst portraying a sepia-tinged recent past of community cookouts and barbeques, Biggie juxtaposes this with a far harsher present typified by:

> Smoking blunts in the project hallways
>
> Shooting dice all day
>
> Waitin' for niggas to step up on some fightin' shit
>
> We get hype and shit and start lightin' shit
>
> So step away with your fistfight ways
>
> Motherfucker, this ain't back in the days
>
> But you don't hear me though

[527] Johnson, Golub and Dunlap identify what they call ""the CrackGen, [who] came of age during the peak of the Cocaine/Crack Era (1985-89)." "The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs, Drug Markets, and Violence in Inner-City New York," 176.
[528] This is also the central argument of Geoffrey Canada's book *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun*.

The listener can hear the disdain with which he regards these "fistfight ways" and he reinforces this in the next verse, describing how "stupid motherfuckers want to try to use kung-fu."

This embrace of the gun highlights key aspects of the neoliberal hustler mindset which rappers advocate in their descriptions and narrativization of the drugs trade: adaptability; indomitability and "additional power." Biggie's verses – fixated as they are on this track with intergenerational violence – establish three key groups of people in this narrative. The first are the "stupid motherfuckers" who eschew guns in favour of the more respectable, athletic, and fair practice of fist fighting. The second, of which Biggie is a part, is "real street niggas" who use guns to settle violent disputes. (This reflects the belief that in order to be an authentic hustler/dealer you need to be prepared to use violence.) The third, is the generation beneath him, who it seems are even more ready to utilise firearms because "little motherfuckers with heat want to leave a nigga six feet deep."

Jim McGuigan in his essay "The Neoliberal Self" claims that "generational tension is a distinct feature of the neoliberal imaginary, including the rejection of 'dinosaur' attitudes concerning all sorts of matters cherished by an older generation.[529] This generational tension is the central theme of the song which Biggie opens by referring to now outdated fashion: "Remember back in the days when niggas had waves / Cazal shades and corn braids?" Narrative violence is visited upon those individuals who are unable to appraise that "things done changed," and is framed as the result of poor decision making:

Instead of a MAC-10, he tried scrappin'

[529] McGuigan, "The Neoliberal Self," 234.

Slugs in his back and that's what the fuck happens

When you sleep on the street

The assertion that the unnamed victim was sleeping reflects their status as unaware or unseeing. JAY-Z sums this up poetically on "22 Two's" from *Reasonable Doubt*: "At your wake as I peek in, look in your casket / Feelin' sarcastic, "Look at him, still sleepin'" / You never ready, forever petty minds stay petty." The listener is also put in mind of Nas' famous line: "I never sleep, 'cause sleep is the cousin of death."[530] In contradiction to the narrator in BDP's "9mm Goes Bang2 who saw the imminent danger, this person did not, which is why they are a "stupid motherfucker." The "MAC-10" mentioned is the type of cheap semi-automatic weapon that fell into the "Saturday Night Special" marketing niche identified by gun manufacturers. Retailing for between $100-150 new, 900,000 of them were produced in the year of the song's setting, 1993.[531]

Wallace was twenty-two when "Things Done Changed2 was released, meaning that the violent youth he describes are likely in their teenage years. Biggie tells us indirectly that these figures are involved in drug dealing as well as violence: "Kids younger than me, they got the Sky brand pagers." These young dealers have the technology needed to arrange sales (pagers) and also the technology which enables them to mete out deadly force (guns) in order to protect sales. The Rockefeller 'mandatory minimums' began what Schneider calls "the 'juvenalization' of drug trading," a theory supported by the images portrayed in this song. [532] An unintended, or potentially unforeseeable, consequence of this juvenalization was an increase in street violence:

[530] "N.Y. State of Mind."
[531] Wintemute, "Guns and Gun Violence," 56.
[532] Schneider, *Smack,* 185.

> The reduction in age of workers in the crack trade entailed a predictable increase in violence, as the inclination to deliberate before acting is simply less developed in the young. "[533]

"Sticks and stones break bones, but the gat'll kill ya quicker:" The gun as a violent technology.[534]

On "Things Done Changed" Biggie's position as witness to, and participant in, the shift in street violence allows him to look back to a time before the proliferation of handguns and also forecast how "shit's getting crazier and major." He stands between the two eras, and, having played his own small part in driving the change from past to present, forms a bridge between them. His assessment of these trends is supported by data. Following a decline in murders between 1980 and 1985, the period 1985 to 1991 saw "arrest rates for homicide more than doubling for each age group of males under 20" and "the rise for black youth was even steeper."[535] Across his two albums, the Notorious B.I.G shows a particular regard for, and attraction to, firearms and weaponry. Not only is he pre-occupied with guns as gadgets and consumer goods, referencing their brand names, slang nicknames and models, but he also frequently highlights the physical damage they can do. Song titles like "Machine Gun Funk" and "Who Shot Ya" highlight this gun heavy focus, whilst others such as "Dead Wrong;" "Suicidal Thoughts;" "Ready to Die;" "Niggas Bleed" and "Somebody's Gotta Die" clearly show a macabre fixation with death and wounding.[536]

[533] Blumstein and Wallman eds., *The Crime Drop in America*, 4.
[534] Notorious B.I.G. "Machine Gun Funk," *Ready to* Die.
[535] Blumstein and Wallman eds., *The Crime Drop in America*, 3.
[536] These all appear on *Ready to Die* (1994) apart from 'Niggas Bleed' and 'Dead Wrong' which are from *Life After Death* (1997).

On “Machine Gun Funk” he claims to own a glock, a MAC-10, a rocket launcher and a 9mm ‘nina’ pistol.

This inventory serves several rhetorical purposes. First, it functions as masculine posturing, intended to signify his power and potential capacity for violence. This is augmented in the song by the justification for having these weapons. When Biggie describes himself as being “In the Land Cruiser Jeep with the MAC-10 by the seats,” the gun is there for “the jackers, the jealous-ass crackers in the (blue suits).” The MAC-10 is there for protection against potential assailants and errant police officers who both want his possessions. If either of them attempts to take his things, he intends to, from the protection of his Jeep, make them “prove that it's bulletproof” (i.e., engage in a gun battle.) Another reason for Biggie to lyrically bear his arms is that he can identify himself as a purchaser of exclusive or niche goods. His fanciful boast of owning a rocket launcher establishes himself as someone extraordinary because he owns something extraordinary. Much like JAY-Z’s Lexus, the novel consumer good is a signifier of difference and separation from the usual. Perhaps more important than both of these motivations, the number of weapons that Biggie possesses demonstrates his exemplariness as a neoliberal actor within his particular economic sub-system.

If “Things Done Changed” showed to the listener that having a weapon is common sense, then investing in a range of weapons in order to protect one’s personal safety and possessions is likewise reasonable, logical, and sensible. Neoliberalism teaches that the subject should invest in their own human capital to further their employability, adaptability, and suitability within the neoliberal economic system. Yet, in the arena of interpersonal conflict and violence the human body is never able to compete with the technology of the

gun. Using Biggie's comparison, even if the subject spends hours training in Kung-Fu to master their physical state and enable their body to outperform their peers, they will still be vulnerable to the extreme power and violence of the gun. That is the inescapable reality. Things done changed. In so doing, they have shifted the paradigm on what the responsible and prudent use of time, money and capital is. In the new reality, buying the best or most comprehensive violent machinery is an investment in protecting the self.

"You're talking to the robbery expert / Step into your wake with your blood on my shirt.": Force and finance.[537]

Robbery is a key site of thematic overlap between Hip-Hop and the drugs trade and one which was altered by the advent of crack: "during the Heroin Injection Era, robbers preyed on citizens and businesses. During the Cocaine/Crack Era, drug sellers became the preferred target."[538] Crack increased entrepreneurialism at the street-level, but also increased robbery and attendant violence, all of which is reflected in the drug dealing Hip-Hop that covers or refers to this period. Rappers themselves were prime targets and the FBI file opened after Wu-Tang Clan member Ol' Dirty Bastard was shot in an attempted robbery details a gang who committed a number of robberies of rap stars.[539] Robbery is a key narrative by which Hip-Hop reinforces mainstream norms of protection of capital and the inalienable rights of the owner.[540] If someone threatens what is yours, you have the right to

[537] Notorious BIG, "Gimme the Loot."
[538] Johnson, Golub and Dunlap, "The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs," 181
[539] "Russell Tyrone Jones," *FBI Records: The Vault*, accessed June 10, 2020, 24, https://vault.fbi.gov/russell-tyrone-jones/russell-tyrone-jones/view
[540] It is also another narrative thread by which rappers weave their own lived experiences into their artistic output. *Vibe* magazine's gossip column told its readers that famed Hip-Hop club Tunnel had banned revellers from wearing jewellery inside the venue due to a spate of robberies. See "Vibe Confidential," *Vibe*, Dec.1999 – Jan.2000, 130.

kill them. James B. Twitchell, writing in 1989, claimed that this was a common theme across entertainment media: "The modern victims of television dramas are most often economic overreachers and swindlers. They want our *things*. In this sense they *deserve* the preposterous violence they encounter."[541] He goes further, claiming that the morals which these violent stories relay are merely reflective of the urges and desires of the spectator:

> After all, the mass audience is the source of popular culture. Like the child preparing for bed, it demands certain stories. Television, comics, pulp novels and splatter movies are tribal entertainments—bedtime stories. They essentially confirm, not enrich; repeat, not originate; reassure, not rearrange. […] In the main, the fables of aggression play out to this mass audience an unreeling sequence of images which claim to be destabilizing but are instead vehicles of repression."[542]

This interpretation of violent art rebuts the claims of Hip-Hop artists who seek to position themselves as outsiders, renegades, or threats to the established order. Instead, if Twitchell's estimation is correct, by producing art which displays disciplinary and retributive violence in the face of economic threats rappers are implicitly reinforcing society's codes of practice.

Influential scholar Bakari Kitwana supports this view, he states that the meretricious narratives of Gangsta rap serve to "reinforce the white economic elite's agenda for Blacks, demonstrating the depth of Black economic and political powerlessness."'[543] Even as they attempt to shock and destabilize, MCs reinforce. Violent rap functions as a normative force,

[541] James B. Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 30. Original emphasis.
[542] Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence,* 31.
[543] Lorenzo Thomas, *Don't Deny My Name* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 187.

a socializing code, exposing individuals and consumers to explications of violence in the face of transgression. The fact that it often does this in relation to concerns or contestations over capital is even more suitable to the dominant neoliberal ethos of wealth creation, competition, and protection. In this way, even as gangsta rap tries to rebel and shock via its lurid tales it inadvertently reinforces the predominant warnings of capitalist society.

"I Gave You Power:" The gun as an instrument of "glory."[544]

> I was around a lot of guns then. Guns were in my sleep, in my car, in my home, on my person, on my friends. That's how much they were around. It's crazy to think about that today, but it was my reality. It was in my head 24/7.[545]

These are the circumstances which Nas says he was living through when he wrote "Gave You Power." The song features on his second album *It Was Written*, released by Columbia Records in 1996. Whilst his debut, *Illmatic*, is often considered one of the greatest Hip-Hop albums of all time, its praise from critics and rap's cognoscenti had not translated into high sales figures. That corporate shortfall was remedied by *It Was Written* which ultimately went double platinum and remains the best-selling of Nas' now thirteen studio albums.[546] This commercial success was a result of a concerted effort by the rapper's management

[544] Nas, "Gave You Power." *It Was Written*.
[545] Rob Kenner & Ahmed, Insanul. 'The Making of It Was Written,' *Complex*, July 2, 2016, https://www.complex.com/music/2016/07/nas-the-making-of-it-was-written.
[546] Data taken from the RIAA database: https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=Nas&col=certification_date&ord=asc#search_section

team to broaden his popularity and boost sales by crafting a more radio friendly sound for his songs.

The song's conceit, that of providing a narrative voice to an anthropomorphised gun, mimics a song by another New York rap duo, Organized Konfusion, whose 1994 track "Stray Bullets" saw the pair pretending to be projectiles enthusiastically bent on death and destruction.[547] Whereas "Stray Bullets" highlights the physical violence a bullet can do, it also foregrounds the bystanders that the bullet enters, typified by the traditionally innocent child, and the non-combatant woman. Organized Konfusion were the epitome of an underground Hip-Hop act, lauded by their contemporaries and rap enthusiasts but virtually non-existent in the charts and never garnering any significant sales.[548] When listening to the song the reason for this is perhaps apparent, as the continual use of enjambement, internal rhymes and the disjointed, occasionally staccato, syllabication makes the track sound more like spoken word poetry than rap music. This sense of dislocation and jarred oral mechanics is emphasised by pairs of lines such as:

> And I struck it, now it's a flood of blood in circumfrence to her face
>
> And an abundance of brains all over the street
>
> […]
>
> You better pray to the Pope or the Vatican before I go rat-tat-a-tat again
>
> I'm mad again brother somebody's mother will be sad again.

[547] The song appears on the album *Stress (The Extinction Agenda)*, Hollywood Basic, 1994.
[548] The album *Stress (The Extinction Agenda)* is not on streaming sites, and accurate information about its sales figures are hard to discern. Although, we can say with some confidence that it didn't go Gold or Platinum on the RIAA scale. The Wikipedia article for the album claims its highest chart position was 187 on the Billboard 200 but this is hard to substantiate.

In Nas' narrative, the voice of the gun is far more in keeping with the performer's usual cadence and his rhetorical flourishes are sparser. This pared back style, coupled with the distinction between a solo performer and a duo make "Gave You Power" an easier listen than "Stray Bullets." Whereas Organized Konfusion were epitomising the frenzied, uncontrollable ricocheting of the speeding bullet, Nas offers the bellicose resignation of the gun itself. The spoken word intro, which is delivered in an agitated, hurried tone, makes clear to the listener that Nas is adopting the perspective of a gun. Interestingly, both Steve Stoute and the producer Tone (Trackmasters) counselled Nas to remove the line "Like I'm a f—, I'm a gun, shit," where he lays bare the conceit, as they were worried it was too obvious, but Nas felt that without it, people wouldn't understand the song.[549] The sound of the song itself with its jangly, wind chime like intro and sparse, throbbing beat, overlaid with a sample taken from legendary jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal, is despondent and melancholy.[550] This was by design, producer DJ Premier recalled his thought process in crafting the sound: "Instead of making this hard, mean shit, let me make it sound sad."[551] This is mirrored in Nas' lyrics, and amplified by the track's position on the album, coming as it does after "Street Dreams," an uptempo song which samples disco singer Linda Clifford and, more conspicuously, British pop duo Eurythmics.[552]

"Street Dreams" extols the aspirational quality of drug dealing, with lines like: "I'ma try to get filthy, purchase a club and start up a realty / For real, G, Imma fulfill my dream / If I conceal my scheme, then precisely I'll build my cream." This mindset is one that we have

[549] Nas has subsequently said that he "underestimated" the audience. Kenner & Insanul, "The Making of It Was Written."
[550] The song sampled is 'Theme Bananas' from Jamal's 1974 album, *Jamalca.* 20th Century Fox Records.
[551] Qtd in Kenner & Insanul, "The Making of It Was Written."
[552] "Street Dreams," *WhoSampled*, accessed September 5, 2017, https://www.whosampled.com/Nas/Street-Dreams/.

seen advocated before, the 'hustler' who surveys his narrow opportunities within legitimate society and decides to use illicit capitalism to accumulate wealth and then segue into mainstream society. The song also highlights the pitfalls, traps, and negatives of aspects of the drug dealing lifestyle and disparages small scale drug dealing, with its attendant violence, in favour of large scale, interstate and international dealing which is far more lucrative. The song ends with an outro skit which involves a shooting and a potential robbery, as well as the disposal of the weapon involved with the shooter being told to "Get rid of that heat yo!" As it ends, "Gave You Power" begins and we hear life from the perspective of the gun itself. Whereas "Street Dreams" positions violence as an attendant behaviour or risk, akin to an occupational hazard, for drug dealers, by centring on the gun, "Gave You Power" foregrounds that violence and highlights the caustic effect it has not only on its victims but also its instigators.

The song's narrative concerns a handgun who, sickened by the death and destruction he has been forced to commit begins to wish he could extricate himself from the cycle of violence. At the climax of the action, in a confrontation between his owner and an adversary, the gun intentionally jams himself and refuses to inflict anymore suffering. As a result, the man holding the gun is killed, and momentary relief is experienced as it appears the cycle has been broken, however, the deceased's killer picks up the gun and the song ends, presumably with the cycle beginning all over again. The personification of the gun is a novel and complex narratological device which forces the listener to consider issues of agency, masculinity, design and of course, violence. Consider Nas' spoken intro:

Damn,

Look how muh-fuckers use a nigga

Just use me for whatever the fuck they want

I don't get to say shit

Just grab me, just do what the fuck they want

Sell me, throw me away

Niggas just don't give a fuck about a nigga like me, right

Like I'm a f-, I'm a gun, shit

It's like I'm a motherfucking gun

I can't believe this shit

Word up, word up

Once already familiar with the song it is apparent that in the song Nas will speak in the guise of a handgun. However, on first listen especially, it sounds as if he could be using the simile of a gun to describe his own powerlessness. The line “Its like I’m a motherfucking gun,” could only be said by someone who wasn’t a gun, else the simile fails. His description of himself as “a nigga like me,” reinforces that there is something more complex at play here. The fact that this soliloquy precedes the song is important. Nas begins by saying ‘I am like a gun’ (paraphrasing) and then goes on to deliver his lines in the style of an anthropomorphised gun. It is a reasonable assumption that there is a degree of symbiosis between the two and that the emotions and angst “felt” by the gun can also be considered as emotions which Nas is feeling.

In the parameters of the song the connection between Nas and the gun are strengthened by this ambiguous self-identification.[553] As he says in the earlier quote, for Nas in the mid-1990s, "Guns were in my head 24/7." This autobiographical angle is reinforced in the second verse where Nas says:

Always I'm in some shit

My abdomen is the clip, the barrel's my dick

Uncircumcised, pull my skin back and cock me

I bust off when they unlock me

Results of what happens to niggas shock me

I see niggas bleeding, running from me in fear

Stunningly, tears fall down the eyes of these so-called tough guys

For years, I've been used in robberies

Giving niggas heart to follow me

Placing peoples in graves, funerals made 'cause I was sprayed

I was laid in a shelf, with a grenade

Met a wrecked-up TEC with numbers on his chest that say

Five-two-oh-nine-three-eight-five and zero

Had a serial defaced, hoping one day police would place

[553] The notion of unsatisfactory and contested similes is expanded in to a song exploring Nas' fungibility, 'Nas is Like,' on the album *I Am. . .* Columbia Records. 1999.

Where he came from, a name or some sort of person to claim him

Tired of murdering, made him wanna be a plain gun

But yo, I had some other plans, like the next time the beef is on

I make myself jam right in my owner's hand

When Nas describes the 'TEC' he met who has had his serial number scratched off he is drawing upon his own experiences to enrich the narrative.[554] He himself received five years' probation under New York statute 'NY PL 265.02,' which pertains to knowingly possessing a weapon which has been "defaced for the purpose of hiding a crime or misrepresenting the identification of the contraband."[555] The charge, from 1995, is visible on his file within the NYPD's so-called 'Hip-Hop Dossier.'[556]

This highlights one of the major problems individuals faced when buying second-hand weapons, it was impossible to know if a gun "had bodies attached to it;" unsolved crimes which the new owner could be accused of committing.[557] That this detail from his life is coupled with the TEC's sensation of dislocation and feelings of unbelonging further complicates and develops the complex narrative. In this respect, it may be that Nas is speaking for more than just himself. The album begins with a dramatized slave revolt, sounds of gunfire and a threat of lynching, with dialogue that references Harriet Tubman and backing music that samples Sam Cooke's civil rights classic "A Change is Gonna

[554] 'TEC' is short for TEC-9, a semi-automatic pistol similar to the MAC-10 discussed earlier.
[555] "Criminal Possession of a Weapon in the Third Degree: NY PL 265.02," *New York Lawyers*, accessed July 28, 2021, https://www.new-york-lawyers.org/new-york-criminal-possession-of-a-weapon-in-the-third-degree-ny.html.
[556] "NYPD's Secret Hip-Hop Dossier," *The Smoking Gun*, August 29, 2005, http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/celebrity/nypds-secret-hip-hop-dossier.
[557] Canada, *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun*. Loc 2,207.

Come."[558] The desire then, to "place [w]here he came from, a name or some sort of person to claim him" can conceivably be read as a comment on the African American experience.

Nas's verse opening where he identifies the physical machinery of the gun as a masculine tool by comparing it to his own body highlights that he is approaching this aspect of the African American experience from a particularly male focus. He skilfully draws an impression of the allure and despair of violence with the first half of the verse sounding, if not triumphant, then in awe of the power that he possesses. The interlinking of the firing of a gun and ejaculation in line four begin this and lines six and seven which discuss people running in fear and the tears of "so-called tough guys" reinforce the feeling of pride instilled by the "power" of the song title. This clearly establishes a key triumvirate of masculinity, power, and guns. This sensation quickly turns into being "tired of murdering" in line sixteen, which is followed by a plan of decisive action to break the cycle of violence.

The depiction of the gun as a phallic symbol is also utilized on Biggie's song 'Kick in the Door:'[559]

So, Jesus, get off the Notorious'

Penis before I squeeze and bust

If the beef between us, we can settle it with the chrome

And metal shit, I make it hot like a kettle get

This clearly links violence and masculinity with the gun being an instrument which signifies the comingling of the two. The recourse to "settle it with the chrome," is, as Biggie told us

[558] *Ain't That Good News*. RCA. 1964.
[559] *Life After Death*.

on “Things Done Changed,” the sign of a “real nigga.” The positive affirmation of the gun as a tool which reinforces notions of authenticity, manliness and “power” clearly engages with the “system of signs, of marks,” and the “additional power” which Foucault evokes in his quoting of Hobbes. Guns then, it would appear, confer glory or, at least respect and authenticity. For the hustler, the possession of a gun reflects his embodiment of neoliberal virtues regarding risk, the protection of profits, and investment in technology which preserves status and diminishes the threat of competition.[560]

This privileging of violence as an affirmative and empowering act mimics the militarization of American society at large. Although rappers primarily articulate violence in their guise as hustlers engaged in the inherently violent and highly competitive drugs trade, they also reflect what Henry A. Giroux calls the “imaginary of war and violence [which] informs every aspect of American society.”[561] This omnipresent violence, with its accompanying militaristic lexicon, is recapitulated in Hip-Hop with young men holding figurative guns inevitably referring to themselves as soldiers. The artist formerly known as Mos Def, now Yasiin Bey, conveys this on “Mathematics:”

> Light in the ass with heavy steel, sights on the pretty shit in life
>
> Young soldiers trying to earn they next stripe
>
> When the average minimum wage is $5.15

[560] For the link between neoliberalism, masculinity and guns see: Levi Gahman, ‘Gun Rites: Hegemonic Masculinity and Neoliberal Ideology in Rural Kansas,’ *Gender Place and Culture A Journal of Feminist Geography*, May 2014 22(9):1-17.

[561] Henry A. Giroux. ‘The Disimagination Machine and the Pathologies of Power,’ *Symplokē*, vol. 21, no. 1–2, University of Nebraska Press, 2013, 257–69. See also Harvey, *A Brief History,* 2, 82.

> You best believe you've got to find a new grind to get cream[562]

Inspectah Deck on the Wu-Tang hit "Protect Ya Neck" promises to "Terrorize the jam like troops in Pakistan / Swingin' through your town like your neighborhood Spider-Man."[563]

This valorisation of military themes, although far less lyrically represented than the intragroup violence of drug dealers shooting at each other, reflects the association of violence with order, discipline and the technical expertise associated with the armed forces. This constitutes a direct reflection of the status of drug dealers, and the communities they inhabit, as the focus of the governmental "war on drugs."[564] The gun, as a technology of neoliberalization, is the central force which underpins all of these interrelated currents and their appearance within Hip-Hop lyrics. Lester K. Spence defines "technology" within the system of neoliberalism as follows:

> I use the term ''technology'' above to depict government as the consistent application of technical know-how to problems of conduct. And two forms loom large — technologies of subjectivity designed to work on and through those able to govern themselves, and technologies of subjection designed to work on and through those unable to govern themselves.[565]

[562] *Black on Both Sides*. Priority. 1999.
[563] *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers.)*
[564] See Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 48-51, for a discussion of the militaristic nature of inner-city drug policing.
[565] Spence, "The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics," 143.

