FROM TRICKSTER TO BADMAN TO “GANGSTA”:
GLOBALIZING THE BADMAN MYTHOFORM IN HIP-HOP MUSIC

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by
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Abstract

While a vast amount of hip-hop scholarship has focused on the proliferation of rap music within contemporary national contexts, little research has been conducted on the ways in which rappers have capitalized transnationally on each other’s national histories and folklore in their music. As a counterpoint to this dominating presentism in current hip-hop scholarship, my project analyzes how the mythological figures of the trickster and the badman, key characters in numerous African-American traditional narratives, have dramatically influenced the modes through which authenticity and notions of communal agency have shaped hip-hop in the United States, France, and Kenya. I show how and why these figures that first emerged in U.S. hip-hop have been extensively reproduced in Kenyan and French rap music. In this fashion, my dissertation tracks the formation and articulation of these tropes in hip-hop music and reveals the extent to which they are symptomatic of key moments in the history of the United States, France, and Kenya.

The figure of the trickster has survived for centuries in African-American music, mainly because of each subsequent generation’s ability to reinvent it in their own image as well as accommodate it to their own social predicaments. During slavery, trickster tales emerged as ontological modes of cultural resistance through which Africans could cope with the physical and ideological realities that had been imposed on them. In the 1890s, the trickster tales that had been popularized during slavery evolved into what was to be known as badman heroic figures. The figure of the badman as an outlaw was the antecedent of the “gangsta” persona that later appeared in hip-hop culture.
It is only through an exploration of this genealogy that the global cultural translations in contemporary hip-hop become historically intelligible. My project thus seeks to analyze how the badman trope, through its multiple manifestations in both “conscious” and “gangsta” rap, has been appropriated by French and Kenyan hip-hop artists.
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All the songs and texts in French and Swahili quoted in this study have been translated by me, unless otherwise indicated. The lyrics in each citation represent not more than ten percent of entire songs. More extended versions of these songs can be found on the websites indicated throughout the dissertation.
Introduction

From Trickster to Badman to “Gangsta”:

Globalizing the Badman Mythoform in Hip-Hop Music

Hip-hop music emerged in the 1970’s amidst the harsh realities of the Bronx. The face of the borough had drastically changed in the 1960’s when many factories and business relocated to other sites, leaving a high rate of unemployment, crime and drug abuse in the area. It was in this environment that hip-hop developed at house parties and other venues. Before becoming one of the most profitable businesses in the media industry, hip-hop was mostly confined to the “underground” world of music (Watkins 9). Since its birth, hip-hop has been expressed through different forms of artistic performances. These include breakdancing (or b-boying), MCing (or rapping), DJing, graffiti spraying, and beatboxing. Rap can be defined as one’s ability to speak rhythmically in verse. According to Onwuchenkwa Jemie, rapping “is basically a monologue, lively in style, colorful in language, rich in images, intended to persuade or give information, or to exhibit oratorical skills before an approving audience, whether the audience is limited to the person or persons being addressed or includes some sideliners” (41). DJing describes the art of using several turntables to create and mix desired sounds from a repertoire of music recordings while beatboxing is characterized by an often improvised production of vocal percussions.

The composition of a hip-hop performance can involve one or more of these artistic genres. For example, a hip-hop show can be comprised of a DJ who produces and mixes different sounds, a rapper who raps over the DJ’s music, and a breakdancer who dances to the sounds produced by the DJ and the rapper. In this sense, designating someone as a “hip-hop artist” can refer to one or all of these genres of performance. In this study I will primarily use the term hip-hop in reference to the performance of rapping.
Following its birth in the Bronx hip-hop has since become one of U.S.-America’s most popular cultural exports. Hip-hop culture and music have become popular in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa. A growing list of scholars have examined the specific ways in which this music genre acquires different locally distinct characteristics as it is arrogated by marginalized communities in different national contexts. However few works have studied the role of traditional African-American folkloric figures in the popularization and appropriation of the music genre among oppressed groups in the world. Yet I contend that it is by studying how folkloric figures, emerging from African-American oral traditions, have influenced the poetic structures of hip-hop music, that we can understand why this music genre has acquired its global popularity—specifically among disenfranchised people. As hip-hop is diffused in many places around the world it becomes important to comprehend not only how it has spread but also why it is so easily appropriated. One way of answering these questions is by examining particular elements within hip-hop that are the most reproduced as artists across national contexts localize the music genre. One of those elements is the badman, a figure that has deep roots in African-American oral traditions in the United States.

The goal of this study is to seek answers to these broad questions by a) analyzing the birth of hip-hop and the rise of the badman as a figure rooted in African and Afro-American narratives, in particular those that focus on the concept of authenticity and communal agency, and b) by learning how the figure of the badman has been incorporated into local cultures in France and Kenya. There are several reasons for choosing France and Kenya as discursive sites of analysis. First, as hip-hop spreads around the world, differences in local conditions lead to divergent
manifestations of the music genre in Western and non-Western countries. France and Kenya offer the possibility of learning why hip-hop has been able to develop in Europe and Africa, two continents with distinct cultural traditions. Second, France is the largest market for hip-hop music outside the United States and therefore serves as an excellent example of the music genre’s diffusion. Third, Kenya is an African country that has developed one of the most vibrant forms of hip-hop by drawing on both African and Western languages and cultures. Though hip-hop is heard in many African countries, Kenyan hip-hop offers a critical model of the ways in which the music genre was appropriated in East Africa as well as other regions on the continent.

In both France and Kenya, many young people have used rap music to address their sense of alienation and marginalization. The growing presence of hip-hop culture in these two countries offers evidence for a comparative analysis, revealing common characteristics that have contributed to the global proliferation of the music genre. Nonetheless, insights emerging from this project are not unique to France and Kenya. They offer instead a critical point of departure from which one can begin to examine the cultural processes that facilitate the diffusion of hip-hop music in many other locations. In order to examine the significance of the badman in the global propagation of hip-hop music, it will be important to analyze not only how it emerged in the U.S. context but also how contemporary hip-hop culture largely owes its aesthetics to this figure. Given the role of the United States as the source of hip-hop, I will devote chapter 1 and 2 to a genealogical exploration of the evolution of the badman in African-American oral culture. These two chapters will serve as the basis for the comparative analysis of French hip-hop in chapter 3 and Kenyan hip-hop in chapter 4.
As previously mentioned, the badman figure is central to the global diffusion of rap music. Through its multiple manifestations in both “conscious” and “gangsta” rap, the badman has been appropriated by French and Kenyan hip-hop artists as a means of addressing socio-political issues. The character emerged during specific moments of social turmoil in the African-American community and was later adopted both by African immigrants in France, who have often been treated as second-class citizens, and by Kenyan youth facing poverty and unemployment as well as age-based forms of discrimination. The figure of the badman, popularized in the late nineteenth century in the United States in Blues songs (Roberts 180), was typically portrayed as an outlaw whose persona epitomized hypermasculinity as well as a sense of iconoclasm vis-à-vis dominant structures of power. Badmen appear often as pimps and gangsters in the Blues as well as in hip-hop music. They usually display an ambivalent sense of morality towards social norms that seem to constrain their actions or goals. However, badmen do not necessarily always have a destructive influence over their communities. Their defiant stance towards figures of authority adjoined to a repressive state apparatus can also reflect heroic ideals of social resistance.

Aside from the Blues and hip-hop music, badmen have also been popularized in “Blaxploitation” films such as Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetbacks Baadassss Song* (1971), Rudy Ray Moore and D’urville Martine’s *Dolemite* (1975), and Gordon Parks’ *Shaft* (1971). The use of the word “bad” in “badman” has its origins in the phrase “bad niggers,” which was often used by slaveholders to refer to slaves they considered dangerous and rebellious (Jeffries 106). For African Americans in bondage, the rebellious nature of the “bad nigger” was turned into an admirable quality due to the
symbolic image of resistance embedded in the term. Being perceived as a “bad nigger” henceforth became a “badge of honor” among black slaves. Jeffries explains that “when one is referring to a ‘ba-ad’ nigger, the more one prolongs the ‘a,’ the greater is the homage” (106). The word badman therefore receives its iconoclastic connotation from the subverted meaning of the term “baad nigger.”

Badman tropes are of course not unique to African-American culture. They can be seen in many Western films. The gangster films of the 1930s also portrayed heroic badmen whose representations questioned the morality of capitalism in the face of the Great Depression. Nonetheless, the popularization of the figure within African-American music and folklore speaks to particular experiences of marginalization encountered by blacks in the United States.


While authors such as Cecil Brown and Alo Colleen Nef have described the ways hip-hop artists appropriate badman personae, few scholars, investigating the globalization of the music genre, have paid attention to the popular reproduction of this figure in other contexts. Yet well-known French rappers such as NTM have used the poetics of the badman in their performances in order to critique the French government for its social and economic exclusion of banlieue communities. In Kenya, members of
the hip-hop collective Ukoo Flani Mau Mau have similarly employed badman tropes in their contemporary explication of the Mau Mau struggle for freedom (1952-1960). An examination of the cultural interpretations of the badman mythoform in both French and Kenyan hip-hop reveals the extent to which its appropriation is central to notions of “authenticity” commonly expressed in rap music. Such an exploration also contextualizes the global popularization of hip-hop by examining how its dissemination has been facilitated by particular tropes that have easily become translatable across cultural contexts.

In this study, my examination of the cultural interpretations of the badman mythoform across national contexts in hip-hop music will be guided by the following questions:

1. What role did the badman mythoform play in the emergence of hip-hop in the United States?
2. Why and how has the badman mythoform been produced and reproduced in Kenyan and French hip-hop?
3. How have the badman mythoform and the ways in which it expresses authenticity, influenced American, French and Kenyan hip-hop artists/activists? In other words, how has the trope of the badman impacted the styles through which these artists approach various global and local problems in their music and community projects?
4. How have the effects of media consolidation and the globalization of mediascapes, defined as media images, ideoscapes, which encapsulate the dissemination and appropriation of ideologies, and financescapes, the global flow of capital markets, impacted representations of authenticity in hip-hop music?
Outside the United States, scholarship on representations of authenticity in hip-hop has focused to a large extent on issues of race and social class. Tony Mitchell’s *Global Noise* (2002), Alain Philippe Durand’s *Black, Blanc, Beur: Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in the Francophone World* (2003), as well as Mwenda Ntarangwi’s *East African Hip-hop: Youth Culture and Globalization* (2009), have examined rap music in specific national or geographic contexts. These authors have revealed the ways in which the music engages with themes such as poverty, alienation, and second-class citizenship. But, few scholars have conducted comparative studies on the manner in which articulations of authenticity from the United States have contributed to the growing propagation, popularization, and appropriation of hip-hop among disenfranchised communities in other countries such as France and Kenya. In this project, I will examine expressions of authenticity not as a stable representation that can be “discovered” or apprehended from the perspective of a given epistemology but rather as an unstable and performative discourse that is administered, policed, and deployed by hip-hop artists. In this context, authenticity can be analyzed in terms of its rhetorical use not simply as a trope but also as a strategy, a template, a self-image and an analogy to the concept of *double consciousness* as developed by W.E.B. Du Bois. The shifting approaches used to describe and examine expressions of authenticity throughout this project are themselves a symptom of the dynamic instability of the phenomenon. The dissertation therefore traces the ways in which the poetics by which discourses of authenticity are expressed in French and Kenyan hip-hop have largely been borrowed and in the process transformed from the U.S. cultural context in which they emerged.

As will be shown, French and Kenyan hip-hop artists often make references to the lyrics and styles of well-known African-American rappers in their songs. The hypertextuality embedded in their works can therefore be explored better through a comparative approach
grounded in the cultural performance of hip-hop in each of the three countries, starting from the United States. This approach will lead to an examination of the cross-cultural signifying strategies employed by Kenyan and French hip-hop artists. My analysis of the manner in which French and Kenyan artists “signify” upon American hip-hop lyrics and tropes such as the badman in their music is of course partially borrowed from Henry Louis Gates’ critical approach to analyzing African-American literature and folklore in *The Signifying Monkey*. The practice of signifying generally refers to the act of mimicking something transformatively. In this sense, meaning is continuously deferred or altered for different purposes through the practice of signifying. Using a post-structuralist approach, Gates examines the manner in which African-American writers have tended to tranformatively signify upon earlier authors as a rhetorical strategy. Gates’ analysis of signifying strategies as hypertextual literary devices offers useful ways of understanding cultural appropriations of hip-hop. My examination of French and Kenyan hip-hop will hence reveal how many rappers in both countries proclaim their authenticity by signifying upon badman tropes made popular by African-American artists. This is not to say that badman tropes are the only means by which authenticity is expressed in rap music. The goal is rather to launch an inquiry into the significant role played by badman tropes in expressions of authenticity in the contexts of U.S., French, and Kenyan hip-hop. The song lyrics selected for this project highlight not only the ways in which hip-hop theorizes itself but also exemplify the variety of rhetorical methods through which badman tropes have been employed.

In the United States, many works, including Bakari Kitwana’s *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop* (2006), Tricia Rose’s *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008), Imani Perry’s *Prophets of the Hood* (2004), Davarian Baldwin’s “Black Empires, White Desires” (2004), Murray Forman’s
“Represent: Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music” (2004), as well as Jeffrey Ogbar’s *Hip:Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (2009), have examined the expression of authenticity in hip-hop culture. The obsession with authentic “realness” in hip-hop is widely expressed in the language of the art form. Popular terms that circulate in hip-hop, such as “representing” or even “keepin’ it real,” convey a need to exalt the realities of the local spaces from which the art form emerged. The phrase “just keepin’ it real” generally refers to “talking openly about undesirable or hard-to-hear truths about black urban street life” (Rose 134). In hip-hop culture, the notion of “keepin’ it real” is often used either by those who seek to distance themselves from hyper-commercialized and commodified forms of hip-hop that they consider to be “inauthentic,” or by defenders of mainstream rap music in particular who, in an attempt to justify the misogyny and neo-minstrel images in the music, contend that the art form simply depicts the realities of inner cities. In both cases the notion of “keepin’ it real” is frequently employed to “prove hip hop’s role as a truth teller, especially the truths about poor black urban life that many people want to shove under the rug” (Rose 134). There is a correlation between “truth telling” and being “authentic” to the extent that lying is equated to various forms of “falsehood” or “misrepresentations.” Following this logic, being “real” or “representing” for the community is thus interpreted as a sign of authenticity.

The quest for authenticity in hip-hop has also surfaced as a nostalgic attempt to recapture or return to a bygone “old school” era. In *Prophets of the Hood*, Perry posits that hip-hop offered a nostalgic music that has often paid homage to its origins through the sampling of songs from as far back as the 1960s (54). Hip-hop emerged in part from a creatively compiled and mixed pastiche of soul records among other African-American musical genres, especially Soul. Hip-hop has often been ontologically nostalgic and at times experimentally avant-garde at the same time.
Nostalgia, as an authenticating device, is sometimes employed, as Perry argues, to counter “the commodification and commercialization that comes along with the mainstream appeal that threatens notions of community and authenticity in hip hop” (55). Hip-hop artists authenticate their art by “signifying” or transformatively alluding to the musical tradition that preceded them, hence placing themselves within a historical continuum. Forman explains that they are also required to be successful “on the home front first, where the flow, subject matter, style and image must resonate meaningfully among those who share common bonds to place, to the posse and to the hood” (208). In this field of cultural production, hip-hop musicians have been compelled to acquire their cultural capital through their relationships to the local community in the hope of forging an aura of authenticity.

Debates about authenticity or “being real” have been simplistically reduced, in the mass media, to esoteric analysis of the level of profanity and misogyny in rap lyrics. However, scholars such as Davarian Baldwin have also revealed that there sometimes exists a class division between African Americans who consume mainstream hip-hop and those who listen to its “socially-conscious” counterpart (Negus 532). According to Baldwin, disagreements over what is “authentic hip-hop” have often oscillated between two audiences. The first is the middle class section of the African-American community that tends “to support what is understood as ‘positive rap’ because of its Afrocentric rhetoric and/or political awareness” (160). The second includes “‘Ghetto-centric’ advocates who defend the explicit lyrics as reality-based and resent the possibilities of censorship as a dilution of the authentic realness of black experiences” (160).

Much of hip-hop research has focused on the supposed division between “the ghetto surreal and the politically conscious” (Neal 59) in an attempt to analyze depictions of authenticity through performances of “realness” (59). In *Hip-Hop Wars*, for example, Rose
examines the manner in which the media consolidations that preceded the Telecommunications Act of 1996 have negatively impacted the variety of hip-hop in the mainstream media. She traces the polarization that developed between “politically conscious” hip-hop and its “mainstream” counterpart and relates this split to the effects of media consolidation. According to Rose, the political economy of mass media industries has given birth to dissenting artistic voices in hip-hop, often called politically conscious, that have tried to find a place for themselves outside of the mainstream media. In *Hip-Hop Matters*, Watkins offers the same conclusions by analyzing the hip-hop industry since its inception. Other works, including Jeffrey Ogbar’s *Hip-Hop Revolution*, have placed the concept of “realness” or “keepin’ it real” at the locus of their analyses by contextualizing these representations in the realities of inner cities. But these kinds of analyses, while insightful, have often glossed over some of the cultural traditions that are responsible for the ways in which notions of authenticity have been formed in hip-hop music. It is important to examine what concepts such as “keepin’ it real” tell us about the community in which they were conceived, as well as the realities and ideologies that were manufactured and culturally projected as a result of particular historical circumstances—realities and ideologies that have manifested themselves in hip-hop. I will thus analyze not only the worldview in which authenticity is articulated but also what conditions and traditions contributed to this perspective.

The gritty realism or the “gangsta realism” that is often embedded in hip-hop genres such as “gangsta rap” can be better comprehended by analyzing not only the systemic structures that brought about the realities of inner cities, but also, and just as importantly, the communal traditions and body of ideas that have influenced hip-hop as an art form. Here, I will argue that the tropes through which discourses of authenticity are performed in U.S. hip-hop music are an epiphenomenal symptom of what W.E.B DuBois described as double consciousness. The
emergence of such symptomatic tropes can be traced back to the trickster and badman heroic figures that have existed in African-American music and folklore since the dawn of North American slavery. For this reason, it is useful to begin by focusing on:

- Du Bois’ notion of double consciousness,
- The emergence and social significance of African-American badman narratives.
- How these two concepts, double consciousness and the badman motif, are vital to understanding the expression of authenticity in hip-hop culture.

While both Imani Perry and Jeffrey Ogbar provide a background in their works on the cultural roots from which hip-hop emerged, they only mention briefly the significance of the badman motif in hip-hop culture. This motif and especially its relationship to double consciousness have rarely been explored at length in hip-hop scholarship in relation to performances of authenticity. But I contend that this relationship is important to understanding the ways in which hip-hop artists have tackled issues of authenticity. The approach I am appropriating in this study contextualizes contemporary practices in hip-hop within historical and ideological genealogies. This approach has been employed by Houston Baker in his work *Blues Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984). Baker’s analysis of the manner in which African-American literature (both in its written and oral form) transformatively expresses and engages with the realities, and the logic of social and economic structures from which it stems, provides a useful framework for conducting a comparative analysis of U.S.-American, French, and Kenyan hip-hop.

The objective here will therefore be to show how and why badman figures that first emerged in U.S. hip-hop have been extensively reproduced in Kenyan and French rap music. The evidence presented will reveal the extent to which the emergence of the trickster and the
badman are symptomatic of significant moments of social struggles in the history of the United States, France, and Kenya.

I will therefore not limit my examination of discourses of authenticity in hip-hop music to contemporary urban realities. Instead, I will view the performance of “authenticity” as a continuum that stems from a folkloric tradition as well as past and present systemic structures of oppression. A study of the evolution of certain forms of African-American cultural productions and ontological postulations that have preceded and influenced hip-hop will give more insight into the artistic modi operandi employed by rap musicians to address contemporary socio-economic and political forces affecting their immediate communities and the world at large.

In the first two chapters, I will analyze the relationships among hip-hop, politics, media consolidation, gender, social activism, and globalization through discourses of authenticity. The goal is to show how hip-hop artists navigate through these interrelated fields through expressions of authenticity. Authenticity emerges here as a method of tackling social phenomena while being a social phenomenon itself. The study of representations of authenticity in hip-hop culture reveals some of the vectors in the propagation and popularization of hip-hop around the world—especially in the disenfranchised communities of France and Kenya.

An examination of hip-hop lyrics provides examples of different ways in which authenticity is expressed in the music genre. As Alexs Pate contends in his book In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap (2012), rap “is an important link in the evolution of African-American literature, and just as significant, an accurate and compelling window into black consciousness” (xv). The lyrical dimension of rap music will thus help uncover the manner in which double consciousness generated a need to recreate trickster and badman heroic figures who influenced discourses of authenticity in hip-hop culture. In this study I will then examine
verbal art as literature. In *East African Popular Songs: Verbal Art in States of Transformation* (2007), Aaron Rosenberg contends that not only must we analyze popular songs as significant parts of literary traditions but we must also acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between oral and written forms of literature. Rosenberg argues that the “the potency of oral expression […] provides a foundation for verbal art in written forms” (6). He explains that “popular songs, for instance, may be written down in both musical notation and words. They may be performed live or recorded and sold to the public as CDs, long-playing records, or cassettes” (6). I will therefore treat hip-hop lyrics both as the key to understanding the performative oral dimensions of the music genre and as examples of a distinct genre within the larger context of African literature, written and oral.

The lyrics will reveal the ideologies that have impacted rap music. Ideologies in this context cannot simply be seen as the external by-products of certain social conditions but rather as operating *with* and *within* given social realities. As George Lukacs puts it, “ideological factors do not merely ‘mask’ economic interests, they are not merely the banners and slogans: they are the parts, the components of which the real struggle is made” (58). Here double consciousness is the source or the reason for the emergence of an ideological form of cultural resistance performed through the badman folkloric figure as well as through the gangster image in hip-hop.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) W. E. B. DuBois describes double consciousness as a condition rooted in the African-American experience of being divided into a state of “two-ness,” stuck between two realities. According to DuBois, “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (9). DuBois posits that this double vision is the state in which one looks at “one’s self through the
eyes of others” (9), the oppressor’s worldview, while simultaneously attempting to conserve an older and more empowering self-image that does not negate his or her existence as a human being. It is an experience that arises out of a state of exclusion-inclusion, to borrow Agamben’s term, of being part of American society without having equal access to the civil rights that have been naturally conferred upon other citizens. In this context, being an African and an American produces two antagonistic identities. According to DuBois, this dual state can be reconciled only through a dialectical synthesis. He argues that:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellow, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly on his face. (9)

DuBois advocated a synthesis in which a new state of being emerged from this dual place of consciousness, one that would require a reconfiguration of societal norms leading to the full rights of citizenship for African Americans. The concept of double consciousness is of course not unique to the African-American experience. One finds this notion used in postcolonial theory by authors such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi. In addressing double consciousness, Fanon, for example, posits that the self-image communally created a priori or before colonization does not necessarily present itself dialectically as a counterpoint to the pejorative self-image of the
colonized that was constructed by the oppressor. In *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) he contends that:

> Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some people will argue that the situation has a double meaning. Not at all. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. From one day to the next, the Blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own. In the twentieth century the black man on his home territory is oblivious of the moment when his inferiority is determined by the other.¹ (89-90)

The black man cannot, at this juncture, practice his being for himself while being for the oppressor at the same time. From Fanon’s perspective, the pre-colonial systems of meaning in which the self-images of the “natives” were constructed cannot survive because the oppressed is, in this context, unaware of the “moment when his inferiority is determined by the other” (90). The oppressed has come into being within the oppressor’s worldview, one that has denigrated an older and more self-empowering value-system constructed *a priori*. From this position, the dialectic movement of consciousness oscillates between the oppressor’s thesis that asserts the inferiority of the oppressed and the negation of this thesis, at first articulated via cognitive tools borrowed from the oppressor’s reality. From this point of view, the duality of consciousness seems to operate at first within the oppressor’s system of reference or reality. In the following passage Fanon elaborates on this dual and antagonistic state of consciousness, which he characterizes as neurotic:
I have two ways of escaping the problem. Either I ask people not to pay attention to the color of my skin; or else, on the contrary, I want people to notice it. I then try to esteem what is bad—since, without thinking, I admitted that the black man was the color of evil. In order to put an end to this neurotic situation where I am forced to choose an unhealthy, conflictual solution, nurtured with fantasies, that is antagonistic—inhuman, in short—there is but one answer: skim over the absurd drama that others have staged around me; rule out these two elements that are equally unacceptable; and through the particular, reach out for the universal.²

(174)

Fanon’s synthesis at the culmination of his dialectic postulates a universal category of “man.” Indeed, he intentionally echoes Jean-Paul Sartre’s position in Black Orpheus (1948) where, pointing to Negritude as a simple moment of negation rather than an end (Fanon acknowledges this dialectic with much grief in Black Skin White Masks), Sartre contends that “Negritude appears as the weak stage of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as antithetical vale is the moment of negativity” (59). But this moment of negativity can only be ephemeral since it “is dedicated to its own destruction, it is transition and not result, a means and not the ultimate goal” (60).

According to Sartre, Negritude ultimately paves the way for “the synthesis or the realization of the human society without race” (60).³ I will later show throughout my analysis of American, French, and Kenyan rap, how similar discussions surrounding the ontology and agency of the oppressed have been generated in the poetics of hip-hop lyrics.

In spite of their varying positions on double consciousness, both Fanon and DuBois put forward the notion of a dialectical teleology in which the oppressed get to experience their being
in their own terms. DuBois describes this process as a longing “to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (9)—thus becoming a being-for-himself rather than a being-for-others. It is through the notion of being-for-one’s-self or becoming a “truer self,” (to use the words of Du Bois) that authenticity as a concept has often been articulated—especially, as will be seen later, within African-American ontological postulations.

In *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger brings together the relationship between being-for-one’s-self and being-for-others, connecting it to the idea of authenticity. Heidegger argues that “with the lostness in the they, the nearest, factical potentiality-of-being of Da-sein [or the temporal self] has always already been decided upon […] the they even conceals the way it has silently unburdened Da-sein of the explicit choice of these possibilities. It remains indefinite who is ‘really’ choosing”—in other words, the potentiality of one’s being has already been decided upon when one is a being-for-others (249). Being-for-others, or to use Heidegger’s terminology “the lostness in the they,” can only be overcome when “Da-sein thus brings itself back from the they, the they-self is modified in an existential manner so that it becomes authentic being-one’s self” (248). Being-one’s-self is henceforth described as “authentic” while “the lostness in the they” is defined as an “inauthentic” state of being. By “deciding for a potentiality-of-being,” Da-sein (the temporal self) begins to exercise “its authentic potentiality-of-being” (248). Following this logic, the exercise of one’s authentic potentiality of being is therefore a creative act as it is not conditioned by a predetermined future.

A similar rationale echoes in Georg Lukacs’ writing. Lukacs contends that it is not only necessary for the oppressed man to comprehend the present as becoming but it is also necessary for him to see “in it the tendencies out of whose dialectical opposition he can make the future. Only when he does this will the present be a process of becoming that belongs to him” (204).
Here (as with Sartre and Fanon) the Hegelian dialectic, in which a relational series of causative stages are predetermined following a method, is thus transformed into a blueprint from which one can actualize one’s own non-predetermined potentiality of being. Agency is in this case not located within the individual’s capacity to transform or alter the dialectic in question but rather in his or her ability to intervene within a pre-existing dialectic.

Formulations regarding the authenticity of one’s being have of course been common in Marxist discourse, where inauthenticity is reflected in the idea of an internalized “false consciousness” propagated within a superstructure that is maintained by the ideology of the ruling class. Such formulations have also been present in the works of “postcolonial” critics such as Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, or even in Albert Memmi’s *Portrait of the Colonized* (1957) where the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is examined at length. In this context, it is vital to take notice of the manner in which authenticity has been constructed as being-for-one’s-self and inauthenticity as being-for-others. Indeed, we find that this way of articulating authenticity has also been pointed out by Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator and social activist, in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). In formulating his theory of liberation, Freire comes to the following conclusions:

The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic [my emphasis] beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be “hosts” of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the duality in which to be is to be like, and to be like the oppressor, this contribution is impossible. The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical
discovery that both they and their oppressor are manifestations of
dehumanization. (48)

Authentic being is therefore the oppressed’s ability to break away from the oppressor’s reality that has been internalized in order to forge a parallel system of meaning, one that rhetorically and ideologically provides more agency. Formulated in this context, the question of authenticity then emerges as an ideological battle that African-American slaves would have had to engage in as captives in a foreign land. In contemporary African-American society, authenticity thus becomes a phenomenon that not only exalts local spaces, vernaculars and other forms of communal representation in hip-hop culture, but also one that gestures towards the experiences of being “Black” in America and the modes or methods in which these experiences have been grappled with throughout the years in African-American folklore and music.

My intention here is not to exalt the ideas of Heidegger, Lukacs, or Fanon as universal critical tools from which an analysis of hip-hop music can be examined, but rather to demonstrate the ways in which the issues and critical postures that many African-American rappers adopt in their music have also been articulated in other contexts. It is precisely by observing how different marginalized communities from diverse national contexts respond similarly to diverse forms of political and economic exclusion through hip-hop that this study constructs its comparative approach. Questions about the possibilities of individual agency performed within or as a negation of normative structures generated by social and cultural institutions are of course not unique to Heideggerian discourse, but are also engendered poetically in American, French and Kenyan hip-hop lyrics. In this project, it will be important to examine the manner in which authenticity is communicated through badman tropes against a background of particular histories and socio-political contexts. This background will encapsulate
descriptions of the historical formation of French national identity and its impact on integrationist and exclusionist immigration policies. It will also highlight the role of the Mau Mau movement in the contemporary imagination of Kenyan artists. Expressions of authenticity will therefore be analyzed as rhetorical responses to social issues ranging from the prison industrial complex in the United States and second class citizenship in France to youth unemployment and poverty in Kenya. Nonetheless, the goal of this project is not simply to identify performances of authenticity through badman tropes in U.S., French, and Kenyan hip-hop but also to elaborate on the manner in which an analysis of these representations leads to a deeper understanding of why hip-hop has become so popular in numerous places around the world. In other words, this project identifies particular poetic elements stemming from the music genre in order to explain why they have become easily translatable across nations and cultures. While this dissertation engages itself in conversation with scholarship on Francophone and East African hip-hop, such as Durand’s *Black, Blanc, Beur* (2002) and Aggrey Wetaba’s *Kenyan Hip-Hop as a Site of Negotiating Urban Youth Identities in Nairobi* (2009), it also differentiates itself from these works by mostly focusing on specific forms and moments of cultural appropriation using a comparative methodology. The purpose here is not merely to outline the manner in which Kenyan and French hip-hop have developed into distinct musical sounds and expressions that are different from the U.S. variety, as many other authors have demonstrated, but rather to investigate the political and economic significance of particular cultural exchanges. In lieu of decentering U.S. hegemony through a given critical approach, this analysis, on the contrary, examines the ways in which the effects of this cultural pervasion permeate discourses of resistance in French and Kenyan hip-hop.
In the first chapter I will investigate the relationship between double consciousness and the badman motif in African-American folklore before shifting to an analysis of its contemporary manifestation in hip-hop music. The second chapter will focus on the popularization of badman tropes among marginalized inner city communities in the United States during the later part of the twentieth century by examining the emergence of the prison industrial complex as well as the rise of neoliberal economics. The analysis conducted in the first two chapters will provide a framework from which a comparative analysis of U.S., French, and Kenyan hip-hop can be conducted. The third and fourth chapters will focus on the cultural appropriation and significance of badman tropes in French and Kenyan hip-hop. While most of the chapters in this dissertation follow a specific chronology, the first section of chapter one has been positioned anachronistically. This section briefly outlines the theoretical tools that form a foundation for analyzing the cultural exchanges involved in the global propagation of hip-hop music. Such a foundation subsequently contextualizes the genealogy of the evolution of the badman figure from its emergence in the United States to its transformational dissemination in France and Kenya through the medium of hip-hop music.
Chapter 1

From “Badman” to “Hustler”: Double Consciousness and Authenticity, from African-American Folklore to Hip-Hop

A) Contextualizing the Propagation of the Badman Mythoform in Globalization Theory

The desire to relate local histories of marginality to other experiences of social inequity around the world is, in many ways, a typical rhetorical and political maneuver that has been repeated by many groups and historical figures. W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, argued that “the physical bond” as well as “the badge of color” that binds oppressed groups is less important than the “social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insults. [This heritage] binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa” (1915, 565). By the same token, Richard Wright’s involvement in Présence africaine, “the journal that attempted to bring together the thinking of Africans and
Africanists with that of American, Caribbean, and European blacks” in order to explore “their similarities and differences,” similarly echoes an attempt to connect and relate different marginalized groups to each other (Gilroy 151). It is by analyzing how the discursive practices produced in specific marginal spaces are propagated, appropriated and translated across cultural and national contexts that we can begin to lay the theoretical framework for understanding the global proliferation and popularization of hip-hop and in particular the badman mythoform.

Arjun Appadurai’s schema for examining the complexity of global cultural exchanges by fragmenting different dimensions of globalization provides a useful means to understand the processes through which several forms of cultural production are transferred from one national context to the other. In Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (2003) Appadurai distinguishes “five dimensions of global cultural flows that can be termed (a) ethnoscapes, (b) mediascapes, (c) technoscapes, (d) financescapes, and (e) ideoscapes” (33). According to Appadurai, ethnoscapes are “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, etc…” (33). Mediascapes can be defined as the global dissemination of information and media images through “electronic capabilities” (35). Technoscapes alludes to the global flow of technology that is “both high and low, both mechanical and informational” and that “moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries” (34). Financescapes represents the global connectedness of capital markets (35). Finally, ideoscapes encapsulates the “concatenations of images” and ideas that are “often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it” (36). These categories interact with each other symbiotically as well as disjunctively. One may also find cultural and social processes that fit into more than one category of “scapes.”
It is by further expanding on Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* that Appadurai frames the notion of *imagined worlds*—a concept that describes the ways in which worlds, social realities, and identities are collectively imagined and shared within intranational and across international boundaries (33). Appadurai contends that “many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds (and not just in imagined communities) and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them” (33). Through its global proliferation hip-hop has acquired an array of interactive intercultural processes that demonstrate the complex disjunctive and symbiotic relationships between ideoscapes, ethnoscapes, mediascapes, financescapes, and technoscapes. For example, Appadurai’s schema can be used to analyze the collaborative rap song composed by Keny Arkana, a French rapper of Argentinean descent, and Monsieur R, a French rapper of Congolese origin, entitled “De Buenos Aires à Kinshasa” (From Buenos Aires to Kinshasa, 2008). In this song Keny Arkana and Monsieur R assume the personae of Che Guevara and Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Congo (1960). The song describes an imaginary meeting between the two iconic political figures.

**From Buenos Aires to Kinshasa**

**Che Guevara**

1958, Batista is overthrown,

It has been 7 years since the Cuban revolution began,

The human revolution that we thought was developing […]

No borders in this fight for life,

It’s for all those who are oppressed by imperialism and its tyranny, […]

I therefore go to meet the incorruptible of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba against the Belgians and their schemes!

(My translation; the full lyrics of the song can be found at: http://www.13or-du-hiphop.fr/parole/keny-arkana-de-buenos-aires-a-kinshasa-feat-monsieur-r-189.html)

The first section of the song features Keny Arkana impersonating Che Guevara’s voice. It is important to understand the manner in which the formal poetic structures embedded in rap music easily lend themselves to this kind of performance. Many hip-hop songs are sung in the first person. Rappers often impersonate voices or characters who are not always necessarily their own. These characters they embody are often symbolically imbued with forms of cultural capital that are widely influential among the performer’s target audience. In this song, both Che Guevara and Patrice Lumumba emerge as powerful symbols of political resistance against larger structures of power. There is a dual purpose to the use of the first person narrative structure in the context of hip-hop performances: first, it gives the performer the ability to testify on behalf of the community he or she claims to represent, second, the assumed persona authenticates the legitimacy of the narrative.

The practice of testifying (or testifyin) has a long history in African-American verbal art and specifically in the black church. Personal testimonies are often used within this tradition to reify a belief system and make claims upon the nature of reality through the prism of particular experiences. This tradition has also influenced the formal structure of rap songs. In the context of Keny Arkana and Monsieur R’s song, both artists, through their use of personal testimonies, seek to make claims upon the realities of imperialism as well as highlight the need for a particular form of global solidarity. It is by appropriating the voices of globally recognized anti-colonial
figures that they intend to legitimize their narrative. In the first segment of the song we therefore hear Che Guevara give a personal testimony about the historical events that compelled him to travel to the Congo. In the process, the song therefore invites its listeners to occupy the role of an imagined global audience who, like Che Guevara, can claim a sense of solidarity with people fighting imperialism and predatory forms of capitalism in various national contexts. While neither Monsieur R nor Keny Arkana are African American, in order to convey their message they have employed an art form that has deep roots in African-American oral traditions. This oral tradition, including the discursive structures that it engenders, becomes easily translatable across cultural contexts.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the content of this song and its form. The conversation between Patrice Lumumba and Che Guevara is not only depicted in the manner in which they make references to each other and ultimately talk directly to one another, it is also formally portrayed in the organizational structure of the song, which initially separates the voices of Lumumba and Che Guevara into different stanzas each organized along a series of couplets. The dialogue between the two iconic characters is thus poetically aestheticized according to the song’s rhyming scheme. It is by examining the relationship between form and content—specifically the method through which the message of the song becomes aesthetically exteriorized in the medium—that one can begin to understand the specific ways by which hip-hop becomes culturally translatable. As previously mentioned, the fact that rap songs often construct narratives in the first person, in addition to the symbolic capital that designates the music genre as the urban language of the dispossessed, makes it easy for those seeking to document their marginalized reality, those seeking to project their voices from the catacombs of invisibility, to appropriate hip-hop as a medium.
The song further exemplifies the complicated relationship between ethnoscapes, ideoscapes, and mediascapes. It weaves together a concatenation of scapes through its multiple layers of signification, both within the content of the lyrics as well as the composition of artistic talents that helped compose the song. Both Keny Arkana and Monsieur R are descendants of the late 20th century waves of immigrants who came to France. Born in France (1982) but of Argentinean parentage, Keny Arkana has become one of the most vocal voices of the French “alterglobalization” movement. Monsieur R, however, was born in Belgium (1975) before he moved to France in 1989. His parents are originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Together, Keny Arkana and Monsieur R typify the impact of hip-hop music in the French ghettos. While Keny Arkana had her rap debut in the immigrant-populated banlieue of Marseille, a social milieu that has inspired many of her songs, Monsieur R launched his career by rapping about the realities of life in the impoverished Parisian suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis to which his parents had moved.

The hip-hop collaboration between Monsieur R and Keny Arkana epitomizes the confluence of ethnoscapes and mediascapes. At the same time, it symbolizes the convergence of diverse diasporic communities on French soil. Through the influence of globalized media representations of African-American culture (mediascapes) both artists turned to hip-hop music to articulate a shared sense of reality. The lyrics of the song illustrate the revolutionary impetus and the ideoscapes that framed anti-imperialist movements from Cuba to the Congo as well as the manner in which narratives of social struggle have been translated and appropriated across national boundaries. In this context the song details the ways in which the Cuban revolution aroused the imagination of many Africans who sought to liberate themselves from the shackles of colonialism and neo-colonialism.
Of course, Che Guevara did travel to the Congo, but he entered the country only in the aftermath of Patrice Lumumba’s assassination (1961) in an attempt to overthrow the U.S. and Belgian-backed forces of Mobutu Sese Seko, who had supplanted Lumumba’s government. It is by impersonating Che Guevara that Keny Arkana articulates his global vision—one that has facilitated the propagation and appropriation of his mythologized persona by people involved in various struggles of liberation around the world. The imagined dialogue between Che Guevara and Patrice Lumumba mirrors the contemporary exchange between Keny Arkana and Monsieur R. The song contextualizes and reinforces their common identity as members of diasporic ethnic minorities in France by forging a shared historic background of social struggle that mitigates their differences while highlighting themes that bind them.

The phrase “un pueblo unido, jamás será vencido” (a people united will never be defeated) in the chorus of the song further demonstrates how slogans and ideas that are produced within the spaces of local struggles are translated across national and international contexts. The slogan was originally popularized in the title of a Chilean song composed by Sergio Ortega (Rzewski 453-456), a member of the Nueva Canción Chilena (The New Chilean Song), a politicized music movement that supported the presidency and populist ideas of the late Chilean president Salvador Allende (Broughton, Ellingham, and Trillo 365-366). The slogan has since been appropriated by a wide range of activists and social movements around the world. For example, in his seminal work Decolonizing the Mind, the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o employs the slogan as a means to highlight its cultural translatability within local languages and struggles when he contends that “the classes fighting against imperialism […] have to speak the united language of struggle contained in each of their languages. They must discover their various tongues to sing the song: ‘A people united will never be defeated’” (3). Similarly, the
slogan in the last stanza of the song, “let’s be realists let’s demand the impossible,” was first uttered by Che Guevara and later used in the May 1968 student protests in France.

Through the multiple layers of signification that are embedded within it, the song thus manages to capture the histories and trajectories of different ideoscapes, mediascapes, and ethnoscapes that form its composition. As an artistic genre that was given birth within marginal spaces, hip-hop emerges as the vessel in which the confluence of ideoscapes and ethnoscapes that articulate various experiences of social struggle can coexist. As James Smethurst explains, “hip-hop allows the figuring of class and class consciousness through a model of class identification that is multiracial or cross-racial” (81). As I will show throughout this chapter, this model of class identification transcends existing notions of race and can also cross cultural and national boundaries. Here “class identification and the creation of a feeling of class community are often created indirectly by a cultural form that has gained a sort of class association” (Smethurst 77). The tropes that have been developed within hip-hop music—tropes that include the badman mythoform as well as the sense of authenticity that this figure engenders—also influence the ways in which voiced notions of class identification in hip-hop are performed across cultural contexts. Halifu Osumare explains that “connective marginalities” are phenomenological manifestations of social inequities that emerge from different places in the world (64). These global counter-cultural manifestations of resistance to social inequities can be thematically taxonomized by social class, youthful rebellion and historical oppression (64). Many youth across the globe typically challenge the inherited social inequalities they experience through popular culture (Osumare 64).

According to Osumare, hip-hop culture thus “instigates global connections of understanding about various peoples’ marginal status at the local level” (64). An examination of
the trajectories and interactions among various scapes informs us of the manner in which new connections and forms of identification are constantly being created and reconstructed. As Stuart Hall posits, this “makes us aware that identities are never completed, never finished; that they are always as subjectivity itself is, in process” (74). It is through these dynamic processes that new forms of connective marginalities are imagined.

The dissemination of hip-hop in France provides a powerful example of the cultural processes through which marginalized groups interact and appropriate each other’s language. The biography of Philippe Fragione (aka Akhenaton), one of the founding figures of French hip-hop in Marseille, illustrates how hip-hop emerged in France through transnational interactions among various ethnoscapes. Fragione’s grandparents migrated from Naples in Italy to find work in France. His family soon settled in the ghettos of Marseille, a place that is home to a diverse community of immigrants. There he was born and raised in a one-income family by a single mother (Bocquet 187). Throughout the eighties Fragione made frequent trips to New York, Connecticut, Florida, and California in order to visit members of his extended Italian family who had settled in the United States (116). It was through his visits to the United States that he begun to frequent and develop close bonds with African-American hip-hop musicians in Brooklyn. Fragione recounts his experiences there in José-Louis Bocquet’s seminal biography on French hip-hop entitled *Rap ta France*.

The second time that I went to New York, DJ Jeckyll told me to come one night for a concert on a boat that went around the city. As a seventeen year old teenager I had a shock. I was sitting at a table with Mr Hyde and Russel Simmons (the hip-hop mogul) who had just begun to create Def Jam. We talked about rap, about Marseille, because we were French, we presented an opportunity for them. They
asked us if the Riviera was beautiful, they did not even know that there were blacks in France.\(^5\) (Bocquet 116)

It was during his extended stays in Brooklyn, when he interacted with many prominent figures in hip-hop, that Fragione developed a fascination for the genre. He explains that, by living in some of the most impoverished and violent places in New York City, he came to understand how the social milieu in which hip-hop emerged had impacted the form, style, and content of the music.

Remembering his experiences in New York City, Fragione explains that:

One evening, an armed man robbed a store in-front of me. To me this had become a “normal” event. You tell yourself, if they shoot each other and die, it is normal. I understood people who live there. It’s not that rap engenders violence. Violence was already there, rap arrived, rap talks about what exists. Rap channels violence.\(^6\) (118)

It is these experiences that Fragione brought back with him when he returned to Marseille. Once home, Fragione sought to articulate the harsh realities of impoverished communities that dwell in the banlieue of Marseille by using hip-hop music. As a music genre, hip-hop had a distinctive lower social-class identity with which he identified and which he appropriated to document the realities of the disenfranchised community in which he grew up. It is difficult to find a more striking example of global cultural processes and interactions than the tale of a French man of Italian origin who went to visit his extended family in the United States. There he discovered, appropriated, and imported an African-American form of musical expression, which resonated with the melting pot of Italian, Spanish, Greek, Arab, and Sub-Saharan African communities in the ghettoes of Marseille. Fragione became a founding member of I AM, a group that helped
pioneer the popularization of French hip-hop and establish Marseille as one of the most well-known cities in the region to have incorporated hip-hop within its culture.

The appropriation of hip-hop in French spaces of marginality can perhaps best be described by the term “glocal.” In Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture, Roland Robertson explains that the term “glocal” was first “developed in particular reference to marketing issues as Japan became more concerned with and successful in the global economy […]” (174). The term originally referred to the means through which commodities that were sold on a global scale could be particularized with local traits in order to appeal more directly to local communities. Halifu Osumare elaborates on Robertson’s synthesis of the global and the local by contending that “indigenous people are not mindless consumers of Western goods, services, and pop culture, but, in fact, are proactive participants in this global transfer by reinscribing new meaning into imported ‘foreign’ commodities” (66). The “glocalization” of hip-hop music describes the manner in which the genre adapts “to its new environment through a localization process that serves that culture’s own social issues and cultural priorities” (66). In this case, the foreign good being appropriated is rap music.

Monsieur R and Keny Arkana’s rap song provides us with one example of the ways in which hip-hop music becomes culturally arrogated across cultural contexts. More specifically, the song also demonstrates how the inscription of “new” cultural content and meaning can be facilitated by the poetic structure of the music genre as well as its symbolic capital. In the song both Keny Arkana and Monsieur R assume the personalities of “badasses.” That is to say that both artists lyrically embody symbolically powerful revolutionary figures that fit certain conventional traits ascribed to badmen in the African-American community. As previously mentioned, badmen are regularly presented as hypermasculine characters who are often ready to
boldly subvert larger structures of power and conventions which threaten either their interests or those of the communities they support. From this perspective, the badman simultaneously captures the rebellious attitude stemming from the gangster who disregards moral conventions and laws as well as the grassroots activist or revolutionary who attempts to dismantle a system. Badman tropes are of course not unique to the African-American community. Nonetheless, it is the fact that these tropes have affected the formal structures of hip-hop performances, which precisely facilitates the translatability of the music genre across marginalized communities.

In this context, it is crucial to understand the badman not simply as an abstract trope, but rather as a *mythoform*, that is to say, a trope whose significance depends on a rhetorical history of transmission. It is by means of this diachronic process that standardized archetypes and narrative structures become the locus through which social values and interpretive worldviews can be disseminated in time and space. Of course, the words “mythoform” and “trope” both allude to a given process of formalization. According to Molefi Asante, “myth is most pervasive as mythoform, the all-encompassing deep generator of ideas and concepts in our living relationships with our peers, friends, and ancestors. A productive force, it creates discourse forms that enable speakers to use cultural sources effectively” (108). From this perspective, the archetype of the badman in rap music emerges as a discourse form stemming from a specific mythological tradition. This discourse form has incorporated a diversity of cultural sources through the global diffusion of hip-hop. Asante contends that the function of myth in the African-American community is both etiological and eschatological (113). African-American myths are etiological because they contain an epistemological posture that offers a causal interpretation of reality (113). It is by uncovering the “truth” of that reality that they capture the African-American experience (113). They are also eschatological when “the idea of hope and
possibility rises on the shoulders of an imaginative African-American mythology that sees the future as brighter than the present” (113). In order to understand how and why the badman, as a discourse form, has been assimilated in France and Kenya, it is necessary to begin by tracing its genealogy in the African-American mythological tradition. In the next section of this chapter I will trace the evolution of the badman mythoform, beginning with an analysis of its emergence from the tradition of trickster tales to an examination of its adaptation in hip-hop music.

B) The Emergence of the Trickster and the Badman as Symptoms of a Cognitive Duality

During the era of slavery, authenticity emerged as an ontological mode of cultural resistance by which Africans could cope with the physical and ideological realities that had been imposed on them. The folklore traditions that they had brought from the African continent provided cultural platforms from which they could articulate their social conditions and interpret them in a way that preserved their humanity. One way to analyze the manner that African slaves defined and rationalized the situation into which they were thrust, is to examine the heroic depictions of certain protagonists in their folklore. In From Trickster to Badman, John Roberts contends that “heroes act within boundaries defined by our perception of immanent social needs and goals” (2). They are often depicted either “to cover cracks in the basic structure of [a] culture [or to offer] an ideal image of itself, [an image that is] projected as if it were actual” (2). In the African-American community, the trickster tale traditions, where anthropomorphized animals were often imbued with heroic traits, were, of course, in many ways similar to those that had developed on the African continent (17).
It was through trickster tales that black captives attempted to address the dehumanizing conditions of slavery. According to Roberts, the trope of the animal trickster helped the slaves “maintain the value traditionally placed on native intelligence as a source of behavior for protecting physical and social well-being” (Roberts 35). As a typically smaller animal who always managed to fool larger and more powerful creatures in the community, animal tricksters “served as an expressive mechanism for transmitting a perception of cleverness, guile, and wit as the most advantageous behavioral options for dealing with the power of the slave masters in certain generic situations” (38). The tale of “The Signifying Monkey” which inspired the work of Henry Louis Gates emerged from this tradition. In this particular tale, the monkey is able to transformatively mimic the elephant’s voice in order to deceive the lion and ultimately create a confrontation between the two powerful animals.

This “double voiced discourse” is based on the trickster’s dual cognitive ability to assume and articulate the dominant language of power constructed in a reality where he is hierarchically inferior, while also tacitly pushing forth an agenda that seeks to affirm his own agency within the “political” structures he inhabits. The use of the animal trickster as a trope testifies to the ways in which double consciousness emerged as slaves sought to forge an identity for themselves in their folklore. Roberts explains that while African-American slaves, like the trickster, depended on their own ingenuity in order to survive the realities of slavery, they also relied upon the master’s pejorative perception of them as sub-human beings—which they exploited as “important aids to success in their on-going struggle” (39). Just like larger animals (who were duped in these tales) often underestimated the trickster and frequently fell victim to their own predatory needs, slave masters blinded themselves to the possibility that they could be outsmarted by their slaves (39).
The trickster tales thus highlight the slaves’ ability to navigate between the slave masters’ worldview and their own. The tricksters’ victims are duped because of the tricksters’ ability to see themselves through the eyes of others, while simultaneously maintaining an “authentic” self-image that they have constructed for themselves and through which their subversive actions are performed. Certainly, as Roberts argues, slaves always faced the danger of accepting the shared reality that the master had manufactured. Nevertheless, as Roberts explains, “the actions of the trickster revealed the solution to the dilemmas created by existence in a socio-cultural environment in which trickster and dupe could suddenly reverse their roles” and this solution “was to always remember one’s cultural roots” (42). The trickster tales, which featured animal characters such as Br’er Rabbit, therefore revealed in the slaves a desire to resist through wit and trickery “a value system that they had no reason to accept as a guide for action or as a reflection of their identity” (43). It was through the trickster’s character that the badman motif, so prevalent in hip-hop culture, later appeared.

Through time, the animal trickster and the dupe were replaced by John, the human trickster, and the Old Master. The exact period in which this occurred remains unknown. Nevertheless, Roberts informs us that the situations that these tales depicted suggest that they originated during the era of black chattel slavery (44). In these tales, John the human trickster was depicted as “a talented and skillful exploiter of his exploitation by Old Master, his dupe or foil in most of the rules” (53). Roberts posits that despite the fact that John the trickster often tried to “take advantage of his position of intimacy and trust with Old Master for his own personal gain, his humanity, or more precisely, his potential as a human being, is often an implicit issue in the tales of his exploits” (53). Enslaved Africans thus discovered that they could exploit their master’s pejorative view of their humanity to their own ends and this attitude was
reflected in their folklore (56). The slaves were thus keenly aware of the ideologies that justified slavery—ideologies which they subverted in their folklore. Alongside the trickster, one also found the image of the conjurer, a figure who employed his supernatural spiritual knowledge as a means to “challenge the master’s power” (95). The conjurer held a significant position in the African-American community. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Frederick Douglass describes an incident in which he uncharacteristically enters into a physical confrontation with the slave master after being given a protective “ROOT” by Sandy the conjurer (76). Roberts explains that “in many instances, enslaved Africans, believing that they were protected by the power of a conjurer’s spell, embraced actions that they otherwise would never have attempted” (101-102). The conjurer thus provided an ideological source of agency whose performative dimensions could be acted out in real life situations. This agency was constructed within a parallel worldview—one that was an ideological residue from certain African traditions and value systems that had been maintained and transformed throughout the years. In *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy analyses Douglass’s emancipation through the conjurer’s spell by framing it in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. Gilroy posits that while Hegel’s slave “submits to the conqueror’s version of reality,” Frederick Douglass, as a slave, “prefers the possibility of death to the continuing condition of inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends” (63). I however argue that the agency produced by the conjurer offers a means to resist the slave master’s reality. In this case, it is not so much that the slave chooses death, as Gilroy would have it, but rather that he chooses a different reality through which he can not only reconstruct his humanity but also empower himself with a system of meaning that gives him control over his destiny. The presence of the conjurer as a heroic figure in African-American folklore exemplifies the way in which these tales functioned as ideological modes of resistance.
After the institution of slavery came to an end in 1861 and post-emancipation-Jim Crow-America slowly unfolded, the tales of John the human trickster were soon replaced in the 1890s by badman heroic figures such as Railroad Bill, Stackolee (or Stagolee), John Hardy, Harry Duncan, and Devil Winstons (173). The appearance of these figures testified to the transformation of John the human trickster into characters that could reflect better the new social conditions that African-Americans encountered in the aftermath of their “emancipation.” Indeed, blacks soon discovered that the positive behavioral traits attributed to John the trickster were now criminalized or outlawed in the new world in which they found themselves. The figure of the badman as an outlaw or a “gangsta,” as he later appeared in hip-hop culture, stems from these historical and cultural forces. As Roberts puts it, although badmen were often portrayed as outlaws who compulsively broke the law, “their acts of lawlessness were conceptualized within a tradition of folk heroic creation that African-Americans recognized and accepted as normative expressions of their heroic ideals” (173).

