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Representations of Space and Gender in African
American Hip Hop Life Writing

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zur Erlangung des Grades
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am Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik
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der Universität Rostock

vorgelegt von

Henrik Bönner
aus Rostock

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Gutachter:

Prof. Dr. em. Gabriele Linke, Universität Rostock, Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik

Prof. Dr. Christian Schmitt-Kilb, Universität Rostock, Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik

Prof. Dr. em. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, Technische Universität Dresden, Institut für
Anglistik/Amerikanistik

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Henrik Bönner, geb. am 10.07.1988 in Rostock

Hanse- und Universitätsstadt Rostock

Rostock, den 10.03.2024

Gutachter_innen

Prof. (em.) Dr. Gabriele Linke

Prof. Dr. Christian Schmitt-Kilb

Prof. Dr. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay

Universität Rostock

Universität Rostock

Technische Universität Dresden

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Dissertation

**Representations of Space and Gender in African American Hip Hop Life
Writing**

by Henrik Bönner

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Introduction

It was a raucous party in New York on August 11, 2023, as thousands in attendance and millions watching around the world celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Hip Hop. The celebration took place at Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, near where Hip Hop was born, on the same day in 1973 at a now-infamous party hosted by Kool DJ Herc (Batey 2011). Hip Hop artists past and present, including Run-DMC, Snoop Dogg, Whiz Khalifa, and Nas, performed, and celebrated with fans. The August 11th party was just one of the many highlights of a year-long celebration. Across the U.S., various festivals, concerts, and conferences were held to honor and discuss Hip Hop's past, present, and future. In September, Vice President Kamala Harris called Hip Hop the "ultimate American art form" in a speech at the White House (2023).

Media outlets worldwide recognized the anniversary's significance with articles, in-depth cover stories, retellings of the culture's birth, photo series, and interviews (Trebay 2023). The global interest in the anniversary indicates that Hip Hop has long since moved from its subcultural status into the mainstream. Further evidence of this is the inclusion of breakdancing, one of the elements of Hip Hop, for the first time at the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris (CIO 2024). The interest in Hip Hop is also reflected in casting shows like *Rhythm & Flow* that aim to find the next rap superstar. Moreover, popular documentaries like *Hip Hop Evolution*, on Netflix since 2016, *The Defiant Ones* (2017), or *Ladies First: A Story of Women in Hip Hop* (2023) portray the historical and social background of Hip Hop's rise (Ali 2017). Additionally, *Wu-Tang: An American Saga* (2020) chronicles the history of one of the most influential rap groups on Hulu.

The location where Hip Hop celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and where Hip Hop was born in 1973 is paramount to understanding the culture. As an urban place, the Bronx, and places like it have a special significance in Hip Hop. Despite the diverse backgrounds of today's artists and fans, the development of Hip Hop has been shaped primarily by urban practices and styles. Jeffries has noted that "populations without urban experience have resultantly come to identify urbanism with [Hip] [Hop] sensibility" (2007: 211). It was the streets and neighborhoods that "nurture, shape, and embody the [Hip] [Hop] music aesthetic" (Keyes, 2004b: 122). Neither Hip Hop nor rap music was created by suit-wearing agents in corporate offices but by lower and working-class artists in the underprivileged communities of America's inner cities. Paying homage to one's humble beginnings, or calling out to the posse that lives there, is a strategy that connects Hip Hop artists to their place of belonging, even if that place has long since been abandoned (Forman, 2004b: 155).

Hip Hop artists use a variety of expressive forms to praise their city, district, neighborhood, and other places. In doing so, unpleasant incidents or states of depravity are rarely omitted.

Instead, urban space is “a dominant concern, occupying a central role in the definition of value, meaning, and practice” (Forman, 2002: 3). In addition to this lack of palliation, the richness of detail with which streets, crossroads, neighborhoods, street corners, and zip codes are referenced either in lyrics, in graffiti, and other expressions is characteristic of Hip Hop. “The Message,” a song about the appalling conditions of inner-city New York in the 1970s, is one of the earliest examples of Hip Hop’s connection to urban space. Since then, countless rap songs have acknowledged this connection, such as the 1987 song “South Bronx” by Boogie Down Productions.

This strong connection between Hip Hop and urban space also leads to a multilayered meaning of class in Hip Hop. As the communities from which the first Hip Hop artists emerged were often characterized by poverty, inequality, and marginalization, space and class are important categories of identification in Hip Hop. Shaped by the conditions in which they grew up, Hip Hop artists interpret how marginalization, gentrification, and discrimination affect their access to participation and power differently. Class is evident in the class backgrounds of Hip Hop artists and is juxtaposed with their infatuation with materialism. For example, while rappers incorporate social commentary and stories of poverty into their lyrics, they also accumulate wealth and status symbols to gain respect and display such items once they have achieved critical success (Ilan, 2015: 13-16).

Rap artists often portray Hip Hop as an implicit export of disadvantaged communities characterized by poverty, lack of infrastructure, and economic decline and stylize themselves as legitimate voices addressing these shortcomings. However, Forman has cautioned against reading rap music as ‘ghetto music’ and Hip Hop as the exclusive product of social and economic deprivation. Although Hip Hop originated in generally disadvantaged communities, artists come from all walks of life, including middle-class and much more affluent backgrounds. Moreover, the consumption of rap music is not limited to poor communities, as evidenced by the widespread appeal of gangster rap in white suburban communities. Regardless of the social background of either artists or consumers, the spatial construction of the ‘hood’ and the ‘ghetto’ is a marker of authenticity and credibility within Hip Hop (Forman, 2002: xix).

The connection between space and class inevitably leads to intersections with other identity categories, such as gender, adding another layer of complexity to Hip Hop. Gender discourse in Hip Hop has long focused on the presence of loud, dominant, macho rappers. Male performers and their entourages have flaunted harmful yet profitable notions of sexuality and objectified women while catering to a mainstream white audience. Sexism and misogyny in rap music are pervasive in vulgar lyrics, in ambiguous music videos, in the clear stylization of male

performers as hypersexual machos, and in the black female body as an object of pleasure for artists and audiences alike. Critics who blame rap music and Hip Hop for the deterioration of society often ignore that white mainstream culture has set an example that rap music has emulated (Rose, 2008: 118f). For example, violent masculinities are pervasive and have become deeply embedded in the fabric of society, popular culture, sports, and the military (de Boise, 2019: 149). Just as actors like John Wayne or Clint Eastwood have embodied violent and emotionally unaffected men for generations of white viewers, blaxploitation films like *Shaft* propagated a similarly narrow and stereotypical image of black (hyper)masculinity.¹

However, although male artists have shaped the culture, Hip Hop is more diverse than often portrayed. The overabundance of male-dominated themes and issues has long overshadowed the contributions of female artists. For this reason, Hip Hop has long been accused of perpetuating negative gender stereotypes and offering women or queer artists little potential for identification. However, it is the character of Hip Hop as a (former) subculture that demonstrates its potential for “the exaggeration of established gender roles or the subversion or transformation of them,” thus enabling male, female, and queer artists to deconstruct rigid notions of gender (Milestone and Meyer, 2012: 192). Moreover, as a “culturally reflective public space,” Hip Hop allows women to explore and embrace other aspects of their identity (Rose, 1994: 182).² Women who grow up with rap music, lyrics, and videos are inevitably confronted with stereotypes of black femininity, forcing them to negotiate their gender identity around these perceptions (Cox, 2012: 89). One way in which Hip Hop is used as a space for cultural expression in relation to gender is when artists write and rap about their experiences of everyday sexism, harassment, or sexualized violence in their communities. Female rappers such as Queen Latifah, Sandra Denton, and Tionne Watkins have acknowledged issues of relevance to women, including sexual responsibility, empowerment, or African American sisterhood (Keyes, 2004: 270). Moreover, as they have carved out a niche for female performers, they have proven that Hip Hop can be a space of empowerment.

In addition to referencing their origins and addressing gender issues, artists provide insight into their lives by incorporating autobiographical references into their forms of expression. In 1988, for example, the members of N.W.A. addressed police brutality in their Los Angeles neighborhood in the song “Straight Outta Compton.” Toward the end of the song, Eric Lynn Wright, better known as Eazy-E, casually announces that the song is his autobiography. In her

¹ See, for example, Henry (2004) or Fenske (2016).

² Various feminist researchers have argued this point, see Morgan (1999: 59), Halliday (2020: 9), Pough (2007: vi-viii). See also Peoples (2008) for an overview on Hip Hop feminism.

2008 song “Autobiography,” Nicki Minaj talks about her alcoholic father and having an abortion as a teenager. In addition, there are countless examples of artists interweaving autobiographical references with their stories of drug abuse, poverty, gang crime, police brutality, and street culture. This close connection between rap music and autobiographies distinguishes rap musicians from artists in other musical genres. Although rap lyrics must be taken with a grain of salt, as the truth is often distorted to exaggerate, emphasize, and embellish,³ there is a strong connection between autobiography and Hip Hop (Hess, 2007: 48).

Scholars from various fields have applied an autobiographical lens to rap lyrics, music videos, album covers, or websites to examine how Hip Hop artists portray their lives and careers. Hess noted that autobiographical references in rap music are important in tracing an artist’s path to success while maintaining a sense of authenticity (45-49). Eva Kimminich explored questions of autobiography and authenticity in lyrics of female French rappers (2012). In 2018, the *Biography* journal dedicated its forty-first issue to exploring Asian American Hip Hop artists’ autobiographical references in albums, songs, and music videos (Labrador and Chung 2018).

While autobiographical references in rap lyrics have received scholarly attention, Hip Hop in autobiography has so far gone largely unnoticed by life writing and Hip Hop studies (Balestrini, 2015: 224). However, there is a large and growing corpus of life writing publications written by Hip Hop artists or writers close to Hip Hop culture. Actual book-length autobiographies and memoirs have increased over the past two decades, resulting in a substantial corpus of Hip Hop Life Writing. Nassim Balestrini is one of the few scholars who have approached this corpus as an object of research (2016). In a 2015 article, she examined life writing publications of Hip Hop artists with regards to constructions of authenticity through the “strategic nexuses between visual and verbal discourse” (224). In another contribution, Balestrini has argued that the intermediality of Hip Hop life writing challenges established life writing reading practices (2018). In addition, Brumble (2014) addressed the genre of ‘gangbanger’ autobiography in his discussion of the memoir of West Coast rapper Ice-T. Beyond these contributions, scholarship at the intersection of Hip Hop and life writing studies remains scarce. Given Hip Hop’s long history and global impact, there is a need for more research that links these two fields.

³ The artistic freedom of rap artists has long been ignored as prosecutors have used lyrics as evidence in court. In 2023, Congress reintroduced the Restoring Artist Protection Act (RAP), which prohibits the use of rap lyrics and other expressions to be used as evidence in court (Lopez 2023).

Given the fifty-year history of Hip Hop and the success of its artists, it is not surprising that Hip Hop artists have embraced life writing as a medium to reflect on their lives and careers. Moreover, the increasing appeal of memoir as a form of life writing has intensified over the past two decades, a time which life writing scholars have referred to as the ‘memoir boom’ (Rak 2013). Long before this surge, however, memoirs were seen as emblematic of “the ‘vulgar’ who try to ‘excite prurient curiosity that may command a sale,’” as a nineteenth-century critic lamented (Anderson, 2011: 7; see also Treadwell, 2005: 76ff). In particular, celebrity memoirs have been dismissed as a “literary phenomenon of the non-literate” and are widely regarded as ‘low’ mass entertainment, surpassed only in poor quality by their ghostwritten counterparts (Yelin, 2015: 2).⁴ The memoir as a life writing genre has drawn comparisons to the selfie. Both can be seen as emblematic of contemporary society in their symbolization of self-absorption and the individualism craze (Avieson, et al., 2018: 4).⁵

Nevertheless, the continuing popularity of the memoir proves that it is more than a passing trend (Smith and Watson, 2010: 274f). The condemnation of the memoir as superficial falls flat in the face of a thriving memoir industry and the genre’s increasing popularity. Moreover, critics need to consider the underlying market industry that, despite its flaws, facilitates the production and distribution of writing (Rak, 2013: 13-16). Hip Hop artists and those associated with the culture have discovered the memoir as a form of writing to reflect on their lives and careers. Unlike rap lyrics, music videos, and other forms of expression used in Hip Hop, autobiographies and memoirs provide authors with more means to reflect on their lives, for example by including details, anecdotes, and photographs. Moreover, publishing a Hip Hop autobiography or memoir can serve as an incentive for artists to take advantage of the current memoir boom.

Research Questions

Regardless of motivation, life writing is a form of self-expression guided by three central questions that all writers must confront. First, authors are dependent on their memories of past events. Second, authors must decide what of their lives they want to share publicly. Third, authors ponder how they want to be seen by others. While the first question is beyond the author’s control, the remaining two questions determine how authors publicly present themselves to readers in their life writing. The third question is relevant in the context of musicians and celebrities, who are already public figures whose lives may be known to a wider

⁴ Yelin revisited this thought in her 2020 book on celebrity memoirs (13-17).

⁵ For a closer look at the selfie and its global implications, consider the article by Senft and Baym (2015) as well as Frosh (2015).

audience. Accordingly, authors may pursue a specific strategy of self-representation to present themselves in their life writing. Authors often, wittingly or unwittingly, indicate spaces relevant to their lives and careers and make statements about their gender identity by recounting anecdotes and experiences. In this context, my primary research question is to determine how Hip Hop artists represent space and gender identity in their autobiographies and memoirs. These representations include which spaces are presented as relevant and what functions Hip Hop artists assign to these spaces. By bringing space and gender together, I further ask where and how space and gender intersect in African American Hip Hop Life Writing. Building on Balestrini's previous research on life writing by Hip Hop artists, my second research question is to examine what characterizes African American Hip Hop Life Writing and to what extent it can be considered a distinct or a hybrid life writing genre.

Objectives

I have chosen space and gender as the primary lenses through which I approach Hip Hop because both are relevant identity categories in Hip Hop. Moreover, issues of space and gender are invoked when Hip Hop is characterized as lacking diversity, often reducing it to rap music or portraying it as a product of impoverished, criminal black male youth. In relation to my primary research question, I aim to determine which public and private spaces Hip Hop authors include in their life writing and what functions they ascribe to these spaces. Based on this, I will determine if there is a recurring, characteristic pattern of spaces in life writing by Hip Hop artists. Furthermore, in the context of gender identity, I will assess how authors represent their masculinity or femininity within their publications. This step will necessarily include comparing male and female authors' representations of space and gender to assess where representations are similar or where ruptures become apparent.

To answer my second research question, I inventory the primary and secondary genre elements that inform African American Hip Hop Life Writing. This step is necessary to demonstrate whether Hip Hop Life Writing blends established life-writing subgenres or constitutes a distinct genre. To accomplish this goal, I identify repetitive narrative patterns and motifs that align with established life writing conventions of African American, musical, and celebrity life writing. Patterns and motifs that do not align with this triumvirate will be analyzed in terms of how they specifically contribute to the representation of a life and identity shaped by Hip Hop. By publicly tracing their lives and careers in an autobiography or memoir, celebrity authors can either add to what is already known about them or choose to present an entirely different image of themselves. Whether they do so by using language and imagery like their rap styles or by choosing to adapt their language is part of this analysis.

Scope of the Thesis

My research topic is at the crossroads of several research fields and, thus, follows an interdisciplinary approach. To avoid getting lost in the complexity of the topic and the overlapping research fields, it is necessary to define my thesis's scope and limits clearly. On the one hand, I have deliberately set limits for this study to keep the research manageable and ensure a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter. On the other hand, the corpus of African American Hip Hop Life Writing already comes with specific parameters. Thus, the dissertation has the following scope and limitations.

First, the study has a geographic and ethnic focus on life writing publications written by African American Hip Hop performers from the United States of America. This can be explained by the fact that the number of publications written by African American artists from the U.S. alone is already so large that it constitutes a self-contained corpus. Since there have been no comprehensive studies of this corpus, identifying these publications promises new and innovative insights into Hip Hop and life writing. African Americans are among the forerunners and pioneers of Hip Hop. Their enduring influence on Hip Hop culture reveals complex intersections of space, gender, and 'race.'

The available publications range from 1997 to 2020 and thus define the time frame of this thesis. Applying this time frame has resulted in forty-two autobiographies and memoirs of African American Hip Hop artists. It should be noted that the thesis focuses on autobiographical writing in the form of actual book-length memoirs and autobiographies. Thus, I exclude other forms of autobiographical expression Hip Hop artists use, including lyrics, music videos, social media presentations, and websites. In addition, the study does not include unpublished autobiographical manuscripts or private journals. This does not mean, however, that Hip Hop artists do not make autobiographical references in other media or that they are irrelevant. On the contrary, Hip Hop artists use social media such as Facebook or Instagram to provide insights into their lives and careers.⁶ However, to avoid complicating matters, the archive of forty-two publications, spanning more than two decades, constitutes the research object of my thesis.

⁶ Smith and Watson (2010: 268) list *digital life stories* among their life writing subgenres. Jennings (2020) discusses a more current example in Nicki Minaj, who has subverted stereotypical gender and beauty ideals by extensively using digital media to interact with fans and audiences. The 2022 Paris conference "Hybridity in Life Writing: How Text and Images Work Together to Tell a Life," organized by life writing theorists Clare Brant and Arnaud Schmitt, focused on the interrelation of visual and verbal content of autobiographical writing in the digital age.

Key Terms and Preliminary Remarks

Today, rap music and Hip Hop are used interchangeably (Graves, 2016: 256f). However, the interchangeable use of both terms oversimplifies the diversity of Hip Hop and neglects the contributions of DJs, graffiti artists, and breakdancers to the culture. With the extraordinary commercial success and worldwide popularity of rap music, it is easy to forget that Hip Hop did not begin with rap music as its flagship. In the early years of Hip Hop, rappers, or emcees (MCs), were flanked by DJs, breakdancers (b-boys and b-girls), and graffiti artists (Morgan, 2014: 67f).⁷ While these four elements represent the tangible artistic expressions practiced by members of the culture, Hip Hop scholars argue that ‘knowledge’ of the “cultural, aesthetic, social, linguistic, intellectual and political identities, beliefs, behaviors and values” of Hip Hop serves as its fifth element (Morgan, 2014: 68). This ‘knowledge’ can also be complemented by an ‘attitude,’ which the influential DJ Afrika Bambaataa translates as “survival, economics and keeping our people moving on” (Hebdige, 2004: 223).

In addition to these five core elements, Hip Hop demonstrates a subculture that has adopted tastes, styles, languages, and aesthetics from a larger culture and developed styles to distinguish itself from a larger white mainstream culture. Subcultures are a “formation of specific meanings and values as a collective solution to, or resolution of, problems arising from the blocked aspirations of members, or their ambiguous position in the wider society” (Scott 2015). As such, Hip Hop is a countermovement to dominant cultures that began in the U.S. but has now spread globally. Participation in MCing, DJing, breakdancing, graffiti, or knowledge sharing has given global youth access to what is commonly referred to as the ‘Hip Hop Nation.’ However, this nation is not delineated in terms of physical borders, nor is access to it regulated in terms of nationality, religion, ethnicity, or age (Forman, 2004c: 5f).⁸ It is helpful to consider Anderson’s notion of an ‘imagined community’ to grasp the shared sense of identification of the Hip Hop nation (2006: 6f). Although it is unlikely that all its members will ever know each other, let alone meet physically, Hip Hop fans, artists, producers, and scholars around the world are united by a shared idea of what Hip Hop is. Divergent tastes or animosities within the broader culture do not prevent its members from agreeing on a common denominator and the distinctive characteristics that define the Hip Hop *community*.

Rap music is only one form of Hip Hop expression, although it is the most commercialized form, and rappers have had a lasting impact on the development of the culture, both positive and negative. I use the inclusive terms ‘Hip Hop’ and ‘Hip Hop artists’ to refer to the entire

⁷ See also Chang (2007: 149) and Forman (2004c: 1-8).

⁸ See also Morgan (2014: 67).

culture, which includes DJs, breakdancers, graffiti artists, *and* rap artists. When I operate with ‘rap artists’ or ‘musicians,’ I mean only those artists who have made a name for themselves as rappers or lyricists. I will not use rap and Hip Hop interchangeably to avoid further misunderstanding and to emphasize the diversity of contributions to Hip Hop. While rappers, DJs, breakdancers, and graffiti artists make up the majority of agents in Hip Hop and Hip Hop life writing, some additional agents have made a name for themselves in the context of Hip Hop, including producers, entrepreneurs, and executives.

In connection with the clear distinction between Hip Hop and rap music, I must also address my spelling of Hip Hop. The spelling of ‘Hip Hop’ varies widely in academia, magazines, journalism, or by the artists themselves, ranging from lowercase to uppercase, hyphenated to unhyphenated. Rarely is there any discussion of the actual spelling or justification of a spelling. In this study, I deliberately use the capitalized, unhyphenated spelling, as opposed to the widely used ‘hip-hop.’ This choice is not arbitrarily chosen but has been proposed as the official spelling of the term by Hip Hop scholars Iglesias and Harris, who have challenged the APA and Merriam-Webster to change their official spelling of the term. They argue that “Hip Hop is a culture by definition and as a result is considered a proper noun and must be capitalized” (2022: 125). Furthermore, the lowercase, hyphenated version represents only the products of Hip Hop, which have too often been reduced to rap music (126). Since the subject of this study are the life writing publications of Hip Hop artists, and thus aims to contribute to Hip Hop scholarship, my writing style is based on the style suggested by scholars of the field and used in relevant Hip Hop journals such as *JHHS*.

Hip Hop is a worthwhile area of study because, as noted above, there are numerous intersections between space, gender, ‘race,’ and class. As categories of identification, space, gender, nation, and ‘race’ have been used to map the diverse experiences of African American Hip Hop performers living in the U.S. In this context, ‘race’ becomes relevant and will be briefly defined. At its core, ‘race’ is associated with easily identifiable physical characteristics, such as skin color or hair texture (Denton and Deane, 2010: 69).⁹ The history of African Americans is marked by the justification of their subordination, facilitated by stereotypes that portrayed blacks as the negative *other* in relation to a dominant white group. ‘Race’ is a relational category of identity because it is “a product of...difference from others in the system” (Hartley, 2020: 252).

⁹ Also consider Collins (2010: 3) and Branch and Jackson (2020: 35) for a more recent discussion of the term ‘race.’

According to Derrida, Western dichotomies “are arranged in a hierarchical order which gives the first term priority,” and the “second term...is considered the negative, corrupt, undesirable version of the first, a fall away from it” (1981: viii).¹⁰ These dichotomies and their corresponding identity categories, social norms, and values are social constructs and contingent on time, place, and culture (Weinberg, 2009: 283). Perpetuated understandings of being black, white, male, female, transgender, old, or young influence people’s lives (Lock and Strong, 2010: 7f). To account for the constructed nature of the term, I use terms such as ‘race’ and ‘racial’ only in quotation marks (Scott 2015). This clarifies that ‘race’ is a social construct and does not correspond to a biological reality.

In contrast to ‘race,’ groups that “share common cultural characteristics that differentiate them from other collectives in a society...form an ethnic group” (Scott 2015). Ethnicity is conceptualized to emphasize “the formation and maintenance of cultural boundaries” and includes language, history, or shared origins, but not physical characteristics (Barker and Jane, 2016: 341).¹¹ ‘African American’ is an ethnic label that is used for the descendants of peoples who were forcibly uprooted from their ancestral homelands in West Africa and brought to North America as enslaved people (Anderson and Stewart: 2007: 1). African immigrants who migrated to the United States on their own terms, constitute a small but growing group of foreign-born Black people of African descent living in the United States (Branch, 2020: 34f).¹² It is often unquestioningly assumed that African Americans and African immigrants share a unified culture, identity, and history because of their racial affinity. However, this perspective ignores the reasons, times, and circumstances of their immigration to the United States (Alex-Assensoh, 2009: 90). When I use the term ‘African American,’ I am referring to black people whose ancestors were taken from their homelands against their will to be used as slaves in the Americas.

As noted above, Hip Hop is characterized by the intersection of various identity categories. In the case of African American Hip Hop performers from the United States, identity categories such as space, ‘race,’ gender, sexual orientation, and many others intersect. This results in different experiences of discrimination and marginalization that are interdependent and overlapping. Collins has defined *intersectionality* as “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary...but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (2015: 2). By applying

¹⁰ See also Crenshaw (2000: 551).

¹¹ See Collins (2010: 5) and Denton and Deane (2010: 67ff).

¹² See also Lorenzi and Batalova (2022).

an intersectional approach in my dissertation, I consider experiences of discrimination and marginalization not as the result of one category of identification, but as the result of multiple identity categories interacting.¹³

In addition to space, gender, ‘race,’ and intersectionality, life writing publications demonstrate a central element of my study. I base my use of the following definition on the explanations of Smith and Watson, who have provided a widely cited and comprehensive guide to interpreting life narratives. According to them, life writing is an umbrella term for writing that focuses on retelling a life, either the authors’ own or someone else’s. Thus, the term ‘life writing’ encompasses both autobiographical and biographical writing and includes forms such as autobiography, memoir, diary, letter, or blog (2010: 4).¹⁴ The study of life writing encompasses “all documents or references pertaining to human lives; in so doing, it necessarily overcomes any distinction between the oral and the written” (Banerjee, 2019: 336).

Thus, I understand and use the term ‘life writing’ as a literary genre that encompasses all forms of narrating a life retrospectively. Of the various forms of retrospection, autobiographies and memoirs are probably the most popular. Lejeune has defined *autobiography* as a retrospective account of a natural person in which the history of that person is central (1994: 14; see also Anderson, 2011: 2). Since the era of Enlightenment, autobiography has become the model for Western life writing, emphasizing the autonomy of the individual above all else (Smith and Watson, 2010: 2f). While autobiographical writing is primarily concerned with the development of identity throughout a lifetime, memoirs are often said to focus on only one important segment of life and its relationship to the author’s identity (274f).¹⁵ With the growing popularity of memoirs, the boundaries between autobiography and the memoir have become blurred. However, a central difference is that memoirs are considered mass products of the memoir industry (Rak: 2016: 205), and seem to revolve around “‘sadness, triumph, and therapy’” (Köhler 2012; see also Lahusen, 2019: 630). I will use the terms ‘autobiography’ and ‘memoir’ as examples of life writing when referring to African American Hip Hop Life Writing publications.

¹³ At this point, I would like to point out that I am aware of my own privileged perspective as a white male author and that it is from this perspective that I approach the subject of racialized and marginalized subjects in the present work. I do not presume to speak for them, nor do I wish to speak on behalf of the African American authors and their works I analyze.

¹⁴ Smith and Watson (2010: 4) acknowledge that “self life writing” is a more appropriate way to distinguish autobiographical, that is self-referential, writing from biographical life writing. However, they reject the term for practical reasons.

¹⁵ See also Neumann (2013: 79f) and Lahusen (2019: 626).

In contrast, Smith and Watson define life *narrative* as standing in for all the acts available to a person for their self-presentation, including any written, visual, aural, digital, or performative presentation (2010: 4). Because I focus exclusively on self-referential written documents of life writing, either in the form of autobiographies or memoirs, I use life narrative to describe the narrative strategies a person uses to present his or her life in written form. By extension, I also use ‘life account’ to refer to a single self-referential report of a person’s life, that is, either a single autobiography or a single memoir. When I analyze autobiographies or memoirs, I will refer to them, when possible, as they are labeled. As I have shown how I use my thesis’s most relevant key terms, I now turn to explaining the course of how I will approach my analysis of African American Hip Hop Life Writing.

Approach

To address the multiple dimensions of the research questions and objectives outlined above, the dissertation moves from a general historical and theoretical consideration of Hip Hop, space, and gender to an application of these theories to Hip Hop life writing by African American authors. This approach is reflected in the structure of the thesis, which is divided into four parts. Each part has a distinct purpose and continually expands the understanding of life writing by Hip Hop artists and its implications with space and gender. These four parts are 1) the Historical and Theoretical Framework, 2) the Corpus and the Genre of African American Hip Hop Life Writing, 3) Representations of Space and Gender, and 4) Case Studies. I will now briefly explain the content of each of these chapters and their function in answering the research questions.

Part I lays the foundation by addressing the historical and theoretical framework. The first section of this part, Chapter 1.1, isolates Hip Hop culture and provides a brief historical overview, tracing the history of Hip Hop from its inception at a party in the Bronx in 1973, to its status as an urban subculture and, finally, to its rise as a global and influential cultural phenomenon. Chapter 1.2 focuses on gender theory and its implications for Hip Hop. It introduces the relevant key terms and concepts of gender studies before demonstrating their relevance to Hip Hop. The second section of Chapter 1.2 analyzes archetypes of masculinity and femininity that recur in Hip Hop lore, performance, and identity. Chapter 1.3, the third and final subsection of the first part, serves as an introduction to spatiality. In this chapter, I will demonstrate the multiple connections between space and place, space and power, and space and gender. Building on the theoretical explanations of space, I will present and critically examine the spaces most relevant to Hip Hop culture.

The second part of this dissertation seeks to provide an unprecedented characterization of the archive and genre of African American Hip Hop Life Writing. In Chapter 2.1, I approach this endeavor by providing an overview of Hip Hop Life Writing worldwide before focusing specifically on life writing accounts by U.S. authors. In Chapter 2.2, I will then attempt to characterize African American Hip Hop Life Writing as a genre by illustrating its primary and secondary genre elements as well as the elements unique to Hip Hop Life Writing publications. At this point, I will contribute innovatively to Hip Hop scholarship on the threshold of life writing studies and complement previous research by, for example, Balestrini.

While in the second part, I roughly describe the corpus of African American Hip Hop Life in terms of gender issues, in Part III, I will explicitly focus how authors represent space and gender in their autobiographies and memoirs. In Chapter 3.1, I identify the most relevant functions ascribed spaces and places. Using gender and spatial theory, I show how authors present themselves in their publications by relying on the implications of space and gender. Chapter 3.2 examines how Hip Hop authors represent their gender identities in their autobiographies and memoirs by referring to traditional gender patterns or questioning and challenging them.

Finally, in the fourth part of the dissertation, I will examine the issues of space and gender in detail through four case studies. While in chapters 2 and 3, I seek to answer the research question with examples from the entire corpus, in Chapter 4, I discuss four selected publications in detail. The four case studies are examined in their entirety as a publication, and I rely not only on the content-related representation of space and gender but also on paratextual indices that support the authors' intended self-representation. In doing so, I hope to broaden the understanding of Hip Hop Life Writing and to show that it is not only about Hip Hop performers and their publications but that they are also subject to the interests and marketing principles of the memoir industry.

Significance

The fiftieth anniversary of Hip Hop and the extensive archive of Hip Hop Life Writing indicate that the culture is old enough to reflect on itself. In addition to formal events such as the Hip Hop anniversary celebrations, Hip Hop artists are looking back at the culture and its impact on their careers and lives. In the context of the culture's growing influence on other areas as evidenced, for example, by the inclusion of breakdancing as a discipline in the 2024 Olympic Games, my dissertation is of current interest. In addition, Hip Hop autobiographies and memoirs by African American authors represent an area of research that is both understudied and complex due to the intersection of different lines of inquiry. Examining intersecting categories

of identity such as space, 'race,' class, and gender through Hip Hop autobiographies and memoirs helps to broaden our view of Hip Hop and the perspectives of predominantly African American protagonists. Too often, Hip Hop has been reduced to representing rap music. The statements made by artists in rap lyrics and music videos have also been too quickly cited as evidence of the alleged decline of the culture and its artists.

Much scholarship on Hip Hop has examined rap music, often one-sidedly presenting it as an expression of a seemingly male-dominated subculture that uses sexist and misogynistic language to objectify women (Harris, et al., 2022: 3f). Rose has rejected this one-sided perspective, suggesting that the discourse on Hip Hop's sexism, homophobia, and gender inequality has been framed in such a way as to suggest that Hip Hop is solely responsible for the spread of such harmful attitudes. She argues that scapegoating Hip Hop ignores that it is a reflection of a larger social context (2008: 8f). Moreover, in the context of space, Rose has warned that "[using Hip Hop] as 'proof' of black people's culpability for their circumstances undermines decades of solid and significant research on the larger structural forces that have plagued black urban communities" (9).

I aim to contribute to a more informed understanding of the African American experience and Hip Hop by showing how Hip Hop Life Writing provides a much more complex and expansive view of the culture from the perspective of those who have helped to create, shape, and develop it. Moreover, in the context of a culture that has been, and continues to be, sustained by marginalized voices, its inclusion in academia has raised questions about who is qualified to research and teach Hip Hop and what responsibilities scholars have in their positions of power. Harris and others have encouraged Hip Hop scholars to step outside the box of rap music scholarship, which "limits our understanding and potential of what Hip Hop is and can be and do" (2022: 3). With my research on African American Hip Hop Life Writing, I take up this task and contribute to Hip Hop scholarship without rehashing stereotypes of rap music, Hip Hop, and rappers. Instead, I aim to open new ways of looking at Hip Hop from the perspectives of space, gender, and life writing. By approaching Hip Hop as a research object in this way, I aim to demonstrate the diversity of both Hip Hop and Hip Hop Life Writing and to deconstruct one-sided portrayals of the culture as responsible for perpetuating stereotypes in the contexts of gender and space.