Spence's categorisation of this "technical know-how" is framed in relation to notions of "expertise," and the use of predominantly "black elite" expertise to render a problem "technical as opposed to political."[566]

My categorisation of the "technology" of the gun involves a similar understanding of expertise, but it is not administered top-down from the black elite, rather it is an extension of the hustler embrace of the notion of human capital. With the capacity for violence being a useful, and even saleable, asset within the drugs trade the drug dealer hustler must be prepared to utilize violence as necessary.[567] The changes in the drug trade documented by Biggie and the increased mechanization of violence shifted the dynamic from physical investment in the self, through learning combative skills or lifting weights, to the purchasing of firearms. For this reason, Ghostface Killah calls himself a "rifle expert" on "Mighty Healthy" and Wu-Tang colleague Masta Killa self-identified as an "expert that hurts" on "Wu-Gambinos."[568] Expertise is framed in these instances as the achieving of a state of supreme capability through practice and refinement. This is a validation of the notion of human capital as something which can be refined or multiplied through the application of time and effort. These rappers become experts in firing rifles or inflicting pain. In the same way, the character of the Notorious BIG is able – via extensive practice, documented on his albums – to become a "robbery expert."[569]

[566] Spence, "The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics,"145-6, 152. This unsatisfactory dynamic, of the "middle-class" ministering to the "inner city," is the thrust of the aforementioned Ishmael Reed missive 'Drug "Experts" Don't Live with Gunfire,' from *Airing Dirty Laundry*.
[567] "Employers or new entrepreneurs in the underground economy look for people who can demonstrate their capacity for effective violence and thus terror." *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, 66.
[568]Ghostface Killah, 'Mighty Healthy.' *Supreme Clientele*. Epic. 2000. & Wu-Tang Clan, 'Wu-Gambinos.' *Wu-Tang Forever*. Loud. 1997.
[569] "Gimme the Loot."

For the metaphorical holder of the gun, the TEC or MAC-10 functions as, what Spence terms, a "technology of subjectivity:" their status as self-governable means that they can learn the implicit lessons and behaviours which interaction with the neoliberalizing technology of the gun confers. This is reflected in the ways in which rappers use the gun – to protect themselves, protect their capital and forcibly dispossess others of capital – and their referencing of it as an extension of the self. The gun, as a tool which aides capital accumulation and/or consolidation, is internalised and becomes part of the neoliberal subject. By contrast, for those figures that the gun is pointed at, the gun functions as a "technology of subjection:" their status as unable to self-govern or unsuccessful actors within the neoliberal system leaves them exposed to disciplinary violence. Their status as fit to be dominated or harmed is often signalled by their being stupid or unthinking, a theme we can trace back to BDP's drug dealer named Peter. As Biggie states on "Who shot ya?" the purpose of gun violence is to: "Separate the weak from the obsolete."[570] This designation of some individuals as expendable or "obsolete" sees rappers invoke the kind of Darwinism encapsulated by the title of the Mobb Deep track "Survival of the Fittest."

"My creation was for blacks to kill blacks:" Violence as a critique of neoliberalism.[571]

Despite the titular "Power" which Nas references in his song, overall, the track conveys a strong sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. His narrative is far removed from the declarative macho posturing typified by Biggie's lines on the Junior M.A.F.I.A hit "Get Money": "Came out on bail, commence the ass-kickin' / Kick in the door, wavin' the

[570] "Who Shot Ya?"
[571] Nas, 'I Gave You Power.'

.44."[572] Instead, Nas's song claims to function as a form of therapy or catharsis: "They use me wrong, so I sing this song to this day." This has even greater importance when we consider Nas' ambiguous identification with the narrative voice of the gun. The key complaint is resentment at a lack of agency, surmised as other people "Making me kill, but what I feel, it never mattered." Nas acknowledges the allure of violence as when he is empty of bullets and circumstances are quiet, he finds himself "fiending to be fired," language usually associated with drug addiction. Even this potentially positive appraisal, or appreciation, of the pull or "power" of violence is undercut by an image of dependency.

Many of the features of life as a "motherfucking gun," accurately reflect behaviours or characteristics which are valuable in the neoliberal marketplace. Nas' narrator is hypermobile, able to move undetected and cross state lines, as a result it/he has "been through so many towns / Ohio to Little Rock to Canarsie living harshly ."[573] This notion of living harshly is emphasised by his appraisal of himself as "beat up and battered" with a "broken safety." This lack of maintenance makes the gun yearn for the kinds of expert care made possible by the 'expertise' that hustler-rappers value: "So I beg for my next owner to be a thoroughbred / Keeping me full up with hollow heads." Once again, Nas' gun relays the push and pull of violence, and by association his experience within the neoliberal marketplace: he desires the expertise which is a mark of excellence but because he does not possess or receive it, he is left "in some shit."

This is a key theme of the song, the dissatisfaction with an experience formed as a result of neoliberal subjection.[574] The gun is governed by others – he has two owners within

[572] *Conspiracy*. Big Beat Records. 1995.
[573] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 230: "In the elements making up human capital we should also include mobility, that is to say, an individual's ability to move around, and migration in particular."
[574] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness,* 14.

the song and has been "in the hands of mad thugs" – and as a result he is reduced to a tool, with no agency over who he harms. The climactic moment of violence also bears witness to the increased mechanisation of street violence examined in relation to "Things Done Changed." Nas' current owner is "stomped out" by somebody and rushes "eyes bubbling" to his stash of violent technology – which includes a grenade and the defaced TEC – to arm himself and take revenge. Having been bested physically by an adversary, the "outlaw" reaches for an instrument of additional power which is capable of "making niggas memories." The song's denouement, at which the gun executes his long-held plan to stop the bloodshed, only serves to reinforce the notions of neoliberal subjectivity that are so present throughout:

> He pulled the trigger but I held on, it felt wrong
>
> Knowing niggas is waiting in Hell for him
>
> He squeezed harder, I didn't budge
>
> Sick of the blood, sick of them thugs
>
> Sick of wrath of the next man's grudge
>
> What the other kid did was pull out, no doubt
>
> A newer me in better shape, before he lit out, he lead the chase
>
> My owner fell to the floor, his wig split
>
> So fast, I didn't know he was hit, it's over wit'
>
> Heard mad niggas screaming, niggas running, cops is coming
>
> Now I'm happy, until I felt somebody else grab me

Damn!

The attempt at emancipatory intervention fails, and even the brief respite of his owner's death is fleeting as a new owner instantly fills the void.

That the individual seeks to break the cycle by withdrawing his labour is of paramount importance here. Nas, in his guise as the narrator functions as an ambiguous amalgam of self/hustler/gun and the refusal to work is accordingly multivalent. When he tries to prevent violence occurring, he fails, and as an instrument of violence he is replaced by "A newer me in better shape." This conveys key principles of labour within the neoliberal system: the position of the worker is inherently precarious and substitutable. As Lazzaro explains:

> By capping wages (through wage deflation) and by drastically reducing public spending, today's neoliberal policies produce human capital and 'entrepreneurs of the self' who are more or less in debt, more or less poor, but in any case always precarious."[575]

The gun, who sits in a drawer of other substitutable items waiting to inflict damage, refuses to engage and is replaced as the source of violence within the narrative by the newer model. Its owner, the outlaw, is killed by "the other kid" who then takes ownership of the anthropomorphised gun. The fears of competition outlined at the beginning of this chapter in Foucault's theory of "a war of all against all" are seemingly realised. Nas even experiences this substitutability within his own career as an artist in the aforementioned beef with JAY-Z over his voice sample.

[575] Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man,* 94.

"I Gave You Power" exposes the falsehood of neoliberal rhetoric. It offers a counterpoint to the embracing of neoliberalization that many hustler narratives espouse. It directly rejects the concept of freedom being a tangible and intrinsic benefit to the marketization of life. This is a process outlined by Lazzaro:

> The independence and freedom that entrepreneurism was supposed to bring to 'labor' have in reality led to a greater and more intense dependence not only on institutions (business, the State, finance), but also on the self. This independence might ironically be considered the economy's colonization of the Freduian superego, since the 'ideal self' can no longer be limited to the role of custodian and guarantor of the 'morals' and values of society. In addition and above all, it must be the custodian and guarantor of the individual's productivity.[576]

The ambiguous 'self' of Nas' narrative attempts to use this primacy of selfhood to take back control by refusing to work or engage in the cycle within which he is immersed. His selfhood, sacred as the self supposedly is within neoliberalism, proves to be illusory as he is replaced and ownership of him is transferred from one hustler to another.

"Killin' is fun, I'm number one with a gun:" Hustling, violence, and neoliberalism.[577]

Violence in Hip-Hop's hustler tales is frequently employed as a narratological device through which rappers mark themselves out as capable and adaptable neoliberal subjects. Its utilization within the business of the drugs trade as a tool to ward off competition is celebrated and incorporated into their conceptions of masculinity and authenticity. As "I

[576] Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man,* 94-5.
[577] *Return of the Devil's Son*. SMC Recordings. 2010.

Gave You Power" shows, it can also function as a discursive space for artists to articulate their dissatisfaction with conditions and circumstances which are exacerbated or intensified by neoliberalism. This dialectic of violence and entrepreneurialism is heavily weighted in favour of celebration rather than condemnation, particularly in the time period and acts studied within this thesis. Rappers are more likely to proclaim their toughness, self-reliance and authenticity in relation to guns than they are to use the gun as a totem around which to meditate on violence or the individuating forces of the post-Fordist economy and its shadow, the illegal trade in drugs.

Whereas violence within Hip-Hop was formerly articulated in the highly metaphorical framing of MC battles, the growth of the hustler-cum-rapper figure and the fixation on the trade in illegal drugs as a metaphor and provider of parallel experiences for the music business caused a shift towards more visceral, 'real' representations of violence. In 1987, when Eric B. & Rakim released "My Melody," Rakim was threatening competitors with the lines: "Any MC that disagree with me, wave your arm / And I'll break, when I'm through breaking, I'll leave you broke."[578] Less than a decade later, Kool G. Rap features on M.O.P's 1996 single "Stick To Ya Gunz", from their album *Firing Squad,* and issues a far more vicious threat:

> Queens on the motherfuckin' map nigga we stay strapped
>
> In fact I let a AK cap push your toupee back
>
> Runnin' with mad sons gunnin' shit up and leave you hit up for the funds

[578] *Paid in Full.*

As he advises with the last line of the verse, in Hip-Hop's lyrical arms race: "Niggas better stick to they guns."

The increased mechanization of violence which Hip-Hop reflects was mirrored on the streets of New York which saw rising levels of gun crime and homicides involving guns during the late 1980s and early 1990s.[579] This supports the common argument of Hip-Hop performers to be reflecting the reality which they saw, or still see, on the streets from which they came. However, what Hip-Hop was seemingly less capable of documenting was that the violence which they discuss so evocatively and powerfully in relation to the trade in drugs (particularly crack cocaine) actually contributed to the contraction of those markets in the 1990s. Blumstein and Wallman describe how "the violence that initially enhanced the profitability of this pursuit held the seeds of its own decline:"

> the risks from the growing violence raised the cost to both buyers and sellers in the crack market. Grogger believes the increasingly deterrent effect of violence was an important part of the drying-up of the markets and their attendant carnage. That was the push away from illegal wages.[580]

This forces the listener to remain mindful of Hip-Hop's purpose as entertainment, even if it offers, on occasion almost exemplary articulations of neoliberal practices and ideology.

When rappers commodified violence and marketed violent tales, they were undoubtedly reflecting the violence and tumult which was occurring in the wider society and on the streets of many American cities, not just New York. Even when violence began to decline, it still featured perennially in Hip-Hop songs, one of the reasons for this was its

[579] "Donatella Lorch, "Record Year For Killings Jolts Officials In New York."
[580] *The Crime Drop in America,* Blumstein and Wallman, eds., 10.

continued use as a site of neoliberal exemplariness, as Spence explains: "Committing violence in response to violence is an important technology of subjectivity for the MC, particularly given that institutional agents poorly regulate the spaces they represent and about which they rhyme."[581] Yet rappers did not always have agency when it came to violence, or force.

Violence was also visited upon rappers by the neoliberal state itself. The NYPD created its own Hip-Hop task force, which surveilled acts for any signs of wrongdoing.[582] The city of New York shut iconic clubs like 'Tunnel,' using the same quality of life statutes as the prostitution in Times Square. Even more insidious forms of control relating to violence occurred, such as censorship of songs which metaphorically brought violence against agents of the state such as police. These restrictions on artistic license narrowed the aperture of violence within Hip-Hop lyricism to focus only on what Eithne Quinn describes as "lumpen black on black violence."[583] If we consider violence to be an exposition of "additional power," then we can place the closure of Tunnel and the censorship of rap lyrics in a similar position to acts of disciplinary violence within the drugs trade. By utilizing their instruments of additional power (contract, legal statutes) the incumbent (the record label, the city of New York) counters the perceived destabilizing influence of the challenger (violent rap lyrics, the carnivalesque black nightclub.)

These disciplinary acts are not violent in the sense of a gunfight, they do not involve threats or attempts to physically harm the adversary. Rather they function by way of performative force – showing to the subject that the corporate entity retains ultimate

[581] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, Loc 611.
[582] *The Smoking Gun*, "The NYPD's Secret Hip Hop Dossier."
[583] Quinn, *Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang*, Loc 2932.

power. The implicit threat of the record label is termination of contract, which carries with it a return to the unsatisfactory economic conditions of the ghetto with its accompanying physical manifestations. The implicit threat of Giuliani pursuing the nightclubs is of prosecution, and if necessary, imprisonment – the act of carceral control against the body. The drug dealer turned rapper is all too familiar with the consequences of imprisonment. Similarly, the inherent surveillance of the Hip-Hop Task Force likewise threatens arrest if scrutinised behaviours reveal transgression. In Hip-Hop parlance this would be "flashing the steel," showing a competitor you have an additional power and that you are prepared to use it.

As with Nas' narrative gun, the promise of independence, freedom and autonomy was not necessarily a promise that neoliberal New York was able to keep to all of its citizens. These processes highlight the complex and interlocking ways that neoliberalism functions. At the governmental level, the privately financed activism of gun-lobbying groups provided a hospitable environment for the production of cheap Saturday night specials.[584] These guns found their market at the lower-end of the socioeconomic pyramid and were frequently purchased and used by entrepreneurs displaying their capacity for competition and market internalisation within the unregulated space of the drugs trade. Those figures, and people familiar with those figures, used these experiences to produce art which disseminated a vernacular neoliberalism highlighting the virtues of competition, self-reliance, and disciplinary violence. As a result, the autopoiesis of neoliberalism continued apace.

[584] Matthew MacLellan 'The Gun as Political Object: Transcoding Contemporary Gun Culture under Neoliberal Governmentality.' *Cultural Logic: Marxist Theory & Practice* 2014 (No. 21), pp. 56-75

Chapter Four: "I'm a business, man:" The Masculine Self-Entrepreneur.

The ways in which rappers conceptualise, interrogate and evidence their masculine credentials has profound implications for how they see themselves, and others, as humans. Masculinity exerts pressure upon images of humanity in rap lyrics. For some, an abundance of masculine signifiers is used to elevate the rapper to superhuman status. At other times, the wretchedness or unmanliness of targeted people (e.g. drug addicts) is used to render them sub-human. In another layer of complexity and confusion some rappers describe themselves as inhuman or beyond human, deliberately othering themselves as exemplars of a particular behaviour, whether that be financial accumulation, violence, or emotionlessness. Sometimes rap lyrics come close to reaffirming normative morality, reinforcing conceptions of both drug dealers and drug users as alien, uncivilised and fit only to be punished.[585] Mimetic of rap's engagement with the politics of 'self-help' and its confluence with neoconservative aims to remove state provision and foster entrepreneurialism, rappers' attitudes towards their fellow human beings frequently fall back upon categorizations of deservingness and even 'human-ness.' These categorizations are fluid and associated with a clutch of labels which indicate manliness, unmanliness, authenticity, inauthenticity, success, failure, and everything in between.[586] The vivid, and frequently controversial language with which rappers explore and assert identity and social status will be interrogated in this chapter as a way to understand their representation of themselves as hustlers, performers, and men. This process, frequently evoked by casual

[585] One key distinction being rappers primarily critique drug dealers who are ineffective or unsuccessful whereas the censorious society punishes all drug dealers by way of illegality and scorn.
[586] These include bitches, pimps, hoes, fiends, gangsta/ers, wankstas, punk ass niggas, jakes, crackheads.

commentators as rappers talking about 'bitches and hoes,' alarms people at various points on the political spectrum. Socially conservative commentators see rap as a threat to family values and many black (primarily older) critics express concern about rap lyrics reproducing stereotypes that reinforce notions of black pathology. As Lester Spence argues, many MCs "publicize a problematic form of racial representation that many middle-class African Americans believe should be private."[587] Many of these "problematic" representations centre upon the areas of sex and violence, key components in the construction of masculinity in Hip Hop, as well as broader society.

This creation of a space where violent fantasies can be conjured and imaginatively enacted mirrors the role that the music itself plays for some of its listenership. Hip-Hop's tales of drug dealing, gun toting and hustling function in divergent ways depending on the audience. For some, who live lives similar to those recounted, in neighbourhoods similar to those described, the songs and their tales of success and excess can be seen to be aspirational, or cautionary, as well as documentarian. Even if the listener knows these tales may be exaggerated or embellished they still bear witness to recognisable and relatable events. This is evidenced by artists' direct address to these listeners, for example, Notorious B.I.G. saying that his debut album is dedicated to "all the niggas in the struggle."[588] For those listeners who live and work at a remove from such activities, the songs can be a form of thrilling, dangerous entertainment. They also propagate and celebrate the ethos of accumulation and speculation which is endorsed by the capitalist society and neoliberal governmentality.[589] There is a clear class and race element to this 'ghetto safari,' hence the

[587] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness* Loc 327.
[588] "Juicy," *Ready to Die.*
[589] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars,* 108.

pushback from older black generations who see rap lyrics, particularly in relation to the violence and celebratory criminality of the drugs trade, as reaffirming the worst images of black pathology and disfunction.[590] The fact that these testimonies come out of black mouths who perennially proclaim their authenticity adds to the risk that they will be misappropriated and used to shame or vilify the race. In the preface to *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (2011), Judith Butler asks:

> What are the constraints by which bodies are materialized as "sexed," and how are we to understand the "matter" of sex, and of bodies more generally, as the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility? Which bodies come to matter—and why?[591]

The concept of the "repeated and violent circumscription" of sex and gender is an important one to consider in relation to the production of masculinity within these lyrics. Rappers produce, define, and heavily codify notions of manhood, both their own and that of others, and this chapter seeks to unpack some of the ways by which they attempt to do so.

"Bumpy Johnson style, old timers, crocodile shoes / Pinky rings, bank robbers wit two's, boss of wild crews:" The hustler as a reflection of American manhood. [592]

In forming their impressions of what successful and aspirational masculinity looks like, drug dealer rappers draw upon influences from American culture as a whole, black culture, and the subculture of criminality and mafia-inspired organised crime. They adopt and sometimes

[590] Robin D.G. Kelley, *YO' mama's disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 39.
[591] Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011) x.
[592] Nas & Ruc, 'Real Niggas,' *QB's Finest* (2000). Ill Will Records.

adapt the mores of these overlapping cultures to create a masculine ideal which is violent, business-savvy, recalcitrant, stoic, and persuasive. Ironically, the drug rap man is authoritarian, but the authority he seeks to defend and uphold is the 'code of the street.' Rap duo Gang Starr's 1992 song, appropriately titled "Code of the Streets," details what this entails and the mindset it cultivates:

> I can't work at no fast-food joint
>
> I got some talent, so don't you get my point?
>
> I'll organize some brothers and get some crazy loot
>
> Selling D-R-U-G-S and clocking dollars, troop
>
> Cause the phat dough, yo, that suits me fine
>
> I gotta have it so I can leave behind
>
> The mad poverty, never having always needing
>
> If a sucker steps up, then I leave him bleeding
>
> I gotta get mine, I can't take no shorts [593]

The song details the mentality shift of a young man from "doing crime for fun" to swearing allegiance to the street life: "fuck turning my back to the street scene / It gives me energy." The narrator progresses from carelessly joy riding with his friends to orchestrating drug deals that will yield "crazy loot." Within the song's three verses the audience is shown what the ascension from juvenile status to manhood entails.[594] Key behaviours are the willingness

[593] *Hard to Earn*. EMI

[594] A similar narrative arc is utilised in Ghostface Killah's 'Motherless Child' from the album *Ironman,* 1996. Epic Records.

to use violence, an appraisal and understanding of the workings of organised crime, the rejection of poorly paid salaried work and the power of the performative, persuasive, masculine voice. The song ends with an affirmation of the power of the voice and the righteousness of the code: "I've never been afraid to let loose my speech / My brothers know I kick the code of the streets."[595]

Through the illegality of his business the individual directly opposes the traditional authority of the state. Hip hop's narrative detailing of broken homes and absent fathers undermines the authority of the traditional, patriarchal family.[596] The way by which Raekwon discusses the experience of growing up fatherless is telling:

> I was the ones being made in the hood with no father. My mother was my father. She's not lesbian but she was like, 'I'm your father too.' I had to respect it, but the streets was my father. I had to grow up and go through certain experiences that I think made me a man and I wanted to represent that in this music.[597]

His admission that he "had to respect it," in relation to his mother assuming the role of both parents sounds like a grudging respect, one which is not enthusiastic or whole-hearted. If Raekwon felt that his mother could not adequately replace his absent father, he substituted "the streets" into that role.[598] This is a particularly overt admission of what is often a more

[595] Another track on the album, the posse cut "Speak Ya Clout," allies violence, lyrical dexterity and sex appeal as ways in which the different MCs evidence their power or 'clout.'
[596] "So many kids I knew, never knew who Pop was" Nas, "Poppa was a Playa," *The Lost Tapes*, 2002. Columbia. See also JAY-Z's "December 4th," *The Black Album*, 2003. Roc-A-Fella.
[597] Paul Meara, "Raekwon Reflects on How 'Only Built 4 Cuban Linx' Came Together on 20-Year Anniversary: Exclusive," *Billboard*, August 1, 2015, https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/6649414/raekwon-only-built-4-cuban-linx-anniversary.
[598] This reflects a familiar theme within Hip Hop of the crucible like nature of "the streets." The streets is most often taken to mean a mixture of the physical neighbourhood, its inhabitants and their practices, of which criminal activity is frequently implied. The title of the album *The Streets Made Me* (2001) by Louisiana rapper Soulja Slim sums up this concept. *The Streets Made Me*, 2001. No Limit / Priority Records.

subtle process whereby young men choose or encounter masculine role models and then mimic or adopt what they see as ideals of masculine behaviour. JAY-Z's song "Coming of Age" (1996), and its follow up "Coming of Age (Da Sequel)" (1998), document this process via a duet between the rapper and a protégé, Memphis Bleek, who came out of the same Marcy public housing projects as JAY-Z.[599] In the original song JAY-Z adopts the role of a drug dealer, "the hottest nigga in New York," with Bleek an admiring neighbourhood kid who is "trying to come up / In the game and add a couple of dollar signs to my name." This calls back to the purpose of Melle Mel's line from "The Message" (1982) where he lists the appeal of the "Thugs, pimps and pushers" before asking "And you wanna grow up to be just like them, huh."