Under these new conditions the manner in which the figure of Old Master was, for example, replaced by Old Boss suggests an attempt by emancipated slaves to project and compare the newly legalized forms of oppression they encountered in the workplace and society as a whole to the ones that they had previously experienced (Roberts 187). It should be noted that during this period, the law was used as one of the primary institutional tools of oppression against the African-American community (186). At this juncture Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of the outlaw as a homo sacer might help shed some light on the relationship between the badman motif and double consciousness: 7

Let us observe the life of homo sacer, or of the bandit, the *Friedlos*, the *aquate et igni intercuts*, which are in many ways similar. He has been excluded from the
religious community and from all political life: he cannot participate in the rites of his *gens*, nor (if he has been declared *infamis et intestabilis*) can he perform any juridically valid act. What is more, his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditioned threat of death. (181)

Just like DuBois’ portrait of the African in America, the condition of the *homo sacer* is one of exclusion-inclusion, of being part of a society but not belonging to it as a citizen with rights. As is the case of the *homo sacer*, African Americans could be killed or in this context lynched with impunity, because the law which has the authority to grant “inalienable human rights” to citizens of a given nation-state (the law that transforms Zoë, biological life, into *Bios*, political life), had relegated them to the status of second-class citizens. Theirs was thus a situation in which they were banished from engaging in certain civil activities while being an integral part of American society—a condition that engendered the double consciousness cited by DuBois. The representation of the outlaw through the badman motif exemplified the ways in which African Americans could see themselves as they had been projected within the realities of Jim Crow segregation. It also alludes to the manner in which they were compelled to manufacture the persona of their heroic figures outside of the legal structures that oppressed them. The badman is therefore a symbolically meta-juridical figure who puts the law, as an ideological state apparatus, under a microscope by questioning its credibility. I will later demonstrate how the “gangsta” trope that is often used as a signifier of authenticity in hip-hop music was similarly employed as
a response to the prison industrial complex that has continuously preyed on the African-American community.

The deployment of hypermasculine tropes as a symbol of power within the badman mythoform partly stems from the ways in which rituals of domination and authority on Southern plantations were sexualized and “directly reflected masculine values” (Fabre & O’Meally 208). Plantation owners often used sexual terrorism as a means not only to control black and white women but also in order to assert their authority over “men within the subordinate class” (208). In *History and Memory in African American Culture* (1994), Fabre and O’Meally contend that in many literary works by black male writers, “white men’s access to black women becomes the emblem of racial oppression which inevitably spurs violence […] The black women’s violation by a white man is seen not as her submission but as the white man’s act of aggression against the entire race” (213). These historicized intersections between masculinity and power certainly influenced the ways in which badmen were also seen to express their agency.

Badman characters often presented themselves as a synthesis of the trickster and the conjurer. Roberts explains that “the black conjurer tradition, especially the belief that the Devil was the source of the conjurer’s power, assumed a central role in the black conception of the badman as folk hero in the late nineteenth century” (200). As will be seen later, the reappearance in “gangsta” rap music of the conjurer as a badman who acquired supernatural powers from the devil testifies to a contemporary manifestation of this tradition. The natural habitat of badmen was in the saloons and gambling establishments that many newly-freed black slaves often frequented. The characterization of badmen as “bad” stemmed from the “secular anarchy” that was associated with recreational venues frequented by free African Americans (Roberts 203). As Roberts confirms, the tales of badman characters emerged from the ballads that were sung “in
social contexts such as bars and saloons where the lifestyle and character types portrayed in them would have been well-known” (209). In the badman folkloric tradition, the figure of Stakolee (sometimes pronounced as Stagolee) is one of the most notorious badman personalities whose supernatural powers partly stem from a pact with the devil that required him to sell his soul (201).

In “The Godfather of Gangsta,” Cecil Brown traces the manner in which Stagolee’s character not only influenced the thug image that has dominated gangsta rap but also helped create MCing or rapping as an art form. The ballads of Stagolee recount the tale of a pimp, Stagolee, who shot a man in an argument over a hat “in the red light district of St. Louis in 1895” (Brown, www.daveyd.com). According to Brown, Stagolee’s tale has been recorded by hundreds of blues and jazz musicians, including Cab Calloway, Jimmy Dorsey, Peggy, Lee Duke Ellington, Jack Dupree, Sonny Terry, and John Hurt. Brown contends that the emergence of Stagolee’s character coincides with the appearance of the Blues in the 1890s. The tale was first narrated “as a field holler of former plantation slaves, who carried it with them as they migrated to the work camps along the Mississippi” (Brown). The character of Stagolee was inspired by a man named Lee Shelton who was a pimp and the “leader of a group called the Stags” (Brown). According to Brown, Lee Shelton “was a slum hero, reigning in an area called Deep Morgan, one of the few places in the city where blacks and whites could commingle, and where blues, ragtime and ‘coon songs’ had their origins” (www.daveyd.com). It was in this social context that Shelton shot a man by the name of Billy Lyons.

The murder of Billy Lyons was significant in the mythologization of Lee Shelton as Stagolee the badman. Brown informs us that Lyon belonged to a clan that was loyal to the Republican Party, which at the time enjoyed strong support among the black bourgeoisie. Lee
Shelton or Stagolee represented a growing number of working class African Americans who had joined sides with the Democratic Party. Cecil Brown reveals the political significance of this murder, explaining that during the 1890s in St. Louis, many African Americans sought political protection in exchange for their vote. Both the Republican and the Democratic Party relied on the black vote in order to win elections. While a majority of African Americans voted Republican at the time, during the summer of 1896 many discontented black voters—“unhappy that the national Republican Party ignored their interests”—switched their allegiances to the Democratic Party (Brown). Cecil Brown explains that “this break owed much to the black pimps in St. Louis. Under the guise of ‘sporting’ clubs, frequently called the 400 Clubs, pimps, saloon-keepers, and gamblers exerted voting power for the Democratic Party. Some saloon-keepers represented the ‘unofficial’ Democratic Party.” The pimps and saloon owners emerged as a political force seen to be connected not only to the grassroots in general but especially to the downtrodden of society. The pimp was thus portrayed as an iconoclastic figure whose position outside of an oppressive legal structure provided the most visceral symbol of social resistance. An example of this can be drawn from an interview that Cecil Brown conducted with Bobby Seal, the leader of the Black Panthers, who often used the image of Stagolee to attract new members. In this interview Bobby Seal explicated that Stagolee symbolized black resistance. Seal further contends that “Stagolee was a bad nigger off the block and didn’t take shit from nobody […] 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” (Brown).

The reference to Malcolm X as the embodiment of a type of politicized badman and its effects on hip-hop music will be explored in the next section of this chapter. For the present, it is
useful to analyze how Stagolee influenced both the content and the form of hip-hop music. In the
propagation of tales in which Stagolee emerged as a prominent figure, a new form of narrative
technique known as the “toast” emerged in the 1960s (the toast, also known as the Jamaican toast, was popularized in hip-hop music by DJ Kool Herc). The “toast” was essentially a story
told in the first person that was recited in verse. Brown explains that “in telling the Stagolee
legend as a toast, the speaker takes on the role of Stagolee. He begins to incarnate the character
of the hero he is rapping about. Asserting themselves as bullies and bad men, young black men
‘perform’ Stagolee.” The “toast” was thus a performative gesture in which the artist not only
identified with the badman but also became him in the moment of performance, in the process
giving him a sense of power and charisma (Brown, www.daveyd.com).

Brown confirms that the “toast” became “the basic form that the oral poets, the first hip-
hoppers, adopted. During the 1980s, the first rhymers of rap took Stagolee to heightened levels”
(Brown). As hip-hop evolved, rappers employed the structure of the “toast” in order to deliver
their own personal narratives (Brown). Stagolee’s influence in hip-hop music can therefore be
seen in the use of the first-person narrator, the adoption of nicknames and alter-egos, and the
tropes of conspicuous consumption and commodity culture (Brown). While commodities such as
the Stetson as well as Zoot suits were used during the 1890s as symbols of black male status, in
the 1990s ghetto black youth similarly appropriated unique clothing styles such as baggy pants
and exalt jewelry, cars, clothes, and women as “signifiers of success and wealth” (Brown). The
term as well as the concept of the “mack” as used in contemporary hip-hop music can be
genealogically traced back to the 1890s cliché of the St. Louis mack that Stagolee once
personified (Brown). As Brown explains, “it is not just the mack who is revived, but the women
who will do anything for him, including sell their bodies. The girls rappers talk about are whores, or ho’s just as they were back in the pre-industrial ballads of Stagolee.”

When used as signifiers of authenticity, the images of hyper-masculine, consumerist and misogynist rappers point towards the evolution of a folkloric tradition that was initially used as a cultural mode of social resistance. It was a way to construct both imaginary and real models of behavior through which their harsh and oppressive socio-economic and political environments could be exploited to their advantage. In analyzing Stagolee we can therefore see how the figure of the trickster has survived for several centuries, mainly because of each generation’s ability to reinvent him in their own image as well as accommodate him to their own social predicaments. Indeed, one of the most famous contemporary manifestations of the badman conjurer to whom the devil granted supernatural powers can be found in the following passage of rapper Snoop Dogg’s 1994 hit song titled “Murder was the Case.” The song begins as paramedics are trying to revive the rapper who has just been shot:

As I look up at the sky […]
My body temperature falls
I’m shakin and they breakin tryin to save the Dogg […]
A voice spoke to me and it slowly started sayin’
“Bring your lifestyle to me I’ll make it better”
How long will I live?
“Eternal life and forever”
[…]
“I’ll make your life better than you can imagine or even dreamed of
So relax your soul, let me take control”
(The full lyrics of the song can be found at:

http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/snoopdogg/murderwasthecasedeathaftervisualizingeternity.html)

As a self-professed member of the Crips gang, Snoop Dogg depicts the violent realities of drive-by shootings and other gang-related activities—realities which are also symbolized in his persona as a former gang member. The chorus of Snoop Dogg’s song, “murder was the case that they gave me,” also refers to a specific murder charge for which the rapper was tried and acquitted in 1996. The song—also featured as the soundtrack to a short fifteen-minute film by the same title that starred Snoop Dogg—ushers its listeners into the violent world the rapper claims to inhabit, or in this case, a world in which he has just been shot. In an attempt to save his life, Snoop Dogg sells his soul to the devil, who in turn brings him back from the dead and provides him with wealth and fortune. Here, the representation of supernatural forces which the protagonist employs—through the devil’s help, in order to change or alter the oppressive surroundings he inhabits—makes him a more recent manifestation of the badman conjurer. In the blues, the devil certainly also plays a vital role in emphasizing Stagolee’s “badness.” For example, Stagolee is said to have acquired supernatural powers by selling his soul to the devil as a child (Roberts 201). Additionally, in one version of the folktale, having been executed for the crime of murder, Stagolee goes to hell where he displaces the devil as the ruler of the underworld. The devil, in these contexts, emerges as the \textit{deus ex machina} by which the badman gains his glory in the Stagolee folktale as well as in Snoop Dogg’s rap song. In other words, the emergence of the devil into the narrative allows the badman protagonist to overcome incredible obstacles such as death or the disgrace of being captured and executed for murder, and therefore resolves an impasse in the plot.
The song is accompanied by tense and suspenseful beats that dramatize the narrative. The dramatic repetition of the word “murder” in the chorus instills a gloomy and omnipresent sense of danger into the song. In this way, the devil’s dangerous and ubiquitous presence is represented not only in the lyrics but also in the musical background through which the narrative unfolds. The omnipresent and therefore inescapable presence of the devil is also compared to the prison industrial complex. Towards the end of the song, the protagonist reneges on his deal with the devil in order to recover his soul and ultimately finds himself in jail. In the same way that specific events which take place beyond the protagonist’s control lead him to relinquish his metaphysical freedom by selling his soul to the devil, his material freedom is also taken away from him by higher institutional power structures that he cannot fight. The song dramatizes various forms of movement: this includes Snoop Dogg’s movement from life to death and back to life again, in other words from the physical to the metaphysical realm of existence, as well as material forms of movement from freedom to jail or even from poverty to wealth.

As previously mentioned, the images of wealth and fortune that the devil has provided in the song are juxtaposed to the violent space of the ghetto. The commodities that the protagonist acquires are reflective of his ability to escape or at least successfully survive the ghettoized milieu in which he was born. Here commodity fetishism is thus a yearning for a nebulous upward social mobility that has been denied to many.

This song provides an example of how tropes of excess, such as hyper-masculine posture as well as expensive cars and jewelry, are often used in hip-hop to express notions of power and agency rooted in the oppressive and poverty-stricken realities of many ghettoized communities. This desire for social agency manifested in tropes of consumption is also reflected in the song’s narrative structure. The first person perspective used in the song places the narrator/rapper at the
center of the world he describes. It allows him to become visible in the context of larger social structures that have rendered him economically invisible. Economic invisibility translates into one’s limited ability to engage with the world as a consumer in a society that is driven by and relies on hyper-consumption. The narrative structure of the song therefore captures the yearning for visibility and masculine power expressed through tropes of conspicuous consumption. But there is also a different kind of hip-hop that chooses to experience its agency through much more politicized modes of social protest. And this kind of hip-hop also owes its political discourse to badman tropes in the ballads of Stagolee.

C) The Badman and the Afrocentric Aesthetic: Examining Discourses of Psychic Conversion through the Stagolee Mythoform

Through the influence of badman figures, two genres of hip-hop music emerged: gangsta rap (which will be analyzed in part three of this chapter as well as in the second U.S. chapter and the third French chapter) and “socially conscious,” Afrocentric hip-hop, which I will examine in this section. The line between these two styles of hip-hop can sometimes be difficult to discern. This is not to say that Afrocentric discourses stem from the badman tradition—they do not. Afrocentricism, in its own right, is the manifestation of a countercultural tradition which, like the badman, has its own modes of signification. However, many “conscious” rappers typically convey Afrocentric themes through badman tropes. It is therefore important to examine the manner in which these two types of social phenomena, Afrocentricism and the badman mythoform, relate to each other.
The two genres of hip-hop: one that glorifies the ghetto hustler, the other a socially conscious one that seeks to communicate a political message, find common ground in the rhetoric of African-American figures such as Malcolm X. It was through the style of his rhetoric that Malcolm X transformed the street hustler from an outlaw seeking personal gain to one whose contempt of the law could be used to dismantle both ideological and repressive state apparatuses that propagated unjust and oppressive social structures. Many of the tropes expressed in Afrocentric hip-hop stem from the image of the politicized street hustler. In order to comprehend the significance of the badman as a street hustler in Afrocentric hop-hop music, it is fruitful to examine how this figure has been employed as a symbol of authenticity by people such as Malcolm X, whose iconoclastic image influenced many hip-hop artists seeking to address socio-political issues both in their lyrics as well as in their community projects. Certainly, as the lengthy recording transcribed below demonstrates, Malcolm X’s now famous contrast between the “house negro” and the “field negro” exemplifies the ways in which the ontological dichotomy of being for one’s self versus being for the other has shaped the frames through which authenticity has been viewed in the African-American community. At this point it is useful to quote at length an excerpt of Malcolm X’s speech on the subject in order to examine its significance.

Back during slavery when black people like me talked to the slaves they didn’t kill him, they sent some house Negro along beside him to undo what he said. You have to read the history of slavery to understand this, there was two kinds of Negroes, there was the house Negro and the field Negro. And the house Negro always looked out for his master. When the field Negroes got too much out of line he held them back in check. He put them back on the plantation. The house Negro
could afford to do that because he lived better than the field Negro. He ate better he dressed better and he lived in a better house, he lived right next to his master in the attic or the basement. He ate the same food his master ate, and wore his same clothes. And he could talk just like his master, good diction. And he loved his master more than his master loved himself. That’s why he did not want his master hurt. If the master got sick he said what’s the matter boss, we sick? When the master’s house caught a fire he tried to put the fire out, he didn’t want his master’s house burnt. He never wanted his master’s property threatened and he was more defensive about it than the master himself. That was the house Negro. But then you had some field Negros who lived in huts, had nothing to lose, they wore the worst kinds of clothes, they ate the worst food, and they caught hell, they felt the sting of the lash. They hated their master, oh yes they did. If the master got sick they prayed that the master died. If the master’s house caught fire they prayed for a strong wind to come along. This was the difference between the two. And today you still have house Negroes and field Negroes. I am a Field Negro.

(My transcription from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znQe9nUKzvQ, December 2009)

Here as with previous examples, authenticity is manifested in one’s ability to break away from the oppressor’s reality, to replace the master’s lenses with one’s own. To be inauthentic, however, is to identify completely with the master by accepting his reality. In Race Matters, Cornel West contends that “Malcolm X’s notion of psychic conversion,” in which one ceases to see one’s self through negative standards of valuation, “is an implicit critique of W.E.B. Du Bois’s idea of ‘double consciousness’” (97). According to West, Malcolm X rejects the liminal
position of double consciousness in which people live “betwixt and between the black and white worlds—traveling the border between them yet never settled in either. Hence, they crave peer acceptance in both, receive genuine approval from neither, yet persist in viewing themselves through the lenses of the dominant white society” (West 97). West argues that Malcolm X’s distinction between house Negroes and field Negroes aims to provide decolonizing sensibilities to the masses of black people who will then be “less likely to be ‘co-opted’ by the white status quo” (98). But of course, as West adds in this particular instance, the problem with Malcolm X’s dichotomy is that while it problematizes the propensity of the black bourgeoisie to assimilate into “whiteness,” it is nevertheless less critical of the modes in which “blackness,” as a political category, gets to be performed as a negation (West 98).

It is by conflating the figure of the field Negro with that of the street hustler that Malcolm X manages to posit his own authenticity. Whenever he was invited to join discussion panels at various institutions of higher learning, Malcolm X often articulated his own sense of authenticity in the following fashion: “Gentlemen, I finished the eighth grade in Mason, Michigan. My high school was the black ghetto of Roxbury, Massachusetts. My college was in the streets of Harlem, and my Master’s was taken in prison” (286). Through his rhetoric Malcolm X portrayed himself as the negation of an educated black bourgeoisie that he felt was out of touch with the realities of the black masses—realities which his own past as a street hustler enabled him to comprehend. These feelings are exemplified in the following anecdote in which he emphasizes his authenticity by separating himself from the “out of touch” black leaders whose knowledge of the streets and credibility are put into question. It is important here to take notice of Malcolm X’s emphasis on language:
After a Harlem street rally, one of these downtown “leaders” and I were talking when we were approached by a Harlem hustler. To my knowledge I’d never seen this hustler before; he said to me, approximately: “Hey, baby! I dig you holding this all-originals scene at the track …I’m going to lay a vine under the Kew’s balls for a dime—got to give you a play…Got the shorts out here trying to scuff up on some bread…Well, my man, I’ll get on, got to go peck a little, and cop me som z’s—” And the hustler went on up Seventh Avenue. I would have never given it another thought, except that this downtown “leader” was standing, staring after that hustler, looking as if he’d just heard Sanskrit. He asked me what had been said, and I told him. The hustler had said he was aware that the Muslims were holding an all-black bazaar at Rockland Palace, which is primarily a dancehall. The hustler intended to pawn a suit for ten dollars to attend and patronize the bazaar. He had very little money but he was trying hard to make some. He was going to eat, then he would get some sleep. (315)

Here Malcolm X showcases his ability to comprehend the linguistic code of the streets and by extension his intimacy with the ghettoized milieu which, according to him, other leaders only talked about. He emphasizes his linguistic ability to code-switch in different environments when he points out that “as a ‘leader,’ I could talk over the ABC, CBS, or NBC microphones, at Harvard or at Tuskegee; I could talk with so-called ‘middle class’ Negroes and with the ghetto blacks (whom all the other leaders just talked about)” (315). Malcolm X is able to appropriate and use the language employed by the dominant culture and institutions while also reverting when necessary to a linguistic heritage that was nurtured in African-American forms of vernacular. According to Gary and Frank Simpkins, “many African-Americans use AAVE
African American Vernacular English] with friends and relatives and then *code-switch* seamlessly to Standard American English (SAE) at work or in school; this allows them to maintain their own specific linguistic and cultural heritage while still participating and succeeding in the more generally shared American linguistic and cultural milieu” (38). In the African-American community, individuals who only use SAE and who are unable or unwilling to communicate in AAVE are often perceived by other in-group members to be “talking white” (Bell 319). Malcolm X thus undermines the credibility of the black downtown leader by describing his inability to code-switch. He employs the symbolic capital embedded in language to proclaim his authenticity as an African-American leader as well as a former street hustler.

Malcolm X further conveys his perception of the street hustler as a subversive and potentially revolutionary character by his respect for the latter, whom he proclaims to be “the most dangerous black man in America” because he embodies more contempt “for the white power structure than any other Negro in North America” (315). For Malcolm X, the ghetto hustler’s personality could be used either to wreak havoc in the black community in which he lived, or to destroy the structures of oppression that created the environment in which he was born.

Of course one can only speculate about the degree to which Malcolm X was influenced by the ballads of Stagolee. In his early life as a street hustler he certainly would have been familiar with the gambling and drinking venues in which the ballads of Stagolee were often sung. Nevertheless, the point here is not so much to posit the degree to which Stagolee directly influenced Malcolm X but rather to highlight the manner in which the iconoclastic role that Stagolee personified was to some extent reproduced in the construction of Malcolm X’s political persona. It could be argued that badman tropes are propagated through an inherent
hypertextuality that permeates various forms of cultural production. Aaron Rosenberg defines inherent hypertextuality as a process “whereby works of verbal or other art, which emerge from similar social circumstances and respond to common societal pressures, may come to relate to each other through character development, plot, thematic content and other elements of creative composition” (41). This inherent hypertextuality can also impact the manner in which popular figures are mythologized and remembered. Molefi Asante echoes this point when he contends that “Stagolee represents the radical impulse to challenge an authority that seeks to repress freedom, improvisation, and harmony. The direct-action orientation of Stagolee is found in Marcus Garvey, Fannie Lou Hamer and Malcolm X” (118). In Malcolm X’s case, it was by rhetorically alluding to his familiarity with the ghettoized inner cities—a familiarity that stemmed from his past as a street hustler, an outlaw, in other words a badman—that he rationalized his political capital. The following passage highlights the rhetorical significance of his “ghetto-centric” discourse:

Over the ensuing years, I’d had various kinds of evidence that a high percentage of New York City’s black people responded to what I said, including a great many who would not publicly say so. For instance, time and again when I spoke at street rallies, I would draw ten and twelve times as many people as most other so-called “Negro leaders.” I knew that in any society, a true leader is one who earns and deserves the following he enjoys. True followers are bestowed by themselves, out of their own volition and emotions. I knew that the great lack of most of the big-named “Negro leaders” was their lack of any true rapport with the ghetto Negroes. How could they have rapport when they spent most of their time “integrating” with white people? I knew that the ghetto people knew that I never
left the ghetto in spirit, and I never left it physically any more than I had to. I had a ghetto instinct; for instance, I could feel if tension was beyond normal in a ghetto audience. And I could speak and understand the ghetto’s language. (315)

Malcolm X’s rhetoric enables us to comprehend that the importance attached to the language, the fashion, the lifestyle and the worldview of the ghetto in hip-hop music reflects much more than an exaltation of local spaces. It also signifies the modes through which one attempts to conceive of one’s being, of one’s environment and of one’s possibilities of emancipation outside of the ruling ideologies that reinforce and propagate one’s subaltern position.

The influence that Malcolm X had on early politically conscious hip-hop music cannot be overstated. Hip-hop journalist Davey D describes how many early DJs such as Afrika Bambataa, 3X Dope, or even Sway & Tech often played excerpts of Malcolm X’s speeches over popular beats. In his music, Paul Winley, a hip-hop pioneer, inserted the voice of a fictional announcer who asked Malcolm X various questions, including his opinions on non-violence as well as his thoughts on Black Nationalism. Many of the answers to these questions were often taken from recorded speeches of Malcolm X, including “The Ballot or the Bullet speech” (Devey D). Malcolm X’s upbringing in the “hood,” his past as a street hustler, as well as his subsequent politicization provided an example to many hip-hop artists who grew up in ghettoized inner cities, who identified with him, and who used his story as a model for their own emancipation. Just like Stagolee and the trickster, Malcolm X thus became an empowering fantasy, an imagined projection of one’s potentiality of being. As was also the case with Stagolee, this projection was given life in popular forms of music such as hip-hop.

Many Afrocentric hip-hop artists and groups, including The Last Poets, Public Enemy, KRS-One, and Dead Prez, echoed Malcolm X’s ideas on Black Nationalism. The Last Poets in
particular, a group formed in 1968 on Malcolm X’s birthday (May 19th), were the forefathers of what later became labeled as “conscious” hip-hop. Prominent hip-hop scholars such as Mark Anthony Neal contend that “The Last Poets, along with Gil Scott-Heron and the Watts Prophets, represent one of the many direct artistic links to hip-hop” (109). The Last Poets emerged at the locus of the civil rights and black power movements (Neal 308). At the time, much popular music, such as Marvin Gaye’s politically themed What’s Going On concept album, The Temptations’ “Ball of Confusion,” or even Stevie Wonder’s “Heaven Help us All,” reflects the socio-political issues that pervaded the late 1960’s and early 1970s. During this period, other artists on the margins of mainstream music were also popular among African-American, Hispanic, and white audiences (Neal 308). These artists became known for their use of “spoken-word poetry” and even “West African drum rhythms” in their music (Neal 308). Through their style of spoken word, a type of performance poetry considered to be one of the manifestations of hip-hop culture, artists such as The Watts Prophets, Gil Scott-Heron, and the Last Poets emerged as the precursors of politically conscious rap.

The historical memory of figures such as Malcolm X as well as their ideas was thus nurtured and propagated partly through the music of early hip-hop groups. As hip-hop scholar Michael Eric Dyson contends, hip-hop has often “retrieved historic black ideas, movements, and figures in combating the racial amnesia that threatens to relegate the achievement of the black past to the ash heap of dismemory” (66). These actions, according to Dyson, have often “renewed a sense of historical pride to young black minds that provides a solid base for racial self-esteem. Rap music has also focused renewed attention on black nationalist and black radical thought” (66). Thus, similar to West African griots, rappers also perform as time-binders (Hale 1998, 114) whose role is to reflect on the past and its relationship to the present as a means to
create a possible future. From Dyson’s perspective “this renewed historicism permits young blacks to discern links between the past and their own present circumstances, using the past as a fertile source of social reflection, cultural creation, and political resistance” (67). The memory of important cultural figures such as the trickster, the badman, or even Malcolm X has been preserved in this art form as a way of articulating one’s sense of identity, history, and ultimately one’s agency as a member of a marginalized community.

The Last Poets were one of the groups of musicians who remained dedicated to the preservation of black “radical” thought as well as the ideals of social transformation through their art. The name of the group was inspired by one of the poems of the South African human rights activist and writer Keorapetse William Kgositsile (1968). Their name also reflects their avant-garde projection of themselves as belonging to the last group of poets before the revolution. These thoughts are clearly epitomized in the lyrics from their poem/song “When the Revolution Comes” (1970):

Speak not of revolution until you are willing to eat rats to survive […] When the revolution comes; guns and rifles will be taking the place of poems and essays Black cultural centers will be forts supplying the revolutionaries with food and arms

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8M5W_3T2Ye4)

Here, The Last Poets position themselves at the vanguard of a revolutionary movement. Henry Oyewole, one of The Last Poets, explains that “Since Harlem was the Mecca of African-American political and cultural events, many of us assumed the revolution would start there and spread like wildfire. Of course being one of The Last Poets made me feel like I was at the
vanguard of making this revolution happen” (Oyewole 45). As the song indicates, the Black Arts Movement of the time was seen as the habitat in which a revolutionary culture could be nurtured—a culture that would usher a revolution they considered to be inevitable. In the song, The Last Poets accompany their words with the beat of African drums. They express their Afrocentricity performatively not only through their musical accompaniments, composed primarily of drums, but also through their dashiki attire and Afro hair styles. The fast paced drum beats as well as the incessant repetition of the word revolution by the background vocals, have the effect of giving their words a sense of urgency. The Afrocentric mode of presentation is fundamental to their revolutionary message. The socio-economic and political forces that caused the invention of the trickster, and later the badman, figures conceived out of an ontological necessity, also created a desire to return psychologically, aesthetically, ideologically and even at times physically to an exalted and mythologized Africa. The idea of a homeland where one could recapture one’s humanity and dignity was a rejection of the identity and by extension the reality that had been “naturally” conferred upon African Americans by virtue of their disadvantaged position in a highly racialized society. The emergence of the badman motif as well as Black Nationalist discourses are epiphenomena of DuBois’ double consciousness—they represent a symptom of this cognitive duality.

When apprehending Black Nationalism as an idea that projects a nation without borders, we must contextualize the noun Nationalism before taking into consideration the adjective “black” that modifies it. Etymologically the word nation can be traced back to the Latin word natio, whose stem is a past participle of the word nasci, which means “to be born.” Nation as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary was subsequently politicized to designate large groups of individuals who shared a common ancestral heritage. The semantic variations that characterize
the diverse usage of the word throughout history also reflect a shift in the ways in which collective identities came to be defined.

As used in concepts such as Black Nationalism or even in organizations like The Nation of Islam, one’s identity as belonging to a nation was not contingent upon territorial demarcations but was distinguished rather by a given point of racial origin. Black Nationalism as a concept emerged out of a need to create a collective black identity that transcended geography at a time when many African Americans lived and were viewed as second class citizens by the white majority in the United States. The idea of Black Nationalism therefore provided the platform for a sub-cultural identity emerging out of the diminishing power that the symbol of the nation held as a shared communal icon to citizens who felt disenfranchised.

In politically conscious hip-hop music one often finds a conflation of the politicized hustler and the Afrocentric persona. Certainly, characters like Malcolm X himself symbolized this synthesis. Similar to the badman, whose position as an outlaw offered a way to re-imagine existing power relations, the embodiment and performance of an imagined African identity also became useful in reconfiguring one’s position as a second class citizen in the United States. Indeed, the impetus to embrace an African identity—first imagined in Egypt and Ethiopia and subsequently in other newly-independent sub-Saharan African nations—offered an escape to African Americans who sought to see themselves through different discourses of valuation. As Nell Irvin Painter explains, Psalm 63:31 had a profound influence on the ways in which African Americans came to imagine Africa in the nineteenth century (7). The prophetic phrases found in the Psalm not only linked Egypt and Ethiopia but also encouraged “the Ethiopianist fusion of Egypt, Ethiopia, Cush, Africa, and people of African descent throughout the Diaspora into one whole” (7). Leading African-American figures such as Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) often
chose to connect themselves to an idealized image of Africa that was historically derived from a “magnificent, Ethiopianist past, rather than to little-known and little-respected black Africans” of their own time (7)

According to Painter, Ethiopia and Egypt became so pivotal to African Americans—specifically those who chose to exalt their present identity by connecting it to well-respected ancient civilizations—that the “Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 galvanized African-American opinion and brought a wave of support for the African symbol of independence” (230). As a nation that had resisted the onslaught of colonization, Ethiopia represented black independence. To many Americans of African ancestry, as well as people in other parts of the African diaspora, the Italian attack on Ethiopia felt like “an attack on black Americans themselves” (230). Many African Americans attempted to organize and even volunteered to defend Ethiopia, attempts that were foiled by the government of the United States. Nevertheless prominent African Americans such as Adam Clayton Powell, A. Philip Randolph, Walter White and even W.E.B. Du Bois organized rallies in support of Ethiopia (230).

According to Painter, it was mostly through two key movements, in particular “Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the New Negro movement, also known as the Harlem Renaissance or Negro Renaissance movement,” that many African Americans departed dramatically “from the common, late nineteenth-century tendency to avoid Africa and blackness,” they instead “repudiated intellectual white supremacy and embraced their African identity” (Painter 12). Newspapers such as Marcus Garvey’s Negro World, later titled The New Negro after Garvey’s demise, which featured articles on African history, encouraged a “diasporic outlook” that embraced the African continent (12). Thus the evocation of Africa in the 1960s and 1970s was often employed as a reaction to the injustices and oppression experienced
in the United States (17). Indeed, many African Americans often chose to embrace the African identity that they had manufactured for themselves over their American one.

The desire to embrace an Afrocentric identity as well as a different system of valuation certainly fits into Antonio Gramsci’s thoughts on the impacts and reactions to cultural hegemony. In his reflections on class differences as the basis for ideological struggles, Gramsci posits that “one of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing toward dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer ‘ideologically’ the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals” (10). Afrocentric-conscious hip-hop artists often see themselves as occupying the role of organic intellectuals whose mission is to activate in a particular fashion the consciousness of the communities they represent. Here, class consciousness is substituted by a people’s awareness of their common African ancestry and the modes through which this awareness can engender a revolution. This state of consciousness is ushered into existence through the psychic conversion that Malcolm X advocated, one which gravitates from coming into being through the oppressor’s perception of reality to existing within more empowering standards of valuation. In the lyrics from their song “Niggers are Scared of Revolution” (1970), The Last Poets re-articulate the role of psychic conversion as a prerequisite for the emergence of a black revolution:

Niggers are lovers, niggers are lovers are lovers
Niggers love to see Clark Gable
make love to Marilyn Monroe
Niggers love to see Tarzan fuck all the natives

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eB-m6BnUgIU)
Here the moment of coming into being through the oppressor’s reality is projected through the priming of mediatized images of Tarzan and his natives, the identification with “white” heroic Hollywood figures such as Clark Gable, as well as the consumption of minstrel images that are propagated by the American culture industry. Just as in the previous song, the Last Poets use African drums and backing vocals that constantly repeat the word “nigger.” The term is therefore emphasized both in the song’s background vocals as well as in the main lyrics:

Niggers loved to hear Malcolm rap
But they didn’t love Malcolm
Niggers love everything but themselves […]
I love niggers, I love niggers, I love niggers

Because niggers are me
And I should only love that which is me […]
But there is one thing about niggers I do not love
Niggers are scared of revolution

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eB-m6BnUgIU)

What is of more interest to my analysis of this song is the manner in which the word nigger has been employed. According to Oyewole of The Last Poets:

Nigger was a key word. Nigger was the embodiment of all the anger, frustration, joy, and pain of being Black in America. It was more than a word, it was a term with dimensions far beyond the negative connotations found in the dictionary. With all the color, attitude, excitement, strength, and shame, we knew we could not build a movement on Niggers or Niggerism. (Holt 49)
In conscious hip-hop music there is often a dichotomy between the performative roles that the words Nigger and African embody. Certainly, the naming of the self has always been an important part of Afrocentric discourse. Its significance can be seen in the positioning of the “X” in Malcolm X or even in Cassius Clay’s transformation into Mohamed Ali. Changing one’s name in Afrocentric discourse becomes the key to changing one’s state of consciousness—it is the symbolic representation of one’s psychic conversion.

In conscious hip-hop the word “nigger” is often employed in reference to a given state of mind, an “inauthentic” state of being in which one has come to accept the hegemonic version of reality that has been imposed. The word “nigger” therefore refers to the manner in which one’s identity as a “black” person in America has been pejoratively constructed by the dominant “white” society. To be a “nigger,” following this logic, is a debilitating state of being which is in some ways similar to the notion of “false consciousness” that pervades Marxist discourse. The Last Poets’ song “Niggers are Scared of Revolution” alludes to this state of cognition. From the song’s perspective, it is impossible for “Niggers,” referring to their state of mind, to lead a revolution. Only the enlightened Afrocentric persona, symbolized by Malcolm X in the song, offers a possibility for change.

Stuart Hall explains that it was “in the wake of the de-colonization and nationalistic struggles” that “black was created as a political category in a certain historical moment. It was created as a consequence of certain symbolic and ideological struggles” (54). Similarly, being “African” in the African-American context, or, as Neil puts it, “naming people only by the continent of their origin and ignoring their ethnic identity,” was a new identity that emerged as “a consequence of distance in time and space” where “millions of peoples speaking hundreds of languages came to be seen as ‘Africans,’ and as all having the same identity” (5). Nonetheless,
while the generic evocation of Africa acted as a negation of racial power structures in the United States, it also took the thesis that advocated White supremacy as its axiom. Paul Gilroy echoes this point in the following passage from *The Black Atlantic*. According to Gilroy, “the Afrocentric movement appears to rely upon a linear idea of time that is enclosed at each end by the grand narrative of African advancement” (191). From this perspective, Afrocentric discourses do not necessarily question Eurocentric metahistorical eschatologies regarding the birth of civilizations and their ensuing evolutions; instead they simply substitute Western protagonists in this evolutionary continuum with African ones. As Gilroy explains, “Blacks become dominant by virtue of either biology or culture; whites are allocated a subordinate role. The desperate manner in which this inversion proceeds betrays it as merely another symptom of white supremacy’s continuing power” (191). While “whites” are not always relegated to an inferior position within Afrocentric discourse, as Gilroy claims, it is true that proponents of Afrocentricism often fail to problematize or deconstruct the standards of valuation through which notions of civilization or “race” are articulated, nor do they question the creation of Africa as a source of identification. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from Dead Prez’s rap song titled “I am an African” (2000):

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Nigga the red is for the blood in my arm
The black is for the gun in my palm […]
Somewhere in between N.W.A. and P.E.
I’m black like Steve Biko
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(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.lyricsfreak.com/d/dead prez/im a african_20038332.html)
In the beginning of their song, Dead Prez employ the symbol of the Black Liberation Flag, which they then dramatize into a series of Afrocentric motifs such as African locks and daishikis. More importantly, these references to Afrocentric motifs are expressed through the performative representation of a badman persona. In other words, the image of the badman emerges from the interplay between the power of subversive references and the sense of masculine charisma emanating from the musician’s performance. The iconoclasm and hypermasculine posture associated with badmen are found in the manner in which Dead Prez identify themselves with “militant” rappers like N.W.A. (Niggers With Attitude) or P.E. (Public Enemy) as well as characters like Steve Biko, the renowned anti-apartheid South African activist. Dead Prez utilize a hodge-podge of domestic and foreign symbols of resistance to convey their defiant state of consciousness. Other constructed images such as “the gun in my palm” further metaphorically portray the rappers as uncompromising men of action. The imagery described in the lyrics is amplified by the entirety of the rappers’ “flow.” In rap music, “flow” refers to multiple levels of performance that include “stylistic rhyming, symbolic representation, and linguistic manipulation coupled with attitude and social standing” (Morgan 82). The accompanying beats in many rap songs are often created in order to coincide with the stressed syllables of the verses they complement. These structures have the effect of dramatizing words by giving them an aesthetic appearance of power. It is precisely by aestheticizing the power of specific words which often signify “controversial” figures, ideas, and images that badman tropes acquire their distinctive style in hip-hop music. In Dead Prez’s song, the stylistics of the badman are therefore used to exalt an Afrocentric discourse, as the next segment of the song demonstrates:
I’m a runaway slave watching the north star

Shackles on my forearm, runnin’ with the gun on my palm

I’m an African, never was an African-American

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.lyricsfreak.com/d/dead prez/im a african_20038332.html)

The reference to slavery emphasizes the rapper’s “badness.” The image of a runaway slave holding a gun in his palm harkens back to the notion of the “baad nigger” that was developed during slavery. In this case, the “badness” of the slave is expressed through his militancy as well as his defiant attitude vis-à-vis figures and structures of authority that emerge as obstacles to his well-being. This image of rebellion is also captured in the Afrocentric references employed in the lyrics. “I am African” clearly employs the coming into consciousness of one’s projected African identity as an authenticating device—as a trope that conveys one’s possibilities of emancipation. In an interview conducted by hip-hop scholar Patrick Neate, M1 from Dead Prez explained the title of their song in the following way:

When we say, ‘I’m an African,’ it means we recognize that our identity historically and presently is one and the same. All we are now is a consequence of what we’ve been. That sounds simple but it’s important. It means, for example, that our roots are not slavery because that is only one part of the African experience and Africa was the cradle for a whole lot of important and positive shit. (117)

From Dead Prez’s perspective, the Afrocentric persona thus presupposes one’s ability to “decolonize one’s mind,” to use Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s term. A brief anecdote narrated by Stic Man, the other group member of Dead Prez, exemplifies this rationale: “We recognize Africa as
including not just people born on the continent but citizens scattered around the world by colonialism. I met this black dude in Amsterdam. He was, like, ‘I’m Dutch.’ And I said, ‘What?’ The truth is people have been assimilated, in mind and fact, by their colonizers” (117). It is in an attempt to demonstrate their “decolonized” state of consciousness that they evoke figures like Steve Biko. Furthermore, by locating themselves ideologically “somewhere in between N.W.A. and P.E.,” two groups rooted in the traditions of gangsta rap and “conscious” hip-hop respectively, Dead Prez has attempted to isolate and merge the perceived subversive energies of both of these genres in their music.

Many “conscious” hip-hop musicians, including Dead Prez and Public Enemy’s Chuck D, have traveled to Africa. In his book *Fight the Power: Rap, Race, and Reality* (1998), Chuck D, one of the pioneers of politically conscious hip-hop music, elaborates on the significance of Africa:

> Africa is definitely the future for our existence as a people. Not only do we have to be in line with Africa mentally, but we have to be in line with Africa physically. Africa has to be a physical reality […] People from the Caribbean have the closest thing to an African state of mind because they had less of a cultural breakup than there was in the vast continent of the United States. (172)

The Afrocentric discourse that hip-hop musicians like Chuck D espouse has been problematized not only by Paul Gilroy but also by hip-hop scholars such as Davarian Baldwin. In “Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip-Hop,” Baldwin states that Afrocentric narratives tend to stifle the multiplicity of black experiences by initially “re-imagining Egyptian/African culture as sources of racial legitimacy in the face of racial oppression” (164). By expecting blacks to identify with a reconstructed identity stemming from a
specific version of African-American history, Afrocentric narratives typically gloss over problematic issues of gender (164). They emerge as androcentric discourses through which black experiences become primarily conveyed through the voices of black men from normalized positions of patriarchy (164).

The patriarchal structure of Afrocentric organizations like The Nation of Islam have certainly always presupposed models of social transformation that were androcentric in nature. These androcentric postulations were also essential in developing the philosophy of the Five Percent Nation, an organization that broke out of The Nation of Islam. According to Baldwin, members of The Five Percent Nation essentially believed that “God was not a deity or external force but rather was to be found within the Asiatic black man. Members of Five Percent believe themselves to be ‘poor righteous teachers’ or those who know that the original black man is God” (175). In The Five Percent philosophy black men were considered to be “gods” and black women “earths”—the earth being a symbol of fertility on which God produces life.

The Five Percent philosophy certainly bestowed a sense of agency on its male practitioners. Through this ideology they not only enjoyed a superior position to that of black women but they also dominated all other living beings on the planet. It was mostly through hip-hop music that The Five Percent Nation gained its popularity. Many prominent hip-hop musicians, including Nas, Brand Nubian, Wu Tang Clan, Rakim and Big Daddy Kane, have often incorporated the teachings of The Five Percent Nation in their music. Perhaps the most notorious hip-hop group to be identified with The Five Percent Nation is The Poor Righteous Teachers, a group from New Jersey founded in 1989. The lyrics from their song “Conscious Style”(1996) exemplify the ways in which Five Percent philosophies were sometimes embedded in the lyrics of conscious hip-hop artists:
Yo, where the teachers went, with all that pro-black shit?

Where all the conscious niggas, who used to chat like this?

See, I remember yesterday when y’all was Gods and Earths […]

Now everybody’s on that bullshit about killing and so

Eat my pussy, suck my dick, well that’s the size of the shit

So in the head of ignorance, I rip some conscious clip […]

I’m on that road called freedom, seldom traveled by the multitude

I bring gifts of life, light, and some conscious food

God degree, cause see God’s the size of me

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.lyrics007.com/Poor_Righteous_Teachers_Lyrics/Conscious_Style_Lyrics.html)

In this song, The Poor Righteous Teachers bemoan the disappearance of conscious hip-hop as well as the proliferation of gangsta rap. A return to the golden age of hip-hop is thus conflated with a return to Five Percent philosophy. The song therefore simultaneously articulates a sense of nostalgia for hip-hop’s “conscious” era while positing Five Percent philosophy as a way of steering the music back to its glorious days. The words “God’s the size of me” are a direct reference to the belief in the deity of the black man. Here the psychic conversion involves being conscious of one’s self as a god. The criticism of gangsta hip-hop in the song is also symptomatic of the rift between what was to become “conscious” hip-hop and gangsta rap. In certain respects the rift between these two genres of hip-hop also epitomized larger social class disparities in the African-American community. Baldwin argues that the icons of Afrocentricity often served as “bridges between upward mobility and historically black experiences. The notion that success and academic achievements were necessarily white experiences was met with a
wave of Afrocentricity, where the study and consumption of Afrocentric goods and literature could justify a class distinction without raising issues of black authenticity” (162). Bourgeois habits could henceforth be excused by adorning Afrocentric themed attires such as “Kente cloths,” as well as by historicizing one’s ancestral past with “reconstructed Yoruba origins” (162). To many African Americans in higher education, Afrocentric discourse became a means through which they could introduce new forms of epistemology that placed their cultural heritage into the general canon of knowledge (163). The construction then, of an Afrocentric persona in conscious hip-hop as well as the exaltation of the badman in gangsta rap provided two different modes of articulating notions of authenticity. Both of these tropes emerge from the manner in which African Americans have responded to the social and economic structures that have shaped their communities. The adoptions of trickster, badman, or Afrocentric personae are all rhetorical gestures that attempt to articulate a sense of identity outside of the dominant culture in which one’s subjectivity is constructed. The badman’s indifference towards structures of authority and laws therefore expresses this critical posture symbolically. In the next section of this chapter I shall expand these ideas through an analysis of how the relationship between gangsta rap and conscious hip-hop have offered different modes of engaging with socio-political and economic issues.

D) Gangsta Realism and the Stagolee Mythoform

The Afrocentric persona in conscious hip-hop as well as the badman in gangsta rap are both used as figures who seek to claim and authenticate an African-American existence through a preferred narrative—one that seemingly rejects the dominant ideology by which their identities have come to be defined. According to Imani Perry, “the ‘cultural nationalist’ period of hip hop
on the one side, and the ‘gangsta’ period on the other perfectly [exemplify] two responses to 
white supremacist America” (41). The difference was that while the “West Coast Gangsta” became a “survivalist hero” by mimicking a stereotype, the “East Coast Afrocentrists” professed
an essentialized discourse of black identity (41). Both Afrocentric and gangsta rap musicians
thus articulate a given notion of what it is to be “real” by placing “white” racism as well as the
perceived dominant culture at the axiom of their negation (106).

In order to give their image an aura of authenticity, rap artists often project themselves as
truth tellers. Their lyrics are often imbued with a sense of realism that seeks to reveal the world
of the ghetto in its naked form. Alexis Pate asserts that as a communicative medium “rap is a
literary art that is forged from the need. The need is self-expression, the need to say: ‘I am. I
exist, and this is what I think’” (12). This desire for self-expression can be traced back to the
construction of the trickster and the badman in African-American folklore. During slavery
trickster tales emerged as a way to project a more humane image of the slaves and subvert the
narrative of their oppressors. As Angela Nelson contends in “Rap and the Stagolee Mythoform,”
“truth-telling is an ethic in African-American culture, one of the culture’s highest moral values,
because, as during the days of enslavement and now, truth-telling is used as a way of maintaining
self-dignity and holding at bay the oppositional myths the oppressors have used to control
African Americans” (http://www.americanpopularculture.com). In hip-hop culture, the
performative dimensions of notions such as “keepin’ it real” and “representing” are symptoms of
this cultural trend that has survived throughout the ages in African-American music. Marcyliena
Morgan’s description of the relationship between the cultural performance of “representing”
and ideology can help us situate the significance of this practice in hip-hop music. According to
Morgan, representing in hip-hop culture does not only mean identifying with a neighborhood, a
city or a school, it is also a discursive way of artistically organizing symbols, objects, people and memory (72). Hip-hop artists endorse cultural insiders, belief systems and ideologies by representing (72). The performance of representing is accomplished through “a fantastical and complex system of indexicality—literally pointing to and shouting out places, people, and events when an interaction is framed around important referential symbols and contexts. In this case, shout-outs index and remind us of contextual layers that then invoke related contexts and ideologies” (72).

To represent is thus to validate, to make apparent, to signify a given communal worldview. It highlights a system of valuation that projects a countercultural ethos. Representing places an emphasis on an artistic modus operandi that assumes a realist posture. However, as Perry points out, “realist movements in art of any sort are always decisive periods in which choices of how to represent truth or reality are made. Hip hop realism is filled with metaphors and metonyms of existence that trouble listeners or commentators from a wide range of political, social, and intellectual perspectives” (40). Hip-hop thus has its own modes, its own standards of judgment and sets of values through which it articulates its realism. In hip-hop lyrics, a sense of realism is often communicated through the use of saturation. Alexs Pate defines saturation as “the degree to which a rap/poem, through its use of language, image, and ethos, communicates hip hop culture” (46). In other words, saturation is the extent to which a song expresses the projected realities of young, disenfranchised, low-income African Americans through its language, imagery and meaning. Pate offers the following guidelines for detecting the degree to which a given hip-hop song can be said to be saturated:

One way of considering saturation is to begin asking questions about a given poem. We offer these as a starting point:
1. Does this poem express an oppositional posture to the dominant culture?

2. Does this poem celebrate or glamorize the marginalized?

3. Does this poem reference African American ways of being (language, image etc.)?

4. Does this poem and its speaker take agency (that is, does it locate the poet and the poet’s community as the center of reality and profess truth)?

5. Is this poem politically conscious?

6. Is this poem gendered?

7. Is this poem racialized?

8. Does this poem suggest a desire for equality? (Pate 48)

Pate’s guidelines offer a means to analyze the prevalence of certain tropes and cultural discourses that are found in hip-hop. Hip-hop artists often attempt to increase their cultural capital by saturating their music as well as their artistic images with symbols that correspond to the community and social class they claim to represent. As pointed out by Marcyliena Morgan, one of the ways they manage to represent their localities in their songs is by giving “shout-outs” to people and places within their community. The ability of rap artists to assimilate local cultures into their music gives them a sense of credibility and authenticity. It was in an attempt to increase his credibility that Vanilla Ice, a Caucasian rapper, decided to authenticate his music by appropriating the chant of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. as well as by using “black vernacular, dance, and general style” in his music (Ogbar 56). When it was discovered that he had embellished his past by claiming to have been raised in a tough criminal environment, his popularity quickly dwindled (56).
Apart from shout-outs and cultural references, one of the means through which hip-hop artists get to represent for their community is by saturating their songs with images that seek to depict the realities of life in their community. As Pate explains, rap music “engages us in the same way all poetry does. Concepts and emotions are often transformed into pictures constructed from words” (Pate 81). The following song by Grand Master Flash, titled “The Message” (1982), exemplifies the deployment of realist images in rap music:

It’s like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under
It’s like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don’t care
I can’t take the smell, I can’t take the noise no more
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 the baseball bat
I tried to get away, but I couldn’t get far
Cause a man with a tow-truck repossessed my car

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.lyricsfreak.com/g/grandmaster.flash/the.message_20062225.html)

“The Message” manages to evoke feelings of hopelessness and despair through its depiction of “broken glass,” “people pissing on the stairs,” and “rats in the front room roaches in the back”.
“The Message” is of course not the first song to have compared the ghetto with a jungle. Bob Marley’s “Concrete Jungle,” first recorded in the 1960s, also compares the Jamaican ghetto of Trenchtown to a jungle. In both cases the jungle is used as a metaphor for the inescapable and chaotic environment of the ghetto. The image of an unruly urban jungle attempts to subvert the narrative of social progress. Instead, however, it epitomizes a social regression by highlighting the creation of ghettos as an epiphenomenon of modernization.

Hip-hop’s realism is in many ways similar in its methods to the modes of representation that proponents of cinema verité often practice. Both hip-hop and cinema verité seek to project social “truths” through their realism. The methods used in neorealist works, for example, often exalt the agency of non-professional actors sometimes taken from the marginalized communities that the film seeks to represent. Similarly, in hip-hop an emphasis is often placed on the authenticity of artists who claim to represent for a given community. In this context, artists are required to have direct ties to the ghettoized milieu that they sing about in their rap songs. Proponents of cinema verité often choose to shoot their films in real-life locations rather than on sets. Their desire to capture the “real” in its raw and unmediated form is further exemplified in their penchant for filming ordinary people who, in neorealist films, are seldom enhanced by professional makeup. Likewise hip-hop artists do not shy away from depicting the grimmest realities of the ghetto in their songs. Rap musicians’ projection of themselves as truth tellers is often demonstrated in their unapologetically raw lyrics as well as the saturation of ghetto-themed images in their songs. Thus, just like the proponents of cinema verité or “cinema of truth,” hip-hop artists claim to capture the “truth” in its most unmediated and rawest form. The realist posture in hip-hop has caused rap artists like Chuck D to claim that the music is the “CNN of the streets.”
Nevertheless, hip-hop scholars, including Tricia Rose, have often problematized the realist rhetoric in hip-hop culture. Rose argues that “the illusion that commercially manufactured rappers are unvarnished, gritty truth tellers has […] been used to silence legitimate criticisms of the narrowing and increasingly parodic images of black urban life that dominate commercial hip hop” (137). According to Rose, the notion of “keepin’ it real” “has become a kind of vaccine not only for rappers but for many industry representatives and corporate managers as well. This statement is a way of inoculating them from any and all criticism for their role in reducing and narrowing the stories told by the same young people they claim to represent” (137). From Rose’s perspective, their lyrics thus convey a form of realism that conceals and even suppresses the diversity of “black” experiences.