Part I

I. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 History of Hip Hop

1.1.1 From Subculture to Global Phenomenon

Given its humble beginnings, it is astonishing that rap music has become a billion-dollar business and has overshadowed much of the original diversity of Hip Hop. Rappers are very popular, especially in the United States, and their music and concerts generate huge revenues. However, it is not only rap music that makes artists successful, but their involvement in other industries such as film, fashion, and sports. The most successful artists have been celebrated as fashion ambassadors, generating immense profits for clothing brands such as Dior or Calvin Klein (Miller, 2011: 116-125). Contemporary Hip Hop differs significantly from its beginnings in the 1970s and 1980s. Today's artists come from diverse backgrounds that are far more affluent than those of the first artists. Furthermore, the examples mentioned at the beginning, such as the inclusion of breakdancing in the Olympics, illustrate the influence of Hip Hop on mainstream society.

Nevertheless, rap music remains the flagship of Hip Hop. There are several reasons as to why rap music is the most commercialized element of Hip Hop. First, it is the least resource-intensive of all the expressive elements of Hip Hop. DJs depend on expensive and sophisticated equipment, and break-dancers and graffiti artists need a space for their performances and art. A rapper needs little more than lyrical skills and a place to hone them. To practice their skills undisturbed, budding artists use whatever they can find in their immediate surroundings, including the dinner table or the basement. Curtis Hanson depicted this in his musical film *8 Mile* when protagonist Jimmy "B-Rabbit" Smith (portrayed by Eminem) is seen writing his lyrics on a messy-looking scrap of paper while riding the bus. Moreover, it is alluded to on the movie poster, which shows the same character taking notes on his hand.

Furthermore, Lusane (2004: 353) has argued that producing rap music is attractive and lucrative for labels because it does not require excessive production compared to other genres. There is rarely a need to incorporate live instruments or hire other artists, reducing the studio time required for production. Once convinced of an artist's lyrical talents, labels are willing to pay producers to deliver beats continuously, significantly reducing production costs.

The Rise of a Subculture

Hip Hop was born from poverty, scarcity, mismanagement, and unemployment. It is the South Bronx in the 1970s where a massive influx of poor residents led to a housing and job crisis

(Diallo, 2010b: 1-4).¹⁶ While landlords made more money by neglecting their tenants, government policies of abandonment and cuts in social services did little to prevent further escalation. Numerous arson cases in the South Bronx resulted in burned-out ruins that created a cityscape of abandonment and neglect (Chang, 2007: 13-18). The Bronx became an unreconstructed center of poverty that even merited a visit from Mother Teresa and several presidents and presidential candidates, including Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, who drew attention to the deplorable conditions (Fernandez 2007; Marcano 1997). In 1986, the unemployment rate for black youth rose to 43 percent and did not decline significantly until the 1990s (Lusane, 2004: 352; Fairlie 1999). Youth unemployment was a significant factor; as Chang succinctly put it, “[if] blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, [Hip] [Hop] culture would arise from the conditions of no work” (2007: 13).

One of the founders of Hip Hop, Kool DJ Herc, who immigrated from Jamaica in 1967, brought the mobile sound system of his homeland to the South Bronx (George 2004: 45; see also Hebdige, 2004: 224). Simultaneously operating two turntables using electronic mixers and sound systems was the hallmark of Jamaican DJs and their dancehall culture. These mobile discos allowed their operators to set up dance events in any location large enough to accommodate an audience, making them independent of booked venues (Stolzoff, 2000: 1-4). In the U.S., these systems would become characteristic of the sound of Hip Hop. When Hip Hop’s Jamaican roots are acknowledged, it is usually in tribute to Kool DJ Herc. However, the ties between Hip Hop and the Caribbean are much more profound, as Hip Hop has replicated Jamaica’s dancehall culture in many ways. Like Hip Hop, dancehall proffered a “black lower-class youth” the productive means to “articulate and project a distinct identity...[and] deal with the endemic problems of poverty, racism, and violence” (Stolzoff, 2000:1). Dancehall culture permeates every aspect of Jamaican life, including clothing, fashion, personal style, language, media, and advertising (Williams 2010). Moreover, in its use of public space, Hip Hop is very similar to dancehall culture, whose performers, before conquering the eponymous dancehalls, performed in lodges, courtyards, abandoned buildings, and at private parties (Stolzoff, 2000: 48).¹⁷

The combination of Jamaican dance hall techniques with Caribbean influences, African diaspora elements, and funk and soul music led to the emergence of Hip Hop as an evolutionary

¹⁶ Jonnes (2002) and McLaughlin and Gomez (2019) detail the South Bronx’s varied history, from disintegration to becoming a vibrant community, in more detail. See Nietzsche (2020) for a discussion of representations of the Bronx in popular culture.

¹⁷ Galvin (2014) and, in particular, Stanley-Niaah (2007, 2010, 2020) have written extensively on the history of dancehall culture and Black Atlantic performance culture.

hybrid culture (Forman, 2004d: 390).¹⁸ According to Hazzard-Donald, the distinctive practice of rap, namely talking over music, was already known as “toasting,” a musical form characteristic of Trinidadian calypso that was popular until the advent of Jamaican reggae in the 1970s (2004: 515; see also Samuels, 2004: 148).

Jamaican DJs have created niches from which figures like Afrika Bambaataa have shaped Hip Hop. Bambaataa was a former leader of the Black Spades who sought to instill a sense of community regardless of gang affiliation by founding the Zulu Nation (Hebdige 2004: 225; Muzo 2019: 70-73). As a DJ, he crossed musical boundaries by bringing the sound of the Bronx to Manhattan’s predominantly white punk rock clubs (Chang, 2007: 92f; George, 2004: 45-56). Bambaataa’s innovative song mixes (including samples from German electronic music band Kraftwerk) particularly appealed to white punk rock audiences. Hip Hop and punk rock found mutual attraction and affirmation in their opposition to mainstream culture. The influence of Jewish record producer Rick Rubin, the founder of Def Jam Recordings, further exemplifies the close ties between white punk rock and Hip Hop. Rubin has promoted rappers like LL Cool J, Public Enemy, and Run-DMC. One of Rubin’s protégés, The Beastie Boys, started as a punk rock band (Light, 2004: 140; Samuels 2004).

At the end of the 1970s, Hip Hop came of age as its main protagonists and audiences grew older. They were no longer satisfied with attending house parties frequented by a primarily underage audience. DJs found that gigs in real clubs were much more profitable, while the maturing fans were attracted to nightclubs of drinking age. At the same time, The Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” inspired hype for rapping and caused a wave of new rap acts by white artists and comedians.¹⁹ With the proliferation of rappers, the DJ’s influence diminished. Record companies were looking for ways to profit from the new wave of rappers and for channels to market rap music accordingly (Chang, 2007: 129-134).

In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration failed to respond adequately to the plights of African American communities, including structural racism, inadequate education, and a lack of profitable sources of income. Instead, “drug addiction, laziness, and the inferiority of African American culture” were cited as reasons for the conditions of these communities (Neal, 2004b:

¹⁸ See also Hager (1984), Toop (2000), Hebdige (2004: 230; 2010). Jamaican and Latin American influences on Hip Hop have been mentioned in research but have yet to be explored in depth. In this context, the research project *Hip-Hop as a Transcultural Phenomenon: Jamaican and Latin American Cultural Signifiers in U.S. Hip-Hop (New York and Los Angeles, c.1970s - 1990s)* (Bern at the University of Bern is an example of further research in this area.

¹⁹ Examples include the Austrian band Erste Allgemeine Verunsicherung (“Alpenrap” in 1983), the German band G.L.S.-United (“Rapper’s Deutsch” in 1980), Rodney Dangerfield (“Rodney Rappin” in 1983), and Mel Brooks (“The Hitler Rap” in 1984).

368). Police brutality and misconduct further complicated matters in New York City (Chang, 2007: 196). In their 1982 song “The Message,” Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five addressed these conditions. While “Rapper’s Delight” was a fun and entertaining song, “The Message” was poignant and epitomized the anger and frustration of neglected and marginalized communities in U.S. inner cities (Chang, 2007: 179). However, Watkins cautions against presenting Hip Hop as a clear-cut response to the shortcomings of the Reagan era. Many neighborhoods in New York City were already structurally deficient and impoverished when Hip Hop began to develop in the 1970s, long before Reagan entered the White House, and his policies took effect (2004: 567). Nevertheless, Hip Hop performers demonstrated resourcefulness by appropriating what was available, including public spaces such as parks, streets, or basements.

The emergence of Run-DMC shifted the momentum of the early Hip Hop culture to the southern New York City borough of Queens (Chang, 2007: 203). Particularly in terms of clothing and stage performance, Run-DMC set the tone for the future of rap music performances. Dressed in all black with Kangol hats, gold chains, and their iconic white Adidas sneakers, Run-DMC dressed like their fans and became the first rap group to be endorsed by a sportswear company in 1985 (Middlebrook, 2007: 80; Miller, 2011: 116-125). After Run-DMC, Public Enemy emerged as another influential rap group of the 1980s. The artists, hailing from the Long Island suburb, were “children of successful black middle-class professionals” who rebelled against “unequal treatment by the police, of never quite overcoming the color of their skin” (Samuels, 2004: 149). These artists “came of age in a deteriorating human rights situation characterized by police brutality, racial profiling, rising rates of homicide, drug epidemics, draconian sentencing guidelines” and rebelled against these conditions with their criticizing lyrics and political activism (Woods, 2007: 64f).

Western Expansion

In the 1980s, a similar situation developed on the West Coast in the Los Angeles Metropolitan area, where the demand for affordable housing led to an increase in the concentration of housing in the Watts neighborhood, which by the mid-1940s had grown to the highest point west of Mississippi (Chang, 2007: 308). At the end of the 1970s, several large manufacturing plants were closed, and unemployment worsened the situation for Watts and its surrounding districts of Compton, South Central, and Inglewood (307-315). Chang vividly contrasted the characters of the East and West Coasts and their respective influences on Hip Hop:

What the South Bronx had been to the 1970s, South Central would be for the 1980s. It was the epitome of a growing number of inner-city nexuses where deindustrialization, devolution Cold War adventurism, the drug trade, gang

structures and rivalries, arms profiteering, and police brutality were combining to destabilize poor communities and alienate massive numbers of youths (315).

The Watts neighborhood emerged as the birthplace of a new interpretation of rap music on the West Coast, infused with the spatial specifics of Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, gangster rap combined “claims to street authenticity,...teen rebellion...urban stereotype...individualist ‘get mine credo’” and, thereby, appealed to black and white youth (320).²⁰ Particularly after N.W.A.’s album *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), the attention to the locale, the ‘hood,’ became more pronounced in rap music. Every rap fan could relate to their message, and every neighborhood in the country could become *a Compton* or *a Watts* (319ff). In 1992, Los Angeles native Dr. Dre established his iconic sound as a legitimate counter-image to the styles of the East Coast and legitimized Los Angeles as an equal to New York (Diallo 2010a: 234-238).

Gangster rap started its success story in Los Angeles and was probably the most successful and widespread subgenre of rap music in the 1990s and 2000s. As notorious as gangster rap and its tapestry of masculine violence, misogyny, patriarchy, and crime has become, Rose (2008: 2) has emphasized that before corporations marketed it to the mainstream, early gangster rap had its appeal in terms of social critique. At that time, rap music featured more creative, open-minded, and inclusive styles, and artists promoted gangster life as the only viable alternative for black youth in the face of economic stagnation. In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, however, gangster rap evolved into a commercially driven, one-dimensional, stereotype-laden caricature of its former self. In doing so, Rose notes, it was “pandering to America’s racist and sexist lowest common denominator” (2008: 2). The patterns of identification diminished while the record sales increased. As a result, the lifestyles of gangsters, pimps, and thugs within the black American ghetto were paraded through the media and disseminated globally. Subsequently, many harmful tropes of rap, such as a penchant for violence and crime and the objectification of (black) women, have been transferred to and consumed by a global audience.

Although the social and urban conditions in New York and Los Angeles were similar, two different trends in rap music emerged. According to Forman, “narrative imagery of vicious gang-oriented activities” was unique to the West Coast style of rap music (2004e: 214). Furthermore, artists from Compton and Watts responded to their surroundings with a “West coast style of rap that narrates experiences and fantasies specific to life as a poor young, black,

²⁰ Despite the prevalence and popularity of gangster rap, there are relatively few comprehensive works on the genre. See, for example, Quinn (2005), Viator (2020), or Baker (2018), who provides a chronological overview of the development of gangster rap, including interviews with the most popular artists.

male subject in Los Angeles” (Rose, 1994: 59). Cross, on the other hand, identified West Coast rap as a direct response to the front of rappers that had emerged on the East Coast (1993: 37). Forman supports Cross’ notion by emphasizing that “Straight Outta Compton” was not concerned with economic inequality but instead treated Compton as an abstract space, like Grandmaster Flash’s notion of New York, presented in “The Message” (2004e: 214).

Toward a Global Culture

Although the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 laid the foundation for the emergence of national broadcasting and radio stations, it took some time until a national network of radio stations developed (CPB n.d.). Accordingly, rap music listeners in New York were not necessarily exposed to music from other cities. Instead, each major city or metropolitan area had its radio station that played local or regional records. In many cases, persistence, chance, and sometimes sheer luck were the deciding factors, and often, a career was stopped in its tracks because of a lack of connections. Despite some appeal to rap as music from the ‘streets,’ black radio stations were mostly indifferent. The exceptions were WBLS in New York and KDAY in Los Angeles, which launched a format devoted entirely to rap music in 1984 (Forman, 2002: 128). In addition to public radio stations, college radio stations were instrumental in accepting rap music on the radio (Collier, 2019: 16f). MTV responded to this growing popularity by launching *Yo! MTV Raps*, a program dedicated exclusively to rap music, in 1988. This development fueled the global consumption of rap music and gave it a competitive edge over radio (Viator, 2020: 193-197; see also Payne, 2019: 73ff). It was not until the mid-1990s that radio stations began incorporating rap music to appeal to a teenage audience.

Lyrical and Actual Wars

The development of Hip Hop and rap music in the United States in the late 1980s led to the emergence of additional Hip Hop hubs like Miami, Houston, or the Bay area. In 1990, MC Hammer became the first rap artist to successfully cross into pop music with his hit “U Can’t Touch This.” This period was characterized by innovative approaches to production techniques and an increased use of samples. In addition to gangster rap, artists became more politicized and addressed various socio-political issues. However, along with many success stories, there was criticism from the mainstream media and verbal and physical clashes between artists from different camps. A long-running feud between East and West Coast artists escalated in the mid-1990s with the deaths of two rap icons: Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. Central to this conflict, as Neal argues, was a competition for authenticity as “one ‘hood was deemed more

authentically [Hip Hop], and by extension, more authentically black, than the other” (2004a: 58).

While the East Coast and West Coasts were engaged in a lyrical and literal war, rappers from the South established themselves as significant artists. Sarig (2007) helped coin the term “Third Coast,” which is used to describe the rap scenes from Atlanta, Miami, New Orleans, and Houston. However, rappers from New York and Los Angeles denied Southern rappers any skill and accused them of perpetuating black stereotypes. This criticism denied Southern rap its right to exist among the plethora of expressions of black identity and implied a marginalization of Southern Hip Hop art.

From its humble roots in the poor neighborhoods of major U.S. cities and its subculture status, Hip Hop has become an accepted part of mainstream society. The conditions of scarcity encouraged the early Hip Hop pioneers to use what little they had to achieve their goals. Long before it was commercialized and rap music became its flagship, Hip Hop developed off the beaten path and broke the rules of long-established conventions. It has created new fashion styles, introduced new musical techniques (scratching), allowed individuals to become artists with little or no musical skill by not relying on bands or instruments, discarded notions of musical ownership by recycling other forms of music (sampling), and celebrated social outcasts like criminals and drug dealers in lyrics and videos.

1.1.2 Overview of Hip Hop Studies

In a 2022 article titled “Funk What You Heard: Hip Hop is a Field of Study,” several Hip Hop scholars, led by Travis Harris, affirmed that Hip Hop Studies is a valuable field of inquiry with a bright future. While Hip Hop has been around for half a century, Hip Hop scholarship has grown, especially since the turn of the millennium.²¹ While graffiti,²² breakdancing,²³ and DJing have received their fair share of scholarly attention, rap music and its associated videos have attracted the lion’s share of scholarly interest.²⁴

Today, Hip Hop studies have become an accepted interdisciplinary field of inquiry, combining perspectives from musicology, sociology, history, literary studies, cultural studies,

²¹ Woldu (2010) has provided an overview on Hip Hop scholarship, beginning with Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise* in the mid-1990s.

²² See Rahn (2002), Castleman (2004), Kimvall (2014), Miller (2015), and Ross (2016) for contributions on graffiti.

²³ Banes (2004), Washington (2007), Schloss (2009), Holman (2012); Johnson (2015), and Rode (2016) have furthered the understanding of breakdancing in the context of Hip Hop.

²⁴ For DJing, see Katz (2012) and Miyakawa (2007).

critical race theory, psychology, anthropology, popular culture studies, feminist studies, and religious studies (Miller, 2014: 9). Educational institutions around the world have incorporated the study of Hip Hop into their curricula or created special projects dedicated to its further study. For example, the Hutchinson Center for African and African American Research (2024) established a Hip Hop archive and research center in 2002, while the University of Arizona offers a minor in Hip Hop. In 2007, the University of Wuppertal launched a Hip Hop Academy, while Cornell University established the Cornell Hip Hop Collection, which has amassed about 250,000 items, ranging from albums and photographs to posters and interview material (2020).

The number of international conferences recognizing Hip Hop as their primary object of analysis has increased over the past decade. In 2018, Sina Nietzsche of the Technical University of Dortmund founded the European Hip Hop Studies Network (EHHS), under whose auspices several annual conferences on Hip Hop have taken place. In 2014, Virginia Commonwealth University launched the *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*. In 2020, *The Global Hip Hop Studies Journal* was founded.²⁵ In the summer of 2021, Manchester Central Library hosted the Manchester Hip Hop Archive Exhibition, which featured a variety of items from the history of Hip Hop, including posters, photographs, sketchbooks, and oral histories (Manchester 2024).

²⁵ Harris (2019a; 2019b) has contributed to the research of Global Hip Hop Studies.

1.2 Introduction to Black Masculinities and Femininities in Hip Hop

1.2.1 Key Terms of Gender Theory

In 2019, NBA athlete Dwyane Wade publicly announced his child's transgender identity in a Thanksgiving post on social media. What was intended as an innocuous celebration of family, solidarity, and love was met with approval and harsh criticism. The cause for these reactions was Wade's 12-year-old son Zaya (Zion), who dressed in a crop top and flashed fake nails. Homophobic and transphobic comments questioned the parents' reasoning. It was the rapper Boosie Badazz who also enraged the LGBTQ community by publicly berating and insulting Wade for supporting his child's transgender identity (Aniftos 2020). In an interview, Wade's wife, actress Gabrielle Union, reacted by alleging that the rapper was secretly gay, to which Boosie Badazz reacted with two Twitter posts citing his "ghetto hero manhood" as proof of his heterosexuality (@BoosieBadass 2022). [fn1](#) This incident vividly illustrates the often-heated debates and discourses on questions of gender identity and illustrates the interrelatedness of gender, space, and rap music in which an insinuation of homosexuality is refuted with a reference to 'ghetto masculinity,' its apparent antithesis.

Gender identity is one of many aspects that emerge in social interaction. Scholars argue that different social situations cause certain aspects to become relevant while others become less salient (Vignoles, et al. 2011: 4; Blommaert, 2009: 203). Thereby, identity consists of a "person's self-chosen or ascribed commitments, personal characteristics, and beliefs about herself; roles and positions in relation to significant others; and her membership in social groups and categories" (Vignoles, et al. 2011: 4). Thus, identity appears in the form of the individual, relational, and the collective. While individual identity emphasizes a person's agency in constructing his or her identity, including individual goals, beliefs, ideal behaviors, morals, and intended life plan, relational identity implies that people take on different roles as they interact with others throughout their lives. For example, parents recognize their children as teenagers, while customers in a supermarket understand their role in relation to employees. Finally, collective identity includes what a person voluntarily or involuntarily shares with others, such as nationality, religion, or ethnicity. A person can contribute individually to a group, while the collective shapes the person's beliefs and attitudes (Ashmore, et al. 2004).²⁶ Moreover, material

²⁶ See also Taylor (1997) and Schildkraut (2007).

possessions (clothing, status symbols, artifacts, and places) have been suggested as contributing to a person's identity (Vignoles, et al. 2011: 4).²⁷

Collective identity categories, such as nationality, gender, or 'race' have long been assumed as 'natural.' However, the constructed nature of identity categories and their mutual conditionality in the context of experiences of discrimination has taken hold in many research fields.²⁸ Individuals can construct their identity independently but may encounter constraints from society that prevent the full exploration of these identity aspects. For example, the desire to explore gender identity outside of a binary gender order may fail due to conservative belief systems (Vignoles, et al. 2011: 12).²⁹ Similarly, Hartley argues that personal identities are "'positioned' by social structures, forces and powers," including nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, age, and even subcultures and their modes of self-representation (2020: 156). To further emphasize the relational aspect of identity, Blommaert argues that despite the desire to join or leave a group, individuals are often "*grouped* by others in processes of – often institutionalized – social categorization called *othering*" (2009: 205).

The assignment of meanings, values, and norms accompanies this labeling. In some cases, these meanings are positive and can benefit the individual. In other cases, labels have pejorative connotations and can lead to discrimination and marginalization. These labels are, first and foremost, tools of language and, as they are repeatedly affirmed, find their way into broader society. However, insisting that social classifications are invented and "objectively not existing" ignores reality as the labeling of people as 'black,' 'female,' or 'working class' has severe consequences for the individual (Jeffries, 2007: 216). It is a discourse that "transforms our environment into a socially and culturally meaningful one...under rather strict conditions that are both linguistic...and sociocultural...and...cannot be exploited by everyone in the same way" (Blommaert, 2009: 4). Critics of this notion often refer to language as a concept too abstract to explain the world. However, while language may be intangible, the meanings it produces are not. Discourses are always under the influence of current social, historical, and cultural contexts and the institutionalized practices that result from them.

Sex and Gender

First, distinguishing between sex and gender is crucial to understanding the underlying issues of masculinity and femininity. Gender is understood as the "culturally specific characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity" and is therefore detached from a person's physical

²⁷ See also Belk (1988) and Mittal (2006).

²⁸ See for example Narváez, et al. (2009), Wetherell (2010), Gregg (2011), Bussey (2011), Thomas and Azmitia (2014), Jenkins (2014), Elliott (2016, 2020), Syed (2018), Côté (2018), and Kroger (2019).

²⁹ See also Collins (2010), and Oyserman (2011).

composition (Hawkesworth, 2016: 36; Hartley, 2020: 145ff). In the context of gender, I mainly refer to Judith Butler's concept of gender as a performative act. Butler's understanding of gender transforms labels such as man or woman into an inventory of socially accepted performances that people emulate, regardless of whether their bodies conform with what society has determined men and women to look like. Instead of being a gender, gender "is something that one does. Gender is something that is enacted; [it is] seen as a series of acts, not a fact" (Battaglia, 2010: 306; Butler, 1990: 6). The assumed 'naturalness' of gender is most vividly exposed in exaggerated gender performances, for example, in parodies or when gender expectations are defied (Butler, 1990: 145f). Butler has illustrated this with Harris Glenn Milstead's drag performance, "whose impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of impersonation that passes as the real" (1990: x). Butler's theory opposes perceptions that consider gender 'natural' and static. After all, it is another social construct that can be deconstructed, challenged, and subverted.

Gender Binarism

As advanced as Butler's concept and similar theories may appear, it often clashes with widespread perceptions of gender as static, natural, and binary. The binary gender order compels every human to identify as a man or a woman. To become accepted as such, people have internalized rules that determine "who can giggle, who can cry, who will fight, who should play with cars, and who with dolls" (Gilbert, 2009: 94). These rules are perpetuated by social, political, economic, and cultural institutions and practices (Wade and Ferree, 2015: 62-70). The enforcement of gender rules has led to apparently distinct characteristics of men and women. For instance, women have been portrayed as "nurturant, suggestible, talkative, emotional, intuitive, and sexually loyal," while men were assigned attributes suggesting the opposite, including "aggressive, tough-minded, taciturn, rational, analytic and promiscuous" (Connell and Pearse, 2015: 42). These attributions have helped to cement the hegemony of the binary gender order as 'natural.' However, studies have shown that men and women hardly differ across various characteristics, including, for example, intelligence (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974). Focusing on differences rather than similarities significantly hinders bringing about change (Barker and Jane, 2016: 355; Connell and Pearse, 2015: 42ff). People who choose not to perform behaviors that identify them as the gender assigned to them by society often face backlash, experience trauma, or must suppress parts of their identity.

Like other binary oppositions governing life in the Western world, the binary gender order demonstrates a hierarchized dichotomy, resulting in "a margin and a center, insiders and outsiders, normals and others" (Lorber, 2006: 451; Derrida, 1981: viii). The proclamation of a

male/female dichotomy, combined with assigned rules of behavior described as ‘natural,’ has helped to consolidate masculinity as the dominant gender against which women and people identifying as transgender or non-binary are defined. The binary gender order and its systemic enforcement have long been perceived as equally ‘natural’ (Gilbert, 2009: 93; Hartley, 2019: 146).

Emerging from a binary-gender order is heteronormativity, the perception that heterosexuality is the only permissible and ‘natural’ form of attraction between people (Gilbert, 2009: 97f). According to Warner, heterosexuality has become “the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist” (1993: xxi). Consequently, heterosexuality is constructed as the sole way of human bonding, vilifying other forms of human coexistence and desire as ‘unnatural.’ In this context, Wittig questioned the relationship between gender and sexual orientation by proclaiming, “lesbians are not women” because, within a heterosexual order, women can only exist as sexual partners for men (1992: 32). Resulting from this is a hierarchy of genders, ensuring that men and masculine attributes are valued higher while women and feminine characteristics are devalued (Gilbert, 2009: 97f).³⁰ Androcentrism, the favoring of masculinity and the marginalization of femininity, results in a perception that “imbues men, masculine people, and masculinized activities with more status, value, and power than women, feminine people, and feminized activities” (Wade and Ferree, 2015: 120).

Within the binary gender order, masculinity and masculine ideals are focal points. Derrida described the system of thought, which stipulates masculinity and men as central and the norm, as phallogocentrism. He criticized it for its marginalization of alternative viewpoints and the hierarchization of power in society (Griffin 2017). The favoritism of masculinity and masculine attributes has led to the devaluation of feminine attributes, which has led to gender inequality, including the underrepresentation of women in positions of power. For instance, although the bars have been lifted for women in many professions formerly dominated by men, the workplace still presents one area where gender inequality remains pervasive. To a great extent, women still lack equality in the job market, including earnings and representation in higher positions. A plethora of empirical and theoretical studies on discrimination against women in the workplace have been published over the last two decades (Goodman 2010; Padavic, et al. 2019). For example, women in the US are paid less than men, and Black women are paid about 63 percent of what white men earn (AAUW, 2019: 2). While the devaluation of women’s

³⁰ See also Wade and Ferree (2015: 120) and Thiele (2013).

performances and underrepresentation of women in powerful positions may be attributable to the binary order and heteronormativity, the intersectional perspective cannot be ignored in this context.

Challenging Gender Binarism

In addition to these examples of gender inequality, emotional and physical discrimination in the form of sexism has gained more attention in recent years. Activist movements like the MeToo Movement and the #MuteR.Kelly campaign have increasingly challenged systemic sexism and gender inequality in many contexts.³¹ In addition, the increased visibility of people who identify as non-binary has led to changes in legislation around the world. In Germany, ‘diverse’ was introduced as a third category of gender identification, while Canada has added the category ‘X’ to its passports (Eddy 2018; Chokshi 2017). In the United States, identifying as non-binary has become an option in many states (Savage 2019; Silverman 2019). However, these and similar efforts are not unproblematic, as people accepting the binary gender order rarely feel the same imperative to dismantle it as non-binary people. For example, critics of gender neutrality often point to inconvenience when language is adapted to acknowledge non-binary people (Vergoossen, et al. 2020).³²

Breaking down rigid gender concepts and increasing the visibility of non-binary identities has also arrived in Hip Hop, where today, the diversity of gender identities is higher than ever before. Rappers like Lil Nas X, Cakes Da Killa, Le1f, or Mykki Blanco have either openly acknowledged their homosexuality or are advocates for the LGBTQ community. At this point, however, I must emphasize that non-binarism does *not* play a role in the corpus of life narratives I have selected. None of the artists studied identify outside of the gender binary. I would like to point out that a discussion of Hip Hop masculinity and femininity does not mean that non-binary identities are less influential in Hip Hop, but that they are not part of my corpus. Masculinity and femininity demonstrate the most significant gender concepts regarding the discussion of African American Hip Hop Life Writing. Therefore, the following subchapter outlines masculinity and femininity to help explain the gendered implications prevalent in Hip Hop.

Masculinities

Since the 1990s, masculinity studies have dispelled the assumption that there is only one concept of masculinity. Scholars like Connell (1987, 1995, 2002), Kimmel (1996, 2004, 2016),

³¹ #MuteR.Kelly is a campaign launched in 2017 that aims to convict African American R&B singer R. Kelly of sexual abuse, sex with underage girls, and child pornography.

³² See also Muchhi-Faina (2005).

Biddulph (1994), Johnson and Meinhof (1997), Nixon (1997), and Pfeil (1995) have called attention to a plurality of masculinities by indicating their variation across time, class, age, sexuality, 'race,' and various other social parameters. Periods of upheaval may lead to a reinterpretation of men's status in a variety of contexts, including the work environment or politics (Reeser, 2016: 29f). For example, the political and social upheavals following the Second World War and "a culture of celebrity, image, entertainment and marketing, all underpinned by consumerism" significantly affected and altered the idea of dominant Western masculinity (Barker and Jane, 2016: 377). In 2015, German literary critic Stefan Horlacher proclaimed masculinity studies as "a social necessity" and, thereby, highlighted research studying the detrimental effects some masculinities have on men themselves (2015: 1). Moreover, a deeper understanding of men's health, including physical ailments, addictions, life expectancy, or mental health issues widened the understanding of masculinity (2f). Scholars have explored how the coexistence of various masculinities results in the appreciation and marginalization of certain masculinities and how access to power is established or denied (Reeser, 2016: 31; Connell, 1995: 37).

Hegemonic Masculinity

Although a plurality of masculinities exists, 'hegemonic' masculinity stands out as the one that describes a man as "*in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power" (Kimmel, 2016: 63; see also Wilchins, 2019: 31f). Connell described hegemonic masculinity as how men "legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance" (1995: 92; see also Reeser, 2015: 20f). Like 'normal' masculinities change, hegemonic masculinities are also subject to change. However, characteristics such as "heroic, independent, aggressive, unemotional, and heterosexual" appear as static traits (Mooney-Somers and Ussher, 2010: 355). Thus, (American) masculinity is characterized by its incessant rejection of femininity, its pursuit of wealth, status, and power, its reliability in times of crisis, its rejection of emotions, and its penchant for risk-taking and violence (Kimmel, 2016: 63). Men accumulate power, status, wealth, and women to underscore their claim to masculinity and to become seen as *real* men in the eyes of other men because women, following the logic of hegemonic masculinity, cannot grant this form of approval. Kimmel has called this interrelation of masculinity "a homosocial enactment" because men rely on other men to have their masculinity confirmed (2016: 65). This also explains how the accumulation and display of women by one man serves as a demonstration of power to other men.

Connell has defined hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization as the four types of relations masculinities can assume (1995: 37). In this network, the subordination of

homosexual masculinity manifests in the denial of access to power, physical violence, discrimination, or personal insult. From the perspective of hegemonic masculinity, homosexual masculinity is subordinated to the same degree as femininity and degraded with a rich vocabulary of pejorative terms (Connell, 2005: 78). Complicit masculinities, however, are granted the privileges that result from subordinating women and ‘weaker’ masculinities without performing hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, after all, is only realized by a small minority of men (79f). Finally, marginalized masculinities “are dependent on hegemonic masculinity for authorization” (Reeser, 2015: 22; 2016: 31f). Connell provides the example of black athletes who benefit from a patriarchal society that favors the actions of men. Black athletes enjoy a particular reputation, but their admiration does not positively affect other black men (1995: 37; see also Reeser, 2015: 22).

In the context of hegemonic masculinity, men are often attributed with a ‘natural’ sex drive to justify their dominance in terms of sexual intercourse. The “male sex drive,” as described by Hollway, implies that men have a natural urge they act out with women (1984: 63). Various studies have confirmed that Hollway’s perception is still valid today. These studies have found, for example, that “sexuality is the central site in men’s struggles to become masculine” (Holland, et al. 1994: 124). Moreover, a recent study has exemplified Hollway’s ‘male sexual drive’ discourse in Australian youth. The study found that male adolescents desired more sex and associated this desire with their identity as men. In addition to reducing sexuality to physical sensation, respondents also indicated that they need to keep their sex drive under control to avoid sexually inappropriate or behavior deemed ‘animalistic’ (Mooney-Somers and Ussher, 2010: 358f). Hegemonic masculinity is closely linked to the view that there is a natural male sexual drive with which hegemonic men legitimize their ‘right’ to have heterosexual sex with women.