The prevalence of single-parent families in Hip-Hop's lyrical autobiographies provides an insight into the machinations of neoliberalism for those figures growing up in places like the Marcy projects. Increased social disruption and dislocation is a noted side-effect of economic hardship. When examining the impact of neoliberalism on black communities, Lester Spence highlights how: "Families experiencing significant levels of income instability and unemployment are more likely to dissolve and children in such families are more likely to drop out of school."[600] When these children do drop out of school, they move further away from being able to achieve the kinds of desirable employment skills which are conferred by diplomas, grades and graduation. Instead, their constrained choices frequently constitute poorly paid entry level work, or engagement with the illegal economy of 'blight hustling.' This is a story which Hip-Hop tells. In order to survive

[599] "Coming of Age," *Reasonable Doubt*. "Coming of Age (Da Sequel)," *Vol. 2… Hard Knock Life*, Roc A Fella. 1998.
[600] Spence, "The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics," 141-2.

via the wages of drug dealing, for example, the dealer must evidence many of the skills of financial accumulation and plasticity that are desirable of the neoliberal subject. In this way neoliberalism reproduces itself, first in its restructuring of the economy which contributes to economic and social instability for the working classes. Secondly, in its withdrawal of social support it turns the individual – and their dependents – over to the market (both legal and illegal) in order to inculcate in them the principles of market driven judgment. Those which are profitable or productive may carve out a route for themselves by which they can regain a foothold in society and become active participants in consumer culture again. This is the lesson that Raekwon was describing when he said "the streets" were his father.

We might expect to see – given the lack of faith in the two foundational, stability producing institutions of the nuclear family and the state – that most of the rap lyrics in this study depict lives that are chaotic or even anarchic, but they are not. Many are despondent, some even anti-social, but the undercurrent which remains throughout is a belief that the drug market and the music market can offer salvation via economic advancement. Whether these proclamations reflect artists' true feelings or are just devices used to spin more entertaining and relatable music is debatable. Songs of striving have a greater reach and power than songs which advocate giving up. The symbiosis between documentation and fabrication in Hip-Hop comes to the fore here. When artists write and perform songs about drug dealing and rapping being ladders by which to escape their environs, provided the style matches the substance, the songs themselves (if commercially successful) actually enable that process to happen. Rapping about escaping poverty can enable some rappers to escape poverty. The act of detailing desires, experiences or ambitions can speak them into reality. Thus, the rhetorical voice is revered in Hip Hop and is the most prominent of its founding elements. There is a similar dynamic at play with masculinity. Within the process of

evidencing their own masculine credentials, rappers show how they match up to their ideals and implicitly outline those behaviours which they consider to be 'right' or appropriate for men to engage in. In so doing they produce codes of behaviour which listeners, other rappers, and critics see as indicative of "masculinity," not only within Hip Hop but frequently within urban communities and African American youth culture as a whole.[601]

This particular prism of street life, through which many rappers view and categorize masculinity is taken on by members of the audience. Within this chapter I will analyse the ways that rap lyrics package and interrogate masculinity both as a concept and as a lived, often performed, experience. Focussing on both positive and negative estimations of masculinity I draw out the key components that rappers use to establish a masculine framework or ideal. The connections between these behaviours and their utility or origins in the criminal enterprise of the drug trade is highlighted and explained. Where rap's overriding understanding of masculinity is shaped by broader societal or cultural factors, these are also interrogated in order to piece together the complex and multi-layered process by which Hip-Hop constructs its image of the man who sells drugs and also makes music. Tricia Rose is correct in her assessment that "[c]ontrary to the vision of hip hop as a dangerous outside influence, it profoundly reflects some of the most celebrated American values on both sides of the political divide."[602] Rappers' representations of masculinity are one such area in which they reproduce some of the most celebrated American ideals. Similarly, an engagement with the drugs trade – despite its illegal status – may also reproduce American ideals, as Ethan A. Nadelman outlines: "[t]he illicit drug business has

[601] As always when using such as essentialist term as "black culture," this is not to suggest one homogenous entity but it is often the framing by which conservative criticism of Hip Hop is parsed.
[602] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 110.

been described – not entirely in jest – as the best means ever devised by the U.S. for exporting the capitalist ethic to potentially revolutionary Third World peasants."[603]

So yeah, I sampled your voice, you was using it wrong / You made it a hot line, I made it a hot song (Woo!): The rhetoric of masculinity. [604]

This jab from JAY-Z to Nas on his classic diss track "Takeover" strikes at one of the key elements of Hip Hop's relationship to manliness: the power of the masculine voice. Rhetorical skill and oratorical impact are key features by which rappers define their worth, power and supremacy. The lines refer to JAY-Z's sampling of Nas for the hook to the song "Dead Presidents II" (1996), that was referenced in Chapter 2. The accusation that one man knew how to use another's voice better than he did himself is a relatively simple slight. JAY-Z is demonstrating his superiority over Nas by not only being a better rapper than him, but even bragging about taking ownership of his voice. He claims he used the sample to make a greater commercial success of it than Nas did, a hot song versus a hot line. This barb is considered one of the most impactful and cutting in all of Hip-Hop, and part of the reason for this is that it strikes at the very core of what rappers base their identity and brand on: the voice.[605]

By taking Nas' voice and putting it to work for himself, JAY-Z was establishing a power dynamic whereby he employed Nas (without permission) to enhance his own artistic output. Nas fell foul of the permanence and fungibility of recorded music; his voice is

[603] Ethan A. Nadelmann, "Drug Prohibition in the U.S. – Costs, Consequences and Alternatives," *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, Reinarman and Levine eds., 291.
[604] JAY-Z, "Takeover," *The Blueprint*, 2001. Roc A Fella.
[605] The publication *XXL* included it in their list of "50 of the Most Brutal Diss Lines in Rap History," *XXL*, August 6, 2015, https://www.xxlmag.com/50-brutal-diss-lines-rap-history/.

forever available for other artists to use, sample or listen to. This replicates the process by which Hip Hop came to be: the dismantling and repurposing of the musical works of others in order to fashion something new. Hip Hop musicians are acutely aware of both the possibilities and the pitfalls of the mass production of recorded music. Both JAY-Z and the Notorious B.I.G. threaten to remove the voices of their competitors in their songs. JAY-Z on "Friend or Foe" (1996) whilst in the process of threatening disciplinary violence against an upstart drug dealer who has encroached on his turf, raps: "You leave me no choice, I'll leave you no voice." An outro interlude on Biggie's "Who Shot Ya" (1994), reinforces the threat to silence:

> Come here, come here (It ain't gotta be like that, B.I.G.)
>
> Open your fucking mouth, open your—
>
> Didn't I tell you don't fuck with me? (Come on, man) Huh?
>
> Didn't I tell you not to fuck with me? (Come on, man) Huh?
>
> (Come on, man) Look at you now, huh? (Come on, man)
>
> Can't talk with a gun in your mouth, huh?
>
> Bitch-ass nigga, what?

These lines are followed by a flurry of gunshots as the unnamed victim – (seen pleading for his life in parentheses above) is killed. The dismissive and emasculating line "Bitch-ass nigga" equates the now silenced "nigga" with weakness and unmanliness, with bitch being a common label for a woman.[606] The placing of the gun in the mouth functions first as an act

[606] See 50 Cent's line "Homie, you a bitch, you got feminine ways," from "Straight to the Bank," *Curtis*, Shady Aftermath, 2007.

of silencing – "Can't talk with a gun in your mouth" – then as a facilitator for murder. This graphic composition yokes together voicelessness with powerlessness and reflexively demonstrates the voice as a signifier of power. If the voiceless are victims lacking agency, then the MC who uses his voice expertly is both powerful and autonomous.

One reason that the notion of the authorial, masculine voice is so important to MCs is that it engages with a tradition of black political and religious leadership which centred on the rhetorical traditions of the black church, storefront preaching, and stepladder lectures.[607] Minkah Makalani outlines how, as far back as the 1920s, orators had to meld substance with style; "the ideas one put forth were rivalled in importance only by one's facility with the spoken word."[608] In his book *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1968) Claude McKay details Marcus Garvey's engagement with this kind of politicking after he experienced a disastrous first public speaking engagement. Speaking in the annex of St. Marks Roman Catholic church in Harlem, Garvey was heckled and amidst the boos and jeers of the crowd fell off the stage and injured himself. McKay reveals that subsequently "Garvey was persuaded to join a group of street speakers of radical-racial ideas. And from 1916 onwards he harangued crowds on the sidewalks of Harlem."[609] Makalani and McKay both recount how radical black thinkers and politicians cut their teeth speaking on the streets, learning to hold a crowd's attention whilst attempting to persuade and cajole their sensibilities.

[607] "In Harlem, the stepladder offered a democratic space to articulate an alternative politics and ideologies without the money required to publish a newspaper or magazine or to print pamphlets" Makalani, *In the Cause of* Freedom, 34.
[608] Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 23.
[609] Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1968), 146-7.

This focus on the importance of rhetoric was underscored and extended throughout the twentieth century by the impact of both the black church and Muslim organisations like the Nation of Islam. It is no coincidence that the two most recognisable and revered black political leaders of the mid-century, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, both had extensive tutelage in public speaking from the pulpits of their respective religions.[610] On the influence of the black church sociologist E. Franklin Frazier commented:

> The church was the chief center of the Negro's social life in both the cities and in the rural areas. It provided the chief means for self-expression and leadership and erected a shelter against a hostile white world.[611]

Manning Marable, who wrote the definitive biography of Malcolm X, said of him that he was a "master of public rhetoric" who could "artfully recount tales about his life that were partially fiction, yet the stories resonated as true to most blacks who had encountered racism."[612] When reading this quotation it is not hard to see why the figure of Malcolm X is so revered by rappers, for they often undertake the same process of embellished recounting. The rhetorical power of religious and political leaders such as King and Malcolm X inspired artists and performers who continued the tradition of powerful, and empowering, black oratory.[613] The likes of James Brown and Muhammad Ali represented masculine ideals for black youth and had the wit and mastery of language to create an impact which

[610] For a detailed study of the influence of preaching on rapping see Dwight A. Radcliff Jr. "Hip Hop Hermeneutics: How the Culture Influences Preachers." *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 5, no. 1 (Summer, 2018): 64-84.
[611] E Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 23.
[612] Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of* Reinvention, Loc 302.
[613] See Dorian Lynskey's analysis of Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and the video for the Public Enemy song "Fight the Power" (1989) in Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute,* Loc 7756.

extended far beyond their success as musicians or athletes.[614] Artist Justin Bua opens his book *The Legends of Hip Hop* (2011) with a study of Ali:

> Ali was a fast-talking, lightning-wit loudmouth who took on superhuman battles and taught an entire generation how to use love, creativity, MC-style battling, self-aggrandizement, intellect, and a sense of humour to triumph over the haters. His dance between imagination and domination paralleled the original tenets of the hip-hop founders. Ali embodied all of the qualities that the hip-hop culture later adopted as its own.[615]

Ali's status was referenced on the breakthrough rap hit "Rapper's Delight" (1979) by Big Bank Hank and has remained a masculine ideal and source of inspiration for MCs ever since.[616]

50 Cent on his song "Many Men (Wish Death)" (2003), invoked the boxer with the line "I'm the greatest, something like Ali in his prime."[617] Interestingly, the usually supremely confident 50 only says he is "something like" Ali, as if to pay respect to the uniqueness and priority of the self-proclaimed greatest. In his paean to Hip Hop, "Love" (1999), Mos Def (Yasiin Bey) says that the genre "Shook up the world like Ali in 6-3."[618] Gang Starr, in collaboration with Nice & Smooth, used Ali's name change as a signifier of racial authenticity on their song "DWYCK" (1992) with Greg Nice's lines: "I say Muhammad Ali, you

[614] Afrika Bambaataa has highlighted the importance of Brown's "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" to the formation of Hip Hop. Qtd in Fricke and Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all*, 44.
[615] Justin Bua, *The Legends of Hip Hop* (New York: Harper Design, 2011), Kindle, Loc 103.
[616] Even in 2013, JAY-Z was invoking Ali's masculinity, portraying his diagnosis with Parkinsons disease as a result of living in an unequal society: "America tried to emasculate the greats / Murder Malcolm, gave Cassius the shakes." "F.U.T.W," *Magna Carta Holy Grail*, 2013. Roc-A-Fella.
[617] *Get Rich or Die Tryin*, Interscope, 2003. Joey Bada$$ borrowed this line of 'ROCKABYE BABY' from his album ALL-AMERIKKKAN BADA$$ (2017). Pro Era Records.
[618] Mos Def, "Love," *Black on Both Sides*, 1999. Columbia.

say Classius Clay / I say butter, you say Parkay." [619] In the couplet, Ali is aligned with butter, a natural product and the purposefully mispronounced "Classius" is aligned with a brand of margarine, a synthetic imitation. In the next verse, Guru claims he is:

> A poet like Langston Hughes
>
> And can't lose when I cruise out on the expressway
>
> Leavin' the bodega, I say "Suavé"
>
> Premier's got more beats than barns got hay
>
> Clips are inserted into my gun
>
> So I can take the money, never have to run

We see here the invocation of the revered black artist from a bygone age, the jocular wordplay regarding hay and the lyrical bearing of arms. Guru demonstrates elements of the masculine credentials for which Ali was hailed: wit and a capacity to demonstrate power and indomitability through violence. Only now – as discussed in the previous chapter – street violence does not involve the Marquis of Queensbury rules, but rather sourcing, maintaining, and utilising firearms.

Ali is just one member, although a particularly sanctified one, of a pantheon of cultural icons which form the antecedents of what successful masculinity would look like in Hip-Hop. Dorian Lynskey, along with many other scholars and commentators, includes the radical black poets of the 60s and 70s in this lineage:

[619] Gang Starr, *Hard to Earn*, 1992. EMI. LL Cool J also referred to the Ali/Clay issue on his iconic pugilistic single 'Mama Said Knock You Out' from the album of the same name. LL Cool J, "Mama Said Knock You Out," *Mama Said Knock You Out*, 1990. Def Jam.

> The Last Poets, like the Watts Prophets and Gil Scott-Heron, operated at the nexus of black America's two most radical art forms: poetry and jazz. The most celebrated and controversial poet of Black Power was Amiri Baraka, formerly LeRoi Jones. […] His 1965 poem 'Black Art' was a two-fisted manifesto for black poetry as intellectual warfare: 'We want "poems that kill." / Assassin poems.'[620]

As well as the artistic endeavours of figures like Baraka, more casual forms of entertainment provided role models for African American youth. The influence of Kung-Fu movies on the likes of the Wu-Tang Clan has already been noted within this thesis. Robin D.G. Kelley explains how in "Harlem in the 1970s, Nehru suits were as popular and as 'black' as dashikis, and martial arts films placed Bruce Lee among a pantheon of black heroes that included Walt Frazier and John Shaft ."[621] Wu-Tang Clan member Ghostface Killah testifies to the veracity of this statement on "Fish" from his solo album *Ironman* (1996).[622] Heavyweight boxing champions, radical poets, Asian American actors, fictional Blaxploitation movie frontmen, the list is eclectic and extensive. One key feature that all of these men possessed was their status as outsiders or radicals. Not only were they impressive in their fields or demeanour, but they also opposed the status quo, the state itself, or in Blaxploitation terms the malevolent amalgam of state, racism and inequality encapsulated by the term "whitey."[623]

The highly sexed Blaxploitation style had a strong influence on the emergence of pimp narratives within Hip Hop and success with women is a key marker of masculine

[620] Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per minute*, Loc 3343.
[621] Kelley, *Yo Mama's Dysfunktional,* 25.
[622] Ghostface Killah, "Fish," *Ironman*, 1996. Epic Records.
[623] See Horton-Stallings '"Im Goin Pimp Whores!": The Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip-Hop Neo-Slave Narrative,' 198-9.

prowess in rap lyrics. The first gangster rap record to be made by a New York artist, Just-Ice's "Hip Hop Gangster" (1986), is more concerned with seducing women and sexual braggadocio than violence or drug dealing.[624] Whilst highlighting his success with women – success so extensive that other men fear their women will leave them for him – Just-Ice is also at pains to demonstrate his intelligence and cunning: "I use a rhyme for a gun, intellect for a bullet / And my natural crafty ways will execute it to the fullest." We see here the narrative utilisation of the "additional power" of the gun, but rather than a direct threat of violence, it is delivered in word play. Just-Ice chooses similes rather than weapons to show his pre-eminence; his intellect is "like a bullet." This is noteworthy as it refers back to the mechanisation of violence discussed in Chapter 3 around Biggie's "Things Done Changed" (1994), Just-Ice is rapping before that change and still uses a figurative rather than literal gun in his lyrics. His foregrounding of his intellect engages with the kind of trickster figure which is common in much folk literature and which Hip Hop's pimp and 'mack' narratives draw upon extensively.[625]

Similar to the trickster is the 'bad nigger/nigga' trope and drug dealer rappers engage continually with this stock character.[626] Scholar and folklorist Cecil Brown calls archetypal bad nigger Stagolee the "Godfather of Gangsta" and traces his lineage and impact extensively:

> At the height of the Black is Beautiful era, James Brown and Wilson Pickett recorded the Stagolee song. Bobby Seale, the leader of the Black Panthers, used it to recruit young black men to the party. I once got the opportunity to ask him why. He replied

[624] Just-Ice, "Hip Hop Gangster," *Back to the Old School,* 1986. Fresh/Sleeping Bag Records.
[625] See Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang,* Loc 3427 – 3447 & Thieme, "The hustle economy," 538.
[626] For a comprehensive history of the "bad nigger" trope and its impact in rap see Judy "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity" 119 – 135.

> that Stagolee represented a template for black resistance to whites that just needed to be organised. "Stagolee was a bad nigger off the block and didn't take shit from nobody," he said. "Malcolm X at one time was an illegitimate hustler. Later in life Malcolm X grows to have the most profound political consciousness... So symbolically, at one time he was Stagolee... To me, Stagolee was the true grassroots.[627]

Hip Hop lyricists often portray themselves as inspired or guided by the kind of political legacy that Seale was advocating for above, but as The Roots asked on their song "Tip the Scale" (2011), "Lot of niggas go to prison—how many come out Malcolm X?"[628]

Autobiography follows the footsteps of Malcolm X / Money and sex, Gore-Tex, Donna Karan and Guess:[629]Economic, rather than political, mobilisation.

The legacy of Malcolm X within Hip Hop is that he has become a kind of stock figure like Stagolee.[630] He is often referenced, his name dropped into songs in order to add gravitas or the illusion of some kind of revolutionary spirit, but this is rarely supplemented with any kind of political analysis or commitment which would seem in keeping with his legacy or

[627] Cecil Brown "Godfather of Gangsta," *The Guardian,* May 9, 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2003/may/09/artsfeatures.
[628] The Roots, "Tip the Scale," *undun,* 2011. Def Jam.
[629] AZ, "Rather Unique," *Doe or Die*, 1995. EMI.
[630] For the importance of stock figures in pop culture, including Stagolee/Stagger Lee, see Williams, Duncan A.H. "Stagger Lee: How Violent Nostalgia Created an American Folk Song Standard." *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*, 89-97.

principles. Ghostface Killah invokes him on "Malcolm" from *Supreme Clientele* (2000): "I'm like Malcolm, out the window with the joint / Hoodied up, blood in my eye, I let two fly like fuck it!"[631] Ghost refers to the famous picture of Malcolm from 1964 where he is peering out of a window holding a rifle, an image that was staged for an *Ebony* magazine interview and photoshoot.[632] This reference trades on the popular image of Malcolm as a man prepared to use violence if necessary. Wholly absent is the "revolutionary socialist internationalism" that he had begun advocating for shortly before his assassination.[633] He is more invoked for the earlier years of his story – the hustler and 'john' steerer gone straight – than he is for his later, post-Nation of Islam politics or his violent early death.[634]

Even though acts like Public Enemy tried to advance the cause of black revolutionary ferment within Hip Hop through engagement with the legacy of Malcolm within the Nation of Islam, the commercial move towards drug dealing narratives stymied and ultimately squeezed those notions from the mainstream. Greg Tate, in his review of JAY-Z's most recent album *4:44* (2017) says that there was a brief hope that Hip Hop might provide the "dynamic synthesis of politics, culture, and economics" that Harold Cruse called for in his *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967). Instead, he says:

> We were quickly disabused of that fantasy by the throwback gangsta-centric Bling Moment — a bubbly and boobalicious rebuke of conscious rap in favor of

[631] Ghostface Killah, *Supreme Clientele*, 2000. Epic.
[632] Oliver Wang, "Bullet Points: How Hip-Hop Handles the Gun," *KCET*, February 3, 2013, https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/bullet-points-how-hip-hop-handles-the-gun.
[633] Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1983), 257.
[634] Kofsky says of him that "while still on "the street," he had rapidly distinguished himself by his ability as a hustler." Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music,* 252.

> conspicuous consumption, a turn of the boom-bap screw promoted by hip-hop's first generation of corporate nouveau riche […][635]

I would contend that the "gangsta-centric Bling Moment," as Tate calls it, *is* a synthesis of politics, culture, and economics; the issue is that the politics which are advocated are not ones which Tate recognises as appropriate or progressive. Within his piece Tate lauds JAY-Z for extolling the virtues of black economic nationalism and places his politics in the lineage of Garvey, Booker T. Washington, Elijah Muhammad, and Berry Gordy.[636] Tate called *4:44* the "most provocatively pro–Black Nationalist rap album since Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*." Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan declared his appreciation for the album, becoming a vocal advocate of JAY-Z's entreaties for African Americans to create generational wealth and, as Hov suggests on "Legacy," to "start a society within a society."[637]

The irony of Tate's distinction between gangsta and (what he sees as) the revolutionary spirit of *4:44* is that gangsta artists also engaged with many of the themes which are present in JAY-Z's ersatz manifesto, but they did so in less explicit, more circumstantial ways.[638] When DMX rapped "I put in work and it's all for the kids (Uh)," on *"*X Gon Give it to Ya" (2003), he was gesturing towards the notion of generational wealth which

[635] Greg Tate, "The Politicization of Jay-Z," *The Village Voice*, July 11, 2017, https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/07/11/the-politicization-of-jay-z/.
[636] Tate seemingly agrees with Timothy B. Neary's claim that "Along with the black church, economic populism [was] a pillar of the modern civil rights movement." "Buying the Dream: Identity, Authenticity, and Mass Consumption in Black America." *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2010, 120.
[637] Ural Garrett, "MINISTER LOUIS FARRAKHAN CO-SIGNS JAY-Z'S "4:44" ALBUM & ICE CUBE'S BIG3 BASKETBALL LEAGUE," *HipHopDX*, August 3, 2017, https://hiphopdx.com/news/id.44265/title.minister-louis-farrakhan-co-signs-jay-zs-444-album-ice-cubes-big3-basketball-league#.
[638] Ernest Allen Jr. offers an extensive unpacking of the surprising similarities of "message rap" and "gangsta" in his essay "making the strong survive: the contours and contradictions of message rap" in *droppin' science: critical essays on rap music and hip hop culture*, William Eric Perkins ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 159–192.

JAY-Z foregrounds on *4:44*.[639] The fundamental premise which weds Farrakhan's politics and those of the hustler-turned-rapper is anti-statism. Farrakhan and the likes of JAY-Z, 50 Cent and Puff Daddy do not (or in some cases, did not) see a legitimate avenue by which engagement with the state would improve their lot. Instead, they criticise those who they see as over-reliant on the government and prescribe personal responsibility and self-reliance as the tonic for perceived laziness, apathy, and moral failings. "Personal responsibility" was the central theme of Farrakhan's Million Man March of 1995.[640] Robin D.G. Kelley in his 1997 work *YO' mama's disfunktional!* suggested this rejection of state assistance is a widely held attitude in black communities, particularly amongst young people. Those citizens who had lived under (and been the subject of) the Reaganite rhetoric which vilified the irresponsible, deviant "welfare queen" were now eschewing what little state provision remained after years of budget cuts and programme roll backs.[641]

Kelley castigates this impulse and claims that it is tantamount to "letting the government off the hook" and that "opposing strong government supports in favor of some romantic notion of self-reliance is tantamount to relinquishing our citizenship."[642] Instead of state intervention or the social pact of welfare, rappers frequently proclaim their faith in themselves and the market economy. Evidencing their neoliberal credentials, performers identify wealth accumulation through market competition as their only legitimate option of

[639] DMX, "X Gon Give It To Ya,' *Cradle 2 the Grave*, 2003. Def Jam. JAY-Z himself had a double platinum album called *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* (2000) where he highlighted the talents of new artists signed to his Roc-A-Fella label. One of those artists, Memphis Bleek stated "Dynasty means hard work, family, longevity." See Ex, Kris. "Jayhova's Witness," *Vibe* Dec. 2000, 130.
[640] Leah Asmelash, "A look back at the Million Man March, 25 years later," *CNN*, October 16, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/16/us/million-man-march-25-year-trnd/index.html.
[641] For an explanation of the rhetorical power of the "welfare queen" label see Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars,* 181 and Kohler-Hausmann, Julilly. "Welfare Crises, Penal Solutions, and the Origins of the "Welfare Queen"." *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 41, no. 5, 2015, 756–71.
[642] Kelley, *YO' mama's disfunktional!,* 81.

advancement. In keeping with Hip Hop's tradition of braggadocio they boast of their status as entrepreneurs or exemplary "workers" within either the drugs trade or the music trade, a designation which does not hold the same connotations as salaried or waged work.