The disturbing images propagated in hip-hop’s gangsta realism also partially accounts for the music’s popularity. Perry argues that “for a mainstream audience, rap may indulge in voyeuristic fantasies of black sociopathy and otherness, while for an oppressed community these images might engage fantasies of masculine power in people who feel powerless” (Perry 42). Here, hip-hop’s realism can be likened to a double-edged sword which allows a disenfranchised group to articulate a sense of agency based on its own standards of valuation while also enabling the commodification and minstrelization of black popular culture. The realism in rap music can sometimes have deep political undertones that generate a wave of controversy by highlighting social issues sometimes swept under the rug. The song titled “Fuck the Police” (1988) from NWA (Niggers with Attitude) provides such an example:

Right about now NWA court is in full effect.

Judge Dre presiding in the case of NWA versus the police department.

Prosecuting attorneys are MC Ren Ice, Cube and Eazy muthafuckin’ E.
Order order order. Ice Cube take the muthafuckin’ stand.

Do you swear to tell the truth the whole truth

and nothin’ but the truth so help your black ass?

Why don’t you tell everybody what the fuck you gotta say?

Fuck tha police

Comin’ straight from the underground

Young nigga got it bad cuz I’m brown

And not the other color so police think

They have the authority to kill a minority […]

(Full text can be found at: http://www.lyricsdepot.com/n-w-a/fuck-tha-police.html)

Here, NWA reverses the legal power structure by putting the police on trial in a court presided over by the members of the group. The lyrics depict the victimization of African Americans by the police force whose use of racial profiling often targets black males. In the song, the group appropriates the stereotypes of badmen as a means to locate themselves in positions of power over the police. The bravado of badmen as outlaws is not only articulated through the insults and contempt directed at the police but also in their defiant and defensive stance against agents of the law. The song conveys the general sense of anger directed against the legal system and especially against the police in the African-American community. The lyrics foreshadow the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles that would take place a few years later. Upon its release, the song generated much controversy. The FBI reportedly sent a warning letter to NWA’s recording company in August 1989 shortly after the release of the song (Swedenburgh 584).
Critics of the song took issue with passages that appeared to condone violence against police officers. In 1990 the justice department was also reported to have “issued an internal memorandum” concerning artists. Among them Public Enemy, Sir-Mix-A-Lot, NWA, 2 Live Crew and Ice-T were named in the memorandum (584). Following the publication of this memorandum, various campaigns emerged to censor and even criminalize rap songs by categorizing them as “obscene,” banning rap CDs from public libraries, as well as “making it illegal to sell to minors” (584). The controversial nature of NWA’s song stems from its dual interpretive position within two social narratives that are antagonistic to each other. NWA’s hostility towards the police is the product of a long-standing distrust of the law, which had historically been employed as a repressive state apparatus against the African-American community. It was as a result of this distrust that the badman emerged as an iconoclastic figure. Nevertheless NWA’s antagonism against law enforcement also reflected the stereotype of black males as dangerous or pathological figures, a portrayal that was exemplified in films such as Birth of a Nation (1915).

The controversy surrounding NWA was of course not unique to the group. Other rap artists such as Ice-T, whose trash metal band released a song titled “Cop Killer,” also generated a social uproar. The hip-hop journalist Martin Johnson reports that that in the aftermath of “Cop Killer’s” release, various police associations “called for divestiture of stock from Time Warner, 60 congressmen signed a proclamation denouncing the song,” and even president Bush called it “sick” (Johnson 288). Johnson further explains that “few of those jumping on the bandwagon to denounce ‘Cop Killer’ analyzed its content—the story of a psychopath pushed over the edge by police harassment” (289). Even though the song targeted a “rock ‘n’ roll constituency” that was mostly white, it nevertheless also drew its inspiration from a general sense of frustration and
anger against the police in large segments of the African-American population. Many African Americans have been victimized by police brutality (289). The survival and re-interpretation of the badman mythoform in gangsta rap highlighted the ongoing antagonistic relationship between law enforcement agencies and the African-American community. As Angela Nelson contends, “the enactment of Stagolee’s “badness” (meaning that he is both the best at what he does and is the most “low-down” and “dirty”) is the essence of boasting in hip-hop, as well as in the blues” (http://www.americanpopularculture.com). Stagolee’s influence can also be seen in hip-hop’s naming culture. The names of rap performers and groups such as “Public Enemy, Rebel MC, NWA (Niggas With Attitude), Terminator X, Gangsta Pat, Digital Underground, HWA (Hoes With Attitude), BWP (Bitches With Problems), Poison Clan, Above the Law, and Detroit’s Most Wanted” all seek to signify the iconoclastic persona that Stagolee embodied (Nelson). The anti-establishment posture symbolized in the badman persona has been used to authenticate rap artists by making them more marketable in hip-hop’s field of cultural production. Both NWA and Ice-T’s “street cred” and their careers benefited greatly from the controversies generated by their songs.

The badman persona is typically performed in a first-person narrative style. Here the “I” of the badman and the “I” of the artist become interwoven. The “I” in certain instances also bridges the gap between the performer and the community that he or she represents. In this context, the musician’s “I” functions not only as a personal narrative but also performs as a representation of the general experiences of black youth in the ghetto. This technique is exemplified in Ice Cube’s rap song entitled “It was a Good Day” (1992), which seeks to represent the experiences of marginalized black youth through a first-person narrative:

Just waking up in the morning gotta thank God
I don’t know but today seems kinda odd [...]  
Looking in my mirror not a jacker in sight [...]  
I got a beep from Kim and she can fuck all night [...]  

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.lyricsfreak.com/i/ice_cube/it_was_a_good_day_20066677.html)

The music used in this song was sampled from a “slow jam” recorded by the Isley Brothers in 1977 titled “Footsteps in the Dark.” With a mixture of Soul and R&B influences, slow jams typically feature downtempo rhythms that are meant to foster a relaxed, happy and often erotic mood. The downtempo rhythm featuring in Ice Cube’s song therefore effectively conveys the state of mind of the song’s protagonist who happens to experience an exceptional “good day.” Similarly to Monsieur R and Keny Arkana’s collaborative track that was examined earlier, Ice Cube’s song also seeks to testify on behalf of a community. Ice Cube’s testimonial about the daily events in his life is meant to document a reality that many cultural insiders would recognize. From this perspective, the song not only operates as a personal narrative but also functions as a meta-narrative to which a larger audience of cultural insiders can attach and interpret their own experiences. This is not to say that the message embedded in the song is only targeted to inner city black youth. On the contrary, the song employs a double voiced discourse in order to communicate simultaneously with those inside the culture as well as the outside world. This is because the song concurrently invites outsiders to occupy a voyeuristic role while also gesturing towards cultural insiders.

There are many similarities between Ice Cube’s song and the narrative tropes and themes used in the ballads of Stagolee. According to Jerry Bryant, the Stagolee toast “is not designated for psychological probing. It is exclusively narrative and its narrative subject is
violent action. We do not see what goes on in Stagolee’s head, only what he does” (92). While Ice Cube’s song, as well as many other rap lyrics, can be easily examined using psychoanalytic tools, there is nonetheless an emphasis on the actions attributed to the rapper’s persona. In this particular song, Ice Cube’s character is not only a successful gambler, a trait he shares with Stagolee and other badmen, but he is also imbued with remarkable athletic skills. The first person narrative perspective therefore has the effect of highlighting the rapper’s agency within the world he describes. Nonetheless, this sense of agency is also subservient to the surroundings in which it is articulated. Ice Cube’s successful endeavors are attributed to the fact that “this is a good day” as the following lyrics demonstrate:

Saw the police and they rolled right past me
No flexin’, didn’t even look in a niggas’ direction
as I ran the intersection […]
Plus nobody I know got killed in South Central L.A.
Today was a good day
(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.lyricsfreak.com/i/ice_cube/it_was_a_good_day_20066677.html)

The boasting that is typical of the Stagolee mythoform is clearly present in Ice Cube’s song. The song exalts the protagonist’s athletic abilities, his gambling skills and even his sexual prowess. Thus by virtue of his survival skills, the narrator embodies the image of the “baad nigger,” an image that dominates most of the gangsta realist tropes in hip-hop music. As previously mentioned, it is important to note that in African-American vernacular, when the vowel in the word “bad” is prolonged into “baad,” the word’s connotation is reversed from negative to positive.
As Boyd explains, unlike Afrocentric hip-hop, in gangsta rap the word “Nigga” is “often used by rappers who consider themselves products and practitioners of the ghetto life. The ‘hardest’ and often the most confrontational rappers have defined themselves as ‘niggas’ in opposition to the dominant society” (Boyd 331). Perry confirms that, as a representative of their world, rappers often encourage a “sociological interpretation of the music, best expressed by the concept of ‘the real.’ ‘This is the documentary story of my world,’ we are told” (Perry 39). One of the ways Ice Cube’s song can be analyzed is by examining the use of texture in his lyrics. According to Pate, texture is when “a rap/poem expresses interwoven or multiple story lines, includes complex metaphorical constructions, and uses intricate and complex language or imagery to convey multiple meanings” (87). In order for a rap song to be textured the rapper must therefore attempt to position critically his reality by contextualizing it within a larger world, thus identifying systemic trends and structures (87).

Ice-Cube’s “good day,” is thereby articulated against a background that depicts the harsh realities of the ghetto. His day is exalted because he was not car-jacked, the police did not harass him and neither he nor anybody he knows died on that particular day. The texture of the song allows the lyrics to project a social criticism of the systemic structures of oppression that generate the realities the protagonist faces. By exalting an experience that those who do not live in this environment would consider to be normal—that is getting through the day without being shot, harassed by the police or losing a loved one—the song formulates a critique of a system which relegates certain communities to the ashes of a hopeless and violent world that other more affluent groups do not experience. The song thus typifies the feelings of exclusion-inclusion central to the creation of the trickster, the badman mythoform and Afrocentric motifs.
Despite its occasional critical message aimed at the dominant society, gangsta rap is often laden with misogynistic lyrics and representations of pathological behaviors that tend to drown any kind of critical posture. Pate contends that “rap/poetry from its inception was a mechanism by which the private language of marginalized inner-city young men was transformed into a public one. This private language houses all of the misogynist ideas that this society has privileged men to have and to discuss privately” (87). Tricia Rose offers the following critique of gangsta realism by listing the limitations of “keepin’ it real.” She argues that:

1. [It] refers to an ever-narrowing slice of black ghetto street life.

2. The constant commercial promotion of thugs, hustlers, pimps, and whores reflects and promotes this aspect of street life.

3. It denies the immense corporate influence on hip hop’s storytelling.

4. It contributes to the idea that black street life is black culture itself.

5. By reflecting images of black people as colorful and violent criminals, drug dealers, and sex fiends, this defense is intended to protect the profit stream such images have generated; at the same time, however, it crowds out other notions of what it means to be black and reinforces the most powerful racist and sexist images of black people.

(139)

Nevertheless, as seen earlier, amidst the pathological behavior and misogyny for which mainstream hip-hop is famous, there sometimes exists a critical positionality that cannot be ignored. The misogyny, which partly stems from the Stagolee mythoform, functions as a way of expressing notions of power and agency within a ghettoized milieu, albeit a highly problematic way of positing one’s agency. It is understandable why the Stagolee mythoform in its various contemporary manifestations would be attractive to marginalized black youth, mainly because it
imagines a person who does not recognize any physical, moral or legal limitations while their social realities are structured by “limitations and consequences” (Smethurst 81). A significant body of hip-hop scholarship has tended to focus on the question of misogyny in rap lyrics by relating it to contemporary patriarchal cultural norms that dominate the music—norms that have had an adverse impact on African-American women. In my analysis, however, I seek to focus on how these misogynist representations operate within discourses of authenticity.

As previously mentioned, the excessive commodity fetishism in rap music allows the artists to re-imagine notions of power expressed through the consumption of seemingly unattainable goods. The conspicuous consumption as well as the misogyny (which is also subject to similar patterns of consumption) that pervade gangsta rap eventually created a rift between mainstream hip-hop and its conscious counterpart, that is hip-hop that is more socially critical and politically active. The lyrics from Dead Prez’s song titled “Hip-Hop” (2000) illustrate this rift:

All my dogs stay real […]
MC’s get a little bit of love and think they hot
Talkin’ ‘bout how much money they got
Nigga all y’all records sound the same
You would rather have a Lexus or justice […]
A Beamer, a necklace or freedom
Still a nigga like me don’t playa hate […]
This real hip-hop, and it don’t stop […]

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.lyricsfreak.com/d/dead_prez/its_bigger_than_hip_hop_20038333.html)
In order to critique mainstream hip-hop, Dead Prez revert to the practice of dissin’, or verbally undercutting opponents, popularized in free style battle rhymes. Dead Prez ultimately question the authenticity of commercial hip-hop artists by pointing at how similar they sound. It is important to note that Dead Prez convey their criticism of commercial rappers using the normalized modalities through which hip-hop theorizes itself. One of the cherished skills by which emcees or rappers are judged, is by their ability to lyrically improvise, experiment and create new meaning by signifying upon evolving cultural references that are well known to their target audience. These skills are especially exalted in free style battle rhymes where emcees lyrically compete against one another. They are also used in freestyle cipher gatherings. As Shahid Stover explains: “the freestyle cipher begins with an MCee rhyming as others begin to gather around in a loose knit circle. As one MCee finishes or is creatively interrupted, then another MCee takes control of the lyrical content and contributes to the continuation of the lyrical flow” (28). During these gatherings, the emcee must also take general cues from his (or her) audience and act positively on the ways in which his or her lyrics are received by the crowd. The cipher gathering therefore emerges as the locus of a dynamic collective consciousness which facilitates the creative evolution of the lyrical flow. It is worth remembering that the ability to assess quickly a rhetorical situation and cleverly improvise was one of the exalted traits associated with trickster characters such as the signifyin’ monkey. It is this focus on creative improvisation that Dead Prez juxtapose to unchanging and monochromatic “varieties” of records plaguing mainstream hip-hop.

The singers of Dead Prez bemoan the commodification and corporate cooption of hip-hop. By comparing record labels to drug dealers (“these record labels slang out tapes like dope”), Dead Prez emphasize what they perceive to be the contamination of hip-hop by the American
culture industry. The lyrics of the song thus offer a meta-textual analysis through its critique of mainstream hip-hop as well as its self-referential mode of drawing attention to itself as the embodiment of “authenticity” or “realness.” The chorus “it’s bigger than hip-hop” mirrors an ideological penchant to views hip-hop as a medium for social activism. The plea to stay “real” or revert back to the “real” subverts the claims to “realness” that most mainstream hip-hop enthusiasts and artists employ to defend the prevalence of hyper-consumerism and misogyny in the music. What Dead Prez is offering in their song is a deconstructive realism that seeks to undermine the dominant modes through which “the real” is represented in rap music. In the process they thus posit their genre of “conscious” hip-hop as the ultimate “reality.”

Similarly, in the video to their song entitled “Ego Trippin” the group De La Soul employs the same kind of deconstructive realism as they poke fun at rappers who deceivingly showcase their opulence by renting expensive cars and hiring “busty models” for their videos (Neate 50). Both Dead Prez and De La Soul project a meta-reality through which representations of reality are identified and deconstructed. However, despite their criticism of “ghetto fabulous” consumerist hip-hop, Dead Prez does not necessarily locate itself in an antagonistic position vis-à-vis gangsta rap. In the past they have not only stylistically and ideologically placed themselves in between NWA, a gangsta rap group, and Public Enemy, a conscious hip-hop group, but they have also employed the concept of “RBG” (Revolutionary but Gangsta) in order to synthesize the iconoclastic energies of conscious and gangsta rap. Revolutionary but Gangsta is the title of a Dead Prez album released in 2004. Songs that are featured in the album such as “Pimp the System” argue in favor of channeling criminal activities towards revolutionary ends. “Pimp the System” epitomizes the concept of RBG by displacing the badman motif from a performance
that merely seeks to generate immediate personal gains to a state of mind that gravitates towards a project of social transformation.

The dichotomy between African Americans who view “gangsta” realism as a subversive technique and those who would rather embrace “cleaner” communal images that they deem more positive and empowering is not unique to hip-hop. The essential framework of this dichotomy has been a subject of contention throughout the history of social struggles in the African American community. The ontological modes through which projects of social transformation are articulated have habitually oscillated between the survivalist anti-establishment badman and the “clean negro” type whose respectable demeanor was employed as a model for the civil rights non-violent protests (Perry 4).

According to Perry, during the struggle for civil rights, “being impeccable, moral, and well-spoken stood as evidence of the unjustifiability of white racism and brutality” (4). Certainly, as Perry points out, the pictures of “student activists at lunch counters, with clean-cut clothes and hair trimmed” facing unjust discrimination highlighted the brutality of the segregated south through their impeccable presence (4). It was for this reason that Rosa Parks, a married church-going Christian woman, was chosen as a symbol of the bus boycott over Claudette Colvin, an unmarried teenage mother who had similarly resisted segregation in public transportation (5). These politics of representation were also present in black music. Alongside harmonic ballads featuring clean and respectable black men wearing suits as well as women adorning cocktail dresses, one could also find the “funky rough sounding tunes of the Sax” (5). This division can be seen in the dichotomy between spirituals and jook music, between the gospel and the blues (5). One was presented as the idealized image of respectability that was marketed to mainstream culture while the other “was music for the dark, smoky nightclubs” (5).
Pery explains that “this division in part served as a civil rights strategy; it was necessary to have a clearly demarcated space of respectability that could provide an unarmed example of the denial perfect citizens experienced in a racist society” (5).

The badman persona that permeates gangsta rap emerged from the funky tunes and jook music that Perry describes. In some ways, unlike the clean-cut and respectable image, the badman presents himself as an inassimilable countercultural figure who denounces a given sociopolitical reality. However, it should be noted that the clean-cut image did not always reflect the politics of assimilation or integration. Groups such as “The Nation of Islam,” who were known for their respectable mannerism (to be distinguished from their rhetoric), well groomed and professional looking suits and bow ties, never wished to integrate themselves into “white” society.

Nonetheless, as was the case with Ice Cube’s song “It was a Good Day,” the figure of the badman is sometimes used as a mirror image of the larger society in which it was created it. In this sense, the badman serves the same rhetorical purpose as Richard Wright’s character Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. The badman is thus stuck between the double conscious duality of being black and American. It is a duality he refuses to reconcile by projecting himself as the misunderstood and inassimilable Frankenstein who mirrors the unjust society that created him. Nonetheless, as Ogbar points out, many ghetto realist narratives also problematically tend to “celebrate the ways in which a ‘nigga’s’ life can be taken almost casually,” in the process reinforcing the image of the black uncivilized brute that was constructed by a white supremacist ideology (Ogbar 29).

Although the badman emerged in a patriarchal space that privileged notions of masculine empowerment, the figure has also found its feminine equivalent in hip-hop music. In rap music,
the badwoman trope, also known as the “Queen Bitch,” has been typified by certain female rappers such as Lil’ Kim, Trina, Kia and Foxy Brown. One of the ways in which the badwoman trope is performed is through an exaltation of her sexual ability which is used to emasculate her male companions. But in order to examine the discourses behind the hypersexual badwoman it is fruitful to contextualize the significance of sexual prowess in the representation of figures like Stagolee. In the badman tradition, sexual prowess has always formed part and parcel of the badman mythoform. The importance of sexual prowess to the Stagolee myth is exemplified in the following toast that was recorded and transcribed by Roger Abrahams. In this version of the myth, Stagolee demonstrates his sexual abilities prior to the arrival of Billy Lyons (or Benny Long)—whom he eventually murders:

I said, “Me bitch, and my name is Stackolee.”

She said, “Oh, I heard of you, Stack, from the tales of old. Be here when my son Benny Long get back.”

I said, “Bitch, I’ll be here till the world go to pass. You tell your son, Benny Long, that I said, “Kiss my ass”

Just then a cute little broad came over, a terrible smile.

She looked me up and down and said, “You look like you ain’t had none, daddy, in quite awhile.”

I said, “Now raise, bitch, don’t hand me that shit. I’m used to pussy quite a bit.”

She looked at her watch, it was quarter to eight.

She said, “Come on upstairs, I’m a set you straight.”

The bed gave a twist, the springs gave a twistle.

I threwed nine inches of joint to the whore before she
could move a gristle.

We came back downstairs. They was fucking on the bar,
Sucking on the floor.

Just then you could hear a pin drop, for that bad-ass Benny
Long walked in the door. (131)

Here Stagolee’s virility is intricately tied to the badman figure that he personifies. Agency or power in this context manifests itself through his ability to take another man’s life or sexually prove his manhood with a woman. Just like the badman, the badwoman seeks to empower herself, as Keys observes, by “seducing, repressing, and sexually emasculating male characters; or ‘dissin’” (verbally downplaying) their would-be female or male competitors—all through figurative speech” (Keyes 272). The lyrics from Lil’ Kim’s song titled “How Many Licks” (2000) provides an example:

I’ve been a lot of places, seen a lot of faces
Ah hell I even fuck with different races
A white dude - his name was John
He had a Queen Bee Rules tattoo on his arm, uh […]
Dan my nigga from Down South
Used to like me to spank him and cum in his mouth
And Tony he was Italian […]
He ate my pussy from dark till the morning […]
And this black dude I called King Kong
He had a big ass dick and a hurricane tongue
(Full lyrics can be found at:

http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/lilkim/howmanylicks.html)

In the song, Lil’ Kim’s sexual virility is not only manifested through the multiple sexual partners that she collects but also by assuming, literally and figuratively a position of power vis-à-vis her sexual partners. Her sense of power is not only exerted over black males but also over men in general—as signified by her conquest of men from different races. This form of “empowerment” employs the sexual politics of male patriarchy as its axiom, albeit by substituting a male protagonist for a female one. Ultimately, Lil’ Kim does not change or question the modes through which notions of power come to be defined by sexual behavior.

At this point it is useful to historicize the significance of sexual prowess as a means to comprehend its impact on both the badman and badwoman trope. In Dismantling Black Manhood, Daniel Black retraces the different ways black men’s perceptions of manhood were significantly altered by the institution of slavery. According to Black, “the ability of White men to whip and kill Black men at will and force them to witness violence against their female partners and children served not just as a tool of racial control, but violence also became deeply embedded in the very definition of masculinity” (58). Their inability to protect their children, daughters, sisters and wives against the slave owner’s cruelty and abuse negated the sense of manhood that had been developed in Africa, which was rooted in the ability not only to provide for one’s family but also to protect them from external aggressors. The frequent rapes as well as other atrocities committed against family members during slavery were not only physical forms of violence but also symbolic ones. In this case it was the symbolic castration of male patriarchy that now had to find other means of expression. As Black explains, “because enslaved African men were denied the patriarchal power that came with family and property, they claimed other
markers of masculinity, namely, sexual prowess and brute strength. Foreshadowing contemporary images of Black masculinity that celebrate hypersexuality and athletic ability, Black men were permitted dimensions of masculinity that most benefited Whites” (58). In the 19th century many black men subconsciously embraced an idea of manhood that rested upon their sexual virility (Black 126). As Black explains: “a black man’s penis was the only aspect of his maleness which the captor had not usurped. Further, sexual performance provided black men an arena in which they could be guaranteed victor, never being forced to relinquish their title to anyone” (126).

Because virility was one of the few spaces left where black men could perform their masculinity, their self-worth and pride was “disproportionately tied” to their sexual virility (Black 126). Yvonne Jewkes defines hegemonic masculinity as “a structural device which understands the production and reproduction of masculine attributes, attitudes and behaviors as outcomes of social processes and inequalities which are upheld at every level of society” (41). Using this definition I argue that performances of masculinity, especially when exercised in hip-hop, can partially be understood as having operated under a similar paradigm (Jewkes 41).

Power is generally articulated and negotiated in various forms in all segments of society. Sexual virility, just like the talent of the trickster, materializes as a way of renegotiating relations of power within a given reality. Sexual behavior is, in this context, the locus of biopolitical discourses in which the subject’s sexuality is performed and imagined in the face of competing representations of reality used to ossify or subvert existing power relations (Foucault, The History of Sexuality). In this sense, the lenses through which social power relations are analyzed and expressed by men in male-dominated media become increasingly framed within notions of manhood and sexual virility. But as the patriarchal ideology expressed in Five Percent
philosophy as well as the counter-cultural image of the hyper-masculine badman have exemplified, discourses that have codified parameters of sexual behaviors in power relations can also operate within broader articulations of authenticity. Consequently, in hip-hop culture, those who seek to critique the hyper-masculine gangsta as well as the hyper-sexual badwoman often delegitimize them on the basis of their “inauthenticity.”

While the gangsta persona has been confronted by its Afrocentric counterpart, the badwoman, “Queen Bitch” or “Sistah with Attitude” has also been problematized by the “Queen Mother” figure. Cheryl Keyes explains that the “Queen Mother” category essentially comprises “female rappers who view themselves as African-centered icons, an image often suggested by their dress. In their lyrics, they refer to themselves as ‘Asiatic black women,’ ‘Nubian queens,’ ‘Intelligent black women,’ or ‘sistas droppin’ science to the people,’ suggestive of their self-constructed identity and intellectual prowess” (Keyes 266). Female rappers who embody the Afrocentric “Queen Mother” persona include Lauryn Hill, Isis, Queen Kenya, Sister Souljah, Nefertiti, Queen Mother Rage and Queen Latifah. In her song titled “U.N.I.T.Y.” (1993) Queen Latifah, unlike Lil’ Kim, questions the modes through which notions of power are articulated in misogynist discourses. Queen Latifah further attempts to deconstruct the badwoman persona, or the “Gangsta Bitch” as she refers to it, by questioning its authenticity, as these lyrics reveal:

Every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho […]
I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame […]
I walked past these dudes when they passed me
One of ‘em felt my booty, he was nasty […]
Then the little one said (Yeah me bitch) and laughed […]
(Huh) I punched him dead in his eye and said
Female rappers who embody the “Queen Mother” persona often adorn their bodies with Afrocentric attire such as “royal Kente cloth stripes” and “ankle-stylized jewelry” (Keyes 266). Their lyrics typically promote themes such as “Black female empowerment and spirituality” (266). These artists often seek to identify with images of African queens, priestesses and warriors (Keyes 266). In their lyrics, these female rappers demand respect not only for their people as a whole but also more specifically for black women (Keyes 266). Queen Latifah’s song, for example, seeks to dismantle the privileged space of male patriarchy by positing a system of valuation that is both empowering and egalitarian in terms of gender relations. In her lyrics, Queen Latifah further emasculates certain male figures that her protagonist encounters, but unlike Lil’ Kim this lyrical emasculation is not based on sexual prowess but rather on pride, self-confidence and intelligence.

Nonetheless, Queen Latifah’s wrath is not only directed at men but also women. “U.N.I.T.Y” further problematizes the constructed persona of the “Gangsta Bitch” by portraying it as an inauthentic performance based on feelings of insecurity and a lack of education rather than on a position of social empowerment. It is important to note that Queen Latifah assumes the role of various characters throughout the song. In the first two stanzas of the song she is a “no nonsense” bold woman who punches misogynistic men who cross her path. In the third and fourth stanza she is a physically abused woman with children who is attempting to leave her “bad tempered” husband. In the fifth and sixth stanza she is an older figure/teacher trying to mentor young girls by preventing them from engaging in violent criminal behavior. Queen Latifah’s
ability to embody diverse characters in her songs offers a perfect example of the ways in which rappers typically assume various personalities in order to create experiential narratives that resonate with their target audience. The rhetorical structure of the toast, initially used to impersonate the character of stagolee the badman, therefore acquires a plethora of contextualized applications.

Just like its male Afrocentric counterpart, the figure of the “Queen Mother” has been constructed around a projected African space, one that allows the individual to construct an empowering image of the self. Cheryl Keyes explains that the Queen Mother is generally associated with African traditional court culture (266). She contends that in the “16th century in the Benin Kingdom of Southeastern Nigeria,” the Queen Mother “was the mother of a reigning king. Because of her material connection to the king, she garnered certain rights and privileges, including control over districts of the king and a voice in the national affairs of the state” (266). The allusion to the Queen Mother in hip-hop culture, just like the figure of the badman and the trickster, empowers those who use these characters with an ability to oppose dominant discourses that pervade their realities.

The empowering attributes of these characters stem from their iconoclastic position vis-à-vis the present realities of the artists who claim them. Female hip-hop artists such as Queen Latifah have sought to assume a critical position on the periphery of the patriarchal narrative that seeks to define their femininity. The idea of Africa in this case emerges as a liberatory space from which representations of identity and agency can be created. Similarly, as seen earlier, the gangsta realism in ghetto-centric rap provides an “authentic” space from where a different system of valuation seeking to convey a counter-cultural narrative can be advanced.
From the evidence presented in the chapter, it is apparent that the badman mythoform has impacted the manner in which discourse of authenticity are articulated in American hip-hop music and particularly in gangsta rap. Here authenticity stems from a desire to project one’s potential as a human being beyond the limitations imposed on one’s reality. The figures of the trickster and the badman have been important to the construction of heroic personalities such as Stagolee. The badman emerged as a meta-juridical figure whose heroic depiction subverted the validity of a legal system that had excluded African Americans from obtaining their civil rights. The trope of the badman as an outlaw is of course not unique to African-American culture. Similar representations can be seen in cowboy Westerns that still remain popular. Nonetheless, my intention is not to claim that the trope of the badman only appears in African-American culture but rather to examine how and why it has been employed and popularized in this context. It is in response to the sociopolitical and economic exclusion of African Americans—this inclusionary-exclusion whose progenitor is the institution of slavery itself—that the badman, originally the trickster, was given birth as a means to navigate between a double conscious cognition of being African and American. It is by embodying badman characters that hip-hop artists later found a means to articulate their authenticity, seemingly outside of systemic structures that oppressed them. Nonetheless, any analysis of authenticity in hip-hop culture as it pertains to a variety of issues ranging from gender relations to black social emancipation remains incomplete without an examination of how media consolidation and neoliberal economics have influenced the form and content of rap songs. In the next chapter I will examine the ways in which media consolidation as well as the privatization and formation of the prison industrial complex, as an epiphenomenon of neoliberal economics, have influenced discourses of authenticity in hip-hop music. The chapter will further provide the basis for analyzing in
subsequent chapters the proliferation of hip-hop in France and Kenya, in particular the production and reproduction of the badman and Afrocentric personae in both countries.

Chapter 2
The Badman Mythoform in the Age of the Prison Industrial Complex and the End of History

A) The Prison Industrial Complex

Much critical discourse on hip-hop has focused on the proliferation of misogynist and neo-minstrel images in the music. These discourses tend to problematize the exaltation of the pathological “gangsta thug” without necessarily seeking to examine the origins of these tropes nor the social conditions that led to their propagation. In many ways the trickster, the badman and the gangsta thug are all epiphenomena of the symbolic production of race and social marginality throughout the history of the United States. As Michelle Alexander explains in The
New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness, “a primary function of any racial caste system is to define the meaning of race in its time. Slavery defined what it meant to be black (a slave), and Jim Crow defined what it meant to be black (a second class citizen). Today mass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America” (192). This is not to say that the phenomenon of mass incarceration has not affected populations of other ethnicities in the United States but rather to state that the adverse effects of the nation’s current legal structure and penal system has disproportionately impacted certain economically marginalized segments of the African-American community. Furthermore, the images which connect African Americans to criminal activities have often been excessively primed in the mainstream media (Oliver 2003). The different historical manifestations of the badman mythoform in African-American popular culture are symptomatic of the continuously evolving legal system that has disenfranchised large segments of the African-American community through a variety of means ranging from the tendency to exclude blacks from juries to the inadequacies of legal defense services accessible to them.

There is a direct relationship between the popularization of the gangsta posture that has dominated much of mainstream hip-hop and the emergence of the prison industrial complex. In fact, some aesthetic elements such as sagging and baggy pants that have become the norm in rap music stem from the prison culture that many impoverished young African-American males have experienced. It is not a coincidence that the experience of prison has given many rappers, including the late Tupac Shakur, an aura of authenticity. But before analyzing the rapport between the prison industrial complex and hip-hop culture, it is essential to contextualize the system of mass incarceration as it pertains to lower income African-American communities within a larger socio-political and economic framework.
Michelle Alexander contends that contemporary modes of racial stratification in the United States employ “color blindness” as their rhetorical modus operandi. In many ways, the contemporary nature of racial oppression in the United States has remained mostly invisible in mainstream discourse, primarily because of the manner in which issues that relate to racial violence have often been framed. Nevertheless, in order to examine this problematic framing of racial violence, we must first visit Slavoj Zizek’s definition of the dichotomy between objective and subjective violence. According to Zizek:

[…] subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the ‘normal’ peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart to-an-all-too-visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be “irrational” explosions of subjective violence. (2)

Subjective violence can thus be performed by a visible agent, e.g. a white policeman beating a black man on the side of a highway. Objective violence, however, is the background that generates subjective outbursts (2). Nevertheless, as Zizek argues, the spectacle of subjective forms of violence as well as “the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as an allure which [sometimes] prevents us from thinking” or rather from perceiving the normalized contexts from which the violence in question arises (3). The
violence that stems from the incarceration of large segments of the African-American community offers an example. Despite the fact that the majority of the prison population in the United States is black, very seldom, especially in the mainstream media, is there an attempt to analyze the phenomenon of mass incarceration as a systemic form of racial disenfranchisement that has come to resemble certain fundamental the laws of Jim Crow in ways.

The injustices perpetrated by systemic forms of violence that seem to target specific marginalized communities are often perceived through the prism of a pathos that certain types of victims generate. As I have argued in the previous chapter by citing the case of Rosa Parks who was chosen over Claudette Colvin to be a protagonist of the civil rights movement, there are certain types of victims whose irreproachable moral character in the face of adversity and oppression brings attention to the system that instigates the injustices that they experience. By the same token, the systemic institutionalization of young African Americans into the penal system generates less compassion for a social group of outcasts that have been labeled criminals.

In the case of Rosa Parks and the civil rights marches, it was through the pathos that these peaceful and moral victims produced,—a pathos spawned by subjective forms of violence inflicted on civil rights leaders—that the systemic nature of their oppression was put into question. In this context, subjective forms of violence do not necessarily obfuscate the systemic structures from which they stem. On the contrary, subjective forms of violence can occasionally act as inroads that reveal the fundamental apparatuses which maintain and normalize certain forms of social inequity. Nonetheless, those who are labeled as felons, many of whom are individuals who have been victimized by the prison industrial complex, find themselves for the most part unable to engender the same level of compassion and ethical uproar for their cause. This situation normalizes the objective forms of violence to which they are subjected. As will be
seen, it is by understanding the relationship between subjective and objective forms of violence, as well as the manner in which they are socially perceived when it comes to race related issues, that the popularization and propagation of the badman mythoform in hip-hop culture becomes comprehensible.

Throughout the history of race relations in the United States, the legal and penal systems have often been employed as a means to maintain underlying structures of racial stratification in the wake of reforms aimed at providing African Americans with certain rights of citizenship. For example, in the aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation the infamous black codes and vagrancy laws which, according to Alexander, “essentially made it a criminal offense not to work and were applied selectively to blacks,” instituted a system of forced labor that was akin to slavery (28). Under the vagrancy laws, African Americans could be imprisoned for “dubious” crimes such as “mischief” or “insulting gestures” (31). The impetus to enforce these so-called criminal offences thus provided a substantial market for “convict leasing” where prison labor was sold “to the highest bidder” (31). As Alexander contends, similar legal maneuvers have been employed against the African-American community, specifically those in economically marginalized sectors, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Overt displays of racism have been replaced in the twenty-first century by more “subtle” signifiers (2). The criminal justice system is in this context used to identify people of color as “criminals” as a means to engage in practices that were supposedly left behind through the advent of civil rights legislations (2). Once someone is labeled a felon, old forms of discrimination suddenly resurface. These include: losing the right to vote, “denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service […] as a criminal, you have scarcely
more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow”
(2).

The felon is indubitably a homo sacer in contemporary American society. Felons are often perceived as undesirable individuals who have been relegated to the outskirts of “civilized” society because of their inability to adhere to its legal codes. However, we need to scrutinize how one’s identity as a felon is sometimes ushered into existence beyond the generalizing pathological narrative that is often ascribed to those who have become entangled in the penal system. This analysis will provide the basis for further understanding articulations of authenticity through badman tropes in hip-hop music.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act which enforced harsh minimum sentences for drug offenders (Alexander 52). The “War on Drugs” which he initiated has specifically and disproportionately continued to target black and brown communities. Despite the fact that statistically the youth in white communities were reported to “use cocaine at seven times the rate of black students, use crack cocaine at eight times the rate of black students, and use heroin at seven times the rate of black students,” SWAT teams and police patrols have often focused their efforts on performing drug raids, random searches as well as stop-and-frisk operations within racially segregated ghettos (97). While the majority of individuals who are stopped and searched under the suspicion of drug related offenses are predominantly from racial minorities, scholars such as Alexander affirm that in fact “whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in illegal drug dealing than people of color” (97).

After the implementation of the “three strikes” law endorsed by President Bill Clinton in 1994, it became common practice to inflict harsh minimum sentences (55). First-time drug offenders could, for example, be given the maximum of a life sentence behind bars (89). One of
the consequences of harsh minimum sentences is that many people are often coerced into accepting a guilty plea for crimes they did not commit out of fear that they may serve an extraordinarily long sentence if their case is taken before a judge (83). As legal scholar Michelle Alexander explains, many television shows, specifically the ones that romanticize the law, can be considered to be contemporary equivalents of old films that portrayed happy slaves (58-59). These shows typically cast a fictional representation of an idealized legal system which actually conceals brutal structures of racial oppression (58-59). In reality, many accused individuals never meet with an attorney; full blown trials are also rare (59). The penalties for minor drug related offenses are so severe that “innocent people plead guilty, accepting plea bargains to avoid harsh mandatory sentences; and children as young as fourteen, are sent to adult prisons” (59).

Furthermore, many of those who are incarcerates are for the most part not charged with serious crimes. In 2005, it was reported that “four out of five drug arrests were for possession, and only one out of five was for sale. Moreover, most people in state prison for drug offenses have no history of violence or significant selling activity” (59).

Thus, once they are socially branded as felons via the threat of harsh mandatory sentence requirements, many young African Americans, whether they spend an extended amount of time in jail or not, are stripped of certain rights of citizenship which not only include voting and jury duty but also the right not to be discriminated against in areas such as employment and public housing—rights that were obtained through the impetus of the Civil Rights Movement. The prison population in the United States, with a majority of black inmates, has also significantly increased through the advent of harsh mandatory sentences. As Alexander explains: “between 1980 and 2000, the number of people incarcerated in our nation’s prisons and jails soared from roughly 300,000 to more than 2 million. By the end of 2007, more than 7 million Americans—or
one in every 31 adults—were behind bars, on probation, or on parole” (59). Once labeled a felon the majority of individuals who have in one form or another gone through the U.S. penal system are often condemned to return.

In addition to employment and housing discrimination, those felons who miraculously do manage to find a job can have up to 100% of their wages garnished for the purpose of repaying numerous debts that they incurred as a result of their time spent either in prison or in courts—a debt that they owe to a host of agencies including “probation departments [and] courts” (Alexander 150). These agencies charge fees for “services” which include drug testing and treatments, which felons often receive as a requirement for parole, jail book-in, jail per diems, public defender application costs, “pre-sentence report fees, public defender recoupment fees [as well as] parole or probation fees” (150). Unable to make a decent living legally or even survive when 100% of their wages can be garnished, most felons eventually end up within the same for-profit prison institutions from which they were previously released (150).

It is thus important to contextualize the popularization of the badman mythoform and the social purpose that it serves within the growing prison industrial complex as well as the ways by which the legal and penal systems have victimized and disenfranchised certain segments of the African-American community. The emergence of “gangsta rap” and the manner in which artists such as NWA or even Tupac Shakur have attempted to employ the genre in successful and/or problematic ways as a tool of cultural resistance need to be investigated in relation to the onslaught of the war on drugs. The added legal measures cited above intensified the ghettoization and aggravated the social marginalization of African and Hispanic Americans who dwell in economically disadvantaged areas. In many ways the exaltation of the “gangsta thug” in hip-hop culture is not an unusual phenomenon. As Alexander explains, the comportment of
young black men who appear to embrace “gangsta culture” should be placed into proper perspective since “there is absolutely nothing abnormal or surprising about a severely stigmatized group embracing their stigma” (167). The act of embracing one’s stigma can be interpreted as a “psychological maneuver” or a “political act” through which marginalized communities articulate a sense of resistance vis-à-vis discursive social practices that “seek to demean a group based on an inalterable trait” (167). As Alexander contends, the popularization of baggy pants in hip-hop videos—“a fashion trend that mimics prison-issue pants”—seeks to exalt a lifestyle that many black youth feel they cannot escape (167).

Of course, there is a difference between the re-appropriation of the gangsta posture as an iconoclastic trope and the manner in which proponents of, say, the negritude movement sought to reclaim the pejorative identity of the nègre to their advantage. Embracing a “thug life” in this context feeds directly into and serves to perpetuate one’s position of marginality. Nevertheless, by claiming the image of the “thug,” an image that has already been ascribed to them regardless of their agency, young hip-hop artists from poor inner city communities are able to re-articulate the images that have been projected onto them in a manner that appears to empower them with a sense of purpose. In the process, they circumvent and redirect the negative terms already applied to them.

The late rapper Tupac Shakur’s “Thug life” slogan exemplifies the manner in which the pejorative image of the thug was re-imagined and used as a counter-cultural tool of resistance in hip-hop music as well as on the streets. Shakur employed his “Thug Life” slogan as an acronym that stood for “The Hate U Gave L’il Infants Fucks Everyone” (ThugLifeArmy.com). As Shakur explained, Thug Life meant “what you feed us as seeds grows and blows up in your face” (ThugLifeArmy.com). Thug Life was in a sense the “chickens coming home to roost,” the
pejorative image that had acquired an autonomous agency and was ready to turn against its creators. Thug Life was thus an accusatory gesture—one that contextualized the systemic, the objective violence that ushered the thug into existence.

In 1992 Tupac Shakur brought together the Crips and the Bloods in Los Angeles, two of the most infamous warring gangs that have terrorized inner city communities. The meeting between the two gangs was orchestrated in order to make them sign a Code of Thug Life that he had created and which aimed at redirecting the collective energies of both groups towards the goal of improving the communities in which they resided. The Code of Thug Life included the following rules:

- Crew Leaders and posse should select a diplomat, and should work ways to settle disputes. In unity, there is strength.
- Car jacking in our hood is against the Code.
- Slinging (drug dealing) to children is against the Code.
- Having children slinging is against the Code.
- No slinging in schools.
- The Boys in Blue don’t run nothing; we do: Control the hood, and make it safe for squares.
- No slinging to pregnant sister that’s baby killing; that’s genocide!
- Know your target, who’s the real enemy.
- Civilians are not a target and should be spared.
- Harm to children will not be forgiven.
- Senseless brutality and rape must stop.
Respect our Sisters, Respect our Brothers (ThugLifeArmy.com).

Although Shakur’s Code of Thug Life, which was signed by both gangs, did not have the lasting effect that he desired, it nevertheless represented a grassroots initiative prevalent in youth-centered movements that have employed hip-hop as a medium of critical analysis and collective actions. Shakur’s vision of collective action, communal self-reliance and the right to defend oneself against state-sanctioned forms of violence was highly influenced by the brand of activism that The Black Panther Party often espoused. Michael Eric Dyson explains that “Tupac saw thug life extending Panther beliefs in self-defense and class rebellion” (48). As the son of a former Black Panther Party member (Afeni Shakur), Tupac Shakur, named after a Peruvian revolutionary fighter, often incorporated the party’s ideology in his own frames of reference and implemented them in his activism.

Shakur always maintained strong reservations towards the police, partly because of his own family background. Many of Shakur’s family members were often targeted by the law because of their involvement with the Panthers. For example, Shakur’s mother was herself sent to jail because of her connections to the party. The Code of Thug Life certainly shows a clear distrust and even hatred for law enforcement by its emphasis on a form of self-reliance that delegitimizes the police as the custodians of social stability. Shakur’s disparaging view of legal authorities was based on the tendency of agents of the law to aggravate the social problems of those who dwell in ghettoized environments rather than solve them. Indeed, the draconian onslaught of police brutality in inner city communities has been the subject of many hip-hop songs other than those of Tupac Shakur. For example, in the aftermath of the murder of Amadou Diallo, a young African immigrant with no criminal record who was shot forty-one times in front
of his own home by New York City policemen in a case of “mistaken” identity, the hip-hop artist Wyclef Jean recorded the following song (2000) documenting the tragedy:

(Wyclef Jean performing as Diallo)

Boy I am so tired
I’ll be glad when I get inside the house
Oh, I dropped my keys
Oh what dis bright light? […]
Oh it’s the police
I feel so much better
I will show them, I have my ID […]

(sounds of gun-fire)

(Song)


In a manner typical of hip-hop songs, Wyclef Jean bridges the gap between the song’s protagonist, Amadou Diallo, and himself as the performer by assuming the identity of the victim. Through Wyclef Jean’s use of prosopopoeia, Diallo’s voice is thus resurrected from the dead at the beginning of the song, recapturing the events that led to his murder. The victim is heard from beyond the grave through his imagined last words. In this study, I have not only examined how hip-hop artists impersonate voices that are not necessarily their own but also the ways in which the first person narrative perspective embedded in this performance gives them the ability to testify about specific interpersonal experiences shared by the community. In the context of this song, Wyclef Jean’s impersonation of Amadou Diallo also functions as a legal testimony that is
meant to capture the events that led to his murder. However, unlike similar performances of impersonation in hip-hop music, the assumed persona here does not directly or tacitly communicate with an imagined audience but instead explicitly talks to himself. This is because the assumed audience is supposed to occupy the role of a silent witness to the murder as opposed to an interlocutor. The remaining parts of the song henceforth focus on the unjustifiable murder committed by the New York Police Department:

Who’ll be the next to fire
forty-one shots by Diallo’s side?
You said he reached sir
but he didn’t have no piece sir […]


The proceeding segments of the song then refer to Diallo in the third person. Rather than reach outwards from the depths of his own personal experience in order to convey a social reality, as is typical in many hip-hop songs, Wyclef Jean prefers to relinquish the authorial persona of a clearly visible and well defined narrator in order to focus on the event. It is by repeating the fact that Diallo was shot forty one times that Jean conveys the excessive and unnecessary violence employed by the police. However, Jean’s analysis does not simply revolve around the “incident” that led to Diallo’s murder, it also contextualizes the details of the case within a larger project for social justice. In this way Diallo is ultimately transformed into a meta-victim whose murder symbolically captures the long history of known and unknown victims of police brutality in the black community. It is thus by transforming Diallo into a symbolic victim that Jean is then able to construct an eschatological narrative using biblical references.

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The song offers stark evidence of the widespread systematic criminalization of black youth. By relating Diallo’s assassination to the murder of Steve Biko, the South African activist who was murdered while in police custody, the song juxtaposes the nature of South Africa’s apartheid society to the institutionalized harassment and victimization of young African Americans by agents of the law. Jean’s condemnation of the police is further conveyed through a biblical discourse. When he claims that “every man will be judged according to his words,” he is referring to a universal judgment. Not only are all the “villains” eventually punished in Jean’s song but the victims are also “born again.” Jean therefore corrects the legalized injustices that engender a type of victimhood symbolized in a meta-victim by in-turn seeking solace in a meta-judicial system whose power extends over all mankind. When agents of the law emerge as perpetrators of injustice, Jean discovers the need to exalt a form of natural law, or universal law, over a “positive law” that is man-made.

The message of the song acquires its rhetorical strength through the formal structures of the medium through which it is conveyed. In order to understand more fully various stylistic elements deployed to create the world that the song depicts, we must first step back and examine hip-hop’s contemporaneous quality. Although this particular song is mostly sung rather than rapped, it is nevertheless structured in a manner that is fairly typical of many rap songs.

Hip-hop performers have often attempted to be stylistically modern both in their experimental reliance on contemporary instruments as well as in the content of their music. In many ways, hip-hop’s modernist posture is epitomized by its continuously introspective and retrospective presentism—for even when it looks backwards it always does so in order to diagnose the present. Mikhail Bakhtin’s thoughts on the revolutionary nature of an “inconclusive” present that permeates certain literary genres (specifically in his analysis of the
novel) can help us in our attempt to analyze the stylistic aspects of Wyclef Jean’s interpretation of Diallo’s thoughts. It also sheds light on the contemporary modes in which the badman has been translated in hip-hop music through the prism of its presentist discourse. In the following passage from *The Dialogic of Imagination* (1975), Bakhtin provides a useful way of examining literary works that place an emphasis on an open-ended present:

> The revolution in the hierarchy of the times […] makes possible a radical revolution in the structuring of the artistic image as well. The present, in its so-called “wholeness” (although it is, of course, never whole) is in essence and in principal inconclusive; by its very nature it demands continuation, it moves into the future, and the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more tangible and indispensable its inconclusiveness becomes. Therefore, when the present becomes the center of human orientation in time and in the world, time and world lose their completeness as a whole as well as in each of their parts: it becomes a world where there is no first world (no ideal world), and the final word has not yet been spoken. (30)

In Heideggerian terms, presentist discourse within the literary imaginary thus offers an authentic potential of being in the world and with the world. The inconclusive nature of the continually evolving present is characterized by an evolving sense of significance that grows “as the context continues to unfold” (Bakhtin 31). In this regard Wyclef Jean’s song can similarly only frame the events that led to Diallo’s murder within an open-ended present that allows the possible restoration of justice.

In the song, Diallo’s story is not merely confined within the historical moment that led to his death. On the contrary, his death is channeled, almost in a Messianic Christ-like fashion, into
a project of social transformation that has yet to be actualized but whose possibility looms in the everlasting present. Wyclef Jean makes a direct reference to the necessity of rebirth by drawing on the Christian-like narrative of a resurrection—albeit in a manner that does not directly presume an eschatology but rather a possibility—when he raises the following questions in his lyrics: “Have you ever been shot, forty-one times? Have you ever screamed and no one heard you cry? Have you ever died only so you can live? Have you ever lived only so you can die again, then be born again from these enemies, on the borderline…” Diallo himself is not silenced into oblivion by the forty-one bullets that riddled his body. Instead his voice echoes from beyond the grave through Jean’s imaginary impersonation as a constant reminder of the present need for collective action. As Bakhtin puts it, here the literary “image acquires a specific actual existence. It acquires a relationship—in one form or another, to one degree or another—to the ongoing event of current life in which we, the author and readers, are intimately participating” (31).

Diallo’s murder and the subsequent court decision to acquit the officers involved of all charges “sparked huge protests, resulting in a series of studies commissioned by the attorney general of New York” (Alexander 133). Rather than disappear from public memory, Diallo’s murder has been covered in the songs of over 70 hip-hop artists and groups. His image thus continues to survive, interact and give meaning to the never ending struggle for justice—not just for Diallo but for those who have shared and continue to share his fate.

The dialogic relationship between the literary image and the ever evolving incomplete present continues to echo in the ongoing reinterpretation of the badman mythoform throughout the history of African-American folklore and music. Hip-hop’s presentist posture has allowed it to depict various modern-day manifestations of Stagolee. It does so in a manner that infuses the
literary image of the badman with a dynamic and sometimes iconoclastic impetus that is in constant dialogue with different segments of its contemporary audience.

In this regard it is useful to reexamine more closely Tupac Shakur’s interpretation of the badman. Very few hip-hop artists have ever embodied the badman mythoform in all its complex and multifaceted, not to mention contradictory, aspects as much as the late rapper Tupac Shakur. His music reflects an intricate personality that continuously resists a one dimensional depiction of his image. He concurrently symbolizes different interpretations of the badman mythoform. As an artist, Tupac Shakur was able to project simultaneously the intellectual demeanor and critical posture of Malcolm X, whose posthumous works were quite familiar to him, while displaying at other times the pathological behavior of Bigger Thomas.\textsuperscript{11} His lyrics depicted a “conscious” style but also celebrated the conspicuous consumption endemic to hip-hop. He displayed a strong sense of compassion and activism for women’s issues in his songs while also falling prey to the misogyny that pervades rap music.

Tupac Shakur’s incarnation of the badman persona reached its performative climax in 1993 when he shot two off-duty police officers in an attempt to defend a black motorist whom he claimed was being harassed. According to the journalist Connie Bruck, Tupac was later cleared of all charges when it was discovered that “the policemen had been drinking and had initiated the incident, and when the prosecution’s own witness testified that the gun one of the officers threatened Tupac with had been seized in a drug bust and then stolen from an evidence locker” (http://www.newyorker.com). With the words “Thug Life” proudly tattooed on his upper abdomen, Tupac thus re-enacted the badman mythoform beyond the content of his lyrics. The gangsta image that had been manufactured was turned into a hyper-reality, a conflation between the fantasy and its actualization. Tupac Shakur sought to maintain his authenticity by tackling
issues that affected many black youth who dwelled in impoverished milieus. As he explains in the following passage, his lyrics were meant to transform the lives of those who could relate to the experiences of his personal narratives:

To me it’s like when I say “I live the thug life baby I’m hopeless,” one person might hear that and just like the way it sounds. But I’m doing it for the kid that really lives a thug life and feels like it’s hopeless. So when I say “hopeless,” when I say it like that, it’s like I reach him. And even if when I reach him it makes it look glorious to the guy that doesn’t live that life, I can’t help it, it’s a fade. He will drop the thug life soon enough but for the person that I was trying to reach, he will pick it up and I will be able to talk to him again.