Masculinity and the ‘Other’

The fear of becoming associated with weakness, epitomized by femininity or homosexuality, demonstrates an essential aspect of hegemonic masculinity. Thereby, homophobia does not merely represent an aversion against homosexuality, homosexual practices, or homosexual affection but is “the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (Kimmel, 2016: 65). Moreover, this fear results in shame over the insight that one lacks what it takes to be considered as a real man. To be read as masculine and become accepted within manhood, supposedly masculine behaviors are aggrandized and overdone.

Exaggerated masculinity finds its confirmation in the degradation of its *other*: women and homosexual men. Kimmel argues that women threaten masculinity as they epitomize everything men are typically not associated with, including the home and care work. Women have always represented the *other* against which masculinity defined itself. However, throughout US history, the image of the ‘emasculated’ and impotent man was projected on European men, enslaved Black people, Native Americans, Italian and Irish immigrants, Jews, and Japanese during the Second World War, and Vietnamese during the Vietnam War (Kimmel, 2016: 67).³³ Yet, within the heterosexual matrix, gay men and homosexuality demonstrate a constant antithesis to ‘normative’ masculinity.³⁴

Hypermasculinity

Since the convictions of Harvey Weinstein, R. Kelly, and other male celebrities who exploited their position of power to abuse and harass women, public discourse about the negative, destructive, and harmful behaviors of masculinity has gathered momentum. This behavior has been labeled as ‘toxic’ and publicly paraded as the pinnacle of problematic masculinity. Although defining toxic masculinity has been extremely difficult, the term has been used for descriptive purposes without a contestable definition available (Harrington, 2021: 346-349). According to Harrington, its use has not undermined the binary gender order but “provided a framework that essentialized marginalized men as aggressive and criminal, discursively packaged in a way that it was presented as concern for men’s well-being” (348). Because of these reasons, Harrington advises against using ‘toxic’ masculinity as an analytical category. The term’s vagueness is also demonstrated in definition attempts, which list behaviors and attributes that accord with hypermasculinity but do not refer to it. I desist from using ‘toxic’ masculinity as an analytical category for similar reasons and point to hypermasculinity as more suitable for my object of investigation.

Hypermasculinity has been prevalent in popular culture, Hip Hop culture, and various musical genres. The prefix ‘hyper’ points to an exaggerated performance of masculinity that exists out of the ordinary. Burstyn has defined *hypermasculinity* as “an exaggerated ideal of manhood linked mythically and practically to the role of the warrior” (1999: 4; see also Craig, 2009: 368). Central to hypermasculinity is an affinity to “violence as a way to success and [one that] defines success as the appropriation of property – which includes women – to achieve high status and accumulate social capital” (De Dauw and Connell, 2020: 4). Hence,

³³ See also Arnold and Brady (2011).

³⁴ See, for example, the work of Plummer (1999), who examines the levels of homophobia in different social contexts. See also Nayak and Kehily (2010) who do the same for the specific example of the school.

hypermasculinity can be interpreted as an exaggerated performance of behaviors that have become associated with masculinity. Overstating masculinity in this form is an attempt to strongly demarcate oneself from femininity and supposedly ‘weaker’ masculinities.

Femininity

Recent social changes and a growing body of feminist research on gender issues have encouraged women to selectively interpret, re-interpret, or reject stereotypical perceptions of femininity. While the first ‘wave’ of feminism, during the 19th and 20th centuries, opposed slavery and fought for temperance, suffrage, access to higher education, or child custody (Delap, 2011: 319), activist feminism from the 1960s to the 1990s mainly targeted beauty pageants and similar venues parading the female body (Barker and Jane, 2016: 344f). In 1970, the emergence of the scholarly field of women’s studies recorded its milestone of academic recognition when the first women’s studies program was established in San Diego (Salper 2011). However, Barker and Jane pointed out that using the term ‘waves’ to track feminist activism is not undisputed. They argue that equating historical periods to waves conveys a simplified and reduced idea of highly complex historical periods with inner divisions (2016: 344f; see also Nicholson, 2010: xii-4).

However, postfeminist movements after the 1990s probably had the most significant impact on challenging stereotypical ideas of femininity. Postfeminist research adopted an intersectional approach when it acknowledged the interrelatedness of ‘race,’ gender, class, and other categories. Moreover, postfeminists were set apart from their predecessors as they recaptured previously discarded pejoratives, including ‘slut’ or ‘bitch’ to gain agency and liberty (Barker and Jane, 2016: 344f). The ‘SlutWalk,’ a transnational protest movement protesting victim-blaming and rape culture, became famous for reframing sexist insults (Ringrose, 2013: 6). In 2015, feminist scholar Halberstram (2012) even invoked a new feminism based on the performances of femininity by pop star Lady Gaga whose gender fluidity has transgressed existing gender conventions.

Like stereotypical ascriptions of masculinity, women have been subjected to widely unattainable gender ideals. An accumulation of behaviors and preferences defined as ideal femininity have characterized women as “compliant, cooperative, dependent on others, submissive/passive homemakers, and emotionally easy to read” while showing “deep concern for others, [providing] relationship building, and [putting] others’ needs ahead of their own” (Pompper, 2017: 5). Moreover, girls and women learn to pay attention to their physical attraction to remain presentable. Gilbert has described this focus on beauty as “stress-inducing, almost Sisyphean, conglomeration of patriarchally determined standards of attractiveness,

personality, ability, and sexuality...dependent upon male approval” (2009: 99). Supposedly feminine behavior as well as social expectations of women construe femininity as supportive to and attractive for masculinity. Consequently, women are raised and socialized with the idea of “being physically attractive for men and nurturing husband, children, and extended family members” to become perceived as feminine (Pompper, 2017: 4). While women’s subordination to men has been justified across many cultures and throughout history, contemporary media, science, politics, and popular culture contribute to its persistence. For example, in many countries worldwide, policymaking regarding abortion rights is primarily carried out by men. The historic overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 and similar decisions in other countries have shown how much women and female issues are still being controlled and decided by powerful men.

Acquiescing Feminine Behavior

Since a closer engagement of gender studies with research on masculinity and in the wake of public discourse about ‘toxic’ masculinity, scholarship has increasingly pointed out that there are negative, harmful, and dangerous patterns of behavior in performances of masculinity. Within a heteronormative paradigm that favors masculinity, a woman’s ‘value’ is measured according to her functioning within a heterosexual relationship. Stereotypical perceptions of women as dependent on men’s approval have led to internalized behaviors proclaiming women as passive, reticent, and considerate of other’s needs. Weber has argued that this perception of femininity is predicated on “core beliefs that are not always cognitive but are always insistent: I’m not worthy. I don’t deserve good things. I shouldn’t bother people. Love and acceptance are conditional on my compliance” (2019: 206f). In some cases, the stress of meeting the expectations of society, family, or partners leads to the deferment of personal desires and evokes self-defeating behavioral patterns. Then, femininity may lead to self-policing, accompanied by “negating imperatives: Don’t take up too much space. Don’t ask too many questions....Don’t upset others with your needs or concerns. Don’t be unpleasant” (207).

While the negative consequences of hypermasculinity (or ‘toxic’ masculinity), including risk-taking, a penchant for violence or drug abuse, affect men and other people, these stereotypical feminine behaviors seem to primarily harm women complying with the gender norm while implicitly buttressing the dominant position of men. There is no external enemy image for a potentially self-defeating performance of femininity. Instead, it requires masculinity’s claim to power and privilege to persist, as the need to conform to societal expectations is diminished without the presence of an all-dominating patriarchal masculinity.

1.2.2 Archetypes of Black Masculinity and Femininity in Hip Hop

In the 1990s, (gangster) rappers began to flaunt their physical prowess, bellowing tales of greatness into the camera while video vixens danced seductively around them, visually asserting the rappers' claim to superiority. These displays of hypermasculinity, paired with the "trinity of commercial [Hip] [Hop] – the black gangsta, pimp, and ho" have become synonymous with gangster rap (Rose, 2008: 4; see also Hunter and Soto 2009). This straitjacket masculinity tends to reject any expression of affection or vulnerability as a sign of weakness and ridicules what it perceives as weak, primarily femininity and deviant masculinities (Bradley, 2015: 182; see also Speers, 2017: 7). In particular, the fear and disdain of women, or what Michael E. Dyson has called "femiphobia," has become synonymous with rap music produced by black male artists (2001: 15).

However, an evaluation of black male artists' ridiculing of (black) femininity must consider the gendered oppression of black men who suffer from a racialized male privilege. The attribution of stereotypical characteristics, including physical prowess, an insatiable sex drive, or ignorance, to black men demonstrates the principles of a broader patriarchal system that is based on a hierarchization of masculinities along the lines of 'race' and class (Perry, 2004: 119f). In other words, black men are "subject to patriarchal objectification through white male gaze, and thereby become feminized... [and choose] hypermasculinity" as compensation (121; see also hooks, 1994: 127-130). The embodied hypermasculinity of black male rappers has become an instrument of their self-assertion against a white mainstream society that continues to ridicule them.

Like the idealized versions of masculinity portrayed on screen in blaxploitation and gangster films, male rap artists reject any displays of vulnerability as signs of weakness and choose to suppress their emotions to avoid being read as weak. However, studies have shown that rap music is not entirely devoid of emotion, as it allows for expressions of affection and love when they fit within the framework of heterosexual relationships and the idea of masculine superiority (Chaney and Mincey, 2014: 122). In a qualitative content analysis of the lyrics of 79 R'n'B and rap songs from the 1950s to 2013, Chaney and Mincey have concluded that socially constructed gender roles prohibit many male performers from displaying vulnerability in their lyrics (130-136). In his analysis of rap lyrics, Tyree took a similar approach and concluded that male rappers display seemingly contradictory attitudes when they show affection for their mothers

while openly disrespecting the mothers of their children (2009: 50-58).³⁵ Regarding male-to-male relationships, Oware has analyzed homosociality, the phenomenon that describes how artists bond with other men in non-sexual ways and without risking readings of homosexuality. According to him, male rappers deliberately address affection, love, and vulnerability with other men (2011).

Moreover, expressions of love and affection become permissible once the family is involved, especially when artists become fathers. Using three examples, namely Jay-Z's 2017 song "4:44," which presents a musical apology to his wife, the 2011 song "New Day" by Kanye West, a collection of wishes for his newborn son, and "Hailie's Song," Eminem's 2002 ode to his daughter, Hook has shown how older artists avoid being read as weak (2020: 76f). The discussion shows how older artists increasingly struggle to identify within a younger culture that prohibits expressions of vulnerability and affection. Accordingly, older artists tend to change their stance on vulnerability when they take on the role of father and own their emotions, providing an antithesis in an otherwise hypermasculine and regulatory culture.

Archetypes of Black Hip Hop Masculinity

The strong link between hypermasculinity and rap music can be attributed to the influences of 'race,' class, and space on black masculinity. Throughout the history of Hip Hop, several archetypes of black masculinity have emerged. While these archetypes represent patterns of identification that may be relevant within African American communities, they have been adopted by Hip Hop culture and manifest, sometimes in exaggerated form, in the stage personae of male rappers. Many of these archetypes adopt a hypermasculine perspective, deriving their disdain for femininity and 'lesser' masculinities from the black 'badman,' a tradition conceived in the blaxploitation films and white gangster epics of the 1970s. Rappers who appeal to these archetypes embody a range of outlaw figures such as the thug, pimp, gangster, or gambler in their lyrics, music videos, and stage personas. The performance of the black outlaw masculinity relies heavily on the female body, using it "as a geography on which to graft the territory of his badness" (Perry, 2004: 129). This embrace of outlawry, as Perry argues, is a response to a perceived alienation and marginalization from mainstream values, norms, and meanings (103-108).

Hip Hop is rich in its glorification of outlawry, vividly reproduced in a series of anti-hero figures, including the anti-hero of the 'bad nigga,' the drug dealer, or the criminal. At its core,

³⁵ Rapper Tupac Shakur's "Dear Mama" is an example of a song that praises the mother as a central reference figure (Hall 2015).

outlawry demonstrates an “elemental nihilism” that reflects “the mentality and fears of young Americans of every color and class living an exhausting, edgy existence” (George, 1998: 49). The glorification and romanticization of outlaw figures result in archetypes prominently featured in rap music. Rather than mapping distinct experiences of black masculinity, these archetypes represent standard self-identification labels and market segments within a commercialized rap industry.

Gangster

Among the most frequently embodied archetypes of rap masculinity is the gangster, whose “ruthless survivalism and violence make him at once a powerful and tragic figure” (Perry, 2004: 131). The adaptation of the gangster in Hip Hop is inspired by real-life violent clashes between inner-city youth gangs and borrowed from movies and shows that celebrate the mobster as an antihero. The archetype of the black gangster or thug reflects gendered “stereotypes of hypermasculinity, emotional toughness, and sexual virility” (Wilchins, 2007: 114). While gangsters seem to fully embrace their role as bad guys, drug dealers, a subcategory of gangsters, seem to pursue their trade out of necessity, given the few legitimate and profitable employment opportunities in the inner city. While rappers adorn themselves with labels such as ‘gangster’ or ‘thug’ to claim masculinity in the face of real-life challenges, these labels are tied to actual problems occurring in communities. Jeffries has shown that the “collective understanding of the gangster/thug phenomenon” is tied to a “lack of opportunity, marginalization, and personal suffering” (2011: 180). Space and class thus emerge as dominant factors informing this archetype.

In addition to promoting overbearing behavior, gangster rap has highlighted the criminal tendencies of predominantly male ghetto residents. Neal has identified the portrayal of the gangster as an antisocial brute as particularly attractive to young white audiences. Listeners perceive rap music as “a conduit for oppositional expression” and the gangster rapper as a model of social resistance (2004b: 379; see also Kitwana 2005). Baldwin, however, suggests that the commodified image of the gangster rapper emerged and was promoted by labels and corporations to meet the demand of white suburban teenagers (2004: 166). Watts described gangster rap as “*an overdose of commercialized reality*,” perhaps a sign of white audiences’ desire to resist their mainstream culture (Watts, 2004: 602). Gangster rap celebrates and glorifies outlaw characters who triumph over adversity and accumulate wealth, material possessions, sexual partners, and respect.

Hustler

Unlike gangsters, the archetype of the ‘hustler’ “fights no war based on affiliation, but also because he maintains the trickster mentality of overcoming, albeit illegally, the limitations set by social class” (Perry, 2004: 132). Equipped with an ingenious sense of survival, cunning, and nonviolence, the ‘hustler’ seeks advantage in a society that systematically disadvantages him. While resourceful in finding profitable ways to make a living, this archetype does not discriminate against women per se. Through their cunning skills, hustlers discover sources of income that lie outside their community. While moving through different spaces, it is the hustler’s roots in “working-class ideals that authenticate their hustler status” (Bradley, 2015: 187). In Hip Hop jargon, ‘hustle’ describes a grind and a willingness to overcome adversity by any means necessary, suggesting a trait not exclusively ascribed to men.

Pimp

The pimp uses manipulation and deception to objectify and exploit women for his profit systematically. As an outlaw character, the pimp proved profitable for rap music, serving as a blueprint to “package black urban crime narratives for a mass market audience” (Turner, 2015: 20; see also Neal, 2004b: 381). Furthermore, the pimp embodies the “idea of pleasure in [Hip Hop] as male dominated and at the expense of women” (Bradley, 2015: 186). The reimagining of the pimp in 1970s blaxploitation films and autobiographical accounts like Iceberg Slim (Gifford, 2013: 42) led to the romanticization of pimping in mainstream culture and its glorification in rap music.

It is the renunciation of violence, the manipulation through language, and the “restless entrepreneurial attitude” that distinguishes pimping from other acts of street crime (Turner, 2015: 25; see also Quinn, 2005: 118). This entrepreneurial aspect of pimping led Turner to argue that the lack of profitable employment and the establishment of an illicit economy in the inner city turns sex into a business plan, a *hustle*, in which pimps and prostitutes are commodities (2015: 31). Ilan has argued that the pimp is an archetype that combines both masculine and feminine archetypes because the pimp figure is very concerned with appearance, a trait usually associated with femininity. At the same time, pimps skillfully exploit women under the pain of violence for personal gain (2015: 44).³⁶

Conscious Artists

Scholars, ‘conscious’ artists, or ‘philosopher kings’ interpret their place in the world and understand what lies beyond their community. They engage with the world not through violent

³⁶ See also the in-depth analysis of representations of the pimp archetype in the corpus of African American Hip Hop Life Writing (p. 145).

conquest or objectifying denigration but through lyrical interpretation, skillful description, and the pursuit of higher knowledge (Perry, 2004: 132). While stereotypical rappers participate in the perpetuation of violence, ‘conscious’ artists adopt a resistance to crime and violence (Bailey, 2014: 132).

Given the commercial success of rap music and the appeal of the gangster image to both black and white audiences, the diversity of stereotypical archetypes may not be surprising. In contrast, less stereotypical and more positive archetypes, such as conscious artists, are not as commercially successful. However, the assumption that commercially successful ‘bad’ (gangster) rappers exist in binary opposition to less successful ‘good’ and ‘conscious’ artists does not, as Pough has suggested, map the complexity of rap music as a commercial branch of Hip Hop (2007b: 93). In fact, the dichotomy rests on shaky ground, as a definitive measure of commercial success has yet to be defined. Instead, Rabaka distinguishes between commercial and ‘conscious’ rappers, defining the latter’s work as tending “toward socio-politically conscious content and is most often poorly promoted when compared with commercial rappers working within the *ghetto/gangsta/pimp/whore paradigm*” (2011: 202). Rabaka also points out that many artists considered ‘conscious’ have achieved commercial success with their music or have adopted commercial strategies of marketing and promotion (203).

Regarding lyrical themes, ‘conscious’ artists may occasionally use offensive language to convey a message. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that gangster rappers blend social criticism with offensive lyrics. One example is ‘conscious’ rapper Common, who was criticized for his homophobic lyrics (Kornegay 2022). Overall, the dichotomy between commercial and ‘conscious’ rappers has become blurred as artists considered ‘conscious’ have increasingly rejected the label as inappropriate to characterize their music (Rabaka, 2011: 203).

Hip Hop and Homophobia

Like other dichotomies of Western discourse, Hip Hop masculinity establishes a hierarchy by defining the dominant masculinity against its homosexual *other*. As a result, many male rappers portray themselves as hypermasculine, independent, harsh, violent, promiscuous machos with exclusively heterosexual desires lived out in polyamorous relationships. Although certain strands of rap music are infused with homophobia, and some artists have made headlines for their demeaning lyrics, Rose has argued that the discussion of misogyny in rap music has almost overshadowed homophobia (2008: 236f).

Women who are read as strong and independent are perceived as competing with men and are denigrated as lesbians, while men who fail or choose not to perform hypermasculinity are

also belittled but with homophobic labels. As a result, “homosexuality is equated with ‘femininity,’ and both are designated as weak and subordinate” (Rose, 2008: 237). Hutchinson interprets black men’s strict rejection of homophobia as an attempt to connect with mainstream patriarchal masculinity, from which black men have been excluded for centuries:

In a vain attempt to recapture their denied masculinity, many black men mirror America’s traditional fear and hatred of homosexuality. They swallow whole the phony and perverse John Wayne definition of manhood, that real men act tough, shed no tears and never show emotions (2001: 3).

Referencing rap music’s aggressive style and competitiveness, 50 Cent, himself a paragon of stereotypical hypermasculinity, equated weakness with homosexuality by declaring that “[Hip Hop] isn’t for gays” (50 Cent in Rose, 2008: 238).³⁷

Such homophobic attitudes are not new to rap music. However, the recent surge of queer and openly gay rappers, including Lil Nas X, Cakes Da Killa, Le1f, and Mykki Blanco, evidently refutes 50 Cent’s statement. By linking their music with activism for the LGBTQ+ community, these artists have contributed to the subversion of gender roles by demonstrating that queer rappers indeed have a place in a traditionally masculine culture like Hip Hop and a very profitable place at that.³⁸

Archetypes of Black Hip Hop Femininity

Archetypes of Hip Hop femininity do not exist in isolation but are informed by and adopt ideas of black femininity that circulate in society. Some of these archetypes demonstrate self-chosen identities, while male artists and audiences have instrumentalized others to discredit and objectify women. As rap music has become a global business, record labels have adopted various strategies to increase the marketability of female artists. One of these strategies is to emphasize the female body to appeal to male audiences. As a result, many female artists face the dilemma of whether to emphasize their bodies to attract attention and increase profits or to emphasize their lyrics and risk losing profits. Female performers can identify with these archetypes, reject them, or reinterpret them for their purposes. Keyes has identified several self-chosen archetypes of black womanhood and has pointed out that women in Hip Hop can identify with more than one type at a time. These archetypes of female rap music performance are the “Queen Mother,” the “Fly Girl,” and the “Sista with Attitude” (2004: 266). With her

³⁷ In 2013, Los Angeles rapper Snoop Dogg made a similar insinuation (Beaumont-Thomas 2017).

³⁸ Coleman and Cobb (2007) have studied the emergence of the ‘homo-thug,’ a new archetype of Hip Hop masculinity that blends the hypermasculine thug with queer masculinity. Consider also the 2012 article by Joel Penney on queer styles in Hip Hop.

identification of feminine Hip Hop archetypes, Keyes contributed to the ever-growing research in the context of Hip Hop feminism (Halliday and Payne, 2020: 9).³⁹

A direct comparison of the concepts of masculinity and femininity in Hip Hop reveals that the female archetypes, unlike their male counterparts, have no concrete counterparts in the public spaces of the inner city. While gangsters and drug dealers appear in rap lyrics and stage performances, as well as in the realities of inner-city life, the archetypes of Hip Hop femininity are rarely found in inner-city public spaces. This imbalance can be explained by the dominance of masculine ideas and styles in public spaces, which leave little room and potential for the development of non-masculine identities and push female identity patterns into the private sphere.

Queen Mother

In the 1980s and early 1990s, before the rise of gangster rap, female artists were popular for their lyrical message and artistic delivery, not for how they accentuated their bodies. The archetype of the “Queen Mother” has been assigned to rapper Queen Latifah, among others, for her “maternal demeanor, posture, and full figure” (Keyes, 2004: 267). In her song “Ladies First,” she stylizes herself as a pan-African agent of black female liberation (268; see also Chaddock, 2015: 21-28). The accompanying music video opens with still images of female political activists and shows documentary images from the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. In addition, Queen Latifah has presented herself as an advocate for women’s rights, as exemplified in her 1993 song “U.N.I.T.Y.,” in which she challenges the sexist language many men use. She ‘talks back’ to male artists and refutes the apparent swiftness with which male artists claim their romantic advances. In doing so, she and similar female MCs transform themselves into empowered women with agency rather than passive objects of male desire. Because of her interest in uplifting African American communities, Collins (1990: 132) has described Queen Latifah as an ‘overmother,’ a particular form of this caring category of Hip Hop femininity.

Among the archetypes of black Hip Hop femininity, the ‘Queen Mother’ is often portrayed as the least sexualized. On the one hand, this is because of the complete embrace of Hip Hop clothing. Oversized shirts, baggy pants, and similar iconic garments conceal more than they reveal. On the other hand, the gendered protocols of street culture lead women to view Hip Hop clothing as a survival tool that emulates the tough and unforgiving behavior of men. Ilan has

³⁹ Building on the work of Keyes’ and other feminist scholars’ research, Cooper, et al. envisioned Hip Hop feminism as a theoretical framework. For example, by creating the Crunk Feminist Collection, which they have described as “a space of support and camaraderie for [Hip Hop] generation feminists of color, queer, and straight, (with)in the academy and out” (2017: 1).

noted that the adoption of street culture features leads to an alignment of dress and style, such that women appear to dress similarly to men who are aligned with street culture (2015: 46). For women in the inner city, fashion and dress become highly ambiguous. Dressing in a way that can be perceived provocative, women are often seen as “sexually promiscuous and therefore ‘down’ for sex acts that are in fact multiple-perpetrator rape” while dressing plainly reduces their street credibility and can make them victims of ridicule (46; see also Jodie Miller 2008).

Fly Girl

Inspired by the appearance of female characters in 1970s blaxploitation films, the ‘fly girl’ archetype is assigned to female rappers who wear fashionable clothing and flashy accessories while drawing attention to their appearance and demeanor. Compared to the ‘Queen Mother,’ this category of black Hip Hop femininity is characterized by a growing awareness of one’s erotic capital as well as a sense of independence, both of which allow the artists to reframe themselves from objects to independent agents with self-determined sexuality (Keyes, 2004: 269). The rap duo Salt-N-Pepa (supported by DJ Spinderella) is considered the epitome of the ‘fly girl’ archetype.

However, according to Keyes, the rap trio TLC is also an example of this archetype, but in a very different way. While Salt-N-Pepa dressed flashy and form-fitting, TLC’s “baggy style of dress ran counter to the revealing apparel of [Hip Hop’s] typical fly girl” (270). TLC acted independently, not through their choice of clothing, but through their embrace of body positivity, best exemplified in their 1999 song “Unpretty.” By favoring typical Hip Hop fashion, including baggy pants and oversized shirts, TLC refused to be complicit in the degradation of the female body. While avoiding or deflecting the male gaze, attention is drawn to their message’s lyricism and integrity (Perry, 2004: 156f).

Sista with Attitude

This archetype of black Hip Hop femininity is assigned to female MCs with an overly confident demeanor. According to Keyes, rappers Foxy Brown and Lil Kim represent artists who “conflate fly and hardcore attitudes in erotic lyrics and video performances, bordering both ‘Fly Girl’ and ‘Sista with Attitude’ categories” (2004: 271). Not only did they market their sex appeal, but they also consciously featured sexuality in their lyrics while embodying a female version of the ‘badman’ (Perry, 2004: 157-175). However, Lil Kim, in particular, has repeatedly resorted to appealing to male desires by employing pornographic aesthetics and embodying white beauty ideals in her videos and stage persona (181f). By exploiting male desire, these female rappers have constructed their bodies as objects, but ones that are constituted by a conscious decision on behalf of the female performer rather than the male gaze. Although still

ambiguous as catering to male desires, this can also be interpreted as a marketing strategy that capitalizes on the consternation of women who turn the tables. Particularly during the era of gangster rap, when themes of pimping and other sexually charged roles dominated rap music, female artists delivered their versions of being ‘hard’ by performing hypersexuality (Muhammad, 2007: 125). Rose has warned that the use of sexually explicit imagery by female rappers is not always empowering or perceived as an attack on the patriarchy but highlights how female rappers are trapped in using the same hypersexualized imagery that their male counterparts use to objectify and exploit black female bodies (2008: 123f).

In a more contemporary contribution to black womanhood in Hip Hop, Khong (2020: 88-95) has drawn attention to a recent trend of female rappers whose empowerment strategy centers on rhetoric that objectifies men as a source of financial gain and stability. These self-proclaimed ‘scammers’ renegotiate authority and power while subverting conventions of black womanhood. By objectifying men and male artists as sources of income, performers like City Girls, Megan Thee Stallion, Saweetie, Kash Doll, and Maliibu Miitch form a new wave of black female artists inspired by the hypersexuality performed by Lil Kim or Foxy Brown. Moreover, ‘scamming’ expands the range of available identifications for female rappers by adding the archetype of the ‘Badwoman.’ Impersonating this archetype, female rappers move away from the one-sided role of women as victims and express malice and anger, a character trait mostly reserved for male rappers (Bradley, 2015: 188). The deconstruction and subversion of gender hierarchies and roles within Hip Hop contribute to the reinterpretation of the female (black) body and restore sexual freedom.

Negative Stereotypes of Hip Hop Femininity

Due to the dominance of male rappers, audiences, and interests, stereotypical and objectifying perceptions circulate in Hip Hop through rap lyrics, music videos, interviews, onstage, and in Hip Hop Life Writing. It should be noted that women have, to some extent, been complicit in the dissemination of sexist and objectifying ideas. Although artists such as MC Lyte made occasional references to their sexual appeal, female rappers whose careers preceded the commercialization of rap music were generally disinclined to present themselves as sexual objects (Perry, 2004: 155f).

For female artists, the introduction of music videos proved to be both a blessing and a curse. As gangster rap proliferated, the appeal of empowered female voices diminished in favor of video vixens accompanying hypermasculine male performers. Record label and audience preferences shifted toward machismo, violence, outlawry, and misogynistic references. As a result, it became more profitable for women to appear as visual embellishments to male

performers than to attract attention with their lyrics or delivery. Sex appeal had become “the currency by which women in the music business are valued and devalued” (Muhammad, 2007: 125). The job of the video vixen, however, rarely involved rapping or dancing but “to be the perfect physical specimen for most rap video’s [Tits] & [Ass] aesthetic” (Morgan, 2002: 120). The female body, then positioned alongside expensive jewelry and extravagant cars, was presented as a continuation of the hypermasculine rapper’s accumulated possessions. The visual message was not to portray the artists as ladies’ men whose charms attracted numerous women but to emphasize that their wealth and fame enabled them to buy women and their company like any other commodity.

Moreover, as Perry has pointed out, the dancing performances of the video vixens are reminiscent of the equally purchasable services offered in strip clubs and pornography (2004: 175f). Many rap videos of this period presented an image of black women that was shaped by both ‘race’ and class: “the ideal features a ‘high-status’ face combined with a highly sexualized body read by the viewer as the body of a poor or working-class woman” (Perry, 2004: 177). Rap artists and their music videos have contributed to the misrepresentation of black women by portraying them as lewd, promiscuous, and universally available to men (Aubrey, et al. 2011: 360-379).⁴⁰ As a result, black women have become ashamed “of their bodies and sexual potential,” thus reducing the gendered roles available to them both within Hip Hop and in their communities (Halliday, 2017: 66).

While many of these attributions are misogynistic, the importance of women in legitimizing claims of male dominance and hypermasculinity cannot be underestimated. Male rappers, who ‘collect’ women to demonstrate their masculinity and power to other men, depend on women for their compliance. Sharpley-Whiting has drawn attention to female groupies, who “may be handy, interchangeable, throwaway women, but they are also ego-intoxicating and self-affirming for [Hip Hop] stars” (2008: 88). Male rappers use female groupies to enhance their masculinity and attract even more women. However, groupies may also be involved with various Hip Hop stars to gather inside stories that they can publish and profit from (90).

As unfavorable as some portrayals of women in rap music are, the history of black women’s misrepresentation is more extended. Rap music has merely adopted pre-existing perceptions of women. For example, stereotypical perceptions of black women, embodied in the images of the ‘Jezebel,’ ‘Sapphire,’ or ‘Mammy,’ can be seen in the performances of video vixens as well as in misogynistic rap lyrics. The ‘Jezebel’ demonstrates a reimagining of black women as

⁴⁰ The representation of women in rap music videos has attracted a plethora of scholarship. See, for example, Conrad, et al. (2009: 134-156), Frisby and Aubrey (2012: 66-87), and Wallis (2011).

hypersexual and sex-crazed. It was used in the 19th and 20th centuries to condone the abuse and exploitation of black women. According to Adams and Fuller, the ‘Jezebel’ image, epitomized by the slur ‘ho(e)’ or ‘whore’ in rap music, represents a lascivious woman with liberal sexuality who “uses sex as a means to get what she wants from men” (2006: 945; see also Khong, 2020: 94; Rose, 2008: 152). These principles have been used to justify the sexual assault of black women with impunity and have become the dominant image of black women in popular culture, pornography, and rap music (Pilgrim 2023).

Among the most enduring caricatures of African American femininity is the ‘Mammy,’ an epitome of the nurturing black woman, who is “generally depicted as an overweight, dark-skinned woman who appears to be asexual” (Adams and Fuller, 2006: 944). As a modification of the ‘Mammy,’ the ‘Sapphire’ image refers to the idea of the angry black woman who tyrannizes her household, including her husband. However, unlike the ‘Mammy,’ the ‘Sapphire’ is not conceived as asexual (Morton, 1991: 7; see also Owens 2018). Adapted to the misogynistic interpretations found in rap music, the ‘Sapphire’ then becomes the ‘bitch’ who represents “a socially aggressive woman who tries through manipulation to control her man. She is filled with attitude, has a fiery tongue, and she squashes the aspirations of her man or men in general” (Adams and Fuller, 2006: 945). Another misrepresentation of black femininity is the ‘welfare queen,’ characterized by her dependence on social assistance and seen as undermining the integrity of African American families. A product of political misinformation to divert attention from failing social programs in the 1980s, the welfare queen image firmly links black femininity to dependency (Deutsch, 2008: 135).

Conclusion

Hip Hop and hypermasculinity are closely intertwined, resulting in several archetypes of masculinity defined by violence, misogyny, homophobia, and a rejection of emotions. However, these hypermasculine behaviors, views, and attitudes did not emerge from Hip Hop but are a reaction to a white mainstream society from which black men are largely excluded. In an attempt to exercise power themselves, hypermasculine male rappers dominate those they perceive as weak in order to legitimize their masculinity. The archetypes of Hip Hop masculinity are based on notions of the black ‘badman’ and romanticized outlaw figures. The black outlaw depends on an ‘other,’ usually a woman, onto whom he can project his power and dominance. In rap music, it is gangsters, drug dealers, and pimps who most vividly embody this role. These archetypes have proven to be particularly marketable and commercially successful. In contrast to this is the less commercially successful ‘conscious artist’ who strives to

intellectually interpret and criticize social problems in lyrics. The boundaries between these archetypes are blurred as rappers adopt different strategies to gain attention and sell records.