"Biting it'll make you choke, you can't provoke / You can't cope, you should've broke because I ain't no joke:" Personal style as property.[643]

Given the preoccupation with authenticity and the masculine voice in Hip Hop it is no surprise that "biting" or copying another performer's act is seen by many MCs and fans as a cardinal sin. This biting can take the form of borrowing lines, imitating a lyrical style, employing a narrative format, echoing other artists' album covers or even wearing the same clothes.[644] As early as the 1981 battle at Harlem World Kool Moe Dee was accusing Busy Bee of stealing someone else's work. In the documentary, *The Art of 16 Bars* (2005), RZA describes biting as "the only real crime we had in hip-hop."[645] It is a crime that could be punishable by death.[646] Scholar Adam Bradley states that one of the paradoxes of Hip Hop is that it "is an artform based upon borrowing, and yet it punishes stealing like no other."[647] Who gets to decide what constitutes homage or an artist merely acknowledging their inspiration and what constitutes flagrant copying is open for debate and discussion.[648] These debates call back to those around sampling and whether interpolation and reinterpretation

[643] Eric B & Rakim. "I Ain't No Joke." 1987, *Paid in Full*.
[644] Pigeons, "The Fine Line Between Biting and Paying Homage," *Complex*, March 10, 2016, https://www.complex.com/pigeons-and-planes/2016/03/rap-biting-paying-homage/602874.
[645] Dir. Peter Spirer, "The Art of 16 Bars (Full Documentary)," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uClckZKd2bQ&t=3205s.
[646] "At one point, a nigga would kill you if you sounded like them." RZA, "Raekwon: The Making of Only Built 4 Cuban Linx."
[647] Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip* Hop (New York: Basic Civitas, 2009), 146.
[648] Bradley, *Book of Rhymes,* 146-155.

should be condoned whilst unchanged reproduction is condemned. In the elongated and ever-present metaphor of rap being a product to be moved, the same way that cocaine or heroin are in the drugs trade, an individual rapper's style is often viewed as a mixture of their turf and their signature.[649] Whilst the lyrics and stories are made from the raw materials of the rapper's own life, the way in which they are packaged and delivered is the calling card of the rapper himself. If he is 'dealing' music, then his particular brand and sound are the ways by which he is identifiable to his audience.[650] Style is the tangible, physical identifier in the same way that a particular city block would be for someone who wanted to buy their drugs from a particular vendor. The drugs which come from a particular vendor may have an identifying feature, like Frank Lucas' "Blue Magic" heroin or Raekwon's purple tape. For the MC, his style is his identifying feature and the one which both ensures profitability and helps cultivate a dedicated following of fans. At the same time, rappers who see themselves as artists do not want the creative value of their art to be diminished by imitation and reproduction by less innovative and skilled artists.

It is no coincidence that one of the most vehemently anti-biting messages in 90s Hip Hop appears on the skit "Shark Niggas (Biters)" from Raekwon's mafioso masterpiece *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* (1995). The protectionist mindset of the mafia don character translates easily to the sense of guardedness and ownership that an MC feels towards his style. Once again, the impulse falls back on the notion of work. MCs who have worked hard to hone their craft, refining and perfecting their narrative voice, their cadence and their ability to manipulate the beat, do not want anyone else to reap the benefits of that invested time and

[649] See Guru's lines from the aforementioned "DWYCK": "You wish that you could come into my neighborhood / Meanin' my mental state, still I'm 5-foot-8."
[650] "For all the implicit and explicit politics of rap lyrics, Hip Hop must be understood as a sonic force more than anything else." Kelley, *Yo mama's dysfunctiona,* 38.

effort.[651] As Ghostface Killah warns: "I don't want niggas soundin' like me on no album." He subtly threatens confrontation for anyone who transgresses, saying he will "approach a nigga." The protected sphere of content is extended to include the whole Wu-Tang Clan:

> For real son, you know (No doubt)
>
> Bad enough, nigga, I don't want nobody sound like nobody from my Clan, man
>
> Keep it real, get your own shit man, and be original (Word up)
>
> That's all, man (And you'll be a better man)
>
> And— And you gon'— you gon' come out on your own way (Word up)
>
> Whatever how you gon' take it, man, fuck it (Word up)[652]

Raekwon's interjection "you'll be a better man" clearly links innovation and originality to masculinity; it is more manly to be a creator than an imitator. Rolled up in this conception of manhood are the notions of self-reliance which are frequently extolled as well as the self-entrepreneurial instincts of neoliberalism. Ghostface's extension from seeking just to protect his own intellectual property to that of his clique gestures towards a less individualistic notion of ownership. Yet it is still an exclusive one, with only those rappers who fall within the boundaries of the Wu-Tang Clan being protected by his pre-emptive threats of violence to wannabe biters.

Making such public proclamations of ownership also codifies the behaviours around any intended or subsequent imitation. Ownership of this style has been stated and claimed, and the punishment for any transgression has been promised. This is one way in which Hip-

[651] Page, *Enter the Wu-Tang: How Nine Men Changed Hip Hop,* Loc 1410.
[652] The words in parentheses are spoken by Raekwon.

Hop lyrics reproduce codes of masculinity whilst seeking to defend or uphold them. Raekwon and Ghostface give an explicit lesson about what they view as their property, their produced content, the originality of which is a masculine signifier, and tell both competitors and their audience that unauthorised usage will result in violence. Ghostface said that this outlook was shaped by their experiences with the drugs trade and the criminal justice system:

> We came into the game like, Fuck everybody. Niggas can't touch this, whatever, whatever. That was our mind-frame back then. We ran all that shit—jails, streets, Brooklyn House, Rikers Island, and Up North—Wu-Tang was what was up.[653]

This is not just idle posturing, Wu-Tang member U-God was in and out of prison during the recording of the Wu breakout album *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (1993) and *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*. As a result, U-God only appears on two songs on *36 Chambers* and although appearing on the song "Knuckleheadz" from *OB4CL* he wasn't able to re-record his performance to master it as he was returned to prison for violating his parole. Likewise, the track "Incarcerated Scarfaces" was inspired by one of Raekwon's friends who had just been "hit with some heavy time" in prison.[654] The carceral rhythms of law, transgression, punishment, violation, punishment and so on had a direct effect on the Wu-Tang Clan, and this experience is one which Ghostface adapts when he lays down his own law regarding biting.

Rappers were, and still are, fiercely territorial over what they perceive to be 'their' style and intellectual property. As we can see above, the threatened method of conflict

[653] 'Raekwon: The Making of Only Built 4 Cuban Linx.'
[654] 'Raekwon: The Making of Only Built 4 Cuban Linx.'

resolution is not always a lawsuit – as it was with Gilbert O' Sullivan and Biz Markie in the 1980s – but rather violence. The wronged rapper who has experienced "jails, streets, Brooklyn House, Rikers Island, and Up North" is more likely to seek retribution than restitution. The most striking example of this occurred in December 1999 when JAY-Z's album *Vol. 3: Life and Times of S. Carter* was bootlegged and widely available on the street a week before its official release date.[655] Suspecting his friend and former manager of The Notorious B.I.G, Lance "Un" Rivera, of being the source of the leak, JAY-Z stabbed him in the stomach in the VIP section of Manhattan's Kit Kat Club.[656] Dan Charnas claims that prior to the stabbing JAY-Z said to Rivera "you broke my heart," a quotation from "the dramatic scene from *The Godfather II* where Michael Corleone administers the kiss of death to his brother Fredo."[657] This incident shows the pitfalls drug dealers turned rappers must navigate when seeking to move between what Charnas calls "the code of the streets and the standards of society." The quotation from *The Godfather II* is something of a flourish but also shows how important these fictional works were in establishing the frameworks for masculine behaviour. Prior to a moment of real violence, an act of revenge on a man who he felt had disrespected and betrayed him, JAY-Z was quoting a line from a film. Rivera survived the attack, but it shows the lengths which some performers are willing to go to preserve ownership of their art, and by direct association their masculinity. Charnas' book contains many instances of such violence, from a number of different individuals, bearing witness to the significant overlap between the 'street life' and Hip Hop as a music industry. As Michael Eric Dyson observes: "The profound investment in a violent masculinity costs many black

[655] Charnas, *The Big Payback,* 581.
[656] JAY-Z referenced this incident with the lines: "You stabbed Un over some records / Your excuse was "He was talkin' too reckless!" "Kill JAY-Z," *4:44*. 2017.
[657] Charnas, *The Big Payback,* 582.

men their lives, especially on the streets where codes of respect are maniacally observed and brutally enforced."[658]

"Feel the force of impact from the iron side of the gat as I attack the track:" Imagined violence and masculine society.[659]

This concept of street violence and codes of behaviour has resonance with the skit which opens the Wu-Tang Clan song "M.E.T.H.O.D Man" (1993). [660] In the skit friends, relatives and members of the music group sit around and try to outdo each other by conjuring up the most extreme violence to be meted out upon an individual. It is a complex, layered process. At its surface level it reproduces the phenomenon that Twitchell identifies in relation to gory films such as *Commando* (1985) and *Road Warrior* (1981): "The violence is so bizarre as to be parodic, but underneath the hyperbole lie the ancient rituals of induction through retribution."[661] By recounting these threats of extreme violence to each other, the speakers establish codes of behaviour, the most resonant of which is that transgression will be punished with physical harm. This pattern is commonly found in gang initiations with the fabled 'blood in – blood out' code of violent induction into and, if permitted, violent exit from the gang:

> In particular, the initiation increases solidarity among gang members by engaging them in a collective ritual […] Because of these common experiences, the inititation ritual – especially to the extent that it involves violence – creates aspects of what

[658] Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean?* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007), 107.
[659] Masta Killa, "Wu-Gambinos," *OB4CL*
[660] Wu-Tang Clan, "M.E.T.H.O.D Man," *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*.
[661] Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence*, 213. Dir. Mark E. Lester, *Commando*, 1985. 20th Century Fox. Dir. George Miller, *Road Warrior*, 1985. Warner Bros.

> Klein (1971) called 'mythic violence,' the legends and stories shared by gang members about their participation in violence.[662]

In a gang setting, violence can be a pro-social activity, even when the victim of that violence is a member of the gang itself.

Twitchell's description of the bizarre is conveyed via the fantastical nature of the violence which is imagined/described:

> Yeah, torture, motherfucker, what?
>
> Torture, nigga, what?
>
> What? I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin' tie you to a fuckin' bedpost
>
> With your ass cheeks spread out and shit, right?
>
> Put a hanger on a fuckin' stove and let that shit sit there for like a half hour, take it off and stick it in your ass slow like "tsss"
>
> Yeah, I'll fuckin', yeah, I'll fuckin' lay your nuts on a fuckin' dresser, just your nuts layin' on a fuckin' dresser, and bang them shits with a spiked fuckin' bat (Blaow)
>
> Ooh wassup?
>
> I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin', pull your fuckin' tongue out your fuckin'
>
> Mouth and stab the shit with a rusty screwdriver, blaow
>
> I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin' hang you by your fuckin' dick off the fuckin' twelfth stor-story building out this motherfucker

[662] Decker & Van Winkle. *Life in the Gang,* 69.

> I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin', sew your asshole closed, and keep feedin' you, and feedin' you, and feedin' you, and feedin' you

Threats of suspension by the genitals, sodomy with a hot hanger, impaling of the tongue and extreme over-feeding are so gruesome and macabre that they veer towards parody. They sound like an unholy mix of the Spanish Inquisition and grindhouse cinema. This movie-like feel is enhanced on the track by the sound effects the performers add at the end of their lines. The "tsss" of the hot metal and the "blaow" of the impact upon tongue and testicles is almost comic.

These sound effects, in keeping with the Wu-Tang Clan's penchant for Kung-Fu films, reflect the skit's status as an entertainment which is not to be taken seriously or literally. The threats, delivered in direct address, are not about intimidation but rather imagination. The back and forth is a playful aesthetic exercise to see who can come up with the most shocking, entertaining, and gruesome form of torture.[663] This rhetorical gauntlet is thrown down at the beginning of the skit with the line, "Torture, nigga, what?" Its status as improvised word play is shown in the perpetual use of the word "fuckin'" by the performers to buy themselves time whilst they think of the next violation they are to inflict on the victim. The laughter of both performers and bystanders, coupled with the end of the skit where someone says, "Yo, roll the dice," underlines that this is a pastime that can be engaged in at the same time as playing a game.

Folklorist Roger D. Abrahams, who studied black vernacular expression saw this kind of game as a way in which young men produce and evidence their masculinity: "by creating

[663] Method Man explained this himself, see Insanul Ahmed, "Method Man Breaks Down His 25 Most Essential Songs," *Complex*, October 19, 2011, https://www.complex.com/music/2011/10/method-man-25-essential-songs/wu-tang-clan-method-man-1993.

playgrounds for playing out aggressions, he achieves a kind of masculine identity for himself and his group in a basically hostile environment.[664] This reading of the interplay as creating a kind of safe space in which aggressions can be explored without risk is important. Method Man himself hints at something similar in his recounting of how the skit came about. He says its origins were "some block shit we used to do when dudes were snapping."[665] "Snapping" here is the badinage of insulting and counterpunching, sometimes couched in "Yo Mama" jokes, that many scholars focus on when they study or analyse 'the dozens.'[666] Method Man says the torture focus was used by him and Raekwon the Chef to divert the subject away from mothers and overtly personal attacks into more abstract and neutral ground. The motivation for this was to prevent things spilling over into real world confrontation or violence:

> [A] lot of personal shit would come out and dudes would get angry behind that shit. You'd be amazed at some of the mother jokes that come up. When you do it [like the Chef and I did it], you saying the most outlandish shit in the world knowing damn well nobody gon' really do shit like that to you. But it's funny at the same time, just some of the shit niggas think of.[667]

Method Man's description of "snapping" is often brought within the compass of 'the dozens,' the name given to various forms of verbal jousting that are typified as a particularly African American cultural expression. Robin D.G. Kelley claims that misinterpretation and over-analysis of the dozens has seen them framed by sociologists as a ritual behaviour

[664] Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle* (Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, 1976), 88-96.
[665] Ahmed, "Method Man Breaks Down His 25 Most Essential Songs,"
[666] Kelley: "The emphasis on "your mama" in most interpretations of the dozens has more to do with the peculiar preoccupation of social science with the Negro family structure than anything else." Kelley, *YO mama's disfunktional!*, 34.
[667] Ahmed, "Method Man Breaks Down His 25 Most Essential Songs,"

rather than "the daily banter of many (not all) young African Americans."[668] Whatever their importance, that rap artists can take this "block shit" and turn it into a consumable, saleable, artistic product is one way by which they conform to Foucault's definition of *homo economicus* as "an entrepreneur of himself."[669]

"Brownsville, home of the brave / Put in work in the street like a slave":[670] How masculinity works.

Foucault theorizes that in the process of "bringing labor back into economic analysis" in order to make sense of and understand neoliberalism, we would need to "study work as economic conduct practiced, implemented, rationalized, and calculated by the person who works."[671] This attempt to understand the motivation of the work is expressed most simply in the question "[w]hat does working mean for the person who works?"[672] In Hip Hop lyricism working is a multifaceted and multivalent activity which provides an opportunity for rappers to display their masculine credentials and their capacity to move judiciously within the economic system. This is encapsulated in JAY-Z's mot juste: "I'm not a businessman, I'm a *business*, man."[673] In eight words JAY-Z summarises how neoliberalism ontologises work, it is no longer an activity but rather a state of being, a defining characteristic (potentially *the* characteristic) of who we are as individuals. In response to Foucault's question about the meaning of work, for the hustler-rapper, work is a central feature by which he defines himself and his self-worth. References to how hard the illegal work of the drug trade is

[668] Kelley, *YO' mama's disfunktional!,* 32.
[669] Foucault, "14th March 1979," 226.
[670] M.O.P, "Ante Up," *Warriorz*. Loud/Relativity Records. 2000.
[671] Foucault, "14 March 1979," 223.
[672] Foucault, "14 March 1979," 223.
[673] Kanye West ft. JAY-Z, "Diamonds from Sierra Leone (Remix)," *Late Registration*, 2005. Def Jam.

constitutes a proclamation of his own resilience and toughness as often as it does any kind of structural critique of the trade itself.

The notion of "putting in work" relates to the neoliberal conception of human capital and self-investment. By putting time and work into something the individual is making an investment of effort from which they will be able to reap dividends. When rappers talk about the 'work' they are also displaying another key neoliberal touchstone, the ability to evaluate and mediate risk. When 'work' is taken to mean the drugs trade they are inevitably balancing the risk of death and incarceration against profitability and when the transition is made from street to recording studio they are making a prudent decision to drastically reduce those risks. Furthermore, that the origins of many successful rap careers and narratives lie in the illegal activities of the street enables the alchemic process of turning those risky behaviours into further opportunities for capital accumulation. The risk of drug dealing is rewarded twice: first in the cash obtained from selling the product, second from turning dramatic accounts of those transactions into a cultural product and selling those in turn.

I referenced in Chapter 1 the changing demographics of the job market and the reduced opportunities for young, urban males who did not, could not or chose not to conform to mainstream norms of speech, manners and comportment. It seems ironic then that these young men who frequently disavow the employment opportunities available to them in legitimate roles, seem at such pains to evidence their work ethic, efficacy, and profitability. Highlighting the capacity for work is a way of reclaiming masculine credentials within a society which values and insists on profitability but which has created a job market which squeezes men from their traditional roles in sectors like manufacturing. As many

rappers have shown, tutelage in the rhythms and rules of the market is what matters, the actual sector or industry in which the individual works is less important. Thus, many of them have been able to do a kind of economic apprenticeship in the illegal trade of drugs and parlay the lessons learned from those experiences into successful legitimate careers in a range of industries. When rappers demonstrate how willing and capable they are at 'putting in work,' they draw attention to their status as exemplary neoliberal agents. The macular processes of neoliberalism – deregulation, outsourcing of labour and manufacturing processes, the transition to a service economy – create a job market less hospitable to working-class and minority men. As a result, they engage in the drugs trade, which is a neoliberal utopia (in an economic sense at least), a completely deregulated marketplace in which only the most calculating, driven and savvy are able to achieve lasting success and make a profit. They then internalise the lessons of that deregulated workspace and bring them to bear into a legitimate field such as the music industry. Furthermore, they not only evidence and perform neoliberal behaviours but they advocate, promote and disseminate them to legions of fans who pay to absorb the economic lessons that they offer up.[674]

As early as 1990, in his work *Beyond the War on Drugs* Steven Wisotsky claimed that the drug trade was causing a "corrosion of the work ethic." He detailed how "according to law enforcement officials and people involved in the drug trade" the cocaine trade in NYC had "become so lucrative and widespread that many in the middle class with comfortable careers had been drawn into its illegal operations." Professionals including "lawyers, doctors, nurses, police officers and teachers" had all become susceptible to the lures of the drug trade, both as a result of its high profit potential and often as a result of needing to

[674] See Gilroy on 50 Cent & Robert Greene in "We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under . . .", 31.

fund personal drug use.[675] He augments his research with a quote from the minutes of a 1981 senate sub-committee on 'Illegal Narcotics Profits': "The work ethic of those citizens who are struggling to make an honest living can only be undermined by the general awareness of an ostentatious display of ill-gotten gains."[676]

Lester Spence argues that much neoliberal social policy is cultivated with the express intention of replacing welfare with work, by association "rewarding work" and punishing those who do not work. He identifies how the "growth of the prison-industrial complex fits here, as do the various programs that were designed to ensure that the working poor eligible for benefits were actually working."[677] This valorisation of work is frequently disseminated in Hip-Hop lyrics, where it not only serves to mark the individual out as an entrepreneur willing to hustle for their rewards, it also provides the ballast for the protectionist attitudes towards their hard-won possessions. As we saw in the previous chapter with regards to notions of competition and substitutability, rappers commonly conceptualise their position like The Game does on "Rollin'" (2012): "I work for mine, you can't take that from me."[678]

Town or city, I'm rollin' like Frank Nitti, I'm rich and pretty:[679]The mob as masculine space.

One of the most notable and interesting manifestations of masculinity in New York Hip Hop of this period is the fixation upon Italian American mob imagery. Tales of organised criminal

[675] Steven Wisotsky, *Beyond the War on Drugs: Overcoming a Failed Public Policy* (New York: Prometheus Books. 1990), 144.
[676] *Illegal Narcotics Profits: Hearings Before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs*, 96th Cong. 1st Sess., 1981, 50.
[677] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness,* Loc 244.
[678] The Game, "Rollin'," *Sunday Service*, 2012. Mixtape, no label.
[679] Kool G Rap, "It's a Shame," *4, 5, 6*, 1995. Cold Chillin' Records.

activity which leans on or employs the imagery and styles of 'The Mob' is often referred to as Mafioso rap. Kool G Rap was one of the first exponents of the subgenre and his references to figures like Frank Nitti became a staple of New York rap from the late 80s through the 1990s. Wu-Tang Clan member Raekwon's solo album *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* (*OB4CL)* (1995), was the driving force for a large number of artists to begin incorporating these kinds of themes into their rhymes.[680] Raekwon said that in making the album he went "straight up into a drug zone vibe," adding that it drew on his own experiences and had strong autobiographical themes: "It was almost like a tablet of my life, where I wanted to go, and all the shit I seen."[681] The album peaked at #4 in the *Billboard* chart on its opening week and was a resounding commercial success.[682] As Wu-Tang founder The RZA put it: "[w]hen Raekwon came on with *Cuban Linx*, he started everyone in hip-hop fiending for that mafia shit."[683] The Wu-Tang Clan themselves took on new names as the "Wu-Gambinos" for their second album *Wu-Tang Forever* (1997).[684] The adoption of these themes came at a time when New York rappers were trying to regain control of the stylistic thrust of Hip Hop music from West Coast artists like Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg who had begun to dominate with their laconic G-funk rhythms.

Mafioso rap was an important innovation because it was a particularly resonant depiction of criminality for New York performers and audiences. Where Los Angeles had gang banging and low-riders, New York had the mob and fedoras. Rappers likening

[680] "Gangsta Rap," *Hip Hop Music History*, accessed 25 July, 2021, http://www.hiphopmusichistory.com/gangsta-rap/.
[681] XXL Staff, "Raekwon: The Making of Only Built 4 Cuban Linx," *XXL,* August 1, 2010, https://www.xxlmag.com/raekwon-the-making-of-only-built-for-cuban-linx/.
[682] "TOP ALBUM SALES The week of August 19, 1995," *Billboard*, accessed August 25, 2021, https://www.billboard.com/charts/top-album-sales/1995-08-19.
[683] RZA. *The Wu-Tang Manual* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 101.
[684] Loud Records.

themselves to totemic figures of organised crime who were also cultural touchstones was a lyrical point of difference which was localised enough to feel authentic. The fact that many of the crime bosses who were referenced were from a bygone age was another way of asserting primacy over the arriviste gangbanging of LA. When Big L claimed on his song "MVP" (1995) that he would "run up like Machine Gun Kelly with a black skully," he was evoking the reputation of an infamous American criminal.[685] This kind of signifying, evoking a famous but deceased bootlegger and gangster is a standard process and one which Ska pioneer Prince Buster was using as early as the 1960s on his cut "Al Capone."[686] The impact of Jamaican performers, DJs and musical styles within Hip Hop is well documented.[687] It is important to note that a Jamaican MC chose a Prohibition-era Chicago gangster to impersonate as part of his "rude boy" posturing. Figures like Capone, Kelly and even more recent examples like Scarface, are often utilized in a similar manner to black folk heroes by rappers and MCs within Hip Hop. They become an easily understandable and concise way for performers to allude to their criminal capacities.