(My transcription from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbhAllAdmzE, December 2009)

In Tupac’s music, as with many other hip-hop songs, personal narratives, whether real or imagined, are thus turned into collective stories in a perpetual dialogical relationship with the lives of those who identify with them on a personal level. In *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip-Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice* (2009), Greg Dimitriadis documents the manner in which many African-American youth who identified with the personal stories told in Shakur’s music immortalized and mythologized the rapper shortly after his death. While working at a youth community center, Dimitriadis describes how many black teenagers categorically refused to accept the rapper’s passing by immortalizing him in urban legends. In the aftermath of Tupac’s assassination, many urban tales documenting his survival soon surfaced. These tales often portrayed the rapper as a cunning trickster-like figure who managed to avoid or cheat death through various schemes (Dimitrius 135-146). Tricksters such as the
Coyote in Native American mythology often possess an ability to survive fatal injuries and even death (Phelan 134). In this context, Tupac’s ability to conquer his own mortality either through trickery or physical stamina turns him into a manifestation of a modern day trickster. Michael Eric Dyson posits that Tupac’s survival in the collective imagination of many youth functions as a metaphor for “the hidden existence of anonymous, ordinary people, the people who invest in the legends by which their private lives—their most intimate experiences—are publicly narrated” (262). Dyson continues to argue that “by contributing to the creation of a legend—what we might term the posthumous persona—ordinary people are in fact creating themselves” (262). In other words, Tupac’s mythologized persona, his invincibility and cunning foresight in the face of adversity is imagined against the numerous obstacles that permeate the lives of ordinary young black men who reside in U.S. ghettos.

Tupac’s ability to tell stories that many marginalized youth could identify with on a visceral level contributed to the manner in which his image and songs continue to outlive him after his death. The following song composed by Tupac entitled “Keep ya Head Up” (1993) provides us with such an example:

Chorus
Keep ya head up, oooh child things are gonna get easier […]

I remember Marvin Gaye, used to sing to me
He had me feelin’ like black was the thing to be
And suddenly the ghetto didn’t seem so tough

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/keep-ya-head-up-lyrics_2pac/c4ec4762b806b8824825686a000cd809)
From the beginning, Tupac’s song is saturated with references to poor and marginalized African-American youth who reside in inner cities. Tupac juxtaposes the reality of his surroundings during his childhood to his dreams of success. His own personal experience growing up in the ghetto is used as a palimpsestic device on which others can read the struggles of their own lives. It is vital here to understand the manner in which Tupac uses saturation as a literary tool.

According to Alexs Pate “The construction of saturated rap/poem requires that the poet make use of language, image, and meaning to communicate his or her authenticity” (48). Tupac addresses his target audience while conveying his own authenticity in the process, by using specific images and idioms. This is exemplified in the next few verses of the song:

I’m tryin’ to make a dollar out of fifteen cents
It’s hard to be legit and still pay the rent
And in the end it seems I’m headin’ for the pen

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/keep-ya-head-up-lyrics 2pac/c4ec4762b806b8824825686a000cd809)

Here, Tupac captures the realities of many impoverished African-American youth. In this passage he simultaneously alludes to the harsh economic conditions experienced by young inner city residents, the incentives and temptation to engage in criminal behavior, the predatory nature of the prison industrial complex, the sense of hopelessness that drowns their aspirations for a better tomorrow and the habitual loss of life through gang related violence. By rapping about “tryin’ to make a dollar out of fifteen cents” or mentioning the inevitability of “headin’ for the pen” Tupac seeks to inject a moral thorn in the flesh of American society by making these realities visible through his lyrics.
In Tupac’s song, social conditions are diagnosed but never presented as a *fait accompli.* They are instead positioned at the locus of an ever evolving dialectical relationship between the open-ended unfolding present and the looming possibility of hope in an uncertain future. The chorus of the song samples an uplifting track entitled “Ooh Child” that was written by Stan Vincent and which has since been covered by many African-American musicians ranging from The Five Stairsteps (1970), The Spinners (1970), Nina Simone (1971) to Richie Havens (1974). The dichotomy between the uplifting chorus that promises better days and the grim realities described in each verse reveals the dialectic between the open-ended oppressive present and the uncertain future that has yet to be written. Through various meta and intertextual modes of reference, the song alludes to itself as a medium of hope, a medium whose role is to posit the seeds of possibility within an incomplete present. Indeed, by making references to the manner in which Marvin Gaye’s music instilled a sense of purpose within the desolate environment in which the artist was raised as well as by sampling Stan Vincent’s track, Tupac’s song frames its own inspirational message within the historical continuum of African-American music.

Tupac further shifts back and forth between his descriptions of the social conditions that pervade the harsh environment of the ghetto and his prescriptions for solving or significantly altering these realities, specifically in this passage from the first stanza of the song:

I wonder why we take from our women
Why we rape our women, do we hate our women?
[I think it’s] Time to heal our women, be real to our women
And if we don’t we’ll have a race of babies
That will hate the ladies, that make the babies
Tupac Shakur thus problematizes and challenges the propagation of misogynist discourse as a social impediment that partly coalesces the cycle of social marginality through its far-reaching generational effects. Tupac’s authenticity is thus not only constructed within his hardcore persona and harsh upbringing but also in his dialogic way of examining what is in relation to what could be. Authenticity, in this case, also manifests itself within the presentist character of literary discourse. Bakhtin explains that, when a “dynamic authenticity” is “introduced into the image of man,” men cease “to be completely exhausted by the plots that contain them” (35). While inauthenticity exists within a temporal framework that has already been decided upon or concluded, authenticity relies upon the unforeseen future that has yet to exist. As used by Shakur, “thug life” does not merely diagnose or ontologically confine itself to a given pre-established reality, it also projects its own potentiality of being beyond the immediate present. It is thus simultaneously reactionary and proactive in its discursive position.

Tupac Shakur’s proactive and reactionary posture, specifically his beliefs in self-reliance and self-defense, often permeates the content of many of his songs. For example, in “Changes” (1992), Shakur does not only highlights a need for collective action and self-determination but also expresses a virulent critique of the “war on drugs:”

Instead of war on poverty they got a war on drugs
so the police can bother me
And I ain’t never did a crime I ain’t have to do
But now I’m back with the facts givin’ it back to you
Don’t let ‘em jack you up, back you up,
crack you up and pimp smack you up

You gotta learn to hold ya own

(Full lyrics can be found at: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/2pac/changes.html)

Amidst its call for the right to self-defense against police brutality, the lyrics criticize policies that criminalize disenfranchised black youth rather than rectify the socio-economic structures that ossify their social position. This line of criticism is certainly not unique to Tupac, it has also been advanced by young activists from California who employed hip-hop as a means to reverse the onslaught of newly-implemented legal measures threatening to criminalize them more severely as a group.

California’s embrace of “tough crime” politics as well as its high rate of juvenile and adult incarceration needs to be contextualized to understand the rise of gangsta rap. It is not a coincidence that gangsta rap first emerged in California, which, according to Craig Watkins, is the state that has “the nation’s biggest prison population and corrections system” (165). Watkins explains that throughout the 1980s and 1990s “media portrayals of juvenile crime became more graphic and sensational, and politicians realized that by standing up against crime, they could gain support from an electorate that tended to be older, whiter, and more affluent than the youth often targeted by tougher crime laws” (166). The propagation and popularization of gangsta rap throughout California can be seen as a backlash or a reaction by the youth to the growth of the prison industrial complex in the region. The heroic image of a thug who could fight and trick the repressive state apparatus looming in their midst created a counter-cultural hero who gave meaning to their stigmatized identities. Such sentiments were articulated by Tupac Shakur in the subsequent passage from this interview conducted at a shooting range:
All throughout being black in America we always had to take the route that was non-violent, peaceful, logical, and more saintly than any other race. We could never take the stance, which was our true stance to be straight soldiers, straight warriors until, hip-hop came. When hardcore hip-hop came it was alright for a nigger to say “fuck y’all, you know we gonna do what the fuck we want, you know bang, bang,” you know it was cool for a nigger to do that, other than that, it was never heard of […] In hip-hop the nigger is still living, the nigger that do all the dirt is still living so, that’s like the hero shit, that goes back to Africans telling stories and shit, you know we just passing the hero soldier, we passing the story of the soldier and the hardcore youngsters that come up, when they see that there is a nigger that can do something that can shoot back, shit it’s all good. You instill pride, you instill self defense and everybody got a right to self defense.

(My transcription from 
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVAhw2Tn7OA&feature=related, December 2009)

The emergence of gangsta rap and its popularization in the mid to late 80s in California was thus symptomatic of the victimization of African-American youth by the criminal justice system. As Shakur’s testimony reveals, the figure of the gangsta in hip-hop music was a powerful image that imparted a strong sense of purpose to a young generation that felt powerless. It was also through the medium of hip-hop that young activists from the Bay area of California sought to change predatory state laws known to penalize disproportionately juvenile delinquents.

Watkins describes the series of events that began on March 7th, 2000 when “62% of [Californians] who participated in the state’s primary voted yes for the Gang Violence Juvenile
Crime Prevention Act of 1998,” otherwise referred to as Proposition 21 (165-166). Proposition 21 implemented punitive policies that proved to be the nation’s toughest measures imposed on juvenile offenders. According to Watkins, “among other things Proposition 21 allowed prosecutors rather than judges to decide whether a young person would be tried as an adult, reduced confidentiality protection for juvenile offenders” and essentially made “some youthful pranks and indiscretions a more serious offense” (166). Proposition 21 went so far as to categorize as gangs groups of young people dressed in the same clothes and publically spending time together (179). However, contrary to the political rhetoric that denounced an imagined increase in felonies, statistics taken from the Department of Justice revealed that the crime rate among juveniles had actually decreased in the 1990s (166-67). Proposition 21’s tougher sanctions on crime were thus out of touch with reality.

Proposition 21 was further supported by the notion of an upsurge of potentially young “super predators.” Watkins argues that “the notion that future generations of youth—at a time when many were likely to be brown, black, or red—represented a new species of criminals was one of the many ways in which the discourse about juvenile justice was cloaked in race-speak” (168). The financial costs of Proposition 21 were just as staggering as its effects. The cost of construction projects for the new prisons was estimated at “hundreds of millions of dollars” (168). But perhaps even more disturbing were its human costs which translated into the predatory destruction of young lives.

In the spring of 2001, many young activists from the San Francisco Bay Area launched a campaign against the growing rate of youth incarceration. The lead organizers of the movement used hip-hop to access and politicize the youth (Watkins 180). They realized that hip-hop had a particular resonance with the youth of the Bay area. The music influenced their consumption
habits and their language, their clothes as well as their worldviews. As Watkins contends, hip-hop was “the medium through which they articulate a vision of their world that is insightful, optimistic, and tenaciously critical of the institutions and circumstances that restrict their ability to impact the world around them” (181). In an attempt to influence California’s Board of Corrections, young activists organized into groups that attended the Alameda County Commissioners meetings in order to plead their case. The goal was to place a human face on the effects of the policies that the California Board of Corrections was prepared to implement by making them hear the testimonies and experiences of teens who had been most affected by the “state’s approach to juvenile justice” (181). These young activists demanded to be heard at all costs. When their request was granted, they addressed the city and state officials in a style and vernacular that emerged from the creative well of hip-hop music (182). Through the use of personal testimonies, sometimes delivered in poetry or rap, youth activists were thus able to influence the Board of Corrections which decided to rescind $2.3 million that had been allocated to increase the size of the prison industrial complex under Proposition 21 (182).

It must be noted that social activism and grassroots organizing are not new to hip-hop. On the contrary, they have formed part and parcel of the culture’s core since its inception in the 1970s. The roots of hip-hop’s activist side can be traced back to one particular person, Afrika Bambaataa, one of hip-hop’s pioneers and founding fathers. Bambaataa was one of the first people to instill a vision of political transformation into the movement beyond the lyrical content of the songs. In the next section of this chapter I shall examine the manner in which he managed not only to politicize the movement but also imbue it with a global vision.

**B) The Birth and Ideological Fragmentation of Hip-Hop Activism**
Afrika Bambaataa’s penchant for social activism grew out of an empowering Afrocentric image of defiant Zulu warriors that, in his youth, had captured his imagination. Inspired by a historical film entitled *Zulu* (1964) that he had seen as a young boy, Afrika Bambaataa decided to create a group called the Zulu Nation (Watkins 23). As Bambaataa explains, “just to see these black people fighting for what was theirs against the British, that always stuck in my mind” (23). In the same way that Stagolee was employed as a means to navigate between existing relations of power as well as articulate certain notions of socio-political and economic agency, the Afrocentric image of the defiant Zulu warrior was similarly used in order to empower youth from impoverished communities with the ability to master and transform their environment. In an attempt to recruit what he labeled “warriors of the community,” Bambaataa embraced and propagated a vision of self-reliance and unity (23). He thus sought to channel the anger that emerged from being cast in the margins of society into something constructive (25).

Afrika Bambaataa’s organization, first called the Mighty Zulu Nation and later on The Universal Zulu Nation, was highly influenced by the teachings of The Nation of Islam as well as the NGE, the Nation of Gods and Earths also known as the Five Percent Nation. As Jeffrey Ogbar explains, in those days it was not uncommon for members of the NGE to provide security for hip-hop DJs in the outdoor and indoor parties where they played (18). The majority of Bambaataa’s entourage, with whom he formed the core Mighty Zulu Nation, were former members of a group known as the Notorious Black Spades—a gang that “once reigned terror throughout the Bronx in the early to mid-70s” (Davey D). Many youth initially associated themselves with the Zulu Nation in order to protect themselves from other gangs (Davey D). However, overtime the Zulu Nation acquired an agenda that sought to bring positive change in their community (Davey D). According to hip-hop journalist Davey D, Afrika Bambaataa would
“do simple things like bestow titles like ‘King’ and ‘Queen’ upon Zulu members in an attempt to instill pride and confidence. His feeling was that if you treated people like royalty then they would turn around and act like royalty in their actions” (Davey D).

In an attempt to transform their communities, the Zulus cleansed their housing projects of drug dealers. According to Davey D, “there are stories about Zulus escorting women to and from their apartments as well as looking out and helping those in need. This of course is in addition to various Zulu chapters that have involved themselves in local politics including the fight to free [Abu Jamal] Mumia,” a Pennsylvania journalist who is said to have been wrongfully imprisoned for shooting a police officer (http://www.daveyd.com/).

Afrika Bambaataa was also one of the first hip-hop artists to perceive the global potential of the movement. Bambaataa’s global vision of hip-hop’s political potential began in France. After he toured the country in 1982, he formed a chapter of the Universal Zulu Nation among French youth, many of whom were of recent immigrant descent. The aim of the Universal Zulu Nation was to channel their youthful rebellion and anger into artistic expressions found in the four elements of hip-hop which include MCing, graffiti, DJing and break dance (Halifu 85). It was in the aftermath of Bambaataa’s tour in France that Jacques Lang, France’s minister of Culture in the Mitterrand administration, invited him to preside over seminars that examined the possible adoption of hip-hop for the purpose of providing an occupational outlet to French youth (85). As Osumare Halifu describes in his analysis of the global expansion of the Universal Zulu Nation, during this period “the French government actively courted hip-hop culture as a creative outlet for French youth to address their class and generational issues” (85). Today one can find Zulu chapters in over 20 countries around the world comprised of about ten thousand members (Davey D).
Afrika Bambaataa’s brand of social activism is in many ways rooted in a political activism that employs certain notions of authenticity in its rhetorical ethos. It is evident that Afrika Bambaataa’s name, his visual presentational style, and the inspirational source of his activist organization are all Afrocentric in nature. In hip-hop culture, notions of authenticity can thus sometimes give birth to a political avant-garde. Authenticity in this context is not always solely rooted in the nostalgic quest for a return to a “museologized” identity. It is also conceived as a rhetorical trope, one employed for the benefit of ushering into existence a project of social transformation.

As a performance, authenticity is the drawing kit or the paint brush by which grand narratives that posit and perpetuate a given social reality are dissected, transformed and redesigned in an attempt to create a different socio-political and economic environment by altering existing relations of power. By imagining an empowering weltanschauung that locates authentic modes of being at its center, hip-hop artists like Afrika Bambaataa or Tupac Shakur seek not only to transform their own marginalized identities but also their communities. They thus begin by redefining themselves, either by changing their names or by embracing and re-interpreting their stigmatized identities as a stepping stone for remapping the world that surrounds them. The performance of authenticity is thus the medium and not necessarily the project, it is the vehicle rather than the destination. The badman and Afrocentric persona can therefore epitomize an avant-garde attitude inscribed within the iconoclastic possibilities that they sometimes offer to those who choose to embody these figures. Here the power to change one’s sense of self or the perception of one’s identity and relationship to the world translates into an ability, whether real or imagined, to further impact one’s environment.
The expression of a desire to positively impact one’s community has been assumed by many rappers. Hip-hop artists, including those whose lyrics convey the most blatant misogyny, often volunteer to participate in or initiate community projects to transform various marginalized communities. According to Tricia Rose, “several of these multimillionaires in hip hop focus their philanthropy on local education, grassroots organizations, and the arts—crucial and highly underfunded organizations and institutions in lower-income urban communities that have been defunded by federal and local leaders” (206). Nevertheless, a number of hip-hop scholars such as Rose and Patrick Neate have argued that the activist impetus of many rappers’ charitable works and organizations are often undermined “when big business still appropriates the super stars’ cultural capital to exploit the very same communities” that they seek to uplift (Neate 259). As Rose explains:

In short, big money comes from the successful fashioning of alluring and rhetorically powerful stories that normalize and often even celebrate images of black people as thuggish, promiscuous, sexist, and violent. And if these long-standing images of black people, which are perpetuated most visibly by highly profitable rappers, have served as ammunition and justification for policies that help destroy black communities, then what good is this philanthropy? Isn’t it—no matter the good intentions—taking from black people with one hand and giving back with the other? (210-211)

Indeed, Rose makes an important point which cannot be ignored when examining the gangsta persona in hip-hop music. On the one hand, it is clearly evident that the performative dimensions of the contemporary badman epitomize and speak to certain conditions of social marginality. On the other hand, the popularization of the Stagolee mythoform in hip-hop culture has also been
widely commodified and appropriated within the same economic apparatus that has
disenfranchised certain segments of the African-American community.

The debates surrounding the credibility of the hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons as an
activist exemplifies the tension between mainstream hip-hop celebrities and those at the
grassroots level who feel that their participation in the corporate takeover of the music genre
compromises its authenticity. In 2001 Simmons founded the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network,
known as HSAN, which, according to its mission statement, sought to harness “the cultural
relevance of Hip-Hop music to serve as a catalyst for education advocacy and other societal
concerns fundamental to the empowerment of youth” (http://www.hsan.org). Similarly, in 2003
Rosa Clemente, a hip-hop activist, independent journalist and onetime vice presidential running
mate for the Green Party in the United States, organized the National Hip-Hop Political
Convention, which was in many ways founded as a rejection of Simmons’ activist organization.
She expressed her discontent with Simmons’ HSAN project in an open letter that attracted much
attention on the internet and which specifically targeted the hip-hop mogul on the basis of his ties
to the corporate and business elite.

Dear Russell:

Here is a news flash, as quiet as it’s been kept YOU ARE NOT HIP-HOP!

You didn’t know? Many of us have this conversation about you and others in the
industry like you every day. The industry who has pimped hip-hop culture so the
chosen few of you can live in an MTV crib, wear Iceberg jeans, Phat Farm
sweaters, and Sean John fur coats, much of which I’m sure are made in
sweatshops by Black and Brown children who earn an average of .75 cents a day
and we cannot forget about the ‘Bling-Bling’ diamonds that are mined by South African workers […]

“Russell, as quiet as it’s been kept YOU ARE NOT HIP-HOP!”

[...] We who need the Afrika Bambaataas’, Public Enemy’s, Sister Souljah’s, KRS-ONE’s, The Rock Steady Crews, The Bobbitos’, The Tony Touchs’, The Stress Magazines, The Dead Prezs, Queen Godis’, Welfare Poets and the many Graff artists and breakdancers who speak truth to power. These Hip-Hop artists are not in it for the money, the bling-bling or the $350 bottle of Cristal. They don’t want the fancy cars; fur coats nor the mansions; they just want to contribute to the greater good of the community. What do you want? […]

*Written by*

**Rosa Clemente** (http://www.daveyd.com/)

Clemente articulates a widely held belief among hip-hop activists who posit that Simmons “is out of touch with the movement’s grassroots and fails to appreciate, assist, or even acknowledge” their existence or efforts (Watkins 158). Watkins argues that Simmons has also been criticized for his propensity to “equate access to big name rappers with access to hip-hop’s pulse” (158). By focusing on celebrity endorsements HSAN has thus constructed a top-down organization that is often comprised of famous hip-hop artists rather than lesser-known people. To certain grassroots activists, this was antithetical to hip-hop’s notoriety for being a bottom-up cultural movement (161). It was in an attempt to rectify this problem that hip-hop activists such as Rosa Clemente decided to form a parallel organization, The National Hip-Hop Political Movement, which, they felt, more adequately reflected the grassroots vision of the movement.
The rift between Russell Simmons and other grassroots community activists in the movement is symptomatic of larger economic discourses and policies that have shaped the landscape of rap music. The impact of macro-economic laws affecting the mass media have fostered a growing dichotomy between hyper-commercialized sectors of hip-hop culture and the grassroots driven “underground” space—a space where artists such as Immortal Technique have defined their own sense of authenticity in opposition to mainstream or “commercial” artists owned by large media conglomertations. To understand more clearly this change, the next section of this chapter shall examine how neoliberal economics and the effects of media consolidation have impacted hip-hop music and more specifically how they have also influenced the modes through which certain rappers have come to express their authenticity and interpretations of the badman mythoform.

C) Double Consciousness and Authenticity at “The End of History”

Representations of the badman mythoform function as poetic tropes through which various articulations of power are expressed, including the desire to actualize an imagined sense of agency. These representations are complicated by the commodification and mass consumption of contemporary manifestations of Stagolee. The propagation of the commodified gangsta thug has in many ways reinforced the very systemic structures that many gangsta rappers were trying to critique. Through the increasingly heavy handed corporatization of hip-hop culture, the hyper-commercialized gangsta persona has been stripped of its critical posture and been presented as a voyeuristic fantasy in suburban homes.

Of course, misogyny and conspicuous consumption have always been part of the Stagolee mythoform. Nevertheless, through its misogynist and consumerist discourse the badman
mythoform has often communicated a defiant stance vis-à-vis the larger structures of power that framed his reality. The badman was not just a spectacle but rather the instrumentalization of a spectacle for the purpose of achieving certain ends. Initially gangsta rap often sought to subvert or at least question certain forces of power while it also boasted about material wealth and sexual ventures. Songs such as “Fuck tha Police” by NWA employed the badman mythoform as a means to critique the systemic criminalization of black youth swept into the prison industrial complex. This critical and defiant aspect of gangsta rap has for the most part disappeared from mainstream hip-hop music. It has instead been reduced throughout the years to a purely voyeuristic and apolitical spectacle that reinforces images of black pathology used to justify the political and economic marginalization of certain segments of the African-American community.

Discourses that propagate notions about black pathology predate the emergence of hip-hop. One study that theorized and advanced the idea of black pathology was the Moynihan Report (1961). Named after the late senator from New York, Daniel P. Moynihan, the report posited that “a key element of this so-called black cultural dysfunction is the interpretation of black female-led families as pathological” (Rose 69). The report went as far as to define problems “facing poor black people as a ‘tangle of pathology’ and cited black female-led families as the central cause” (68). As Rose contends, narratives that promote the idea of black pathology as a central cause of the difficult conditions experienced in inner cities hide “the fact that the very same argument was not only a cornerstone of the means by which African Americans were deemed suitable for enslavement but also formed the basis for maintaining slavery” (64). Arguments which posit that the prevalence of black dysfunctional families is the main problem affecting the African-America community also pander to the national myth of the American dream that advocates personal responsibility and individual agency as its rhetorical
ethos. According to this rationale, poverty in the black community does not emerge from systemic problems caused by widespread social inequities but is rather created out of personal and familial failures.

Individual success stories of blacks are thus touted as proof that the system works, at least in its fundamental structure. Indeed, when it comes to diagnosing impoverished sections of the African-American community, the concept of personal responsibility and agency have come to rely heavily on black exceptionalism, mainly by exalting the stories of individual African-Americans who have managed, through their own personal efforts and dedication, to make it out of the tough neighborhoods in which they were born. Not surprisingly, proponents of these narratives often point to hip-hop as a symptom of black cultural dysfunction. Gangsta rap’s emergence as a reaction to the violent criminalization of black youth is thus conflated with its cause. Yet, narratives about joining a gang, pimping or even drug dealing are symptoms of the violent world these youth inhabit—they are not necessarily the causes of these realities (Rose 51). Asserting that the violence portrayed in rap music is the cause of crime in poor black communities places a decontextualized focus on individual responsibility and denies larger systemic social forces that have engendered this environment (51).

Fields of cultural production are for the most part formed in relation to various institutions “that shape our society” (Rose 67). For this reason, one cannot examine gangsta rap as though it emerged from a social vacuum (67). Clarence Lusane points out that “the material basis for the material production and reproduction of black youth alienation” stemmed from the increasing immiseration of many black working-class communities in the 1980s (352).

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that between 1986 and 1992 “an additional 1.2 million African-Americans fell below the poverty line” (Lusane 352). According to this report, the
official poverty rate for African-Americans was “32.7 per cent, 10.2 million people, which is higher than for Hispanics (28.7 per cent), Asians (13.8 per cent), or whites (11.3 per cent)” (352). When the statistics for black youth were taken into consideration these figures became significantly higher. Lusane contends that “In 1986, in the middle of the Republican years, black teenage unemployment was officially as high as 43.7 per cent. In October 1992, six years later, the numbers remained virtually unchanged, with black youth unemployment officially at 42.5 per cent” (352). It is not a coincidence that hip-hop culture became increasingly popular within the black and brown communities that had been most affected by the impact of Reagonomics, the notion that wealth will trickle down to the poor through tax policies that favor the rich (353). Many youth living in places such as Los Angeles or New York saw hip-hop music as a source of employment as well as a means to express their realities (353). The economic changes taking place in various black communities as well as elsewhere in the United States at the local level were symptomatic of larger macroeconomic policies being implemented progressively on a global scale. But in order to understand the relationship between these macroeconomic policies and their effects on hip-hop culture, including its global propagation, it is fruitful to examine some of the ideological underpinnings that promulgated the continued ascension of neoliberal economics.

i) The Ideology of Neoliberalism

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama, an influential American political economist and philosopher, published a controversial article titled “The End of History.” It was later extended into a book titled *The End of History and the Last Man* in which the author argued that liberal democracy and free market capitalism were the inevitable final stages of social development. As a self-proclaimed Hegelian, Fukuyama posited that human history was based on a continuum of
ideological contradictions that were to culminate eschatologically into an ideal state of social existence. Fukuyama further declared that in this ideal homogenous state of social existence, “all prior contradictions are resolved and all human needs are satisfied. There is no struggle or conflict over ‘large’ issues, and consequently no need for generals or statesmen; what remains is primarily economic activity” (http://www.wesjones.com/eh.htm). Following this logic, Fukuyama explained that the “state of consciousness that permits the growth of liberalism” can only stabilize itself “at the end of history if it is underwritten by the abundance of a modern free market economy.” From Fukuyama’s perspective, the final state of consciousness at the pinnacle of his dialectical progression was supposed to inevitably engender an economic liberalism followed by a political one. The economic liberalism that Fukuyama and those who shared his views advocated, also known as neoliberalism, rejected many well-established theoretical concepts advanced by the influential British economist John Maynard Keynes. Keynes argued that governments had a responsibility to regulate financial markets and directly finance job creation projects when necessary.

The central thesis of Fukuyama’s work, later mockingly criticized in Derrida’s Specters of Marx, epitomized the burgeoning neoliberal narrative that had existed long before the article’s publication. As early as 1963 Milton Friedman, one of the most ardent defenders of neoliberalism from the Chicago school of economics at the University of Chicago, had written Capitalism and Freedom, a book which similarly contended that “economic freedom” (in terms of fewer regulations on capital) would inevitably engender political freedom. Friedman’s economic theories on monetarism advocated a limited role of governments, especially in socioeconomic matters, whose main purpose was to control the rate of inflation through the policies of the central bank. His ideas gradually gained popularity throughout the 1970s and 80s.
British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) and U.S President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) became some of the most vocal supporters of deregulation and “free” market capitalism. The popularity of “free market” doctrines in the corridors of power in the United States led to the implementation of a vast array of deregulatory reforms in various areas of economic activity—including but not limited to the Depository Institutions Deregulation and Monetary Control Act of 1980 which disbanded state caps on interest rates, the Financial Service Modernization Act of 1999 which permitted the merger of investment and commercial banks as well as the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which drastically accelerated the rate of media consolidation. The impact that some of these reforms had on hip-hop culture, especially the Telecommunications Act, will be examined shortly in more detail.

ii) The Effects of Neoliberalism in Impoverished African American Communities

The global impetus of free market deregulation also escalated the “the mobility of multinational corporations” which, with the deregulation of capital controls, could drive down wages by locating production facilities to countries that lacked a unionized labor force or a minimum wage standard in line with their living needs (Norberg 181). The impact of capital flight, as some communities moved from a manufacturing economy to a service driven-one, was detrimental to certain already marginalized sections of the African-American community. As the war on drugs was taking off in the 1980’s, blue-collar factory jobs that had previously been a source of employment for these communities in the 1950s and 1960s started disappearing (Alexander 50). Many uneducated inner-city workers could often find low skill jobs in these factories prior to 1970 (50). The onslaught of globalization, however, transferred these jobs “away from American cities to countries that lacked unions, where a worker earns a small fraction of what is considered a fair wage in the United States” (50).
According to Jeffrey Ogbar, capital flight was further reinforced by tax incentives for “U.S. corporations to relocate factories abroad”—a policy that “accelerated deindustrialization across the country. From Detroit, to Gary, to Chicago, and Los Angeles, millions of manufacturing jobs were lost” (145). During this period, taxes for the wealthiest Americans were cut from “68 percent in 1981 to 28 percent” when Reagan left office (145). These tax cuts led to reduced spending on social services needed in poor communities throughout the 1980s (145). In addition to the devastating effects of capital flight from many inner city regions, the free market doctrine also emphasized the increased privatization of institutions that had previously been owned by the state—notably the prison system. As Ogbar argues, while many political figures espoused the idea of expanding the prison system in order to assume “tough on crime” rhetoric, “they also pushed for [the] privatization of the prison industry, generating millions for private business. In 1993 the Clinton administration began to extend these projects with great aplomb. The prison industry had become one of the fastest growing sectors in a recession economy, with profound racial implications” (140). Many small towns that had suffered from capital flight thus came to depend on the construction of new prisons in their midst as a major source of employment for hundreds of individuals in their communities (140).

The propensity to criminalize black youth was thus partly driven by a need to create jobs as well as maximize the profits of privatized prisons which received millions of dollars from the government for their services (Hallet 2006). As Michael Hallet documents in Private Prisons in America: A Critical Race Perspective, “in California, for example, corrections has become the fastest budget category since the mid-1980s—and by the mid-1990s outpaced spending on education—rendering enormous chunks of the state budget available to private prison vendors for the delivery of correctional facilities” (128). The global dimensions of the prison industrial
complex were highlighted by Eve Goldberg and Linda Evans in their article entitled “The Prison Industrial Complex and the Global Economy.” Evans and Goldberg explain that:

An American worker who once upon a time made $8/hour, loses his job when the company relocates to Thailand where workers are paid only $2/day. Unemployed, and alienated from a society indifferent to his needs, he becomes involved in the drug economy or some other outlawed means of survival. He is arrested, put in prison, and put to work. His new salary: 22 cents/hour.

(http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/EVA110A.html)

Thus, according to the authors, when it comes to “private business, prison labour is like a pot of gold. No strikes. No union organizing. No unemployment insurance or workers’ compensation to pay” (Evans & Goldberg). In many ways, the emergence of the prison industrial complex was an epiphenomenon of the globalization of capital under the banner of “free” market economic policies.

iii) Neoliberalism and Media Consolidation

The impact of laissez-faire economic doctrines not only escalated the impoverishment of African-American communities in inner cities as well as their criminalization under the impetus of profit-driven privatized prisons, but also influenced the discursive parameters within which the contemporary badman was depicted in the mainstream media. The Telecommunications Act of 1996, which deregulated caps on media ownership that had previously existed, accelerated the rise of big radio and corporate rap (Watkins 138). One media conglomerate that epitomized the effects of media consolidation was Clear Channel Communications. As Craig Watkins explains, in the aftermath of the Telecommunications Act, “between 1996 and 2000, Clear Channel rose from obscurity to become the dominant player in broadcast radio and an undeniable force in pop
music. In 1996, Clear Channel owned thirty-six radio stations. By 2002, it owned more than 1,200 commercial stations or more than thirty times the previous ownership caps” (137). Clear Channel’s media hegemony allowed it to control music labels and bands. It could punish artists by limiting “the number of radio spins” as well as various promotional outlets for advertising concerts if they failed to adhere to its standards (137).

Through the systemic institutionalization of the pay-for-play doctrine, many prominent record companies made sure that the artists signed under their label would be promoted over others by bribing radio stations for airplay (Watkins 135). This created a chilling effect on artistic and musical diversity as artists who refused to conform to the prevailing marketing formula were virtually rendered obsolete (135). Pay-for-play thus determined the variety of music that received the greatest exposure on the radio (135). In the ensuing analysis, Watkins examines the manner in which pay-for-play (or payola) affected the diversity of hip-hop music in the mainstream media:

Because they were committed to securing a place in the pop mainstream, many of hip hop’s top producers learned to play by the new rules that governed big radio: pay-for-play, testing, call-outs, and corporate-controlled playlists. Whereas saying and doing something original in rap was once a main goal, in the era of big radio the mimicking of already established styles and trends meant more. Its image of rebelliousness notwithstanding, rap grew remarkably conservative in style, tone, and musical structure. (138)

In an attempt to comply with the standards of the industry “gangstas, pimps, and hoes” were placed in high rotation over other narratives “of black lived experience” which did not fulfill broader social “stereotypes and fantasies about black youth and ghetto life” (Rose 23). It was in
this new climate that many hip-hop artists attempted to negotiate between their own sense of authenticity and the constraining demands of the industry. Jay Z’s song entitled “Moment of Clarity” (2003) exemplifies the manner in which some musicians tried to reconcile their artistic integrity with the narrow-minded and formulaic marketing of hip-hop music:

**Chorus**

Thank God for granting me this moment of clarity […]

Through my Hard Knock Life time

My Gift and The Curse

I gave you volume after volume of my work

So you can feel my truths […]

(Full lyrics are available at: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jayz/momentofclarity.html)

In the introduction to his song Jay Z repeatedly signifies upon his earlier albums: which include Reasonable Doubt, The Hard Knock Life, The Dynasty, The Blueprint and The Black Album. Jay Z perceives each of his albums as a long list of *encoded* and somewhat autobiographical works that capture “truthful” moments at specific periods of his life. This song therefore, in many ways, anticipates the publication of his book titled *decoded* (2010), in which he contextualizes his lyrics vis-à-vis events that were taking place at specific periods of his artistic career. Jay Z encourages his audience to read his works as phenomenological representations of his state of mind at certain moments in time. In this introduction, his target audience is therefore given instructions on how to interpret not only this song but also his entire body of works as a musician/poet. The following verses taken from his song are meant to be understood as an apologetic explication of his music:
Verse Two

I dumb down for my audience
And double my dollars
They criticize me for it
Yet they all yell “Holla”

(Full lyrics are available at:
http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jayz/momentofclarity.html)

In this segment, Jay Z highlights the contradictions that emerge, on the one hand, from those who criticize him for “dumbing down” his lyrics and, on the other hand, from the tremendous popularity these songs enjoy among his target audience. Jay Z’s “confession” details the manner in which hip-hop’s emphasis on experimentation and creativity is subverted by the logic of mass consumption and marketing. The confessional aspect of this song is central to the manner in which it portrays itself as being “subversive.” This is because the act of confessing, as noted by Foucault, operates within a multi-layered discourse where the thought that is supposedly repressed, the thought that can only be publicly enunciated through a confession, is not only normalized but also noticed everywhere. In this sense, the confessional nature of the song operates as a rhetorical space from which Jay Z encourages a heteroglossic reading of his works that publicly uncovers his own “repressed” voice. This heteroglossic reading identifies, on the one hand, the artistically diluted music produced in his name and filtered through the voice of the powerful record industry and, on the other hand, his own intentions as an “author.” This critical approach to understanding his music is emphasized throughout the song:

If skills sold

Truth be told
In his song, Jay Z addresses the constraints that have been placed on rappers who are often told to “dumb down” their music. According to Tricia Rose “many of hip hop’s most talented lyricists have been told that they must make their rhymes more simplistic, less metaphorically sophisticated, if they expect to sell records” (220). However, while Jay Z admits to complying with the pressure and “dumbing down” for his fans, he also seeks to maintain his artistic authenticity as a truth teller, as someone who “keeps it real,” by openly disclosing the ways in which his music has been compromised. Jay Z projects his badman persona when he identifies himself as a hustler (“When your sense got that much in common, and you been hustling since your inception, fuck perception”). Here the hustler does not, of course, only designate a drug dealer but also more broadly denotes a skilled “street smart” individual who is able to outsmart the social forces in the environment in which he is placed. One can not only hustle drugs but also any number of commodities. The hustler, without a doubt, embodies many traits which, during slavery, were identified with the trickster—traits that subsequently became part and parcel of the badman persona. Adopting his hustler persona, Jay Z claims to benefit the neighborhood that he
“represents” by financially giving back to the community as opposed to inspiring them through “socially conscious” lyrics.

Jay Z therefore professes to have turned the corporate exploitation of his cultural capital into positive actions that improve the community in which he was raised. Just as in the old tales of John the human trickster and Old Master, Jay Z claims to be an exploiter of his exploitation by his master—the corporate industry. Of course, many hip-hop activists, including Rosa Clemente, have argued that the images of black pathology which are primed in mainstream hip-hop engender negative consequences that far outweigh the benefits that accrue from the charitable projects with which many rappers are involved. However, unlike Jay Z, other artists such as Lupe Fiasco have repeatedly refused to alter the content of their songs. They have rejected the pressure to conform to the standards and demands of the industry. In his song “Dumb it Down” (2007) Lupe Fiasco, a rapper known for the depth and complexity of his lyrics, proclaims his defiant stance towards demands to modify the artistic quality of his music:

**First Stanza**

I’m fearless

Now hear this

I’m earless

And I’m peer-less

That means I’m eyeless

Which means I’m tearless

Which means my iris resides where my ears is

Which means I’m blinded […]

But I’mma veer so I don’t come near […]
The windshield is minstrel, […]

Took both pills, when a bloke in a trench coat and the locks in the chair
had approached him here

(Full lyrics are available at: http://www.lyricsreg.com/lyrics/lupe_fiasco/Dumb_It_Down/)

Lupe Fiasco thus proclaims his authenticity by lyrically setting himself apart from other
mainstream rappers. The complexity of each stanza performatively dramatizes his refusal to
dumb down his music. The song is structured in such a way that each stanza is meant to
dialectically negate the chorus that precedes it and vice versa. In the first stanza of the song
Fiasco seeks to convey the manner in which normalized and internalized neo-minstrel images
that proliferate in rap music generate a “false consciousness”—which he equates to a debilitating
state of social blindness (and deafness). Throughout the first stanza, the consumer (and perhaps
even performer) of mainstream hip-hop is compared to a deaf and blind person who, blinded by
the mirage of neo-minstrel images that have been internalized, is imprisoned within a mediatized
hyperreality that he cannot visually transcend. The reference to the film The Matrix in the last
four lines of the first verse compares the simulated world in the film to monolithic and limited
depictions of black lived experiences in hip-hop music—monolithic depictions which are
subsequently imitated and reproduced in the world at large. In Lupe’s song, the trope of the
badman surfaces in the experimental and creative modalities embedded in the production of hip-
hop music. Fiasco’s rebellious nature, his “baad ass” attitude, stems from his “fearless” refusal to
limit or simplify the form and content of his music. This rebellious attitude is contrasted with
repeated pleas, stemming from the chorus, requiring him to “dumb down” his lyrics:
In his song, Fiasco seeks to détourn the commodified “dumbed down” spectacle that pervades mainstream hip-hop by not permitting his audience to consume passively his music and instead requiring them to actively engage in deciphering its meaning. By necessitating a different mode of consumption, one that is active rather than passive, Fiasco depicts a dialogue between those who seek to confine his music within certain formulaic boundaries and his own efforts to break the limits set by the industry. Each verse dismantles the boundaries and limits imposed by the chorus which continuously reminds him to “dumb it down”. The iconoclasm that the song embodies is also reflected in Fiasco’s complete unwillingness to duplicate the neo-minstrel images that proliferate in rap music. Here Fiasco’s defiant autonomy—an autonomy that imbues his music with an authentic quality—is not only exemplified by his refusal to ossify aesthetic representations of African-American culture and experiences within preexisting formulaic depictions of black identity but also in his quest to modify and experiment with the poetic apparatus through which these experiences are conveyed. In this specific context, authenticity manifests itself as the desire to break away from monochromatic ways of depicting reality through art rather than attempting to recover what was “original.”

Both Jay Z and Lupe Fiasco’s songs epitomize the manner in which media monopolies have complicated the modes in which authenticity is articulated in hip-hop music. The local impacts of large media corporations on American rappers and their discursive practices have
been a symptom of broader global trends. The concentration of media ownership was of course not just a national phenomenon but also a global one. Five major conglomerates emerged from the rising trend of corporate mergers in the media industry, “Time/Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corporation, and Bertelsmann (of Germany)” (Watkins 18). These large media conglomerations together controlled 70 percent of the world’s music market and 80 percent of the record industry in the United States (18). Indeed, the vast majority of popular artists in the music industry have signed contracts with many companies that form part of these media giants (18). The corporatization of hip-hop music is therefore in many ways a symptom of the globalization of consumer culture (Watkins 569).

Hip-hop’s evolution from an art form rooted in impoverished ghettoized communities to a highly lucrative business that has generated millions of dollars in profits was for the most part caused by the ascension of SoundScan (1991), a system that offered better methods for tracking data on sales and patterns of consumption. While the corporate industry had imagined that the vast majority of individuals who consumed hip-hop were black, SoundScan revealed that the genre enjoyed a broad appeal among white youth (Watkins 96). Rose explains that this ultimately encouraged “an increase in record label investment in hip hop production, distribution, and promotion on radio, especially for gangsta rap” (Rose 15). Thus while gangsta rap materialized as the iconoclastic voice of alienated and marginalized African-American youth it also developed into “a shrewd, market-driven performance” that exploited the sensationalist and voyeuristic aspects of this cultural productivity as a commodity (Watkins 45).

Such heavy-handed corporate dominance and control of hip-hop music have been criticized by a number of hip-hop artists. Chuck D, from the hip-hop group Public Enemy, began to voice his criticism against the corporate media monopoly when his record label Def Jam
prevented his group from releasing some of their songs for free on the internet. Having waited in vain for Def Jam to release what was at the time their latest album (*Bring the Noise*, 2001), Public Enemy decided to make some of their songs available on the internet. Unfortunately for the group, their plans to release their songs on the internet were thwarted by threatening letters from corporate lawyers working for Polygram (Watkins 113). It was in the aftermath of this incident that Chuck D declared that “Napster was ‘the new radio of the millennium’ and the internet represented ‘power going back to the people’” (113). Chuck D further used the group’s website in order to strike back at the corporate monopoly—mainly by becoming the first successful hip-hop group in the country to disseminate a new album entirely through the internet (Watkins 128). Although recent concerns about net-neutrality have complicated debates about its potential, initially a number of hip-hop artists and activists saw the internet as a space that opened possibilities of resisting media monopolies.

For artists such as Chuck D, the issue at hand was not simply one’s ability to control the creative content of one’s work but also, by extension, the formation of a digital landscape that allowed a multiplicity of worldviews and opinions to circulate (Watkins 113). Thus internet radio as well as independently owned hip-hop oriented websites, “webzines” and other internet-enabled forms of activism, became known as hip-hop’s digital underground—a discursive domain that attempted to recuperate the movement’s political and rebellious impetus (113). It is within this discursive space that new tropes and performances of authenticity emerged as a negation of the growing corporatization of hip-hop culture.

As mentioned previously, Hip-hop activists often tend to perceive a dichotomy between “commercial” and “underground” hip-hop. While the term “commercial” is often used in reference to the widely circulated type of hip-hop music that has been shaped by corporate
imperatives, the “underground” denotes a libratory space meant to be free from corporate dominance (Morgan 16). According to her: “the underground simultaneously recalls the era of slavery, when a people summoned incredible desire and courage for a chance to exercise control over their own language and communication, creativity, body, culture, spiritual practice, and life itself” (16). The impetus for the birth of trickster tales during slavery was nurtured by the necessity to create and, more importantly, own an empowering image of one’s identity and cultural values. In contemporary underground hip-hop culture this longing has similarly manifested itself as a desire to regain control of rap music in order to shape its image, its language, and its politics according to the needs of marginalized communities from where it first emerged. The emergence of an underground phenomenon has also been facilitated by the relatively low-cost of production needed to create and distribute hip-hop music. This has made the underground attractive to poor artists searching for ways to circulate their music.

The underground operates as a discursive space in which many hip-hop artists have framed their authenticity. As Rose explains, “those considered ‘underground’ are generally progressively minded artists, some of whom have not been signed to a major record label and tend to operate in local DIY (do it yourself) networks, on-line, or through local, marginally commercial distribution networks” (242). The hip-hop underground has always maintained a focus on competitive skills that are used to evaluate the legitimacy of rappers. Those who operate in the underground function in a field of cultural production where their artistic skills are constantly scrutinized by Long Term Members (otherwise known as LTs) who frequent the underground scene and often assume the position of critics. LTs are thus empowered with the ability to either make or break an artist’s career in the underground. In her examination of the hip-hop underground Morgan contends that “The LT serves as the social and cultural critic that
assesses every aspect of the performer, including his and her body, movement, adornment, language, and message” (60). According to Morgan, an LT audience can therefore reject a given artist “because the words, referents, experiences, and symbols evoked [in the song or performance] do not reflect the reality of the streets (or their community)” (61). Underground hip-hop artists often embody a badman persona as a means to assert their skills over other competitors, often by lyrically emasculating or delegitimizing them and in the process legitimizing themselves in the eyes of LT members. This practice is often referred to as a “freestyle battle.”

One artist who epitomizes the iconoclastic image of underground MCs is Immortal Technique, a New York based rapper of Peruvian and African descent. Technique is one of the most popular hip-hop underground artists in the United States. In the lyrics from his song titled “Freedom of Speech” (2003), Immortal Technique defines his authenticity by juxtaposing his underground persona to hip-hop musicians who have signed with major music record labels.

**Immortal Technique**

Bitches know that I’m a freak like the elephant man […]

Fuck a record deal, I want development land

40,000 records sold, 400 grand

Fuck a middle man, I won’t pay anyone else

I’ll bootleg it and sell it to the streets myself

(Full lyrics are available at: [http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/immortaltechnique/freedomofspeech.html](http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/immortaltechnique/freedomofspeech.html))

In the introduction to his song, Technique seamlessly shifts from boasting about his sexual prowess to exalting his artistic independence vis-à-vis big record labels. The simultaneous
allusion to the rapper’s heteronormative hypermasculinity and his rebellious nature does not, in this context, emerge as a rhetorically odd maneuver. This is because rhetorical demonstrations of power tend, for the most part, to be androcentrically conveyed through figures of speech and references that reflect hierarchized gender relations in domestic and public spheres. In hip-hop, as in many other social spaces, power is therefore often expressed through the language of male domination. The badman is, of course, also a product of these cultural norms. In the ballads of Stagolee, for example, he is made to prove his masculinity first with a woman before killing his adversary. In adopting a badman persona, Technique henceforth also employs the androcentric language of power through which it expresses its agency. In the next segments of the song he emphasizes his artistic independence and therefore his position as a badman.

**Immortal Technique**

I guess to America I’m a disaster

A slave that was destined to own his masters

Independent in every single sense of the word

(Full lyrics are available at:

http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/immortaltechnique/freedomofspeech.html)

Once again, the image of the rebellious slave or the “baad nigger” finds its way hypertextually into the lyrics of Immortal Technique. In Technique’s song, human bondage is substituted with the contractual bondage from which he escapes. The metaphor of a puppet with strings thus, through its imagery, also signifies a form of bondage. It is by comparing himself to a rebellious slave that technique boastfully proclaims his ability to say and do what he wants in his music regardless of the rules that have been established by major record labels. By referring to record executives as “bitch niggas,” Technique intends to emasculate them verbally through a figurative
expression couched in patriarchal perceptions of gender and power. His claim to being able to say what he wants in his lyrics is therefore performatively replicated in his song as seen in these verses:

[It makes you nervous] the way I snatch puppet rappers that belong in a circus
You motherfuckers just can’t compare
Looking for a fan base that’s no longer there

(Full lyrics are available at:

http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/immortaltechnique/freedomofspeech.html)

Immortal Technique acquires his cultural capital from being one of the few underground musicians who has continuously refused offers to sign on to major music record labels. His independence has allowed him the flexibility to own and control the direction and content of his music. Immortal Technique’s badman persona is illustrated by his defiant stance vis-à-vis the corporate media monopoly. Through his lyrics and presentational style, Immortal Technique instrumentalizes the hyper-masculine badman persona in order not only to attack verbally the corporate media but also the rappers that they have signed. It must be remembered that the badman is not necessarily always an outlaw but rather someone who has no regard for generally accepted social customs that are counterproductive to his overall sense of well being and freedom. Such an attitude is consistent with the social ambivalence of the trickster character as defined by scholars such as John Roberts. According to him, the trickster’s actions “were conceptualized as occurring in a context free of moral and social restraints governing human behavior in the social world” (33). By refusing to affiliate himself with major record labels and deciding to sell his music directly on the streets, as he indicates in the song above, Immortal Technique subverts the normative customs of the industry.
The artist’s ability to network and successfully sell his music on the streets, a move that grants him the opportunity to keep a fairer share of the profits that accrue from his music, presents him as a “street-smart” hustler—in other words a trickster who is able to manipulate advantageously his environment. His success as an independent artist whose cultural capital emanates from his achievements in the underground scene further authenticates his connections to the grassroots milieu of hip-hop culture. This provides him with the ammunition to confirm his status as an unfiltered authentic “truth teller” who always “keeps it real” vis-à-vis the communities that support him. Immortal Technique’s persona as an independent underground rapper therefore rhetorically epitomizes the impetus that engendered the trickster and badman mythoform. This desire to appropriate trickster or badman figures compels one to exist “authentically” by imagining and manufacturing one’s identity as well as one’s relationship to the world beyond the parameters, or as a negation of the parameters, that have been set by existing structures of power and commercial institutions.

Immortal Technique’s songs not only problematize the cooptation of hip-hop culture by the American culture industry but also oscillate between domestic artistic concerns and global macroeconomic and geopolitical issues. In his song “Open Your Eyes” (2008) he attempts to relate the corporatization of hip-hop culture to the privatization and corporate control of natural and human resources around the world.

We were promised a better life in our home countries, where we were told that privatizing, war and electricity would make things run more efficiently. Instead, the quality remained almost the same and the price was increased until it became an unaffordable luxury.
Here, Immortal Technique’s lyrics embody a style which, when transcribed, resembles prose rather than verse (This is the primary reason why the song has not been transcribed in metrical lines). The song liminally places itself at the intersection between a political speech accompanied by beats and a rap song. Immortal Technique certainly constructs his song as a political manifesto that diagnoses a problem and encourages collective action. In juxtaposition to Lupe Fiasco’s song “Dumb it Down,” “Open Your Eyes” offers its message in a direct and clear fashion without overtly resorting to poetic tropes that draw attention to the song as an artistic project. There is little else that distracts one from the central message of the song other than the subdued but suspenseful and urgent musical background beat that accompanies the lyrics. The song is thus constructed as a call to action as conveyed here:

Such is the same in the rap industry, for the major label superpowers treat the underground like the third world: when they need new assets, new artists to prostitute […] they came to the underground, to the third world. Build your defenses my independent brothers and sisters.

As mentioned earlier, Immortal Technique compares the appropriation of natural resources in “Third World” (2008) countries to the exploitation of underground hip-hop culture by the corporate industry in “Open Your Eyes”. In this song, the “Third World” and the hip-hop underground emerge as marginalized and exploited spaces. Nonetheless, belonging to the margins (i.e. the Third World or the underground), even as an exploited class or group, may also
imbue one with the freedom to walk away from the scripts that have been written at the center. The marginal space may also enable one to expand or create new practices, ideologies and parameters of behavior that diverge from those perceived to be endemic to the center at a given moment. Indeed, hip-hop as well as the badman and the trickster emerged out of marginal social conditions.