While Hip Hop masculinities can be seen as self-chosen labels to gain respect and embody certain street culture ideals, the archetypes of Hip Hop femininity also include labels that have been assigned to women to justify their subjugation. In the process, centuries-old stereotypes have been rehashed to misrepresent black women. These negative representations of women in rap music negatively impact the identity formation of girls and young women. Despite participating in a culture that tends to objectify and ridicule women, female artists have found ways to carve out participatory spaces and used Hip Hop fashion to express alternative ideas of black womanhood. The 'Queen Mother,' the 'Fly Girl,' and the 'Sista with Attitude,' as well as various subcategories, demonstrate positive and empowering categories of black Hip Hop femininity.

1.3 Introduction to Hip Hop Spaces

1.3.1 Introduction to Spatial Theory

Space is not simply a storage form containing objects, bodies, agents, or societies. Instead, it depends on these entities to exist. In all its variations, space results from production processes (Nehrdich, 2012: 314f). This understanding of space contrasts with absolutist conceptualizations, such as those of Isaac Newton, which conceive of space as an immutable container, unaffected by any boundaries or events beyond it (Rau, 2013: 61).⁴¹ This concept of space does not anticipate that the ‘contents’ of a space are influenced in any way. Idealistic models, such as Leibniz’s, describe space as resulting from the placement and positioning of objects and bodies in relation to each other (Alpsancar, 2012: 340f). Both absolutist and relativist concepts define spatial formations as immutable, static, neutral, and, thus, incapable of exerting influence (Yüksel 2018).

However, French philosopher and sociologist Henry Lefebvre draws attention to the relational aspect of space, according to which space becomes the result of the social practices of individual agents and the collective efforts of societies. Lefebvre concluded that “[every] language is located in a space. Every discourse says something about a space (places or sets of places); and every discourse is emitted from a space” (2008: 132). The spatial turn has refocused attention on the relationships between spaces and individuals, emphasizing that space and society are inseparable.⁴² Members of society generate space through social actions. In contrast, space provides the area where these actions occur (Macher, 2007: 39f). However, since space is not an empty, immutable entity, individuals are not compelled to surrender to a given space. Consequently, space can be appropriated, modified, or otherwise altered by those acting within or without it (Soja, 2009: 255).

Space and Place

As discussed by Lefebvre and supported by Harvey in 1993 and 2004, the relational concept of space allows for mutual influences between agents and the various spaces they traverse and interact with. Space represents the vast and naturally occurring landscape that defies swift comprehension in its entirety and on its terms. Casey has described space as a “neutral, pre-given medium, a tabula rasa onto which the particularities of culture and history come to be inscribed” (1996: 14). Whenever the vastness of space is processed through human interaction

⁴¹ See also Böhme (2012: 14f), and Schroer (2016).

⁴² See, for example, Warf and Arias (2009), Klumbies (2010), Günzel (2011, 2017), and Löw (2017).

and ascribed meanings, values, and ideas, space is transformed into *place*. Therefore, when place is the manifestation of presence, space is the “absence of presence – that nonetheless separates one material form from another whilst being subjectable to measurement” (Whaley, 2018: 30).

A ‘sense of place’ is the result of individuals and societies attaching meaning, values, and ideas to a space (Smith and Watson, 2017: 284). In doing so, the place’s “reduced scale allows individuals to inhabit it more fully, permitting greater intimacy, awareness, and involvement with the particularities of its geographic and social composition” (Forman, 2002: 25f). Thus, while space denotes vastness, place is more commonly associated with proximity and environment, which are more appropriate for the attribution of personal and individual meaning. The meaning of a place goes beyond its physical and material characteristics. Places acquire their core meanings through the agents who use them and how they are used. For example, “an agora is qualified by the people who pass through it or linger there; a dwelling is characterized less by its architecture than by the quality of the life that is sustained in it” (Casey, 1996: 27). The attribution of meaning transforms space into place and makes the local comprehensible. Adopting a relational understanding of space, the place influences the agents who use it and attribute meaning to it.

In contemporary Western societies, space in the sense of uncharted territory has largely ceased to exist. Giddens has observed that “space and place largely coincide, since the spatial dimensions of social life are...dominated by ‘presence’ – by localised activities” (1990: 18). The most important distinction in a modern understanding of space is between public and private space. In its broadest definition, public space is “a place created and maintained by public authority, accessible to all citizens, for their use and enjoyment” (Jackson, 1984: 52). Public spaces are reserved for collective activities and the celebration of community, for formal and informal gatherings. Moreover, public spaces are points of reference with a high recognition value and can be crucial for a person’s identity and sense of belonging (Birch, 2008: 118). In addition, who has access to public space and how the community uses it determines the function of public space. Birch points out that, ideally, it is “malleable and allows its users to take or give it meaning and definition. At its worst, [it] acts as a magnet for conflict” (126).

Access to private spaces, however, is often highly regulated to serve as a retreat from the bustling of public spaces. In doing so, private spaces are often relegated to the privacy of the home for their potential to offer “‘peace, quiet, sense of place, relaxation and seclusion’ – what [has been] termed *private places of withdrawal*” (Abbott-Chapman and Robertson, 2009: 431). In her work on the cultural idealizations of the Western home, Chambers emphasizes that

although the home is widely regarded as a private place, it is nevertheless exposed to and affected by external and non-private influences and perceptions of an ‘ideal’ home, which inevitably and ultimately shape the character and the meaning of home (Chambers, 2020: 5). In their characterization of home, Blunt and Dowling also draw attention to the heightened relevance of the emotions that are attached to the physical space of the home, thereby distinguishing it from other places of habitation that are not or less emotionally charged (2006: 2). The importance of emotional attachment helps to understand why people can imagine a variety of spaces as home, including those that are outside the private sphere or that are commonly associated with attributes contrary to idealizations of the home. Ganser has argued that we should refrain from attributing characteristics such as private or domestic to the space of the home because it is, like any other space, a product of social interactions and (re)productions (2009: 70). Social relations outside the home negotiate what is ‘private’ and how it affects the private life of the family. Thus, the home is not an isolated space; like any other space, it reflects norms and meanings negotiated outside of the private.

Others may reject a place called home as groups are excluded from participation based on equally socially constructed notions such as ‘race,’ class, ethnicity, or gender (Belina, 2013: 145). Furthermore, as Chambers argues, dominant understandings of home influence discourses about the characteristics of an ‘ideal’ home and influence individual perceptions of what an ‘ideal’ home entails. In this regard, Blunt and Dowling emphasize that “a central focus of imaginaries of home is their idealisation: certain dwelling structures and social relations are imagined to be ‘better’, more socially appropriate and an ideal to be aspired to” (2006: 88). However, it is often the case that the homes of vulnerable, ethnic, or ‘racial’ minorities are not included in the idealized homes. The homeless, for example, are defined as a specific group who appear to lack what is widely regarded as the ‘ideal’ home. Their case highlights the importance of adding a sense of belonging to the definition of home (Chambers, 2020: 6).⁴³

In addition, due to socio-political conditions, many African American communities, especially in urban metropolitan areas, have been affected by poverty, drugs, crime, and single-parent families. The homes of African American families are often discredited for their perceived instability. As Harvey put it: “[Otherness]’ is *produced* in space through the simple logic of uneven capital investment and a proliferating geographical division of labor” (1993: 6). Neil Smith took a similar approach in his treatise on capitalism and space, explaining uneven development as “the concrete manifestation of the production of space under capitalism” (2008:

⁴³ See also Blunt and Dowling (2006: 126-131), and Morley (2017).

122f). As such, space and place are instruments of power through which groups of people are hierarchized.

Space and Power

In addition to being a means of production, space becomes an instrument for the powerful to impose their will on others (Lefévre, 2008: 26). Space reflects the social spectrum of power, authority, domination, and marginalization. In this sense, space is far from innocent or apolitical. The question of who has the power to change space and with what motivation adds to the complexity of a relational understanding of space. Marginalized groups, for example, the poor, the sick, or people of color, find themselves clustered within one space. Their limited environment is tantamount to their limited influence, political, economic, or otherwise (Shabazz, 2015: 45). These measures of exclusion and inclusion are acts of power that promote the classification of people and the attribution of characteristics to groups and the places they inhabit. Undesirable conditions, including poverty, unemployment, or danger often lead to the stigmatization of entire neighborhoods as ‘lazy’ or ‘poor.’ The result is a city map dominated by perceived stigma and danger. It is a common but misleading practice that attributes of a neighborhood are transferred to the groups, practices, social relations, and opinions that reside there (Belina, 2013: 90-93).

Whenever the reasons for a group’s social marginalization and spatial segregation are questioned, the discourse cannot avoid exploring the complex relationship between space and power. Foucault has constructed space as a relational instrument of separation, for example, when specific spaces are created to house social pariahs, including the outcast, the sick, or the convicted. These spaces are given meaning based on the positioning of subjects to other subjects, such as those without power and those who monitor them (Crampton, 2013: 385).

Foucault’s understanding of space and power is inextricably linked to methods of surveillance and control, of which his concept of the panopticon has received the most scholarly attention. He implied surveillance as an act of power, using various methods to elicit the desired behavior from convicts and citizens in general (Hartley, 2020: 226). In describing the benefits of the design, Foucault already hints at the applicability of the panopticon to general society: “[all] that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy” (1995: 200). This reflects his investment in a disciplinary society in which control and power are exercised comprehensively, using various means of discipline, including that of space, to regulate the behavior of a population (Crampton, 2013: 391ff; see also Foucault, 1995: 209). Discipline and spatial power work closely together, as Foucault summarized:

Discipline is above all, analysis of space; it is individualization through space, the placing of bodies in an individualized space that permits classification and combinations... [it] is a technique of power, which contains a constant and perpetual surveillance of individuals (Knowlton, et al. 2014: 147).

Once again, space is seen as a tool for classifying and hierarchizing groups of people. Shabazz has adopted Foucault's theory of space and power to describe how African American communities are marginalized and spatially separated from the rest of society. The spatial instruments of power have, according to Shabazz, "produced disciplinary techniques that could be learned and appropriated by other institutions...to ensure efficiency" (2015: 5). He argues that measures of control, containment, and surveillance previously used only within the prison system have been applied to a free black population living in the US inner city. Regarding the panopticon, Shabazz uses the term 'carceral power' to explain how systematic and institutionalized racism and its measures of control and containment have affected Chicago communities. Furthermore, Shabazz argues that impoverished neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side were deliberately built in ways that systematically oppressed and discriminated against their black residents.

Strategies of surveillance and confinement used to control prison populations have been adopted to police urban communities on the South Side, thus resulting in what Shabazz has called a 'spatialized blackness.' Chain-link fences, curfews, heavy police presence, and stop-and-frisk-protocols create inner-city communities that increasingly resemble prison populations (Shabazz, 2015: 66f; see also 2013: 158f). Branch summarizes how the disproportionate police presence in African American communities leads to an equally disproportionate number of arrests, resulting in frequent circulation in and out of the prison system:

Being Black puts you at risk of formal criminalization, through arrest, incarceration or supervision, and guarantees that, even if you have never come into contact with the criminal justice system – you're assumed to be dangerous (Branch, 2020: 143).⁴⁴

The disproportionate number of arrests and the increased exposure of African Americans to the prison system is only one factor considered by Shabazz. He also draws attention to the social consequences of incarceration, including the impact of incarceration politics, both in the community and in prison, on people's sense of mobility, their gender identity, and their understanding of gender roles (2015: 2-5).

⁴⁴ Some rap artists also address this predicament in their autobiographies and memoirs, see p. 117.

Gender and Space

A discussion of space and power can only proceed with discussing the gendered implications of public and private space. The built cityscape, including the architecture of buildings, the alignment of streets, or the placement of shopping malls and offices, is used differently by men and women. Women often face unwanted male attention as they move through the city, while few men have similar experiences. This affects the way men and women perceive public safety. In this context, Microsoft and other companies have faced controversy for their apps that rate neighborhoods based on average crime data to help pedestrians avoid ‘bad neighborhoods’ (King 2012). Thus, the “control of space, or the built environment, clearly demonstrates... behavior is affected by social as well as spatial norms; the two spheres are dialectically linked” (Gottdiener, et al. 2019: 279).

Gender and space are mutually intertwined, mutually influential, and constantly constituted and (re)produced products of society, its practices, and discourses (Massey, 1994: 178). Concerning the social (re)production of space, Lefebvre has emphasized the power hierarchies that assign functions and groups to spaces. He pointed out that “[social] space contains – and assigns (more or less) appropriate places to – (1) *the social relations of reproduction*, i.e. the bio-physiological relations between the sexes and between age groups along with the specific organization of the family” (2008: 32). In this process, ‘appropriate places’ are assigned for all purposes of life, including the formation of a family or the assignment of men and women to ‘their place’ in society. Accordingly, men have been assigned the public sphere to fulfill social roles, go to work, or conduct official business. On the other hand, the private sphere has been described as the space where women perform care and domestic tasks.

This division of space has long been perceived as ‘natural’ and has been reinforced in everyday practices (Grisard, et al. 2007: 21f). In a 1999 study, Mehta concluded that women are often on the receiving end of (sexualized) violence and, come to “*embody* discourses that construct them...as vulnerable and physically powerless” (77). Because these discourses portray women as threatened and needing protection from the dangers of the public sphere, they determine how women perceive and use public spaces. On many occasions, however, women have ‘trespassed’ into the public space to attend church or to participate in other social events (Ganser, 2009: 69). It should be noted that gender relations vary from space to space and are influenced by social categories, such as ‘race’ and class. Working-class women, such as daycare workers, nurses, or men’s assistants, had stable jobs in public spaces (Gottdiener, 2019: 281). Prostitution established a particular justification for women to use the streets and move in public spaces. While other women workers made negligible use of public space on their way from

home to work, prostitutes relied on their presence and dominance over men in public spaces. Milestone emphasizes, however, that women were rarely granted the freedom of a male *flâneur* who could roam the public space for pure pleasure (Milestone and Meyer, 2012: 190).⁴⁵

Another notable contribution to the discussion of space and gender was made by Gillian Rose, who argued that women, unlike men, are overly aware of their bodies and the bodily space they inhabit. Masculinity, Rose argued, is constituted to a greater extent by focusing on the world outside the body, thereby shifting the focus point away from the body. Women, on the other hand, are targeted by a “threatening masculine look [that] materially inscribes its power onto women’s bodies by constituting feminine subjects through an intense self-awareness about being seen and about taking up space” (1993: 145f).⁴⁶ Massey suggested that a “limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination” (1994: 179). Furthermore, Domosh and Saeger have demystified the illusionary nature of the safe home, as domestic violence prevents women from leaving their homes. The home becomes an ambiguous place for women because they can become victims of domestic violence without outside help. Leaving the private sphere can still invite sexualized violence all the same (2001: 115ff; see also Huffschnid, 2015: 51).

Public space is construed as the opposite of private space, and for women in particular, public space is associated with danger, threats, and predators. Streets, alleys, and other publicly accessible places are generally portrayed as no-go areas because “[women] are not supposed to circulate freely in these male domains, especially after dark (the time propitious to desire, the drive, the unamenable and the unknown)” (Minh-ha, 1994: 15). Koskela, among others, has emphasized that this anxiety does not stem from a perceived weakness, but rather relates to the presence or absence of power within a given space. She argues that no-go areas can be actively entered to resist social (re)productions of space and contribute to deconstructing spaces perceived as ‘dangerous.’ By visiting no-go areas, “women ‘write themselves onto the street’” and, in doing so, appropriate space from which they were previously excluded (1997: 316).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See also Barker and Jane (2016: 218) and Massey (1994: 234). See Wilson (1996: 65) and van den Heuvel (2019) for more on the implications of gender and public spaces.

⁴⁶ Female authors of Hip Hop Life Writing also acknowledge how they navigate public spaces, see p. 159.

⁴⁷ The case of British women protesting under the banner *#ReclaimTheseStreets* following the disappearance and murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021 is a valid example (BBC 2021).

1.3.2 Relevant Spaces of African American Hip Hop Practice

There is an attachment to place in all forms of Hip Hop expression, namely DJing, breakdancing, graffiti, and MCing. Graffiti is a way of appropriating public space. Although often easily misrepresented as vandalism, artists have used and continue to use graffiti to lay claim to public space and express resistance (Forman, 2004b: 155; Ards, 2004: 312).⁴⁸ Relying on public space for its performance, breakdancing is an expressive form that has taken over urban space.⁴⁹

According to Forman, the discursive spaces of Hip Hop represent the multiple structures and sites, including media and academia, that negotiate what constitutes an authentic black identity in Hip Hop. Hip Hop discourse includes “both language and images of the urban terrain... describing and narrating a perceived social reality that is further invested with values of authenticity” (Forman, 2002: 9). The ongoing negotiation of an ‘authentic’ black Hip Hop identity has been accompanied by the attribution of specific urban locations and notions of the ‘real,’ resulting in a seemingly straightforward model of black Hip Hop identity. This discourse complicates the acceptance of non-black artists whose spatial backgrounds are not congruent with what has been discursively defined as ‘authentic’ Hip Hop spaces (22f). A prominent example is the white rapper Vanilla Ice, who was heavily criticized in the 1990s for hiding his middle-class background to appeal to a Hip Hop audience (Boyd, 2004: 326).⁵⁰ Thus, artists from suburban areas or rural backgrounds are often targeted for their perceived lack of street credibility, and by extension, Hip Hop authenticity.

The other spatial dimension, identified by Forman, refers to the actual space, or “the space of experience,” to use Lefebvre’s words. Hip Hop performers and their stories gain credibility and acceptance by adding the location of a particular event or experience, thereby enhancing the meaning of the account that is being referenced (Forman, 2002: 22f). Imagining Hip Hop as a distinctly urban phenomenon, the *where* of an event is usually located within the city. From its earliest beginnings to the present day, Hip Hop has shown unmistakable tendencies of a culture attached to urban space (Forman, 2004b: 155).

Long before the proportion of predominantly African American communities in inner cities increased in the 1980s, urban spaces were important to black citizens. Jeffries equates the city

⁴⁸ For more in-depth exploration of the development of graffiti and its role in Hip Hop, see one of the first scholarly contributions on graffiti by Craig Castleman (1984). Castleman also illustrates the emergence of graffiti and anti-graffiti movements in New York during the 1970s and 1980s (2004).

⁴⁹ Consider Banes (2004), Schloss (2009), Holman (2012), and Johnson (2015) for a history of breakdancing.

⁵⁰ See also Bernard (1991), Hess (2005), and Hodgman (2013).

with the birthplace of “black cultural styles” (1992: 159). The material and physical character of the city is most evident in its network of streets, intersections, multipurpose buildings, and the private and public spaces its inhabitants pass daily. The representational or symbolic city also consists of images, various artistic expressions, and verbal articulations projected onto the material space of the city. Taken together, the material and symbolic aspects of the city create a complex system of meanings and references, full of hierarchies, power relations, and potential for conflict (Forman, 2002: 35).

While it should be noted that the inner-city experience is not universal to the African American experience, the inner city represents the world of many Hip Hop artists considered for the archive. The following sections explore the ghetto as a site of African American experience and argue that the specific conditions of the inner city in the U.S. significantly influence how African American artists express themselves within Hip Hop culture. On a smaller scale, the (neighbor)hood, the streets, and ‘street culture’ are considered driving forces. Finally, the prison, although spatially separated from the inner city, is a central space worthy of consideration. African Americans are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated due to the principles of marginalization and criminalization embedded in the social fabric of the inner-city community. This correlation between predominantly black urban spaces and the prison as a site of unequal spatial power makes it inevitable to consider the prison as a space that is relevant to an African American Hip Hop experience.

The Inner City and the Hood

In the early twentieth century, millions of people fled the racist, rural southern states in search of work in the more urbanized, supposedly less racist northern states.⁵¹ As a result of these waves of migration, major cities experienced considerable increases in their black populations. New York, for example, experienced an increase from 36,000 to 328,000 between 1890 and 1930, while Chicago’s black population increased more than twentyfold, from 14,000 to 234,000 during the same period (Goldberg, 2005: 91). By the mid-20th century, the distribution of whites and blacks in urban and rural areas had reversed. By 1960, more black people lived in cities than whites. In addition, the percentage of blacks working in agriculture declined dramatically to just 1% in 1981 (91).

In the 20th century, as U.S. metropolitan areas began to prosper and expand, it was common for immigrants and marginalized groups to live in outlying neighborhoods. However, while

⁵¹ Many blacks fleeing the rural South imagined the North as a ‘promised land’ full of job opportunities and without the racial hostility of the South. For the majority, however, this proved to be an illusion. Consider, for example, the autobiography of civil rights advocate Lottie Scott, who moved from North Carolina to Connecticut, and her accounts of experiencing racism in the housing market (2018: 174).

white immigrants eventually left their segregated status behind, the development of black ghettos and segregated Asian communities was primarily a response to “conscious white avoidance, as manifested in the use of physical violence, intimidation, and the creation of a dual housing market by way of racial covenants” (92). African American communities in U.S. metropolitan areas have been referred to as *ghettos*. This term is not without controversy because of its primarily pejorative connotations; some scholars, activists, and politicians have called for its deconstruction.⁵²

The spatial characteristics of the US inner city have been intensively observed and researched by the French sociologist Loïc Wacquant. While certainly not the first to approach the ghetto, Wacquant has criticized previous explanations that failed to examine the underlying strategies and practices of control and marginalization that contributed to the emergence of ghettos in the first place (Wacquant, 2016: 1080; see also Wacquant, 2009: 204).

Wacquant has emphasized how the ghetto is used as a tool by dominant groups to “simultaneously *ostracize* and *exploit* a subordinated group endowed with *negative symbolic capital*” (2009: 204). Wacquant’s emphasis already alludes to the ghetto as a stage for power struggles fought unilaterally through spatial means. Drawing on the work of Clark (1965), Branch paints a similar picture: “[Ghettos] are the institutionalization of powerlessness created from cumulative racial and economic disadvantage, and poverty...and are controlled by those who live outside of it rather than within it” (Branch and Jackson, 2020: 90; see also Duneier 2017). In addition, Wacquant identified stigma, constraint, territorial confinement, and institutional encasement as characteristics of ghettos. The result of the combination of these four elements is an urban space that equals “an *ethnoracial prison*” (2009: 205).⁵³

Not only has the concept of the ghetto been used superficially by researchers, as Wacquant laments, but misleading and superficial images have shaped discourses about ghettos and their inhabitants. For example, it is often claimed that the inner-city population has a flawed culture and that its residents are, therefore, to blame for the persistence of impoverishment and deprivation (Branch and Jackson, 2020: 79; see also Lipsitz 2007). Spatial strategies of exclusion stigmatize, marginalize, and criminalize residents and contribute to the portrayal of neighborhoods and their residents as *bad*. The example of U.S.-American ghettos illustrates that the exclusion of an ethnic and racial minority often has a spatial rationale. Bourdieu argued

⁵² In 2008, a New York City councilwoman attempted to ban the term ghetto altogether (Baez and Seabrook 2008). The term ‘inner city,’ a euphemism for the ghetto, sidesteps some of the negative attributes associated with the term ghetto, but according to Graaff (2015: 34f; see also Rothstein, 2017: xvi) has an equally negative connotation.

⁵³ This insight is reminiscent of Shabazz’ discussion of spatially maintained power in Chicago’s South Side communities, see p. 49.

that authority over space is expressed in the ability of the powerful “to control constructions of reality that reinforce its own status so that subordinate groups accept the social order and their own place in it” (Bourdieu in Spain, 1992: 17).

Some of these control measures have been applied to U.S. inner cities and, over time, have contributed to their bad reputation. Among these measures are discriminatory practices like ‘redlining,’ which has proven particularly detrimental to black people in U.S. inner cities (Belina, 2013: 91f). ‘Redlining’ describes an “unethical practice that puts services (financial and otherwise) out of reach for residents of certain areas based on race or ethnicity” (Kenton, 2019; see also Branch, 2020: 87ff). Coates has chronicled the racist practices of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and certain banks that denied loans to specific neighborhoods based on maps with red lines (2014).⁵⁴

One area that has been deeply affected by ‘redlining’ is New York’s neighborhood of Queens, particularly the district of Jamaica, which is also the birthplace of many Hip Hop artists and performers, including LL Cool J, Ja Rule, and Prodigy. A historical map of Queens from 1938, full of colored districts, already isolates the Jamaica neighborhood as a distinct space, colored red, marked with a “D,” and surrounded by neighborhoods of higher value. As a result, redlining deepened racial divides and prevented black people from owning their own homes (Kahlenberg and Quick 2019; see also Rothstein 2017). Thus, neighborhoods dominated by white homeowners are significantly better equipped with educational institutions, teachers, and neighborhood networks, affecting career prospects and future salary ranges (Branch, 2020: 84f).

The deficiencies of the inner city manifest themselves not only in infrastructure and education but also in families. Duneier warned about the lack of role models for young people. Compared to poor white communities, black inner cities have a significant lack of employed people who can serve as role models for youth at risk of growing up unemployed. The profound lack of gainful employment in the 1970s and 1980s has affected several generations. As a result, it has become more challenging to find suitable role models in the extended family who could set an example by completing school, holding down a steady job, maintaining a functional family, or abiding by the law (Duneier, 2017: 157f).

⁵⁴ The University of Richmond’s ambitious digital project, *Mapping Inequality*, reveals a unique source of historical documents, including maps for every major U.S. city, that illustrate the practice of redlining. Although the practice was made illegal by the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977, its effects are still relevant today (Squires 1997; Perry, et al. 2018). Today, housing in affected neighborhoods is much less valuable than comparable neighborhoods (Kenton 2019). In addition to redlining, ‘blockbusting’ is another unethical real estate practice that exploits racial fears. For example, real estate agents persuaded white homeowners to sell their properties by creating fear of an influx of racial minorities into the area (Chambers, 2020: 72f).

The inner city's economic, infrastructural, educational, and systemic deficiencies are often accurately problematized by the media, politicians, and public discourse. However, the imagery used to talk *about* inner-city communities is often misinformed and reminiscent of degrading practices that characterize communities as undesirable. Within this discussion, Hip Hop becomes relevant as a form of expression that allows agents to speak from within these spaces. Hip Hop imagery, as propagated in rap lyrics and music videos, regularly features ghetto spaces and thus conveys images of the inner city. In doing so, rappers validate the images, meanings, and ideas circulating in the public sphere (Diehl 2012). As early as 1993, Saunders addressed this by concluding:

Rappers are deconstructing the ghetto – block by block, tenement by tenement, individual by individual. Their words and images, though often merely rhetorical, do depict hard realities. While not nullifying the dominant discourse, and in some cases graphically reinforcing aspects of it, rap humanizes a condition, a standard of living, and a social situation otherwise glossed over (24).

Thus, while rappers often benefit from sharing (or inventing) their gritty inner-city stories with audiences unfamiliar with these spatial conditions, rap music also offers the potential to learn about the living conditions of many African American communities. Rose has also called for consideration of the social and historical conditions, the “decades of urban racial discrimination ...in every significant arena – housing, education, jobs, social services – in every city with a significant black population,” in order to refute characterizations of Hip Hop as complicit in perverting the youth and propagating exploitative messages (2008: 5).

Neighborhoods represent “the bundle of spatially based attributes associated with a proximate cluster of occupied residencies, sometimes in conjunction with other land uses” (Galster, 2019: 21). In contrast, the ‘hood,’ as a slang term derived from ‘neighborhood’ is explicitly used to refer to an impoverished inner-city area (OED 2021). The physical and symbolic capacity of the hood informs the discourse of authentic Hip Hop identities that are performed, embodied, and expressed by artists and consumed by audiences both inside and outside the boundaries of the hood. Rose has argued that “[identity] in Hip Hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience and one’s attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family” (1994: 78). While loyalty to one’s origins is a celebrated theme, rappers often face a dilemma once their economic means allows them to leave the hood. The creative capital of the neighborhood then secures claims to authenticity and is often described as a reason to stay in the hood. Conversely, some artists cite the poverty and dangers lurking in the neighborhood as reasons to leave (Forman, 2004b: 207f).

Streets

Encapsulated within the larger spaces of the inner city and the hood are, on a much smaller scale, the streets, which have always played an important role in African American communities. Particularly after the Great Migration and during the Harlem Renaissance, African American authors such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claude McKay, and Lorraine Hansberry wrote about urban space and the hardships resulting from a life of poverty and segregation in the U.S. inner city (Graaff, 2015: 38). In addition, numerous songs from various musical genres, most notably Bobby Womack's *110th Street*, attest to the importance of the street in the African American urban experience. After the Great Migration and the expansion of cities, the street became a stage for cultural expression and a gathering place. In addition, poor housing conditions led people to move their daily lives to the streets, especially during the summer. Economic crises and poverty forced many to supplement their wages with activities that took place mainly on the streets, including lottery games and betting. Huffs Schmid has described streets as primary sites of social interaction and self-organization. On the one hand, streets allow citizens to become lost in the shuffle, anonymous, and thus evade rigid definitions of identity. On the other hand, streets provide spaces for self-dramatization and self-assertion to ensure that identities become known (2015: 42f).

In Hip Hop, the street serves as a site for various artistic and cultural practices. Since its inception, Hip Hop has evolved into a subculture primarily practiced on the streets. Graffiti art, breakdancing, block parties, and free-style rapping ('cyphers') are integral practices independent of specific venues and primarily occur on the streets. Highly accessible and easy to practice, Hip Hop has been successfully instrumentalized to keep youth, quite paradoxically, from participating in more dangerous activities on the streets, including gangs and drugs. A prominent example is Afrika Bambaataa's attempt to provide more attractive recreational activities for youth by creating the Zulu Nation.⁵⁵ Throughout the history of Hip Hop, the streets have been ascribed with collective and individual meanings, values, and norms that differ significantly from external ascriptions (Graaff, 2015: 77f). Furthermore, the streets have become sites of protest, both during the Civil Rights movement, and more recently with the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement (Branch and Jackson, 2020: 71-77).

However, the streets are also used as sites for criminal activities, especially as a place to earn money and respect, the streets have an irresistible aura for an impoverished youth. Drug dealing is seen as a way to earn money and gain independence, self-confidence, and respect, while the

⁵⁵ I have mentioned the example of Afrika Bambaataa in the first chapter on the history of Hip Hop, see p. 17.

ever-present threat of arrest or death fades into the background. The euphemistic labeling of drug dealing as a ‘game’ underscores the lack of inhibition in pursuing a criminal career (Graaff, 2015: 88f). Because of the dangers and promises of the drug trade, the streets present, especially for men, “an unambiguous space that is associated with both home and maturation, but also with containment and danger” (39). Streets represent the antithesis of housing units characterized by confinement, overcrowding and miserable living conditions.

Street Culture

Spending considerable time on the street for socializing, engaging in illegal activities, and expressing one’s identity has made the street a significant urban space. Of particular relevance to the streets is ‘street culture,’ a deceptive form of codes and values often referenced by Hip Hop performers and audiences. Ilan defined *street culture* as “a product of social, economic, and cultural exclusion, and yet it is a process of attempting to remain viable, thriving and included within a specific street milieu” (2015: 3; see also Bourgois 2003). Although primarily associated with impoverished inner-city communities, Ilan underscores the appeal of street culture to mainstream culture. This external admiration is well documented in the romanticization of criminal archetypes such as the gangster, drug dealer, or pimp as authentic, and the coolness of gangster rap has captivated primarily white listeners (Ilan, 2015: 3, 10; see also Quinn 2005).

Because of their symbolic capital, streets are often associated with a sense of informality, as evidenced by phrases such as ‘street food’ or ‘street fighter.’ Despite the constructed link between street culture and (street) crime, there is no direct link between the display of street cultural values and criminal activity. However, an investment in street culture may lead to less inhibitions to becoming criminal or tolerating the crimes of others. Ilan has suggested that street culture should be understood as a spectrum that allows for different degrees of participation. Some people may prefer to simply ‘hang around’ on the streets or express themselves according to the styles, fashions, or language used and valued in street culture. More invested groups, however, may commit crimes to generate income and, thus, embrace and live by ideas that reward violence and assertiveness. Between these two extremes, the spectrum can account for a broader range of behaviors in inner-street communities (Ilan, 2015: 9f).⁵⁶ Richardson and St. Vil suggest that although a variety of attitudes, norms, and values circulate in inner-city communities, the meanings implicit in the code of the street predominate and compel all residents to be at least aware of and partially internalize the code for their own sake and the integrity of the community (2015: 76f).

⁵⁶ See also Gunter (2008) and Daniel (2012).

Ilan has identified seven key aspects that shape street culture in contemporary impoverished communities worldwide. First, he argues that the conditions of deprivation that characterize the inner city influence how its residents secure their livelihoods. Scarce or restricted access to resources, lack of gainful employment, and dependence on social welfare force many residents to live without amenities. Resilience to these conditions is often expressed by adopting a survivor mentality, relying on one's "resourcefulness, improvisation and the shadow economy to subsist" (2015: 14).