It is noteworthy that many of the infamous criminal figures whom rappers liken themselves to are Italian-American. References to black crime bosses such as Bumpy Johnson exist but it is more common to find lyrics which namecheck the likes of Al Capone or John Gotti.[688] The ever-present rap figure of Scarface is based on Al Capone, inspiration

[685] Big L, *Lifestylez ov da Poor & Dangerous*. 1995. Columbia.
[686] Russel A Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 37-40.
[687] See Hebdige "Rap and Hip-Hop: The New York Connection," in *That's The Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, 256-267.
[688] References to Bumpy Johnson can be found on: Nas & Ruc, "Real Niggas," *QB's Finest*, Ill Will Records, 2000; DMX ft. JAY-Z & The Lox, "Blackout," *Flesh of My Flesh, Blood of My Blood*, Def Jam, 1998; Shyne, "Commission," *Shyne* Bad Boy Records, 2000.

for the classic gangster movie *Scarface* (1932).[689] The motivations for this cross-racial self-identification are varied and nuanced. One fundamental reason that lyricists use the names of notorious criminal figures is because they are popular or well known. Like most Americans, the MCs writing these rhymes are keen consumers of pop culture, particularly film and television. Calling out to or aligning oneself with a renowned gangster like Scarface or Capone not only evidences the writer's credentials but also strikes a chord with a shared point of cultural knowledge. Kenneth Clark, writing in 1965, highlighted the role of "mass media" in mooring "the ghetto" to American culture:

> Yet the ghetto is not totally isolated. The mass media – radio, television, moving pictures, magazines, and the press – penetrate, indeed, invade the ghetto in continuous and inevitable communication, largely one-way, and project the values and aspirations, the manners and the style of the larger white-dominated society.[690]

If Hip Hop is a way by which the ghetto speaks back to "the larger white-dominated society," then speakers self-identifying with the outlaws and infamous villains of that society is logical.[691]

The fixation on mob themes highlights the appreciation Hip Hop musicians have for gangster cinema and highlights their preference for the stylings of Italian American

[689] Lawrence Grobel. "Reflections on Scarface," *Empire*, September 5, 2011, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/reflections-scarface/.
[690] Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 12. For a more academic history of this relationship between African Americans and consumerism see Neary, "Buying the Dream: Identity, Authenticity, and Mass Consumption in Black America," 116–22.
[691] This is an overly reductive explanation of what Hip Hop is/does, but it strikes at the core rhetorical power of Hip Hop lyricism, summarised by Ice Cube on N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police"; "Fuck the police comin' straight from the underground / A Young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown." *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless, 1988.

organised crime rather than African American illegal enterprise.[692] Part of the fixation with film is that it bestows a permanence upon a narrative, particularly a rags to riches outlaw story such as *Scarface*. The RZA makes telling comments in this regard when discussing two key features of his production style: the movie sample and the skit. Grant 'Big Un' Williams recorded some of the interlude on *OB4CL*'s "Ice Water" (1995); Un was sentenced to life in prison later that year and ultimately served 25 years, being released in 2019. The RZA, reflecting on this process said:

> Big Un—he's in jail for life, a thorough-ass nigga, a real street nigga. We let him do the talking [between the second and third verses]. He confirmed Ghost and Rae's association from the streets. He was from Stapleton with Ghost.... So, he's immortalized now. Music and film, it keeps you there forever.[693]

This concept of immortalization through verse and the recording process reinforces why rappers are so protective of their form. If your creative works are the way by which you establish your legacy, or record and preserve the stories and characters of your life, then they become even more valuable than merely an avenue to make money. Also reflected in the quote is the calculated notion of confirming one's bona fides by having a "real street nigga" appear on the track.

Once again we see recourse to the notion of the "real," with authenticity being a privileged or desirable quality. That 'Big Un' is considered "thorough," reflects his expertise in the street, he is respected enough that his presence can confirm the associated street

[692] "NWA members have even admitted that some of their recent songs were not representations of reality "in the hood" but inspired by popular films like Innocent Man starring Tom Selleck, and Tango and Cash." Kelley, *YO' mama's disfunktional!,* 39.
[693] "Raekwon: The Making of Only Built 4 Cuban Linx."

status of the rappers on the record. This shows how masculinity is a kind of performance which trades on signifiers and symbols which are associated with manliness. That the RZA could consciously use "a real street nigga" on the song to this end shows that masculine kudos or status is consciously constructed and performed, as much as it is observed or demonstrated in lyrics. This is the same process at work when performers invoke notable pop-culture gangsters in their songs, by allying themselves to a known, respected or feared figure from the criminal underworld they proclaim their associated status as tough, calculating or criminal.

I'm like Gambino, the slick head honcho:[694]The Mafia don as totem.

Given the impact of films and cinema on the sensibilities of the young men who would go on to become New York Hip Hop's tastemakers, the privileging of mafia themes is understandable. Whether they were films like *The Godfather* released in the early 1970s that had already become classics or more recent features such as *Goodfellas* (1990) the compelling and epic cinematography of directors like Coppola, Scorsese, de Palma, or Sergio Leone had created a cultural reservoir from which 1990s New York Hip Hop artists were able and willing to draw from.[695] RZA explains that, much like Hip Hop, such films offer particular kind of documentary:

> Basically, if it's a crime movie, a nigga wants to see it. It's not that they're all necessarily great movies, but they reflect what we see around us in a way you don't

[694] Gang Starr, "Speak Ya Clout," *Hard to Earn*, 1994, Chrysalis Records.
[695] Oliver Lunn, "10 Great Mafia Films," *BFI*, January 5, 2017, https://www.bfi.org.uk/lists/10-great-mafia-films.

> see in other films. Some films hold that essence, they dramatize realities, shit that you see played out in the street game every day.[696]

Raekwon was inspired by Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) to give the Wu-Tang members new aliases on the track "Wu-Gambinos."[697] Critically acclaimed films about black gangsters or drug dealers – such as *Menace II Society* (1993), *New Jack City* (1991) and *Fresh* (1994) – were only beginning to be released with regularity in the early 1990s.[698] Some of these films featured Hip Hop on their soundtracks as well as rappers in acting roles, and there was significant crossover between their stories and those of Hip Hop's narratives of hustling and drug dealing. However, their novelty and similarity to street rap meant they were always less likely to be utilized for sampling or inspiration than older, more resonant art. For those performers who wanted to invoke black movies, the most available source was the Blaxploitation genre, but its gaudy and highly sexualised style was more suited to being taken up (as it was enthusiastically) by Hip Hop's erstwhile pimps than its ambitious hustlers. Things might have been different if R&B singer Lloyd Price's film *The Ripoff* (1970) had been released. Set on the streets of New York, the film starred what Price called "real, practicing gangsters" playing themselves with Frank Lucas as "the villain romantic lead." As Lucas puts it, it was "like *Shaft* before *Shaft*."[699] Journalist Mark Jacobson called it "the Great Lost Film of the blaxploitation genre." The notion of gangsters producing art would surely have appealed to the likes of the Wu-Tang Clan, especially with the ever-quotable Lucas

[696] RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual,* 100.
[697] "Raekwon: The Making of Only Built 4 Cuban Linx."
[698] Directors, in order, Albert Hughes & Allen Hughes; Mario Van Peebles; Boaz Yakin.
[699] Mark Jacobson, "The Return of Superfly," *New York Magazine*, Aug 14th, 2000. https://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/3649/.

capable of offering up gems such as "You see, I never went to school even for a day, but I got a PhD in street."[700]

Ultimately, a film about Lucas' life, *American Gangster* (2007) was made with an accompanying soundtrack, but in the 1990s it was Italian American organised crime which dominated Hip Hop's aesthetic.[701] Scholars Jessica Elliot and Mikey Hess offer one simple explanation for this process that "the figure of the Mafia don carries more wealth than the figure of the street thug."[702] This argument is persuasive in one respect: with money and power being signifiers of masculine strength the wealthier and more powerful a figure that rappers can liken themselves to, the more they assert their pre-eminence. From a business perspective, the image of the Mafia don is often seen as being in some way synonymous with his organisation. Not only a patriarch, but also a dispenser of discipline, deviser of strategy and a businessman with an authoritarian voice, the 'don' figure stands as an incarnation of the various competing forces which make up the common conception of masculinity in Hip Hop lyrics. Once we consider his status as someone involved in illegal operations but who is able to move freely in polite society, often known to be a criminal but not apprehended or charged, then the appeal to the hustler/rapper figure is obvious.[703] On the first line of the first verse of "Ice Water" Ghostface Killah invites the audience to "Check out the rap kingpin, the black Jesus."[704] On the track's third verse Raekwon details the low-level violence and drug dealing that they were formerly involved in, a back-to-front story of

[700] Frank Lucas, qtd in 'The Return of Superfly.'
[701] Dir. Ridley Scott. *American Gangster*, 2007, Universal Pictures. For a detailed and illuminating study of JAY-Z's accompanying album see Rambsy, Kenton. "Close-Up: Hip-Hop Cinema: Jay Z's American Gangster," *Black Camera: the Newsletter of the Black Film Center/Archives*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2017, 255–66.
[702] Hess and Elliot, "Wu-Tang Clan," *Icons of Hip Hop,* Mikey Hess ed., 377 – 9.
[703] Even figures who ultimately met inglorious ends, such as John Gotti, are celebrated in rap lyrics, see Mobb Deep, "Hell on Earth (Front Lines)," *Hell on Earth*, Loud Records, 1996.
[704] Once again this reinforces the dichotomy, also highlighted by JAY-Z and Biggie Smalls that sports and entertainment offer the most attainable avenues for advancement to urban black youth.

rising through the ranks. He also takes a shot at the Notorious B.I.G., the self-styled 'King of New York' (another movie reference) claiming they had "beef" over cocaine sales and that Biggie tried to blind him with bleach as a result.

As to be expected given the title, "Wu-Gambinos" (1995) from *OB4CL* crystallizes many of the lessons that rap lyrics absorb and recapitulate from mob tales and Mafia films. The titular joining together of the Wu-Tang Clan and the 'Gambinos' is intended to highlight that the Wu-Tang Clan are a crime family in the same vein. The Gambinos are a historic and storied La Cosa Nostra family, involved in the famous 1970s 'Pizza Connection' case, with John Gotti their most infamous boss.[705] Despite their proclamations, some under oath, that there was a ban on La Cosa Nostra members selling drugs, the Gambino family had connections to black drug dealers as far back as Frank Matthews in the early 1960s.[706] There is a potential site of conflict here between the impulse of the hustler and the desire to align oneself aesthetically with the mob as the Mafia does not sit neatly with neoliberal enterprise. Whilst its activities may involve the circumvention of law and the use of violence to ensure discipline and profitability, its protectionist practices and attempts to establish a monopoly are antithetical to the notion of free market capitalism and competition. Likewise, the strict codes of behaviour which make up the mafia mythos and purport to govern how members lead their lives restrict the greatest virtue of neoliberal subjectivity: choice. The conception of an imposed or chosen "family" similarly pushes back against the neoliberal dissolution of social bonds.

[705] Robert J Kelly, *The Upperworld and the Underworld: Case Studies of Racketeering and Business Infiltrations in the United States* (New York: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers, 1999) 22, 119 – 134.
[706] Kelly, *The Upperworld and the Underworld,* 127 & Schatzberg and Kelly, *African American Organized Crime,* 41.

In Roberto Saviano's best-selling book *Gomorrah* (2006) he details how the traditional Neapolitan organised crime families have, at the turn of the millennium, been outmanoeuvred and usurped by newer, leaner neoliberal enterprises.[707] These are the kinds of "young kamikazes" that JAY-Z spoke about when recounting a similar process inherent in the crack cocaine explosion. Developments in law enforcement and prosecution have weakened the once solidly monolithic structure of La Cosa Nostra. RICO statutes and the increased penalties that they enable, even for relatively minimal involvement in conspiracy, have tested the venerated notions of loyalty and 'omerta' to its limits. Former Gambino boss John Gotti was sentenced to life without parole following the testimony of his underboss Salvatore Gravano who negotiated his own prison term down from life to five years by giving evidence.[708] These highly public trials have conferred important lessons to those watching them, furthering the representation of organised crime as cut throat and untrusting. Big L states his ability to keep his counsel on the posthumously released "Uptown Reps" (2010): "I'm not a soprano like that italiano sammy gravano / Mc's be gettin knocked off like Paulie Castellano."[709]

"In the end, the most important value you take away from crime movies and from mafia tales is loyalty." – The RZA[710]

When the Wu-Tang Clan and many other rappers were writing their rhymes in the early to mid-1990s the image of the traditional crime family was still a solid and relatively

[707] Saviano, *Gomorrah*.
[708] Kelly, *Encyclopedia of Organized Crime in the United States,* xii – xiii.
[709] Big L, "Uptown Reps," *Return of the Devil's Son.*
[710] RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 102.

uncontested one. Family connections are the bonds which have always underpinned the intricate and multi-layered structure of Italian American organised crime. As Robert J. Kelly wrote when discussing the Gambino family involvement in The Pizza Connection: "Sicillian family ties, also tightly interwoven, have always been the Mafia's most priceless asset."[711] The Wu-Tang Clan are keen to foreground this sense of family on "Wu-Gambinos," bookending the track with spoken word references to La Cosa Nostra.[712] The intro is a frenetic collage of sounds. Excerpts of dialogue from the John Woo film *The Killer* (1989) are played over the top of various Wu-Tang Clan members chatting and playfully cussing each other out. This gives the impression of watching the aforementioned film in someone's lounge, a feeling emphasised when Raekwon tells someone to take their feet off of his mother's glass coffee table. This relaxed, communal atmosphere is overlaid further with Ghostface Killah and Method Man loudly namechecking Wu-Tang members with their new assumed monikers: Bobby Steels, Noodles, Rollie Fingers, Johnny Blaze, Lou Diamonds and Tony Starks. These names have a reverb or echo effect added to them which makes them sound as if announced over a microphone or a public address system, like the individuals are about to be welcomed to the stage. As well as these names, Ghostface says to the assembled crew, "Let's cut the pie five ways," and this is how the track is formatted with each lyricist taking one of the five verses each.

This collaborative feeling is further underscored by a couplet that Method Man raps in both the chorus and the mid-song interlude: "Wu roll together as one / I call my brother son 'cause he shine like one." Across the song's quintet of verses, each of the rappers offers their own play on why they as individuals and the Clan as a whole are supreme amongst

[711] Kelly, *The Upperworld and the Underworld,* 123.
[712] "La Cosa Nostra" on the intro and the shouted "Cosa, Cosa" on the outro.

rappers, criminals, and men. Method Man, fulfilling his role as the 'pretty boy' of the group, talks about how he eschews sex with women who may give him an STI: "Fuck a nigga hottie, that ho pussy probably / Burn like the deserts of Mogabi, for real."[713] Using his ability to assess and quantify risk, he avoids the potential for debilitating or uncomfortable sexual illness. In doing so, he also recapitulates a common trope in Hip Hop of the MC disparaging a sexually promiscuous woman.[714] This process is constantly utilised by MCs in relation to their status as men; they frequently disparage others for a perceived deficiency as a way to define themselves and their masculine ideals.

"Hey yo once a crack head, always a tack head / You have no craftibility all that shit you talk is dead:"[715] The masculine self and the unmasculine other.

Rappers frequently define themselves in relation to others. Sometimes that is the positive act of likening themselves to a totemic figure of organised crime, at other times they disavow other members of society and render them subjects of scorn and vilification. Situated as many of these songs are against the backdrop of the trade in crack cocaine, one regularly disparaged archetype is that of the "crackhead." As the lines from Keith Murray quoted above show, the common depiction of the crackhead is as a figure who is irredeemably incapacitated by their substance dependency. In contrast to the power of the masculine male voice documented above in this chapter, everything that the crackhead says "is dead." This prefigures a kind of social marginalization or social death whereby the

[713] The Mogabi desert is a fictional location from the animated Disney TV series *TaleSpin*. See https://talespin.fandom.com/wiki/Mogabi_Desert
[714] *The Hip Hop Wars* p.174
[715] Busta Rhymes ft. Keith Murray, "Flipmode Squad Meets Def Squad," *The Coming*, Elektra Records, 1996.

individual who uses crack uncontrollably is seen as no longer a constituent part of society, thus evoking the image of a "circle of lost souls" referenced in Chapter 3 on violence and the remodelling of Times Square.

In their work "The Stigmatized Image of the Crack head," Furst, Johnson, Dunlap & Curtis suggest that this disavowal is intrinsic in the nomenclature chosen to describe people addicted to crack cocaine:

> The drug subculture's preoccupation with casting people in a discreditable mold can be traced to use of the term 'head,' which denotes a change in consciousness owing to illicit drug use.[716]

This is the kind of stigma which Murray evokes in his lyrics about absent "craftibility," presumably a synonym for ingenuity, wit, and intelligence. Not only do crackheads lack an all-important voice within Hip-Hop lyrics, they are also maligned for their inability to perform acts of violence; a key masculine signifier. LL Cool J on "The Ripper Strikes Back" (1998), disses fellow rapper Canibus by saying "Duct-taped your little bitch-ass for fronting / Your four-eleven crackhead ass ain't hurting nothing."[717] As a result of their inability to advocate and retaliate, crackheads become an easy target within the predatory space of the ghetto, as Mobb Deep articulate:

> The street life ain't nothing to play with, no jokes, no games, kid
>
> For years, I been doing the same shit

[716] R. Terry Furst , Bruce D.Johnson , Eloise Dunlap & Richard Curtis, "The Stigmatized Image of the ''Crack head'': a sociocultural exploration of a barrier to cocaine smoking among a cohort of youth in New York City," *Deviant Behavior*, 20:2, 1999, 162.
[717] Unreleased.

Just, drinking liquor, doing bids

Extorting crack heads, and sticking up the stick-up kids[718]

Their repeated experiences in prison – "doing bids" – mark them out as experts, in the same mold as the Wu-Tang associated "Big Un," and as a result they target those beneath them in the food chain, crack heads and stick-up kids.

Whereas Mobb Deep warn there are "no jokes" in the street life, Nas depicts the drug addicted as tragi-comic figures on "N.Y. State of Mind" (1994), the audience finds him: "Laughin' at base-heads, tryna sell some broken amps." The hustler rapper finds comedy in the image of an unsuccessful hustle(r). This depiction as a figure of fun is another step towards diminishing the humanity of the abstract figure labelled with the depersonalised and dehumanized pejorative of "crackhead." Big L on "Devil's Son" (2010) goes even further than Nas:

Word, Big L

The motherfuckin' Devil's Son is definitely in effect

Givin' a shout-out to all the murderers, thieves

Armed robbers, serial killers, psychos, lunatics

Crackheads, mental patients, mental retards

And a special special shout-out to all the niggas with AIDS

Peace![719]

[718] Mobb Deep, "Give Up the Goods (Just Step.)"
[719] Big L, "Devil's Son," *The Return of the Devil's Son*.

This litany of undesirables, with its utilization of insensitive and stigmatizing language, lays bare the kind of social exclusion which mainstream society undertakes in order to preserve its sense of propriety and orderliness. In neoliberal terms, the shared characteristic of all of these labels is that they suggest an inability to be governed, either by the self, or by the norms of behaviour which society requires.

The neoliberal self is defined by its capacity for self-governance. This is the crux of what Spence terms the difference between "subjection" – the ability to self-govern – and "subjectivity," an inability to self-govern. Those experiencing subjection govern themselves via the adoption of neoliberal behaviours, those experiencing subjectivity have neoliberalizing forces visited upon them. Big L's shoutout to "all the niggas with AIDS," is noteworthy here. In "The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics," Spence highlights the public health response to AIDS as a technology:

> In this way the HIV=AIDS issue is not treated as a structural issue, not for instance a matter of the lack of access to drug treatment, the lack of access to clean needles, the lack of universal health care, but rather is treated as an issue of people simply not making the proper choices about their own bodies. People become consumers, and consumption is tied to ''healthy choices.''[720]

We see a similar process with the representation of crack users within Hip-Hop. They are not represented as people in need of help, but rather people without agency, without a voice and without dignity. As explained earlier, intrinsic within this process is a process of

[720] Spence, "The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics," 151.

self-endorsement from the rappers who do have all of those things absent from the crackhead.

The image of the crack user as unable to self-govern was complicated by the status of many drug sellers as occasional, or even habitual users. As many as 90 percent of crack dealers were also crack cocaine users.[721] The distinction between those who could, and could not self-govern with regards to drugs use frequently dictated who made money from the trade:

> Low-level distributors were most often paid in crack, which they subsequently consumed. In contrast, the dealer and crew boss who limited or controlled their personal use brought in "crazy money," often several hundred to over one thousand dollars every day.[722]

Spence argues that rap acts "reproduce neoliberalism through narrative, through representation, through aesthetics."[723] I would argue that they simultaneously reproduce their conceptions of masculinity via a similar process. Through their depictions of crackheads as fundamentality unable to self-govern, rappers reproduced the fears of drug use outlined by President Reagan in his "Speech to the Nation on the Campaign Against Drug Abuse."[724] The inference being that someone who lacks self-discipline also lacks the discipline required to work and therefore to be a productive member of society. By contrast, they depict themselves as defined by their work and the antithesis to the unstable and dependent drug addict. If rappers saw crackheads as somehow less than human, they

[721] Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap, "The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs", 179.
[722] (Williams 1989) Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap, "The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs", 179.
[723] Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 15-16.
[724] "Regular drug use is even higher among the age group 18 to 25—most likely just entering the workforce." Ronald Reagan, "September 14, 1986: Speech to the Nation on the Campaign Against Drug Abuse."

occasionally depicted themselves as above or beyond human by dint of their exemplariness within the neoliberal system, packaged in the demotic figure of the hustler.

"Ask Tina, love ain't got shit to do, with me and you / Or the .44 under the pillow:" the hustlers' relationship to each other.[725]

As documented above, male rappers frequently evidence and quantify their masculinity by proclaiming their connection with a pro-masculine idol, or by stating their rejection of a figure perceived to be unmasculine. Broadly speaking the two poles of this scale are defined in the neoliberal sense by subjectivity at the positive end, and subjection at the negative end. We might then expect for femininity to be an immediate disqualifier from being a 'hustler,' but the mid-1990s saw two female MCs in particular, Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, make a big impact on the New York rap scene.[726] Writing in *Essence* magazine in 1997, Hip-Hop scholar Joan Morgan described them as "chart-sistas with the lyrical personas of stay-high juvenile delinquents and hypersexed (albeit couture-clad) hoochie mamas."[727] Whilst hardly enthusiastic about all of their content, Morgan rejected the idea that these sorts of act were "Svengali creations of male producers with dollar-bill signs in their eyes." Instead, she identified these female rappers as "creatures of their own design who exercise the same creative rights as their male counterparts-coupling highly materialistic, violent and lewd personas with deliciously infectious rhythms and rhymes."

[725] Lil' Kim, "Spend a Little Doe," *Hardcore*.
[726] They were not the only successful female MCs of this period but are the two whose style and content is most in keeping with the focus of this thesis, they also had connections, both professional and personal to major male stars such as JAY-Z and Notorious BIG. See Keyes, Cheryl L. "Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 113, no. 449, 2000, p. 263.
[727] Morgan, Joan. "The Bad Girls of Hip-Hop." *Essence*, 03, 1997, 76-77.

The article also claims that the indecorous actions and attitudes depicted in their lyrics are merely a reflection of the wider society at large:

> The punanny-for-sale materialism that dominates Lil' Kim's album, for example, is rampant among some young females. Sex has become the bartering chip many women use to gain protection, wealth and power. In the Black community, where women are given little access to all of the above, "trickin' " can become a way of leveling the playing field.