However, whether it is conceptualized as a physical, ideological or discursive space, the margin is also always central to the existence of the center—in the sense that it defines the boundaries through which the center comes into being. The center and the margin, or the core and the periphery as it is referred to in world systems theory, are, of course, locked in a symbiotic relationship. In many ways, the center parasitically depends on the margin for its mode of existence, whether it is through the extraction of natural resources, the availability of cheap labor or, as is the case with hip-hop culture, the exploitation of artistic talents that have been developed in the underground. Changing or enhancing the constitution of the margin alters the center. The margin and the center are thus tied in a reciprocal power relationship that is never fixed. To recognize one’s marginality as an empowering position is to acknowledge the role that one occupies in the flow of power and wealth pervading one’s reality. It is to recognize one’s surroundings as not being alien but as being part of the self. As Paulo Freire explains in *Pedagogy of Freedom*:

I cannot perceive myself as a presence in the world and at the same time explain it as the result of forces completely alien to me. If I do so, I simply renounce my historical, ethical, social, and political responsibility for my own evolution from the life-support system to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. In that sense, I renounce my ontological vocation to intervene in the world. The fact that I
perceive myself to be in the world, with the world, with others, brings with it a sense of “being—with” constitutive of who I am. In other words, my presence in the world is not so much of someone who is merely adapting to something “external,” but of someone who is inserted as if belonging essentially to it. It’s the position of one who struggles to become the subject and maker of history and not simply a passive, disconnected object. (55)

It is thus by embracing his position in the margins as an underground rapper and conceptualizing a source of agency within it that Immortal Technique seeks to subvert the eschatological neoliberal narrative through his lyrics. Referring to Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” Freire explains that “the recently proclaimed death of history, which symbolizes the death of utopia, of our right to dream, reinforces without doubt the claims that imprison our freedom. This makes the struggle for the restoration of utopia all the more necessary” (103). While free market fundamentalist doctrines propose a closed historical teleology, hip-hop artists such as Immortal Technique, through their marginal positions, posit an open ended history by recognizing themselves as being an integral part of historical processes that have yet to be concluded. Therefore when Immortal Technique encourages collective efforts of resistance on the part of those who identify themselves as marginalized independents, he simultaneously undermines the axiomatic immutability and inevitability of a “free market” eschatology.

Immortal Technique echoes these sentiments in the following line from his song titled “The Third World”: “I see the Third World like the rap game soldier, nationalize the industry and take it over.” He perceives the consolidation of the mass media that led to the heavy handed corporate dominance over hip-hop culture as an epiphenomenon of neoliberal economic policies that also engendered the privatization of state-owned industries. From his perspective, the hip-
hop grassroots movement must find ways to reclaim ownership of their culture in the same manner that marginalized populations in “Third World” countries must take control of their natural resources. He is thus able to present in a broader global context the marginal position of “conscious” rappers who have taken refuge in the underground.

It is not a coincidence that many vanguard political and artistic movements have often rhetorically and strategically assumed marginal positions, often by disassociating themselves from what they perceive to be the center. Vanguard movements often seek to alter the center by expanding or redrawing the borders that demarcate the axis from the margin, at times by *decentering* the center. From its inception the badman mythoform has often professed its iconoclasm from different marginal positions—sometimes by locating itself at the margins of the law, or by allowing those who embody it to *marginally* conceive an empowering identity outside of the social parameters imposed by a given oppressive ideology, nation, media conglomerate or repressive state apparatus.

The lyrics examined in this chapter reveal that performances of authenticity in hip-hop culture are symptomatic of deeper social processes that go beyond the simple desire to exalt local vernaculars, styles and neighborhoods. When it is articulated in a marginal position, authenticity becomes an instrument that projects an alternative mode of perceiving one’s self as well as one’s relationship to the world. It emerges as the platform on which social utopias are posited. As expressed through the badman mythoform, authenticity enables one to assume an empowering persona, not for its own sake but for the purpose of conceiving a substitute future or state of existence. These visions of possible futures do not only take local contexts into consideration but also global ones. Immortal Technique’s lyrics exemplify the manner in which hip-hop artists have attempted to connect local positions of marginality to larger macroeconomic global trends.
In the next two chapters of this study, I shall analyze the ways in which the badman mythoform has been domestically (I am using the word domestic in a national sense) interpreted and appropriated by marginalized communities in France and Kenya. I will argue that the ability to gravitate between nationally localized marginal spaces and global ones as a means to establish connecting marginalities have facilitated the propagation and interpretation of the badman mythoform within different national contexts.

Chapter 3
The Cultural Appropriation of the Badman Mythoform in France

A) Re-imagining French citizenship through Hip-Hop

In the previous chapter I began to analyze the ways in which hip-hop artists such as Immortal Technique sought to connect the domestic predicament of underground rappers to larger global sociopolitical and economic issues. It is by examining the ways the stories of marginalized communities in “foreign” contexts are used allegorically to critique domestic problems that we can begin to understand the manner in which the badman has been appropriated in France and Kenya. In this chapter I will detail how France’s particular history in respect to immigration as well as the evolution of French national identity facilitated the appropriation of hip-hop culture among communities of recent immigrants in France. By contextualizing the historical and cultural space in which hip-hop was domesticated one can
understand how the badman mythoform was similarly employed by marginalized French youth in order to articulate their social alienation. In this context, the aim is not to provide a comprehensive documentation of the evolution of French national identity and immigration history, as many authors have done, but rather to highlight the significance of a few historical moments in order to analyze their influences in contemporary French society and more importantly French hip-hop.

Following this epistemology, the goal of this chapter will be to seek answers to the proceeding questions: How and why have badman tropes been culturally translated in and through French hip-hop? Does the popularization of the badman in French hip-hop emerge from similar socio-political circumstances as its American counterpart?

In order to comprehend the cultural and historical contexts in which rap emerged in France as well as its popularization among marginalized communities in the banlieue it is essential to examine first the evolution of French national identity and immigration policies. The historian Gérard Noiriel’s research on French national identity and immigration history offers particularly perceptive insights on this subject. He explains that the term *nation* was often used to designate a group of people who shared similar origins. According to him, “the term was not necessarily imbued with particular political connotations. We thus talk of student ‘nations’ at the Sorbonne or of a ‘Jewish’ nation” (7). The contemporary conception of the nation in France only emerged in the 18th century (7). While sovereignty was initially viewed as a power relationship “between kings and subjects,” Noiriel contends that in France the modern idea of the nation was given birth as a means to subvert the dominating influence of the nobility whose rule was underwritten by the aristocratic idea that “the nation was founded on ‘blood lineage’” (8). Under this doctrine “only the class of nobles [as opposed to the totality of people in a kingdom]
could incarnate the nation” (7). During this period two opposing narratives were placed in competition with each other. On the one hand the aristocratic class perceived the nation in genealogical and separatist terms and on the other hand enlightenment thinkers preferred to assimilate diverse groups of people within the body politic of the nation (8).

In 1762, Jean Jacques Rousseau published *The Social Contract*, a work that similarly assumed an inclusive and egalitarian position in regards to the nation. Rousseau sought to differentiate “natural liberty” from “civil liberty.” According to Rousseau, “If we are to avoid mistakes in weighing the one side against the other, we must clearly distinguish between natural liberty, which has no limit but the physical power of the individual concerned, and civil liberty, which is limited by the general will” (21). What Rousseau was essentially proposing was a social pact between people that generated a specific biopolitical reality in which individual subjectivities and rights were conceived and subsumed by the general will of the entire population that formed the nation. The nation was to operate on the rights, limitations and obligations of every individual. The people thus became the principal actors in the political life of the nation. Rousseau’s conceptions of the nation indubitably refuted Aristocratic ones. His ideas would heavily influence the French revolution (1789-1799). In *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism and Citizenship in Modern France* (1992), Maxim Silverman argues that “the dichotomy between what one might call the contractual and the ethnic models of the nation is often [also] presented as an opposition between the universalist ideas of the French Enlightenment and the particularist ideas of German romanticism” (19). Silverman problematizes this distinct dichotomy that proposes seemingly contradictory national models by positing that “alongside the claim for the ‘open’ nation, constituted through the voluntary association of individuals, is the ‘closed’ nation, constituted by the predetermined nature of the
community; alongside the claims for universalism are a multitude of particularisms; alongside assimilation there is always difference” (25). Silverman proposes that rather than seeing the contractual and ethnic models of nationhood as opposites in the French context, it is fruitful to perceive them as forming one symbiotic totality. My examination of the inclusion-exclusion of migrant workers in the early to mid-twentieth century periods in France will document this symbiotic relationship.

The process by which individuals began to identify themselves as French and form a coherent national culture was a slow and arduous course. In 1861, Jules Michelet published *Le Tableau de la France (The Portrait of France)*, in which he argued that the French nation emerged from the mutual solidarity and accumulated assimilation of diverse populations from varied backgrounds living in different climates and speaking many languages (Noiriel 39). The French philosopher Ernest Renan similarly attempted to group different people into one national identity. The significance of these efforts can be understood from the fact that if individual rights and obligations had become the locus of a nation’s political system, then it was imperative that all the people and groups that formed the nation were to see and identify with each other as a coherent whole. In *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? (What is a Nation?)* 1882) Renan explains that:

> The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of efforts, sacrifices and devotions. The cult of ancestors is the most legitimate; ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glories, this is the social capital on which we place a national idea. Having glories like those of the past, a will like the present; having done great things together, wanting to do more, these are the essential conditions for being a people.¹⁸ (Noiriel 40)
Renan thus attempted to mitigate communal differences by constructing a collective memory of social struggles and glorious deeds that sought to reinforce a common French identity. The rejection of group differences as well as the exaltation of assimilation policies that were strengthened by a social contract in the post-revolutionary political climate “reflected, above all else, a contestation of the privileges that had been accorded to the nobility” (Noiriel 9). While Rousseau’s vision of the nation was certainly limited in its spatial scope, it was nevertheless extended by others to include the consolidation of peoples and cultures across vast geographical spaces. Jules Michelet’s attempt to anthropomorphize France as a person—who despite different parts that constitute the physical body still formed an inseparable coherent totality with Paris as the head—reflected the anxiety that must have stemmed from efforts to integrate socially and culturally large groups of different people (Noiriel 16).

L’Abbé Gregoire’s 1794 research on the diversity of “dialects” such as Catalan, Alsacien and Flemish, spoken in different regions of France, as well as his attempt to discourage the prevalence of these languages in favor of French, is also a symptom of these anxieties (Noiriel 93). In order to unify the country as a whole, people including L’Abbé Gregoire sought to minimize the differences of groups living within the boundaries of the nation as much as possible. As Noiriel contends, “individuals were no longer ‘outside’ the state, as during the Ancien Régime; they formed the nation as much as it formed them” (95). The construction of roads in the middle of the 18th century as well as the wide availability of postal services in remote areas (1830) reduced the isolation of many provinces (97). It is nonetheless through the scolarisation of vast segments of the population that French identity was naturalized within the collective consciousness of citizens. As Noiriel explains, “by requiring all children to have access to elementary school (in 1896, 5.5 million children attend primary school), the republic
manages to inculcate the basic structures of the written language to most of its citizens” (102). As French progressively became nationalized through the advent of educational reforms, language instruction expanded to include history lessons (103). Noiriel contends that “from 1880 every French child is required to write an essay on the 14th of July [the national celebration commemorating the storming of the Bastille in 1789]” (103). The nationwide distribution of newspapers that disseminated information regarding events that took place within the country further facilitated the ability of French citizens to relate to the imagined community to which they had become a part (Noiriel 105; Anderson 1993).

In contemporary political discourse in France, the importance attached to arguments regarding assimilation—specifically which groups can or cannot assimilate into French society—stems from the historical background outlined here. From Noiriel’s perspective in The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity (1996),

The long-standing trend toward centralization effectively undermined “ethnic” communities of origin and facilitated the emergence of a relatively homogenous “civil status.” The revolutionary upheaval discredited not only the old order but everything that harked back to origins, so much so that the first decrees abolishing nobility were also directed against names that evoked people’s origins: An elegant name is still a form of privilege; its credit must be destroyed. (Noiriel 9)

The tendency to diminish ethnic or cultural differences while highlighting essentialized national traits is thus a product of the revolutionary impetus that swept France. The assimilability of different groups into French society—some of which were considered too “different” or incapable of conforming to French national culture—became an increasingly important issue at the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, between 1913 and 1929 France underwent an
industrial growth of 40% which, according to Noiriel, “was equivalent to the one experienced by the United States and Germany” (137). During this period, France became the second largest producer of aluminum and the third most important manufacturer of steel in the world (138). As Elisa Camiscioli reveals in *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (2009), “the question of labor power assumed paramount importance for politicians and industrialists confronted with depopulation and upward social mobility of the French working class” (6). Politicians and industrialists alike were forced to admit that economic growth could only be achieved through the importation of foreign labor from other parts of Europe as well as France’s colonies (6).

Immigrant labor thus played a significant role in France’s economic growth. After the tremendous loss of French lives during the First World War, immigrants were employed to provide the desperately needed manpower. Camiscioli’s research on the manner in which immigrant labor became hierarchized according to different nationalities and ethnicities epitomizes the general anxieties of people who sought to protect French national identity from external forms of “contamination.” Camiscioli posits that “according to industrialists, government officials, ‘work scientists,’ and others, white labor was always preferable to that of Africans and Asians, who were deemed suitable only for unskilled work” (7). This racial taxonomy not only distinguished whites from “people of color” but it also fragmented other European nationals by valuing them differently (7). As immigrant laborers poured into France, their capacity to assimilate was measured according to “the immigrant’s proximity to a biocultural and essentialized notion of Frenchness” (11). Italian and Spanish nationals were for example considered better candidates for French citizenship than Africans or Asians.
Their capacity to assimilate was based on the argument that they “belonged to the same race as the French, and thus had similar language, culture, and mores” (Camiscioli 13). This is not to say that Italian and Spanish nationals had an easy time integrating into French society; however, as Camiscioli demonstrates, “while Jews, colonized people, and white immigrants were all racialized in early-twentieth-century France, the weight assigned to this racialization was far from the same” (15). In the quest to develop exclusionary policies to decide which groups could and could not assimilate into French society, gender relations were also put into question. Writers such as Ludovic Nadeau, a columnist for *Le Temps*, complained that the declining population of French citizens was caused by French women’s desires “for economic independence and sexual freedom” which they had prioritized above the “obligation of motherhood and care of the domestic sphere” (Camiscioli 38). Nadeau’s argument exemplified the politicization of female reproduction and sexual behavior.

Under the belief that France was to remain a white nation at all costs, French women were discouraged from engaging in relationships with men of color (Camiscioli 65). French women could initially lose their nationality by marrying foreign men. It was only after an extended battle that the Parliament approved the Law of 10th August 1927, allowing French women to retain their citizenship “despite” their decision to marry immigrants (152). This law was enacted under the assumption that “French women should be permitted to keep their nationality, raise children who were legally French, and employ their particularly feminine influence to assimilate foreign husbands” (141). The law of 1927 offered a compromise between the desire to assimilate only immigrants who could conform to an essentialized notion of “Frenchness” while excluding those who could not, and the need to slow the decline in France’s population. It is significant to note that the inclusion-exclusion of immigrants in France,
to a minor extent, is reminiscent of the situation that I described in the first two chapters concerning the African-American community. Like African Americans, many immigrants in France were initially employed to satisfy an economic imperative but were nonetheless prevented from integrating into the society at large through state-sanctioned mechanisms.

In the early years of the twentieth century as well as between 1957 and 1972, “postwar era France recruited and attracted massive numbers of foreign workers” (Fedblum 20). Miriam Fedblum estimated that “by 1968, foreigners accounted for 5.3% of the resident population in France; this contrasts to 1946, when foreigners accounted for 4.4% of the population” (21). This policy open to labor migration continued until the 1970s when the oil crisis damaged the French economy. By 1975 the number of foreigners had increased to 6.5% (22). It is the experiences of migration by communities of recent immigrants now marginalized in France that are often captured in rap songs. The hip-hop song titled “Le cuir usé d’une valise” (The Worn Leather of a Suitcase, 2004) by the rap group La Rumeur seeks to document these periods of migration:

**Le cuir usé d’une valise (The Worn Leather of a Suitcase)**

**Mourad**

I went to make the worn leather of an old suitcase talk under the faded colored sheets contrasting its memories. Dar Baïda, a sunny port at the departure, an arrival on a dull pontoon and a beaming face, the one of a foreman with an ink and a rubber stamp in his hands, beating the side of this suitcase which retained the pain. The faces rushing into a train towards the truck factory for grueling hard labor […]

**Chorus**

It’s a suitcase in a corner, which screams at destiny that it did not come in vain.
One of the significant sets of images in the song is the description of workers emerging from the boarding ship, workers who are driven towards a truck factory where hard labor awaits them. These images that focus on the arrival of a ship and seek to paint the toil of immigrants as a form of forced labor also conjure memories of slavery (it should also be remembered that France did practice forced labor in its West African colonies until 1946). In juxtaposing the conditions of French immigrant labor in postwar France to the agonies of slavery, the song seeks to highlight the ways in which the modern French economy relied on the exploited labor of marginalized groups.

The members of La Rumeur are the descendents of twentieth century waves of immigrants to France. Ekoué and Hamé, two prominent members of the group, have Togolese and Algerian roots respectively. In the song they attack the deliberate socio-historical invisibility of immigrants whose ethnic backgrounds do not necessarily conform to essentialized notions of French identity. Fedlum’s analysis of the manner in which the term “immigré” (immigrant) is employed to mask specific cultural identities offers a vital way of comprehending how the desire to render certain ethnic differences invisible permeates discourses on immigration. From Fedlum’s perspective, “the ethnicity of Franco-Maghrebis has [for example] been externalized, hidden behind the ‘immigré’ perspective; despite their seeming challenge to the classical model, Franco-Maghrebis have not been acknowledged as ethnic citizens” (286). In the song the image of a neglected old leather suitcase is used to render visible the invisible status of different ethnic groups that migrated to France in the twentieth century—ethnic groups whose contributions helped build the French nation. The mute nature of the suitcase captures the ways in which
certain stories have often been ignored or discarded, in other words silenced, in official accounts of French history. It is through the music of these rappers that the silenced stories find a voice.

The suitcase therefore functions as an appropriate metaphor in the way that it carries or contains the historic memories of immigrants from French colonies. The story that the suitcase tells, in a way, legitimizes the “Frenchness” of the rappers who consult it in their song by validating their identities as black or Arab French citizens. The rappers’ elegant use of formal French in the song as opposed to slang further reifies their French national identity. La Rumeur therefore communicate their national identity both in the message of the song as well as the style of language they use. The song echoes Ernest Renan’s language about the importance that social struggles and heroic contributions hold in constructing a national collective consciousness. It uses this logic to focus on the significant contributions of those who have been excluded from legitimate citizenry, thus exposing the hypocrisy of French republicanism. The lyrics of the song therefore not only problematize the French government’s refusal to acknowledge ethnic differences in its official discourse but also point to the governments historic failures to set aside those same differences in its integration policies. In other words, while the presence and contributions of ethnic minority groups are historically ignored, their “otherness” is nonetheless tacitly acknowledged as an impediment when it comes to policies of integration. In her analysis on the systemic impact of policies that have rendered certain ethnic groups invisible in France, Fedblum observes that:

This refusal to accept internal differentiated communities like ethnic groups into the national political community is not only an ideological refusal. It has institutional implications. The concept of minority groups is absent in French legal and legislative texts. According to the legal scholar Danielle Lochak, this
has translated into the “impossibility” for policy-makers, legislators and jurists to think about the notion of a minority […] In French immigration politics, for example, most state policies do not recognize or take into account the ethnic specificities of the different immigrant groups […]. (260)

I must add to Fedblum’s analysis by positing that it is not merely the case that policy makers do not think about minorities but rather that the language they use to designate or legislate laws regarding these groups is subsumed by an asepticized discourse which ignores ethnic specificities.

The invisibility of certain ethnic groups, especially those of north and sub-Saharan African origin, is thus ossified through official forms of discourse as well as historically by a refusal to acknowledge the significant contributions of “non-whites” in general. French rap artists of recent immigrant descent thus attempt in their lyrics to “revive this blindness by emphasizing the participation of black people in French history” (Helenon 152). Rap songs including La Rumeur’s “On m’a demandé d’oublier” (I have been asked to forget) or even Assassin’s “A qui l’histoire?” (Whose history?) epitomize these efforts. According to Véronique Helenon, the curricula in French schools “teach the history of the ‘nation’ exclusively as composed of White people, but the contributions of minorities, and especially blacks, to the building of France is discarded” (152). The social and historical presence of the “ethnic other” as an “immigré” is only invoked in respect to the “immigration problem.”

The issue of French national identity has become a way for French politicians to accrue political capital. In A quoi sert l’identité nationale? (What’s the Purpose of National Identity? 2007), Gérard Noiriel documents the ways in which Nicolas Sarkozy, France’s president at the time made the question of national identity a central theme in his 2007 presidential campaign. As
a French citizen of Hungarian ancestry, Sarkozy painted a dichotomy between himself, a product of successful assimilation, and “ethnic” immigrants who were deemed inassimilable as a result of broadly generalized stereotypes such as the practice of polygamy and adherence to religious fundamentalism. His decision to create a Ministry of National Identity and Immigration won him popular support against Ségolène Royal, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Party, who was portrayed as being too “soft” on immigration issues.

The significance attached to the topic of immigration in French political discourse reveals social anxieties that emerge as products of ideological and economic forces. There is a symbiotic relationship between ideological presuppositions of what constitute French national identity, the presence of legal and illegal immigration, and the impact of economic globalization. But in order to understand this relationship it is important to re-examine socio-economic events that took place in France after World War Two. The escalation of the population of immigrant labor in France in the aftermath of the Second World War was underwritten by a need to feed the resulting economic boom, a period which became known historically as Les Trente Glorieuses (the Thirty Glorious Years), with large sources of available foreign manpower abroad. During this period, the need for workers was significantly higher than the domestic supply. The French government thus encouraged the large scale migration of workers through its “colonial ties to Africa and the Caribbean” (Helenon 156). This economic growth, which relied on the labor of migrant workers, “required the construction of large apartment projects [largely financed by industrialists] to house the burgeoning populations of both White native-born French and immigrants” (157). These housing projects, known as les cités or the banlieue, have now become “synonymous with urban poverty” (157). As Helenon explains, due to the emergence of the oil crisis in the 1970s, employment priorities were “given to French citizens and the situation in the
banlieue rapidly deteriorated. Immigrants’ living conditions worsened along with education, housing, and job opportunities” (157). Moreover, the social destitution of the banlieue, caused by the oil crisis was later also exacerbated by capital flight including the outsourcing of jobs to other countries (Silverstein 50). In his essay on French Gangsta rap, Paul Silverstein contextualizes the impact of capital flight in the French banlieue by documenting the escalating globalization of financescapes. According to Silverstein:

In the French case, the movement to European economic and monetary union has both opened the country to job and capital flight and necessitated (in the name of currency stabilization) a reduction of state expenditure that has meant the gradual dismantling of the public sector. Both factors have contributed to the creation of a postindustrial economy, with increasing levels of unemployment that have nationally reached 13 percent and up to triple that in the working class areas that previously relied on the manufacturing sector […]. Indeed, these statistics are even more disheartening when broken down by “nationality,” among populations historically employed in factory work. As of 1990, unemployment figures for foreigners were twice that of the national average. (50)

As is the case in other parts of the world, the effects of economic globalization have also adversely affected the living standards of marginalized communities in France. With the need for foreign labor largely diminished, France has begun to implement stricter immigration policies at the same time that the rate of unemployment has increased among marginalized diasporic communities already residing in the country.

The “unemployment rate for 21-year old men and women whose mothers were Algerian was 39% and 49% respectively, or about three times that of the children of mothers with French
nationality” (Silverstein 49). Silverstein estimates that in 2002 the unemployment rate in France’s impoverished housing projects was “as high as 85%” (49). It is not surprising, then, that the atmosphere of urban decay as well as experiences of social exclusion characterizing the realities of the banlieue permeate many French rap songs. The song “Nés sous la même étoile” (“Born under the Same Star,” 1997) by the group I AM articulates the despair of many youth living in the banlieue:

**Nés sous la même étoile (Born Under the Same Star)**

No one plays with the same cards
The crib lifts the veil, multiple are the roads that it reveals […]
Why fortune and misfortune, why am I born
with empty pockets while his are full of cash ?[…]
Money is a beautiful woman who does not marry the poor
Otherwise why am I alone here, married without a dowry […]
I can’t do anything about it, I can’t do anything about it
I am a spectator of hopelessness

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:


There are many thematic similarities between I AM’s lyrics and Ice Cube’s rap song “It Was a Good Day,” examined in the first chapter. Just as in Ice Cube’s song, the first person whom the narrator embodies in “Born Under the Same Star” attempts to appeal to and speak on behalf of a totality of marginalized youth who can relate to the realities described in the song. The “I” who represents the insiders, those who are socially excluded, is contrasted with “him,” the privileged class that fully enjoys the benefits of French citizenship. In their song the rappers seek to portray
the realities that permeate the lives of banlieue youth in nihilist terms. Cornel West argues that “nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophical doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards of authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness [and] hopelessness” (14). While West examined nihilism in the context of the ghettoized world in which impoverished African-American inner city youth inhabit, these same sentiments are also articulated in “Born under the Same Star.” In their song, I AM seek to capture sentiments of meaninglessness and hopelessness embedded in the realities they describe through the unanswered questions posed in their lyrics.

Many French rappers, including the members of the group I AM, experienced the social decay in the banlieue that followed the Thirty Glorious Years (Vichera 33). For this reason topics such as social exclusion, hopelessness and poverty emerge as recurrent themes in the lyrics of their songs. Having lived through and become part of “the generation of the crisis, it is only natural that they should describe a pessimistic vision of the world” (34). Just as in African-American hip-hop, French rap also exalts the local spaces and neighborhoods of the rappers. In French hip-hop, the focus on local neighborhoods stems from a desire to establish an equilibrium between one’s sense of belonging to a French city or suburb and one’s cultural and ethnic identity as an “Other” (48). The anxiety that emerges from the desire to affirm one’s cultural roots while also proclaiming one’s identity as a French citizen—albeit a second class citizen—can be observed in the rap songs of Kery James, one of France’s most popular hip-hop artists. For example, one of his songs, “Banlieusard” (2008), captures the tensions that develop from the yearning to assimilate into French society while also maintaining one’s cultural identity (the term banlieusard typically describes people who come from the ghettoized French suburbs):

**Banlieusard**
The second is for those who dream of a unified France
Because today there are two Frances, who can deny it?
I come from the second France, the one of insecurity
Potential terrorists, welfare parasites
That’s what they expect of us, but I have other projects
Let, them remember that I am not a victim but a soldier
look at me, I am Black and proud of it
I spin out the language of Molière,
I master French literature because France colonized my ancestors
But my spirit is free and my Africa has no debt […]

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:

In the beginning of his song, Kery James refers both to himself as well as marginalized banlieue residents as warriors, fighters and soldiers. He is quick to disavow a discourse of victimhood in favor of one that emphasizes their roles as active agents in a struggle to overcome systematized social obstacles. James transformatively uses the stylistics of the ego trip embedded in hip-hop culture in order to vaunt the agency and self-worth of banlieue residents. As mentioned in earlier chapters, the ego trip is a rhetorical device usually used by hip-hop artists to boast about their skills, masculinity, authenticity or wealth. The practice of “ego tripping” is one of the ways by which the badman persona manifests itself in rap music. It is through the ego trip that the badman hyperbolically exalts his agency. Hip-hop did not invent the ego trip; it simply appropriated it as one of the central stylistic elements within the music genre. Outside of music, one of the most famous personalities to have employed the ego trip in his public persona was
Muhammad Ali. A famous example of Ali’s ego tripping rhetoric can be found in the following statement he made after defeating Sonny Liston in 1964:

I'm the king of the world, I am the greatest, I’m Muhammad Ali. I shook up the world, I am the greatest, I'm king of the world, I'm pretty, I'm pretty, I'm a bad man, you heard me I'm a bad man. Archie Moore fell in four, Liston wanted me more, so since he's so great, I'm a make him fall in eight, I'm a bad man, I'm king of the world! I'm 22 years old and ain’t got a mark on my face, I'm pretty, I easily survived six rounds with that ugly bear, because I am the greatest.

(http://www.boxing-memorabilia.com)

In this quote, Ali clearly assumes the persona and even identifies himself as a badman as he boasts about his athletic skills and physical appearance. Nonetheless, the ego trip is not just used for boasting purposes; it is also exploited as a way to affirm a given sense of power and control over one’s destiny. Thus, in the context of Kery James’ song, the ego trip is employed rhetorically in order to highlight the agency of an oppressed class of people. In addition to declaring a sense of ethnic pride, Kery James also boasts about his ability to “spin out the language of Molière” and “master French literature.” The skills he exalts are therefore embedded within a nationalist discourse. In this way James not only affirms his national authenticity but also portrays his mastery and his ability to successfully navigate the social and cultural environment in which he was born. In this context, it is not that hip-hop emerges as the only space in which this type of message can be conveyed, but rather that the rhetorical styles already embedded and normalized in the music genre accommodate and facilitate discourses of power which are expressed from the margins of society. James’ attempt to emphasize the agency of marginalized classes of people from the banlieue permeates the rest of his song:
[…] I am not a beggar I come to take what they promised me yesterday

[…] and if you cry, cry tears of determination

Because this is not a mere complaint but a revolution

(Chorus) Learn, understand, undertake

Even when it hurts!

Stand up, progress and fight

Even when it hurts!

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:


In a rhetorical gesture that is reminiscent of W.E.B Dubois’ famous proclamation regarding the dialectics of African-American identities, Kery James articulates a double consciousness which is contextualized in the politics of assimilation and exclusion in France. He neither wishes to abandon his African roots nor does he desire to be excluded from the promise and rights of French citizenship. He instead aspires to be both black and French. Kery James denounces the social exclusion of marginalized communities of recent immigrant descent by appealing to French principles of equality that were advanced by philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau—principles that fueled the French revolution. He offers a dichotomy between the promise of equality that the French nation affirms only in words and the realities of social exclusion and discrimination. In doing so he criticizes the very foundation of French national identity that presupposes a unified and egalitarian collective body politic of French citizens. His lyrics reveal the presence of two French nations, one that has access to the rights of citizenship professed by the republic and the other a marginalized alien nation of second class citizens of which he is a part.
The national portrait that Kery James constructs in his lyrics by rapping about a first and second France is, of course, antithetical to the French revolutionary ideal which supported a unified country and sought to reduce aristocratic privileges based on blood lineage by according equal rights to everyone. It is by assuming the persona of a French revolutionary that Kery James projects his vision of a unified France. He proclaims in the last stanza, “and if you cry, cry tears of determination because this is not a mere complaint but a revolution.” The revolutionary persona that Kery James embodies has not come to plead for his rights; quite the contrary, he has come to take what he feels is owed to him and those he represents. This revolutionary impetus is dramatized at the end of the song through a chorus of voices from the banlieue. Kery James deliberately inserts a chorus only one time, in the final segment of the song, in order to replicate performatively the energized voices of masses seeking change. By assuming the persona of a national revolutionary he thus authenticates his “Frenchness” as well as the valid citizenship of all the excluded banlieusards that he represents. In so doing, he adroitly employs the language of the French revolution as a means to subvert nativist discourses that seek to exclude communities of North and Sub-Saharan African origin from enjoying the full benefits of French citizenship. Kery James’ lyrical proclamation of his mastery of the French language further strengthens his revolutionary nationalism. French has historically been employed as one of the central instruments through which a collective national identity, formed out of different groups of people, was conceived.

Kery James’ use of music to declare a revolution fits into the long historical tradition of protest songs in France. According to Larry Portis, “at the end of the second empire, in 1870, the tradition of militant protest song was strong, in spite of the beginnings of a commercial music industry. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, a sort of musical guerrilla warfare developed
parallel to the organization of labor unions and socialist groups, and the effects of this tradition reached all dimensions of social and cultural life” (29). The popularization of this musical tradition emerged as a result of specific historical events that took place during this period. In the aftermath of France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), resentment against the new French government, which was comprised of a monarchist majority in the French National Assembly, resulted in a Parisian uprising led by discontent revolutionaries who became known as the “communards.” The communards, who were subsequently mythologized by Karl Marx as a symbol of proletarian uprising, were simultaneously reacting to many issues and events; these included the fact that rural France had elected a monarchist assembly. They therefore feared a return to monarchy. 29 They opposed the costly peace treaty that was being negotiated between the National Assembly and the Prussians, whom they held responsible for engendering the starvation of Parisians during their occupation of the city. They were also angered by the fact that the National Assembly had transferred the capital from Paris to Versailles.

It is from this background that in 1871 a group of dissidents took control of Paris and established their own government, which they named the Commune of Paris (Portis 80). The communards were eventually defeated by French government troops in a bloody massacre that took place in May 1871. Survivors were quickly imprisoned, deported and even executed. Nonetheless, as Portis explains, “when the surviving communards were amnestied in 1880, they rallied not to the Republic but to the Revolution. The Commune lived on in the minds of all who identified more with the wretched of the earth than with the bourgeois masters of the new regime. A veritable counterculture was created as the struggle of the working people was celebrated in militant songs, composed in great part by returned communards” (30-31). In the aftermath of these events, a series of actions took place on behalf of the working-class. Among
them, a law legalizing trade unions was established in 1884; the French Workers’ Party was founded in 1882 and the Second Socialist International was created in 1889 in Paris (31). Many communards continued to champion the rights of the working-class through songs. For example, in 1887 a group of communards known as the “Comité Portier” compiled a volume of revolutionary songs. It was in this volume that Eugène Pottier’s “Internationale,” the song that became the fighting anthem of the working-class movement, was popularized (31). Pottier was himself a communard who initially wrote the words of the song as a poem in 1871 while he was in jail. From this background, it is clear that the instrumentalization of popular music, for the purpose of not only galvanizing marginalized populations to act and change their circumstances but also in order to revive the spectral impetus of the 1789 French Revolution, has a long history within French society. Understanding Kery James’ song against this background, especially his call for a revolution on behalf of a proletarian class (as he himself calls them), places him along the lines of a well-established discursive and artistic tradition that dialectically contrasts the exalted objectives of the French Revolution against the realities of French society.

However, it would be myopic to only contextualize James’ allusion to the French Revolution within the tradition of protest songs in France. There is also a different historical example, partly signified by Kery James’ own Haitian background, which was popularized in C.L.R James’ canonical work The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution (1938). In his description of the Haitian Revolution, James examines the manner in which the revolting slaves appropriated the discourse of the French Revolution in their battle songs as they faced Napoleon’s army.

Many [French] officers and all the men believed they were fighting for the Revolution; they saw in Toussaint a traitor sold to the priests, the émigré, and the
English […] the men still thought they belonged to a revolutionary army. Yet certain nights they heard the Blacks within the fortress sing *La Marseillaise*, the *Ça ira*, and other revolutionary songs. Lacroix tells how the deluded soldiers, hearing these songs, raised up and looked at their officers as if to say: ‘Could justice be on the side of our barbaric enemies? Are we no longer soldiers of republic France? Could it be that we have become vulgar political tools?’ (295)

Here, the self-liberated former slaves of Haiti displace the French soldiers by becoming the authentic inheritors of the French Revolution. There is a serendipitous parallel between the gesture of authenticity deployed by the former slaves turned soldiers and the rhetorical maneuver used by Kery James, especially vis-à-vis their references to the French Revolution. Like the Haitian soldiers, Kery James proclaims his desire for equality as well as his emancipation through the idiom of France’s republican revolution. It is also important to note that Kery James makes a metaphorical reference to slavery when, in his song, he states that, “je suis parti de rien, les pieds entravés, le système ne m’a rien donné, j’ai du le braver” (I came from nothing, with my feet chained, the system did not give me anything, I had to conquer it). In this context, the chains Kery James seeks to overcome in order to liberate himself are the discriminatory social obstacles that engender a vicious cycle of poverty, joblessness and, ultimately, nihilism.

However, unlike the communards’ uprising discussed earlier, Kery James does not intend to subvert the power of the nation state by establishing federated communes. On the contrary, his allusion to the French Revolution is mostly inflected with an appeal to transform the nation into the mythologized image it has decorated itself with. Here, established ways of ontologizing the *raison d’être* of a nation are disseminated through seemingly “countercultural”
forms of music such as hip-hop. In this sense, when Kery James asserts in his song that he has “not come to beg but to take what was promised to him yesterday” he is referring to the ideals of equality for all professed by the French nation. He is tacitly invoking the phrase *liberty, equality and fraternity*, which emerged during the French Revolution and was later officially adopted by the Third Republic before becoming an essential part of France’s national heritage. As previously mentioned, these references to the ideals of the French revolution therefore, in the modern context, give Kery James the authority to critique contemporary French society while simultaneously legitimizing his own authenticity as a citizen in the process.

This brand of patriotism espoused by Kery James has not gone unnoticed. When in 2008 Charles Aznavour, one of France’s most beloved singers, appeared with Kerry James on the French television channel *France 2*, he was asked about his opinion of the rapper:

> Let’s say that French music at this hour has a fantastic advantage which is that rappers and slammers write our language beautifully. We always think that the youth do not know music, on the contrary they know it very well. But they want to express their music in a different way. And I find that there exists a multiplicity of authors, compositors and interpreters or slammers who are formidable today. And I must say that the leader of all of them, the one who emerges ahead is Kery James. And you are going to listen to him attentively and see that his words are beautiful, how they are well written and how they are French.

(My translation and transcription from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EIoxnNqlgo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EIoxnNqlgo), December 2009)

In his description of Kery James’ artistic talent, Aznavour assimilates the rapper to a discourse on French nationalism. Aznavour, who collaborated with Kery James on a song titled “À l’ombre
du Show Business” (“In the Shadow of Show Business”), also espouses a unitary vision of a French nation that embraces the diversity of people within its borders. The artistic collaboration between Kery James, a hip-hop artist of Haitian parentage and Charles Aznavour, a legendary French singer of Armenian immigrant ancestry, symbolically seeks to project and mirror their shared belief in a unified France.

Nevertheless, unlike Kery James, many French youth who dwell in the banlieue, especially those of North or Sub-Saharan African descent, often choose to identify with the homeland of their parents or grand-parents as a way to reject French nationalism. The French ethnographer David Lepoutre documents the politics of identity among banlieue youth of North and Sub-Saharan origin in his book Coeur de Banlieue (1997). According to Lepoutre, despite the fact that many black and Arab youth born in France have been socialized by French institutions and media into acquiring the values of the dominant culture, many of them still choose to affirm their own respective cultural and ethnic origins over their French identity (70-71). Like the Afrocentric phenomenon in the African-American community, black and Arab French youth often desire to articulate their “authenticity” as a rejection of French republican values—which, they feel, have antagonized and alienated them—by projecting an imagined sense of identity inspired by their ancestral homeland. Lepoutre explains that “the identity consciousness that is marked by this auto-designation does not rely on any practice or traditional cultural trait of the communal type. On the contrary, the youth find themselves more or less cut off from their parent’s cultural models which they don’t hesitate to mock” (71). 31 Attitudes, accents and gestures that typify the mannerisms of people in their homelands are often ridiculed as piqueté (typical or old fashioned) (71). Black and Arab French youth have very limited knowledge of the languages spoken in their parents’ countries of origins. In the diasporic space
that they occupy, these languages are mostly used symbolically as signifiers of authenticity but are seldom spoken in everyday conversations (71).

The desire to assuage one’s double consciousness as an Algerian-French citizen or a Senegalese-French national as well as the need to make sense of these seemingly “contradictory” identities that have not been allowed to co-exist peacefully, has—as in African-American communities—sometimes translated into an exaltation of one identity over another. In many parts of the banlieue, “identities are founded on an invented or reconstructed reality that is put together from elements that are borrowed from modern life in the host county and from the fantasized mythical past of the ancestral homeland” (Lepoutre 71).

For example, in the Arab-French community, the adherence to religious rituals that allow many youth to project and publicly display their ethnicity frequently emerges as a purely symbolic gesture as opposed to a religious conviction or quest (73). Lepouvre observes that among black-French youth:

> Ethnicity translates into an identification, in the limits of adolescent consciousness, with different nationalisms. Thus even if they do not have an in-depth knowledge of specific histories, they are aware of the destinies of black movements in South Africa and the United States (many have seen Spike Lee’s films and sport a Malcolm X haircut while wearing tee-shirts of his image) (73).

(My translation)

It is therefore not surprising that hip-hop music was quickly appropriated in the French banlieue where many black youth reside. Of course, as opposed to the United States, France enjoys greater racial diversity among hip-hop musicians. Not all French rappers are necessarily from recent immigrant backgrounds. Nonetheless, as Véronique Helenon argues, “when the idea of the nation does not allow any racially based claim, a U.S. detour has been instrumental in
questioning the French model of multiculturalism” (159). For many youth of African origin in France “the United States today offers the image of a society where black people have successfully articulated their struggle” (159). Living in a society in which whiteness is the norm and where “French Blacks receive very little [positive] exposure,” the presence of African-American media icons such as Tupac Shakur, Barack Obama and Jay-Z provides an inspiring source of identification (159). The appropriation of black American and African icons stems from the need to construct an empowering sense of identity outside the disempowering national rhetoric espoused by French nativists. Many French rappers often adopt stage names that evoke the African continent. Helenon points out examples of French rappers and groups such as “the members of Djoloff, a Senegalese posse, who have named their group after the empire which existed in the region of present-day Senegal; Mafia K’1 Fry is slang for African Mafia; Ménélik, who is from Cameroon, chose his alias in memory of the Ethiopian emperor” (155). The members of the group I AM have assumed stage names that are centered on pharaonic personalities in ancient Egypt (153). The decision to base their stage personas on characters from ancient Egypt rather than, for example, Algeria was a strategic choice (Prévos 11). This is primarily because ancient Egypt is often vaunted in French schools as having had a significant impact on early Western civilization (11). As a group whose members have roots in Italy, Reunion, Senegal and Algeria, their adoption of pharaonic themes emerges as a master signifier that encapsulates their identities as “foreigners” from a position of power while mitigating the obvious cultural differences between them. Black and Arab French rappers have also found a way to signify their ethnic difference by combining hip-hop with “raï,” an Algerian folk music that has historically been used for social protests, as well as by incorporating styles inspired from Jamaican born Ragga music (Drissel 11).
Other rap groups such as La Rumeur have, however, preferred to highlight the instability of French diasporic identities. In their rap song, “Blessé dans Mon Ego” (“Wounded in my Ego”), they describe the ambiguous identities of black and Arab French youth who are considered foreigners in France but are treated as French citizens when they visit their ancestral homelands (Blondeau 157).

The identity crisis that La Rumeur documents is a symptom of the systematic objective violence (see chapter 2 on Zizek and violence) that permeates the realities and experiences of many youth in the banlieue. This violence emerges symbolically by excluding them from fully identifying with the larger imagined national community. The violent world they experience is also produced within a given set of socioeconomic gate-keeping structures that prevent them from participating in the labor market—in the process ushering in the development of an informal “black” market economy of drug trafficking. Finally, the objective violence that permeates their lives has also been visually and physically manifested when the French government has responded to the outbursts and riots that sporadically erupt in the banlieue by increasing the presence of police officers in the cités (Silverstein 52). According to Silverstein, between 1995 and 1996 the French government “added 200 plain-clothes inspectors to the already expanded suburban security forces” present in the impoverished Parisian suburbs. Similarly, in 1999, “Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin took riot police (CRS) and 17,000 military gendarmes to patrol these same ‘sensitive urban zones,’ and thus effectively completed the militarization of the French suburbs” (Silverstein 52). As the next section of this chapter will demonstrate, in these conditions, many youth residing in the banlieue have embraced and appropriated gangsta rap as well as the iconoclastic badman figures that pervade the genre as a means to express their social realities from a symbolic position of power. These youth have
easily related to the violent environment described in gangsta rap from across the Atlantic. In the next section of this chapter, I will trace the evolution of hip-hop music in France as well as examine the birth of French gangsta rap from the 1980s.

**B) French Gangsta Rap and the Badman Mythoform**

The propagation of hip-hop in France can be examined through the flow of ethnoscrapes that were also influenced by mediascrapes and financescrapes. Two French cities in which hip-hop music emerged are Paris and Marseille. Akhenaton, one of the members of the group I AM, explains that in Marseille “rap music [also] traveled directly from the United States. Between 85 and 88, there were Americans who gave us discs and cassettes. They descended from a boat, from a destroyer, or from aircraft carriers with five thousand navy men” (Bocquet 116). According to Loic Lafarge de Grandgeneuve, Marseille has often had a stigmatized reputation in France because of its status as a city of immigrants (58). Nonetheless, one of its unique traits stems from the fact that the local government made the decision to transform the stigma associated with Marseille into a cultural resource (58). French hip-hop music and culture from Marseille was used to promote the image of the town. De Grandgeneuve explains that this decision was taken because hip-hop music is “massively practiced by young people of recent immigrant descent who strongly identify with their city” (58).

However, hip-hop culture has not always been welcomed by the local government of Marseille. In fact the ability of hip-hop artists to claim and subvert the “proper” usage of public spaces initially provoked friction with law enforcement authorities of the city (de Grandgeneuve, 59). Through graffiti, loud outdoor music and break dancing performances, impoverished youth managed to appropriate or “colonize” various public spaces. In doing so they modified “the
instrumental rationale of the architectural scene and the neutral usage of these environments”—in the process provoking the intervention of law enforcement and political agents (59). 36

Following its emergence in Marseille there has been an attempt to assimilate hip-hop music within conventional boundaries that are designated by the local government (60). Hip-hop breakdancers and rappers have, for example, been subsumed under the umbrella of state-sanctioned youth organizations such as La Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture (The House of Young People and Culture) (60). One of the most poignant symbols of hip-hop’s assimilation into the city’s culture can be found in exhibitions dedicated to hip-hop at the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires (National Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions) (64). De Grandgeneuve posits that the incorporation of hip-hop into the city’s museum imbeds the culture in the history of Marseille (64). The strategic official assimilation of hip-hop culture in Marseille mirrors in many ways the larger and highly contentious national debate regarding the manner in which various marginalized ethnic groups can be integrated into the French nation while respecting the cultures and identities that they espouse.

One of the hip-hop groups that successfully articulated the alienation of banlieue youth on a national scale is I AM. The name of the group captures the communal experiences of exclusion and alienation that they seek to represent in their songs. In addition to designating the first person singular of the verb to be in English, the name I AM functions as an acronym in French for “Invasion Arrivant de Mars” (Invasion Coming from Mars), “Imperial Asiatic Men” or even “Indépendantistes Autonomes Marseillais,” (Autonomous Independents from Marseille) (Martinez 191). The multiple meanings embedded in the group’s name reflect to a certain extent the complex set of manufactured identities that banlieue youth can simultaneously occupy at a given time. Their name exemplifies the relationships among a signified group of people and the
multiple, sometimes contradictory, array of social and cultural signifiers that are associated with them.

In their album *De la planète Mars (From the Planet Mars)*, I AM dramatizes the *alienation* that they seek to describe. In this case Mars emerges as a symbol that vividly captures the experience of being an *alien* in one’s *nation*. In the song “Planète Mars,” Mars is described as none other than the city of “Mars…eille” where they live. As a city which has often been considered as the locus of a hodgepodge of different waves of twentieth century immigration, Marseille is known for the diversity of groups that inhabit it—groups that often feel excluded from the larger French society in which they find themselves. By equating Marseille to the planet Mars, I AM seeks to highlight the social and economic exclusion of marginalized groups in the city while also emphasizing the fact that as inhabitants they are indubitably part of the nation. The process by which a community that belongs to the nation-state is excluded and transformed into a foreign—or in this case an alien—entity is linguistically replicated by deleting the last syllable “-eille” from the first one, “Mars-.” Marseille, and by extension the marginalized banlieue residents that identify with the city, is thus distorted and denaturalized into an alien object through this linguistic apocope which changes its name from “Marseille” to “Mars-”. The city of Marseille is consequently turned into a separate *nation* of *alien* immigrants.

Members of I AM, are known as the founding fathers of hip-hop in Marseille. The group’s “career was launched in 1990 when they participated in Madonna’s *Blonde Ambition Tour*” (Prévos 11). To the local government of Marseille, I AM incarnated perfectly an image of their city that they hoped to advertise. First, through their role as political organizers, I AM encouraged many youth from the banlieue to channel their social anger by voting for candidates who would best address their needs. Because of their grassroots organization, the group has
managed to mobilize a young voting bloc against the far right in their region. This has given the group a sympathetic image in the eyes of local law enforcement agencies and politicians (de Grandgeneuve 66). Second, the members of the group offer a representation of Marseille’s diversity—an image that appeals to local politicians who see multiculturalism and cultural tolerance as a strength (66). The third factor that explains the group’s appeal to local authorities—a factor that is significant for an examination of the cultural appropriation of the badman mythoform in French rap—stems from the fact that I AM has also been perceived to offer a more mature and moderate style of hip-hop as compared to the hardcore gangsta rap genre that permeates the Parisian scene (66).

In order to comprehend the dichotomy between French rap from Marseille and the gangster-themed Parisian variety, it is useful to examine more closely the manner in which hip-hop culture emerged in France. In the 1980s, hip-hop quickly acquired a fan base in France through the popularization of breakdancing (Prévos 4-5). In 1984 the French television channel TF1 broadcast a show called *Hip-Hop*. It was presented by Sidney, a French DJ who is known today for being one of the early proponents of French hip-hop (4-5). Although the program initially focused mostly on breakdancing, it also “led to a clear reorientation of most youngsters from the French banlieue from Break dancing to rapping” (5). The French rapper Akhenaton explains the relationships among the hip-hop cultures of breakdancing, graffiti and rapping in the following terms:

Effectively there was initially no rap but there was a very active break dancing scene that was organized, a bit like in Paris, around the Zulu Nation. From 1983 rappers emerged out of that scene. It’s funny to say but the first people that started rapping in Marseille were those who were not good dancers. There was such a
high level of dancing that those who could not attain it tried to vary their relationship to local hip-hop in other ways. I was part of this group [...] I did graffiti in Marseille and New York. (Blondeau 125)

As in the United States, French rap thus came from an environment where the four main aspects of hip-hop, which include breakdancing, graffiti and DJing, interacted side by side with one another. While French rappers initially attempted to mimic their African-American counterparts by rapping in English, “they soon switched to French because they were aware that they did not sound as good as those African-American models” (Prévos 5). Dee Nasty was one of the first rappers in 1984 to record a hip-hop album in French, titled *Paname City Rapping* (5). Other artists such as Lionel D insisted on rapping in French whenever they performed on the radio (5). Initially, French artists like Akhenaton (Philippe Fragione) or even Dee Nasty made frequent trips to the United States and appropriated the stylistic aspects of hip-hop from Brooklyn (Martinez 65). However, French hip-hop artists were not the only ones to cross the Atlantic. As André Prévôs documents in *Black, Blanc, Beur*, “in 1984, [one of hip-hop’s founding fathers] Afrika Bambaataaa came to France and established a French branch of his movement—the Zulu Nation” (3). During his Parisian trip, Bambaataaa crowned many French hip-hop artists as Zulu Kings (Blondeau 80).

Bambaataa is also responsible for giving some of the early canonical French artists their stage names. For example, the French rapper Afrika Loukoum explains that “people always called me Loukoum. I was born in Tunisia and it came from that source. But I think that it was Bambaataaa who added Afrika to my name” (Blondeau 80). Other rappers including Dee Nasty and Gangster Beat all received their stage names from Bambaataaa. Like Afrika Loukoum, Gangster Beat offers a similar story about the origins of his name:
I was sixteen, I was going to school. At the beginning I called myself Gary V. It’s Afrika Bambaataa who gave me the name Gangster Beat. We were in Trocadéro and at one point I hear “Gangster Beat!” I turn around and see Bambaataaa in front of me. It is from then on that I kept that name […] we were part of the Zulu Nation, we had the famous necklaces. We were following a Messiah. 39 (Bocquet 38)

Like Gangster Beat, other French youth who joined the Zulu nation were often inspired by Bambaataaa’s message, specifically the manner in which he imbedded his activist discourse in hip-hop culture. During his Parisian tour, Bambaataa went to Sidney’s hip-hop radio show—one of the first dedicated to hip-hop at the time—in order to explain his grassroots activism to young banlieue residents (Bocquet 37). A number of French hip-hop groups including Les Little, Sens Unik (One Way), Les Vrais (The Real Ones) and Assassin were ideologically influenced by the Zulu Nation (Prévos 9-8).

In addition to Bambaataaa’s influence, the emergence of Gangsta Rap from California in the late 1980s to early 1990s significantly impacted the hip-hop scene in Paris. French hip-hop groups including NTM, Mafia K1fry or even Ministère AMER were seduced by and appropriated the hardcore West Coast genre which eventually supplanted the more reflective New York style of hip-hop. Blondeau explains that in Paris, “the first detonations of a French gangsta formula that was marked by rap from Los Angeles rather than the conscious one from New York, saw the day-light through the words of Ministère AMER who released ‘Pouquoi tant de haine?’ (“Why So Much Hate?”) (33). 40 Hip-hop groups from Marseille such as I AM, whose members had been inspired by Afrika Bambaataaa’s Zulu Nation, did not embrace the new west-
coast genre of hip-hop with open arms. In an interview conducted by Blondeau, Akhenaton describes his views on gangsta rap:

**Question:** You were marked by the Zulu Nation, a state of mind that was present in New York among Public Enemy or even KRS-One, but which was less present among the gangsters of the west-coast. Was there an ethical element in this choice?

**Akhenaton:** It of course played a role. We listened very little to Above the Law and NWA, all these things which influenced Paris. We were hooked on the Bronx, on Diamond D, DITCT, Lord Finess, Gangstarr. For us there was the axis of Boston, Philadelphia with New York at the centre of everything. Miami did not exist for us either. Our opinion of rap was very “Taliban like.”