A partially illegal economic system, created by deprivation and a survivor's mentality, demonstrates a second aspect of street culture. Illegal markets selling drugs and contraband flourish in the communities of the urban poor. These various practices are expressed with a wide variety of vocabulary, including 'hustling,' and 'grinding.' Furthermore, inner-city violence is so pervasive that it is euphemistically called 'work' (Richardson and St. Vil, 2015: 91). Money is not the only motivating factor for participating in the street economy. As a third crucial aspect of street culture, Ilan describes respect as the second most important currency of street culture (2015: 14). According to Elijah Anderson, respect on the streets refers to being treated with the reverence a person believes they deserve. To gain respect, individuals deliberately commit crimes and violence to enhance their street status (1999: 33; see also Fagan and Wilkinson 1998).

In an environment that leaves few legitimate alternatives for gaining respect, the code of the street rewards violent and aggressive behavior with respect. Richardson and St. Vil suggest that inner-city violence among young black men is a response to a "profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and its institutions" (2015: 73). In addition, street codes glorify the accumulation of material wealth and male promiscuity. Women become objects that enhance men's social status (Kubrin, 2005: 364f). Several studies have established a causal relationship between the adoption of street code values and the willingness to use violence (Stewart, et al. 2002, 2006). The accumulation of respect and status by using force and violence is particularly relevant to the performance of masculinity in urban settings.

A fourth key aspect of street culture is a shared hostility toward government authorities. Because of negative experiences with the police, federal authorities, or the prison system, many residents of inner-city communities refuse to cooperate with representatives of the state and instead rely on their "interpersonal knowledge and relationships as well as street cultural dispute resolution mechanisms" (Ilan, 2015: 15). Fifth, these attitudes toward authorities lead to a reluctant acceptance of state assistance, which makes informal networks even more important.

Ilan suggests that “neoliberal and consumerist notions of individualism” have deeply affected this sense of community (15).

A sixth element of street culture is the accumulation of material wealth as a sign of respect and social status. Although street culture is most prevalent in poor communities, clothing, fashion, and other accessories mark distinction and thus perpetuate social hierarchies. In inner-city communities characterized by stagnant poverty rates and a lack of gainful employment, material wealth in clothes, apparel, jewelry, cars, and similar adornments imposes a value system that further divides inner-city residents. As a result, youth, especially males, commit crimes to accumulate possessions and enhance their status among their peers (15). Finally, Ilan has identified hedonistic practices as a central concern of street culture. In the face of constant danger and poverty, life is celebrated more intensely, for example, at Hip Hop block parties that serve as communal celebrations (16).

A completely different form of street culture is realized when the local population uses the public spaces of the inner city for positive purposes and community building. Despite the actual conditions of deprivation that manifest themselves in unequal access to power, participation, and education, as well as racism, poverty, and unfair housing policies, Forman has cautioned against devaluing inner-city neighborhoods as centers of inhospitality and general wastelands. Instead, he emphasizes the creative potential inherent in these spaces, usually described as what they lack or how their supposed inferiority manifests itself compared to other places. Discussions of the inner city must recognize that it is a lived and experienced space. Thus, Forman points to a discursive disparity in the understanding of the ghetto and the hood, as many inner-city residents reject the label ‘ghetto’ as a conglomerate of negative attributions, ideas, and images superimposed on the spaces they inhabit. By rejecting the ghetto, the *hood* is captured as a place discursively inscribed with positive images and values that are inherently familiar and relevant to its residents (Forman, 2002: 64f; see also Graaff, 2015: 77f). As noted above, public spaces in the inner city have always played an important role in celebrating community and solidarity.

Sociologists like Hunter have captured this reevaluation of lived urban environments with the concept of ‘black placemaking.’ The term envisions a corrective set of practices employed by black residents that counter negative and one-sided representations of black communities as violent, crime-ridden, and deprived. Black placemaking prioritizes residents’ experiences and highlights their agency to attach different meanings, values, and ideas to the spaces they inhabit

(2016: 31f).⁵⁷ Black placemaking does not seek to mitigate, palliate, or ignore the actual conditions in U.S. inner cities. However, reflecting on structural deficiencies and racism offers a counter perspective to the negative images perpetuated by the media, the public, and academia (Becker and Sweet, 2020: 63f).

Black placemaking is critical to the creative reframing of urban spaces by the agents who experience them daily. Hip Hop plays a crucial role as artists and audiences participate in challenging and reframing the spatial deficiencies of their community. Through social commentary, critique, education, and activism that recognizes the religious, political, economic, gender, and human rights dimensions of diverse people, Hip Hop artists and audiences can promote change within their communities (Becker and Sweet, 2020: 63f; see also Sweet 2017). In their 2020 study, Becker and Sweet have shown how Southern Hip Hop artists demonstrate remarkable connections to their community and stylize themselves as suitable mentors for youth without role models (71f). Hip Hop performers engage in black placemaking by creating a space for identification with a street, block, or community. While external views of a neighborhood can have a negative effect, Hip Hop performers create collective identities that individuals can identify with and strengthen the sense of community. The constant mentioning and calling out of streets, blocks, housing projects, or neighborhoods in rap music contributes to this identification. In addition, the block parties of early Hip Hop history have functioned as community-building events.

Housing Projects

In addition to the neighborhood and the streets, the inner-city housing projects play an important role as examples of particularly cramped living conditions acknowledged by many Hip Hop performers as places of personal experience, landmarks, or community gathering places. The history of inner-city housing projects began in the 1950s when city planner Robert Moses sought to transform Manhattan into the mecca of commerce and wealth it is today. At the time, building high-rise apartment buildings was the most practical way to house many people in a limited space (Van de Poel and Royackers, 2011: 199f). These ‘towers-in-the-park’ were a cost-effective way to house the displaced poor in a limited urban space from other neighborhoods. Chicago’s South Side became popular for its Carbini-Green project towers, which were the city’s largest housing projects as of 1958 and served as a model for projects in various other cities (Austen, 2018: 22f). Despite their modern nature, these housing projects were doomed from the start, as white residents resisted against their construction, and because of their

⁵⁷ See also Branch (2020: 95), Giancarlo (2020), and Hunter, et al. (2016: 21).

protests, housing projects were built primarily in communities already populated by black people (39). The cramped, isolated, and predominantly black high-rise housing units became known as projects (Chang, 2007: 10ff).

Shabazz further argues that the architecture of these housing projects reflected the developers' intention to isolate its residents from the rest of the city. Clinics, shops, stores, and social services were built around the housing project, creating an enclave within the city. The provision of essential services on site prevented residents from moving beyond the boundaries of the immediate area (Shabazz, 2015: 56, 61-64). Hirsch has likened this housing policy to a "domestic 'containment' policy" (1998: xi). Contemporary witness Elizabeth Wood, the first executive director of the Chicago Housing Authority from 1937 to 1954, suggested that "[it] is the will of politicians to keep Negroes where they are" (American Milestone, 1986: 253). Nevertheless, the housing projects became the primary residences in poor communities and had a lasting impact on millions of residents, including many Hip Hop artists.

Suburbs

As a stage of hierarchies and spatially produced differences, the city is often described as containing the dichotomy between the inner city, or ghetto, and the suburbs. The symbolic representation of the inner city, essentially a distinct urban geographic section in the center of the city, is fraught with biased concepts, stereotypes, and assumptions about the space and its population. Related terms, such as 'inner-city youth' or 'inner-city violence,' are circulated by the media and carry preconceived notions. As a result, inner-city residents are rarely positioned as inhabiting a neutral urban space at the city's core. Instead, they are pushed into the role of a minority that starkly contrasts the suburban population. The inner city has been discursively constituted as a demarcated urban space inhabited primarily by racialized subjects with a disadvantaged class background, a negatively portrayed *other* to the predominately white and more affluent suburbs (Forman, 2002: 42f). The inclusion of the suburbs in this discussion signals the spatial diversity of Hip Hop culture.

Interestingly, the degree of suburbanization in the United States is unparalleled among most Western societies. The suburbs are historically associated with the gradual migration of whites from urban to suburban communities in response to the massive influx of African Americans from the South. This *white flight* was accelerated by racial prejudice, as real estate agents and banks deliberately discouraged black people from moving to the suburbs (Gottdiener, et al. 2019: 123f). Racist practices such as redlining led to the entrenchment of racial stereotypes and the perception, primarily among whites that black people in the proximity were causing property values to decline (Branch and Jackson, 2020: 90; see also Austen, 2018: 37). In

addition to diminishing property values, whites feared the “anonymous poor black male who tended to dominate space...[for] virtually all whites, the key goal on the street was to avoid these potential ‘predators’” (Duneier, 2017: 162; see also Anderson, 1990: 164).

The lack of attractive recreational activities is another aspect that exacerbates the divide between inner-city and suburban communities. In her 2012 study of how children learn about their own ‘racial’ identity, Winkler points to the location of attractive recreational facilities outside of inner-city boundaries and in suburban areas that wealthier white residents predominately inhabit. Although income disparities are commonplace, she argues that limited access to the same resources leads to a mistaken acceptance and internalization of this difference. From the responses of her interviewees, Winkler concluded that inner-city residents perceive predominantly white spaces as better equipped and that “the borders (both literal and figurative) between the black-controlled spaces and the white-controlled spaces are strictly enforced and movement...is not welcomed” (2012: 53f; see also McKittrick, 2006: xv).

Long Island, commonly referred to as “the nation’s first suburb” and the home of many successful rappers, was once considered the fulfillment of the American Dream (Long Island Regional Planning Council 2023). However, at least for the black population, Long Island proved to be “a safe island in a sea of whiteness, and incontrovertible evidence of white resistance to King’s dream” (Chang, 2007: 233). Although the number of blacks in the suburbs was significantly smaller, police misconduct and brutality found primarily black victims. The suburbs turned to “inner-ring suburbs” that “were buffers between inner-city ghettos of color and...the wealth in the exurbs” (234).

Prison

The terminology used by Wacquant and Shabazz has already suggested the inner city and the prison as spaces that reflect spatially maintained power. The marginalization of black people has dramatically facilitated the marginalization of inner-city communities and, as a result, the racist perception that black people are criminals (Branch and Jackson, 2020: 127f; see also Davis, 2003: 16). Around the time that Hip Hop emerged, the Reagan administration introduced the Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1986 (Branch and Jackson, 2020: 136).⁵⁸ The Act targeted primarily disadvantaged communities with a higher propensity to commit crime (Graaff, 2015: 46f).⁵⁹ As a result, the overall prison population has gradually increased from a low of 20,000 people in the 1970s to 1.5 million people in 2018 (Branch and Jackson, 2020: 128; see also Walmsley, 2018: 6). However, Branch argues that these numbers mask a far more severe reality

⁵⁸ See also Wacquant (2009: 128), Provine (2011), and Graaff (2015: 49-52).

⁵⁹ Consider Mauer (2001: 20), Pfaff (2017), and Branch and Jackson (2020: 129).

as prisons have become the first point of contact for many low-level offenses. Thus, many more people pass through the prison system while awaiting trial or release (Branch and Jackson, 2020: 128; Wang 2023).

As a result, millions of black citizens, young and old, male and female, find themselves touched by the prison system in one way or another, either behind bars, on parole, on probation, or under the supervision of the authorities. As a result, Shabazz has argued that the Hip Hop generation, composed of predominantly black men, has a “relationship to prison and carceral power that is more distinct than that of any generation of Black people in American history” (2015: 94). Indeed, a significant number of authors acknowledge experiences with the prison system. The male artists who acknowledge their prison experiences are 50 Cent, DMX, Flavor Flav, Ice-T, Ja Rule, Prodigy, Snoop Dogg, Trick Daddy, U-God, and Rakim. Female artists Queen Latifah, Watkins, and Sandra Denton refer to incarcerated family members and relatives. Prison is described as a public place of isolation and coercion. Because of the high incarceration rates in black communities, black male authors describe it as a place of identity and legitimation in the context of street culture.

Because prisons are strictly segregated by gender, the prison becomes a burning glass for the competition of different performances of masculinity.⁶⁰ In prison, the tenets of hegemonic masculinity lead to a prevalence of hypermasculinity performances, accompanied by homophobia, misogyny, and a propensity for violence. Behavior perceived as weak and, therefore, deviant from the straitjacket of hypermasculinity is considered undesirable and blocks the path to respect. Violence becomes the ultimate form of hyper-aggressive prison masculinity, manifested in both physical and sexual violence (Morse and Wright, 2022: 2-4). The most dominant form of prison masculinity consists of “physical strength, aggression, exercising the threat of violence toward other prisoners, and sexually dominating other prisoners, including through rape” (Pemberton, 2013: 168). Those who are overpowered have failed to perform hypermasculinity convincingly and are degraded with insults such as ‘bitch’ or ‘pussy’ (Ilan, 2015: 48; see also Mullins 2006 and Martyniuk 2014). Their supposed femininity is used to ‘justify’ the sexual assault with which the perpetrator claims power (Robinson, 2011: 1312).

Shabazz has argued that black men often resort to performing masculinity through their bodies because they “lack the material articulations of masculinity (in other words, gainful employment, mobility, property, access to institutions of power)” (2015: 77). In prison, for

⁶⁰ See also Maycock (2018) and Miller (2006).

example, men are deprived of various means of self-expression. Hence, they use their bodies to display masculinity. Muscles represent strength, mean looks demonstrate toughness, and intimidating postures show a willingness to use violence (Shabazz, 2015: 93f; see also 2013: 166). However, the physical and authoritative aspects of prison masculinity have seeped into street culture and, by extension, into Hip Hop masculinities (Shabazz, 2015: 94f). Hip Hop culture and its styles are a valid example of the transfer of prison aesthetics into a socio-cultural space outside of the prison system. Prison-issued clothing has become a marker of Hip Hop culture around the world. For example, the iconic baggie clothes replicate prison imagery “because in prison they don’t receive clothes that fit nor do they receive belts” (Shabazz, 2013: 166).

Conclusion

Relevant Hip Hop spaces generally have an urban character. With specific attributions, Hip Hop artists and audiences define Hip Hop authenticity, strongly linked to street credibility. As the birthplace of Hip Hop culture, the urban inner city is ascribed an identity-forming aspect that lends more credibility to the biographies of Hip Hop artists from urban inner-city spaces than, for example, those from predominantly white rural areas. In addition, the urban spaces of the inner cities are characterized by blight and infrastructural deficits, which were overcome by the inventiveness, tenacity, and DIY mentality of the early Hip Hop generation. The rejection of mainstream society and the awareness of the underground also represent the connection to street culture. For the writers and performers in the corpus, street culture is most relevant in the streets, neighborhoods, and housing projects.

In particular, the streets and other public spaces are integral to African American communities, where important identity-forming and community-building events occur. Hip Hop has also adopted these functions, with the various elements of Hip Hop being expressed and performed in public spaces. In addition to these positive examples, inner city streets and public spaces are also used for criminal activities. Because many actors and Hip Hop performers believe that the inner city offers few legal opportunities to earn money and respect, it is mainly male youth who engage in criminal activities such as theft and drug dealing. Money and respect are the main drivers of street culture in an environment that offers few gainful employment opportunities. The negative characterization of the inner city as a ghetto usually comes from the outside and often confirms existing prejudices about the inner city and its inhabitants. To some extent, Hip Hop artists, especially rap artists, have benefited from the marketing and aesthetic processing of these prejudices. For many years, gangster rap, in particular, has satisfied the desire of white middle-class listeners for stories from the ghetto.

As interpreted and realized by many Hip Hop artists, the various elements of street culture speak to the artists' understanding that they struggle to survive under adverse conditions. As there are no legal ways to earn money from their point of view, criminal activities become a strategy of survival. In addition, the tenets of hypermasculinity, for example, the focus on strength and a willingness to use violence, are a means of gaining power and overriding others. Strength as a central motif in a struggle for survival under adverse conditions is reminiscent of comparisons with the animal world.

However, more positive representations of the inner city often come from within the community. Black placemaking strategies can be found in Hip Hop, for example, when the various elements of the culture are expressed in public space. This happens, for example, when rappers use their songs or music videos to identify with their neighborhoods. In addition, block parties serve as intergenerational events in public spaces, strengthening the sense of community and promoting dialogue between different groups.

Finally, the prison as a public space is relevant for Hip Hop culture. Although it may seem disconnected from the immediate life world of many artists, it is the high incarceration rate and exposure to the prison system on the one hand, and the similarities between the inner city and the prison as sites of spatially controlled power on the other, that make the prison relevant to Hip Hop artists. Furthermore, as a concentrated and isolated public space, the prison is a site for the performance of hypermasculinity, which in turn feeds into street culture.

Part II

II. AFRICAN AMERICAN HIP HOP LIFE WRITING:

The Corpus and the Genre

2.1 The Corpus of African American Hip Hop Life Writing

2.1.1 Taking Stock of AA HH LW

Global Hip Hop Life Writing

As of 2024, rap artists, music producers, DJs, and individuals otherwise associated with Hip Hop have produced a substantial corpus of life writing. Globally speaking, the corpus of Hip Hop autobiographies and memoirs is extensive, with over sixty predominantly Anglophone life accounts. Hip Hop life writing is controlled by the U.S. market and dominated by African American artists. Between 2011 and 2015, the number of Hip Hop life writing publications has nearly doubled worldwide. Artists outside the United States did not contribute to the Hip Hop life writing corpus until well into the 2000s, more than a decade after Sister Souljah published her account. The imbalance between life writing from the U.S. and life writing outside the U.S. reflects the large share of attention that Western artists enjoy worldwide. The photo essay of Korean rapper Dok2 (2016) is the only non-Western example of Hip Hop life writing.

A small but not insignificant number of Hip Hop life writing publications comes from Europe, including contributions from France (Malik 2009), Greece (Georgiades 2012), Germany (Bushido 2008), and the United Kingdom (Tempah 2011, Contostavlos 2012, Green 2015, Cowie 2016) (Table 1 Overview Global Hip Hop Life Writing). However, while Hip Hop has significantly impacted the U.S. media and entertainment industry, the numbers of publications from the rest of the world do not suggest a similar trend.

Hip Hop Life Writing from the US

To receive an impression of the development of life writing by Hip Hop artists, it is worth considering the years of publication and the age of the authors. The first authors were exclusively African American performers, including Sister Souljah (1996), LL Cool J (1997), Chuck-D (1997), Queen Latifah (1999), and Snoop Dogg (1999), all of whom published their accounts before their forties. Of these artists, Snoop Dogg (28) and LL Cool J (29) were the youngest to release their memoirs. However, this young age does not seem to be the norm, as influential performers such as Ice-T, Flavor Flav, and Grandmaster Flash were past their 50th birthdays at the time of the release of their life account. Since the end of the 2000s, the number of Hip Hop publications has increased and rose again in the last decade, both in the U.S. and Europe, as Figure 2 Global Distribution of Publications per Period shows. The most recent memoir to be published was Alicia Key's memoir in 2020.

Among the most commercially successful and well-known Hip Hop artists are primarily men. This dominance directly translates into the ratio between autobiographies and memoirs of male and female artists in the USA and worldwide (Figure 3 Global Distribution of Hip Hop Life Writing). The number of publications by male Hip Hop artists is significantly high, but highest in the United States, confirming it as the hub of Hip Hop culture, which also has the highest number of publications by female artists worldwide. Although female artists have achieved critical acclaim within Hip Hop and rap music, they remain disproportionately represented.

Given the marketing of rap music and the subsequent embrace of MCs, the number of autobiographies and memoirs written by rappers is overwhelming. Only a few authors did not pursue a career as a rapper before publishing their life stories. There are three accounts written by DJs (DJ Shy 2011, DJ Disco Wiz 2009, DJ Khaled 2016). One work reflects the life of a U.S. graffiti artist (MC Yogi 2017), while I did not find an account written exclusively from the perspective of a breakdancing artist. With the main elements of the culture in place, the remaining corpus of life writing consists of a radio journalist, a rapper's mother (West 2007), authors looking back on romantic liaisons with rappers (Bryan 2006), a video vixen (Steffans 2005, 2007, 2017), as well as the co-founder of Def Jam Recordings, Russell Simmons.

African American Hip Hop Life Writing

My corpus of African American Hip Hop life writing includes autobiographies and memoirs published by African American Hip Hop artists, often in overt collaboration with co-authors or covert partnership with ghostwriters. The publication dates range from 1996 to 2020 and reflect on the lives of artists born in the United States. However, two artists in the corpus, Wyclef Jean, born in Haiti, and Sandra Denton, born in Jamaica, immigrated to the United States during their childhood. Regardless of their origins, all artists in this corpus have achieved critical success through their creative achievements as rappers, DJs, or producers. The total corpus contains the autobiographies and memoirs of forty authors, amounting to forty-two publications (Table 2 Corpus Overview African American Hip Hop Life Writing) with two authors, Common and Darryl McDaniels, contributing two memoirs respectively.

The city of New York holds a special place in Hip Hop history, lore, and my corpus. Many writers are from New York or its metropolitan area (see Table 2 Corpus Overview African American Hip Hop Life Writing). Many artists born in New York have also spent their lives in or around the metropolitan area and have been marketed as New York artists. Only a small minority of publications were written by artists from the West Coast (including the Los Angeles

metropolitan area and the San Francisco Bay Area), or the so-called ‘Third Coast,’ a label referring to the coastal southern regions around Atlanta, Miami, and Houston. Since most artists call a city or larger metropolitan area their home, Hip Hop Life Writing in its current state is primarily characterized by an urban experience.

However, concerning the authors’ origins, the birthplace was not defined as a primary selection criterion. A few artists have gained popularity in places different than their cities of birth or regions of their childhood. One example is Ice-T, who was born in New Jersey and moved to Los Angeles as a child before becoming one of the most influential artists on the West Coast. Hip Hop mogul and producer Jermaine Dupri was born in North Carolina but has been most active in the Hip Hop scene around Atlanta. Therefore, for this analysis, artists were assigned to the region where they have accumulated popularity. Although this bears the risk of conflating the regional diversity found in African American Hip Hop Life Writing, ordering artists in this way results in more cohesive regional categories of East Coast, West Coast, and ‘Third’ Coast and facilitates comparing artists.

However, the overrepresentation of East Coast artists belies the importance of the West and Third Coast as crucial regions in developing Hip Hop in its contemporary form. Hip Hop is characterized by a remarkable regional diversity today, and its most successful artists are no longer exclusively from the East Coast. Despite the pervasiveness of Hip Hop and the significant number of publications by older artists, the publication of an autobiography or memoir does not appear to be a milestone associated with a Hip Hop career. Many influential and famous artists, including the members of the West Coast group N.W.A., Dr. Dre or Ice Cube, or important figures of the Third Coast, have not yet published autobiographies or memoirs.

2.1.2 Characterizing the Corpus

My corpus of African American Hip Hop Life Writing includes autobiographies and memoirs penned by African American rappers, DJs, and producers published between the mid-1990s and 2020. In this subsection, I will briefly characterize the corpus and demonstrate what has led to the inclusion and exclusion of publications. Describing my corpus is vital as it informs the subsequent discussion Hip Hop Life Writing as a genre and the analysis of case studies. Prior to this, a brief note on corpus selection is necessary. Although past and current research has delved into artists’ autobiographical expressions in the form of lyrics, music videos, interviews, or web presences, I focus on how these authors present themselves in their respective autobiographies and memoirs. Therefore, due to space and time constraints, this study excludes

any autobiographical references of artists on other media, even if such expressions may be relevant to understanding Hip Hop and its implications on gender and space. Notably, numerous eminent Hip Hop artists who blend their social criticism and protest inequality with autobiographical expressions on social media have yet to publish their autobiography or memoir.

The initial classification level for the archive concerns the authors' ethnicity and 'racial' identification. Most of the revealed co-authors also share the same ethnicity and racial identification as the authors. Only the publications of Grandmaster Flash (co-authored by David Ritz), Sister Souljah (co-authored by Steve Wasserman), Questlove (co-authored by Ben Greenman), Darryl McDaniels (2001, co-authored by Bruce Haring), and Lecrae Moore (co-authored by Jonathan Merritt) were produced in collaboration with non-black journalists and writers. The discussion regarding celebrity culture has shown that producing celebrity life writing involves the collaborative efforts of multiple agents. The many publications with a disclosed co-author on the title page indicate a considerable level of co-authorship within AA HH LW (Table 2 Corpus Overview African American Hip Hop Life Writing).

Second, in addition to their 'racial' identity, the authors of this archive identify strictly within the gender binary. Within the archive, no male or female author identifies as non-binary or acknowledges non-binarism in any way. However, this does not exclude socially and culturally constructed expectations of masculinity and femininity, including the performance of (hyper)masculinity or emphasized femininity. The authors of AA HH LW address these issues in their publications but do so from a standpoint that suggests a deep confidence in their identity as a man or woman. However, the absence of gender non-conforming artists or issues does not mean that Hip Hop or AA HH LW is free from these perceptions, but rather that the authors of the corpus have chosen not to acknowledge these issues.

Moreover, as there have been numerous examples of contemporary gender non-conforming rap artists in recent years, the specificity of my corpus comes into play once again. The archive consists of male and female artists, while openly non-conforming artists have yet to publish an autobiography or memoir. Furthermore, a discussion of gender identity is not complete without a consideration of sexuality. In this regard, the statements of both male and female authors suggest that they identify within the heterosexual matrix. Except for Terrance Dean (2008), who openly acknowledges his homosexuality, all authors seem to accept a heteronormative paradigm while expressing exclusively heterosexual desires in their autobiographies and memoirs.

Third, an analysis of life writing publications by African American authors calls for an intersectional approach that considers multiple discriminatory factors. Systemic racism and the resulting policies of discrimination, marginalization, and criminalization profoundly limit access to resources, power, and equality. In addition, the experiences of female artists in Hip Hop culture become relevant as agents suffering from a patriarchal society and experiencing further backlash within a culture dominated by male performers, audiences, preferences, and values.

As a fourth characterization of AA HH LW, it is worth noting that all artists, except for Terrance Dean have, at one time or another, and to varying degrees, enjoyed a celebrity status. Hip Hop artists owe their popularity to their creative ability to compose art in the form of music and perform it in a way that appeals to a broader audience. Although some artists have appeared on television shows such as *The Celebrity Apprentice* (Watkins), *The Flavor of Love* (Flavor Flav), movies (LL Cool J, 50 Cent, Common, Queen Latifah, Ja Rule, Snoop Dogg, DMX), or TV shows (Ice-T), they did so after becoming famous as rappers. Accordingly, their celebrity status was initially achieved through their affiliation with Hip Hop and the music industry. The publication of an autobiography or memoir has sometimes served as a reminder of an artist's past popularity. In other cases, it was a logical consequence of longstanding fame.

A fifth aspect of AA HH LW is its strong localization in urban cityscapes. Although there are a few exceptions, such as Timbaland, who describes his life as influenced by a rural upbringing, most authors cite cities as their influential spaces. As a result, many spaces revisited in the autobiographies and memoirs are decidedly urban, mentioning conditions typical of urban metropolises such as crime, inadequate housing, poverty, and drug-related crime. Although contemporary artists have undermined the prevalence of urban themes for Hip Hop, this aspect shows how relevant cities and urban spaces were to the artists in the corpus.

Finally, AA HH LW's authors are connected to Hip Hop's culture. Although this may appear as a superfluous statement, it is crucial to point out simply because not all artists explicitly refer to Hip Hop in their autobiographies or memoirs. Most publications were written by rappers, DJs, and producers who leave no doubt about their affiliation with Hip Hop. The life account and its paratextual features, including the cover, accompanying images, and contributing voices are tailored to tell the story of a Hip Hop artist and appeal to readers who associate the celebrity's name with a Hip Hop career. However, some publications do not overtly address the artist's connection to Hip Hop or hide it in the publication's text.

Alicia Keys, for example, has been primarily celebrated and marketed as a soul and R&B singer and is not primarily known for her Hip Hop associations. In her autobiography, however,

Keys makes explicit references to a childhood and adolescence under the influence of a growing popularity of Hip Hop. Her preference for distinctive Hip Hop clothing, her relationship with an aspiring artist, her marriage to an established rap artist, and her references to a vibrant New York Hip Hop culture do not make her a Hip Hop artist. However, they indicate an affinity for the culture (2020: 31ff, 327). R&B artist Faith Evans presents a similar case as she never pursued a rap career but has a solid connection to Hip Hop through her brief marriage to rapper Notorious B.I.G. This liaison and her status as the first woman signed to Bad Boy Records establish a firm connection to Hip Hop.

Another interesting example is Tionne Watkins, or T-Boz, best known for her role as a member of the R&B trio TLC. In her memoir, Watkins explicitly rejects an identification with rap music, stating that “TLC isn’t a rap group, as anyone who’s a fan of us knows” (2017: 75). Based on this statement alone, it is difficult to justify including her publication in the corpus. However, I justify this decision by pointing out that TLC also relied heavily on rap aesthetics, best exemplified by the contributions of band member Left Eye Lopez (Iandoli, 2019: 89). Second, throughout her memoir, Watkins references numerous points of contact with Hip Hop during her childhood and adolescence, most notably in her account of becoming the only female member of a breakdancing crew that met at an Atlanta roller rink (2017: 39f).

In the AA HH LW corpus, Terrance Dean’s memoir, *Hiding in Hip Hop* (2008), presents a case that meets only a minimum of the above characteristics. Although Dean’s memoir boldly proclaims a Hip Hop connection on the cover, the author’s affiliation with the culture and insight into the business of Hip Hop remain largely obscure. The superficial and paraphrased references to actual rap artists and business agents serve to protect the author and his associates from homophobic backlash. However, the lack of substantive knowledge of the culture and the fact that Dean has not functioned as an artist, performer, or producer makes the memoir’s potential to provide insight from a position *hidden* within Hip Hop misleading. From his position as a member of the Hip Hop audience and later as an executive for MTV, Dean identifies himself as fascinated by and a part of Hip Hop culture (2008: 24). Although it represents only an adjunct to Hip Hop and shares a minority of characteristics with other publications in the corpus, Dean’s memoir has been included not as an example of Hip Hop artistry, but primarily to expand and diversify perspectives on homosexuality and homophobia in Hip Hop and the rap music business.

Analyzing the numerous publications makes it possible to make a statement about the language with which Hip Hop artists retell their lives. Although this observation was only a byproduct of my analysis, these cursory observations can further characterize the corpus of AA

HH LW. Furthermore, focusing on the language helps explore how far the chosen language helps artists make their self-image public. A typical feature of rap music is offensive language, including words like ‘fuck,’ ‘shit,’ and ‘bitch.’ In addition, the n-word (optionally spelled with ‘-a’ or ‘-er’) is one of the formerly pejorative terms that have become a label of self-identification within the Black community (Henderson, 2003: 65; see also Rahman, 2012: 138).⁶¹

When it comes to offensive language, male authors are more likely to use words like ‘fuck,’ ‘shit,’ and ‘bitch,’ as well as variations of the n-word. In addition, I have observed that authors who have performed a stereotypical Hip Hop identity throughout their careers and are attempting to do so through their publications use more offensive language than authors who are known (and want to be known) for a less offensive and stereotypical Hip Hop performance. For example, the publication of Wu-Tang Clan member U-God stands out as it mentions the word ‘fuck’ 411 times and the word ‘shit’ 500 times over the course of 292 pages. In comparison, rapper Chuck-D uses ‘fuck’ 104 times and ‘shit’ 151 times in his similarly long autobiography. In the publication of rapper Jay-Z, the n-word appears 164 times, but this can be explained by the many lyrics that are included.⁶²

There are exceptions, however. Among the female authors, Faith Evans stands out as her memoir mentions the word ‘fuck’ 58 times, the word ‘shit’ 73 times, and the word ‘bitch’ 21 times. Thus, Evans surpasses some male authors, including Darryl McDaniels, DJ Run, and Common, who consciously decide against a stereotypical Hip Hop identity and refrain from using overly offensive language, both in their lyrics and memoirs. Although Evans has a reputation as a soft R&B singer, she acknowledges her proximity to rap music, for example, through her liaison with Notorious B.I.G. or her marketing by P. Diddy under Bad Boy Records. For her, using expletives could be interpreted as a strategy to shake off her soft image and correct her position in the rap business.

Before discussing AA HH LW as a genre, I must comment on the quality of AA HH LW publications. Most AA HH LW publications are of high production quality, evidenced by accuracy, editorial control, clarity and readability, formal correctness, and the inclusion of professionally taken photographs. However, some publications suggest that the celebrity author

⁶¹ The repurposing of the n-word by black people has been captured by several scholars, including Kennedy (2000, 2002), Bernard (2005), Harkness (2008), Starkey (2017), King (2018).

⁶² These values were determined using the automatic search for e-book variants. Not every publication in the archive has an e-book variant, and I did not have access to all e-book variants. Therefore, I only have data for a few AA HH LW publications.

lacked the resources or support necessary to publish a polished account. I will briefly illustrate the varying degrees of substandard quality in AA HH LW with three examples.

First, Sha-Rock's memoir contains some occasional orthographic mistakes that would have been corrected with the help of an editorial team. For example, the author states the following: "I was going out to queens [sic]" or "The T-Connection was a placed that a lot of groups and DJs would go [sic]" (2010: 173; see also 117, 145, 157, 209). These mistakes do not aggravate reading comprehension but indicate a lack of (professional) editing not found in many other publications. Second, although Mc Lyte's memoir also contains some orthographic mistakes (2014: 25, 27, 53f), her memoir is primarily distinguished from the rest of the corpus by its reduced length of 88 pages and the use of an unusually large font size that hardly shifts between the headings and the written text.