The album in question is *Hard Core*, released in 1996, which featured tracks with titles such as "Drugs," "Queen Bitch," "Scheamin'" and "Take It!" Kim's lyrics were filled with the same braggadocio, sexual content and street talk pertaining to the trade in drugs as many of her male contemporaries. This equality of lyrical content was further endorsed by Chairman Mao in *Vibe* magazine. Writing in 1998 he stated "the modern female rap pinup could be just as sexually blunt and authoritative as any male counterpart."[728] Lil' Kim features – alongside other star MCs – on the edition's cover, and Chairman Mao cites the figures, including Method Man, L.L. Cool J and Lauryn Hill as people respected "for their exceptional talents, shrewd business savvy, and overflowing personality."[729] We can see from this that some female MCs were clearly considered the equals of, and among the, biggest stars within Hip-Hop culture in the mid-1990s.[730] As will be seen below via a close reading of their duet "Another," Biggie and Lil' Kim espouse lyrics which share significant overlap in their attitudes towards the self, business and relationships. Morgan offers the opinion that

[728] Chairman Mao, "Bow Down," *Vibe*. February 1998, Vol 6, Number 1. p.57
[729] *Vibe* Feb. 1998 p.59.
[730] Kim herself offered this opinion in 1996: "I love every female rapper who's out and has been out because they're showing the men and showing the public right now that we can do the same things that y'all men can do and maybe even better! Some of us are selling more records than men." Greaves, Mclean. "Momma Superior," *The Source*, November 1996, 68.

"contrary to popular belief, absence of the Y chromosome does not guarantee women immunity from societal influences."[731] Her comments on the "bartering chip" of sex suggest a not dissimilar process to that of the male hustler mindset; a surveying of inadequate opportunities and an internalisation of neoliberal ideas – self-reliance, adaptability, disregard of taboo – which leads to a non-traditional form of business which allows the individual to transform their circumstances. The verb "trickin'" is commonly used to refer to prostitution but there are other ways in which the body is used to gain favour, money and power without the explicit trade of sex for cash. Foxy Brown, for example, when rapping "Brace yourself as I ride on top," is not engaging in a direct act with her listenership but is utilising her sexual appeal – often by employing shock factor or transgressing taboos – to increase her sales.[732]

In her article "Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence: The case of women's rap," (2015) Valerie Chepp clearly and persuasively argues that Kim and Brown constituted the "third wave of women's rap."[733] This is characterised as being "even more sexually explicit, provocative, irreverent, and raunchy" than that which had come before it. In broad terms, this third wave sits within a longer lineage of black women's "efforts to combat a racist and sexist America" that began with what Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham called the "politics of respectability." This respectability privileged bourgeois, white, patriarchal ideals. It was resisted by other black women, such as blues musicians, who utilized a strategy of irreverence to portray and promote "depictions of an agentic, desiring and vocal black female sexuality." Kim and Brown are more in keeping with the approach of

[731] Morgan, "The Bad Girls of Hip-Hop," 76.
[732] Foxy Brown ft. JAY-Z, "I'll Be," *Ill Na Na*, Def Jam. 1996.
[733] "Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence: The case of women's rap." *Feminist Theory*, 16(2), 207–226.

female blues musicians. Their irreverence is what Chairman Mao was referring to when he said they could be "just as sexually blunt and authoritative" as male contemporaries.[734] This capacity to be "just as X" as male MCs forms part of a complex and layered process by which these female performers embrace both their feminine agency – the female body, feminine sexuality, the reflected power of being desired sexually by men – and also utilize traditional signifiers of masculinity to form a hybrid authenticity which both achieves equality with male MCs and simultaneously foregrounds and highlights their status as women.

In this way they combine both respectability (by asserting power and supremacy) and irreverence (they disregard outdated social norms around sex) as well as masculinity and femininity. Thus, they demonstrate a rarified capacity for the desirable neoliberal quality of adaptability, transgressing traditional codes of behaviour and synthesizing what Chepp calls a "third way." This language is mimetic of that used to describe the political style of skilful contemporary politicians, President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair, who were said to have synthesized a third way in their respective electoral campaigns.[735] Journalist George Monbiot claims that Clinton and Blair essentially "triangulated" their politics by bridging the gap between the traditional beliefs of their parties and the beliefs of their opponents. Chepp says of the female MCs, that by claiming "both hyper-femininity and hip-hop masculinity, Kim and Foxy open up possibilities for different models of black womanhood and, specifically, black female masculinity." I would argue that Kim and Brown are demonstrating their capacity for subjectivity by performing this complex and nuanced

[734] This equality of disruption is not confined only to sex, in an interview to promote her debut album Lil' Kim tells *The Source* that the R&B singer (and former partner of Biggie Smalls) Faith Evans tried "to run up in the studio on me and she didn't succeed. […] The tables turned and I ended up getting her." Greaves, "Momma Superior," 66.

[735] Monbiot, George. "Neoliberalism: the deep story that lies beneath Donald Trump's triumph." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/14/neoliberalsim-donald-trump-george-monbiot Web. Accessed 18/11/2016.

performative dance. They utilize their own bodies as sources of capital accumulation, whilst simultaneously performing the learned behaviours of gangsta rap – lyrical violence, conspicuous consumption and so on – to add realism and believability to their acts. They demonstrate plasticity and adaptability in their desire to be both perceived as both masculine and feminine, a performative avenue closed to male performers who fear any suggestion that they would be seen as feminine. It appears then that some female MCs were indeed as capable as their male counterparts of successfully parlaying their experiences into commercial success. The next section will undertake a close analysis of the Notorious B.I.G's song "Another," to attempt to understand how male and female hustlers relate to each other when placed in direct competition.

"My nigga's like, fuck that bitch, go play:" Biggie vs Kim

Following a spoken word intro consisting of a repetitive back and forth argument between the two performers – "You wasn't sayin' that when you was suckin' my dick / You wasn't sayin that when you was eatin' my pussy" – Biggie launches into a badly sung refrain which sets the tone for the rest of the track:

> What do ya do when yo' bitch is untrue
>
> You cut the hooker off and find someone new
>
> I need another bitch (Another bitch), in my life.

This lament, sung so tunelessly as to sound almost mocking, is reminiscent of some of the ballad type songs that are referenced in Biggie's later lines.[736] It establishes the crux of the record, an angry romantic tension between the sexes – indicated by the epithets of hooker and bitch – and of dishonesty, unfaithfulness and (attempted or refused) resolution. The main verse begins addressed to the woman in question – subsequently voiced by Lil Kim – with an explanation of what has happened, for the benefit of the listener:

> Uh-huh, uhh, uhh
>
> I know he don't treat you like I treat you
>
> Time to explain your game is see-through
>
> Sex is lethal, I ain't gon' lie
>
> Means to get ya back, I ain't gon' try
>
> Like this y'all, my girl sucked another nigga dick, y'all
>
> Light skinned with the chromed out six, y'all
>
> Thought they was creepin', took trips to V-A every third weekend
>
> While you was sleepin', he hit you on the box
>
> Sixty-nine code non-stop

The first thing to note is the description of sex as "lethal," a double entendre that engages with the power and allure of violence as well as with the concept of "le petit mort" and the conflation of orgasms and death. Sex with Kim is lethal, ergo Biggie 'dies' every time. This

[736] "Now I'm like Brandy, Sittin' in My Room / Pissy drunk listenin' to Stylistics tunes / Or the O'Jays , thinkin' 'bout the old days."

sexual praise is undercut on the next line when he states that he won't try to get Kim back. The same formula is employed in the two lines preceding "sex is lethal," where Biggie starts with what sounds like an affectionate reminder of how good they are together but immediately follows that with "your game is see-through," telling Kim that he is aware of her infidelity. Through the invocation of lethality, and the description of "game" we see Biggie utilising some of the street lexicon around the drug trade to navigate this painful romantic experience. This is further exemplified by the final two lines quoted above which reference the use of a pager to orchestrate the affair. We saw in "Things Done Changed" how Biggie linked the invention and use of the pager to the evolving drug markets and their impact on surrounding neighbourhoods. Here, while Kim is sleeping – a state of vulnerability and the total absence of vigilance – Biggie, awake, has his eyes opened to what is going on between his partner and this man who is "Light skinned with the chromed out six."[737] This description calls back to another track from *Ready to Die*, an interlude called "Fuck Me" in which Big and Kim have sexual intercourse and she calls him a "black greasy muthafucka." It also appears elsewhere within "Another" when Kim refers to the skin of a woman Biggie has cheated on her with.[738] There is not sufficient space here to properly expand on the subject of colorism but it is important to acknowledge its presence within the lyrics, particularly given Kim's own position as a focal point for debates around colorism within the Hip-Hop community.[739]

[737] Representations of sleep as a vulnerable state have been highlighted within this thesis in Nas' 'N.Y. State of Mind;' GZA's 'Gold;' JAY-Z's 'Reasonable Doubt' and Notorious BIG's 'Things Done Changed.'
[738] For a detailed explication of colorism see Traci Baxley, "Taking Off the Rose-Colored Glasses: Exposing Colorism through Counter Narratives" and VaNatta S. Ford "Color Blocked: a Rhetorical Analysis of Colorism and Its Impact on Rap Lyrics in Hip Hop Music from 2005 to 2010."
[739] Patience Zalanga, "Lil' Kim shouldn't be blamed for her new, whiter, look," *The Guardian*, 27th April 2016.

As the verse progresses, the audience learns that Biggie had practical, necessary reasons for maintaining his relationship with Kim. The connection between this and the trade or 'game' of dealing drugs is made explicit:

Shoulda left ya then, but my heart said not

You knew too much, the relationship grew too much

You knew about the crack vials, means to be trial

Where I hid dough under the bathroom tile

The listener is told that Kim knows too much about Biggie's business for him to burn bridges with her.[740] This plays heavily on the image of a detached, calculating masculinity, exemplified by the hustler archetype, which is recapitulated endlessly within Hip-Hop lyricism. Maintaining a relationship with an adulterous partner is not a sign of weakness but a form of self-preservation, a way to stay in the game, rather than risk exposure to street rivals or police attention should the ex-lover reveal your secrets. The phrase "but my heart said not" casts doubt on the veracity of this. It is Biggie's emotions and his feelings for Kim which meant he couldn't break it off, rather than an immediate appraisal of the risks of the situation and a considered decision to keep a potential enemy closer than friends. If employing the rhetoric of risk and reward, the calculated appraisal of relationships, is a strategy to hide emotional trauma, then Biggie doubles down on it as the verse continues:

Waited for a while, thought you was my right thing

[740] As if to reinforce this, Kim references drug dealing and aiding and abetting in her verse later in the song: "Scale them fishes, my love is concrete / Stashin' your heat in the passenger seat of the Nautica Jeep." Fishscale is a street name for high quality cocaine and 'heat' is a synonym for gun.

Then things got frightenin'

Peep the scene, sorta like Sam Rothstein

Guess you Ginger, huh, go figure

Never thought you could be a gold-digger

Take my dough and spend with the next nigga

Asked my man Jigga, my ace boon coon

Told me cut the bitch off 'fore the shit balloon

Biggie likens himself to the main character in Scorsese's film *Casino*, utilizing the familiar imaginary world of Italian-American organised crime as a way to explain to the audience the betrayal he felt as well as the potential stakes.[741] He consults with his best friend JAY-Z who, in the role of consiglieri, tells him to end the relationship before his riches (and accompanying risks) grow larger.[742] Even within this, a song supposedly engaging with romantic tropes similar to those present in songs by The Stylistics and the OJs, Biggie presents to the listener familiar aspects of the gangsta ethos which engage with the neoliberal ideals of solipsism, risk and power.

Lil Kim's contribution to the record is surprisingly similar to that of The Notorious B.I.G, her version of the refrain is almost identical, save for one subtle difference:

[Refrain 2: Lil' Kim]

[741] Scorsese, Martin, dir. *Casino*, Universal Pictures. 1995. It should be noted that Sam the character of Sam Rothstein is Jewish, not Italian-American.
[742] The phrase "ace boon coon" is a mid-twentieth century African-American slang term for best friend. See Lewis, Joy Schaleben. "A Dictionary of How Just Plain Folks Talk." *The New York Times*, Sep 5, 1979, Section C, Page 1.

What do ya do when your man is untrue

Do you cut the sucker off and find someone new

I need another man, in my life

Whereas Biggie's middle line told listeners "[y]ou cut the hooker off and find someone new," Kim's asks the audience "[d]o you cut the sucker off and find someone new?" This may be a small difference, but it immediately establishes a power dynamic with the masculine voice on the refrain sounding sure of its course of action and the female voice seeming unsure. The choice of descriptive nouns is also less confrontational and aggressive with hooker and bitch being swapped for sucker and man. As has already been seen, in the competitive and febrile environment of 'the streets,' being viewed as a "sucker" is dangerous as it opens one up to attacks and diminished status. Mental acuity and perceptiveness are viewed as important character traits within the performative masculine ideal of both the 'street life' and Hip-Hop lyricism. It may be then that hooker and sucker are of similar derogatory weight when being exchanged back and forth but we can draw a clear distinction between the occasionally affectionate but often dismissive "bitch" and the far more perfunctory label of "man."[743] In the body of Kim's verses she more than matches Biggie's tempo, animosity and lyricality, even mirroring his utilisation of other artists to evoke emotion:

'Member when you said you would die for me, shit

All of that was just lies to me

Motherfucker shoulda never said bye to me

[743] An example of this from Biggie's discography is "Me and My Bitch" from *Ready to Die*.

Now you cry for me, like Jodeci[744]

Kim disparagingly describes the woman that Biggie cheated on her with as "Black nasty and mad fat y'all," and so unattractive as needing to be seen to be believed. Here she denies another woman the kinds of self-claimed power over the female body and sexuality that give Kim, and the likes of Foxy Brown their impact. If, as has been persuasively argued, one of the key rhetorical strategies of successful female rappers is to beat others to the punch, in this instance Kim punches first to mark her sexual rival and simultaneously bruise Biggie's ego.[745] This claim, that the other woman Biggie slept with is far less attractive than Kim, is snappily repeated at the end of her verse with the line "Uhh, why go from first class to coach." This clear metaphor – a reworking of a line from her own hit "Drugs" – not only shows Kim's annoyance (with the audible exasperated sigh at the start of it) but also questions Biggie's faculties of judgment.[746] In Kim's worldview there is no logical reason to go from first to coach, therefore Biggie has made a mistake.

As Dardot and Laval explain in their chapter "Manufacturing the Neo-Liberal subject," when it comes to the relationship between the sexes: "no ethical principle, no taboo, any longer seems to resist the glorification of infinite, unlimited choice."[747] Dardot and Laval extend their reasoning to cover the relationship between the generations as well as romantic relationships, but the central tenet remains the same. The abundance and inevitability of choice and choosing which exists within the re-ordered neoliberal world, along with the heavy weight of self-harm for making the "wrong" choice, feed a distrust of

[744] R&B group Jodeci had a gold selling single titled "Cry For You" on their album *Diary of a Mad Band*, Uptown, 1993.
[745] Chepp, "Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence: The case of women's rap," 220.
[746] In "Drugs" the line is "Yes indeed, flows first class and yours is coach like the bag."
[747] *The New Way of the World* p.293

anyone but the self. Richard Sennett claims that the internalisation of the business and entrepreneurial mindset eventually erodes character itself and that "instead of social relations involving a minimum of loyalty and fidelity, the professional world becomes a set of one-off transactions."[748] Sennett references two distinct spheres, the social and the professional, yet this is problematized in Hip-Hop when acts frequently seek to collapse the two – drawing upon their own lived experiences as grist to the creative mill from which they produce their lyrics. For Kim and Biggie, this is quite obviously problematized by the fact that they were in a real-life romantic relationship and also a performative relationship, featuring on each other's songs. That this song narrativizes a deeply personal interchange (whether based on fact or a fabrication) between lovers further blurs the lines between personal and professional, this time in the name of performance.

The key tension at the heart of this track is that love and relationships are depicted as another arena in which individuals must demonstrate, test and evaluate their worth and capabilities in a competitive manner. Not only against other potential romantic rivals but also against the person they are in a relationship with. The competitive individualism that is so prevalent within the gangsta/mafioso rap of this period, informed and shaped as an expression of black vernacular neoliberalism, provides a major barrier to expressions of love, loving and relationships. As Kim explains:

> When I testified in court
>
> Couldn't think straight thinkin' 'bout the bitches I fought
>
> Over you, nigga have the shit you bought

[748] Quoted in *The New Way of the World*, p.290

And fuck you, movin' is my last resort

You see, nine outta ten niggas ain't shit

One outta five niggas suck a dick

You're mad at me, too bad she ain't as bad as me

Shoulda kept the freak bitch off my canapé

Now you see, ain't no pussy warm as mine

Long as mine, ain't no love as strong as this

When I sucked your dick, it's like smokin' a roach

The continued enjambement, juxtaposed effectively with caesura and internal rhyme, destabilise the flow from bar to bar which adds reality to the imagined situation of an impassioned, almost chaotic, fight between two lovers. Kim foregrounds competitiveness and competition, talking about fighting other women over a man. This external competition is immediately driven into the relationship and situated between the two partners with the phrase (running over two lines) “nigga have the shit you bought and fuck you.” From there she asserts her value as a partner by extolling the supremacy of her body and her sexual prowess: “ain’t no pussy warm as mine / Long as mine” which is quickly allied with a love of unrivalled strength. These two images, one of sexual suggestiveness and performance, the other of enduring love both serve as ways in which Kim eradicates competition by explicitly claiming there is none. Her sexual and compassionate offerings are unimpeachable. This is a complex rhetoric, on the one hand it seeks to negate competition by stating that there is no viable alternative of equal quality to what Kim can offer. Kim’s repeated claims to be the best form part of a constructed self-image – visible across her discography – which clearly

engages with a form of "neo-liberal management of oneself [that] consists in manufacturing a high-performance ego."[749] This high performance is spoken into existence – by rapping about having nice things she accrues money with which to buy more nice things – but also places Kim in a realm distinct from everyone else. As she states on "Queen Bitch;" "While you struggle and strive, we pick which Benz to drive."[750] Her frequent designation of herself as queen marks her as elevated, and yet isolated. On "Another" this rhetorical feature exposes a vulnerability about the narrator, insofar as she claims supremacy but is speaking from the position of a wronged lover. Despite her supreme qualities which should be valued in a relationship, she is still experiencing the emotional pain of infidelity. Much like Biggie's claims that he kept Kim around because of her knowledge of his business dealings, this section of the song doesn't quite ring true.

Whilst lauding her own capabilities and qualities as a woman, and as a lover, Kim reflexively suggests that she is willing to stay with Biggie due to a dearth of options. She estimates that 90% of men aren't worthy of her attention and 20% of them are homosexual. The utilisation of bogus statistics adds a veneer of scientific rationale to her claims, a potential recourse to the neoliberal notion of expertise than Lester Spence has offered up. The phrasing "One out of five niggas suck a dick," engages with a respectability politics which centres and normalizes heterosexual behaviour whilst othering and looking askance at homosexual activities.[751] We see here the melding of respectability and irreverence in Kim's lyricism: it is irreverent in its open and graphic sexual content, including its use of slang, cuss words and the repurposing of previously negatively connoted terms such as

[749] Dadot & Laval, *The New Way of the* World, p.274.
[750] *Hard Core*
[751] Chepp, "Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence: The case of women's rap"

"pussy," but it also reinforces or appeals to respectability discourse with its rejection of homosexuality and centring of heterosexual congress. In 1996, scholar Evelynn M. Hammonds wrote that Black Feminist Theory had until then, with a few exceptions, "been focussed relentlessly on heterosexuality." [752] Whereas Hammonds uses this as an argument to foreground the black homosexual experience in discourses around female sexuality, Kim's lyrics include only a disavowal of homosexuality. [753] Kim, with her embrace of hypersexuality breaks out against what black feminist theorists call "the silence" of black female sexuality but simultaneously uses her voice to ostracize homosexuality.[754] In this way her actions are mimetic of many male Gangsta rappers.[755] This attitude may also be another area in which Kim is demonstrating her equality to male performers. In his work *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003) E. Patrick Johnson claims that "black authenticity has increasingly become linked to masculinity in its most patriarchal significations."[756] In his opinion, that this masculinity "epitomizes the imperialism of heterosexism, sexism, and homophobia, therefore, is not surprising." If Johnson's estimation of the authenticity/masculinity dialectic is correct then by engaging with these themes Kim is simultaneously attempting to evidence her authenticity and her capacity for masculine performance.[757]

[752] Hammonds, Evelynn M. "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence." *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 180-181.
[753] Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," p.181.
[754] For a discussion on the theory of silence see Shoniqua Roach., "Black Sex in the Quiet." *Differences* (Bloomington, Ind.), vol. 30, no. 1, 2019, pp. 126–47.
[755] Particularly those who transgress social norms by utilizing lyrical violence – an act of destabilisation -- but do so to assert their ownership of capital, space, or intellectual property.
[756] "MANIFEST FAGGOTRY: Queering Masculinity in African American Culture" in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003. 48.
[757] It is too essentialist to state that Johnson's assessment of black masculinity holds true across all black (in this context a synonym for African-American) men but it is largely commensurate with the depictions of masculinity featured in the lyrics studied in this thesis.

Kim's claim that a lack of options might force her to be more attached to a dishonest lover than she should be puts her narrator in the same place as Big's. Thereby they both offer the audience an implausible reason why they should go against their better instincts and maintain a relationship with their unfaithful partner. We see in this the performative aspect of the neoliberal hustler. Decisions must be justified and justifiable, they must be **seen** to be acting from a position of considered and deliberate strategy. In both verses the opinion from the gendered chorus (in the classical sense) is to get rid, for Biggie it is his consultation with JAY-Z, for Kim it is the "Girls steady screamin', "Kim you need to leave him!" Yet both seem hesitant, choosing to reminisce over the good times and how well they suited each other. Placed in tension with each other are their feelings and their responsibility to act judiciously. Most people in a similar romantic situation might feel a pull between head and heart, but the performative nature of the "King of New York" and "the first female King" personas mean that showing oneself to be ruled by heart is seen as a sign of weakness.[758] This constant evaluation of risk and decision making places barriers to connectivity and interpersonal relationships. Dardot and Laval claim neoliberalism has redefined social dynamics:

> One of the most incontestable effects is that 'transactions' take up more and more space at the expense of 'relations'; that instrumentalization of others gains in importance, to the detriment of all other possible ways of relating to others.[759]

This instrumentalization is a key aspect of the hustler ethos that we have seem repeatedly throughout the songs in this study, it shows detachment, selfishness and cunning. It is

[758] "Lil' Drummer Boy," *The Notorious K.I.M*, Undeas Music, 2000.
[759] *The New Way of the World* p.280

interesting that within "Another" we see this concept placed under strain, or at the very least not easily employed by the two narrators. This suggests push back against, or inability to conform to, the archetype of the cold, calculating, drug dealer turned rapper turned businessman/woman. Further study in this area is required to expand upon and interrogate some of the ideas and themes that Biggie and Kim offer up in this duet. Likewise, a detailed study of the likes of Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown is needed to understand how their internalisation and recapitulation of neoliberal touchstones such as self-reliance and adaptability are further shaped by their position as women, not just within American society, but also within the male dominated sphere of 1990s Hip-Hop. Furthermore, did prominent female MCs offering up gangsta tales change the perception of Hip-Hop's audiences towards roles of femininity and masculinity? It was a violent skirmish in 2001 – during which over twenty shots were fired – between associates of Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim which led to the NYPD establishing a "watchdog branch within its gang-investigation unit to monitor the activities of local hip hop artists."[760] Was it merely coincidental that this incident, centred on two female performers, sparked this increased level of scrutiny?

"They say I walk around like I got a S on my chest / Nah, that's a semi-auto, in a vest on my chest:" The gangsta as masculine exemplar. [761]

[760] Crowley, David. 'Rap Attack: New York City Police officers keep an eye on hip hop artists.' *Vibe*, July 2001. 58.
[761] "What Up Gangsta," *Get Rich or Die Tryin',* 2003. Interscope/ Shady Aftermath.