Because of his reservations about gangsta rap, Akhenaton seemed to have an ambivalent relationship with the music genre. In his first solo album Akhenaton assumes the persona of a mafia boss from Marseille in the video clip to his song “Les Bad Boys de Marseille” (“The Bad Boys of Marseille”) (Drouai, [www.labanlieuesexprime.org](http://www.labanlieuesexprime.org)). Akhenaton explains his ephemeral attraction to the gangsta persona by declaring that he “quickly overcame the malady of the bandit. I think that I was a victim of my success at a given point in time. It was brutal. From the fear of being cut off from my base I tried to justify myself” (Drouai). Akhenaton’s, short-lived appropriation of the gangsta persona stemmed from a desire to solidify his authenticity and connection to the banlieue—a connection which he thought might have been severed by his success. Elaborating on his decision to distance himself from gangsta rap, Akhenaton argues that the genre was merely a journalistic depiction of reality that lacked any sense of political engagement (Drouai). Akhenaton argues that “to be engaged is to take a position on issues, on
events” (Drouai). He thus makes a distinction between a realist discourse that seeks to document a given social environment and a visionary one that posits a political goal—a distinction that is problematic since the methods used to depict social conditions through art can by themselves signify a cry for radical change. The aesthetics of neorealism in Italian cinema, for example, demonstrated a commitment to social and political transformation by seeking to portray realistically the lives and the lot of working-class Italians (Shiel 2).

It is also useful to remember that the performative dimensions of certain badman tropes existed in French hip-hop even prior to the popularization of gangsta rap. The French rapper Gangster Beat remembers that in the 1980s, as French hip-hop was emerging, he would “copy phrases that already existed among rappers, phrases such as ‘I don’t take no mess […] I am the most handsome, the strongest, I have all the women’” (Bocquet 38). As demonstrated in the first two chapters, this boastful rhetoric commonly known as the “ego trip” has deep roots that originate in the performative dimensions of the badman mythoform. Gangsta rap, both in the United States and in France, employed these tropes as a response to the systemic criminalization of youth in ghettoized communities. In the United States, boastful “ego tripping” such as “I am the strongest” turned into “Fuck the police/ Fuck that shit, ‘cuz I ain’t tha one/ For a punk muthafucka with a badge and a gun, To be beatin’ on, and thrown’ in jail / We could go toe to toe in the middle of a cell.” (NWA, Fuck the Police). In France, hip-hop groups including Ministère AMER wrote hardcore song lyrics that offered a virulent critique of the state and more specifically the police (Clyde 30). Less radical canonical French hip-hop artists such as MC Solaar were outshined by unapologetically aggressive and controversial gangster rappers from the banlieue who created a media sensation.44
Like its American counterpart, French gangsta rap is also laden with misogynist tropes that often emerge as symptoms of an attempt to articulate notions of power through hyper-masculine posture. Here, the objectified female body often appears as a site of conquest in which male power is contested. Such is the case of the rap song from Ministère AMER titled “Brigitte femme de flic” (“Brigitte wife of a cop”). In the song, Ministère AMER rap about the wife of a police officer who is seduced into the beds of rappers from the banlieue. The song is clearly an attempt to emasculate male police officers who, as enforcers of French law, hold a position of power in the banlieue. Upon its release the song generated a deep sense of indignation among police officers who sought to ban it from circulation. Their attempts were blocked by laws protecting artistic creativity (Clyde 32). The song, “Brigitte femme de flic,” was couched in the language of masculine power and hegemony. According to Hayes and Moore: “political weakness and lack of social status are often expressed in sexual or gender-linked language. Becoming like women or being feminized, for example, functions as a metaphor across various cultures to represent loss of social prestige or power” (180). In “Brigitte femme de flic,” the ability to protect, conquer or lose a woman—who has become male property—is used to reify or subvert existing power relations. Here, the female body becomes the commodity by which hierarchical social relations are signified. The police officer who is cuckolded by his wife is therefore emasculated and somewhat “feminized” due to his inability to secure and assume his role as a husband. Ministère AMER thus articulate their agency through essentialized gender binaries.

Perhaps one of the most popular and widely distributed French rap songs to convey contempt for the French police in the banlieue was NTM’s “Police” (1993). In the song, the
group seeks to document and denounce the systemic criminalization and racial profiling of youth in the banlieue:

**NTM (Police)**

Police: Your papers, identity check,

A classic formula that you have had to be accustomed to

Only in the ghettos,

The cops, abusers of power, have abused it too much

Also know that the air is charged with electricity.

So no respect or mercy wasted

You will have regrets because:

Never by repression will you obtain peace […]

For our part it will not be “Fuck the Police,”

But a special FUCK YOUR MOTHER,

to the mother country of vice.\(^45\)

(My translation from Perrier 89-92)\(^46\)

In their song NTM make an explicit reference to NWA’s “fuck the police” slogan. Here the phrase “fuck the police” is kept in English rather than translated in French as “nique la police.” The linguistic and visual dimensions of the badman/gangsta persona are thus appropriated from U.S. west-coast hip-hop and re-articulated within a French context. The decision to transform “fuck the police” into “fuck your mother, of the mother country of vice” reveal both appropriation and cultural translation. Here, police brutality is presented as one symptom of larger systemic-state sanctioned forms of *objective violence* perpetrated by the “mother country.” Vulgar language emerges prominently both in the name of the group as well as in the content of
their songs. The name NTM is an acronym that originates from the insult “nick ta mère” (fuck your mother). According to Kool Shen, one of the two members of NTM, the name of the group was inspired by an incident involving a friend of theirs named Colt. He worked in advertising and was preparing a poster for an event organized by a client who refused to have his name placed on the announcement. Frustrated, the friend maliciously proceeded to write “Nick Tahmaire presents…” in lieu of the client’s name (Boquet 100). The French ethnographer David Lepoutre explains the meaning of vulgar language: “it is useful to understand that the rhetoric of obscenity only finds its significance in reference to the implicit discourse of opposition against the norms of the dominant language” (129). Obscenity, in this context, is employed as a rhetorical instrument that seeks to subvert perceived bourgeois sensibilities to proper language and decorum. Lepoutre explains that “for young adolescents who come from immigrant families” the use of vulgar language captures their identity as excluded aliens by linguistically placing them in opposition to the “proper” French valorized and taught in schools (129). This rejection of “proper” French also symbolizes a rejection of values that are associated with the dominant society that has excluded them. Nonetheless, while NTM effectively employ vulgar language as a symbol of their opposition, unlike African-American groups like NWA, their song adheres to formal grammatical and stylistic structures of the French language. Therefore, as the group rhetorically positions itself counter-culturally in opposition to mainstream French society, their use of formal French also reinscribes and legitimates their position within a collective national identity from which they feel excluded.

Like African Americans, banlieue youth feel the need to construct a system of valuation that stands in opposition to the mainstream society which has relegated them to the status of second class citizens. One other linguistic manifestation of this opposition is verlan, a slang
which is spoken by pronouncing French words in reverse. Verlan is itself a reversal of the French word *l’envers* which means upside down or inside out. While verlan is documented in the seventeenth century before becoming a popular slang in the 1970s, it has since been quickly appropriated and transformed by banlieue youth (Martinez 270). Verlan has also, not surprisingly, been widely employed in the lyrics of French rap songs. Tony Mitchell examines this linguistic phenomenon when he contends that:

> The French rappers’ use of the reverse slang languages “verlan” and “veul,” in which words are syllabically reversed, represents a hip-hop vernacular which contests the rules of standard French. Combined with the use of borrowing from English, Arabic, Gypsy expression and words from African dialects [and languages], the vernacular of some North African immigrant French rappers displays a rich linguistic dexterity which constitutes another form of “resistance vernacular.” (Mitchell 8)

In many ways verlan linguistically mirrors a different image of assimilation which opposes the prevailing French model that refuses—linguistically or otherwise—to recognize ethnic or cultural differences. This is because verlan has an ability to assimilate and be shaped by the cultural and ethnic diversity of speakers who have come to inhabit its linguistic space.

One of the most memorable media phenomena in the history of French hip-hop, one that brought the issue of language and obscenity to the center of a national debate, was the NTM affair. On July 14th, 1995, NTM performed at a concert during which they asked members of the audience, in a call and response manner that is typical of rap shows, to shout “nick la police” (fuck the police) “at the security guards present” at the show (Silverstein 46). In the aftermath of the incident NTM was prosecuted and found guilty in court “by a common law protecting public
authorities from verbal insults” (46). Joey Starr and Kool Shen, the two rappers of the group, were given an “unprecedented sentence of six months in prison”—a sentence that also banned them from recording any music “for the entire period of the sentence” (46). The rappers’ condemnation generated a nationwide uproar which escalated into public demonstrations organized by “leftist labor unions, political parties, and anti-racist organizations” who saw their indictment as an affront to free speech (46). These groups, according to Silverstein, “particularly condemned the ‘double standard’ of the French justice system that failed to convict on several prior occasions Front Nationale leader Jean-Marie Le Pen for publicly preaching racial inequality and denying the Holocaust—similar crimes under French Law” (46). The demonstrators drew attention to the fact that “xenophobic skinhead punk rock groups, like Fraction Hexagone” had also been allowed to preach violence against the police as well as the Jewish community without being subjected to the same laws (46). These sentiments were captured in the statements of Philipe Douste-Blazy, the French Minister of Culture at the time:

I disapprove of calls for violence against the police. But it is my opinion that politics should not control cultural life. History has proved that it is from there that dictatorships begin. We must fight for freedom of speech specifically for cultural entertainers. The National Front should begin by sweeping in front of its door. At Orange, rock groups were invited whose words at the end of the phrase “a bullet for Zionists, a bullet for cosmopolitans, a bullet for the police” clearly designated the police. Why do we have two weights, two standards? 48 (Bocquet 232)

NTM’s prison sentence was later dropped and reduced to “a two month suspended sentence” when it was revealed that “the presiding judge, Claude Boulanger, was under internal
investigation for handing down unusually harsh sentences” (Silverstein 46). Nonetheless, the 50,000 francs in fines as well as the “six-month ban on public performances” that had accompanied the sentence were not lifted (46). Surprised by the national outpour that clamored to support them, the two members of NTM began to worry about attempts to recuperate their public persona within the usual discourse on French nationalism. It is as a result of these worries that Joey Starr problematized this sudden wave of support by proclaiming that “when a young man is harassed on the streets by authorities he does not have any witnesses or support. Us, we are condemned and everybody begins to defend us in the name of human rights. But these very human rights are violated every day in Paris” (Bocquet 234). NTM did not seek to have their situation discussed merely in terms of freedom of speech. What was more pertinent to them was a national debate on the systemic criminalization and harassment of the banlieue youth that their songs and public concerts sought to capture.

The NTM affair mirrors the contentious debate that Ice T’s “Cop Killer” as well as NWA’s “Fuck the Police” generated in the United States. As was the case with NWA and Ice T, the NTM affair established the group’s image as iconoclastic badman figures who could successfully stand up to the authorities. Unlike canonical French rappers such as MC Solaar and I AM, NTM was able to escape accusations of having “sold out” in the aftermath of their success (Silverstein 47). In the banlieue, the propagation and popularization of the badman mythoform through the vehicle of gangsta rap is a symptom of the systemic presence of police brutality as well as structural forms of social and economic exclusion that marginalized youth experience. Shurik’N Chang-Ti, one of the members of I AM, documents these pervasive experiences of police abuse in an interview conducted by Bocquet:
I am stopped at least on average two times a week because I am black and bold. I generally don’t say that I am a member of I AM. In ‘95 I was almost the victim of a police incident, it was late, the cops stopped me, since the car I was driving was in the name of a French friend they offered reflections on that. I told them to go to hell, I talked to them informally: “it is none of your business.” I received a slap, they were two. At the moment when he slapped me I saw him dead, I told him: “stop you will end up in a ditch.” Then, I saw the deserted street. I did not insist. They would have finished me and placed a knife in my hands. It would have been said that: “A young black harasses a cop with a knife.”\(^5\) (Bocquet 188)

Cases of “mistaken” identity, racial profiling as well as police brutality and abuse have been the subject of many French rap songs and have even featured as a central theme in Mathieu Kassovitz’ critically acclaimed film *La Haine* (Hate; 1995). French authorities have on a few occasions sought to criminalize and prosecute hip-hop artists who have documented cases of police brutality rather than the government sponsored perpetrators of these acts who are seldom punished. Such was the case with the group La Rumeur who, in 2002, were taken to court on the orders of the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, for “public defamation against the state police” (Blondeau 41). In contrast with the NTM affair, the case involving La Rumeur concerned an article written by Hamé and published in an independent hip-hop magazine owned by the group. Rather than base their defense on freedom of speech, members of La Rumeur decided to rely on the content of their article—claiming that their criticism of the French police did not constitute an act of defamation since it relied on recorded cases of police brutality (163). The group was thus drawn into a prolonged court case that lasted eight years before they finally won in 2010.
The subject of police harassment in the banlieue once again came to the foreground of a national debate in 2005 when two teenagers were electrocuted in the Parisian banlieue of Clichy-Sous-Bois while trying to hide from police agents who had often pursued many youth in the neighborhood. The incident sparked widespread riots in the banlieue. Tensions between law enforcement agents and marginalized youth have never dissipated since then (Smith, New York Times 2005). In his work on violence, Slavoj Zizek, who deserves to be quoted at length here, decoded the meaning behind the looting and burning of private and public property in the 2005 Parisian riots:

What needs to be separated when faced with the shocking reports and images of the burning Paris suburbs is what I call the hermeneutic temptation: the search for some deeper meaning or message hidden in these outbursts. What is most difficult to accept is precisely the riots’ meaninglessness: more than a form of protest, they are what Lacan called a *passage à l’act*—an impulsive movement into action which can’t be translated into speech or thought and carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration. This bears witness not only to the impotence of the perpetrator, but, even more, to the lack of what cultural analyst Frederic Jameson has called ‘cognitive mapping,’ an inability to locate the experience of their situation within a meaningful whole. […] The riots were simply a direct effort to gain *visibility*. A social group which, although part of France and composed of French citizens, saw itself as excluded from the political and social space proper and wanted to render its presence palpable to the general public. (65)

In light of Zizek’s analysis it appears that the desire to make public visible experiences of repression, discrimination and exclusion through the looting and burning of private property, in a
limited fashion, also mirrors the impetus to draw attention to one’s marginality by embracing the hyper-aggressive badman persona that pervades gangsta rap. After all, the violent threats as well as the vulgar language directed at the police in French rap are all symptoms of an attempt to make oneself visible and publicly proclaim a community’s sense of injustice. However, in contrast to the riots, hip-hop music often possesses a cognitive map through which it seeks to articulate various experiences of marginality. Nonetheless, the music genre also draws its inspiration from the same sources of frustration. The 2005 banlieue riots stemmed from a need to visually translate the invisible *objective violence* (see analysis of Zizek in chapter two) that these youth experience on a daily basis by giving it a physical form. This violent outburst found its energy in the transference of normalized trauma that accrued from their daily realities. The violent and “obscene” lyrics such as “Fuck tha Police” or “Nick la Police” found in gangsta rap similarly provided an outlet for expressing one’s rage vis-à-vis the normalized injustices and horrors of the ghetto. Here the badman/gangsta persona communicates and mirrors the violent world of which he is a part through aggressive language. The stylistic aspects of the medium are indeed part of the message. The figures and language they adopt have had a propensity to initially emerge as portraits that depict the violent structures of oppression and exclusion which engendered their environment.

In his song entitled “Thug Life” (2007) Kery James highlights the manner in which the history of the music collective Mafia K1 Fry, of which he is a member, mirrored the environment in which he and those he “represents” grew up:

**Kery James (Thug Life)**

I hear all these Zulus

They are talking about us,
What do they know about the brave ones,
We have been through shit,
What do they know about our history, we come from far, […]
If the youth love us it’s because we resemble them, when they suffer we suffer
(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:

In this song, Kery James affirms his “street credentials” by highlighting the personal tribulations of the group/gang of which he was a member. Here, as in many other hip-hop songs, individual stories are publicized in connection to larger social issues with which the target audience can identify. In hip-hop music, personal narratives are generally exteriorized within larger political, historical and economic forces. In this way, the propensity to connect individual experiences to larger social conditions subverts an atomistic discourse that individualizes suffering or poverty rather than seeing them as phenomena that emerge from a system. Personal narratives henceforth serve as communal testimonies. This critical gesture is embedded within the formalized strategies employed in rap songs, which often connect the rapper’s persona and experiences to the lives of marginalized youth in urban contexts. These rhetorical attempts to relate the rapper to his audience proliferate in Kery James’ song.

Outside the shows we risked huge sentences,
While waiting for our hour to come,
The consequences: Rocco “incarcerated”
Hakim “incarcerated,”
Jessy “incarcerated,”
Mista “incarcerated,”
L.A.S “assassinated,”
M.A.D “assassinated,”

[…] Mafia K1 Fry was a project, a state of mind, a way of life and survival,
The most visionary saw far, the dream was African, the means American
(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:

In “Thug Life” Kery James expresses his authenticity by showcasing his connections to the streets. His authenticity is rendered palpable through a tragic narrative documenting the incarceration and assassinations of some of his close friends. The act of naming places and people inscribes his discourse with a sense of realism that authenticates his artistic persona vis-à-vis the banlieue. The biographical tale that Kery James documents is thus meant to connect him to the banlieue as well as enable those who dwell in the cités to identify with his persona through the stories that are told in his songs. His personal story is constructed as a readily comprehensible master narrative on which other marginalized youth can attach their own experiences. It is through this narrative that Kery James is able to describe his early career as a member of Mafia K1 Fry—a musical collective of rappers from the Parisian banlieue of Orly-Choisy-Vitry. This group not only engaged in music but was also marked by a specific vision which sought to organize its members into a gang that would include a majority of Parisian youth from the cités. By relying on the members who formed its collective body, the gang sought to protect every banlieue youth associated with Mafia K1 Fry.

Kery James’s emphasis on the words “thug life” in his song is significant for my analysis of the cultural appropriation of the badman mythoform in France. As mentioned in the second chapter, the code of Thug Life that Tupac promoted emphasized communal self-reliance and
self-defense against state-sanctioned forms of violence. The French hip-hop collective Mafia K1 Fry proposed a similar model of communal self-reliance. Both The Code of Thug Life and Mafia K1 Fry’s vision were marked by a mistrust of agents of the law as viable solutions to the problems of the community. In the United States, Tupac Shakur chose the figure of the thug as an iconoclastic symbol that captured his vision and sense of rebellion. In France the image of the rebellious and revolutionary outlaw was expressed in the name and social ethos of Mafia K1 Fry. In a state of affairs where agents of the law increase and reinforce rather than mitigate the problems facing impoverished ghettoized communities it is not surprising that the youth seek to find and construct their heroic figures outside the systemic structures that oppress them. This phenomenon can be observed in the U.S. as well as in the French ghettos. Historically, the emergence, popularization and cultural appropriation of the trickster, the badman and gangsta heroic figures tends to originate from conditions of marginality produced by state structures and institutions.

The diffusion of Rap-Line, a televised program that was broadcast on the French channel M6, and recorded videos showcasing U.S. hip-hop artists has had a significant impact in the banlieue. Rappers such as Kery James as well as underprivileged teenagers in general were deeply influenced by the hardcore gangsta rap genre that had emerged from across the Atlantic to appear on French television (Blondeau 95). Looking back at American artists who influenced him, Kery James observes, “I had been inspired by groups such as N.W.A. Public Enemy, KRS One, all these groups that demanded social justice. In terms of my position as an MC, I was in the same spirit as these guys. They are the ones who built me” (95). The influence of U.S. gangsta rap appears in his appropriation and cultural translation of Tupac’s “thug life” slogan. Here “thug life” articulates the social conditions of youth who dwell in Orly-Choisy-Vitry. The
slogan appeals to marginalized populations beyond the U.S. ghettos in which it was conceived. Its propagation seems to be endemic to a specific urban counterculture that illustrates the failings of modernity.

The propagation of the badman mythoform in France through gangsta rap has been facilitated by the global flow of mediascapes. These media images of African-American culture from across the Atlantic inspired French youth who lived in the cités. Initially when Dee Nasty recorded one of the first French hip-hop albums, *Paname City Rapping*, “no commercial French record label wanted to produce and distribute an album by a French rapper” (Prévost 4-5). Due to the lackluster reception they received from record companies, many early French rappers relied on independent producers for their album (5). The first radio show dedicated to hip-hop in France emerged in 1981 after the late president Francois Mitterrand repealed a law which until then had only given the French government the “right to broadcast inside France” (1). One of the privately owned radio stations that materialized in this new environment was Carbone 14, which was broadcast from the Fourteenth Arrondissement in Paris (1). It was inside the studio of Carbon 14 that two French hip-hop disc jockeys, Phil Barney and Dee Nasty, began to broadcast the new style of music emerging from the Bronx (2). Prévos explains that “Dee Nasty was familiar with African-American rap because he had contacts in the United States who had told him how to develop his ‘spinning’ skills by replacing the rubber plate of a vinyl record player with a hard plastic […]” (2). Dee Nasty therefore adopted many of the techniques employed by African-American and Jamaican American disc jockeys in his French radio station (2).

However, the national dissemination and commercialization of French hip-hop music really began in the aftermath of the 1994 Carignon Law which, in an attempt to “protect” French traditions against the Americanization of popular culture, required national radios to reserve 40%
of their airtime for French music (Blondeau 34). The law also required national radio stations to devote at least 20% of their airtime to French music during peak listening hours (34). One other law enacted at the time, the 1994 Toubon Law, “increased legal surveillance of the French language against Americanisms, Arabisms” as well as verlan (Silverstein 53). Nonetheless, despite attempts to diminish the use of verlan, “French gangsta rap groups like NTM, while clearly the anathema of French conservative political parties, have ironically benefited from their laws” (53). As French hip-hop begun to dominate radio stations in lieu of a significant amount of Anglophone music that had previously occupied the airwaves, the sales of francophone rap also skyrocketed to record levels. During this period, rap artists such as MC Solaar sold over one million albums (Prévos 2). Other French rappers whose albums sold very well included IAM, NTM, Fonky Family, Sages Poètes de la Rue, 3e Œil, Arsenik, Mafia Trece, Scred Connection, Ménage à 3 and Fab (Blondeau 34). The propagation and popularization of hip-hop in France was thus marked by two processes related to globalization. On the one hand the global dissemination of American popular culture facilitated the spread of U.S. hip-hop in France. On the other hand the mechanism of state protectionism that ensued in the country as a reaction to globalization enabled French hip-hop to thrive. The dissemination of local gangsta rap through the popularization of French hip-hop must therefore be contextualized in respect to these local and global processes.

As in the United States, the record industries and radio stations in France became aware of French hip-hop’s profitability. Initially they preferred to disseminate a depoliticized, inoffensive, formulaic and highly commercial variety of rap (Clyde 77). Rappers including Alliance Ethnik, Ménélik, Réciprok and Mellowman were preferred to the angrier and controversial music of groups such as NTM or Tout Simplement Noir (77). Nonetheless, record
industries could only ignore the popularity of French gangsta rap for so long before they recognized the necessity to capitalize on its marketability. Prévos notes that:

> The popularity of hardcore groups in France is influenced by several factors. First, the violence of the lyrics may be seen as an equivalent of the “explicit lyrics” stickers used in the United States [following the] censorship campaign against rap in the late 1980s. Second, the fact that they seldom appeared on television often forced their listeners to buy their albums in order to (re)discover the lyrics. Finally, the harsh accusation against the French police as well as the denunciation of the French justice system were based on well-documented cases of excesses; this contributed significantly to the credibility of the sometimes outlandish accusations voiced by hardcore rappers in France. (10)

The commercial success of French gangsta rap also led to the commodification of the badman/gangsta persona. Joey Starr from NTM argues that “today the performance of gangsta rap is a market. Being a gangster is commercial in itself, so everyone does it. Us, we came from a period where that did not exist, we never necessarily had to act as outlaws to receive credit for what we said” (Blondeau 176). Like NTM, the members of the French rap group La Rumeur have also publicly voiced their criticism of French radio channels such as Skyrock which they feel “have gadgetized hip-hop and stripped it of its essence by turning it into a hybrid between R&B and Fatal Bazzoka” (160). The group accuses the radio station of dictating to French hip-hop artists what they can and cannot rap about. In the process the performers have also questioned the authenticity of rappers who are signed by Skyrock (161). French hip-hop artists and groups such as NTM or Kery James who were initially inspired by gangsta rap have throughout the years denounced its formulaic and gratuitous clichés composed of shallow
gangster rhetoric and posture. In his rap song, “Réel” (Real, 2009), Kery James directly attacks rappers whom he accuses of exploiting the “gangsta” persona for commercial reasons:

**Kery James (Réel)**

Rappers tell stories

It is up to you to believe in them or not […]

All pretend to be gangsters  […]

They sing about the streets from their studios […]

And you who live the real banlieue life,

the consequences on your life are real like bullets […]

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at: http://www.rap2france.com/paroles-kery-james-reel.php)

Like the U.S. rap group Dead Prez, Kery James similarly utilizes the conventions of hip-hop realism in his song. Up to now I have frequently used the term “hip-hop realism” to refer to the ways in which rappers attempt to authenticate their lyrics vis-à-vis the common experiences of the communities they claim to represent. I purposefully make a distinction between “hip-hop realism” and the realist or naturalist literary movement that proceeded the Romantic period. This is because, while vaguely similar, hip-hop realism is imbued with its own poetics through which it normalizes and conveys culturally inflected perceptions of what is “real.” In order to convey “the real,” hip-hop songs emphasize experiential narratives that document urban poverty and violence, speak the language of urban youth, they also position themselves counter-culturally in opposition to the mainstream culture from which the signified audience feels excluded. Nonetheless, the hip-hop realism that Kery James employs in his song also conforms to normative critical perceptions of what constitutes “high quality” music in France. Barbara
Lebrun explains that “a powerful anti-varieté bias exists in contemporary France which posits that high quality, prestige and ‘authenticity’ can only be found in consciously leftist, anti-conservative music and in music that appears ‘alternative’ or non-mainstream” (2). In his criticism of mainstream French hip-hop, Kery James therefore tacitly and performatively echoes these critical sensibilities:

The cops push your father, its real,
threaten to arrest your mother, it’s cruel but real
You feel like you are being raped,
you cry as much as you want but no rapper comes to console you
Poison with a taste of honey, is all they have,
me I am real, I only have reality
A cold reality, unlike a movie,
with eyes reddened by blood on the plasma screen
(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:

Kery James’s song epitomizes a central crisis affecting hip-hop’s sense of realism. As I have argued above, the importance attached to authenticity in hip-hop culture stems from a need not only to validate certain experiences and realities but also to construct an empowering system of valuation from which an understanding of one’s environment can be interpreted. This sense of authenticity is thus conveyed through different tropes which include embodiments of the badman/gangsta persona, a focus on marginalized neighborhoods and people, and finally, the ability to represent and testify on behalf of one’s community. In hip-hop, the need for authenticity emerges out of a realist impulse to depict one’s environment as it is seen from the
inside. The French gangsta rapper Joey Starr conveys the significance of hip-hop realism when he declares; “I hope our music will have served people by depicting what they have witnessed, represented, like Chuck D said, rap is the ‘CNN of the ghetto’, and that is exactly what it is” (Blondeau 184). Similarly, Kery James has also exalted hip-hop’s ability to represent the lives of marginalized communities. These sentiments are captured in his song “A l’Ombre du Show Business” (“In the Shadow of Show Business”) where he asserts that “our texts are webs that reveal the suffering/ of destinies without stars/ our letters photograph moments/ become witnesses, singing the past and present” (my translation). But what happens when the realist tropes that are used to signify and authenticate a given reality are appropriated within the fabric of a different ethos whose main goal is to sell a product by maximizing its profitability? Kery James’ song “Réel” above seeks to address this question.

By constructing a meta-realist narrative—in other words, a realist discourse describing hip-hop realism—Kerry James questions the ethical component of highly commercialized forms of gangsta rap. The song examines the relationship between the “fictionalization” of reality on the one hand and the harsh social conditions that have engendered and continue to perpetuate this fiction on the other. It is by deconstructing this hyperreality, produced by a highly commercialized rap industry and simulated by marginalized youth, that Kery James draws attention to aspects of the ghetto that cannot be glamorized. Here, commercial gangsta rap is delegitimized, not because it exalts the badman/gangsta persona but due to the fact that the genre glamorizes the figure or more specifically the conspicuous consumption associated with it, without fully contextualizing the social problems of which it is a symptom. Harsh social realities such as going to prison, being killed, suffering police harassment, poverty and drug addiction, are all employed in the song as a means to render the environment of the banlieue less
glamorous, less abstract and more palpable. Through the lyrical portrait of a youth awakening in the morning to the decrepit suffocating life of the ghetto, a life in which he or she feels constantly violated, Kery James asserts a deconstructive realism that supplants the glamorized image of urban poverty and crime. Furthermore, the description of blood covering the plasma screen of a television showing a movie metaphorically mirrors the way in which the song subverts mediatized images of urban criminality through grim depictions of social consequences. The blood represents the vivid reality that visually disturbs a fictitious representation of the world—symbolized by the plasma screen. Although employed as a slogan, “thug life” in this context is meant to describe one’s ability to survive the obstacles of life in the ghetto. Kery James’ own sense of authenticity as a truth teller who “keeps it real” is highlighted in this meta-realist discourse.

As is the case with American rappers such as Immortal Technique and Lupe Fiasco, French hip-hop artists including Kery James, La Rumeur or even Keny Arkana have similarly felt compelled to denounce dominant practices in mainstream hip-hop by offering their works as a substitute. Both Kery James and La Rumeur have at various points made the decision to have their music produced through independent labels in an attempt to sidestep the dominating influence of recording companies (Blondeau 57, 101-102).

Nevertheless, as the evidence shows, the similarities between issues affecting French and American hip-hop are not confined to the political economy of mass media that shapes how decisions are made in the industries of both countries. They also include socio-political and economic problems that permeate the lives of marginalized communities in each national context. Capital flight resulting from economic globalization and deregulation has created a high level of unemployment in U.S. inner cities and in the immigrant populations of French suburbs.
Contrary to its promises, the adoption of neoliberal economic policies has sometimes necessitated more intrusive and repressive forms of state intervention to combat the backlash of those who feel victimized by contemporary socio-economic realities. In France the “militarization” of the banlieue, as Silverstein refers to it, occurred through the increased presence of the police and riot control units armed to suppress violent outbursts of discontent among an economically and socially marginalized population. In the United States, the outsourcing of jobs previously held by inner city residents has fuelled a flourishing drug trade which criminalized black and brown youth caught up in the “war on drugs.” The prison industrial complex was proposed as a solution to the social problems affecting American inner cities. It also provided an employment opportunity in areas of the country where the transition from a manufacturing to a service driven economy had taken effect.

These social realities, among others, have contributed to the popularization of the badman/gangsta persona among marginalized communities in both the United States and France. In France, marginalized youth of recent immigrant descent appropriated and translated the badman in order to denounce the society that had cast them in the position of second class citizens. The badman also gave them the means to express their defiance through the hyper-masculine bravado embedded in it. It is by hypertextually signifying upon American hip-hop songs that French rappers such as NTM and Kery James constructed a poetic platform for critiquing the policies of the French government. In the next chapter, I will shift the focus of this study from Europe to Africa, from France to Kenya. There I will examine how and for what purposes the badman mythoform has been employed by certain Kenyan hip-hop artists who do not fit the category of ethnic minorities. The Kenyan example will reveal significant differences in the ways the badman mythoform has been globalized.
Chapter 4

Expressing and Negotiating Urban Kenyan Youth Identity through Badman Tropes

A) Music and Politics in Kenya: The Popularization of Kenyan hip-hop in Context

The appropriation of the badman persona by African-American youth in the United States and French youth of immigrant descent in France is, at least in part, a symptom of the objective violence characterized by systemic structures of oppression that permeate the lives of those who reside in both communities. In Kenya, as in the United States and France, hip-hop has been used by rap groups such as Kalamashaka to address socio-economic and political issues affecting the youth. However, unlike American and French hip-hop, many “conscious” rappers from Kenya are often reluctant to cast the societal problems addressed in their lyrics in ethnic frames of reference.

This reluctance partly stems from the manner in which negative ethnicity has systematically been exploited in Kenya’s mainstream political discourse. In Negative Ethnicity: from Bias to Genocide (2003), Koigi wa Wamwere defines this phenomenon as “an assumed
ethnic superiority” stemming from a belief that one’s “religion, food, language, songs, culture, or even looks” are better than those of other groups (22). While African-American rappers have often addressed the social problems plaguing their communities by drawing attention to their ethnic identity in opposition to dominant Caucasian modes of self-identification, Kenyan hip-hop groups such as Kalamashaka are careful not to engage in overt performances of local ethnic identities out of fear that such acts might feed into dominant socio-political forms of rhetoric promoting negative ethnicity that have plagued Kenya (Oucho 2002). A few other local artists such as Gidi Gidi Maji Maji and the late rapper Poxi Presha have found ways to circumvent the effects of negative ethnicity in their songs while overtly projecting a Luo identity. Kenya has many ethnic groups. One of the most populous of these is the Luo (I am a member of the Luo ethnic group in Kenya). In this chapter, I will argue that Kenyan hip-hop has been able to transcend ethnic fields of cultural production that define many other (but not all) local forms of popular music in the country.\(^\text{60}\) The keys to understanding the context surrounding appropriations of hip-hop in Kenya can be found in a closer examination of seemingly unrelated phenomena: ‘negative’ ethnicity and the powerful impact of externally imposed economic policies on the country.

While Kenyan musicians have not embraced the genre of gangsta rap to the same extent that French musicians from the banlieue use it, badman tropes still play a vital function in Kenyan hip-hop. The question is therefore how and for what purposes Kenyan rappers employ and localize the badman figure while avoiding the dissemination of negative ethnicity through their music as well as how the global economic context of the 1990s affected these artistic performances. In the same way that badman tropes have been localized to address the social exclusion of immigrants in France, Kenyan hip-hop artists have sought to assimilate the figure
performatively within local movements and struggles. As I have previously argued, the badman persona emerges as a vessel in which marginalized communities and groups can attempt to negotiate their positions within existing structures of power. In order to examine the manner in which and for what reasons Kenyan hip-hop artists have employed badman tropes, it is useful to understand the social, historical and political context in which hip-hop emerged in Kenya. It is also important to trace the ways in which music has historically impacted political discourse in the nation in order to comprehend the contemporary significance of Kenyan rap. I will therefore begin this chapter by focusing on the role of music in Kenyan independence movements as well as the relationship between regionally inspired forms of politicized music and the proliferation of negative ethnicity. This background will reveal how the memory of the Mau Mau rebellion and the fighters that fought for Kenya’s independence fueled the imagination of hip-hop groups like Kalamashaka and affected the articulation of badman tropes in their lyrics. This background will enable me to bring into focus the historical and political context in which Kenyan youth appropriated hip-hop music.

In the second part of this chapter I will analyze how the popularization and dissemination of hip-hop culture among Kenyan youth was facilitated by the impact of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the 1990s. The effects of these programs were twofold: while they promoted the deregulation and privatization of the Kenyan telecommunications industry, creating a greater media diversity and access to American popular culture, they also led to high levels of unemployment, especially among the youth, as many government employees and workers in domestically owned industries were pushed into the informal economy after losing their jobs. Through greater access to American popular culture, young Kenyan hip-hop groups such as Poxi Presha, Gidi Gidi Maji Maji and Kalamashaka
appropriated rap music to address the economically devastating environment that many of them experienced as a result of SAPs. It is through hip-hop music that many Kenyan youth who had long been relegated to the political margins of the nation found a voice to articulate their desire for change (Kinyatti 1980).

In Kenya, as in many African countries, music has formed a vital part of the socio-political landscape in which opposing ideologies are contested. Even before Kenya gained its independence de jure from Britain in 1963, music had been interwoven in the fabric of political culture. During Kenya’s fight for independence (1952-1960), the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), most commonly referred to as the Mau Mau, placed great emphasis on the role of songs in their struggle.

There are many factors that led to the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya. However, the issue of land ownership was by far the greatest grievance many native Kenyans had against the white settler community. According to Kinuthia Macharia, in the Central Province of Kenya where the Mau Mau rebellion emerged the Kikuyu ethnic group felt that their ancestral land had been taken unjustifiably from them by white settlers (11). This loss of land was aggravated by the introduction of taxes that natives had to pay with colonial currency. Macharia explains that “when poll and hut taxes were introduced, for example, the colonial administration, through local chiefs and police, raided homes either very early in the morning or in the evening (about nightfall)” in order to force people to pay (13). During the 1920s these tax laws prompted many natives to seek work in the white settler communities which had converted the stolen land into profitable plantations in need of manual labor (12). It was only by working in plantations owned by settler communities that black Kenyans could acquire the “proper” currency needed to pay their taxes. The land appropriated by white settlers became commonly known as “The White
Highlands” (12). Many Kikuyu who had been chased out of their land were forced into the “Kikuyu Reserve,” a place that was overpopulated with native Kenyans who had lost their land (3). The squatters who had come to inhabit the Kikuyu Reserve faced malnutrition and starvation as the densely populated reservation they inhabited slowly became barren due to over-cultivation (3).

These squatters from the Kikuyu Reserve, who were often forced to migrate from place to place in search of better living conditions, later provided the manpower that fueled the popular Mau Mau uprising against the British settlers. Macharia further explains that in the aftermath of the Second World War, many native Kenyans who had fought with the British army “decried the fact that they had served abroad and had certain privileges while serving but were discriminated against on the basis of their color when they returned” (13). These former veterans of the Second World War also actively participated in the Mau Mau uprising alongside the squatters (13).

According to Bantu Mwaura, the Mau Mau conceived of their fight as a physical struggle and also an ideological one. He argues that the home-made weapons they manufactured were as important to them as the freedom songs they employed to mobilize people in their communities (204). The Kenyan ethnomusicologist Aggrey Nganyi Wataba similarly contends that “the centrality of text to Kenyan music is most of the time read as meant to define the art as social commentary and an avenue for discourse, as an alternative means through which education and historical knowledge is stored and passed on from generation to generation” (49). Mau Mau freedom songs were not only used for the purpose of disseminating anti-colonial propaganda but were also employed to record daily events that took place on the battlefront (Mwaura 205). The songs were highly influenced by Kikuyu oral traditions that emphasized improvisation and spontaneity in their oral arts (205).
European missionaries often sought to discourage African styles of music and traditions through various forms of censorship (Mwangi 158). According to Peter Mwangi, “in Kenya, the earliest recorded instance of a form of musical censorship occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century when European missionaries in a settlement near Mombasa forbade drums because these were regarded as pagan” (158). The battle songs that the Mau Mau sang were therefore not only subversive because of the content of their message but also due to the fact that their African origins defied the accepted norms of cultural expression allowed by the colonial government. Despite instances of censorship, African styles of popular music were quickly disseminated in the 1920s among an expanding indigenous urban population in Nairobi through the introduction of gramophone records (158). The growing migration of rural populations to Nairobi in search of work generated a demand for these records.

One of the earliest African styles of music to have contained anti-colonial messages in Kenya were the Muthirigu songs that emerged from the country’s coastal region in the 1920s (Mwangi 158). A popular genre of music, these songs had the ability to criticize indirectly the colonial government as well as diagnose sociopolitical events through the use of allegory. The genre was inspired by traditional Gikuyu folk songs (158). Indigenous political groups such as the Kikuyu Central Association promoted the propagation of Muthirigu (158). Alarmed by the popularity of Muthirigu, the colonial administration declared that the music was “anti-Christian and a rebellion against modern civilization’s mission advanced through colonialism” (159). Muthirigu was officially banned by the colonial administration in the 1930s through the “Public Order Act” (159). Under this law, defiant performers of Muthirigu were arrested and tortured. As a result, the state-sponsored assault on Muthirigu performers generated a sense of outrage that helped fuel the creation of an armed struggle for independence.
Other popular genres of music that were used during Kenya’s fight for independence include Mwomboko, Gicaandi and pseudo-Christian hymns. Mwomboko emerged as a mixture between Kikuyu folk songs and Scottish dance (Mwangi 160). The genre was popularized by African soldiers who had fought in the Second World War. Like Muthirigu songs, Mwomboko was outlawed in 1950 by the colonial government when the anti-colonial content of the messages embedded in the genre became apparent (160). Despite the public ban, Mwomboko performers still secretly continued singing their songs in the forests and valleys that would later become the hiding places of Mau Mau fighters.

Pseudo-Christian hymns which emerged in the 1940s were also later employed by Mau Mau fighters as a means of secretly propagating anti-colonial propaganda. Mwangi explains that “since the colonizers advocated the singing of Christian hymns the schemers composed anti-establishment songs using pseudo-Christian hymns of the day […] this scheme went on unabated as the colonizers thought that the subjects had turned into loyal god fearing people” (161). Many of the Mau Mau freedom songs were influenced by a Kikuyu form of oral poetry known as Gicaandi. The performance of Gicaandi among the Kikuyu was characterized by a dialogic relationship between singers and members of the community who were encouraged to participate in the execution of the song/poetry at all levels. According to Mwaura, Mau Mau fighters often appropriated this kind of collective performance in their songs (210). In *Thunder from the Mountains: Poems and Songs from the Mau Mau* (1980), Maina wa Kinyatti similarly documents the manner in which Mau Mau freedom songs were employed for the purpose of instigating collective action on the part of the African masses and in order to record orally and heroically eulogize the actions of Mau Mau fighters.
The Mau Mau revolt pitted the colonial government against the African peasantry at the same time that it gave rise to divisions in the indigenous community between loyalists and more militant factions of the poor. The loyalists were comprised of Africans who had socio-economically benefitted from the colonial occupation by being appointed as “chiefs or home guards” by the British (Macharia 14). These loyalists were often permitted to acquire larger shares of land in the Kikuyu Reserve at the expense of the poor peasantry (14). In *The Social Context of the Mau Mau*, Kinuthia Macharia posits that “the loyalists supported the colonial administration so vehemently that most of the violence within the Kikuyu Reserve was usually the militant defiant peasantry against the loyalists” (4). The divisions that emerged between African loyalists and the poor peasantry persisted in the aftermath of Kenya’s “independence” from Britain but also created a discursive space in which the legacy of the Mau Mau was actively debated.

In “Mau Mau & The Contest for Memory” Marshall Clough describes the manner in which British propaganda depicted the Mau Mau as “atavistic, tribalist, racist, anti-Christian and criminal” savages (254). This negative depiction of Mau Mau fighters was further promoted through the novels of writers like Robert Ruark (254). Many African loyalists who had now assumed positions of power during Kenya’s “independence” felt compelled to distance themselves from and even publicly repudiate the Mau Mau movement. For example, in a speech where he referred to the Mau Mau as criminals, Kenya’s first president, Jomo Kenyatta, declared that “Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again” (255). As a moderate president, Kenyatta did not want to offend fellow loyalists and the white settler community as well as the British government. Clough explains that:
In spite of the expectation of Mau Mau leaders, political radicals and many landless Kikuyu peasants, Kenyatta was not going to confiscate and redistribute programs for the poor. As a Kiambu Kikuyu elder, large landholder, political moderate and consensus-builder he was no natural sympathizer with populist rebels. The salient characteristic of Kenyatta’s Kenya was political and economic continuity with the colonial regime. (255)

It is by attempting to efface the contributions of the Mau Mau within the collective memory of the nation that Kenyatta, for the most part, only alluded to the struggle for independence in general and dismissive terms while always focusing on the future (Clough 256). As Aaron Rosenberg explains, Kenyatta’s attitude towards the Mau Mau was prompted by the fact that his corrupt regime “was steadfastly working on appropriating (well let’s be honest, stealing) for themselves large tracts of arable land throughout the country” (113). Rosenberg further argues that “this was precisely the type of land-grabbing that the Mau Mau movement was intended to do away with” (113). Many published autobiographies and historical accounts on the Mau Mau emerged in the aftermath of Kenya’s independence in an attempt to combat the disinformation and collective historical amnesia promoted by the government. These works included J.M Kariuki’s *Mau Mau Detainee* (1963), John Nottingham’s *The Myth of Mau Mau. Nationalism in Kenya* (1966), Waruhiu Itoe’s *Mau Mau General* (1967), and Karari Njema’s *Mau Mau from Within* (1966) (256-257). Other authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o (*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*) and Meja Mwangi (*Carcass for Hounds*) also offered favorable portrayals of the Mau Mau in their works of fiction.

The historical legacy of the Mau Mau became a vital political weapon between 1966 and 1969 when Oginga Odinga, a prominent politician from the Luo ethnic group, together with 30
other members of parliament, decided to break away from the Kenyan African National Union (KANU) led by Kenyatta, which was the only officially recognized political party at the time. These dissenting voices within KANU formed their own political party in 1966, the Kenya People’s Union (KPU) (Clough 257). Clough posits that the KPU was “an avowedly socialist party which attacked the neo-colonialism of Kenyatta’s Kenya and appealed to the common people for support” (257). In order to differentiate themselves from KANU, leaders of KPU glorified the Mau Mau as well as populations in the outskirts of Kenya’s Central Province who had supported the movement (257). It was in this new political climate that Kenyatta, perhaps sensing the need to exploit these populist sentiments, appeared to reverse his rhetoric on the Mau Mau. Shortly after the emergence of KPU, Kenyatta, together with other prominent members of KANU, decided to honor the contributions of Mau Mau fighters by building a monument in their name (257).

Having publicly changed his position on the Mau Mau, Kenyatta now sought to frame their legacy within his own moderate positions. In his book *Suffering without Bitterness*, published in 1968, he discussed the Mau Mau revolt while placing himself as a central protagonist in Kenya’s national struggle for independence (Clough 258). The historical legacy of the Mau Mau has thus emerged as a contested space in which various groups have attempted to articulate and impose their own interests. These debates have pitted loyalists against Mau Mau veterans, Kikuyus against other ethnic groups, and major political parties against each other. The significance of the Mau Mau movement has caused it to retain the status as an important point of reference when discussing Kenya’s political future. The memory of the movement has been employed to depict and critique social injustices in contemporary Kenyan society. These discussions have taken place not only in published works but also in songs. For instance, the rap
song “Angalia Saa” (Watch the Time, 2008), sang by the Kenyan hip-hop group named Kalamashaka, provides an example of the Mau Mau’s impact on the country’s contemporary popular culture.

**Angalia Saa (Watch the Time) by Kalamashaka**

**Intro**

I am dedicating this
to all the Kenyan heroes
everyone who has struggled
to be reimbursed […]

**Chorus**

I know you want your rights
watch the time […]
you are the hero […]

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:

http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/kamah/angaliasaa.htm)

Like the French Rapper Kery James, the hip-hop group Kalamashaka make references to past struggles that have defined their respective national identities. Kalamashaka uses the memory of national heroes who died during Kenya’s struggle for independence in order to critique contemporary events in Kenyan society. The song directly addresses its target audience by communicating a call to action. Here the audience is compelled to assume the role of revolutionaries. In previous examples, I have examined how rappers assume the identities of various badman figures in order to express a sense of agency from the margins of society. However, in this song the audience is also invited to play the role of badmen alongside the
performers. Here the iconoclasm of the badman, captured in the image of Mau Mau fighters, is used to instigate and engender a national project of social transformation within the Kenyan context. As I have previously argued, badman tropes are not specific to African-American culture—they can be found in other contexts. Nonetheless, it is precisely because these tropes have influenced the poetic structures of hip-hop songs that the music genre becomes easily translatable across cultural contexts. Just as in the French example analyzed in the previous chapter, Kalamashaka demonstrate a hyper-historical awareness which not only highlights the monumental significance of the Mau Mau but also their own roles as historical agents within that continuum. Kalamashaka is among one of the “hardcore” hip-hop groups in Kenya to have used the image of Mau Mau fighters as their artistic persona together with Necessary Noize in their song Shujaa. The name Kalamashaka means “eaten troubles or experience with adversity” (Wetaba 360). Between 2003 and 2004 the group formed a music collective named Ukoo Flani Mau Mau that was composed of 24 rappers from Kenya and Tanzania. Their song “Angalia Saa” can be seen as a continuation of the traditions embedded in politicized forms of popular music established much earlier in genres such as Muthirigu and Mwomboko. Like the Mau Mau freedom songs used to diagnose social problems, record past and present events at the battlefront, and encourage political action, “Angalia Saa” also seeks to accomplish these three goals.

Kama

“White Highlands no More”

it is not a secret that this is no longer sufficient

this fight has surpassed skin color

and I know that there are only two ethnicities

the poor and the rich […]

222
decolonizing minds
don’t say you hypnotized yourself […] they shot Muthoni wa Nyanjiru
in the same way they raped our mother Njeri
these are the trials of heroes
if Kenya is the Matrix who is Neo
if Kimathi was not the one
then society is drunk with opium

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:
http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/kamah/angaliasaa.htm)

The song traces the fight for independence from British colonialism and compares it with the struggle for justice in contemporary Kenyan society. In order to accomplish this it invokes the assassination of Muthoni wa Nyanjiru by the British in 1922 and relates it to the rape of Ngugi wa Thiongo’s wife in 2004.

One of the mythologized figures mentioned in the song who emerged during Kenya’s fight for independence is Muthoni wa Nyanjiru. The event that inscribed her name as a symbol of the nation’s fight for independence occurred on March 4, 1922. On this particular day, many demonstrators convened outside the Kingsway Police Station in Nairobi to protest the arrest of Harry Thuku, a political figure from the Kikuyu ethnic group who had helped create the first multi-ethnic political organization in the region, the East African Association (EAA). Assa Okoth documents the events that unfolded on that day:

On March 4th, 1922 Harry Thuku was arrested at an EAA committee meeting in Abdalla Tarairara’s house. Meanwhile, at the Kingsway Police Station, when
negotiations for Thuku’s release failed, the people became very angry. The women, led by Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru [Muthoni wa Nyanjiru] challenged the men to surrender their trousers to the women if they were afraid to get Thuku out. The men were inflamed by the challenge and a general surge forward began. The police, aided by the settlers who had been relaxing at the nearby Norfolk Hotel, opened fire on the Africans, and 28, or more people, lay dead. Among them was Nyanjiru. (253)

According to the mythologized narrative of this event, before her death Muthoni wa Nyanjiru is said to have challenged the men’s masculinity by removing her own clothes and asking for their trousers. By linking this event to the assault on Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his wife upon his return from exile, an attack rumored to have been organized by prominent Kenyan government officials, the song seeks to draw similarities between oppressive measures adopted by the colonial regime and the crimes the singers accuse the contemporary Kenyan government of committing. The attack on Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the internationally renowned author who had previously been forced into exile by the Kenyan government because of his activism and literary works, casts doubts on the progress many people felt had been accomplished since the 2002 elections.

The reference to “White Highlands,” which also happens to be the name of a book by Ojwando Abuor titled White Highlands no More (1973), is used to project the fight for Kenya’s independence as an ongoing struggle. Kalamashaka, experiencing similar forms of marginalization in the slums of Nairobi, see themselves as the direct descendants of the Mau Mau. Therefore, by arguing that the fight for justice in Kenya surpasses the quest for racial equality, Kalamashaka reframes the struggle for independence within the contemporary realities
of the song’s local audience. The reference to heroic national figures like Dedan Kimathi and Muthoni wa Nyanjiru, followed by the repeated emphasis of the words “wewe ni shujaa” (you are the hero or you are brave) in the chorus of the song, has the effect of positioning its target audience as descendants of the struggle whose eminent task is to usher the country into a new era of liberation. Here independence means not only liberation from British rule but also a general liberation from political and economic oppression. By declaring “na kabila najua ni mbili tu, maskini na mdosi” (there are only two ethnicities, the rich and the poor), Kalamashaka seeks to substitute a Marxist interpretation of Kenya’s problems for the politics of ethnicity that have dominated the country’s national discourse. This interpretation frames the country’s political troubles in terms of social class disparities as opposed to the perceived privileges accorded to one ethnicity over another. Despite the fact that most Mau Mau fighters were Gikuyus, Kalamashaka nonetheless translates their fight into a national project that incorporates Kenyans of different ethnic backgrounds.

The Mau Mau persona that Kalamashaka adopts allows them to affirm a sense of authenticity by claiming to represent the “original” intentions of Kenya’s independence movements. The rhetorical position that this sense of authenticity gives them is demonstrated in the following statement from Kama, one of their members: “we are trying to lyrically show the places where our forefathers went. Because the first fight was physical, the fight now is mental, this is the Mau Mau of today, this is the fight we have” (Wanguhu). This proclaimed authenticity therefore furnishes them with a moral authority through which they can articulate an alternative vision of Kenya’s future. The assumed persona of Mau Mau fighters provides a means by which some “conscious” hip-hop artists such as Kalamashaka can express a sense of
authenticity dipped in the nation’s history. In so doing, they question existing structures of power.

Aside from newspapers, music in Kenya remains one of the main discursive spaces in which social, political and cultural issues are debated. This has been true for Kenyan music genres like Muthirigu, Mwomboko, Benga and Ohangla as well as “conscious” Kenyan hip-hop. It is for this reason that Kenya also has a long history of music censorship. After Kenya’s “independence” in 1963, President Kenyatta created the “Corporation Act Chapter 221” which essentially established a Censorship Board that banned politically objectionable music (Peter Mwangi 163). Despite the Censorship Board’s attempt to maintain the government’s ideological hegemony, the 1970s saw an upsurge in protest music, especially among Benga musicians (163). During this period controversial musicians were often arrested and fined on grounds of “incitement” (164). When Kenyatta died in 1978 and his deputy Daniel Arap Moi succeeded him as Kenya’s second president, a new wave of censorship, torture, political assassinations and intimidations emerged in the aftermath of a failed coup d’état that had threatened to topple Moi’s government in 1982.

John Owino was one of the musicians targeted by Moi’s government. In 1984, Owino released a song titled “Baba Otonglo” (Father of Ten Cents or Father of Money) in which he ridiculed the president’s inability to balance the country’s budget (Mwangi 166). According to Mwangi, the song sought to criticize President Moi through the use of an allegory in which “the head of the house (in other words, Head of State), Baba Otonglo (Father of Money) struggles to make ends meet so as to keep his family together” despite his poor managerial skills (166). Upon its release the song was immediately censored by the government. Music stores that sold records of the song were raided by government agents who confiscated all the copies they could
find. These actions facilitated the establishment of black market networks in which the song continued to be distributed (166).