Finally, of all the AA HH LW publications, Mia-X's memoir is the most poignant example of a self-published book that has not been adequately edited, formatted, and adapted to reading habits. The first indication of self-publishing and a lack of editing is found on the 'copyright page,' where the author states that she wrote the book for Mama Mia X Publishing, a company named after the author herself. Above this note appears a written statement that "[this] novel is based on the life of Mia X" while the book's cover identifies the publication as a cookbook memoir. These inconsistencies continue in the written text, which follows the author's life over fourteen chapters and approximately 230 pages. The pagination, however, is interrupted and restarted several times, making it difficult to read comfortably, let alone quote accurately.⁶³ The memoir alternates between different fonts and layouts for no apparent reason. Although there is an extensive list of recipes, only five uncaptioned black-and-white food photographs are included.

These and similar examples suggest that the notion that anyone can write needs to be expanded to include the perception that celebrity memoirs' lack of quality rarely affects their perception. The memoir boom and the abundance of celebrity memoirs may have accelerated production processes. It is striking that Sha-Rock, Mc Lyte, and Mia X published their memoirs when they had already found other pursuits and had disappeared from the attention of the Hip Hop nation. Thus, it is arguable whether the quality of the publication and, thus, the editorial support and available resources correlate with the author's standing and reputation in the Hip Hop nation.

⁶³ Because of this inconsistent pagination, I will add the respective chapter whenever citing from Mia-X's memoir.

2.2 African American Hip Hop Life Writing: A Blending of Genres

The previous chapter has demonstrated the extent of Hip Hop life writing worldwide. Moreover, I have characterized my African American Hip Hop Life Writing corpus, henceforth referred to as AA HH LW. In this chapter, I explore the corpus to determine whether AA HH LW can be considered a genre of its own. The following observations rest upon my corpus of publications, consisting of forty-two publications in total, of which the majority is overtly, either on the frontispiece or in the paratexts, advertised as memoirs (Table 2 [Corpus Overview African American Hip Hop Life Writing](#)).

In this chapter, I argue that AA HH LW blends African American, musical, and celebrity life writing characteristics. Moreover, it also shows features of several subgenres, including addiction, depression, trauma, abuse, prison narratives, or political and activist life writing. However, these characteristics are much less pronounced and are present in many, though certainly not all, publications of the corpus. I begin by exploring the primary genre elements of African American, musical, and celebrity life writing, which, as I argue, are shared by most publications. Then, using examples from the corpus, I will indicate which secondary genre elements occur in AA HH LW.

2.2.1 Primary Genre Elements

African American Life Writing

Despite of efforts to eradicate racism or change the way of thinking about ‘race,’ discrimination against black people based on their ‘otherness’ from a dominant white group still prevails in the United States. Because reservations about ‘race’ are perpetuated in society and institutions, Branch has called racism “as American as apple pie” (2020: 1; see also Blauner, 2001: 20). Experiences of racial discrimination, marginalization, and criminalization shape how African American writers reflect on their lives and what they choose to make public. Born out of the pain and trauma that generations of black people have endured over centuries, Dudley has suggested that a concern of life writing by African American artists is “to assert one’s full humanity and to call upon America to make good its promises to grant all citizens freedom to fashion and live lives of their own choosing” (2017: 25).

Because African American writers speak from a racialized and marginalized perspective, their desire to be perceived as a human being rather than a racialized *other* is crucial to African

American life writing (Early, 2014: 4).⁶⁴ Balestrini has emphasized the peculiar position of African American writers, whose autobiographical selves, in contrast to the autonomous self of the canonical Western autobiography, are not “construed...as an individualized self but as a politicized personification of a group identity” (2015: 225; see also Smith and Watson, 1992: xiii-xxxi). As a result, African American writers tend to refer to experiences of racial discrimination and marginalization to inscribe themselves into the collective pain that results from the persistence of systemic racism. Authors share their perspectives on past and ongoing forms of racism, from Jim Crow to school segregation, or express their support of and participation in public protests such as the Civil Rights Movement or Black Lives Matter.

Stepo has identified recurring themes typical of African American life writing. These themes revolve around ‘race,’ gender, and identity and, with specific reference to African American men. He concluded that issues of masculinity are central to African American life writing by male authors as they often focus on:

how protagonists raise themselves, often without one or both parents; how black boys invent black manhood, often with no examples or models before them; how protagonists seek and find a home elsewhere, and how protagonists create personalities that can deal with the pain of abandonment (2010: 5).

In the previous discussion about gendered spaces, I have shown how African American families in inner-city communities are troubled by the absence of fathers due to socio-cultural circumstances, including mass incarceration, crime, unemployment, or substance abuse. Poverty and a lack of profitable employment have been cited as the main contributors to this social deficiency (Richardson and St. Vil, 2015: 73). As a result, black youth in these communities often turn to other relatives for comfort, support, and guidance. In this way, African American families respond to the gaps in their middle by shifting the responsibility of raising children to other relatives.

Many AA HH LW authors grew up without their biological father and indicate how they looked to relatives and acquaintances for male role models.⁶⁵ Most authors address the effect of their fathers’ abandonment and acknowledge the challenge of becoming a man without a proper male role model.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ See also Lamore (2017) for an introduction to contemporary African American autobiography.

⁶⁵ These authors include LL Cool J (1997: 18f), 50 Cent (2005: 12f), Ja Rule (2014: 20ff), DMX (2002: 34), Prodigy (2012: 30), Grandmaster Flash (2008: 15), Common (2011: 22; 2019: 82-86), Snoop Dogg (1999: 11), Jermaine Dupri (2007: 9), Scarface (2015: 207), Tionne Watkins (2017: 3f), Mac Mall (2015: 1), U-God (2018: 10f), Trick Daddy (2010: 2), and Jay-Z (2010: 202).

⁶⁶ In Chapter 3.2 Representations of Gender in AA HH LW, I will address these issues in detail.

Another aspect crucial to African American life writing is a concern with experiences of racism and an acknowledgment of experiences of racial discrimination. Artists highlight the persistence of racial discrimination by showing their family history as intertwined with racism and inequality. For example, Common, one of the most outspoken artists on issues of equality and racism, chronicles his family's move from the South to the North during the Great Migration and infers that his grandmother "was only two generations removed from slavery" (2011: 18f). As a former resident of Chicago, Common is also aware of the current situation of African American communities. In his second memoir, he acknowledges mass incarceration, "racist employment strategies," drugs, and police brutality as reasons for persistent discrimination (2019: 45; see also Snoop Dogg, 1999: 84). Third Coast rapper Rick Ross demonstrates his awareness of African American history when he describes his family's history in the rural town of Shelby, Mississippi, near where Emmett Till was murdered in 1955 (2019: 26). By demonstrating familiarity with African American suffering, proximity to important historical sites of the African American experience, or knowledge of contemporary inequality, authors authenticate their membership to a racialized group and emphasize their dedication to equality.

Some authors acknowledge inequality by demonstrating a more militant approach to racial discrimination. For example, New York rapper Prodigy educates his readers about African history and highlights the progress of African societies before enslavement. In particular, he challenges ideas of black inferiority and shows how contemporary enslavement persists on many levels, including religion, finance, and education. To appeal to black readers, he couches his critique of colonialism and racism with the inclusive pronoun "we" (2012: 129). In another instance, rapper Flavor Flav shows sympathy for the Black Panthers (2011: 53), while Houston rapper Scarface advocates radicalization and violent resistance in the face of persistent discrimination in Texas. His penchant for militancy is evident in his appreciation of the Los Angeles riots that followed the beating of Rodney King or the Ferguson riots in the wake of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014 (2015: 57).

Recognition of a racialized self, the awareness of historical and contemporary racial discrimination, and the reference to missing biological fathers are recurring themes in AA HH LW. These issues are particularly relevant in inner-city communities. The prospect of success in Hip Hop, for example, in the form of a rap career, is often equated with a chance to leave the plight of the inner city behind. Many artists describe Hip Hop as a way to escape the inner city. Therefore, the following section focuses on musical life writing as a specific subset of celebrity life writing. Artists in the corpus have written lyrics, composed beats, and samples, provided

the sonic backgrounds for songs, entertained audiences with their DJing skills, or worked as music producers. Therefore, it is justified to consider musical life writing as another crucial element that informs AA HH LW.

Musical Life Writing

Life accounts of artists, musicians, and musical performers have existed since the 19th century. However, their number increased tremendously with the emergence of a professional music industry and sophisticated marketing techniques. Today, the number of musical autobiographies devoted to various genres, including jazz, blues, country, and rap music, is unprecedented. In contrast to this quantity, variety, and appeal of musical life writing, scholarly interest has mainly focused on jazz or country music.⁶⁷ Recently, Lovesey has acknowledged academia's refusal to include popular musical autobiography in the canon of autobiography or as beneficial for understanding popular music (2021: 2).

While pointing to the celebrity character of musical life writing as a likely cause of narrow academic interest, Stein and Butler have defined musical life writing as narratives of the self that are not primarily published in book form but appear in a variety of texts, including song lyrics, music, videos, live performances, websites, blogs, vlogs, or interviews. Furthermore, musical autobiography is relational in that the life being narrated not only exists in text form but “has already been told – in interviews, but also by journalists” (Stein and Butler, 2015: 118). Musical life writing, however, is more than a recollection of an artist's life and career. Authors supplement their publications by adding extensive references to other textual materials, including email correspondence, playlists, lyrics, poetry, footnotes, letters, discographies, and other components.

In the context of AA HH LW, song lyrics are the most embedded element in publications.⁶⁸ Authors make song lyrics an essential part of life writing, for example by introducing chapters or providing background information on the lyrics. The lyrics often appear visually separated from the written narrative, for example, as a reference to specific experiences, as a starting point for remembering a hit song, as a guide for the reader, as an artistic contextualization of passages mentioned in the text, or to chronicle the artist's lyrical development from humble beginnings. When artists reference the lyrics of their songs, either as excerpts within the running text or in

⁶⁷ The scholarship on jazz and country music includes Harlos (1995), Fox (1998), Stein (2004), Farrington (2006), Edgar, et al. (2019), and Lovesey (2021).

⁶⁸ The following AA HH LW authors include lyrics in their publications: Ice-T (2012: 51, 59, 102ff, 108, 147, 219), Common (2011: 98, 114, 184, 265, 274f), Ja Rule (2014: 79, 90f, 109, 127), LL Cool J (1997: 80f, 114, 121, 123f, 149, 146f), Timbaland (2015: 177), Jermaine Dupri (2007: 92), Wyclef Jean (2012: 176f, 178f, 205), Chuck-D (1997: 185, 198, 200f), DMX (2002: 3, 10, 11, 38, 121, 129), Trip Lee (2012: 27, 34, 46, 77, 88, 114, 124, 136, 158), Denton (2008: 47), Queen Latifah (1999: 13, 95, 106ff, 135), and Gucci Mane (2018: 56, 64, 73, 139, 148, 173, 194).

separate sections at the end of chapters, they create a relationship between their life writing and the musical work surrounding it.

In many cases, lyrics accompany the narrative and serve as an additional reference to the artist's career. In the case of rappers DMX and Rakim, however, lyrics take on greater significance. On the one hand, DMX's autobiography (2002) includes an extensive appendix of song lyrics, giving fans and readers insight into songs at a time when lyrics, interpretations, and meanings were not yet accessible online. On the other hand, Rakim (2019: 25-31, 55-63, 107-115, 157-161, 197-203) provides an analysis of song lyrics to stylize himself as a lyrical genius, inviting readers to indulge in his lyrical expertise. Often, lyrics serve as precursors to chapters or are used as introductory quotes, setting the stage for the ensuing text.⁶⁹ Although artists tend to embed their lyrics, some writers sporadically reference other artists' song texts to pay tribute or indicate creative inspirations.⁷⁰ For example, Grandmaster Flash, who has made a name for himself as a DJ, includes lyrics from rappers Talib Kweli and A Tribe Called Quest, who are known for their 'conscious' and politically charged lyrics. In this case, the choice of lyrics further contributes to the framing of Grandmaster Flash as an artist who opposes the wholesale commercialization of Hip Hop in the form of stereotypical rap music.

Poems are rarely embedded in the memoirs, but when they serve to indicate the artist's creative awakening or to showcase his or her poetic range (50 Cent, 2005: 97; Dupri, 2007: 7, 137, 179). Not surprisingly, spiritual memoirs extensively use Bible quotations, sermons, and psalms. While reviews from professional critics or newspapers often appear on the cover or back of the publication, they are rarely found to accompany the written narrative. Rick Ross's memoir, however, is an example of how album reviews from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or relevant Hip Hop magazines contextualize the author's memories (2019: 153f, 177, 194, 210, 213f, 237, 252).⁷¹ Hip Hop artist Questlove is the only author whose publication includes an email correspondence (2013: 6f), regular footnotes, playlists (2013: 25-33, 58-65), and tables listing the author's favorite records by year. However, this potpourri of external texts remains unique in the archive of AA HH LW. It can be attributed to the artist's diverse musical knowledge, demonstrated through his unique incorporation of external material. Gucci Mane also includes newspaper headlines, Twitter posts, and court and arrest statements (2018: xiii, 171, 194, 238-241, 245f). Christian rapper Lecrae Moore's memoir is

⁶⁹ Done so, for example, by DJ Run (2000: 3, 9, 18, 29, 39), Prodigy (2012: 79, 95, 155, 188, 197), and Trip Lee (2012: 27, 36, 46, 65, 77).

⁷⁰ See Ice-T (2012: 126, 180), Timbaland (2015: 199), Chuck-D (1997: 164), and DMX (2002: 91).

⁷¹ See also Gucci Mane (2018: 164, 208).

repeatedly interrupted by handwritten journal entries that are not further contextualized (2016: 51, 57, 69, 92, 114, 126, 133ff, 138, 156, 168).

The memoirs of Alicia Keys, Questlove, and Common are notable for including other people's voices, such as family members, collaborators, or the book's editors. While Common's first memoir offers numerous incidents for his mother to contribute her thoughts on her son's (love) life and career, Alicia Keys' chapters are preceded by brief passages from various people, including her parents, her first boyfriend, her husband, Oprah Winfrey, Bono, or rapper Jay-Z.⁷² A staged dialogue with the book's editor can be found in Questlove's memoir (2013: 1-5, 34-38, 83-87).

In addition, some artists blend their creative work with their life accounts by naming chapters after songs or albums. In this way, artists prioritize their artistic passion and connect their musical interpretations to a specific life experience. For example, New York rapper Prodigy named eight of his thirteen chapters after albums he released as part of Mobb Deep or as a solo artist. The chapters of Scarface's autobiography share the names of albums and songs, whereas the table of contents of Chicago rapper Common's first memoir resembles an enumeration of his most popular songs.

Autobiographies and memoirs by musicians focus on the milestones of an artist's career. Authors may recount their musical awakening, their creative process, or their rise to popularity. As a result, several recurring narrative tropes can be identified in musicians' publications. This subsection focuses on the tropes that recur in the autobiographies and memoirs of Hip Hop performers and artists.

Musical Awakening and First Performance

Most rappers and DJs go to great lengths to portray their childhood or adolescent creative awakening as anything but extraordinary. Often, artists portray their first encounters with Hip Hop as unspectacular experiments before finding their true calling. New York rapper DMX, for example, began beatboxing as a way into Hip Hop (2002: 74), while female rappers Tionne Watkins (2017: 20, 40) and Sha-Rock (2010: 54, 63) started as dancers in breakdancing crews before becoming rappers. DJ Grandmaster Flash experimented with graffiti and joined a breakdancing crew before mastering record tables and samples (2008: 30, 34; see also Flavor Flav, 2011: 16; Scarface, 2015: 14). Learning the basics of rap at a very early age, such as primary school, requires exposure to freestyle rap performed on the streets (Prodigy, 2012: 17) or an affinity for the art in the family (Rakim, 2019: 9f). The first performance in front of an

⁷² Common (2011: 13f, 16f, 23-26, 28ff, 36, 39ff, 65ff, 91ff, 126f, 131, 171f, 195f, 222f, 242ff, 248, 254f, 275f) and Keys (2020: 12, 42, 102, 127, 136).

amateur live audience is often presented as the logical next step. However, this is not without conflict due to stage fright, as in the case of Queen Latifah (1999: 4f) or Darryl McDaniels (2001: 17ff), who fought his nervousness with alcohol.⁷³

First Radio Play

The first Hip Hop performance builds the confidence and exposure to risk further steps, often culminating in recording songs facilitated by friends, insiders of the music industry insiders, or sheer coincidence. The first radio play marks a distinctive stage in the artist's career and indicates the artist's tenacity and independence. Its significance is reflected in how it is embedded in the life account, as the memory of hearing one's song on the radio for the first time often occurs within a highly reconstructed situation, full of dialogue, emotions, and the exact time and day. Queen Latifah, for example, remembers "chilling in the kitchen, and I hear the beginning of... [my] record...[playing] on the radio" (1999: 64). Wyclef Jean remembers waiting for two weeks to hear his song on the radio and, in retrospect, the dynamics of the situation: "Our song was being played on the number one station in New York. My life was complete as far as I was concerned" (2012: 153).⁷⁴ The first radio play brings unexpected attention and often results in unforeseen attention and, in many cases, sets the course for a musical career.

In this context, numerous authors describe how they have honed their musical, lyrical, and performative skills and composed their first beats or sampling of songs. These first steps and experiments often occur in the isolated space of a basement studio, shielded from the outside world and the scrutinizing eyes of adults. In these private experimental spaces, the authors are undisturbed. They are also often spartanly furnished and equipped with improvised technology.⁷⁵

First Record Contract

If the first radio appearance is successful or a record label takes notice of the artist, a label contract sometimes follows. On the one hand, contracts can provide financial stability at a very young age. Houston rapper Scarface remembers the relief he felt after signing a contract at the age of 16:

Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money when you're that young, much less a couple of hundred thousand, especially when it means that you can get out of the streets

⁷³ Sixteen years later, in his second memoir, McDaniels (2016: 29f) confesses that this episode was his first step into alcoholism.

⁷⁴ Other artists acknowledging first radio plays include Watkins (2017: 52f), LL Cool J (1997: 71), Rakim (2019: 134), Denton (2008: 47), Common (2011: 114), McDaniels (2016: 64), Mac Mall (2015: 34), Rick Ross (2019: 83, 143ff), Russell Simmons (2001: 54), U-God (2018: 174-177, 239), Trick Daddy (2010: 246), and Jay-Z (2010: 2018).

⁷⁵ In chapter 3.1.2 Private Spaces, I go into detail about the private space of the basement studio.

and stop risking your life or your freedom just to make a buck (2015: 35, see also 161 and Denton, 2008: 78).

Several young rappers have accomplished the feat of getting signed to record labels even before reaching drinking age.⁷⁶ On the other hand, despite the royalties, the exposure, the professional representation, and the access to almost unlimited resources that come with signing a contract, authors like 50 Cent (2005: 164) or Timbaland (2015: 66) express disappointment at the extent of their royalties. The authors highlight the circumstances of their first contract situations so clearly to illustrate their struggle as artists who try to be taken seriously and to emphasize that even though they are successful celebrities, they, too, started small. The success of their career is thus due to their persistence and grind. Humble beginnings are a characteristic that often appears in musical life writing to depict the artist's journey to world success.

The contractual situations of early Hip Hop artists such as Grandmaster Flash and Sha-Rock, who signed with Sugar Hill Records in the 1980s, point to a particularly complicated situation of exploitation, ownership, and naming rights. In their life accounts, both artists write about legal battles with Sugar Hill Records that led to a lawsuit against the record company (Grandmaster Flash, 2008: 166ff; Sha-Rock, 2010: 36, 40, 147, 167). Sutton has characterized the complicated situation of African American artists fighting for ownership of their music as a “quantifiable measure of their freedom in an industry run by and for affluent whites” (2011: 92). However, the fact that the management of Sugar Hill Records consisted of (former) African American singers points to a power imbalance informed by class rather than ‘race.’

An incentive for readers of celebrity and musician life writing is the opportunity to learn about the artist's life before popularity and fame. References to one's musical awakening, first radio plays, and contracts are common to many musical genres. In Hip Hop, however, the prospect of a promising career is often tied to hopes of social advancement. Thus, many publications allude to classic narrative arcs that chronicle social advancement followed by a sharp break before a final triumph over personal demons, addictions, illnesses, or dependencies.

Most AA HH LW publications are written by artists whose careers focus on writing lyrics, rapping, performing, and, to some extent, creating music. On a formal level, embedding lyrics and other career-related material is a feature of musical life writing. Various intertextual references relate the artist's musical work to the life presented in the written text. By commenting on their song lyrics, artists can reveal thoughts and motivations that would otherwise remain hidden. In their publications, artists also highlight the darker sides of the rap

⁷⁶ For example, LL Cool J (1997: 62ff), Prodigy (2012: 36f), Ja Rule (2014: 96ff), Jean (2012: 124), Mac Mall (2015: 24), Sha-Rock (2010: 123ff), Betha (2003: 44), Keys (2020: 45), and U-God (2018: 274f).

business, pointing to exploitative contracts. With two major core elements of AA HH LW covered, the third, celebrity life writing, remains to be discussed.

Celebrity Memoir

Central to life writing in any form is the exploration of a public and a private self (Smith and Watson, 2010: 4ff). Revealing the private self is a primary incentive of celebrity memoirs as it demonstrates momentary idolization of individual fame. Moreover, disclosing intimate details creates a collaborative space between author and reader, inviting compassion and empathy (Avieson, et al. 2018: 2f; see also Zinsser 2011). Hartley described celebrity as a “mediated performance of the self, organised as a social network market,” primarily in Western societies “where identity is a pervasive socio-cultural and political value” (2020: 42; see also Turner, 2009: 9). Celebrities propagate a mediated image of their selves as they consciously decide what to share with fans, audiences, or readers. In this context, attention becomes the currency by which celebrities are measured and over which they compete. Western societies become “economies of attention” as both conventional and social media contribute to the celebrity network and become complicit in distributing or withdrawing attention (Hartley, 2020: 42; see also Lanham 2006).

In this, celebrities depend on a network that is “made up of highly developed and institutionally linked professions and subindustries [functioning as] carriers of the central commodity (attention getting capacity)” (Gamson, 1994: 64). These include, for example, personal stylists and trainers, TV show hosts, journalists, paparazzi, and fans (Hartley, 2020: 43; see also Driessens, 2013: 552). Rojek has distinguished three ways celebrities gain attention and, thus, celebrity status (2001, 2015). First, celebrity is *ascribed*, for example, by high offices to monarchs and aristocracies. Second, *achieved* celebrity designates popularity gained by accomplishments in sports, music, or other professions. Third, the celebrity status is *attributed* to what Rojek refers to as “*celetoids*’ (tabloid celebrities), those who achieve wide but brief notoriety via tabloid media, reality TV, or exposés in the press” (Hartley, 2020: 44).

Within this network of attention, the publication of a memoir can be considered as one strategy that establishes, advertises, maintains, and reaffirms celebrities. Conventional and social media keep this network running and facilitate insight into the private lives of famous people, thereby creating an “illusion of intimacy” (Turner, 2009: 4ff; see also Schickel, 1985: 4). Consequently, for celebrity memoirs to be successful, authors and publishers make bold promises about what a publication reveals about the author’s life, for example by alluding to the revelation of private secrets, never-before-told stories, and invitations to meet the ‘real’ person behind the celebrity (Yelin, 2020: 4; 115). In the celebrity world, where every journalist,

TV host, or amateur photographer can shape the idea of a celebrity, the celebrity memoir assumes a strategy of self-marketing and a way to partly control the narrative around the public persona (Yelin, 2020: 42, 274).

The economics of access and selling the illusion of intimacy cause celebrities to “[make] a private history public” (Yelin, 2020: 21; see also McLennan, 2013: 7). Promising exclusive insights is a common strategy in the celebrity memoir industry, and AA HH LW is no exception. As a result, many examples of AA HH LW are marketed on the premise of providing unfettered access to the artist’s life and career, enticing readers with “raw,” “uncensored,” “unvarnished,” and “never-before-told stories” to satisfy their craving for secrets and confessions.⁷⁷ The book jacket of Sandra Denton’s memoir is a prime example of this, as it peddles a glimpse of Denton’s “troubled childhood,” “[her] failed marriages,” “[her] triumphant comeback,” as well as “a fascinating glimpse behind the fame, family, failures, and successes of celebrity” to the reader (2008). Conspicuously, much attention is paid to negative and painful experiences, capitalizing on their entertainment value over more positive passages. The insistence on negative experiences is not surprising, since they are usually kept the most private. In celebrity culture, however, privacy is a currency willingly exchanged for popularity.

Celebrity authors tend to acknowledge less glamorous episodes in their lives, including the loss of privacy, fake friends, annoying fans, illness, substance abuse, or personal trauma. In doing so, the authors imply that celebrities are not invulnerable to problems, challenges, or setbacks while juggling parental responsibilities, touring the world, or managing additional sources of income. This strategy also helps them appear more grounded and less eccentric than the media portrays them. Celebrity authors benefit from the growing appeal of life writing centered on personal tragedy by recounting personal trauma (Freeman, 2001: 189). Hip Hop artist Tionne Watkins summed it up when she concluded that “[everyone] loves drama, especially when it involves someone famous, so it can be easy to forget that celebrities are real people” (2017: 178).

In addition to lamenting the loss of privacy, celebrity authors address the negative aspects of success and popularity, drawing attention to what they perceive as the deviousness of the music business, fake friends who take advantage of their benevolence, or the effects of a busy schedule (McLyte, 2014: 112; Betha, 2003: 50, 187f). The intrusiveness of media, fans, and fellow artists caused Watkins to state that “everybody’s out to get you” (Watkins, 2017: 61).⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Examples and variations of these labels can be found on the publications of 50 Cent, Ice-T, Grandmaster Flash, Common, McDaniels, Watkins, and Faith Evans.

⁷⁸ See also Dupri (2007: 204) and Evans (2009: 250).

LL Cool J (1997: 71f) remembers intrusive fans violating his sense of privacy, while Los Angeles rapper Snoop Dogg (1999: 182; see also Common, 2019: 107) laments the complete loss of his privacy. Throughout her memoir, singer Alicia Keys repeatedly expresses discomfort with her life as a celebrity, noting feelings of exposure, the loss of friendships, the invasion of personal space, the loss of anonymity, and the pressure to maintain a façade in the “strange land called Fame [sic]” (2020: 76; see also 9, 85f, 99, 103, 173, 203, 247). Although her irritation can be traced back to her early career, conflicts with the celebrity world may confirm her public image as an intelligent, modest, and coy artist who rejects the spoils of fame and is primarily preoccupied with the creative aspects of her art.

Because Hip Hop places a value on authenticity and realness, encapsulated in the mantra ‘keep it real,’ it is conceivable that Hip Hop artists are particularly offended by the insincerity of celebrity life. Indeed, some artists attest to a high degree of hypocrisy in the entertainment industry (McDaniels, 2001: 171; DMX (2002: 272). LL Cool J expresses this insincerity by writing that he felt like a “commodity” being exploited by his accountants and business managers for financial gain (1997: 82, 147). Rick Ross (2019: 231) has a taut relationship with the media, as various journalists have contributed to questioning his ‘street credibility’ when reporting on his former employment as a corrections officer. Envy and resentment dominate the celebrity world, as producer Jermaine Dupri points out that the “price of success is that it brings out the haters” (2007: 81).⁷⁹

In his study of 1960s rock musicians’ autobiographies, Lovesey identified a recurring aspect of celebrity musician’s lives, writing of “[de]-celebrification,” according to which publications “often address the unwelcome arrival of celebrity and a negotiation with perceptions of themselves as entertainers (and not musicians and songwriters)” (2021: 5). The indignation of some Hip Hop artists at the intrusiveness of celebrity life can be explained by Lovesey’s principle. Although artists depend on a certain amount of attention, too much attention, especially in the context of what is perceived as a celebrity circus, is unwelcome because it distracts from being recognized as an artist.

Authenticity

In the context of life writing, but especially in the context of celebrity memoirs, authenticity is a controversial issue. Culler vividly summarized the inherent contradiction of authenticity when he noted that something or someone “must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly

⁷⁹ See also Scarface (2015: 200ff), Flavor Flav (2011: 75f), Mac Mall (2015: 39), and Evans (2009: 18).

unspoiled” (1988: 164). Richter concludes that authenticity has been lost in the quest for absolute purity and that authenticity can neither be constructed nor found (2008: 60).⁸⁰ In the context of life writing, authenticity plays a particular role as fake or anonymous examples of life accounts are often seen as compromising the presumed authenticity of a text (Couser, 2001: 72f). However, as celebrity authors are rarely trusted to write texts on their own, the revelation of their true and authentic selves is a significant incentive of their texts. Culler’s paradox of authenticity comes into play when the celebrity author, in collaboration with a co-author or ghostwriter, attempts to present the self as authentic. This process is already informed by the criteria and practices that determine what is seen as authentic.

Yelin has contributed to understanding authenticity in the context of female celebrity memoirs by showing how access to a celebrity’s private life is equated with authenticity. This is achieved, for example, when female celebrity memoirs include references or photographs that show them without makeup, costumes, or celebrity affectations to present their ‘true’ and private selves. However, this staging of the self is informed by practices and norms that have defined this appearance as authentic (2020: 37ff; see also Evans, 1999: 138). Despite this paradox, female celebrity memoirs contain strategies for constructing authenticity. For the specific subgenre of female celebrity memoirs, Yelin has found recurring strategies for constructing authenticity, including “promises of access to ‘the real me,’...a history of suffering, ...emotional extremity, ... “narrating the ‘stripped bare’ naked body, locating authenticity in ever greater exposure, ...and the narration of lives that are out of control...” (2020: 39). These strategies are not limited to the written text of the memoir, but can also occur in the visual and paratextual cues of celebrity memoirs.⁸¹

Collaborative Authorship

In addition to focusing on the revelation of intimate details of the author’s life, AA HH LW also meets the criteria of celebrity memoirs in terms of collaborative authorship. In his history on memoirs, Yagoda noted that the contemporary memoir is unprecedented in ubiquity and in the diversity of its subgenres (2009: 6-13; see also Baxter 2022). It seems that everyone has a story to tell and that every story has a right to be told. However, not everyone is equipped with the skills necessary to share their experiences in a way that audiences want to read. As a result, many authors hire co-authors or ghostwriters to help them compose their writing. In this context, authority and authenticity are critical to understanding celebrity life writing.

⁸⁰ See Quante and Kühler (2019) for a definition attempt of authenticity in the context of autobiography.

⁸¹ See Chapter 3.2 Representations of Gender in AA HH LW and Chapter 4 for an in-depth look at how female celebrity memoirs use these strategies to construct authenticity.

Authority describes the relationship between a text and the world it inhabits and is informed by. Central to life writing is the question of whether the text's account can be verified by factual truths that lie outside of it, namely in the author's life (Couser, 2001: 72f). The concept of authorship presupposes that the creative products and meanings presented in a text are the author's private property. In doing so, authorship is more than an indication of intellectual property, but "ascribe[s] not just meaning but value – aesthetic or moral as well as monetary – to works and authors identified...as 'significant'" (Hartley, 2020: 20f).

Unlike classical autobiography, coauthored celebrity memoirs explicitly jeopardize any notion that the author, narrator, and protagonist are identical. However, the insistence of classical reading strategies on determining the author and ignoring collaborative aspects of writing has led, among other things, to dismiss collaboratively written celebrity memoirs as an inferior symptom of a narcissistic popular culture. More than a few celebrities contribute little more than their fame and serve only as the source of information, while the co-author possesses the cultural capital acquired through his or her profession.

Regardless of a published text's form, content, purpose, or genre, its completion and publication are only possible with dialogical negotiations between editors, co-authors, translators, publishers, illustrators, designers, or advertisers. Thus, a preoccupation with identifying an account's author ignores these contributions. In the corpus of AA HH LW, the co-author's names often appear on the book cover, suggesting a collaboration with the author. However, while book-length autobiographies and memoirs cannot and do not hide the fact that they result from a collaborative effort, the narratives, in many cases remain, purely monologic.

Lejeune's autobiographical pact, a tacit agreement between author and reader, presupposes that all statements made in the autobiographical account are "true, or at least sincere" (Missine, 2019: 223).⁸² Moreover, the author's name on the book serves as an evidentiary signature that seals the pact with the reader (222f).⁸³ Stein and Butler have argued that musical autobiographies, a form of celebrity life writing, tend to jeopardize the pact because of the collaboration between musicians and professional co-authors or ghostwriters (2015: 115ff).

Couser has developed a model, the continuum of collaboration, to describe life writing as a scenario in which one person "supplies the 'life' while the other provides the 'writing'" (2001b: 222). For the center of the continuum, Couser cites examples of autobiographies in which two equal co-authors contribute parts of the narrative. Positioned at the far-right end of Couser's continuum model is the ghostwritten account that requires the invisibility of the co-author to be

⁸² See also Lejeune (2016: 34-48).