The opening of 50 Cent's debut album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2003) has him refuting accusations that he sees himself as Superman; instead, he attributes his confidence to a more tangible and banal source of power: guns and body armour. Metaphorically clad in his bulletproof vest and holding a concealed semi-automatic weapon 50 launches into a meditation on why he is different, and somehow separate from the types of "duck nigga" that he hunts for sport. The song, and the album as a whole, represent the apotheosis of the drug-dealer-turned-rapper phenomenon that had been building in Hip Hop over the preceding three decades. When Big Bank Hank referenced the "sucker in a blue and red suit" on "Rapper's Delight" it was because he was trying to steal Superman's girlfriend Lois Lane: "He may be able to fly all through the night / But can he rock a party 'til the early light?" By the time *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* shot to number one on the *Billboard* chart, fans could see that Curtis '50 Cent' Jackson appeared to be everything that the gangster rapper purported to be: he had been a drug dealer, he had been shot multiple times and survived, he had made a successful – if somewhat delayed – transition from selling drugs to selling music. Even if he rejected claims that he saw himself as a cape wearing superhero, he was, within the parameters of gangster rap, a super-man. He had survived being shot and thus withstood the superhuman violence that the gun can administer. If the gun is able to confer status and power upon the individual because of its capacity to inflict harm and destruction, then how venerable is the individual who is able to survive and withstand that violence? 50 was experiencing a kind of life after death, a concept that the Notorious B.I.G. had engaged with extensively, his record company even using it to title his posthumously released second album. Following the attack which threatened his life, 50 Cent "retreated to his girlfriend's

house in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania to heal up, bulk up, and plot his return to hip-hop."[762]

The notion that Jackson set about "bulking up" is an interesting one. It could be read as him seeking to increase his strength and capacity or potential for violence, conditioning the body for combat.[763] This would function both as an aid to self-defence and also as a possible deterrent to would be assailants.[764] Likewise, it could similarly be read as him trying to make himself more attractive, in the hope of securing the move into showbusiness which had eluded him up that point. Perhaps it was an attempt to rediscover and evidence his masculine credentials, having been the victim of a brazen and deliberate attempt on his life which was made all the more personal by occurring outside of his grandmother's house. 50 seemed at pains to show off his physicality, showing his sculpted, muscular body on the album cover and in the video for the evergreen party anthem "In Da Club" (2003) where he is being physically tested in a laboratory setting.[765]

The biopolitics of neoliberalism come to the fore here. Mirowski explains how the body functions as a site of instruction:

> The inducements to carve the body in the name of speculative enhancement serves to teach many people the basic principles of neoliberalism at a visceral level, people

[762] Charnas, *The Big Payback,* 586.
[763] The notion of having, or being, a 'hardbody' is a common trope within street rap. Nas utilizes it on his track "Hustlers," from the album *Hip Hop is Dead*, 2006. Columbia. The rap group Onyx describe themselves as "hard body karate, Killuminati niggas" on "Wakedafucup" from *Wakedafucup*, 2014. Goon MuSick. Raekwon in the verified commentary video for "Criminology" from *Only Built for Cuban Linx* links being a hardbody to militancy, discipline, and efficacy. "Criminology," *Genius*, https://genius.com/Raekwon-criminology-lyrics.
[764] Johnson, Golub, and Dunlap, "The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs," 181.
[765] *Get Rich or Die Tryin'.*

> who might otherwise never give a second thought to political theory or economic imperatives.[766]

This focus on the body serves a double purpose: it offers an easily comprehended and accessible introduction to the arena of self-improvement; and it also reinforces notions of personal responsibility. As social programmes are dismantled, epigenetic responsibility increasingly rests with the individual rather than the state.[767] Accordingly, it behoves them to take care of themselves, as well as invest in commodities through which they may 'buy health,' such as gym memberships, health foods, supplements, and medical insurance. The visible, physical results of going to the gym offer a particularly tangible metric of human capital. 50 Cent has proven himself particularly adroit in exploiting his own human capital in this respect.

Many rappers seek to work on themselves in this way, honing and expanding what Gilroy calls "their buffed-up bodies."[768] The mantra when it comes to physicality in New York Hip-Hop of this period seems to be 'the bigger the better' and this is also conferred in dress, with many layers, thick fabrics and sweatshirts adding bulk to the wearer: "[s]wathed in yards of denim and padded in ski jackets, the bodies of these young men were made to seem large and physically intimidating as they claimed more space in public areas."[769] This aesthetic is visible in the music video for the Wu-Tang Clan video "C.R.E.A.M." (1993) with the group clad in hoodies, overcoats and baggy jeans: a style which – as discussed in

[766] Mirowksi, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go To Waste,* 114.
[767] Charles Dupras and Vardit Ravitsky, "Epigenetics in the Neoliberal "Regime of Truth,"" *The Hastings Center Report* 46 (1) (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2016), 29.
[768] Gilroy, "We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under ...", 32.
[769] M. Moskowitz and Marina Moskowitz, *Testimonial Advertising in the American Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 213.

Chapter 2 – formed the basis of their clothing brand Wu Wear.[770] 50 Cent uses the opposite strategy, removing clothing to take up space with the spectacle of his muscles, which stand as the returns of the time he has invested in building them.

His image as someone who "spent hours a day working out and ate healthy," facilitated his collaboration with the health drink brand Vitaminwater which began in 2004.[771] Originally approached to be just a brand ambassador for them, 50 and his manager Chris Lighty counter-offered and invested in the brand, with 50 netting somewhere between $60 and $100 million when it was eventually sold by its parent company Glacéau to Coca-Cola in 2007.[772] The product, marketed as a health drink, was:

> […] basically a smarter, more upscale, more aspirational version of the ultimate ghetto beverage on which Lighty and 50 had grown up: the quarter-waters sold in every bodega, deli, and convenience store from Queens to Compton.[773]

50 references this in the lyrics to "I Get Money" (2007), with the lines "I took quarter waters, sold it in bottles for two bucks / Then, Coca-Cola came and bought it for billions—what the fuck?"[774] He expresses shock at how he was able to get away with a massive mark up on a product that typically cost 25c – hence 'quarter' water – and then made even greater sums when it was taken up by the corporate behemoth of Coca-Cola.

[770] "Wu-Tang Clan - C.R.E.A.M. (Official HD Video)," *Wu-Tang Clan*, January 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBwAxmrE194.
[771] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 611.
[772] FNR TIGG, "Young Buck Says 50 Cent Discouraged G-Unit From Taking Vitamin Water Deal," *Complex*, December 29, 2020, https://www.complex.com/music/2020/12/young-buck-says-50-cent-discouraged-g-unit-taking-vitamin-water-deal.
[773] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 617.
[774] "I Get Money," *Curtis*, 2007. Shady Aftermath.

Ironically, this exposing of the trick of Vitaminwater does not undermine or invalidate 50's commodified authenticity, it paradoxically reinforces it. By exposing the fact that he has merely repackaged a commonplace neighbourhood consumable, 50 shows his exemplary capacities as a hustler. Whereas prior consumption may have been motivated by physical aspiration, it is now also suffused with an economic one, as Moskowitz and Moskowitz explain in relation to the streetwear brand FUBU:

> Emulation moves from being directed toward a hip-hop celebrity or athlete who represents street authenticity and hypermasculinity (though also a wealthy lifestyle) to upward mobility through business.[775]

Upward mobility through business was a key economic lesson which 50 conveyed via his business activities with Glacéau, with his demeanour in the boardroom "surprisingly different from the rapper's public image: calm, respectful and deliberate."[776] The Vitamin water episode reflects key aspects of 50's neoliberal self: physical investment and a 'health is wealth' mindset, business acumen, self-improvement and adaptability; being able to perform on the streets, on the mic and in the boardroom.

Having survived multiple gunshot wounds is the mythos upon which 50 established his career. As well as being a traumatic event, it established his gangsta bona fides. It also had a sonic impact on his work: a bullet fragment lodged in his tongue causing the slurred cadence which he is now famous for. Jackson clearly understood his audience's fascination with this incident and the value of returning to it: in 2015 he released a single called "9 Shots" which uses each of his wounds as a chance to meditate on his life experiences.[777]

[775] Moskowitz and Moskowitz, *Testimonial Advertising in the American Marketplace*, 225.
[776] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 617.
[777] *Street King Immortal*. G-Unit Records. Unreleased.

When appearing on the BBC's *The Graham Norton Show* to promote the song, 50 detailed the wounds he suffered in the shooting and referenced the fragment which remains in his mouth. This prompted the bizarre scene of British actress Julie Walters placing her finger into his mouth to feel the bullet for herself, as if she were doubting Thomas testing the wounds of Jesus Christ.[778] After the potential vulnerability of being examined in such a way, 50 reasserted his masculine credentials by claiming that the bullet fragment is "great for oral sex," and that he is "a better man now."[779] Not only does surviving the attack show the resilience of the body, it even increases sexual performance and enhances masculinity.

The album artwork for *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* features a shirtless 50, wearing a Gucci gun holster, viewed through a foreground of broken glass which has been fractured and punctured by a bullet. 50 stands behind the glass, with one thumb in his belt loop and the other hand out of shot, seemingly at ease, unperturbed by the gunshot which has inflicted only superficial damage. The album's art director, Julian Alexander, designed the cover to make the artist look as if he were "bullet proof."[780] Around 50's neck and framed by the bullet hole is a bejewelled 'Jesus piece,' a diamond encrusted Christian cross worn as a necklace or medallion. Much like the title of the single "Ghetto Qu'ran" off his unreleased album *Power of the Dollar* (2000) the "Jesus piece" signifies a melding of the sacred and the profane. There are codes of behaviour which the figure of the hustler-rapper, in his role as ghetto entrepreneur, holds sacred and which he proselytizes with an almost religious

[778] This is most famously represented in Carravagio's painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. Carravagio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1602, oil on canvas, 107 cm × 146 cm (42 in × 57 in), Sanssouci, Potsdam.
[779] "Julie Walters feels 50 Cent's gun shot wounds," The Graham Norton Show – BBC, *YouTube*, November 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9m0TrwXFVls.
[780] "Get Rich or Die Tryin'," Genius, annotated album cover, accessed accessed March 1, 2021, https://genius.com/album_cover_arts/106.

zeal.[781] The adherence to such codes is what determines the masculine status of the individual. The doublespeak at play in "What Up Gangsta" is that 50 begins by saying he is not Superman but then details all the ways in which he is an exemplary hustler, gangster and by association, man. This is epitomized in the second verse:

> The rap critics say I can rhyme, the fiends say my dope is a nine
>
> Every chick I fuck with is a dime
>
> I'm like Patti LaBelle, homie, I'm on my own
>
> Where I lay my hat's my home, I'm a rolling stone
>
> Cross my path, I'll crush ya, thinking I won't touch ya
>
> I'll have your ass using a wheelchair, cane, or crutches
>
> Industry hoes fuck us, in the hood, they love us
>
> Stomp a bone out your ass with some brand new Chukkas

The braggadocio melds sex, violence and business, as comprehensive a personal statement of male prowess as you are likely to find in all of Hip Hop.

The listener hears how 50 is both endorsed by rap critics and also by the users of his drugs. His sexual partners are dimes (meaning ten out of tens for attractiveness). As a "rolling stone" 50 eschews any restricting emotional connection to place or people, suggesting adaptability and manoeuvrability. The omnipresent threat of violence is produced and a flourish is added by 50 saying he will stomp you in "some brand new

[781] "*The Godfather and Scarface* in particular, are very serious. They're almost biblical, in terms of their importance in life." RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual,* 102.

Chukkas," a type of workstyle boot like the Timberlands favoured by New York rappers and corner boys alike.[782] He proclaims how he is both popular in the industry and in the hood, showing how he has a foot in both camps. In just eight lines 50 Cent distils the masculine ideal of drug dealer rap, claiming prowess in entrepreneurship, violence and the sexual arena. These are the fundamental qualities of manliness and status which male artists who tell tales of drug dealing, hustling and 'the streets' celebrate. The notion of 'work' is a purposely vague one which allows for a double intonation. Rappers' references to putting in "work" can mean dealing drugs, writing rhymes, or both.[783] It is no coincidence that these are both non-traditional (in one case illegal) forms of work which exist outside of the normal ways most Americans make a living. The word 'work' is sometimes used as a synonym for drugs, and the slightly clumsy phrase to 'put in work' is frequently evoked.[784]

"Shock at Killing of Rap Star With Loyal Good-Guy Image:"[785] The paradox of performed masculinity.

This headline from the *New York Times* in November 2002 regarding the murder of former Run-DMC performer Jam Master Jay strikes at the heart of the tensions around MCs supposedly evidencing their masculine credentials on wax. The masculinity constructed as part of the hustler narratives of selling drugs and selling music necessitates braggadocio and the rationalisation of actions; be it violent confrontation, business decisions or the jump

[782] This is also reflected in the Gucci gun holster mentioned earlier. 50 threatens violence, but allies it with consumer goods, a convenient way to display his wealth and buying power.
[783] This is the 'Rap Game / Crack Game' dynamic explored in an earlier chapter in relation to JAY-Z's track.
[784] Gang Starr have a track called 'Work' which encapsulates notions of 'work' being read as both within the music industry and the street life. "Work," *Moment of Truth*, Virgin Records, 1998.
[785] Alan Feuer, "Shock at Killing of Rap Star With Loyal Good-Guy Image," Nov 1, 2002; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times*.

from street to studio. Owing to this narrative need to articulate why and how decisions are made – narratives which facilitate the kinds of rationalising analysis which Foucault calls for – rappers must constantly evidence their claims to be authentic, rugged street dwellers. Yet this sits at odds with Biggie's claim that "bad boys move in silence and violence." In order to craft entertaining and saleable records, rappers must break one of the "Ten Crack Commandments" (1997).

Jam Master Jay, (Jason Mizell) was killed by a single gunshot wound to the head, administered at close range after gunmen burst into the lounge of his recording studio in Jamaica, Queens. Alan Feuer's article asks: "Who would want to kill Jam Master Jay, a peaceable, old-school D.J. whose group rapped about sneakers, girls and basketball, not money, guns and drugs?" The implication here is that the murder was a shock because murders did not appear in the narratives of Run-DMC's discography. To hammer this home, Feuer explains further: "[i]nstead of profanity-laced nihilistic rhymes about pistols and police brutality, the group wrote danceable, sunny lyrics." He describes how it was "heartbreaking and unfathomable" to Mizell's fans that "he should meet the same bloody end that befell gangsta rappers like Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G."

This lamenting tone engages with the morally and empirically dubious notion that the artistic output of performers constitutes a window into their real-life activities or their capacity to commit crime.[786] This is a problem of Hip-Hop performers own making, by perpetually claiming their authenticity, they encourage listeners to associate the figurative hustler with the one holding the mic. In essence this is the great artistry and conceit of

[786] This issue has grown in importance as prosecutors "have used rap lyrics as evidence of guilt in countless cases in recent years, against well-known stars and amateur artists alike." See McGlynn, Kelly, et al. "Lyrics in Limine: Rap Music and Criminal Prosecutions." *Communications Lawyer: Publication of the Forum Committee on Communications Law, American Bar Association*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2023, 10–22.

much Hip-Hop lyricism; the crafting of entertaining, occasionally lurid, tales about taboo subjects which contain enough 'truth' to hold some relation to reality. This tangential relation to reality is what imbues them with political meaning and provides an opportunity for analysis. On this occasion, any indicator of the reality of the situation – that Mizell was involved in large scale, interstate drug trafficking and was killed as a result – would not appear anywhere in the lyrics of Run-DMC.[787]

It took eighteen years for anybody to be charged with the murder, and among the range of possible motives explored during the investigations was the idea that "the gunman had a grudge against the rapper 50 Cent, a protégé of Jam Master Jay's, and was trying to hit back at him by killing Mr. Mizell." The reporting at the time described:

> The investigators theory about a music-industry feud centered around "50 Cent who had a hit single over the summer that ridiculed would-be gangsta rappers who shuttled in and out of jail and could never scrape up the money to buy fancy cars they always sang about driving.[788]

The song mentioned is "Wanksta" (2002) and its choruses evidences the themes mentioned in the reporting above:

> You say you a gangsta, but you never pop nothin'
>
> We say you a wanksta and you need to stop frontin'
>
> You go to the dealership, but you don't never cop nothin'

[787] Ashley Southall, Mihir Zaveri and Alan Feuer, "2 Are Charged in Killing of Jam Master Jay, Hip-Hop Pioneer," *New York* Times, August 17, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/17/nyregion/Jam-master-Jay-murder-arrests.html.
[788] Andy Newman and Al Baker, "CITY: WAS IT A BAD BUSINESS DEAL OR A MUSIC INDUSTRY FEUD? ...," November 1, 2002; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times*

You been hustlin' a long time and you ain't got nothin'[789]

The central narrative here is of exposing fake gangstas. Much like the disparaging attitude towards crackheads it reveals by association what behaviours a real gangsta should be involved with.

The critical "but you never pop nothin'" could refer to guns – a signifier of the capacity for violence and associated masculine prowess – or bottles, a consumer good which is associated with disposable income and ostentatious displays of wealth. The reference to a dealership is obviously indicative of the cars mentioned in the *New York Times* article but it also gestures towards the trade in illegal drugs. The homophone cop, as in to acquire, and cop, an officer of the law, complicates this further. 50 could be arguing that the target of these lines has never copped any sizable amount of drugs and as such the police do not know he is. In this instance police attention can be an obvious negative insofar as it may stymie business activities, but it is also something of a badge of honour. Like the veneration of John Gotti, the criminal who everybody has heard of or who is actively (but unsuccessfully) pursued by police, holds more cache than one who is anonymous. The last jab, that the hustle, despite the invested time, has been unsuccessful is fairly self-explanatory.

In the neoliberal sense the notion of wasted human capital is particularly effacing as it suggests both a waste of the self, a waste of time, and poor decision making. The individual has persevered extensively with a hustle which has not yielded any rewards. 50 here strikes at many of the key ways that rappers evidence their masculine credentials in their guise as hustlers. The centrality of work – successful work – is preeminent, so much so

[789] 50 Cent, "Wanksta," *No Mercy, No Fear*, Mixtape, 2002.

that they collapse it into their sense of self and judge their manliness by how hard or how much they work. Accoutrements, such as the gun, which facilitate or ensure that work are venerated and absorbed into the masculine sense of self. Whilst occasionally communal, as in the images of the Wu-Tang Clan engaged in collective fantasy violence, the overriding impulse of the entrepreneurial self is individualistic, and self-reliance is regarded as both a primary quality and a necessity.

Conceptions of masculinity are frequently defined in relation to the actions of others, either by positive likening – in the case of Italian American organised crime bosses – or a violent disavowal in the case of the destabilizing and subjected crackhead. Physical manifestations of self are a visceral way by which rappers produce their masculinity, both testifying to their capacities for self-improvement and also allowing them to segue those efforts in to further avenues to make money. Much like the cannibalisation of life experiences into rap lyrics, the sculpting and demarcating of the body serves two purposes. The creation of a desirable and aesthetically fit body testifies to the neoliberal capacity for self-improvement; likewise, it stands as a guarantor against behaviours which threaten the autonomy of the masculine self, such as violence or incapacity through ill health. Much as they do with their proclamations on business, rappers, in cultivating and disseminating their images of what successful masculinity looks like create a code by which they produce their own successful masculinity. As Foucault states in relation to *homo economicus*, the hustler rapper is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of the self.

Conclusion

"Fuck rap, crack cocaine / Nah, we did that, Black-owned things:" [790] The lessons of the drug-rap game.

The themes outlined in the preceding chapters demonstrate the ways in which Hip-Hop lyrics engaged with notions of entrepreneurialism to form a discourse of black vernacular neoliberalism. These lyrics, as well as being entertaining cultural products, provide insight into the business and accumulation strategies which rappers have used, to varying degrees of success, in other fields. As the lyrics from JAY-Z's "Family Feud" (2017) quoted above show, once able to master the drugs trade – i.e. "*crack* cocaine" – they transposed their skills onto other ventures which ultimately yielded "Black-owned things."[791] The striking success that some of these individuals experienced in their subsequent business ventures adds a reflected glow to their earlier proclamations on business, the self and the nebulous notion of 'work.' Despite some contradictions, the presentation of selfhood which appears in the rap lyrics I studied is largely consistent. It is defined entirely in terms of market competitiveness and privileges discipline, hard work, self-sufficiency, and investment in human capital. This self is competitive and combative, disparaging others to reinforce its own status and deriding those who succumb to dependency and addiction. As my examination of representations of violence showed, often this sense of self is augmented by technologies such as guns and encased in the armour of a hypermasculine gym-built

[790] JAY-Z ft. Beyoncé, "Family Feud," *4:44*, 2017. Roc Nation.
[791] Emphasis added.

body.[792] The individual depicted in these lyrics bears striking resemblance to Jim McGuigan's definition of "the neoliberal self:"

> a competitive individual who is exceptionally self-reliant and rather indifferent to the fact that his or her predicament is shared with others – and, therefore, incapable of organising as a group to do anything about it. Such a person must be 'cool' in the circumstances, selfishly resourceful and fit in order to survive under social-Darwinian conditions. Many simply fall by the wayside, exterminated by the croak-voiced Daleks of neoliberalism.[793]

The "social-Darwinian conditions" that form the backdrop of the songs studied in this thesis was the trade in illegal drugs and the social dysfunction and violence which accompanied it. Later in this conclusion I will argue that the increased social atomization which neoliberalism has wrought has sustained the valence and relevance of these songs as texts which speak to the experience of the individual in a highly competitive, individualistic context.

As Chapter 4 demonstrates, my analysis of representations of the Hip-Hop hustler is largely a gendered one. Further study should examine in greater depth the attitudes of female MCs towards hustling and entrepreneurialism. On "Queen Bitch," Lil Kim describes herself as the "rap Pam Grier"[794] and much like the Blaxploitation era with which Grier is readily associated Kim's status as a Hip-Hop sensation was fairly short lived. Is there a reason that her success, and that of similar acts such as Foxy Brown, did not have the same enduring appeal that her male contemporaries like JAY-Z and the Wu-Tang Clan did? Further research would also expand the range of contemporary female rappers' responses to the

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[793] McGuigan, "The Neoliberal Self," 236.