Sam Muraya was also among the popular musicians whose songs displeased President Moi and his government. In the aftermath of the mysterious assassination of Dr. Robert Ouko (1990), Kenya’s minister of foreign affairs at the time, the musician Sam Muraya was arrested after composing a song titled “the Death of Ouko” (Mwangi 168). The song not only addressed the mysterious circumstances under which Ouko was murdered but also alluded to the government’s involvement in the case. In 1995, Muraya was eventually forced to flee the country and seek asylum in the United Kingdom (168).

Music thus provides a reflection of Kenyan society not only in the messages embedded in the lyrics but also in the fields of cultural production in which songs are composed and consumed. While music has been employed as a medium by which dissenting voices could critique the government, the songs were often directed to specific ethnic groups. Kenyan ethnomusicologists such as Aggrey Wetaba have argued that prior to the emergence of Kenyan genres of hip-hop like Genge and Kapuka, not many varieties of locally produced music were trans-ethnic. This scarcity partly stems from the politics of ethnicity in Kenya. In order to understand the relationships among ethnicity, music and politics, it is important to retrace briefly the manner in which colonial and “post-colonial” realities have influenced the construction of identities embedded in imagined communities around the country.

According to Hervé Maupeu, contemporary perceptions of ethnic identities in Kenya are products of the colonial project (24-24). Before British colonialism, ethnic identities were typically fluid and porous. Different communities speaking different languages interacted with each other, intermarried and formed new hybrid cultures (25). However, with the onslaught of
colonialism, the British sought to restrict inter-ethnic interactions as a way to manage the vast expansion of land they had acquired and prevent a calamitous revolt organized by unified groups of Kenyan natives from different communities. Pass laws that restricted movement were quickly instituted in order to confine various communities in different areas. The Gikuyus were therefore confined to the Central Province while the Luos were kept in Nyanza (25). Nonetheless, other groups such as the Luhyas and the Kalenjins were consolidated out of heterogeneous communities by the British as a means of counterbalancing the potentially hegemonic influence of the Luos and the Gikuyus (25). These newly constituted communities became the building blocks with which many activists constructed their political platforms. Luo historian Bethwell Allan Ogot explains how Oginga Odinga, one of the most prominent political figures in the Luo community, facilitated the formation of an imagined Luo community by founding the “Luo Thrift and Trading Corporation” (LUTATCO) in 1946 (12). LUTATCO’s purpose was to promote economic prosperity and self-reliance in the Luo community. Ogot explains that “this business had to be organized on ethnic lines to create a new image of the Luo as entrepreneurs. It was also the time that the Luo Union, whose first branch had been founded in 1922, developed into a major organization in both urban and rural areas” (12). The convergence of LUTATCO and the Luo Union provided a socio-political and economic platform on which a consolidated Luo identity could be expressed. Ogot posits that:

The convergence of the two movements—economic and cultural—on Odinga led to the emergence of a strong cultural nationalism among the Luo. The main emphasis was on cultural identity, and history, some of it invented, was invoked to sustain it. At all public rallies and meetings, the Luo now referred to themselves as Joka-Nyanam (the river people) or Nyikwa Ramogi (the
descendants of Ramogi), thereby giving the mistaken view that all Luo groups descended from one person, Ramogi. This Luo cultural nationalism had by the 1960s, and responding to various political and economic challenges of modern Kenya, produced a strong Luo sub-nationalism, a coherent imagined community which has yet to find a niche in the National Project. (13)

During this period, other people such as the Terik, the Kipsigi, the Nandi, the Marakwet, the Keiyo, the Tugen and the Pokot all became known as the Kalenjin ethnic group (Ogot 15).

Between 1920 and 1950 many Kenyans found political refuge in the invention of greater ethnic communities (16). The first attempt to unify these newly invented communities into a national movement occurred in 1944 when the Kenyan African Study Union (KASU) was formed (16). At the time it was hoped that this name would camouflage the union’s political ambitions (16).

According to Ogot, the national project espoused by KASU was officially abandoned in 1970 when “[President] Kenyatta established a kind of monarchical courts from which he promoted Kikuyu nationalism and entrenched Kikuyu dominance. The other Kenya peoples reacted by further consolidating imagined communities that they had established before 1952” (33). It is because of these events that political issues in Kenya have since been debated through ethnic lenses. Many Kenyan politicians employed ethnic symbols of solidarity for the purpose of augmenting the political and cultural capital they enjoyed in the communities they claimed to represent. The term majimbo-ism (or regionalism) was used to describe political discourse that pandered to ethnic regionalism rather than national cohesion.

The entrenched notions of ethnicity that emerged as products of colonial and “post-colonial” realities in Kenya also structured the social parameters around which Kenyan musicians could practice their art. For example, in “Ethnic Identity and Stereotypes in Popular
Music: Mugiithi Performance in Kenya,” Maina wa Mutonya explains that many bars and night-clubs in Nairobi had a rotation of ethnically-themed music nights that would selectively cater to the tastes of different communities (170).

Many musicians/social commentators emerged as influential icons of popular culture among these communities. For example, Joseph Kamaru, a Kikuyu Benga musician from the Muranga district of Kenya’s Central Province, became one of the most important social commentators among the Gikuyu (Maupeu 27). Kamaru was such an influential figure that in the 1970s President Daniel Arap Moi, a member of the Kalenjin ethnic group, asked him to sing the praises of the one-party government in his songs—an act that many in the Kikuyu community perceived as a grave betrayal (31). Other Luo musicians and political commentators such as D. O. Misiani also enjoyed a tremendous amount of popularity in their community. Misiani regularly critiqued the Kenyan government through the clever use of allegories that could often only be deciphered by cultural insiders (Oloo 182). His songs generally tackled sociopolitical and cultural issues that affected the Luo community. Misiani’s affirmation of Luo identity, as a transnational phenomenon, and pride are exemplified in songs such as “Thuond Luo” (Luo Heroes), recorded in 1979, in which he musically retold Luo legends (186). Misiani was born in Tanzania where a portion of the Luo community also resides. His connections to Tanzania allowed him to escape persecution from the Kenyan government by fleeing to his country of birth whenever he was in trouble.

As previously mentioned, Kenyan hip-hop remains one of the few locally produced genres whose musicians enjoy a wide appeal beyond specific ethnic communities. My own personal experience during a research trip in Kenya confirms what ethnomusicologists such as Aggrey Wetaba have argued. In the summer of 2010, while attempting to purchase large amounts
of music in Kisumu, a city located in the Luo-populated Nyanza province of Kenya, I noticed that the only non-Luo musicians from Kenya whose audio and video CDs were sold in market stalls were those of hip-hop artists. When I asked some of the merchants whether I could find Benga music from the Kikuyu community, they quickly responded that I would probably have more luck finding such albums in Nairobi as opposed to Kisumu. By contrast, the ease with which I could locate the music of Kenyan hip-hop musicians such as Nameless, who is not ethnically Luo, exemplifies the trans-ethnic popularity of local rap artists. While language does play a role, it is nonetheless very difficult to explain hip-hop’s trans-ethnic appeal solely in linguistic terms. After all, Luo hip-hop musicians such as Poxi Presha and Gidi Gidi Maji Maji, who have released many songs in Dholuo, the Luo language, also enjoy an ethnically diverse fan base. The reasons for Kenyan hip-hop’s trans-ethnic success are many. The music’s general appeal to the country’s youth stems in part from the ways in which the nation’s younger generation has been relegated to the socio-political and economic margins of society. These sentiments are echoed by Kevin Wiry, a member of the Kenyan hip-hop group called Necessary Noize, in the following interview conducted by Aaron Rosenberg:

Before our album, one of the most neglected opinions in our country was the youths’ [sic] opinion. So people actually looked at it as a very bold step by youth. That time we were how old? Sixteen? Seventeen? We were pretty young at the moment but you see nobody had ever listened to a teenager’s opinion of what he thinks of his country you see. And people weren’t thinking “Now wait a minute; these youths who are singing right now are the ones who are going to take over eventually.” (Rosenberg 221)
Hip-hop’s popularity among Kenyan youth therefore stems partly from the public platform it provides for them to communicate their opinions and identity. Wateba contends that while the youth are often looked upon as “instruments of change” in African societies “this emergence of young people into both the public and domestic spheres seems to have resulted in the construction of African youth as a threat, the very reason for panic” (67). According to Wateba, the continued migration of people, especially the youth, from rural to urban centers has also facilitated a perception of youth as dangerous, decadent criminals “given to sexuality that is unrestrained and threatening for the whole society” (67). In the Kenyan media, portrayals of youth are often primed with images of violence and chaos (100). These images have been especially connected to Kenyan university students who have on many occasions engaged in strikes as a means of addressing various grievances. Student strikes are often perceived to “degenerate” into the destruction of private property as well as violent confrontations with the police (101). Nonetheless, it should be noted that the Kenyan police have frequently subdued student protests through violent (and sometimes lethal) means.

In political discourse, Kenyan youth have been sarcastically referred to as “viongozi wa kesho” (leaders of tomorrow). Wateba posits that:

In the political sphere, youth in Kenya are mostly viewed as leaders of tomorrow. This title emanates from political power play. Viongozi wa kesho was fashioned during the reign of former president Daniel Arap Moi in the 1980s. It was meant to postpone youth’s ambitions or simply mute the voices of the young members of the Kenyan populace, who the then government considered as power hungry, and yet lacked the expertise, vision and mission, and the general deportment of leadership. (96)
Indeed, since independence, most of the leading political figures in Kenya have typically refused to vacate their seats for members of the younger generations. The Kenyan government has for the most part been characterized by a noticeable lack of young members forming its body. The phrase *viongozi wa kesho* thus epitomizes their political marginalization. It captures the manner in which the youth’s capacity to take part and contribute to Kenya’s national project has been postponed continuously. The portrayal of Kenyan youth as delinquent mobs has therefore made it easier for some politicians to deny their claims for political participation and leadership.

In public discourse, university students are often referred to as “*watoto wa University*” (children from the University) (Wetaba 101). In Kenya, the propensity to identify certain groups of people diminutively as “children” can reflect the social, political and cultural weight embedded in such demarcations. For example, the term *chokora*, which means “street children,” is often employed indiscriminately to describe children, teenagers, young adult and adult populations who live on the streets (101). In Kenya, the term “youth” can be used to encapsulate different age groups simultaneously. While the former Kenyan constitution identifies people between the ages of 15 and 30 as youths it also considers anyone above the age of 18 to be an adult (92). Categories denoting pre-youth, youth and adult thus frequently overlap with each other (93). Another example of this can be found in terms such as “kijana” (boy) or “msichana” (girl) which are frequently used to designate unmarried individuals, sometimes regardless of age.

The common characteristic found in many groups categorized as “youth” is their sociopolitical and economic marginalization. Wetaba corroborates this phenomenon by contending that “an analysis of the Kenya National Youth Policy report (2003) reveals the fact that Kenyan youth constitute a category of people who have been relegated to the periphery in the socio-political system” (93). As I have argued above, it is by gaining visibility as well as
seeking socio-economic empowerment through hip-hop that Kenyan “youths” have often challenged their pejorative identity as *viongozi wa kesho* (68). In his book *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige examines the manner in which the symbolic capital embedded in styles of music such as Punk was initially employed to subvert hegemonic structures of representation. Similarly, in this context, the clothing styles (baggy jeans for men and skimpy clothes for women) and the sexually themed lyrics found in Kenyan hip-hop partly function as a subcultural counterweight to “traditional” mores of public decency. In these cases the concept of “tradition” does not just signify normalized moral codes of accepted behavior and dress but also captures the social, political and economic status quo from which the youth feel excluded. “Tradition,” in other words, encapsulates the entire field of cultural production that has socially, politically and economically affected the youth in a negative way. As will shortly be demonstrated, media images of African American rappers employing badman tropes through language and clothing styles were locally appropriated in Kenyan hip-hop for the purpose of constructing an oppositional subculture that unites all youth from different ethnic communities.

It was during the clamor for multiparty democracy in the 1990s that some politicians sought to harness the political potential of youth (Wetaba 97). During this period the term *Young Turks* was employed by leaders in the opposition to politicize the youth. Wetaba argues that “reference to this term was particularly significant considering that the then president Daniel Moi, born in 1924, and having ruled the country since 1978, was not ready to relinquish power” (97). As Kenyan youth were emboldened to assume their own political and economic ambitions they found in hip-hop a means to articulate these desires. The song “Unbwogable” (“Un-scared-able”) from the rap group Gidi Gidi Maji Maji was released in 2002 and is a product of these social forces.
Unbwogable by Gidi Gidi, Maji Maji

Chorus
Who can scare me […]
I cannot be scared

Verse 1
What the hell are you looking at?
Can’t a young Luo make money any more? […]
Who the hell do you think you are?
Get the hell out of my face because hey […]

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:
http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/gidigidimajimaji/unbwogable.htm)

The song offers another example of the ways in which the poetics of the badman, as expressed through the stylistics of the ego trip, function as rhetorical tools that are easily translatable across cultural contexts where such traditions may already exist. The rappers Gidi Gidi and Maji Maji are both members of the Luo ethnic group where the practice of ego tripping, also locally known as pakruok in Dholuo (the Luo language), has a long historical tradition, especially in Luo popular music. In Dholuo the word pakruok refers to the art of praising a person, oneself or one’s community. In their rap song, Gidi Gidi, Maji Maji not only exalt their fearlessness but also express a sense of ethnic pride by giving “shout outs” to various famous Luo personalities and communities as the lyrics below reveal. The trope of the badman which has been formalized into the stylistic structures of rap songs is therefore assimilated and easily naturalized within an existing Luo tradition.

Verse 2
Oginga Odinga I remember you
Tom Mboya I remember you
Ouko Robert I remember you
Raila Amolo I remember you
Gor Mahia I remember you […]

Chorus

Verse 4
People of Bondo how great is this, you cannot be scared
People of Ugenya how great is this, you cannot be scared

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:

At first glance “Unbwogable” seems to pander to sentiments promoting Luo sub-nationalism and solidarity—sentiments which, one might assume, would make the song less popular beyond the Luo community where the rappers originate. The song not only exalts the memory of Luo political leaders, heroes and social commentators/musicians like Oginga Odinga, Tom Mboya, Gormahia and Okatch Biggy, but also names significant Luo communities. However, the trans-ethnic appeal of the song among Kenyan youth had little to do with the specific ways in which the rappers articulated their Luo identity. What appealed to Kenyan youth was the general sense of frustration and defiance the rappers were communicating. The song was originally written as a critique of the prevailing system of piracy in Kenya’s music industry. This problem has economically affected many hip-hop artists. The words “can a young Luo make money any more” captured the general sense of hopelessness and frustration experienced by many youth
trying to earn a living in a society riddled with structures that perpetuate their position on the socioeconomic margins of the nation. Wetaba corroborates this interpretation of “Unbwogable’s” trans-ethnic popularity in his dissertation:

Residing at the periphery of socio-economic, political, generational divide and unity, a usual phenomenon with most youth in Kenya, Gidi Gidi and Maji Maji decided to take Kenyan hip-hop to engage the audience and convey their dissatisfaction with the ‘music industry’. But this music industry would end up being a metaphorical expression. They set off to secure the nation against criminal activities of selfish individuals in society. (292)

The song also addressed the lack of economic opportunities available to Kenyan youth, a situation caused by the self-serving leadership of the country’s aging political elite. The defiant stance that the rappers took toward the system they sought to critique was conveyed by badman tropes they appropriated to deliver their message. The rhetorical aspects of the ego-trip which normally permeates the gangsta rap genre of hip-hop was used here by Gidi Gidi Maji Maji to capture their determination. The repeated emphasis of the words “I cannot be scared, I cannot be beaten” imbued their artistic persona with a daring self-confidence. Just like gangsta rappers in the United States and France, Gidi Gidi Maji Maji assumed bold and daring personalities to critique structures of injustice they saw around them. Of course, the argument here is not that these daring postures are only articulated in hip-hop as opposed to other music or artistic genres in general, a claim that could be easily proven to be false. One cannot also claim that Kenyan rappers are solely influenced by U.S.-American music as opposed to other “local” or “native” musical varieties. The point I am making is that the stylistics of the ego trip as used pervasively by American rappers and which often contain boastful and hypermasculine rhetoric, were also
exposed to Kenyan youth who massively consumed American popular culture. Kenyan hip-hop artists did not just appropriate rap music but also other elements embedded within hip-hop culture including clothes and jewelry as well as verbal and physical mannerisms, many of which emerged from the badman persona. The transnational propagation of mediascapes therefore weaves together an inherent hypertextuality connecting American and Kenyan hip-hop, in the process facilitating the appropriation and local interpretation of badman tropes by artists such as Gidi Gidi Maji Maji.

When performing their song, the rap duo has also been known to use call and response strategies to encourage audience participation by shouting “I am unbwogable, you are unbwogable, we are unbwogable!” (I cannot be scared, you cannot be scared, we cannot be scared!) (Wetaba 293). Here, as seen in other rap songs, the personal realities communicated by Gidi Gidi Maji Maji are turned into a metanarrative on which a multiethnic Kenyan audience can attach their own experiences. “Unbwogable” became adopted by the National Rainbow Coalition who used it to defeat President Moi’s regime in the Kenyan general elections of 2002. The political appropriation of hip-hop by Kenya’s aging politicians mirrors the manner in which the nation’s youth has on various occasions been used, and sometimes exploited, for the sake of expedient political goals.

In Dholuo the word *bwogo* means “to scare.” The term “unbwogable” (un-scare-able) is constructed out of a common morphological phenomenon observed in a Kenyan slang known as Sheng. The slang is characterized by a tendency either to assimilate English words within the morphological structures of Swahili and other indigenous languages or attach English suffixes and prefixes onto Swahili or Luo words as is the case with “un-bwog-able.” Sheng is a slang that first developed in Kenya’s urban centers among the youth. The slang is a symptom of the
cultural hybridity that permeates the lives of many Kenyan youth who reside in major cities and towns. Kenyan youth living in Nairobi not only interact with peers from different ethnic groups from around the country but are also influenced by the proliferation of cultures originating beyond the country’s borders which are often first encountered in the capital city. It is therefore quite logical that, being an urban slang which drew its influences from different indigenous languages, the primary medium through which Sheng was disseminated and popularized around the country was hip-hop. As a hybrid lingua franca, the use of Sheng in Kenyan hip-hop might have also partly contributed to the genres trans-ethnic appeal. Rosenberg posits that Sheng demonstrates the “potential for giving oral form to new conceptions of identity” (150). As a common language shared among many youth across ethnic backgrounds in the country, Sheng provides a way for them to imagine and relate to the larger community of speakers that use the vernacular.

Like the French reverse slang Verlan mentioned above, Sheng also emerged as a form of resistance vernacular. Wetaba explains that “Sheng was initially intended to remain within the confines of youth themselves. Its purpose was to lock out such unintended audience as parents and other elderly people” (141). The slang was originally used in low income neighborhoods of Nairobi such as Eastlands (141). Many youth who suffered from a lack of privacy in one-bedroom apartments would use the slang to communicate safely with their siblings and peers while their parents were around (141). Nevertheless, despite its early use in economically marginalized spaces, Sheng is now employed by poor uneducated youth as well as university students and young Kenyans from upper-middle class families. Nazizi, the other member of Necessary Noize suggests that Sheng’s appeal is even broader than the social demarcations mentioned above. She argues that “a tremendous amount of people have adopted [Sheng]
because everywhere you go…if you are talking to a waiter, if you go to speak to a security officer, if you have a conversation at the supermarket counter…any person that you speak to will understand you…” (Interview conducted and transcribed by Rosenberg, 151). The influence of Sheng has also spread to the countryside partly because of hip-hop as well as through the social interactions among students from urban and rural areas in Kenyan boarding schools (Wainaina 84). By using Sheng in their lyrics, local rappers therefore appeal not only to urban youth but all young Kenyans in general (85).

Another way of understanding Sheng’s trans-ethnic popularity in an urban context like that of Nairobi is by broadening common ways of imagining diasporic subjects beyond narratives of transnational displacements. As Kenya’s largest city and the nation’s capital, Nairobi has experienced a continuous migration of peoples from different ethnic groups and cultures speaking different languages. These groups initially display characteristics that are typical of displaced communities residing in diasporic spaces. Traditions from the rural homeland are, for example, often reconstructed and reproduced in the host city, especially among older generations of migrant workers. However, it is also in this urban milieu that many youth, who were either born in the city or have lived there for most of their lives, have developed a hybrid subculture that was specific to the daily global, local and multiethnic influences encountered in Nairobi.

The growth and popularization of this subculture coincided with the emergence of Kenyan hip-hop in the 1990s. The subculture that Kenyan youth were developing and articulating through hip-hop music was employed to engage with the hopeless realities of urban unemployment that thwarted their dreams for a better future. Furthermore, hip-hop did not just provide a means for Kenyan youth to express their own desires for a better life and future, it also
allowed them to communicate those wishes through the appropriation of “Western”
commodities. In his book on East African hip-hop, Mwenda Ntarangwi explains that hip-hop
gave Kenyan youth “an avenue to appropriate a Western world they had only seen on television
or heard on radio, because they had primarily been socialized to value Western cultural
products” (22). The culture of conspicuous consumption popularized by badman figures in
African-American hip-hop was assimilated by Kenyan youth.

One of the prominent Kenyan rappers who has consistently projected a decadent badman
persona is CMB Prezzo. The acronym CMB in his name stands for “Cash Money Brothers”
while Prezzo is one of the Sheng words for President. He is also known as the “king of bling bling” because of the expensive jewelry he wears. Prezzo’s extravagant public persona was
magnified when he hired a helicopter in 2005 to make a grand entrance at an award ceremony
called “Chaguo la Teeniz” (Teens’ Choice) (34). In many ways, Prezzo’s helicopter entrance as
well as his personal escort of armed body guards and convoys mimics the spectacle of political
power that many Kenyan youth have seen their leaders display. In this case, the decadent
badman persona already embedded in hip-hop is rendered intelligible within local exhibitions of
power. Prezzo seeks to project this decadent badman persona in his rap song titled “Prezzo”
(2007). Some excerpts from the song have been provided below:

“Prezzo” by Prezzo

Verse 1

a year in the game and I have blown people away […]
two thousand and four I loaded my ammo
and now it’s time for war it’s not a game […]
let me beat this critic, rough rugged and raw
this critic is_____

how dare you compare Redsan with a king […]

Verse 2

Prezzo I’m filthy rich

and like Biggy Smalls it’s just me and my bitch

and that’s why I never trust a snitch […]

Verse 3

I quench your thirst like Sprite […]

for all my enemies I’m equipped with a full clip

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:

http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/prezzo/prezzo.htm)

The aim here is not to analyze the maturity of Prezzo’s lyrics but rather to examine the manner in which he assimilates the badman persona in his music. Part of Prezzo’s song is structured according to the stylistics of freestyle rap battles. Generally, rap battles are events where competing rappers demonstrate their skills by lyrically outshining or emasculating one another. In his song, Prezzo castigates those who seek to compare him to Redsan, a fellow Kenyan rap/ragga artist. It is by exalting his artistic prowess that Prezzo not only seeks to emasculate Redsan but also other local artists in general. Prezzo’s boastful way of expressing how he is the best at what he does as well as the riches he lyrically flaunts are directly taken from the decadent badman persona. The reference to Notorious B.I.G, an African-American rapper known to have incarnated a hyper-masculine and materialistic badman in his public image, reveals Prezzo’s musical influences. Many of the images and terms Prezzo employs are directly taken from U.S. gangsta rap. Utterances such as “I’m equipped with the full clip” or even “that’s why I never
trust a snitch” are unproblematically incorporated into his song from the context of U.S inner cities where the culture of gang violence and the communal disdain of police informants have influenced expressions used in hip-hop music. This hypertextuality not only operates across national contexts but also functions within the state boundaries of Kenyan hip-hop. For example, other lines such as “I quench your thirst like sprite” are copied from the lyrics of the Kenyan group Necessary Noize.

The badman persona therefore allows Kenyan artists like Prezzo to communicate a desire for power by combining global trends of conspicuous consumption and local spectacles of political muscle. Here, desire emerges as a stimulus for a form of cultural production by which rappers authorize reality through badman performances (Deleuze & Guattarri 61). This phenomenon can be observed in the tropes of conspicuous consumption imbedded in U.S. and Kenyan hip-hop. The longing for a lifestyle they see on television and witness among Nairobi’s upper class communities is amplified by the fact that Kenyan youth represent the majority of the nation’s unemployed population (Ntarangwi 77). NGOs located in Kenya such as the Youth Banner have estimated that approximately 64% of unemployed Kenyans are youth (http://www.youthbanner.org). As a source of employment hip-hop has provided artists like Prezzo with the means to spectacularly actualize these tropes of wealth and upward social mobility. These subcultural venues of employment for local youth have further expanded to include a growing Kenyan fashion industry built around hip-hop culture. Young Kenyan designers such as Fundi Frank have achieved local brand stardom by clothing well known hip-hop musicians in the country. Jeffrey Kimathi, another Kenyan designer, has even gained international recognition by having his clothes worn by world famous African-American rappers like Jay Z. From these examples, one could argue that Kenyan rappers such as Prezzo as well as
the hip-hop fashion designers do not necessarily seek to dismantle or negate “the system.” They actually aspire to participate and be integrated into the capitalist modes of production from which they have been excluded.

The popularity and commercial viability of Kenyan hip-hop has also been encouraged by promotional spaces offered by Kenyan forms of public transportation known as matatus or “mathrees” as they are called in Sheng. These congested taxi vans often promote local Kenyan rappers by loudly playing audio and visual recordings of their latest songs during peak business hours when young Kenyans travel to school or return home. Many popular Kenyan rappers have been known to promote their latest albums by personally delivering new songs to matatu drivers and conductors (Wetaba 230). Graffiti paintings of local hip-hop artists which decorate the walls of matatus also provide another advertising avenue for local musicians. As Kenyan youth congregate in matatus to listen to and watch the latest rap songs on flat screen car DVD players on their way to school or college campuses, the subculture they have created begins to colonize the public urban space in which it was conceived. The audio and visual dissemination of Kenyan hip-hop through large networks of public transportation has now become part of the sounds and aesthetic outlooks of Nairobi. Nevertheless, the popularity and commercial viability of Kenyan hip-hop both as a source of employment and as a countercultural medium of resistance needs to be contextualized in the global macro-economic climate that unfolded in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. In the next section of this chapter I will examine how the popularity of Kenyan hip-hop as well as the cultural appropriation of badman tropes must be examined in the context of neoliberal economic policies in the country.
B) Structural Adjustments and the rise of Kenyan Hip-Hop as a Marker of Youth

Identity

Nairobi has emerged as a metropolitan center where one finds a confluence of global and local ethnoscapes, ideoscapes, mediascapes and technoscapes affecting the city’s hybrid culture. Most national media organizations and major corporations have their headquarters in Nairobi (Wetaba 126). The city is also the center from which new forms of technology and media cultures are disseminated throughout the country. It is for this reason that Kenyan hip-hop initially developed in Nairobi before being popularized throughout the nation (126). The fact that most music production studios are concentrated in Nairobi has compelled a majority of aspiring local hip-hop artists from around the country to relocate to the capital for better access to these venues. Nairobi is both a heterogeneous cultural hub from which global mediascapes are filtered and disseminated nationally as well as a socially stratified urban center plagued by the country’s greatest levels of income disparity. The glocal cultural flows that influence the city’s urban customs and the macro and microeconomic realities that affect its inhabitants operate symbiotically. To understand this phenomenon, one must briefly trace the history of Kenya’s capital.

Nairobi’s rise to prominence as the nation’s capital began in 1899 when the British established the place as an administrative center as well as a distribution point from where imported and exported goods were handled (Wetaba 33; Zwanenberg 9). At the time Nairobi was also used as a supply depot for the creation of the Kenya-Uganda Railway (Wetaba 33). As an administrative center for the colonial government the city was mainly used to manage rural provinces around the country (Zwanenberg 13). During this period only White settlers and Indians who had initially been brought to build the Kenya-Uganda railway were allowed to own
and operate businesses. Africans who migrated into the city to work for Europeans were considered to be short term laborers (18). In spite of these constraints, many Africans in search of higher wages and employment opportunities migrated from rural areas to Nairobi (19). The colonial administration, which wanted to maintain a controlled but steady flow of cheap labor initially encouraged the buildup of a surplus of unemployed workers. The flow of migrant workers into the city eventually led to shortages in housing as rent spiked (24). One reason for this problem is that many European employers had not bothered to provide suitable accommodations for the African workers they employed. These circumstances led to the eventual emergence of slum dwellings surrounding the city (24-25).

Witnessing the growth of temporary shacks, the colonial government decided to implement the Vagrancy Act in 1922 which was partly meant to restrict both the migration of Africans to Nairobi as well as limit the presence of unemployed workers (Macharia 226). Under the act, the colonial administration destroyed unauthorized shacks and mandated the detention and repatriation of all African natives living in the city who did not have proof of employment. Zwanenber explains that while enforcing the law “a European officer was entitled to enter any building upon suspicion to check that the regulations were being carried out” (45). The Public Health Act of 1930 provided the administration with another tool for implementing the destruction of “unauthorized” accommodations (Macharia 227). These harsh restrictions were, however, relaxed in the aftermath of the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s, leading once again to a massive wave of immigration into the city. The influx of migrant workers further escalated after Kenya’s independence in 1963. Kinuthia Macharia states that despite President Kenyatta’s plea’s to “go back to the countryside” (“turudi mashamboni”), “by 1971 the population of Nairobi was estimated to have reached 500,000 of whom one-third were living in unauthorized housing”
Due to their inability to find affordable accommodations in authorized residential areas, many migrant workers opted to live in Nairobi’s growing slums.

Following Kenya’s de jure “independence” few politicians sought to address the concerns of the country’s economically disadvantaged population. According to Macharia, “Kenyatta was busy promoting a capitalistic mode of production, and had little patience for the unemployed and/or those struggling to make a living in the informal sector” (229). President Kenyatta is known to have referred to low income populations as “ragai” or “lazy” (229). The inability of successive regimes to address the plight of the country’s poor who moved to the capital in search of better employment, infrastructure and educational opportunities led to the creation of burgeoning slum communities that now include Mathare, Dandora, Huruma, Korogocho and Kibera. Statistics from the Ministry of Planning and National Development in 2000 reveal that 75% of Nairobi’s inhabitants live in slums (Wetaba 124). Some are located not too far away from upper class areas such as Lavingtone, Muthaiga, Kilimani and Karen where a good portion of the wealthiest people in the country reside (122-124). As a consequence many slum dwellers interact in one form or another with Nairobi’s wealthy residents either by working in their homes or by providing other services (124). This proximity enables those situated on the economic margins of the city to witness a reality that stands in stark juxtaposition to the impoverished conditions many of them experience.

According to the Kenya Population and Housing Census taken in 1999, the youth make up about 60% of Nairobi’s slum population (Achola 16). These youth reside in desolate environments characterized by a lack of available water, proper sewage facilities or garbage disposal services (Erulkar & Matheka 3). Slums like Dandora are also officially designated as the city’s dumping site. Wetaba states that “because of poverty, some individuals opt to take rental
housing closer to the dumping site because the closer one is to the dumping site the cheaper the rent” (135). The social conditions suffered by those living in Nairobi’s slums inspired what is commonly referred to as the “hardcore” or “conscious” variety of Kenyan hip-hop. Kenyan rap artists and groups including Kalamashaka, Mashifta, Black Duo, Wenyeti, Mejja, Mwafrika, and Muki Garang have often portrayed the harsh realities of Nairobi’s low income communities in their songs. These groups have assumed the role of spokespeople for the slum communities where some of them reside. Songs such as “Dandora L. O. V. E.” by Kalamashaka express pride and solidarity on behalf of those who reside in slum communities. Groups like Kalamashaka draw their musical influences from militant or “conscious” African-American rappers such as KRS One (Ferrari 112). Inspired by the activism of these American rappers, Kenyan hip-hop artists have similarly helped develop community projects in their neighborhoods that include Ghetto Radio, a station that diffuses information in slum communities (Wetaba 134). Through their community projects these rappers have sought to fight the social stigma associated with the youth who live in the slums.

Due to the high level of unemployment in the slums, especially among the youth, many people have either been forced to seek work in the informal sector of the economy or in crime. As a result, as in the French banlieue as well as in American inner cities, there has been a systematic tendency by the Kenyan police to label youth residing in Nairobi’s slum areas as criminals. This has often led to a high level of police brutality perpetrated against slum dwellers regardless of their participation in criminal activities (Wetaba 125). The effects of these socioeconomic and physical forms of violence experienced by these adolescents are sometimes mirrored in the equally violent rhetoric expressed in hip-hop songs such as “Burn Dem” (Burn Them, 2006) sung by Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. Below is an excerpt from their song.
“Burn Dem” By Ukoo Flani Mau Mau

Intro

Yes sir
We in the ghetto
straight soldiers you know what I mean
you know what I’m sayin’
[…]
God’s fire will burn them

Verse 1 (Sharama)

Ukoo Flani soldiers, we are coming
planes are jammed with tanks
we have the soldiers of Desert Storm and
SS Marines […]
we use TNT
we battle them with B-52s […]
I smoke cigarettes, I set jets, I use missiles

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:

http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/ukooflanimaumau/burndem.htm)69

Statements such as “you know what I’m sayin’” or even “we ghetto niggers” exemplify the manner in which various aspects of African-American culture popularized in rap music, including African-American Vernacular English, have been performatively reproduced by Kenyan hip-hop artists. Kenyan rappers did not only transformatively appropriate hip-hop music they were also influenced by the culture from which it emerged. Aside from arrogating African-
American Vernacular, the song also makes references to violent war machinery including B-52 bombers and TNT explosives which the artists hyperbolically claim to possess. As previously discussed, such hyperbolic claims in hip-hop music stem from the ways in which the stylistics of the ego trip have influenced the formal rhetorical structures of rap songs. Verses such as “I smoke cigarettes, I set jets, I use missiles” are therefore used to convey an over-inflated sense of masculine power and charisma (signified by the cigarette smoking) reminiscent of Stagolee the badman. The translatability of the badman mythoform across national contexts partly stems from the fact that normalized intersections between masculinity and power have often been perceived as the locus from which a sense of agency is typically constructed in many “Western” and “Non-Western” societies. In the remaining sections of their song, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau express their agency using a series of hypermasculine tropes which include references to military weapons as well as mythologized male historical political figures.

**Chorus**

**Verse 3**

I’ve been a soldier

But a soldier in the hood

I stand tall like Marcus Garvey […]

a rifle and a knife like Kimathi […]

MC Fifths and 47s […]

make it rain like Selassie […]

a general like Castro […]

you can’t kill me like Lumumba […]
we soldiers on a mission like

Che Guevara

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:

http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/ukooflaniamaumau/burndem.htm)\textsuperscript{70}

As mentioned earlier, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau is a musical collective comprised of 24 artists. Many members of the group come from the slums of Nairobi. Their song “Burn Dem” draws its inspiration from not only African-American culture but also from expressions associated with the Rastafarian movement. The global influence of Rastafarian culture and ideology, as it has been propagated primarily through Reggae music, deserves a more extended analysis than I am able to provide here. Nonetheless, one way to examine the song is by analyzing the iconoclastic function of historical personalities that have been central to various movements. Important figures in the Rastafarian movement such as Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and Marcus Garvey are named in the song in conjunction with revolutionary characters like Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Dedan Kimathi, one of the prominent leaders of the Mau Mau. The badman mythoform operates as a vessel in which prominent figures perceived to be controversial or subversive can be appropriated. For example, a group known as the Outlawz in the United States who often appeared in the recordings of the late rapper Tupac Shakur featured artists named Castro, Gaddafi and Idi Amin. It should be remembered that the role of the badman is to create a discursive and aesthetic space perceived to be at the periphery of the center. The badman is in many ways employed because of a vanguard impetus to artistically and politically transcend and transform normalized realities. It is for this reason that people such as Dedan Kimathi or Che Guevara, marked as symbols of vanguard political movements, often appear in the songs of rappers who consider themselves artistically avant-garde. Here, the relationship between the
artistic and the political avant-garde is not mimetic but symbiotic. In other words, “conscious” or politically themed rap music is positioned by these rappers at the front of an ideological battle which, they hope, will engender some form of socio-political and economic transformation. In hip-hop music, the badman persona facilitates the artistic enactment of these expressions of rebellion.

In “Burn Dem,” Ukoo Flani Mau Mau describe themselves as soldiers fighting in a war. In this sense one could argue that they see themselves as both a vanguard movement in the way they seek to push the envelope and defy the socio-political status quo as well as in the original sense of the term as soldiers fighting at the forefront of a battle to defend the country’s poor and oppressed communities. They also seek to embody the brute force and destructive power which soldiers represent. The fact that they have named their group after the Mau Mau fighters further demonstrates the manner in which they consider the fight they are engaged in and the realities they experience to be a form of war. In the music video of their song “Burn Dem,” Ukoo Flani Mau Mau express these sentiments artistically by assuming the hyper-masculine gangsta or badman body postures and gestures popularized by African-American rappers. In many ways “Burn Dem” expresses the kind of rage and masculine bravado seen in American rap songs such as “Fuck tha Police” mentioned above.

The harsh economic realities that groups like Ukoo Flani Mau Mau deplore in their songs were engendered by the neglectful internal policies of the country’s governing regimes since “independence” as well as by macro-economic policies imposed from outside. These economic guidelines gave new impetus to the spread of hip-hop in Kenya while also aggravating the socio-economic disparities that already existed in the country.
In 1999, Thomas Friedman, a columnist for *The New York Times*, published a book titled *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. He coined the term “The Golden Straightjacket” to describe a set of economic adjustments every country was supposed to inevitably implement in order to survive the new global economic order. Friedman’s Golden Straightjacket was characterized by “golden rules” that included:

- Making the private sector the primary engine of [a nation’s] economic growth
- […] eliminating and lowering tariffs on imported goods, removing restrictions on foreign investment […], privatizing state owned industries and utilities,
- deregulating capital markets […], opening banking and telecommunication systems to private ownership and competition and allowing citizens to choose from an array of competing pension options and foreign run-pensions and mutual funds. (219)

From Friedman’s perspective, the Golden Straightjacket was a “one size fits all” type of policy that could be applied to the economy of any nation with great results (219). He argued that the Golden Straightjacket was “the only model on the rack in this historical season” (220). The economic policies that Friedman espoused have been frequently referred to since their growing influence in the 1980s and 1990s as “the Washington Consensus.” The term “Washington Consensus” was originally coined by the economist John Williamson in 1989 to describe a list of ten economic policies targeted towards Latin America which met the general approval of Washington’s political establishment (Williamson 1-14). The term has since been used by globalization scholars including Joseph Stiglitz⁷¹ and Ha-Joon Chang⁷² to describe more broadly the ideology of market fundamentalism championed by global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The economic guidelines described by
Thomas Friedman as The Golden Straightjacket were systematically enforced by the IMF and the World Bank in many “third world” countries including Kenya. Under the banner of “Structural Adjustment Programs” (SAPs) these institutions guaranteed future loans to countries such as Kenya while requiring debtor nations to adopt “free market” driven economic policies and reforms.

In Kenya, these economic reforms were implemented through trade agreements such as the Trade Related Investment Measures (TRIM) (Mwaura 20-23). TRIM prevented the Kenyan government from domestically regulating foreign corporations and imported goods. Another trade agreement that was nearly imposed on many African nations was The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) which would have further mandated countries like Kenya to provide foreign investors with “facilities and incentives,” including corporate tax cuts, to guarantee their success (20). Nonetheless, according to Damiano Kulundu Manda, in 1990, “exporting firms were offered a 10 year tax holiday, unrestricted foreign ownership and employment, and freedom to repatriate any amount of earnings” (2). By 1993, all forms of capital controls regulating the domestic inflow of international trade had been removed (3). The implementation of “free market” policies had a disastrous effect on the already impoverished Kenyan population. For example, facing stiff competition from cheap imports, domestic textile industries like Rivatex collapsed, precipitating the loss of 10,000 jobs (Mwaura 37). In the agricultural sector, many local sugar firms were also forced to close and lay off workers due to their inability to compete with cheap sugar imports (Manda 15). The rising level of unemployment led to an increase in people seeking work in the informal sector of the economy. Between 1997 and 2000, employment in the informal sector grew from 63.6% to 70.4% (9). In Kenya, populations living in burgeoning slums make their living, for the most part, in the
informal sector of the economy, which fails to provide them with any form of economic security or decent living wages let alone health or life insurance, thus making their situation permanent and most likely degenerative.

Most of the employment opportunities offered by foreign-owned firms were guaranteed on a temporary or part-time basis with no benefits and limited rights (Manda 14). Those without a western style education therefore saw their wages steadily decline during the 1990s (43). Between 1992 and 1999, foreign owned companies also reduced their employees from 408 to 168 per firm through the help of labor-saving technologies (11, 39). Structural adjustment programs also mandated the Kenyan government to downsize significantly or privatize state owned industries, agencies and departments. Most state industries which became privatized lost half of their workforce in the process (14). Other government agencies and departments which remained state-owned retrenched many of their workers (14). For example, the Kenya Power and Lighting Company declared in 2002 that it would downsize its workforce by about 4000 employees (14). Similarly in 1997, the Kenyan government decided to retrench 125,000 public servants, 66,000 of whom were teachers (Mwaura 33). The effects of structural adjustment programs significantly impacted Kenyan youth because they formed the majority of those seeking employment. In his research, Aggrey Nyangi Wateba explains how the famous Kenyan rapper Gidi Gidi (Joseph Ogidi), who became known for the nationwide hit song “Unbwogable,” (see above) pursued hip-hop as a direct consequence of structural adjustment programs:

In an interview with Banda (2006) Ogidi submits that one evening, his father, a civil servant, came home with the news of an imminent layoff at his place of work. “My father came home one afternoon and announced an impending retrenchment and that hard times were ahead of us,” says Ogidi. Retrenchment
was one of the requirements of SAPs which World Bank and IMF imposed on African states in late 1990s as a prerequisite for donor funding […] this news marked the point in Ogidi’s life when he turned to music. The news came just when Gidi Gidi was to join The University of Nairobi for a Bachelor of Science degree in IT. Banda further notes that Gidi Gidi, on hearing the news resolved to evolve measures to counter the impending hard times. He resorted to hip-hop music. (290)

Ogidi’s story epitomizes the manner in which hip-hop provided a source of employment for the lucky and talented Kenyan youth able to earn a living from music. It is also through hip-hop that groups such as Kalamashaka critiqued the growing economic inequalities they experienced. In their song “Ni Wakati” (It’s Time, 2001) Kalamashaka denounces the imposition of structural adjustment programs in Kenya as symptoms of neocolonial realities.

“Ni Wakati” By Kalamashaka

[Malcolm X : There’s been a revolution, a black revolution going on in Africa, in Kenya. The Mau Mau were revolutionaries. They are the ones who brought the word Uhuru to the fore. The Mau Mau, they were revolutionaries.]

Verse 1

[…] Rush to school and learn about the likes of Samory Touré […]

IMF SAPS are demanding […]

G7 countries are holding the trigger […]

Chorus

It is time for the whole of Africa to stand up

It is time for us the youth […]

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“Ni Wakati” begins with an excerpt of a speech given by Malcolm X on November 10th, 1963, in Detroit, where he exalts the efforts of Mau Mau fighters in Kenya’s fight for independence.

Before examining the manner in which Kalamashaka critiques structural adjustment programs in their song it is fruitful first to study the significance of Malcolm X’s speech featured at the beginning. Malcolm X often referred to the Mau Mau in some of his speeches in order to highlight a sense of urgency for militant action while voicing his disagreement with the rhetoric of non-violent protests advocated by civil rights leaders like Dr. King. In 1964, Malcolm X delivered a speech in Harlem at an event organized by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party comprised of members such as Fanny Lou Hamer, who, at the time, toured northern cities. Speaking after Mrs. Hamer, Malcolm X declared that “in Mississippi we need a Mau Mau. In Alabama we need a Mau Mau. In Georgia we need a Mau Mau. Right here in Harlem, in New York City, we need a Mau Mau […] If they don’t want to deal with the Student Nonviolent Committee, then we have to give them an alternative” (106-107).

Malcolm X studied African liberation movements and used them as templates for emphasizing the necessity of radical action at home. By citing Malcolm X’s reference to the Mau Mau, Kalamashaka exemplifies the ways in which social narratives and symbols that have travelled across nations are employed transformatively in local contexts to address local situations. Kalamashaka’s appropriation of political movements and figures that are chronologically or geographically distant highlights their penchant to see common attributes in different social struggles separated by space and time. These sentiments are expressed by Kamah, a member of Kalamashaka. In an interview from the documentary Hip-Hop Colony, he asserts that “Even Malcolm X knew about the Mau Mau. We and the Black Panthers fight for the
same causes. You see, these are our colors. The Black Panthers and the Mau Mau. You know, Dedan Kimathi and Malcolm X are the same thing.” In their song, Kalamashaka uses Malcolm X’s appeal for collective action to encourage a general revolt among African youth against the onslaught of neoliberal policies being imposed on African nations. This cry for collective action is expressed by Kalamashaka in a meta-contextual fashion by employing Malcolm X’s trans-political reading of Kenyan history to diagnose the historical legacy of their own contemporary sociopolitical predicament.

The title of the song, “Ni Wakati” (“It’s Time”), captures the sense of urgency they are trying to express. Here, once again, the converged iconoclastic roles of historical movements and figures including Malcolm X, the Mau Mau, and Samory Touré the West African leader who resisted French colonialism in the late 19th century, are used to call for an immediate course of action. The realities they are critiquing and examining in their music encompass the legacy of colonialism and the economic laws and structures of production that continue to subordinate African countries to Western institutions.

While local rap groups like Kalamashaka critique neoliberalism in their songs, it is through these same economic policies that an expanding exposure to American culture and goods facilitated the popularization and cultural appropriation of hip-hop among Kenyan youth. In his research on media and globalization in a Kenyan context, Mustafa Ali explains that in the pre-liberalization era the Kenyan media sector was tightly supervised by the government (50). This supervision, according to Ali, “stunted the growth of the sector […] The regime’s totalitarian and dictatorial policies were solely responsible for the lack of development within the sector” (50). The Kenyan government’s tight control on the nation’s media industry was maintained through laws that included the Official Secrets Act (1970), which made it a crime for
journalists to possess or distribute government documents, and the Defamation Act (1972), which introduced large fines for damaging the character of public officials (65-66).

But in the late 1980s, the international pressure for economic liberalization converged with local populist demands for liberal democracy. In 1991, section 2 (A) of the Kenyan constitution which stipulated that only one political party could exist in the country was repealed (Ali 77). With the emergence of multiparty democracy many opposition leaders supported by proponents of neoliberal economic policies demanded that the Kenyan government liberalize the media sector as a means of giving television and radio access to dissenting political voices and opinions that had previously been marginalized or silenced (96). It was under both local and global pressures that the Kenyan government began to grant more licenses for the opening of television and radio stations (76). Mustafa explains that between 1990 and 2008, Kenya went from having one national television station to “12 services transmitting terrestrially and through cable, as well as more than 70 other satellite channels available and 89 television frequencies allocated in various parts of the country by 2008” (74). Radio stations also expanded from one station to 53 operational services including over 244 FM frequencies (74). This wave of liberalization also saw the emergence of 70 licensed Internet Service Providers (74). Most radio and television stations transmitted their programs from Nairobi (77).

The liberalization of the media gave Kenyan youth greater access to American popular culture. As foreign goods flooded the Kenyan market on a scale not previously seen, a vibrant black market peddling pirated goods quickly emerged. Mwenda Ntarangwi documents these events when he states that “one could walk along the busy streets of Kampala [Uganda], Dar es Salaam [Tanzania], or Nairobi and buy any music on video or CD for half the cost of an original copy” (24). The global dissemination of new forms of recording technology made it easier and
cheaper for budding Kenyan rappers to experiment and produce their music. Local producers employed new computer software technology to establish record companies that signed local artists and developed their talent. One of the early Kenyan hip-hop producers was Tedd Josiah. In the documentary *Hip-Hop Colony* (2007), Josiah explains that:

> What’s happened in media is, we have had a lot of influence coming from the West. What happens is 90% of radio back in 95-96 when the FM stations came was the music we were playing was just hip-hop R&B, Rock, everything else apart from Kenyan music. I think a lot of young people when they started seeing the music videos, they stated hearing the music on radio, they started saying, “look, I can do that but I can do that with my language and I can make that hip-hop into my culture.” (Cited in Wanguhu)

However, initially Kenyan hip-hop artists rapped in English while imitating African-American accents and vernacular (Wetaba 20). The talents of early Kenyan rappers were nurtured in a downtown Nairobi nightclub known as Florida 2000 (20). It was there that Kenyan youth often engaged in “jam sessions” where they showcased their rapping abilities. Some of the early successful Kenyan rappers included Poxi Presha and Hardstone, emerging in 1995 and 1996 respectively (Ferrari 110). While Poxi Presha, a musician from the Luo ethnic group, was among the first artists to rap in a local language, it is the group Kalamashaka which popularized hip-hop in Swahili and Sheng with their song “Tafsiri Hii” or “Translate This” (1998). The title of the song not only signified the linguistic vernacularization of hip-hop but also alluded to the manner in which the group contextualized the genre to address local realities. In “Tafsiri Hii,” Kalamashaka tackled social issues that included police brutality, poverty in the slums and
unemployment (Ntarangwi 24). Kalamashaka’s big break came in 1998 when they opened for Coolio, a popular African-American rapper touring various African countries at the time.

For Kalamashaka, the decision to rap in Kiswahili (the Swahili language) was also prompted by a need to affirm an “authentic” African identity (Ferrari 113). In their radio show called *Wakilisha Show* (1999), the group sought to educate a burgeoning local audience of hip-hop fans by informing them about the ideologies embedded in hip-hop culture as well as by promoting rap music in local languages (113). Kenyan hip-hop soon began to acquire its own distinct regional sound. Tedd Josiah describes the constitution of Kenyan hip-hop as “Swahili poetry, Sheng poetry with East coast, West coast flavored beats and Jamaican beats all wrapped up into one” (Wanguhu). For many, this local variety of hip-hop became known as *Genge* (169). The term was popularized by Nonini, a Kenyan rapper who sought to capture hip-hop’s national popularity among the youth by distinguishing it with a local idiom (Wetaba 169). Nonini posits that “*Genge* is a standard Swahili word used to indicate a group of people. Because this music has a mass appeal, Kenyans love it, we called it *Genge* music for the people” (Wanguhu). The term can also refer to a group of dangerous people or thugs (Wetaba 169). In this sense, *Genge* attempts to express a form of youthful insurrection (169).

As Kenyan hip-hop evolved, the macro-economic structures of production that contributed to its popularization also “developed.” While the liberalization of the Kenyan media and economy gave Kenyan youth better access to local airwaves through hip-hop, in the process granting them a platform from which they could express their realities, the consolidation of media monopolies marginalized certain voices while favoring others. According to Mustafa Ali, “corporate censorship was one of the most dangerous and common direct impacts of the forces of corporate globalization on the mass media in Kenya” (195). Through various corporate
mergers large media monopolies, for example Baraza Ltd, emerged (202). Baraza Ltd, owned Kenyan television and radio stations that included KTN, 98.4 Capital FM and major newspapers such as the *Sunday Standard* and the *East African Standard* (202). Other media monopolies that emerged in Kenya included NMG which owned newspapers, radio and television networks including “NTV, *The Daily Nation, The Sunday Nation, Taifa Jumapili, Taifa Leo, Business Daily, Daily Metro* [and] 96.4 Nation FM” (202). NMG’s media monopoly further extended to neighboring countries such as Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Sudan (202).

The emergence of these media monopolies, however, did not produce the diversity that they had initially seemed to offer. Kenyan airwaves were slowly filled with a homogeneous assortment of local rap music. Politically conscious hip-hop groups were quickly marginalized by radio stations that preferred playing more commercially-themed forms of rap (Ntarangwi 24). The concentrated ownership of these stations meant that, once rejected, groups like Kalamashaka who had initially enjoyed a wide fan base were unable to find alternative venues other than the internet where they could disseminate their music nationally. The aversion to the kind of militant rap they performed was also shared by many producers who merely sought to capitalize on commercially-themed hip-hop that enjoyed wider media outlets of distribution (Ferrari 115).

Having been relegated to the periphery, Kenyan militant rappers, like those in the United States, proudly assumed this marginal identity as a mark of authenticity. These displays of authenticity are exemplified in the following excerpt from a song titled “Hip-Hop Halisi” (Real Hip-Hop, 2008), sung by the Kenyan rappers Cannibal, Nazizi, Fujo Makelele, Mapypy and Lavosti:

“**Hip-Hop Halisi**”

**Chorus (Cannibal)**

Give love to the real hip-hop […]
Verse 1 (Nazizi)

[…] from the Mau Mau they received freedom now we are free
to rock the crowds so they are playing with us
they can’t refuse instead they agree
that we are the illest
in this crowd of artists
that’s why we are chosen by youths
from Zimmer, South B and Eastleigh […]

Verse 2 (Fujo Makelele)

I am still underground […]

(My translation; the full lyrics are available at:
http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/ukooflanimaumau/hiphophalisi.htm)\textsuperscript{76}

Cannibal, Fujo Makele, Mapypy and Lavosti all belong to the underground musical collective
named Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. In their song, these rappers seek to project a sense of authenticity
by highlighting their upbringing in tough neighborhoods. It is by claiming to appeal to lower
middle-class and impoverished youth living in sections of Nairobi such as South B and Eastleigh
that the rappers aspire to authenticate their position as spokespeople for economically
marginalized communities. Their negation of mainstream commercial rap is evident in the places
they refer to in their lyrics as well as the people they claim to represent. In other words, their
focus on marginalized neighborhoods is tacitly and intertextually juxtaposed to the flashier genre
of hip-hop that exalts material possessions and party life. For these rappers, the marginalization
of “conscious” rappers who address slum conditions in their lyrics mirrors the socio-economic
exclusion of those who reside in these impoverished communities. In fact, many of these
underground rappers who have been placed at the periphery of the music industry also live in slum communities like Dandora. In the same way that underground American rappers espouse an authentic persona derived from their peripheral identity, conscious Kenyan rappers similarly use the same methods to validate themselves vis-à-vis mainstream hip-hop artists. In Kenya, these articulations of authenticity are also sometimes framed within badman tropes.