⁸³ See also Lejeune (1989: 12) and Smith and Watson (2010: 207).

successful. In celebrity life writing, authors frequently employ the skills of writers whose assignment may render critical acclaim but who are dwarfed by the celebrity's popularity (222f). Yelin, however, points out that the relationship between celebrity and coauthor relies on more than popularity and calls attention to the collaborator's advantage in cultural capital, including education, writing expertise, and publication experience (2015: 361; 2020: 25f).

The co-author's role is to create the impression that the celebrity subject's voice is telling the story so that "the text often owes more to the writer than to the subject" (Couser, 2001b: 223). The collaborator is accountable for "[condensing], summarizing, eliminating the inferior parts," selecting "a tone, a certain type of relationship with the reader, elaborating the authority who says 'I,' or who seems to write it" (Lejeune 1995: 189; Volkening, 2006: 60). Apparently, readers care less about whether the celebrity authored the memoir than they care about the impression that it *sounds* like the celebrity. Moreover, a latent skepticism about the authenticity of mass-marketed popular culture and a growing awareness of the profession of ghostwriting leads readers to disassociate the name on the book from the person holding the pen (Lee, 2014: 1259).

The AA HH LW corpus is no exception regarding collaborations with co-authors (or ghostwriters). In my corpus, only a handful of autobiographies and memoirs *do not* reveal a partnership between a celebrity artist and a co-author. An overwhelming number ostentatiously reveal a co-author's name directly on the frontispiece, jacket, or within the first few pages in a various locutions, including *with*, *and*, or *as told to* (Lindemann 2017, 2018). AA HH LW's co-authors are music journalists, professional writers, columnists, or popular authors, some of whom have co-authored several AA HH LW publications. Karen Hunter has worked with Queen Latifah, LL Cool J, Mason Betha, and Sandy Denton, while Neil Martinez-Belkin collaborated with Rick Ross and Gucci Mane on their respective life writings. To paraphrase Rojek's words, the Hip Hop performers considered here have undoubtedly accumulated much more attention capital than their co-authors and ghostwriters. However, in revisiting Yelin's considerations of the co-author's cultural capital, it must be noted that writers such as Karen Hunter, David Ritz, or Adam Bradley outrank the celebrity subjects in terms of writing and publishing expertise. Karen Hunter, for example, has gone from a career as a journalist to running an imprint at Simon & Schuster and co-authoring several books, including three from this archive (Hunter 2024). Adam Bradley, co-author of Common's first memoir, is a literary critic, professor of popular culture, and editor of books on rap music, pop music, and issues of race (Bradley, n.d.). The most writing experience can be attributed to David Ritz, who has written fiction and non-fiction books, biographies, liner notes, essays, and songs. Interestingly,

in his own words, Ritz is “primarily – and most passionately – a ghostwriter” (2018). On Grandmaster Flash’s memoir, however, Ritz serves as a co-author whose name appears on the book’s cover.

It is crucial for Hip Hop artists to ‘keep it real,’ to compose lyrics independently, and to reject support from mainstream labels. Interestingly, the considerable number of co-authors or, it must be assumed, ghostwriters suggests that the principles of Hip Hop authenticity are suspended when writing an autobiography or memoir. Thus, Hip Hop performers recognize the cultural capital of their co-authors when composing an autobiography or memoir. This is true for artists whose co-authors are unpopular and those who are famous. However, another interpretation of ‘keepin’ it real’ may take precedence. As an idiom of the Hip Hop culture, ‘real recognize real’ epitomizes the respect and admiration that Hip Hop artists have for fellow artists and successful individuals who have achieved fame in other fields. A notable example is the mutual recognition of professional basketball players and rap artists. There are numerous cases of players crossing over to rap music or collaborating with rap artists, while several rap artists have also shown an affinity for basketball (Broussard 2005).

In addition, artists often express their gratitude by naming the co-author’s name directly in the book’s foreword, acknowledgments, or a section arranged explicitly for this purpose. Artists indicate the co-author’s share of the work and emphasize how the co-author’s help facilitated their process of memory and self-reflection. Common, for example, thanks Adam Bradley for his inspiration and equates their collaboration with “an experience of a lifetime” (2011: 305). The intimacy of Sandra Denton’s memoir is brought up again by herself because of Karen Hunter “asking the right questions and getting me so much deeper than I wanted to” (2008: first page). In other examples, the co-authors speak up and thank their celebrity authors for the opportunity and fruitful collaboration (Meadows-Ingram in Scarface 2008).

Although each AA HH LW publication was written by a former or current Hip Hop artist, the publications are marketed differently to appeal to different target audiences. In many autobiographies and memoirs, the author’s affiliation to Hip Hop is prominently featured on the cover, blurb, or book jacket. The publications allude to the artists’ musical oeuvre, for example, when Darryl McDaniels’ first memoir is titled *King of Rock: Respect, Responsibility, and My Life with Run-DMC*. Artists like Scarface (Geto Boys), Prodigy (Mobb Deep), and Tionne Watkins (TLC) make similar references to rap groups. In addition to group affiliations, the publications foreground the artist’s significant contributions to the culture; for example, Grandmaster Flash’s autobiography references his beat-making, while Jermaine Dupri presents himself primarily as an entrepreneur and producer.

2.2.2 Secondary Genre Elements

AA HH LW authors address a remarkable variety of topics, including incidents of childhood abuse, trauma, depression, drug addiction, illness, bankruptcy, rape, immigration experiences, adoption, crime and incarceration, or spiritual self-discovery. This plethora of themes leads to various subgenre elements, which I have documented using Smith and Watson's list of autobiographical subgenres (2010: 253-286).

Spiritual Life Narrative

A few AA HH LW publications show characteristics of spiritual life narratives. According to Smith and Watson, narratives of this subgenre typically chronicle a "journey through sin and damnation to a sense of spiritual fulfilment" (2010: 282). Artists whose life accounts resemble spiritual life writing write about how their solid religious foundation was tested, challenged, or strengthened during or despite their musical careers. The side effects of a musical career, commonly perceived as benefits by many artists and audiences, are presented as reasons for a lapse in faith or as motivation to seek religious guidance. Although many Hip Hop artists make occasional references to their faith or express themselves in spiritual terms, the publications of DJ Run, Mason Betha, Trip Lee, and Lecrae Moore show substantial characteristics of spiritual life narratives, particularly in the narrative arc, the layout of the text, and the marketing of the publication.

Dallas rapper Trip Lee's memoir revolves around advocating the eponymous good life by renouncing the values commonly associated with rap music, including commercial success, material wealth, and mass appeal. While much of his memoir focuses on living a life of faith, references to his musical career are scarce. When Hip Hop or rap music are mentioned at all, it serves as an example of immorality within a broader culture that has abandoned the Christian faith:

But throughout my career, I've refused to write rhymes that dishonor God. I will not glorify violence, degrade women, or lie about God in my rhymes. Because I've taken that stand, it significantly changes the way the industry receives me (2012: 21).

In addition to the use of numerous biblical quotations, the spiritual motif of his memoir is affirmed throughout the paratexts of the publication. A nonprofit Christian publisher published the book, and endorsements from several pastors, a Christian author and artist, and a theology professor precede the text. Taken together, these paratextual examples indicate that Lee's memoir was marketed primarily to a Christian audience rather than a Hip Hop audience. Trip

Lee's rejection of the materialism and consumerism embraced by mainstream rap music places him in the tradition of Christian rappers, a subgenre of rap music.⁸⁴

Like Lee, Lecrae Moore's memoir indicates a Christian background as it is published by B&H Publishing, an imprint of Lifeway Christian Resources. Moore's co-author, Jonathan Merritt, presents himself as one of the nation's most famous writers on faith (2023). In his memoir, Moore addresses his dilemma as a Christian rapper: Christians reject him for producing secular music while rap artists and audiences struggle to accept a Christian artist who mixes Hip Hop with gospel (2016: 174ff). Moore testifies to having survived several personal crises that tested and renewed his faith, ultimately leading him to embrace his role as a niche rapper.

Mason Betha and DJ Run chronicle their epiphany and complete rejection of the vices and virtues associated with the life of a popular musician. Betha's separation from worldly values is poignantly articulated in the prologue to his memoir, in which the newly minted pastor Mason Betha dramatically announces the death of his rap alias, Ma\$e (2003: xi). Betha's memoir describes his moral reversal and journey to unwavering faith. In addition to numerous biblical quotations and sermons, the former rapper constructs an allegory of himself as Moses, demanding freedom for what he perceives as misguided rap musicians. The symbolism is completed by the figure of the Pharaoh, represented by his mentor Sean Combs (alias P. Diddy), who initially denies Betha an unhindered passage out of the rap business (2003: 73f). Like Betha, DJ Run also became an ordained minister, and his memoir is clearly marketed as a form of spiritual guidance. In chronicling his musical career as a founding member of Run-DMC, DJ Run recounts his escapist journey out of the rap business, a world he equated with sin and temptation, and onto a path of piety. Supplemented by biblical verses, the author attempts to add weight to his life advice by emphasizing his moral inversion and his renunciation of the rap business.

These examples are characterized by solid features of spiritual life narratives, suggesting that spiritual memoirs combine several genre elements, including spiritual guidance, self-help, or confessional narratives. In addition, the last two examples, especially that of Mason Betha, exhibit features of what Smith and Watson called conversion narratives (2016: 266).

Autosomatography

Smith and Watson use this unwieldy term to describe life narratives focusing on illness and disability. These narratives "critique social constructions of the disabled body and incorporate

⁸⁴ The interplay between rap music and religion has been addressed, among others, by Miller (2013), Chaney (2018), and Radcliffe (2018).

a counternarrative of survival and empowerment that reclaims the individual's ... body from the social stigmatization" (2010: 261). A small number of AA HH LW authors describe personal suffering, regular hospital visits, medical treatments, and life affected by chronic illness. Watkins' memoir, for example, focuses primarily on her lifelong struggle with hereditary sickle cell disease, as evidenced by the ambiguous title *A Sick Life*, which is both an acknowledgment of her physical suffering and a play on a slang term expressing impressive accomplishment. Moreover, her memoir was published by Rodale, a now-defunct publisher of wellness and health magazines, underscoring the relevance of health issues to her memoir.

Although many AA HH LW publications deal with illnesses or temporary ailments, Watkins' memoir is the only one to address the author's illness to this extent. Rapper Prodigy, who also suffered from sickle cell anemia, makes occasional references but does not acknowledge the disease to the same extent. Prolonged hospitalization due to accidents or rehabilitation is another topic that appears in some AA HH LW publications, but only as a minor theme. Trick Daddy (2010: 248) addresses his suffering from discoid lupus. The graphic novel of MF Grimm, who was paralyzed in an assassination attempt by rival drug dealers, serves as an example of autosomatography dealing with disability.

Citing Couser, Smith and Watson have indicated that mental health issues such as depression are included in the category of autosomatography. Hip Hop performers address a variety of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, or suicidal ideation. Darryl McDaniels, for example, addresses alcoholism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and the emotional turmoil that followed the discovery of his adoption in his second memoir (2016: 3f, 11, 20, 41, 129, 213, 217).⁸⁵ In fact, depression and suicidal thoughts are among the most addressed mental health issues in AA HH LW.⁸⁶

Addiction Narrative

Related to the theme of well-being, but a distinct subgenre of life writing, are narratives that focus on addiction. Addiction narratives often chronicle "a fall into a state of craving...; a cry for help; first steps toward rehabilitation; and conversion to sobriety/recovery" (Smith and Watson, 2010: 254). In AA HH LW, however, the experience of addiction, rehabilitation, and sobriety is not the main subject of the narrative but is acknowledged as a concomitant of inner-city life. Authors of AA HH LW occasionally go beyond casual references to addiction to

⁸⁵ Smith and Watson have also proposed adoption narratives as a separate subgenre of life writing. Since the discovery and aftermath of McDaniel's adoption play only a minor role, this categorization will not be pursued further at this point.

⁸⁶ These mental health issues are addressed by DJ Run (2000: 31), Scarface (2015: 104ff), Dean (2008: 111, 174), Prodigy (2012: 34), Moore (2016: 71, 111), and Watkins (2017: 169).

illustrate how substance abuse has affected their relationships, career opportunities, and physical well-being. It is exclusively male artists who reflect on their long-standing addiction to alcohol, cocaine, pornography, or codeine.⁸⁷

Smith and Watson point out that addiction narratives are closely related to confessional narratives. In the confessional memoirs, authors reveal their long-held secrets, hoping to be absolved of their faults and sins. In doing so, authors expose their mistakes to an objective public (2010: 265). In AA HH LW, Hip Hop authors address their roles as drug consumers, distributors, sellers, users, or some combination thereof. Thereby, due to the frequency and quality of references to the ‘drug game,’ this aspect almost constitutes a niche among life writing subgenres, combining aspects of confession, addiction, and rehabilitation. Authors often refer to struggles to document their personal growth and triumph in overcoming long histories of abuse and addiction. Descriptions of drug rehabilitation and withdrawal are often accompanied by expressions of regret, betrayal of trust, and physical impairment (Gucci Mane, 2018: 159, 244, 262). The harmful habits and physical impairments that result from drug abuse are often described as unfortunate but unavoidable side effects of the artist’s upbringing or the harmful effects of celebrity life.

Trauma Narrative

Among the range of traumatic experiences addressed by AA HH LW authors, experiences of abuse rank highest. Smith and Watson have identified trauma narratives as ubiquitous narrative arcs that have contributed to a shift in public discourse about trauma and healing. Accordingly, the trauma narrative focuses on the “reliving of a past event and [emphasizing] a gap that cannot be closed between the narrative present and the narrative past” (2010: 281). AA HH LW authors address childhood (LL Cool J, 1997: 11-15, 31; Grandmaster Flash, 2008: 11) and sexual abuse.⁸⁸ While male authors write primarily about childhood abuse, the traumatic experiences of female authors continue well into adulthood, often translating into experiences of domestic abuse. As mentioned above, the memoir of Sandra Denton advertises insights into her personal history of abuse directly on the cover. Her story is replete with references to incidents of childhood and marital abuse. Although not as pronounced, Mia-X shares similar experiences with her readers when she acknowledges domestic violence (2019: 124).

⁸⁷ LL Cool J (1997: 117), DMX (2001: 93), Grandmaster Flash (2008: 147, 168), Flavor Flav (2011: 70, 154), McDaniels (2016: 20, 31-37, 213), Gucci Mane (2018: 61ff), Common (2019: 101), U-God (2018: 105, 150), and Trick Daddy (2010: 159).

⁸⁸ Among the authors who address sexual abuse are Common (2019: 45-48, 72, 77, 138, 145, 182-186), Moore (2016: 27, 31), Dean (2008: 25f), and U-God (2018: 14).

Political Activism

AA HH LW authors are aware of the past and ongoing discrimination against African Americans, the structural deficiencies common to many inner-city communities, and the disproportionate incarceration of black people. As a result, some artists use their popularity and influence to campaign against these problems. However, only the publications of Wyclef Jean, Common, and Alicia Keys exhibit characteristics of political or activist memoir.

As a Haitian immigrant, Wyclef Jean's love for his homeland finds expression in his continued activism, especially after the devastating natural disaster and the subsequent humanitarian crisis that struck Haiti in 2010. In his memoir, Jean presents his political activism as a natural consequence of his global popularity (2012: 198, 235). Throughout her career, Alicia Keys has used her platform to support and contribute to various social causes, including the fight against HIV in Africa or the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights, gun law reform, equal pay, and teen suicide prevention. She also outlines her activist agenda, mentioning many famous allies, including the Obamas, Bono, and Oprah Winfrey (2020: 91, 140, 189).

Because of their familiarity with the issues that plague their communities, AA HH LW authors are often the primary activists protesting discrimination, marginalization, and criminalization of inner-city youth. A former gang member himself, Ice-T, has repeatedly visited incarcerated gang members and negotiated between warring youth gangs. He states that visiting prisons and inmates "gives [him] the motivation to stay the course" (2012: 238). In both of his memoirs, Common presents himself as a political activist. He demonstrates his political agenda by repeatedly emphasizing his network of influential African American thinkers and politicians, including Dr. Maya Angelou and Michelle and Barack Obama. In addition, his starring role in the 2014 historical drama *Selma* and his visits to four California state prisons demonstrate his political commitment to the underprivileged (2019: 14, 77).

Gastrography

Among the less common subgenres within AA HH LW are cooking memoirs. Smith and Watson list life narratives that focus heavily on the "production, preparation, and/or consumption of food" under gastrography (2010: 271). New Orleans rapper Mia-X's self-published memoir focuses on family, relationships, and parenting, with little attention paid to her Hip Hop career and musical ambitions. The central theme of the memoir, however, is cooking, particularly as it relates to the artist's home in Louisiana.⁸⁹ Cooking is presented as a highly gendered and exclusive practice for transferring knowledge and values between generations. Her memoir is decidedly advertised as gastrography, and an extensive appendix of

⁸⁹ Fittingly, Mia-X has become a chef in her restaurant in New Orleans (Cullen 2020).

recipes complements the text's detailed description of food preparation. Since food, cuisine, and cooking traditions are central to her narrative, Mia-X's publication is a prime example of gastrography. In contrast, Flavor Flav's memoir seems to contain recipes without any substantive purpose (2011: 226f). Although the author acknowledges cooking and even includes recipes, it cannot be read as a cookbook memoir but rather a mixture of genres.

Self-Help Narrative

Part of retelling a life, especially the life of a celebrity, is not to ignore negative experiences. Many authors acknowledge traumatic experiences and use them to offer advice on topics unrelated to the artist's career, such as moral integrity, spirituality, relationships, parenting, or breaking bad habits. Smith and Watson have described self-help narratives as

a fall into dissolution and self-indulgence, alienation from a community, hitting bottom, recognition of the need for help, renunciation of the substance or behavior, and, with trust in a higher power, recovery of a truer postaddiction self (2010: 279).

To varying degrees, this description applies to many AA HH LW publications. It is worth noting that primarily female authors offer advice on relationships, marriage, love, fidelity, trust, and dealing with men. For example, Mia-X invites readers to learn from their painful experiences with abuse (Mia-X, 2019: Ch. 7, 57).⁹⁰ Mc Lyte advises readers to persevere in stressful situations, keep the faith, find the truth, and stay true to themselves (2014: 21, 37, 55, 65 and 82f). While Mason Betha's book is generally spiritual, the author offers advice on the practice of faith in a specific section of his memoir (2003: 197-201). In the final chapter of her memoir, Sister Souljah offers advice on black womanhood, black manhood, parenting, and the effects of racism on African American communities (1996: 350-360).

However, self-help in AA HH LW is not limited to adverse life experiences but extends to self-actualization and the pursuit of Hip Hop knowledge. Rakim, for example, stylizes himself as a lyrical genius who fulfills his role of educating the Hip Hop nation by sharing his knowledge. In his "Rules for Collaboration," producer Timbaland explains his perspective on successful business partnerships (2015: 215-220; see also Russell Simmons, 2001: 221).

Prison Narrative

Male AA HH LW authors are particularly likely to describe conflicts with the law, including criminal acts such as assault, theft, illegal possession of firearms, or drug-related crimes.

⁹⁰ Sandra Denton does the same in her memoir, see p. 208.

Several male artists address time spent in prison in their publications.⁹¹ Ja Rule and Prodigy claim that parts of their manuscripts were written in prison. Descriptions of daily prison life and accounts of the effects of loneliness and monotony give the impression that the authors communicate directly from their prison cells. Derived from captivity narratives, Smith and Watson characterize contemporary prison narratives as “occasions for prisoners to inscribe themselves as fully human in the midst of a system designed to dehumanize them and to render them anonymous and passive” (2010: 277; see also Rolston 2021).⁹²

Graphic Novel

In my AA HH LW corpus, Percy Carey’s *Sentences* presents the only graphic memoir.⁹³ The graphic memoir, or autograph, as Gillian Whitlock (2006: 966) has called it to account for its blending of visual and verbal materials, is commonly subsumed under the umbrella term of graphic novel. Furthermore, Hescher (2016: 51) distinguishes nine subgenres, including superhero novels, graphic biographies, historical novels, and graphic memoirs. Among the most popular graphic memoirs are Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991) and Alan Moore’s *The Watchmen* (1987), which catapulted the subgenre from its niche alongside comics. After the surge in popularity following *Maus*, a second wave of graphic novels began around 2000 (Hescher, 2016: 19-23). Most recently, in 2023, athlete and activist Colin Kaepernick published his graphic novel *Change the Game*.

Although graphic novels resemble comics and seem to thrive on readers’ familiarity with them, they break up established (reading) conventions. For example, graphic novels tend to deviate from a recognizable grid of panels, thus resisting sequential reading. Unlike ordinary memoirs, the narrator of the graphic novel emerges as a recognizable figure whose changes and developments are visually implied rather than narrated (Baetens and Frey, 2015: 8-10). MF Grimm’s *Sentences* vividly illustrates the potential of graphic novels to visualize the passage of time and to present narrative strands in innovative ways. For example, MF Grimm’s suffering in the aftermath of a life-threatening attack would attract less attention if written in prose. However, the same incident becomes more momentous and compelling when depicted in a series of drawn panels. Moreover, the artist and his illustrator convincingly use the aesthetics of graphic novels to visualize the impossible: reversing the rapper’s fatal injuries and allowing him to walk again.

⁹¹ These artists include DMX, Ja Rule, 50 Cent, Ice-T, Scarface, Prodigy, Flavor Flav, Snoop Dogg, Rakim, Rick Ross, Gucci Mane, U-God, and Trick Daddy.

⁹² In chapters 3.1 Functional Spaces in AA HH LW3.1 Functional Spaces and 3.2.1 Representations of Masculinity, I explore the different functions the prison assumes in publications.

⁹³ See Chapter An Imagery Tale of an Educated Thug: MF Grimm - *Sentences: The Life of MF Grimm* for an in-depth analysis of *Sentences*.

2.2.3 The Character of AA HH LW

While sharing characteristics of African American, musician, and celebrity life writing, AA HH LW authors incorporate various life writing subgenres into their autobiographies and memoirs. These observations suggest that AA HH LW is not reinventing the wheel of life writing but is influenced and informed by Western writing conventions, aesthetics, and styles. In addition to these primary and secondary genre elements, several recurring themes seem crucial to AA HH LW. I think of these themes as defining the character of AA HH LW. On the one hand, recurring themes relate to issues of space and gender, which will be discussed in the next chapter. On the other hand, these themes include issues of authenticity and sharing knowledge about Hip Hop and the author's position within the culture. For now, I will focus on the latter to characterize AA HH LW as a subgenre of life writing.

Hip Hop Historiography

A recurring aspect of AA HH LW concerns how Hip Hop artists inscribe themselves into the broader Hip Hop historiography. In many cases, this goes beyond a retrospective of a musical, producing, or DJing career to include subjective commentary on the state of the culture or the music business. In her analysis of Eminem's and Jay-Z's life accounts, Balestrini concluded that Hip Hop life writing combines a "Bildungsroman with an artistic manifesto and a historiographical narrative" (2015: 228). The milestones of the Hip Hop culture, its most influential figures, New York as its birthplace, and the development of innovative styles such as scratching or sampling are all part of Hip Hop historiography. In AA HH LW, authors pay tribute to these stages, places, and pioneers and, in doing so, define their position within Hip Hop.

In particular, artists considered 'pioneers' claim the right to speak from an elevated position. Veteran artists affirm their pioneering role and blend commentary on the current state of the culture with a nostalgic look at the past (Jean, 2012: xv; Ice-T, 2012: 145; DMC, 2001: 47, 187). Rakim, for example, emphasizes his commitment to a pre-commercialized form of rap and reflects critically on his predecessors and modern Hip Hop aesthetics. Before gangster rap came into vogue, the artist says, audiences were interested in a more diverse interpretation of black culture, including "creativity...dope beats, the best rhyme skills, and a little bit of intellectualism" (2019: 234). Grandmaster Flash also expresses a nostalgic view on Hip Hop, describing the abandonment of the DJ and the subsequent embrace of MCs as the primary representatives of the culture. Recalling the diminishing importance of DJs and facing

existential anxieties, Grandmaster Flash reminds himself and his readers that “[he] had invented something” and that he has influenced Hip Hop (2008: 202).

Moreover, pioneering artists rhetorically emphasize their influence by addressing their responsibility for introducing iconic trends (Balestrini, 2015: 229). Sandra Denton, for example, presents herself as the first artist to put gold diamonds on her front teeth (2008: 68), while Flavor Flav claims to have introduced his fair share of iconic Hip Hop styles, including wearing an oversized clock and a hat tilted to the side, high-top fads, dancing on stage, matching sneakers with a tuxedo, and coining the phrases “Yo, Gee!” and “Yeah boy,” the latter of which, he claims, made him the most recorded and sampled voice in Hip Hop (2011: 28ff). Furthermore, he claims to be the first “who brought street language into records. I brought the ‘hood into rap music. I’m the First Nigga of street records” (23). Given the penchant for offensive lyrics in rap music, it is no surprise that Flavor Flav is not the only artist to claim this feat. Ice-T, who released his memoir one year after Flavor Flav, also presents himself as bringing “hardcore cursing to a rap record” (2011: 114, 215). In doing so, he inscribes himself in West Coast Hip Hop and emphasizes his role in making rap music and slang socially acceptable.

However, it must be noted that rap music has often been accused of using offensive language and helping to make offensive vocabulary socially acceptable. As offensive language was used by musicians long before Hip Hop, the statements of Flavor Flav and Ice-T must be read in context. These artists introduced styles that differed significantly from their predecessors, such as Run-DMC and their more benign lyrics. Adopting ‘street’ language in commercially successful rap music represents a change in trend that may seem trivial for music in general but indicates a milestone within rap music. In contrast to Flavor Flav and Ice-T, New York rapper LL Cool J claims to be the first to replace street bragging and hardcore styles with softer language, contributing “the very first rap ballad, which was different from the bravado and hard, rough style many rappers had adopted” (1997: 84).

These examples demonstrate various efforts to make rap music more acceptable and appealing to a broader mainstream audience. As the popularity of rap music increased, artists were cast in movies and television shows, a fact that AA HH LW authors are keen on mentioning. Ice-T, for example, emphasizes that he became “the first rapper to get a starring role in a major Hollywood movie” (2012: 114) or the first rapper to appear on Oprah Winfrey’s show (183). Lovesey has argued that authenticity is one of the recurring tenets of popular musician autobiography because authors acknowledge the “relationship of their work to musical tradition, the bugbear of authenticity, and their work’s originality” (2021: 5). In this

sense, the accomplishments addressed by Hip Hop ‘pioneers’ serve to establish a link between their achievements and the broader Hip Hop culture, thereby underscoring the artist’s street credibility.

As a subculture, Hip Hop was driven primarily by the ingenuity of artists who broke with the conventions of the time. These innovations and the do-it-yourself mantra are integral to Hip Hop authenticity. In their autobiographies and memoirs, artists invoke this mantra and grassroots mentality to demonstrate that Hip Hop artists and audiences used what little they had to achieve their goals. In addition to influential artists highlighting their contributions to the culture, many artists contribute to the historiography of Hip Hop by demonstrating and sharing their knowledge of the culture. As the fifth element of the culture, knowledge is a crucial intergenerational effort to preserve and generate knowledge about the beginnings, philosophy, and future of Hip Hop. In AA HH LW, older artists follow this idea by sharing details about the founding figures of Hip Hop while younger artists pay tribute to their predecessors. For example, Common writes about being inspired as a youth by listening to “Afrika Bambaataa and Soul Sonic Force. Kool Moe Dee, Egyptian Lover” (2011: 69). While name-dropping serves to demonstrate knowledge, experience is even more revered within the Hip Hop community. Lovesey has described this practice by pointing out that authors tend to address the “aid of others, and a reaching out in terms of crediting sources and influences” (2021: 5).

Throughout the various AA HH LW publications, two important elements of Hip Hop historiography repeatedly recur: the city of New York and the rap group Run-DMC. Run-DMC is mentioned by nearly every author, regardless of gender, age, or origin. As the birthplace of Hip Hop it is less surprising that authors mention New York, its most successful artists, or relevant places of hip hop practice. In addition, Run-DMC, one of the first commercially successful rap combos, is revered for making rap music socially acceptable and for becoming a fashion icon.

2.2.4 Conclusion

The previous sections have shown that characteristics of African American, musical, and celebrity life writing manifest themselves in AA HH LW publications’ content, format, and marketing. By drawing attention to experiences of racial injustice, Hip Hop authors provide evidence of their racial discrimination while emphasizing a desire to be recognized as human beings rather than racialized subjects. Because many authors are involved in the music business as rappers, DJs, or producers, their life narratives also exhibit characteristics of musical life

writing. Their stories follow a narrative arc that follows the performer's life from often humble beginnings to a life in the spotlight. Significant milestones such as the first record deal or radio play mark the journey from aspiring artist to professional musician. The formal characteristics of musical life-writing manifest in incorporating various texts, but lyrics are the most commonly incorporated textual element. Including lyrics allows artists to reveal the meanings and motivations behind their songs and link songs to specific life events. The combination of different texts establishes a direct relationship between the publication and external texts circulating the artist, preceding and following the autobiography or memoir.

In many cases, becoming and remaining a popular artist is synonymous with having celebrity status. Thus, celebrity life writing, as a third central genre element, informs the AA HH LW publications and underscores how celebrity authors use their publications to compete for attention. Many AA HH LW publications peddle unprecedented access to the author's life, promising intimate insights to attract readers' attention. In addition, celebrity authors acknowledge the burdens of celebrity life by addressing their loss of privacy, exploitative marketing strategies, and fake friends to appear more agreeable to readers.

In addition to these three primary genre elements, AA HH LW publications exhibit, albeit unevenly, various secondary genre elements that point to other subgenres of life writing. Rappers, DJs, and producers use their autobiographies and memoirs to address personal trauma, illness, spiritual awakening, or confessions of substance abuse or childhood abuse. As a result, AA HH LW can be seen as a blending of various genres. Furthermore, I argue that celebrity authors and co-authors have, whether consciously or unconsciously, borrowed from various life-writing subgenres to frame the celebrity author in a particular way and to attract target audiences.

In addition to this blending of primary and secondary life-writing elements, there is a limited but recurring set of themes that may indicate the essential nature of AA HH LW. Among these recurring themes is the tendency of authors to situate their creative work and contributions within the broader historiography of the culture. Moreover, references to New York as the center of Hip Hop culture and, most strikingly, to Run-DMC as the first influential rap group can be found in almost every publication. Authors also invoke the improvisational agenda and the do-it-yourself mentality that dominated the culture, especially in its early days. AA HH LW authors do this by addressing the private studio, which both represents the improvisational, do-it-yourself attitude and, on the other hand, is surprisingly often located in the basements of homes. In addition, both male and female authors present themselves as well-versed in the practices and conventions of impoverished inner-city communities. Particularly male artists tie

their self-image and identity to their experiences in urban spaces. In the next chapter on functional spaces in AA HH LW, I will discuss these spaces in more detail.

In conclusion, I argue that an account with the following characteristics can belong to AA HH LW. First, the author positions himself or herself within the broader historiography of Hip Hop, either by pointing to innovative contributions to the culture, commenting on the current state of Hip Hop from a different perspective, or paying tribute to previous artists. Second, regardless of how writers feel about New York artists or the style of East Coast Hip Hop, the city of New York is consistently recognized as the birthplace of the culture. In this way, writers signal that they are rooted in the foundations of the culture.

In this context, mentioning Run-DMC as the world's first commercially successful rap group also plays an important role. Third, the improvisational and DIY aesthetics of Hip Hop are acknowledged. None of the artists justify their success with instant gratification and claim authenticity. The unique understanding of authenticity in Hip Hop dictates that artists have had to fight their way into the spotlight, work hard for it, and make the most of what little they had. This is best exemplified by the home studio, which is often conspicuously located in the basement of a house. Fourth, because of the entanglement of Hip Hop with impoverished inner-city communities, authors reflect on a wide variety of inner-city problems such as violence, crime, poverty, and drug abuse. Addressing these issues helps AA HH LW authors claim Hip Hop authenticity. As a result, descriptions of inner-city life are part of the character of AA HH LW.

A strict application of this formula to my corpus would inevitably lead to the exclusion of some publications since some authors refrain from discussing any details of their careers or making a connection to Hip Hop. However, I argue that combining these elements indicates an example of AA HH LW. Because of the novelty of this characterization attempt, it must be noted that future AA HH LW publications may deviate completely from this formula, especially as the class, gender, 'racial,' and socio-economic backgrounds of Hip Hop artists have grown more diverse in recent years.

This AA HH LW formula includes topics and motifs readers can expect from a Hip Hop autobiography or memoir. In Chapter 4, I will use four case studies to examine the different strategies of self-representation used by Hip Hop artists. Before doing so, however, I will show which spaces and gender issues are addressed by male and female authors, and what roles they play in the authors' self-representation.

Part III

III. REPRESENTATIONS OF SPACE and GENDER in

AFRICAN AMERICAN HIP HOP LIFE WRITING

3.1 Functional Spaces in AA HH LW

The relevance of urban spaces in U.S. inner cities has already been demonstrated in the chapters on the history of Hip Hop and its relevant spaces of practice. Given the importance of urban spaces for Hip Hop, it is unsurprising that artists acknowledge urban spaces in their writing, showing how inner-city spaces have profoundly shaped their identities, careers, and relationships. While not all artists have an inner-city background, many have origins in or near major metropolitan areas. The public spaces, addressed in chapter 1.3.2 Relevant Spaces of African American Hip Hop Practice, constitute the physical character of the inner city that is used, traversed, explored, appropriated, or repurposed by the authors. It is important to note that the use of public spaces differs significantly between men and women, youth and adults, and blacks and whites. The meanings the authors assign to public and private spaces imply experiences of marginalization, violence, discrimination, and loss on the one hand and a sense of community, purpose, and enjoyment on the other hand.