[794] Lil Kim, "Queen Bitch," *Hard Core*, 1996. Atlantic.

ascent of gangsta narratives within Hip-Hop. Whereas Kim and her ilk consciously embraced and mimicked the street posturing of Kool G Rap and the Notorious B.I.G, women within Hip-Hop also made a conscious decision to explore other avenues. In 1998, *Vibe* writer Chairman Mao explained to readers how female rap was multi-faceted as "[b]alancing the excesses of Foxy and Kim was the down-to-earth eclecticism of Lauryn Hill and Missy Elliott." Missy in particular would make an interesting study, as her embrace of afro-futurism, as well as her earlier work with the Native Tongues movement, placed her in a completely different conceptual and artistic space to that of Lil' Kim. [795] Couple this with her image, as a "rapper whose height, girth, and complexion defied conventional standards of feminine fabulousness" and an interesting juxtaposition between two very different female rappers comes into focus.[796]

It would also be informative to know if there was significant pushback against the fusing of hypersexuality and masculinity, and if so what it looked like. Comedian Dave Chapelle, who has had a longstanding connection with Hip-Hop culture and who had a character called 'Gangsta Bitch,' asked in 1998, "What kind of man wants to have sex with a woman harder than him?"[797] How was criticism of female MCs framed? Were female artists discussing sex held to a more rigorous moral standard than male rappers discussing violence? For example, how did the tenor of this movement compare with the earlier Stop the Violence movement? As another celebrated black comic, Richard Pryor, memorably observed, ""You can't talk about fucking in America, people say you're dirty. But if you talk

[795] Aine McGlyn, "Lil Kim," in *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music and Culture Vols 1 & 2*, ed., Mikey Hess (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 443.
[796] Chairman Mao, "Bow Down," 58

[797] Craig Barboza, "Waiting to Inhale," *Vibe* Feb. 1998, Vol 6, 1, 110.

about killing somebody, that's cool."[798] "Pleasure Politics" has grown since the early 1990s to become a significant node of study within black feminist scholarship pioneered by the work of Joan Morgan and Brittney Cooper among others.[799] Azra Rajah's research which focusses on female rapper Megan Thee Stallion and her song "Savage" (2020) is a noteworthy example of the work currently being done in the field.[800] Analysing the song's hugely popular chorus ("I'm a savage / Classy, bougie, ratchet") Rajah shows how the juxtaposition of adjectives "encourages women to embrace their multifaceted identities."[801] Further study in this field may incorporate a temporal aspect, tracing the development of female rapper's depictions of sexuality across time as well as the responses to them both within, and outside, of the Hip-Hop community. This kind of study, coupled with attendant contextual research on neoliberalism and the changing social mores in American society would provide a valuable intervention in the field of Hip-Hop studies and black feminist theory.[802]

The concept of hustling has lost little, if any, of its potency in the period between the release of the works studied in this thesis and the present. In August 2021, the deputy president of Kenya, William Ruto, launched his campaign for the presidency with the slogan

[798] Phillips, Yoh. 'The Evolution of Violence in Rap: From Body Blows to Bullets,' *DJ Booth*m June 3rd 2019. https://djbooth.net/features/2019-06-03-evolution-of-violence-in-rap-music. Accessed July 1st 2019.
[799] See Morgan's article "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2015, pp. 36–46.
[800] Rajah, Azra. "I'm a "Savage": Exploring Megan Thee Stallion's use of the Politics of Articulation to Subvert the Androcentric Discourses of Women in Hip Hop Culture." *Educational Research for Social Change*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2022, 57-71.
[801] Rajah, "I'm a "Savage": Exploring Megan Thee Stallion's use of the Politics of Articulation to Subvert the Androcentric Discourse of Women in Hip Hop Culture," 64. Megan Thee Stallion, "Savage," *Suga,* 1501 Certified Entertainment, 2020.
[802] For a survey of the work currently being done in the field of Hip-Hop feminism see Halliday, Aria S., and Ashley N. Payne. "Introduction: Savage and Savvy: Mapping Contemporary Hip Hop Feminism." *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies,* vol. 7, no. 1, 2020, pp. 8–116.

"Hustler Nation." [803] Whole countries are now encouraged to become hustlers, en masse. The 'hustle' itself has come to be seen as an adjunct to the mainstream way of life, a vernacular neoliberalism all of its own. One such proponent of this is the Instagram account THE FEMALE HUSTLERS, which disseminates thousands of motivation posts such as "Glow up. Educate yourself. Dress well. Make money. Work hard." (@thefemalehustlers, February 4, 2021) to its 3.7 million followers.[804] These kinds of constant invocations to work on the self, coupled with the entrepreneurial opportunities and targeted advertising architecture of the internet, mean that hustling has become a supposed lifestyle choice. Consider how many people now have, and venerate, the notion of a "side hustle" – a money-making venture that is ancillary to one's main form of employment.[805] The ideals of advancement through private, individualistic, economic success that rap lyrics promote have become stronger than ever. As Paul Gilroy explains:

> The enduring significance of African American culture as both a conduit and a source of these enduringly powerful examples of progress and uplift thanks to business acumen and financial gain is undeniable. The unique seductions and pleasures of the US black vernacular are not only part of that nation's cultural and military diplomacy, they get dispersed through the elaborate social and cultural networks that derive from unpredictable, private sources like the energetic advocacy of Oprah Winfrey.[806]

[803] Emmanuel Onyango, "Kenya's Deputy President Ruto campaigns for 'Hustler Nation,'" *BBC*, August 26, 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58246207.
[804] THE FEMALE HUSTLERS (@thefemalehustlers), "Have you always wanted to learn how to use contracts to protect your business?" Instagram photo, 4 Febuary, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/Ck4MdYtKuCT/?utm_medium=copy_link.
[805] Thieme, Tatiana Adeline. 'The hustle economy: Informality, uncertainty and the geographies of getting by.' *Progress in Human Geography* 2018, Vol. 42(4). p.529–548
[806] Gilroy, "'We Got To Get Over Before We Go Under ...,' 28.

As the title of former Three 6 Mafia member Juicy J's 2020 album states, *The Hustle Continues*.[807]

"We in a whole different mode / The kid that used to pitch bricks can't be pigeonholed:"

[808] The updated hustle.

Figures like JAY-Z and 50 Cent are still hustling, only the scale and nature of that hustle has changed. 50 Cent is the executive producer and on-screen star of *Power* "a high-octane, gripping crime drama centered around a drug kingpin's family." For his work on *Power*, he signed a $150 million dollar deal, "the most lucrative in cable television history."[809] He is also the executive producer of a TV series called *BMF,* short for *Black Mafia Family*, a 'family drama' based on a real life black organised crime enterprise who were based in Detroit.[810] As Paul Gilroy notes, 50 has also fashioned a new career for himself as a self-help guru:

> He is something like a popular avatar of the demotic neoliberalism that is both steeped in and warranted by several generations of uplift and self-reliance narratives that supplied ideational ballast to earlier versions of the proposition that liberation from racial hierarchy could be achieved through the medium of black capitalism.[811]

50's latest 'self-help' book is called *Hustle Harder, Hustle Smarter* (2020) it promises to educate the reader in a key neoliberal touchstone: adaptability.[812] In keeping with the logic

[807] Juicy J, *The Hustle Continues*, 2020. eOne.
[808] JAY-Z ft. Beyoncé, "Family Feud."
[809] "Hustle Harder, Hustle Smarter (Hardback)," Waterstones, Accessed September 1, 2020, https://www.waterstones.com/book/hustle-harder-hustle-smarter/curtis-50-cent-jackson/9780062953803.
[810] Lisa Respers France, "50 Cent on 'BMF' and why his urban dramas hit," *CNN*, September 24, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/24/entertainment/50-bmf-starz/index.html.
[811] Gilroy, "'We Got To Get Over Before We Go Under ...,' 31
[812] Curtis Jackson, *Hustle Harder, Hustle Smarter* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 2020).

of neoliberalism at large, 50 prescribes more of the same to his audience.[813] Through the perpetual application and constant recapitulation of his life experiences we can see the ongoing utility of 50's successful hustler narrative. Where once he primarily sold it on record, he now also sells it on television and in print. As he said on "Hustler's Ambition" (2005), "I sell anything, I'm a hustler, I know how to grind / Step on grapes, put it in water and tell you it's wine."[814]

"What's better than one billionaire? Two (two) / 'Specially if they're from the same hue as you:" [815] The retreat into economic nationalism.

JAY-Z's 2017 album *4:44* – initially only available on his streaming service Tidal – was notable for two primary themes: the first was the personal dynamics of his relationship with wife Beyoncé; the second was the album's advocacy for black economic nationalism. Its songs are peppered with supposedly affirmative lines which advocate 'buying black,' shouting out the consumer goods brands 'owned' by himself and his friends: "I'll be damned if I drink some Belvedere while Puff got CÎROC," he raps, promoting fellow Hip-Hop mogul Diddy's vodka brand over its Polish rival. This line from "Family Feud", as well as those quoted above concerning the benefits of black billionaires, engages with what could be termed "neoliberal identity politics." Ganesh Sitaram explains how, "[w]ithout the bedrock of class politics, identity politics has become an agenda of inclusionary neoliberalism in which individuals can be accommodated but addressing structural inequalities cannot."[816] Typical of the kinds of

[813] Ganesh Sitaraman "The Collapse of Neoliberalism," *The New Republic*, December 23, 2019, https://newrepublic.com/article/155970/collapse-neoliberalism.
[814] 50 Cent, "Hustler's Ambition," *Get Rich Or Die Tryin': Music From & Inspired by the Motion Picture*, 2005. G-Unit.
[815] JAY-Z ft. Beyoncé, "Family Feud."
[816] Sitarman, "The Collapse of Neoliberalism."

substitution of business for organised politics that we saw in Chapter 2's analysis of "Dead Presidents II" (1996), here JAY-Z once again criticises black political and cultural leadership: "Al Sharpton in the mirror takin' selfies / How is him or Pill [sic] Cosby s'posed to help me?" He juxtaposes these ineffectual leaders with images of his own success: "Hundred percent Black-owned champagne / And we merrily merrily eatin' off these streams." The "streams" which sustain him are the profits from his music streaming company Tidal, and he signifies his status as a successful exponent of rentier capitalism. Not only does JAY-Z make money from the labour of others via Tidal, he also owns a significant stake in the firm Uber, runs a sports agency and has extensive property and art portfolios.[817] Eithne Quinn details JAY-Z's deliberately limited involvement with the radical, potentially transformative politics of the "Occupy" movement and documents how his company Rocawear attempted to exploit the rebellious aesthetic of the movement to sell depoliticised "Occupy All Streets" T-shirts.[818] JAY-Z's engagement with the politics of economic nationalism suggests that there is a need for change; perhaps, then, the heavily individualised politics of neoliberalism have run their course. Yet Hov's recent turn to black nationalist themes is closer to his Rocawear T-shirt strategy: trade on the cache of a potentially transformative idea but remove its potency by generalisation and commodification.

Amidst *4:44*'s political posturing and interpersonal drama, JAY-Z still takes time to remind the listener of his continued status as a hustler on "The Story of O.J.":

House nigga, don't fuck with me

I'm a field nigga, with shined cutlery

[817] O'Malley Greenburg, "Artist, Icon, Billionaire."
[818] Quinn, "Occupy Wall Street, Racial Neoliberalism, and New York's Hip-Hop Moguls," 87.

Gold-plated quarters, where the butlers be

I'ma play the corners where the hustlers be

I told him, "Please don't die over the neighborhood

That your mama rentin'

Take your drug money and buy the neighborhood

That's how you rinse it"

We see here the advice to purchase real estate, and the allying of JAY-Z with an authentic working-class experience through the 'house Negro' vs 'field Negro' binary of plantation slavery, as articulated most famously by Malcolm X in 1963.[819] JAY-Z is a "field nigga" who trades on his expertise – his implied experiences 'in the field' – and rebuts the opinions of the black elite who reside in their "gold-plated quarters."[820] A cynical appraisal of these ideas would be to state that they constitute a reinforcement of the virtues of rentier capitalism – here typified by buying the neighbourhood – but shrouded in a purportedly black experience of collective historical oppression. As Quinn states, "such black empowerment politics encapsulates what Paul Gilroy describes as 'the project of self-enrichment as collective vindication.'"[821] JAY-Z is not alone in encouraging his listenership to 'buy the block' but other artists have taken this mantra further. Celebrating the actions of the late – and much lamented – Nipsey Hussle, in *The Journal of Hip-Hop Studies*, Pyar Seth, Carlton Keith Harrison and Jasmyn Mackell offer the opinion that Hussle had strived to move

[819] Malcolm X, "The Race Problem," Columbia University, accessed 20/09/21, https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/mxp/speeches/mxa17.html.
[820] For other pejorative uses of "house nigga" in Hip-Hop, see the culture war commentary over Hip-Hop in the 1990s in Ogbar, Jeffrey O. G. "Slouching Toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music."
[821] Quinn, "Occupy Wall Street, Racial Neoliberalism, and New York's Hip-Hop Moguls," 84.

his community in Crenshaw, Los Angeles "beyond the epic folklore and mythical prowess of Black-owned businesses."[822] Highlighting his work on public health and an attitude of care, they stress his attempts to move beyond just acquisition and ownership as avenues for advancement. The personal aspect of *4:44* focuses primarily on themes of infidelity, romantic relationships, family and the benefits of therapy. Murray Forman believes this shows that JAY-Z "has morphed over his roughly twenty-five year career from a young, hungry, street-savvy hustler to a wealthy and accomplished middle-aged family man."[823] Forman says that the albums themes of "adult introspection and self-critical assessment" are in keeping with a general movement within Hip-Hop towards a more open and emotionally expressive form of masculinity.[824] For JAY-Z it represents a dramatic shift from his earlier self-styling as someone who was so closed off he had to use the artifice of his music as a proxy for the catharsis of crying.[825] Whichever way we choose to read JAY-Z's bearing of emotional scars and recourse to 'build black,' it is an interesting, and potentially incongruous philosophy for a hustler to espouse. Or, perhaps, it is just the latest hustle.

"I'm riding Ubers with the toolie (Skrr!):" [826] Neoliberalism and the gig economy.

[822] Seth, Pyar, Carlton Keith Harrison, and Jasmyn Mackell. "Grinding all My Life: Nipsey Hussle, Community Health, and Care Ethics." 85.
[823] "'Things Done Changed': Recalibrating the Real in Hip-Hop," 463.
[824] Forman credits JAY-Z for playing a part within Hip-Hop culture to promote this shift, citing earlier songs from his discography as showing similar, although less consistent, engagement with emotional themes.
[825] See the chorus from "Song Cry": "I can't see 'em comin' down my eyes / So I gotta make the song cry." *The Blueprint*, 2001. The song was the articulation of a scenario which JAY-Z outlined in an interview with *Vibe* magazine in 2000. Discussing his impulse to continue recording music beyond his initial plan of a two-album run he explained: ""All the shit that I seen, all the shit that I been through, it's just bottled up. And these are things you can't just run around talking to everybody about. So it's like therapy, like a release." See Ex, Kris. "Jayhova's Witness," Vibe Dec. 2000, 134.
[826] Lil Yachty ft. Young Thug, Skippa Da Flippa & Quavo, "Minnesota (Remix)," *Lil Boat*, 2016. Quality Control.

The above lyric from Atlanta rapper Young Thug referencing the on-demand taxi app Uber constitutes a site of overlap between the structure of the neoliberal 'gig' economy and the machinations of the drugs trade. Young Thug is using the informal labour provided by Uber to move around but carries a "toolie" – a gun – for protection while he does so. Thug also references the taxi service in the song "With That" (2015):

> We dressed in all-black, I'm always on the road just like a Uber man (I'm textin')
>
> We wrappin' and sendin' them packs, soon as they land, we movin' 'em (Wrapped, shipped)[827]

These lines clearly liken the grind of selling drugs – "wrappin' and sendin'" – with the grind of the "Uber man" who is "always on the road." Jeremias Prassl describes the emergence of the gig economy as a process whereby "[t]raditional companies are replaced by platforms; their long-term employees recast as independent entrepreneurs."[828] The notion of independent entrepreneurship and its concomitant feelings of freedom and self-expression hold liberatory promise as well as a better work-life balance. Yet, the reality is not so affirmative, as Prassl explains:

> For many on-demand economy workers, the dream of 'turnkey entrepreneurship' delivered by 'powerful technology platforms' to workers 'across the country and around the world' has quickly turned out to be a nightmare as they find themselves locked into a life of subordination, dependence, and economic precarity driven by

[827] Young Thug ft. Lil Duke, "With That," *Barter 6*, 2015. 300 Entertainment.
[828] Jeremias Prassl, *Humans As a Service: The Promise and Perils of Work in the Gig Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11.

> intense, multidimensional control over all aspects of their work—all whilst being denied the freedom, autonomy, and self-determination of genuine enterprise.[829]

For the "Uber man" the economic reality is often far from satisfactory: "Uber's driver-partners are not reimbursed for driving expenses, such as gasoline, depreciation, or insurance. Once all costs are subtracted, hourly wages quickly fall, often to far below minimum wage levels."[830] These new informal working arrangements have radically altered the labour market: more than a third of U.S. workers participate in the gig economy.[831] That constitutes 59 million people and research suggests "52% of gig economy workers lost their jobs because of the COVID-19 pandemic."[832] It reflects what David Harvey says has been:

> [..] the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial centres of global capitalism.[833]

Songs by the likes of JAY-Z, the Notorious BIG and their contemporaries still have something to offer in today's economic landscape. By detailing the processes, rationalisations, and behaviours that the internalization of the neoliberal work ethic entails they offer both cautionary tales and exemplars of the hustler mindset. Frequently they "hide the grim realities" of neoliberal subjectivity by foregrounding its sense of agency, independence and self-sufficiency. On occasion they articulate the negative effects of

[829] Prassl, *Humans As a Service*, 69.
[830] Prassl, *Humans As a Service,* 60-61.
[831] T.J. McCue, "57 Million U.S. Workers Are Part Of The Gig Economy," *Forbes*, August 31, 2018,
[832] Igor Mitić, "Gig Economy Statistics: The New Normal in the Workplace," *Fortunly,* August 16, 2021,
[833] Harvey, *A Brief History*, 119.

relentless hustling and grinding and the feelings of precarity and disillusionment this kind of work generates. The increased precariousness of the modern labour experience is predicated on the fact that "the gig-economy platforms' business model is universally based on near-instant recourse to a large pool of on-demand workers: the 'crowd', looking for their next 'gig'."[834] It thereby mimics a key feature of the economics of the drugs trade: a large pool of ready and able substitute workers whose constant availability supresses wages and ensures constant competition and precarity. More and more people are becoming their own boss, but not necessarily through choice. In the way that neoliberalism divests responsibility for social and economic success or failure from systems of governance to the capabilities of the individual, so the gig economy divests itself of the traditional responsibilities of employer to employee. 'Be your own boss' is also 'we are no longer responsible for your wellbeing.' The "independent entrepreneur" which Prassl describes is denied the security of worker benefits such as sick pay, holiday pay, medical insurance, guaranteed hours, or any kind of length of service bonus. These are all absent within the zero-hour contract age as they are within the drug trade. Over the past three decades the regular economy has come to resemble the drug economy to a greater degree than it did in 1990. Given the continued erosion of workers' rights, many people will be able to recognise greater slices of their working life in the kinds of drug dealer rap discussed in this thesis. The Amazon delivery driver who is paid in direct relation to how many parcels he can deliver in a day, who doesn't have a paid lunch hour, and who is technically not an employee of any company can surely empathise with lyrical descriptions of "the grind." Much like the drug dealer rapper, his rewards are given in direct proportion to how many hours he is willing or

[834] Prassl, *Humans As a Service,* 13.

able to work. Hip-Hop has increasingly become part of the pop music mainstream but there are still artists like Young Thug telling the story of drug dealing and allegorising it as living under the conditions of the neoliberal economy.[835]

The similarity between the neoliberal organisation of labour and the drugs trade is made explicit on the Pusha T track "Drug Dealers Anonymous" (2016).[836] The single features JAY-Z, who raps:

> Drug dealers anonymous
>
> Y'all think Uber's the future, our cars been autonomous
>
> Mules move the drums, take 'em to different spots
>
> We just call the shots by simply moving our thumbs

The Uber driver is likened to a drug mule, a low paid worker who transports cargo at the behest of a more senior or powerful figure. This analogy is given added credence when we consider that JAY-Z owns shares in Uber worth $70 million.[837] As someone who knows the business of Uber and – as evidenced throughout his discography and this thesis – also knows the business of selling illegal drugs, his blending of the two worlds in this song strikes at the individuating neoliberal forces at work in both. Much like his 'Rap Game / Crack Game' dialogue, as someone with intimate knowledge of both businesses, his decision to combine the two is illuminating.

Elsewhere in the verse JAY-Z references his criminal past:

[835] see Murs' "Three Lane Theory," *Hip Hop DX,* YouTube, August 21, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEbl1xKfmOI.
[836] Pusha T ft. JAY-Z, "Drug Dealers Anonymous," 2016. GOOD Music.
[837] O'Malley Greenburg, "Artist, Icon, Billionaire."

14-year drug dealer and still counting

Who deserves the medal of freedom is my accountant

He been hula hooping through loop holes, working around shit

IRS should've had the townhouses surrounded

His claim that it takes accountancy tricks to make his money work suggests (improbably) that there is a possibility he is still making money from illicit activities. The more plausible explanation is that his accountant is "working around shit" such as taxes on income and investments. JAY-Z evidences his status as a rentier capitalist: he is happy to exploit the labour of "mules" and simultaneously attempts to unburden himself from the pro-social activity of redistribution through taxation. JAY-Z has correctly stated that "Hip-hop from the beginning has always been aspirational."[838] In his vignettes of drug dealing on an album such as *Reasonable Doubt* (1996) he laid out an aspirational route from corner boy to drug lord. Twenty years later we might read his boasts as aspirational for the "mules" who drive Ubers. If they hustle and put themselves to work, through judicious decision making and investment in their human capital, one day it might be their thumbs that are able to "call the shots."

"I'm living in that 21st century, doing something mean to it / Do it better than anybody you ever seen do it:"[839] Avenues for further study.

[838] O'Malley Greenburg, "Artist, Icon, Billionaire."
[839] Kanye West, "POWER," *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, 2010. Roc-A-Fella.

Hip-Hop's engagement with the gig economy shows that lyricists are still able to articulate the conditions of working in a poorly regulated competitive space, just as they did to an even greater degree with the drug market of the late twentieth century. As my comments on the gig economy demonstrate, the nature of legitimate employment has changed demonstrably in those three decades. What impact might that have on how performers narrativize the selling of drugs? We might expect to see an increase in references to the kinds of technology JAY-Z alludes to regarding Uber. The first year of the new millennium was the first to register a dip in global record sales.[840] Hip-Hop journalist Travis "Yoh" Phillips has described the appearance of peer-to-peer sharing sites such as LimeWire and Napster as "a gift for the kids growing up on the internet – truly our gateway drug into music – but it was a curse to the music industry." The Recording Industry Association of America reported that "U.S. recorded music sales fell to $7.7bn in 2009 from $14.5bn in 1999."[841] Further study might consider the ways in which the already contested and protean concepts of labour, ownership and authorial control within Hip-Hop lyrics are problematized further by such platforms and their role in the music industry's declining profits. Meanwhile, the democratic nature of music upload platforms such as SoundCloud and Garage Band has provided many acts with an avenue in to the music industry that might otherwise eluded them.[842] It is not inconceivable that these changes might amplify some hustler narratives – unknown acts making it big off a self-published mixtape, for example – whilst diminishing others; it is harder to liken selling music to selling drugs if music can be obtained for free on the internet.

[840] Travis "Yoh" Phillips, "LimeWire: The Wrong That Felt So Right," *Best Damn Hip Hop Writing: The Book of Yoh* (New York: Superchamp Books, 2017), 21.
[841] Phillips, "LimeWire: The Wrong That Felt So Right" 20.
[842] Spence, Stare in the Darkness, Loc 2695.

Cornel West, writing upon the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency claimed that "the age of Obama was the last gasp of neoliberalism."[843] The "neoliberal era" he stated had "ended with a neofascist bang." If West is correct in his estimation – and I would contend that he is not – then comparison between the kinds of hustler narrative analysed in this thesis and more contemporary hustler tales produced 'after' the neoliberal era might yield significant conceptual differences. Allied with this must be an understanding of the ever-changing nature of drug markets and interdiction. In 2018, Attorney General Jeff Sessions asked federal prosecutors to pursue the death penalty for drug trafficking offences.[844] This kind of draconian punishment was proposed forty years earlier by Drug Czar William Bennett in the lead up to the passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act.[845] This retrenchment, along with the return to black economic nationalism advocated by JAY-Z, suggests that the neoliberal project has reached the end of its cycle, or at the very least needs to synthesize a new way by which it might inject value into its market principles. What does this mean for the drug dealing songs being produced against this backdrop? How do the narrative hustlers of today describe their 'work' and in what ways do they develop and reflect on the behaviours of their forebears? As 50 Cent asked on his track "Hustler" from the album *Animal Ambition: An Untamed Desire to Win* (2014): "I'm a hustler, baby (can you dig it?) I'm a hustler, baby (say what?)"[846]

[843] Cornel West, "Goodbye, American Neoliberalism. A new era is here," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/17/american-neoliberalism-cornel-west-2016-election.
[844] German Lopez, "Read: Jeff Sessions's memo asking federal prosecutors to seek the death penalty for drug traffickers," *Vox*, March 21, 2018, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/21/17147580/trump-sessions-death-penalty-opioid-epidemic.
[845] Ira Glasser and Loren Siegel, "When Constitutional Rights Seem Too Extravagant to Endure," in *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, Reinarman and Levine eds., 231.
[846] 50 Cent, "Hustler," *Animal Ambition: An Untamed Desire to Win*, 2014. G-Unit.

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