These tropes employed by the rappers performing in “Hip-Hop Halisi” include the use of provocative stage names, for instance Cannibal and Fujo Makelele (Chaos and Noise). As I have previously argued, names form a vital part of the ways in which badman tropes are articulated. Underground Kenyan hip-hop groups like Mashifta have for example sought to capture their peripheral identity through their name. The term Mashifta describes ruthless gangs from Ethiopia and Somalia that are known to terrorize travelers (Wetaba 262). It also refers to uprooted homeless individuals (262). In the Kenyan context where outlaws are rarely glamorized and are even perceived with disdain, the decision to adopt the persona of a bandit symbolically places them at the extreme moral and ethical margins of society. Names such as Mashifta, Cannibal or Fujo Makelele imbue the stage personae of these artists with an aesthetic nominal quality that communicates their peripheral identity. It is by nominally identifying themselves in the margins that these artists attempt to transform the center by lyrically remapping it from outside. Part of this remapping strategy involves authenticating their genre of hip-hop while discrediting others as “inauthentic.” Here, as in other places, the badman becomes the perfect symbol for communicating a sense of authenticity through the marginal identity that it signifies. For these artists, being in the margin expresses authenticity by virtue of seeming to exist “outside” of the structures of production that “negatively” impact mainstream hip-hop. But of course this “authentic” identity inevitably turns them into a symptom of the system they desperately seek to
negate or transcend. Nonetheless, the “authentic” identity also empowers them with the freedom to express themselves through wider possibilities of representation and communicate realities that are shunned in mainstream hip-hop.

However, it should be noted that not all hip-hop artists fall within the dichotomy that separates what are often termed commercial hip-hop and conscious rap. For example, an artist such as Nazizi, who is featured in the song “Hip-Hop Halisi,” has successfully navigated between the two genres in her career. Nazizi is one of the few female Kenyan rappers to have acquired national and international recognition. In an art form dominated by men and permeated with patriarchal cultural norms, Nazizi has created a space for herself without necessarily resorting to the hypersexual badwoman tropes famously employed by American female rappers like Lil’ Kim (see above). Nonetheless, aside from a few female artists such as Nazizi, Lady S and Ratatat, Kenyan hip-hop is for the most part dominated by male performers.

The Kenyan experience with hip-hop, as described in this chapter, reveals a continuity with African-American sources, as exemplified in the re-enactment of tropes that celebrate conspicuous consumption as well as the stylistic appropriation of hyper-masculine postures. It also shows fundamental differences rooted in the specific multiethnic hybrid culture developed in Nairobi and the historic background influencing the topics tackled in Kenyan rap songs. This historic background not only influences what is addressed in hip-hop lyrics but also, just as importantly, what is conspicuously absent from them. Aside from a few artists like Poxi Presha, who carefully managed to invoke overtly his Luo identity in his songs without contributing to dominant displays of negative ethnicity, many Kenyan rappers have often avoided making explicit references to their own ethnic background. Unlike most other locally produced genres of music in the country, Kenyan hip-hop enjoys a trans-ethnic appeal partly because of the hybrid
urban cultural environment in which it was born and partly due to the fact that it articulates the social political and economic alienation that many youth experience regardless of origin.

In Kenya, badman tropes were therefore used by rap artists like Gidi Gidi Maji Maji to convey the marginalization of Kenyan youth and by musicians such as Prezzo to express spectacles of power and upward social mobility. Rappers from the musical collective Ukoo Flani Mau Mau adopted them to encourage political forms of activism among the youth. All these rappers employed badman tropes as a reaction to various sociopolitical and economic realities. In hip-hop, the hypermasculine performative dimensions of the badman become the medium through which militant political rhetoric is conveyed. For example, in their song “Moto” (“Fire”) Kalamashaka employed such rhetoric by encouraging Kenyan youth to storm the State House. The manifestations of such daring acts of political provocation in hip-hop music do not occur in a vacuum. A fruitful examination of local appropriations of the badman in the lyrics and styles of Kenyan rap artists and groups that include Prezzo, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau or even Mashifta can therefore only be accomplished through a contextualized analysis that stitches together a variety of historical, political and economic events impacting Kenyan society. Among these events, an analysis of structural adjustment programs (as mentioned above) imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1990s have provided a means of comprehending how these economic policies opened local borders to increased quantities of unregulated foreign imports, including cultural products such as hip-hop, while destroying thousands of jobs in the country and limiting opportunities available to the youth. These policies therefore ontologically define both the very existence of Kenyan hip-hop and many of the harsh social realities that some Kenyan rappers document in their songs. Kenyan hip-hop thus inhabits a hybrid space where cultural commodities that are globally diffused as epiphenomena of economic structures
of production embedded in the *Word-System* are sometimes used in turn to critique the realities of which they are a product.

**Conclusion**

The evidence presented in this study suggests that mythologized figures such as tricksters, badmen and “gangstaz” in the last 150 years were imbued with character traits used to prescribe accepted forms of defensive behaviors against the repressive realities of slavery, Jim Crow and the prison industrial complex. These characters emerge from a countercultural impetus that seeks to subvert externally imposed parameters of accepted behavior and also, in the process, reframes socio-symbolic structures affecting the relationship between identity and agency. Whether employed by African-American, French or Kenyan rappers, “authentic” identities performed using badman tropes became tools through which notions of agency were posited. In this context, one’s identity as an ethnic minority, an underground rapper or simply a marginalized youth, identities historically shaped by different gatekeeping structures and social norms, became sites of contestation where possible power relations were imagined and fantasized performatively. Being authentic thus translated into a desire to project one’s identity
beyond repressive structures that have defined and confined it. In this sense, while the image of
the thug in American gangsta rap supports the perception that black inner city youth are
pathological criminals prone to violence, it also conveys a yearning to resist the repressive
structures influencing their lives. This yearning to resist was lyrically captured in gangsta rap
songs that fantasized about an untouchable “thug” able to outsmart and emasculate the police
while having access to wealth and women as purchasable commodities. While recognizing that
there are perturbing, misogynist, self-defeating and destructive attributes attached the exalted
image of the thug, one must also acknowledge it as an expression of resistance.

A) Authenticity, the Badman and Marginalized Identities

It is by embracing a figure that was perceived to defy and manipulate social customs
constructed in the dominant culture that African-American youth from inner cities found a way
to communicate their dissatisfaction with the realities imposed on them. This desire to project
one’s identity beyond discursive landscapes stemming from the dominant culture also facilitated
the appropriation of hip-hop music among marginalized youth of recent immigrant descent.
Young French rappers of Caribbean, African, Italian and Portuguese origins living under similar
conditions in the banlieue embraced African-American music and styles as a negation of French
culture and society from which they felt alienated. While hip-hop groups such as I AM
constructed their artistic personae out of pharaonic figures from Ancient Egypt, other artists
including NTM appropriated the thuggish persona popularized in West Coast gangsta rap. These
assumed artistic personae became tools by which their status as excluded citizens was critiqued
using self-images constructed partly within and partly outside perceived demarcations of national
culture. When the nation-state and the cultural norms associated with it are considered by these rappers to be the instigators of their social exclusion, an American or African detour forges a space of emancipation from which they can manufacture a new sense of agency.

For groups like NTM, the thug persona taken from U.S. gangsta rap was used to express their rejection and disdain for French society, a rejection communicated by words such as: “Quelle gratitude devrais-je avoir pour la France? Moi Joey Starr qu’on considère comme un barbare. Donc j’encule tous ces moutons de fonctionnaires” (“what gratitude should I have for France? I, Joey Starr who is considered a barbarian. I fuck all these sheepish government officials”). Here, they express disdain for France in both their lyrics as well as symbolically in the American music genre and artistic tropes they use to critique their government. In other words, for these artists, the medium through which repressive structures are critiqued has to be, in one form or the other, symbolically located outside the dominant culture. Nonetheless, while hip-hop musicians like NTM have sought to position themselves outside of what they perceive to be French cultural norms, other rappers including Kery James have used the genre in an attempt to claim the culture as their own and legitimize their positions as equal citizens.

The wish to subvert, transcend or critically amplify set parameters of social behavior and negative representations of minority groups stemming from the dominant culture has therefore been important to the propagation of badman tropes among marginalized French and African-American youth. In the African-American community, this wish to construct a self-image in their own terms has historically formed a vital part of ontological inquiries developed by prominent black figures and intellectuals. From W.E.B DuBois’ analysis of double consciousness to Malcolm X’s dichotomy between the house Negro and the field Negro, issues of identity have often revolved around its relationship to one’s agency. When identity constructions frame the
boundaries of one’s potential as a human being, it becomes imperative to begin imagining radical ways of perceiving the self. In the case of the badman mythoform, African-American music and folklore became cultural hubs for inventing heroic characters perceived as transgressive role models.

These heroic figures functioned as powerful sources of identification and self identification. It is through his position as a transgressive role model that the poetics of the badman were channeled into politics of resistance not only among young African Americans living in inner cities but also among French rappers from the banlieue and marginalized Kenyan youth. In Kenya, the poetics of the badman were employed to critique economic realities impacting many youth. The musical collective Ukoo Flani Mau Mau employed badman tropes while lyrically re-enacting contemporary interpretations of the Mau Mau revolt. By assuming the personas of Mau Mau fighters these artists also communicated their own sense of authenticity. In this case, to use Alain Badiou’s terminology, it could be argued that the Mau Mau revolt emerged as the “authentic” event to which they asserted their fidelity. For Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, authentic identities were thus constructed from a historical event. By exalting their fidelity to this event, they sought to re-enact it in the present. This “authentic” event gave them the moral authority to make claims about the present and posit alternative futures.

B) The Badman mythoform, the Political Economy of Mass Media and Neoliberalism

When merged with local socio-political and economic issues, the poetics of the badman have given rap artists the ability to posit possible futures and delivered ways of constructing “authentic” identities existing in the margins of dominant cultural fields of production. The question of authenticity not only reflects the need for ethnic minorities to reconstruct their self-image from a position they deem to be more empowering but also captures more generally the
exaltation of marginal identities, including those of underground artists. Kenyan and American underground rappers have embraced their positions in the margins of the culture industry as a symbol of their “authenticity.” For example, the American underground artist Immortal Technique assumed a badman persona to forge an identity located on the periphery of the music industry. For Technique, the marginal identity he embodied captured his independence and sense of being an iconoclast. This subversive persona, rhetorically conveyed through badman tropes, was used in defiance of the media monopoly and the formulaic production of hyper-commercialized rap. It also mirrored his activism aimed at resisting the realities engendered by the ideological dominance of market fundamentalism. Here again, one finds a dialectic relationship between the stylistics of the genre of music being promoted by the artist and the dominant fields of cultural and economic production being negated. By critiquing hyper-commercialized forms of rap and offering his independently produced music as a substitute, Technique seeks to provide alternative possibilities to the economic structures on which the industry is built. Technique’s defiant stance vis-à-vis the music industry can be found in his lyrics as well as in the ways he independently markets his albums. His iconoclasm is, in this sense, inscribed in his verbal discourse as well as in his modus operandi. Like French hip-hop artists, the American underground rapper wanted to position his music outside of what he perceived to be the dominant culture or culture industry, in order to critique it. In Technique’s case, it is the underground that emerged as a place that facilitated possibilities of resistance and flight. This marginal space was poetically depicted through badman tropes. The margin henceforth became a discursive and symbolic space offering artistic, economic and political possibilities.
Appropriations of badman tropes in the United States, France and Kenya have been shaped by local and global diffusions of ethnoscapes, financescapes and mediascapes. In the United States, as manufacturing jobs were lost to countries with more “flexible” labor laws and low production costs, the impact of capital flight from inner cities and other areas in the country helped nurture the growth of an informal drug trade economy in urban centers. Many economically disenfranchised African-American youth were attracted to the drug trade as a source of employment. The impetus to privatize and “reduce the size of government” spurred the growth of private prisons that benefitted from increasing rates of incarceration stemming from the proliferation of drug trafficking and consumption in these urban centers. As private prisons emerged, they were filled with young African Americans, most of them serving time for minor charges of drug possession. The prison industry also became a vital source of employment in rural communities suffering from unemployment and coping with the necessity to rely on service sector jobs as opposed to manufacturing ones. The criminalization of African-American youth by the prison industrial complex engendered the creation of gangsta rap as a response. Rap groups like NWA used the figure of the badman as an outlaw to address their contemporary realities. The character of the badman, who has continuously been recycled in different forms in African-American popular culture, was embodied in the image of a subversive thug in gangsta rap music. While the global diffusion of financescapes led to the immiseration of inner city communities which encouraged the popularization of gangsta rap, the ongoing process of media consolidation also narrowed the parameters in which the badman could be depicted in hip-hop music. Badman performances in rap music were turned into voyeuristic spectacles depicting a world that intrigued and appealed to many suburban teenage consumers. These media images
portraying African-American rappers performing as “gangstaz” in rap music videos were globally circulated countries such as France and Kenya.

The global propagation of mediascapes exposed French and Kenyan youth to American popular culture including hip-hop. In the same way that African-American youth living in inner cities were negatively impacted by neoliberalism, these economic policies also affected economic opportunities available to young Kenyans. The spread of “free market” reforms in Kenya increased the economic destitution of the country’s youth while also giving them a medium in rap music to express their views on a national level. The liberalization of the Kenyan economy was therefore a double-edged sword. Deregulating the Kenyan government’s hold on the radio and telecommunication sectors of the economy initially gave media access to previously politically marginalized voices, including the country’s youth. At the same time, the Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by global financial institutions aggravated the unemployment crisis in the country. This increasingly tough economic environment impacted the country’s youth the most as they formed the majority of the nation’s unemployed population. Many unemployed youth discovered they could use hip-hop to earn a living. In addition to their economic marginalization, Kenyan youth had also been historically relegated to the political margins of society. The popular rap song “Unbwogable” therefore became a symbol of their determination to resist the political and economic status quo. The song used badman tropes to communicate their fearlessness in the face of adversity.

Unfortunately, the proliferation of corporate censorship in the mass media eventually excluded Kenyan rappers whose music did not conform to the dominant commercial formula of the day. While deregulation significantly reduced the Kenyan government’s censorship of the country’s media without completely eliminating it, the policy was not equipped to similarly
combat corporate censorship. In Kenya and the United States, the selective over-promotion of commercial hip-hop engendered the fragmentation of the music genre, hence creating a divide between underground and mainstream rap. In both places, many mainstream rappers flashily showcased material possessions to claim ownership of a lifestyle desired by many youth. While some artists used badman tropes including hyper-masculine postures and the “ego trip” to critique social structures around them, others employed it to exalt their status as successful artists.

C) Hip-Hop and Cultural Hybridity

Hip-hop music has thrived amid the diffusion and convergence of ethnoscapes in urban centers. The migration of foreign workers to France in the aftermath of the two World Wars and the subsequent social and economic exclusion that many of their descendants experienced, especially those whose parents and ancestors came from France’s former colonies, produced social conditions that made the music genre attractive to members of these communities. Similarly in Kenya, the massive migration of many youth from different ethnic backgrounds, searching for jobs and educational opportunities in the country’s capital, produced a hybrid urban subculture that used hip-hop to negotiate and merge global and local customs. It is therefore by examining the interactions among ethnoscapes, mediascapes and financescapes that a comprehensive picture of the social forces impacting the propagation and cultural appropriation of badman tropes through hip-hop emerges. This picture reveals that the translation and recycling of badman tropes in hip-hop music across national and cultural contexts are often symptoms of social, economic, political and historical factors. The convergence of these factors and the social consequences they create are artistically captured and interrogated by desires for hope,
resistance, equality, upward social mobility and possible utopias. Badman tropes are the poetic tools through which these desires are expressed in hip-hop.

The cultural translations of badman tropes by Kenyan rappers also depict ongoing formations of hybrid postcolonial subjectivities. For example, the artistic depictions of the personae of Mau Mau fighters, performed through badman tropes taken from hip-hop music, dramatize the intense confluence of a series of cultural gestures: on the one hand, a concatenation of pre-colonial, para-colonial and post-colonial phenomena; on the other hand, local and global influences informing the political and poetic frames of references which are used to diagnose the present. The use of songs to preserve the memory of events and to educate the masses stems from a tradition existing in many East African cultures. In this context, using hip-hop to critique and educate contemporary audiences about sociopolitical events operates as a modern variation of an already established practice. Political rap songs in Kenya thus function as hybrid cultural products that bear witness to the ways older practices have been salvaged within the interactive processes of global cultural diffusions. The symbolic importance of Mau Mau fighters among underground Kenyan rappers is also significant, as they appear at the liminal point demarcating colonial realities and the postcolonial impetus. They symbolize a breach in the fabric of political reality dividing the old from the new, the colonial from the postcolonial. The contention of these underground artists is that the “new reality” was compromised. They therefore demand another disruption. In this sense, it is quite significant that in their song “Angalia Saa,” the group Kalamashaka equates Dedan Kimathi, one of the leaders of the Mau Mau revolt, to Neo, the protagonist of the film “The Matrix.” They see the manufactured and malleable reality depicted in the film, a reality supported by a production base composed of human bodies, as an allegory for their contemporary situation.
The question of hybridity is also central to the propagation of hip-hop (from the United States to France) among French communities of recent immigrant descent. The exclusion of many of these communities from representing valid forms of citizenship stems from the debate surrounding the acknowledgment of an ethnic and cultural hybridity represented in France’s national identity. The tendency of many rappers from the banlieue to assume artistic personalities perceived to exist outside the national culture reflects their seemingly irreconcilable identities as French-black Africans or French-Algerians. The politics of excluding minority groups from having the right to claim equal citizenship not only facilitated the propagation of the badman in France but also initially helped engender the popularization and survival of the trickster in the collective consciousness of the African-American community. In the United States, the importance attached to the trickster in African-American folklore, a figure whose character traits were later projected onto the behaviors of badmen, emerged from a desire to humanize one’s identity as an African in that country during slavery. The trickster, in this sense, served the same function as DuBois’ dialectic resolution in respect to the double consciousness he diagnosed. The trickster reconciled the dichotomy between existing as a human being taken from Africa and the inhumanity embedded in one’s identity as a slave. For example, John the human trickster’s ability to outsmart his old master in generic situations validated the humanity of the slave in the inhumane environment of slavery. The trickster did not just reassert an empowering sense of self but also provided the slaves with a platform from which they could begin to re-create their identities as a people of African origin in America without having to relinquish their sense of humanity in the process. To a certain extent, the trickster also acted in the capacity of Homi Bhabha’s “third space of enunciation” from which their hybrid identity as African-American people was partially developed (212). The continued interpretation of the trickster’s survivalist
skills through the figures of badmen, including the iconoclastic gangsta in rap music, mirrors this perpetual need to assert one’s humanity and one’s worth as an equal citizen in the face of unequal structures of social stratification.

As hip-hop has been appropriated by different cultures and communities around the world, there have also been international collaborations among rappers either seeking to establish “connective marginalities” or simply vying for new consumer markets overseas. Prominent rap groups and artists who have ventured into collaborations with artists from different countries include Wu Tang Clan and I AM in the song “La Saga”, Kalamashaka and Dead Prez in “Red, Black and Green”, Naz and NTM in “Chacun sa Mafia” (“Each one his Mafia”) as well as Akon, Ali B and Yes Sir in “Ghetto Remix.” These collaborations may represent yet another manifestation of the overlap between the marginalized narratives embedded in hip-hop music and the processes through which these stories influence and interact with each other. But while the articulation of badwoman tropes by American hip-hop artists such as Lil’ Kim was analyzed in the first chapter, the limited presence of female rappers in France and Kenya did not allow a similar extended examination of the representations of this figure. In the future, perhaps as more young women appropriate the spaces opened by French female artists like Keny Arkana and Diams or even Kenyan musicians such as Nazizi, research on the use or rejection of badwoman tropes in the two countries will provide more insight into their social significance.

An examination of character types and figures that exist in our collective imagination can help us understand the ways we conceive the world and how we comprehend or seek to envision our place in it. In the case of the badman, an analysis of the figure’s global circulation in the artistic imagination of many rappers reveals the interconnected relationships among cultural productions and socio-economic and political forces that shape our reality. The focus on the
global significance of a figure whose image has been developed and nurtured in African and Afro-American folklore reveals the multifaceted interactions among culture, economics, politics and art, making it increasingly difficult to taxonomize them as separate and independent phenomena.

Notes

1. “Car le noir n’a plus à être noir, mais à l’être en face du Blanc. Certains se mettront en tête de nous rappeler que la situation est à double sens. Nous répondrons que c’est faux. Le noir n’a pas de résistance ontologique aux yeux du blanc. Les nègres, du jour au lendemain, ont eu deux systèmes de références par rapport auxquels il leur a fallu se situer. Leur métaphysique, ou moins prétentieusement leurs coutumes et les instances auxquelles elles renvoyaient, étaient abolies parce qu’elles se trouvaient en contradiction avec une civilisation qu’ils ignoraient et qui leur en imposait. Le Noir chez lui, au XXe siècle, ignore le moment où son infériorité passe par l’autre” (Fanon 108-109).
2. “Pour échapper à ce conflit, deux solutions. Ou bien je demande aux autres de ne pas faire attention à ma peau ; ou bien, au contraire, je veux qu’on s’en aperçoive. J’essaie alors de valoriser ce qui est mauvais—puisque, réflexivement, j’ai admis que le Noir était la couleur du mal. Pour mettre fin à cette situation névrotique, où je suis obligé de choisir une solution malsaine, conflictuelle, nourrie de phantasmes, antagonistes, inhumaine, enfin, —je n’ai qu’une solution : survoler ce drame absurde que les autres ont monté autour de moi, écart er ces deux termes qui sont pareillement inacceptables et, à travers un particulier humain, tendre vers l’universel” (Fanon 179-180).

3. “En fait, la négritude apparaît comme le temps faible d’une progression dialectique : l’affirmation théorique et pratique de la suprématie du Blanc est la thèse ; la position de la négritude comme valeur antithétique est le moment de la négativité. Mais ce moment négatif n’a pas de suffisance par lui-même et les Noirs qui en usent le savent fort bien ; ils savent qu’il vise à partager la synthèse ou réalisation de l’humain dans une société sans races. Ainsi la Négritude est pour se détruire, elle est passage et non aboutissement, moyen et non fin dernière” (Jean-Paul Sartre, qtd. in Fanon 127-128).

4. “Che Guevara

1958, Batista est renversé,

Ca fait 7 ans que la révolution cubaine a commencé,

La révolution humaine qu’on a pensé s’y développe, […]

Pas de frontière dans cette lutte à vie,

C’est celle de tous les opprimés de l’impérialisme et de sa tyrannie, […]

Je m’en vais donc, à la rencontre de l’incorruptible du Congo, Patrice Lumumba contre les belges
et leur complot”

(http://www.13or-du-hiphop.fr/parole/keny-arkana-de-buenos-aires-a-kinshasa-feat-monsieur-r-189.html)

5. “La deuxième fois où je suis parti à New York, Dc Jekyll m’a dit de venir le soir au concert sur un bateau qui fait le tour de la ville. Pour moi, mec dix-six-sept ans, j’ai eu un choc. J’étais assis à la table avec Mr Hyde et Russel Simmons qui commençaient à fomenter le label Def Jam. On a parlé du rap, de Marseille, parce qu’on était français, on était une fenêtre pour eux. Ils nous demandaient si c’est beau la Riviera, ils ne savaient même pas qu’il y avait des Noirs en France. J’ai fait très fort, parce que je suis rentré avec le survêtement Adidas en peau de pêche et ils voulaient tous me l’acheter pour des sommes incroyables, deux ou trois cents dollars” (Akhenaton/Chill, qtd. in Bocquet 116).

6. “Mais la motivation qui était derrière, c’était la musique, on avait faim de ce qu’on faisait. J’ai accroché à cette musique et j’étais prêt à passer par n’importe quoi. Et je devenais comme eux. Un soir, un mec braque à l’épicerie, devant moi, et c’était devenu « normal ». Tu te dis, s’ils clamsent et s’ils se tirent dessus, c’est normal. Je comprends les mecs là-bas. C’est pas le rap qui engendre la violence. La violence était là, le rap est arrivé, le rap parle de ce qu’il y a. Le rap canalise la violence. Je n’ai pas essayé de vivre à New York parce que j’avais une attache très forte à ma famille, et ma mère me demandait de revenir en pleurant” (Akhenaton/Chill, qtd. in Bocquet 118).

7. The *homo sacer*, was a banned person under Roman law, who could be killed but not sacrificed. This character did not enjoy the same rights of citizenship that other Roman citizens
had. According to Agamben, while being excluded from society the *homer sacer* had a continuous relationship to the society that banned him.

8. This term is used to refer to the growing rate of incarceration as well as the propagation of private prisons in the United States.

9. In the study of Media Effects, “priming” refers to the manner in which repeated images in the media often cognitively provide viewers with certain specific frames of reference that they then employ to make sense of their world.

10. Barring a few popular cases like that of Rubin (Hurricane) Carter, whose story was turned into a film starring Denzel Washington.

11. Bigger Thomas is the central protagonist of Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*. Thomas emerges as a tragic character whose violent outbursts and criminal activities are conditioned by the unjust society from which he emerges. Thomas appears to have very little free will. His fate is continuously determined by the racist structures that permeate his reality. Unlike Malcolm X, Wright’s character is unable to channel his anger towards a political project.

12. This is written under Title V of the bill, which seeks to eliminate “any State restrictions on the rate or amount of interest that may be paid on deposits, or accounts, at depository institutions” (9). It also “eliminates State mortgage usury ceilings and restrictions” (9) ([http://www.bos.frb.org/about/pubs/deposito.pdf](http://www.bos.frb.org/about/pubs/deposito.pdf)).

13. Otherwise known as the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Financial Services Modernization Act, which repealed parts of the Glass Steagal Act of 1933 and allowed investment and commercial banks to merge. Title I of the bill allows “a national bank to engage in new financial activities in a financial subsidiary” ([http://banking.senate.gov/conf/confrpt.htm](http://banking.senate.gov/conf/confrpt.htm)).
14. When any form of capital rapidly moves out of a community or country.

15. Here I am using the concept of *détournement* in the same manner that the situationists employed it.


“La réflexion moderne concernant la « nation » débute véritablement au XVIIIe siècle. D’emblée elle se trouve prise dans les luttes politiques qui opposent les partisans de l’aristocratie à l’élite du Tiers État. Boulainvilliers, estimant que le déclin des libertés politiques est une conséquence de la monarchie absolue, veut redonner à la noblesse « le sentiment de son appartenance » en développant une argumentation qui justifie les privilèges au nom de l’origine et de la race. Si « la noblesse est un privilège naturel et incommunicable d’autre manière que par la naissance », écrit-il, c’est que nul ne peut « changer la source du sang », ni « ne saurait faire couler un autre sang dans les veines que celui qui y est naturel » […] Selon lui, la conquête franque a rendu nobles les vainqueurs et « ignobles » les vaincus et cette distinction originelle s’est consolidée au fil du temps, grâce à la communauté de sang qui assure la reproduction de la noblesse de génération en génération. Pour Boulainvilliers, comme on le voit, la noblesse est une race, c’est-à-dire une société close, mais dont les membres sont égaux entre eux” (Noiriel 7).
17. “Pour ne pas se tromper dans ces compensations, il faut bien distinguer la liberté naturelle qui n’a pour bornes que les forces de l’individu, de la liberté civile qui est limitée par la volonté générale” (Rousseau 42-43).

18. “Ernest Renan, Qu’est-ce qu’une nation ? La nation, comme l’individu, est l’aboutissement d’un long passé d’efforts, de sacrifices et de dévouements. Le culte des ancêtres est de tous le plus légitime ; les ancêtres nous ont fait ce que nous sommes. Un passé héroïque, des grands hommes, de la gloire (j’entends de la véritable), voilà le capital social sur lequel on assied une idée national. Avoir des gloires communes dans le passé, une volonté commune dans le présent ; avoir fait de grandes choses ensemble, vouloir en faire encore, voilà les conditions essentielles pour être un peuple” (Noiriel 40).

19. “Le rejet de l’origine, comme fondement de la communauté nationale, s’explique davantage par la nécessité de discréditer les prétentions politiques que par une volonté d’appliquer la philosophie des droits de l’homme. De même, les conceptions assimilationnistes et la thèse du contrat social reflètent avant tout la contestation des privilèges accordés à la noblesse. Néanmoins, en devenant un point de vie national sur la nation, ces principes, détachés de leur contexte initial, pourront par la suite être mis en œuvre dans d’autres conjonctures pour résoudre d’autres problèmes” (Noiriel 9).

20. “C’est une conclusion logique des principes que rousseau avait posé dans le Contrat social. Si le peuple est à la fois le fondement et le garant de l’État, alors le peuple doit devenir l’acteur essentiel de la vie politique. Mais dans ces conditions, les individus ne sont plus « extérieure » à l’État comme sous l’Ancien Régime ; ils le constituent de même qu’ils sont constitués (ou institués) par lui” (Noiriel 95).
21. “En rendant obligatoire pour tous les enfants le passage par l’école élémentaire (en 1895, 5,5 millions d’enfants vont à l’école primaire), la République parvient à inculquer l’ensemble des citoyens les structures de base de la culture écrite” (Noiriel 102).

22. “C’est à ce moment-là seulement que se produit la nationalisation du français, en même temps que l’intervention de l’Etat central dans la vie éducative se fait de plus en plus massive. Désormais, les programmes officiels et les directives ministérielles définissent avec minutie le contenu des enseignements qui se renforcent les uns les autres. L’enseignement de la langue renvoie à la leçon d’histoire et réciproquement. À partir des années 1880 tous les petits Français feront une rédaction sur le 14 juillet. Le triomphe de la langue nationale a donc permis l’apparition d’une nouvelle universalité verticale (unissant toutes les couches de la population) qui s’oppose à l’universalité horizontale qui dominait autrefois (qui liait européenne cultivée)” (Noiriel 103).


24. “Le cuir usé d’une valise

Mourad

Je suis allé faire parler le cuir usé d’une valise sous un drap de couleur fade contrastant ses souvenirs. Dar Baïda, un embarcadère ensoleillé au départ, une arrivée sur un ponton terne et un visage hilare, celui d’un contremaître, de l’encre, un tampon à la main, frappant le flanc de cette
valise retenant la douleur. Ces visages s’engouffrant dans un train, direction l’usine de camions pour un bien dur labeur […]

**Refrain**

C’est une valise dans un coin, qui hurle au destin qu’elle n’est pas venue en vain.”

(http://www.lyricsmania.com/le_cuir_use_dune_valise_lyrics_la_rumeur.html)

25. **“Nés sous la même étoile**

Personne ne joue avec les mêmes cartes

Le berceau lève le voile, multiples sont les routes qu’il dévoile […]

Pourquoi fortune et infortune, pourquoi suis-je né

Les poches vides, pourquoi les siennes sont-elles pleines de thunes ? […]

La monnaie est une belle femme qui n’épouse pas les pauvres

Sinon pourquoi suis-je là tout seul marié sans dote

[…] Je ne peux rien faire, je ne peux rien faire

spectateur du désespoir”

(http://www.rap2france.com/paroles-i-am-nes-sous-la-meme-etoile.php)


27. **“Banlieusard**

Le 2, ce sera pour ceux qui rêvent d’une France unifiée

Parce qu’à ce jour il y'a deux France, qui peut le nier ?

Et moi je suis de la 2ème France, celle de l’insécurité
Des terroristes potentiels, des assistés
C'est ce qu'ils attendent de nous, mais j'ai d'autres projets qu'ils retiennent ça
Je ne suis pas une victime mais un soldat
Regarde-moi, je suis noir et fier de l'être
Je manie la langue de Molière, je maîtrise les lettres
Français parce que la France a colonisé mes ancêtres
Mais mon esprit est libre et mon Afrique n'a aucune dette […]”
(http://www.rap2france.com/paroles-kery-james-banlieusards.php)

28. “Banlieusard

J'suis pas un mendiant, je suis venu prendre ce qu'ils m'ont promis hier! […]
[…] Et si tu pleures, pleure des larmes de détermination
Car ceci n'est pas une plainte, c'est une révolution!

(Refrain) Apprendre, comprendre, entreprendre
Même si on a mal!
Se lever, progresser, lutter
Même quand on a mal!”
(http://www.rap2france.com/paroles-kery-james-banlieusards.php)

29. The Treaty of Frankfurt not only imposed a costly “war indemnity fee” on France but also ceded the Provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to the Prussians.

30. “Disons que la chanson française a l'heure actuelle à un avantage fantastique. C’est que les rappeurs et les slameurs écrivent merveilleusement notre langue. On pense toujours que cette jeunesse ne connaît pas la chanson, au contraire elle la connait très très bien. Mais elle veut
s’exprimer d’une manière différente. Et je trouve qu’il y a une pluriaison d’auteurs et de compositeurs et d’interprète rappeurs ou slameurs qui sont formidable aujourd’hui. Et je dois dire que le leadeur de tous ceux-là, celui qui émerge en tête, c’est Kery James. Et vous allez l’entendre écoutez surtout attentivement les paroles et vous allez voir comment c’est beau, comment c’est bien écrit et comment c’est français” (Charles Aznavour, qtd. in http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EIoxnNqlgo).

31. “La conscience identitaire marquée par cette autodésignation ne s’appuie sur aucune pratique ni aucun trait culturel traditionnel de type communautaire. Au contraire, les jeunes issus de l’immigration se trouvent souvent en rupture plus ou moins complète avec les modèles culturels de leurs parents, dont ils moquent volontiers — par exemple en les désignant comme « typique » (piqueti) — les attitudes et les conduites du pays d’origine” (Lepoutre 71).

32. “L’identité se fonde en réalité sur une ethnicité inventée ou reconstruite, c’est-a-dire bricolée à partir d’éléments emprunté à la modernité du pays d’accueil et au passé mythique et fantasmé des origines” (Lepoutre 71).


34. “À Marseille, il y avait un truc qui a fait que le rap est venu directement des states.Entre 85 et 88, il y avait les Américains qui nous passaient des disques, des cassettes. Ils descendaient
d’un petit croiseur, d’un destroyer, ou d’un porte-avions avec cinq mille marines. On se trouvait facilement avec deux mille ou trois mille marines dans la ville, ils étaient partout. C’était la flotte de Méditerranée, ils allaient dans le golfe persique par le canal de Suez. À chaque escale à Marseille, il y en avait deux ou trois qui ne repartaient pas : affaires de filles, de drogue” (Akhenaton/Chill, qtd. in Bocquet 116).

35. “Marseille est en effet une ville stigmatisée. La cité phocéenne possède depuis longtemps une réputation ambivalente à l’échelon national, liée à son statut de ville d’immigration et, plus généralement, à la présence importante des classes populaires, considérées comme des classes dangereuses (Peraldi et Samson 2005). Or, la municipalité a mis en place une stratégie politique qui consiste à transformer ses stigmates en ressources, et le soutien au rap s’inscrit dans le cadre de la promotion d’une nouvelle image. À Marseille, le rap est pratiqué massivement par des jeunes d’origine étrangère qui s’identifient fortement à leur ville (Cassari et al., 2001) : on ne retrouve pas l’opposition classique ville-centre/banlieue populaire des métropole lyonnaise et parisienne. La mairie s’approprie ainsi le succès d’ampleur nationale des rappeurs locaux (le groupe I AM par exemple, primé aux Victoires de la musique, ou plus récemment la Fonky Family ») Et vante les mérites de son cosmopolitisme” (De Grandgeneuve 58).

36. “Le rap et les autres disciplines de la culture hip-hop qui l’accompagnent (dans hip-hop et graffiti) constituent une forme de prise de parole d’un groupe dominé […] Au départ, à Marseille comme ailleurs, celle-ci n’est pas toujours immédiatement comprise ni accepté ; elle est souvent associé à des pratiques urbaines qui dérogent aux conventions en usage dans l’espace public. On assiste alors à une forme d’appropriation de l’espace, proche de celle qui peut exister dans les quartiers dits sensibles : les jeunes transforment l’espace de la cité en véritable espace privé. Ils y
sont en ‘terrain conquis,’ colonisent les lieux, et en font clairement un monde en soi qu’ils constituent à part comme un bien précieux […]. Les jeunes modifient la rationalité instrumentale de la scène architecturale et l’utilisation neutre des lieux », explique Cyprien Avenel” (De Grandgeneuve 59).

37. “Effectivement, Il n’y avait pas de rap mais il y avait une scène break très active, organisée un peu comme à Paris autour de la Zulu Nation. Et dès 1983, les premiers rappeurs viennent de là. C’est marrant à dire comme ça mais les premiers mecs qui se sont mis à râper sur Marseille sont ceux qui n’étaient pas assez bons en danse. Il y avait un tel niveau en danse, que ceux qui n’étaient pas au trop essayaient de varier leur apport au hip-hop local. Et j’en fais partie d’ailleurs… À coté de ça je gaffais, je faisais des murs à Marseille et à Brooklyn bien avant qu’il ne fonde Third Bass. Donc on s’est mis à râper, on a été immergés dans la scène break et nos premiers concerts on les a fait devant des breakers” (Akhenaton, qtd. in Blondeau 125).


39. “J’avais seize ans, j’allais à l’école. Au début, je m’appelais Gary V. C’est Afrika Bambaataa qui m’a donné le nom de Gangster Beat. On était au Trocadéro. À un moment j’entend « Gangster Beat !» Je me retourne et je vois Bambaataa devant moi. C’est à partir de ce moment-là que j’ai gardé ce nom, Gangster Beat, c’était par rapport aux s Queuds, peut-être, il
savait comment j’avais les squeuds. Il nous disait toujours qu’il ne fallait pas faire des choses comme ça. On faisait partie de la Zulu Nation, on avait le fameux collier. On suivait un messie” (Gangster Beat, qtd. in Bocquet 38).

40. “À Sarcelles, les premières détonation d’une formule gangsta à la française marquée par le rap de Los Angeles plutôt que par la conscience new-yorkaise voient le jour entre les mots de Ministère AMER qui sort Pourquoi tant de haine ? et deviendra rapidement un des fers de lance de l’underground de l’époque” (Blondeau 33).


42. “Ce positionnement fait débat dans la planète rap. ‘Ça, c’est un travail journalistique, rétorque Akhenaton, leader d’IAM, ce n’est pas un engagement. Etre engagé, c’est prendre position sur des sujets, sur des événements.’ Le leader marseillais a, lui aussi, été tenté par ce rap hardcore. En 1995, dans son premier album solo, ‘Mètèque et Mat’, il disait rêver d’ ‘éclater un mec des Assedic’, et dans le clip de Bad Boys de Marseille il incarnait un patron de la mafia marseillaise. ‘La maladie du bandit m’est vite passée, dit-il. Je pense que j’ai souffert à un moment donné de mon gros succès. Ç’a été brutal. De peur d’être coupé de la base, j’ai cherché à me justifier. J’ai, en effet, eu une vie dans la rue où je restais dehors jusqu’à 5 heures du matin.”
Aujourd’hui, ça fait partie de mes morceaux introspectifs, mais en aucun cas de mon marketing” (Balieusard).

43. “Je rappais en Franglais. Je prenais des phrases de rap qui existaient déjà chez les rappeurs, genre ‘I don’t take no mess‘ ca veut dire : ‘Faut pas délirer avec moi,’ En fait, c’était très Mégalo : ‘Moi, je suis le plus beau, je suis le plus fort, j’ai toutes les meufs.’ Le rap, de toute façon, au début, c’était ça”’ (Gangster Beat, qtd. in Bocquet 38).

44. MC Solaar, a French rapper of Senegalese origin, was influenced by the Zulu Nation. He became popular in 1990 when he released his first single entitled “bouge de là” (move from there). The music of MC Solaar, while critical of French society, tended to be comparatively more restrained in its anger and more reflective in its rhetoric.

45. Depictions of police harassment are also presented in other music genres. In his song entitled “sans papier” (without papers), the Soukous musician Awilo Logomba documents how the legal immigration status of Africans is always questioned by the French police who conduct routine stop and search operations on “suspicious” “foreign looking” people.

46. “NTM (Police)

Police: vos papiers, contrôle d'identité,

Formule devenue classique à laquelle tu dois t'habituer.

Seulement dans les quartiers,

Les condés de l'abus de pouvoir ont trop abusé.

Aussi sachez que l'air est chargé d'électricité,

Alors pas de respect, pas de pitié escomptée

Vous aurez des regrets car:
Jamais par la répression vous n'obtiendrez la paix, […]

Pour notre part ce ne sera pas « Fuck the Police »,

Mais un spécial NICK TA MERE de la mère patrie du vice. ”

(Perrier 89-92)

47. “À l’évidence, il y a une accoutumance à l’obscénité et une habitude acquise qui fait que de telles images ne semblent plus guère dégoutantes aux enfants et aux adolescents qui les produisent quotidiennement. Seulement, il faut bien comprendre aussi que la rhétorique de l’obsène ne trouve son sens véritable que dans la référence et dans le rapport d’opposition implicite à la norme de langage dominante. En d’autres termes, les mots « sales » sont « bons » précisément parce qu’ils sont « mauvais » et parce que leurs auteurs savent très bien qu’ils suscitent le dégout et la répulsion chez les partisans des bonnes manières” (Lepoutre 129).

“Cette contre-légitimité linguistique s’affirme à la fois en tant que manière de parler populaire, en opposition aux manière de parler bourgeoises, en tant que langage jeune, en opposition au langage des adultes acquis aux valeurs dominantes, et, pour les adolescents issus de famille immigrées, en tant que langue impropre et inconvenante des étrangers exclus et rejetés, en opposition à la « belle » langue française, académique et scolaire” (Lepoutre 129).

48. “Je désapprouve les appels à la violence contre la police. Mais j’estime que les politiques n’ont pas à contrôler la vie culturelle. L’histoire a prouvé que c’était par là que commençaient les dictatures. Nous devons nous battre pour la liberté d’expression et pour celle des programmeurs culturels. Le Front national devrait commencer par balayer devant sa porte. À Orange ont été invités des groupes de rock dont les mots de la fin de la phrase ‘Une balle pour les sionistes, une balle pour les cosmopolites, une balle pour la p…’ désignent manifestement la
police. Pourquoi y aurait-il deux poids, deux mesures ?” (Philippe Douste-Blazy, qtd. in Bocquet 232).

49. “Est-ce qu’ils savent qui on est ? Ont-ils déjà acheté des places pour nos concerts ?

Demain, ils condamneront peut-être une de nos attitudes. Quand un jeune se fait emmerder dans la rue par l’autorité, il n’a pas de témoins, pas de soutien. Nous, on est condamnés, et tout le monde nous défend au nom des droits de l’homme. Mais les droits de l’homme sont bafoués tous les jours à Paris” (Joey Starr, qtd. in Bocquet 234).


51. “Kery James (Thug Life)

Je les entend tous ces zoulou,
ils parlent de nous,
qu’est qu’ils en savent des braves,
nous on a galéré grave,
qu’est ce qu’il connaissent de notre histoire, on revient de loin […]
si les jeunes nous aimes c’est par ce qu’on leur ressemble, quand ils souffrent on souffre, ”

(http://www.rap2france.com/paroles-kery-james-mafia-k1fry-thug-life.php)
52. “Kery James (Thug Life)

En dehors de scène, on risquai des grosse peines,

en attendant que notre heure vienne,

conséquence : Rocco « incarcéré »,

Hakim « incarcéré »,

Jessy « incarcéré »,

Mista « incarcéré »,

L.A.S « assassiné »,

M.A.D « assassiné »,

[… ] la mafia k1 Fry c’était un projet, un état d’esprit,

un mode de vie et de survie,

avec les plus visionnaire on voyais loin,

le rêve était africain, les moyens américain,”

(http://www.rap2france.com/paroles-kery-james-mafia-k1fry-thug-life.php)

53. “A cette époque, Yo MTV Rap étaient diffusé sur le câble, Est-ce que le rap américain qui y est diffusé a une influence sur vous à cette époque ? Oui, Via MTV mais aussi via des cassettes VHS qui tournaient. Et puis il y avait aussi Rap-line. J’ai été touché par des groupes comme N.W.A, Public Enemy, KRS One, tous ces groupes revendicateurs. En ce qui concerne ma position de MC, j’étais dans le même esprit que ces mecs. Ce sont eux qui m’ont construit” (Kery James, qtd. in Blondeau 95).

54. “Aujourd’hui, la démarche du gangsta rap est un marché. Le fait d’être gangster est commercial en soi, donc il en sort de partout. Nous, on vient d’une époque où ca n’existait pas,
on n’a jamais eu à faire les voyous pour donner du crédit à ce qu’on raconte” (Joey Starr, qtd. in Blondeau 176).

55. Fatal Bazooka is the name of a French band known for satirizing French hip-hop in their music.

56. “Quelle est l’origine de cette haine envers Skyrock ? Eh bons b-boys amoureux de cette culture, un média qui s’autoproclame du jour au lendemain « Premier sur le rap » et investi grassement dans le rap avec pour objectif d’imposer une définition à laquelle tout le monde devra se faire conformer est pour nous un imposteur. Notre virulence à leur égard a augmenté mesure de leur investissement jusqu’à ce qu’ils finissent par porter plainte suite à un article que j’ai écrit dans notre magazine La Rumeur. Pour nous, ce média a gadgétisé la culture hip-hop, l’a dépourvue de son essence et en a fait cette espèce de produit hybride entre R’N’B et Fatal Bazooka” (Ekoué, qtd. in Blondeau 160).

57. “Kery James (Réel)

Les rappeurs racontent des histoires
A toi d’voir si tu veux y croire […]
Tous prétendent être des gangsters […]
Ils chantent la rue depuis leurs studios […]
Et toi tu vie la banlieue réel, les impacts sur ton cœur sont des impacts a balle réel […]”
(http://www.rap2france.com/paroles-kery-james-reel.php)

58. “Kery James (Réel)

Les keufs bouscule ton père c’est réel,
 menace d’embarquer ta mère c’est cruelle mais réel
Tu as l’impression de te faire violer tu as beau crier a l’aide
mais aucun rappeur ne vient te consoler

[…] Du poison avec un gout un gout de miel c’est tout ce qu’ils ont,
moi je suis vrai, je n’ai que du réer

Réel froid pas comme un cinéma les yeux rougis par le sang sur le plasma”

(http://www.rap2france.com/paroles-kery-james-reel.php)


60. In “the literature of the song: Kantai and Wainaina’s ‘Joka’ as Syncretic Multi Text” Aaron Rosenberg provides examples of the manner in which Kenyan musicians such as Eric Wainaina (who is not a hip-hop artist) have similarly transcended their own ethnic fields of cultural production in their music projects which appeal to a wider national audience.

61. “Angalia Saa

Intro
na-dedicate-ia hii
ma-hero wote wa Kenya
kila mtu ame-struggle
na ako paid for […]

Chorus
najua wataka haki yako
angalia saa […]

wewe ni shujaa […]”

(http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/kamah/angaliasaa.htm)

62. I have taken the term “hyper-historical awareness” from the work of German Campos-Munoz in his dissertation titled Classical Conjunctions: The Greco-Roman Tradition in Latin America. Campos-Muñoz uses the term in order to analyze the influence of the classics during moments of social turmoil in Latin America.

63. “[Kama]

White Highlands no more

si siri hawatoshi

hii vita imepita rangi ya ngozi

na kabila najua ni mbili tu

maskini na mdosi […]

decolonizing minds

msisemi mlij-hypnotise […]

wa-shoot Muthoni wa Nyanjiru

the same route wa-rape mama yetu Njeri

hizi ndivyo trial ya ma-hero

ka Kenya ni matrix nani ndio Neo

ka Kimathi hakuwa the one

then society iko drunk na opium”

(http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/kamah/angaliasaa.htm)
64. “Sababu vita ya kwanza ilikuwa physical, saa hii ni mental, na hiyo ndiyo Mau Mau ya sasa unajua, hiyo ndiyo vita tukonayo” (Kamah, qtd. in *Hip-Hop Colony*).

65. Kikuyu Benga is a derivation of Luo Benga music, which was popularized in the Luo community during the 1960s. D.O. Misiani is one of the most popular Luo Benga musicians.

66. “Unbwogable by Gidi Gidi, Maji Maji

**Chorus**

Who can bwogo me […]

I am unbwogable!

**Verse 1**

What the hell is you looking at?

Can’t a young Luo make money any more? […]

Who the hell do you think you are?

Get the hell out of ma face because hey […]”


67. “Unbwogable by Gidi Gidi, Maji Maji

**Verse 2**

Oginga Odinga dong aparo i

Tom Mboya dong aparo i

Ouko Robert dong aparo i

Raila Amolo dong aparo i

Gor Mahia dong aparo I […]

**Chorus**
Verse 4

Jobondo gini lich manadeni, you are unbwogable
Jougenya gini lich manadeni, you are unbwogable”

(https://www.mistari.com/lyrics/gidigidimajimaji/unbwogable.htm)

68. “Prezzo’ by Prezzo

Verse 1

a year in the game now na nime-blow […]
two thousand and four I loaded my ammo
na sasa ni wakati wa war sio mchezo […]
wacha nimpige huyu critic ruff rugged and raw
huyu critic ni ___
how dare you compare Redsan with a king […]

Verse 2

Prezzo I’m filthy rich
na kama Biggy Smalls it’s just me and my bitch
and that’s why I never trust a snitch […]

Verse 3

I quench your thirst like Sprite […]
for all my enemies I’m equipped with the full clip”

(https://www.mistari.com/lyrics/prezzo/prezzo.htm)

69. “Burn Dem’ By Ukoo Flani Mau Mau

Intro

299
Yes sir

We in the ghetto

straight soldiers you know what I mean

you know what I’m sayin’ […]

Jah fire haffi burn dem

**Verse 1 (Sharama)**

Ukoo Flani soldiers twaja

na ndege zimejami na vifaru

tuna majeshi wa Desert Storm na

SS Marines […]

 tunatumia TNT

twafanya fyatu na B-52 […]

navuta geti, naseti jeti, natuma missile”

([http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/ukooflanimaumau/burndem.htm](http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/ukooflanimaumau/burndem.htm))

70. “Burn Dem’ By Ukoo Flani Mau Mau

**Chorus**

**Verse 3**

I’ve been a soldier

But a soldier in the hood

I stand tall like Marcus Garvey […]

a rifle and a knife like Kimathi […]

MC Fifths and 47s […]

make it rain like Selassie […]

300
a general like Castro […]
you can’t kill me like Lumumba […]
we soldiers on a mission like
Che Guevara!”

(http://www.mistari.com/lyrics/ukooflanimaumau/burndem.htm)

71. Recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002 for his work on asymmetric
information. His most popular works includes *Globalization and its Discontents*, published in
2002.

72. Author of *Kicking Away the Ladder* and *Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the
Secret History of Capitalism.*

73. “*Ni Wakati’ By Kalamashaka*

**Verse 1**

[…] Kimbua shule ujue kuhusu akina Samory Touré […]

IMF SAP’a zinademand

The G7 countries zimeshikilia trigger

[…]

**Chorus**

Ni wakati wa Afrika yote kusimama

Ni wakati kwetu sisi hapa mavijana […]”

(Wetaba 237-74)

Mau Mau mpaka Malcolm X anajua Mau Mau. Black panther, kama kuna mapanther huko
states, wanatuma maprops vibaya sana, tunafight the same cause. Unacheki hizi ndiyo rangi zetu.
Black panther, Mau Mau. Unajua Dedan Kimathi na Malcolm X ni the same thing” (Kamah, qtd. in *Hip-Hop Colony*).

75. “Now we came up with Genge because, Genge ni Swahili sanifu, ‘Genge la watu.’ Sasa hii music iko na mass appeal to Kenyans, they love it. So we called it Genge music for the people. Yani Genge la watu, music for the people” (Nonini, qtd. in *Hip-Hop Colony*).

76. “*Hip-Hop Halisi’*

**Chorus (Cannibal)**

Ipe upendo hip hop halisi […]

**Verse 1 (Nazizi)**

[…] Toka Mau Mau wapate uhuru sa tuko free

ku-rock ma-crowds so wanacheza nasi

hawawezi kataa instead wana-agree

that we the illest

kwa hii crowd ya wasanii

that’s why tunachaguliwa na mateenie

wa Zimmer, South B na Eastleigh […]

**Verse 2 (Fujo Makelele)**

bado niko underground […]”

(https://www.mistari.com/lyrics/ukooflanimaumau/hiphophalisi.htm)
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PUBLISHED


FORTHCOMING

TRANSLATED ARTICLE

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
MEDIA, LITERATURE & LANGUAGE COURSES (PENN STATE)
  ❖ CMLIT 105: Literary Humor (online)
  ❖ CMLIT 003: Introduction to African Literature
  ❖ CMLIT 108: Myth and Mythologies of non-Western Cultures (online)
  ❖ CMLIT 153: International Cultures through Film and Literature (online)
  ❖ CMLIT 422: African Film and Drama (upper level course)
  ❖ ENG 015: Rhetoric and Composition
  ❖ FR 003: Intermediate Level, third-semester French
  ❖ SWA (001, 002, 003): Elementary through Intermediate Level Swahili

LANGUAGES
English, French, Swahili, Luo, Swedish