In this chapter, I will show which spaces recur in the various publications of my corpus and what meanings the authors ascribe to these spaces. To do this, I will use the public/private distinction I made in my introduction to spatiality. To better indicate the relevance of specific spaces, I have defined functions for these spaces that are fulfilled in most publications. This assignment inevitably leads to overlaps, as authors, for example, associate experiences of violence with both public and private spaces. However, this is where the added value of my approach becomes clear, as the representation of experiences of violence in public spaces fulfills a different function than those in private spaces. It is important to note that the spaces represented and the function they assume within life writing are part of the author's strategy of self-representation.

In the first part of this chapter, I focus on the public spaces that the authors address in their publications. As noted in the introductory chapter to spaces, the use of space differs between men and women. Many male authors define their street credibility and Hip Hop authenticity through various performances and practices in public spaces. However, exceptions demonstrate the diversity of AA HH LW, the use of public spaces, and the definition of gender identity in Hip Hop. The spaces addressed here are categorized according to their function for the authors and their framing in the life writing. The second subchapter focuses on private spaces. Although the number of female authors increases here, male authors also describe private spaces as relevant.

3.1.1 Public Spaces (and Gender)

1 | Spaces of Racial Discrimination

As I have shown in the previous chapters, inner-city communities tend to be characterized by a high proportion of African Americans. Authors may have experienced racial discrimination in their communities but primarily acknowledge racial discrimination in urban spaces different from their neighborhoods. In terms of ‘race,’ the inner-city community is portrayed by Los Angeles rapper Snoop Dogg as a “closed off world when it came to meeting and mixing with other races” (1999: 53).⁹⁴ Common also characterizes the South Side of Chicago as a racially homogeneous neighborhood with “very few opportunities to interact with someone who isn’t black” (2011: 26; see also DMX, 2002: 46 and Ice-T, 2012: 6).

While ‘racial’ differences are not presented as a source of conflict in the inner-city community, class is. According to Snoop Dogg, there is “no equalizer like poverty” (1999: 18), while Hip Hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons prefers rich and powerful whites to poorer blacks (2001: 124). In underprivileged communities with few opportunities for gainful employment, as will be shown later, wealth and status symbols become the most distinguishing feature. However, in other parts of the city, such as the suburbs, in public spaces such as schools or prisons, or regions of the South, ‘race’ becomes highly significant. In 2012, Winkler studied how Detroit youth acquire their sense of ‘racial’ identity. Her respondents reported moving to the suburbs in search of better shopping possibilities, restaurants, hotels, or amusement parks and experiencing racial discrimination there. In contrast, the mothers of the children interviewed expressed a sense of safety, particularly within the city limits of Detroit, among people of their color (53f).

The Suburbs

Chicago rapper Common recalls a similar experience, describing a family trip to “the lily-white suburbs” at the age of six in search of more upscale shopping options (2011: 27). Harassed by a boy his age about the color of his skin, he reacted with confusion before pointing to his body as the source of discrimination: “I felt ashamed...[something] started crawling under my skin...I felt like something very small” (2008: 28). Los Angeles rapper Snoop Dogg also tells the story of leaving his inner-city home for the suburbs when he crossed the “invisible boundaries that divide the white part of town from the black” to spend time with white friends (1999: 55). Although ‘race’ is central to this passage, the rapper does not mention any racial

⁹⁴ See also 50 Cent (2005: 2), Dupri (2007: 16), and Rakim (2019: 7f).

discrimination, but rather expresses which ‘race’ he believes dominates the inner city and which dominates the suburbs.

Among the AA HH LW corpus, not all who have ventured beyond the inner city acknowledge interracial tensions. Bronx-based DJ Grandmaster Flash, for example, expresses alienation in his foster home through the absence of blacks. Attending the Greer School Hope Farm, located in a small town within the Poughkeepsie–Newburgh–Middletown metropolitan area, a historically predominantly white and affluent region, Grandmaster Flash recalls encountering many more white people than he did in the Bronx. He writes, “[nobody] was black and the people there looked so different” (2008: 21). While the rural region surrounding the Poughkeepsie foster home differs from the Bronx in many ways, Grandmaster Flash chooses to emphasize ‘race’ as the most salient difference. Although he was surprised by many white students and staff, the artist does not recall any racist incidents (2008: 23). Darryl McDaniels occasionally left his predominantly black neighborhood for white neighborhoods and concluded that he “never felt that sort of hate” (2001: 12; see also 70). Ice-T, who grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Summit, New Jersey, recalls that he and his mother passed as white (2012: 6f). Another example comes from Wyclef Jean, whose first encounter with white people was on his immigration flight from Haiti to New York. Served by a white flight attendant, Jean recalls no incidents of racial discrimination (2012: 25).

Schools

In AA HH LW, schools are represented as public spaces for interracial encounters. A significant number of artists write about attending racially mixed schools or being transferred from a predominantly black school to a predominantly white school. For example, Ice-T describes the practice of transporting children from black neighborhoods to white schools to diversify schools (2012: 18). In inner-city communities, schools are crucial meeting places for different ethnic groups from different neighborhoods. LL Cool J, who had to move to North Babylon, a hamlet on the shore of Long Island, experienced racism at a white school (1997: 38f).⁹⁵ New York rapper Sandra Denton recounts a particularly intense example of interracial encounter in a year-long stay in Logan, Utah, a predominantly white city. Denton states that she searched in vain for black residents and found that even traditionally low-paying jobs were held by whites. She summarizes this experience as a “culture shock” after growing up in a “predominantly black neighborhood in Queens” (2008: 27).

⁹⁵ See also Questlove (2013: 48), Common (2011: 26), and Snoop Dogg (1999: 27).

The South

In addition to the suburbs and the high schools, the southern states of the United States are portrayed as sites of racist encounters, especially by artists from the South. Scarface from Texas and Virginia producer Timbaland present themselves as less affected by the racism and discrimination in the South because they have grown accustomed to it. According to Scarface, the South is “where the good ol’ boy and cowboy mentalities are the law of the land” (2015: 49).⁹⁶ Moreover, the South, as a space of racial tension, also emerges when artists recall their family roots. Rick Ross, for example, acknowledges how his grandparents struggled in Mississippi in the 1950s and mentions the Ku Klux Klan, the murder of Emmett Till, and the prevalent racism (2019: 26f; see also Snoop Dogg, 1999: 11). Mac Mall, on the other hand, remembers his grandfather from Louisiana as a “black man raised in the hate-filled South” (2015: 3).

The Prison

Given the large number of male artists who have served time in prison, it is less surprising that some of these authors also address racist encounters in prison. A prison is a public place characterized by severe restrictions, loss of identity, privacy, and constant control and surveillance. Various inmate groups, some hostile to each other, are crammed into a small space. A disproportionate number of African American inmates are confronted by white prison administrators and correctional officers, which often leads to ‘racial’ tensions addressed by some artists. Scarface remembers the Texas prison he went to as a very racist place where the “prison guards actively tried to cultivate” an environment of violence and racism (2015: 214). For the author, this is the result of systemic racism that he explains with white supremacy, embodied by white inmates and correctional officers who discriminate against black inmates (212; 215). Upon entering a prison in New York, Ja Rule implies a sense of fraternization when he feels relieved to meet “some officers of the same skin color” (2014: 116). In this context, ‘race’ overrides class or other affiliations. Despite these assurances, the author recalls feeling “like a slave” as he was poorly treated and witnessed the mistreatment of others daily (2014: 116).

Acknowledging incidents of racial discrimination in various public spaces allows the authors of AA HH LW to inscribe themselves into a collective racist trauma. On the one hand, the authors use these incidents as an opportunity to express the emotional impact of racism on them. By sharing their own experiences of racism, they challenge institutional racism in schools and

⁹⁶ See also Timbaland (2015: 135) and Watkins (2017: 33).

prisons. In addition, authors can connect with their black readers through shared experiences. On the other hand, addressing racial incidents helps authors present themselves as accessible rather than aloof celebrities. In particular, the examples of Scarface and Ja Rule show that authors cannot rely on their celebrity status to receive fair treatment if incarcerated. Given the high number of black people in prison, fairer treatment in prison would also undermine the credibility of the authors in the eyes of their readers, fans, and peers.

2 | Educational Spaces

The authors of AA HH LW describe various public spaces as places of personal advancement where they can learn or which offer potential for education. These spaces include traditional public places of learning such as elementary school, high school, and college. Many authors indicate that they have attended high school, university, or college with varying degrees of success and persistence.⁹⁷ Some authors express doubt about public educational institutions and their ability to teach black youth valuable lessons. Alicia Keys, for example, expresses distrust in the U.S. educational system to teach her son what she considers important about African American history, politics, and traditions. Instead, she has taken it upon herself to teach her children (2020: 226; see also Sister Souljah, 1996: 352). Thus, the black family and black schools are given more authority to teach younger generations about black history, racism, and emancipation.

The Streets

Some male artists describe an ambiguous concept of education that reveals a skepticism of the mainstream educational system or even a devaluation of conventional educational pathways. A common sentiment expressed by these writers is rejecting public schools as spaces that provide valuable knowledge and enable social advancement, particularly for black youth. Instead, the street is often described as replacing the school as a place to learn valuable skills. The devaluation of school knowledge correlates with the values and meanings rewarded in street culture. Shortly before graduating from high school, Los Angeles rapper Snoop Dogg joined a local gang and concluded that “[nothing] they were trying to teach me in school was ever going to make a bit of difference to the world I had just stepped into” (1999: 78; see also Trick Daddy, 2010: 75). Because they can be readily applied to the artist’s world, street smarts, intransigence, and a willingness to use violence take precedence over grammar and school mathematics. The prioritization of violence is best illustrated by New York rapper Prodigy, who states that the streets resemble a “gladiator school” that provided him with a “concrete-jungle education”

⁹⁷ Among these are McDaniels (2001: 16, 169), Denton (2008: 41), Evans (2009: 46), Jay-Z (2010: 190), Flavor Flav (2011: 34), Wyclef Jean (2012: 48), Watkins (2017: 40), and U-God (2018: 112f).

(2012: 170). The lack of gainful employment and prospects has internalized a sense of dependence on physical attributes and assertiveness that promise more benefits on the streets than any jobs available in the community.

School math becomes relevant, however, when Hip Hop authors express an interest in the calculations necessary to become a profitable drug dealer. In assuming their roles in what is euphemistically called the ‘drug game,’ male authors draw direct comparisons between the knowledge taught in school and the practical skills acquired on the streets. 50 Cent states that he learned “fractions and metric conversion, through real-life applications” in the drug trade (2005: 85).⁹⁸ It is an integral part of Hip Hop authenticity to show one’s street experience and present the streets as places of learning and ‘education.’ The link between drug dealing and learning profitable skills on the street illustrates the authors’ willingness to indulge in street culture and the illicit street market. In this way, the authors present themselves as having been involved in the struggle for power on the streets from an early age and that their experiences are authentic, which is especially important in the context of songs and lyrics that refer to violence and drugs.

The Prison

Public spaces of incarceration are among the unconventional educational spaces addressed in AA HH LW. The prison is ambiguous because it presents a public space that gives the illusion of solitude and privacy in a prison cell. However, this notion is deceptive because inmates are constantly monitored, controlled, and supervised. A few male authors, however, describe the prison as a place of education, learning, and personal growth. For example, 50 Cent describes the transformative potential of the prison, citing acquaintances who have returned from prison with “an economics major” (2005: 67). Ja Rule states that he studied for his general equivalency diploma while in prison (2014: 147, 200, 211; see also Gucci Mane, 2018: 265). Rapper U-God used his prison sentence as an opportunity to attend anger management classes and deal with his addiction, implying that prison is a space to reflect on and learn from past mistakes (2018: 150, 161).

In addition, the prison provides an opportunity for self-reflection and personal transformation, often accompanied by finding solace in the Islamic faith. 50 Cent acknowledges the transformative potential of the prison by referring to acquaintances who returned from prison “religious, quoting chapters and verses of the Koran or the Bible. One guy I knew even

⁹⁸ In addition, Gucci Mane (2018: 43), Scarface (2015: 23), and Rick Ross (2019: 61) address the educational aspects of the ‘drug game.’ Moreover, street culture plays a role in the prioritization of these skills, see p. 59 and Smiley (2017), who explored the implications of drug distribution and consumerism in Hip Hop.)

came back a Buddhist” (2005: 67). Shabazz (2015: 86-89) suggests that Islam has had a significant impact on black inmates, who have spread the faith to their communities and broader networks, leading to a plethora of Muslim rappers and references to Islam in Hip Hop.

These examples show that traditional educational spaces are often rejected in favor of unconventional inner-city spaces. On the one hand, the specific characteristics of inner-city spaces make the skills and knowledge taught in school seem less valuable when respect and money can be earned just as quickly through unyielding and dominant behavior. On the other hand, the perceptions reveal a distrust of mainstream society. Decades of unemployment and poverty have undermined trust in government authorities and, as Ilan suggested, replaced it with a survival mentality that rewards independence and self-reliance.⁹⁹

3 | Spaces of Survival & Resilience Coming of Age

Youth use public space for various purposes, including self-expression, socialization, and identity formation (White, 1994: 109). Malone has argued that there is considerable potential in how the streets and urban space are adapted and appropriated by youth. Adult responses to youth in public spaces often include a desire to regulate, control, and limit youth actions. However, boundaries help to “construct our sense of identity in the places we inhabit and... organize our social space through geographies of power” (2002: 158). Together with their peers, adolescents explore and appropriate public space to become independent and form their identity. With regard to the gendered use of urban space, Wucherpfennig has shown in a German context that the use of public space by boys and girls differs. According to her, public space has an educational purpose different from home or school. Young people interact with each other and with adults and learn about public space and its functions through active and passive use of parks, streets, squares, and other places (2010: 54).

According to Wucherpfennig, boys, as opposed to girls, are more likely to engage in space-consuming behaviors because boys are given a larger radius of action. In contrast, she locates the center of girls’ lives in the parental home. Girls’ movement in public spaces is restricted because girls tend to move with a fixed destination, while boys are allowed to roam freely. Outdoor activities, including games such as skipping or double Dutch, are practiced close to home, under the watchful eyes of parents or legal guardians. In contrast, girls’ leisure activities that take place farther from home are often arranged in isolation to allow for supervision. (54; see also Wehmeyer, 2013: 154). The traditional dominance of masculinity in public spaces

⁹⁹ See p. 59 for Ilan’s aspects of street culture.

reinforces the attribution of negative characteristics to public spaces. The construction of vulnerable femininity in public spaces goes hand in hand with the fear of (sexual) assault.¹⁰⁰

Authors of AA HH LW describe in detail the precarious inner-city conditions in which they grew up. Many authors portray themselves as having acquired a survival mentality and resilience from overcoming the harsh conditions of the inner city. Resilience, as a conceptual framework, has been defined as the ability to recover from “negative life experiences and become stronger while overcoming them” (Ledesma, 2014: 2). This survivor mentality and resilience, especially according to authors who grew up in the inner city, is the result of witnessing violence, facing a lack of prospects, living without parents, facing addiction, and much more. These factors are even more impactful when experienced at an early age.

Because many inner-city apartments are cramped and social life has moved to public places, inner-city youth often spend much time in public spaces. However, these spaces are primarily used by adults, which in turn affects Hip Hop authors, suggesting an overlap between childhood and adult spaces. Authors who write about witnessing murders, shootings, or the occasional dead body, about playing in the streets instead of playgrounds, or being left alone for long periods describe inner-city spaces as neither child-friendly nor conducive to a sheltered childhood. Sister Souljah says inner-city children are more like “smaller versions of adults” (1996: 235). The example of Rakim’s juvenile arrest at the age of twelve illustrates the dilemma of inner-city youth, who are often unwillingly drawn into adult spaces and affairs (2019: 82). Other authors note that they were drawn to the dangers of public spaces at a young age and that their exposure to violence hardened them for life (DMX, 2002: 69; Prodigy, 2012: 22; U-God, 2018: 21f).

Some authors present themselves as so immersed in street life that they imply that adult spaces of the streets have also taken on parental responsibilities. MF Grimm portrays these responsibilities as being assumed by the adults in the community: “Like that old saying, ‘It takes a village to raise a child’? THAT was the neighborhood motto” (2007: Chapter 1). In addition, Ja Rule implies that he and his sister had “only the streets to raise [them]” (2014: 14; U-God, 2018: 24). New Jersey native Faith Evans alludes to the city’s brick architecture when describing the character of those who raised her: “Bricks are tough and unforgiving: And they are building blocks. It’s an accurate way to describe the city – and the people – that raised me” (2008: 10). These examples underscore the importance of the community in taking on the responsibility of caring for children. Furthermore, Evans’ example shows how authors transfer

¹⁰⁰ I addressed this issue when talking about the correlation between gender and space, see p. 51.

the characteristics associated with their living conditions to themselves to express their identification with these places. Another example comes from San Francisco rapper Mac Mall, who presents himself as profoundly affected by the attitudes of his environment: “Being from the Bay I had an independent attitude” (2015: 92).¹⁰¹

Early exposure to the adult world has its downsides, as illustrated, for example, by Sister Souljah, who states that she “wasn’t even ten yet and already...had experienced two murders, several drug overdoses, mental illness, danger, and poverty” (1996: 31; see also Betha, 2003: 22; Gucci Mane, 2018: 28). Describing her youth in the Hell’s Kitchen section of Manhattan, Alicia Keys writes about witnessing poverty, crime, and drug addiction, concluding that she “always felt older than [she] was. For one thing, New York grows you up fast” (2020: 27). By highlighting the precarious conditions of their lives, the authors do not seek to elicit sympathy but to present themselves as the ones who were tenacious and persistent enough to make it out. Keys sums this up poignantly by stating that she had “grown up seeing life through a single lens: survival” (43f, 100).¹⁰² Hip Hop mogul Russell Simmons reflects on learning “survival skills that are very useful” (2001: 24; see also Mc Lyte, 2014: 59).

Authors rarely associate this accelerated maturation with trauma, pain, or despair but rather present it as helpful for their later lives. A survivor’s mentality and internalized street smarts have enabled many authors to prevail in difficult situations, such as negotiating with exploitative record companies or what they see as a hypocritical celebrity industry. DJ Run, for example, writes “[having] grown up in the streets of Hollis, Queens, and being in the music business, I was used to people running games and scamming everybody” (2000: 87).¹⁰³ A common perception among authors of AA HH LW is that having endured and survived the dangers of the inner city, they are overly prepared for the general difficulties of life. However, this contrasts with the experience of very young artists who have signed exploitative first recording contracts.¹⁰⁴ Although they present their young selves as more mature, this does not hide the fact that the prospect of fast money, also a commodity in street culture, was a significant incentive for aspiring artists. Thus, it seems that the authors only address the benefits of their survivor mentality in retrospect.

In describing the benefits of a survival mentality, rapper Prodigy goes even further, portraying himself as a black supremacist whose inner-city upbringing made him dominant and superior over white and affluent suburbanites unfamiliar with inner-city life. In his case, class

¹⁰¹ See also DJ Run (2000: 106), Denton (2008: 27), Mia-X (2019: Ch. 8, p. 79), and Rakim (2019: 41).

¹⁰² See Sha-Rock (2010: 66) and U-God (2018: 68, 75, 164, 193, 289).

¹⁰³ See also R. Simmons (2001: 35), Gucci Mane (2018: 83), and Mac Mall (2015: 27).

¹⁰⁴ See p. 81.

and 'race' become significant markers of difference between 'bad' and 'good' urban spaces. Rejoicing in his experiences with criminal gangs, hoodlums, and drug addicts and growing up without any luxury or comfort, Prodigy distinguishes between two worlds with corresponding mindsets. According to him, the inner city represents the "real world where poverty and savages are king," while the suburbs give a "false sense of security" and are destined to be lost without their luxury and affluence (2012: 48; see also Trick Daddy, 2010: 107). He does not question his sociological background or acknowledge its dangers to himself or his peers. Instead, he embraces the negative meanings ascribed to ghetto spaces, including those that portray black men as dangerous and threatening to the unwary white person. This perception is consistent with the general rejection of white mainstream white culture evident in his autobiography.

The Inner-City War Zone

While children and adolescents may be aware of the negative aspects of their community, they are usually too young to have access to perilous situations. However, the opportunities to become involved in these situations increase with age. Through direct or indirect participation, many authors who grew up in the inner city describe their environment as largely negative. The use of allegory reinforces the danger of the inner city to the reader. The prevalence of violence and crime in the inner city often leads to comparisons with scenarios of lawlessness. For example, various authors use metaphors such as the "Wild Wild West" combined with a regulatory code of "frontier justice" (Snoop Dogg, 1999: 6; see also Timbaland, 2015: 59), to "ground zero" and "hell on earth" (Grandmaster Flash, 2008: 24f), a "wildlife reserve" (Ja Rule, 2014: 23), or a "war zone" (Jean, 2012: 31; see also Sister Souljah, 1996: 350; U-God, 2018: 2) to portray the inner city as a space where ordinary laws no longer apply and the law of the strongest reigns supreme.

Common to all these descriptions is the absence of law and justice, replaced by the law of the jungle and the indiscriminate use of force. The authors transfer the vigilantism and self-assertion associated with the American West and the frontier to urban spaces, implying a blatant disregard for authority and laws. By exaggerating the danger of their urban spaces or drawing comparisons to actual spaces of lawlessness, artists absolve themselves and their peers from the need to obey the law. Moreover, these metaphors help artists present themselves as insiders to urban ghetto spaces while satisfying the curiosity of readers who would not dare to enter such areas. Public spaces such as streets, corners, abandoned buildings, or housing project corridors are occupied by predominantly male youth with little adult supervision, intervention, or prevention. The result is a vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence in the struggle for

material wealth and social prestige, transforming inner-city communities into a world where “violence and disorder become a way of life” (Richardson and St. Vil, 2015: 76).

In describing their childhoods and adolescents as affected by adverse conditions, AA HH LW authors remain faithful to the rags-to-riches narrative arc that informs many of their life accounts. While describing childhood and adolescent experiences is integral to an autobiography and memoir, authors also use inner-city spaces to chronicle their journey from poverty to the heights of critical acclaim and popularity. This emphasizes their achievement, makes their success even more astonishing, and reflects the identity of the celebrity artist as one who has persevered against all odds. Moreover, by pointing to their overcoming of unfavorable living conditions, the authors present themselves as part of the community, even though they have long since left it behind at the time of publication. Their depiction of inner-city life, which resembles spaces of lawlessness, is closely linked to the following spatial function.

4 | Spaces of Hip Hop Realness

Although the spatial and social backgrounds of contemporary Hip Hop artists have changed over the past few decades, the definition of Hip Hop authenticity, realness, and street credibility have strongly influenced how the authors of the corpus define their authenticity within Hip Hop. For these artists, inner-city life, characterized by poverty, violence, self-reliance, and the pursuit of respect and material wealth, represents the most authentic upbringing that Hip Hop performers can exhibit. It is unsurprising that Hip Hop artists who grew up during this period seek to claim this authenticity by drawing attention to their inner-city backgrounds. They do this by including various aspects in their life narratives and referring to various public spaces. These include, first, descriptions of desperation and poverty, the inclusion of which serves the purpose of informing the reader of the artist’s background and reinforces the rags-to-riches narrative arc by literally demonstrating the poor circumstances in which the authors grew up.

Second, because of the pervasive street code many male authors adhered to, they committed various criminal acts to which they confess in their life accounts. Among the most common crimes described in AA HH LW is the selling of drugs, which promised a quick way to gain respect and material wealth in the inner city. Third, the prison becomes relevant in Hip Hop realness because it is closely linked to the street code and crime. Beyond these three points, however, interpretations of Hip Hop realness diverge significantly.

The Neighborhood

Hip Hop identity, as it was widely constructed in the 1980s and 1990s, is closely tied to the experience of poverty, lack, and disadvantage. On the one hand, descriptions of poverty

contextualize the artist's upbringing, fulfilling the promise of celebrity life writing to reveal disturbing or bleak details. On the other hand, artists enhance their authenticity because, as Yelin argues, "[comfort] is popularly interpreted as a mark of inauthenticity" (2020: 237). Moreover, the authors claim Hip Hop realness by situating their youth in impoverished spaces. The artist's neighborhood and public spaces are invoked as sites of despair and hopelessness. Californian rapper Mac Mall, for example, alludes to the pervasiveness of poverty by stating that "being poor and on welfare" was commonplace and a condition that one "never really noticed, 'cause everybody else was too" (2015: 9).¹⁰⁵ Vermin and rodents infiltrating the house are read as a concomitant of poverty by Virginia producer Timbaland, who refrains from characterizing his childhood home as the epitome of decay, but suggests a familiarity with disorder (2015: 8; see also DMX, 2002: 20).

Housing projects

The high-rise towers of public housing projects, which epitomize the cramped living conditions of the inner city, have led authors to describe their surroundings as a "concrete" (Queen Latifah, 1999: 39; see also Mac Mall, 2015: 110) or "urban" jungle (U-God, 2018: 1f; Trick Daddy, 2010: 190). Authors compare these housing projects to giant concrete trees that tower over everything, blocking the sun and giving inner-city residents a claustrophobic feeling. Ja Rule captures this claustrophobic image when he concludes that the high-rise towers were "all smothering the breath of Black people whose only need was a little more personal space" (2014: 74). In addition to restricting residents' mobility and recreational activities, the projects are described as limiting people's opportunities for self-development and personal expression. At another point, the author relates the hopelessness of his community to the absence of the sun as a symbol of hope and warmth: "[clouds] seemed to hang over the whole neighborhood, even when the sun was shining" (2014: 20).¹⁰⁶ As a result, the housing projects not only take the breath away from their residents but also block out the sun, leaving little hope and contributing to the depressing atmosphere of the inner city.

Poverty, as opposed to a life of wealth and insouciance, is constructed as an authentic inner-city experience from which artists claim a sense of superiority and realness. Maintaining a solid connection to the neighborhood is crucial to claiming realness, even after artists have become popular and moved to wealthier neighborhoods. In his memoir, Gucci Mane claims to pay tribute to his former hood by "was rapping for the young boys on the corner with dirty T-shirts on. The ones cooking up in the kitchen. The car thieves. The shooters. ...I was rapping my

¹⁰⁵ See also Sister Souljah (1996: 11f), DMX (2002: 10, 13), Dupri (2007: 14), and Prodigy (2012: 15).

¹⁰⁶ See also R. Simmons (2001: 31), DMX (2002: 15f), Jean (2012: 23), and Keys (2020: 27).

reality” (2018: 110). His homage, however, is primarily directed at the criminal elements of his former neighborhood, glorifying crime, and violence to gain respect.

Trading Drugs

Authors of AA HH LW regularly refer to violent altercations and crimes such as theft, violent robbery, weapons possession, and drug dealing in which they have been involved in public urban spaces. Passive acceptance and active participation in these crimes make up much of street credibility. The authors describe growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods as almost inevitably linked to adherence to the street code. This tacit agreement governs membership in the community and dictates how respect, credibility, and authenticity are earned, given, and taken away. The accumulation of material wealth and respect is the prime directive. The display of accessories, luxury, status symbols, and jewelry is associated with wealth and power. As a result, the inner-city community thrives on its own economy and value system. A value system that, as 50 Cent writes in his memoir, makes a car “more important than a home” (2005: 35). Authors such as DMX, Ja Rule, and Prodigy reflect on the propensity for violence and portray it as a recreational activity done for the sole purpose of gaining respect. DMX reflects on a series of robberies, car thefts, and his general display of aggression (2002: 83, 89, 96, 169), while Prodigy cites various anecdotes in which his violent attitude surfaced (2012: 26, 39ff, 80).¹⁰⁷

Material possessions and financial stability play a crucial role because they are scarce and hard to come by in the inner city and because money and status symbols are used to give and receive respect on the streets. By this logic, drug dealers become respected outlaws. LL Cool J recalls how he and his peers looked up to drug dealers as the epitome of inner-city wealth and status: “They represented everything poor people didn’t have and wanted so much: Money, clothes, cars, property” (1997: 105). This idealization of outlaw figures like drug dealers as the embodiment of wealth and respect in the hood has led to various anti-hero archetypes in rap music.

The sale of drugs ranks highest among the crimes addressed by the authors of AA HH LW. Drugs were ubiquitous when most of the AA HH LW authors were growing up. The authors acknowledge the pervasiveness of drugs and how drug-related crime changed their neighborhoods. Houston rapper Scarface, for example, expresses how his community deteriorated in the 1970s as the crack epidemic swept through inner cities across the United States.

¹⁰⁷ See also Flavor Flav (2011: 22), Ice-T (2012: 57-63), Ja Rule (2014: 66f), Rick Ross (2019: 168, 173), Gucci Mane (2018: 40f, 56, 105), and U-God (2018: 67f, 164).

It was the late seventies and the neighborhood was still pretty intact. Most of the homes had both parents in them. People were working. But once that crack came in, it got to a certain point where you'd hear those shots go off and you didn't even want to go look anymore. You already knew someone was dead. It had become an everyday thing (2015: 107).

Ja Rule makes similar observations about New York in the 1980s (2014: 20), Russell Simmons alludes to the influx of drugs into his Queens neighborhood (2001: 15), and Gucci Mane describes the consequences for Atlanta (2018: 18f). Many authors present drugs as a natural occurrence of inner-city spaces, much like gangs, violence, and single-parent families.

Drugs are so pervasive in the inner city that even children are not immune to their effects. For example, Scarface states that he was “introduced to the game on the city bus” and began selling marijuana at the age of eight before becoming involved in the production and distribution of crack cocaine (2015: 21, 24-28).¹⁰⁸ Rather than questioning the prevalence of drugs in inner-city communities, male authors from lower-class backgrounds tend to justify and excuse their drug abuse with the prevalence of drugs. According to Flavor Flav, “living in Roosevelt, [he] couldn't say no to drugs,” implying that his addiction would not have begun if he had grown up somewhere else (2011: 89; see also DMX, 2002: 35; Prodigy, 2012: 126).

The impact of drugs on the social fabric of inner-city communities, the lure of easy money, and the dangerous implications of the drug ‘game’ have been captured in popular culture and, not surprisingly, in rap music. The life and the memoirs of Miami rapper William Roberts, whose rap alias Rick Ross alludes to a notorious 1980s drug dealer, attest to this history. In his memoir, Ross frequently mentions his connections to Miami-area drug gangs and dealers and how he became involved in the Miami drug business before making a name for himself as a rapper (Rick Ross, 2019: 13, 60f, 84ff, 91).

For rappers claiming Hip Hop realness and street credibility, staying on the ‘wrong’ side of the law is paramount. A complicated example of the entanglement between prison and Hip Hop realness is the case of Miami rapper Rick Ross, who, after dropping out of college, worked as a Florida corrections officer from 1995 to 1997. However, this position did not bode well with his fans and the Hip Hop nation when it was revealed in 2008. As a result, the stories of crime and violence that Ross had chronicled throughout his career came under increased scrutiny. In his memoir, he addresses this controversy by stating that “[the] subtext was this made me a fraud” (2019: 163, 167).

¹⁰⁸ See also 50 Cent (2005: 25), Prodigy (2012: 80), Ja Rule (2014: 44), Gucci Mane (2018: 24ff), and Rick Ross (2019: 54, 70).

Later in his memoir, he painstakingly attempts to repair his tarnished reputation by pointing out that his street credibility has never been questioned before (166). The implication is that even though he has worked for government agencies in the past, his street credibility remains high enough to keep his veracity intact. This perspective is vividly illustrated by the example of Gucci Mane, whose murder charge brought him unwanted attention and was interpreted by fellow artists and audiences as a validation of his street authenticity. The rapper, however, denied his guilt, partly to avoid further persecution, explaining people's reaction by saying that "[in] a lot of folks' eyes I'd done some gangsta shit and people started rocking with me again for that. But I'd never walked around acting like I was hard" (2018: 103). These cases demonstrate the double-edged nature of Hip Hop authenticity. A general distrust of government officials and authorities is expected on the streets. However, cooperation with the authorities can quickly earn the distrust of the 'streets,' the posse, and fans, leading to diminished credibility and realness.

Prison

In AA HH LW, the prison appears as an ambivalent space with positive and negative associations. Snoop Dogg acknowledges that "being a convict in this society is a mark of legitimacy," alluding to the street credibility attributed to convicts and inmates (Snoop Dogg, 1999: 85). Various authors describe their experiences in prison but in a different light. Given the number of male authors who include their prison experiences in their life accounts, one might assume that the prison serves to enhance an author's realness. While some artists use their lyrics to gloat about prison and attempt to add to their realness, the authors of AA HH LW choose to focus on the negative aspects of incarceration, including physical and mental health issues. In AA HH LW, the prison is *not* portrayed as a romanticized space that confers street credibility and enhances one's reputation outside prison walls. Instead, the authors explicitly ascribe attributes to prison that discourage (young) readers from positively reading about prison.

In my corpus, exclusively male authors include prison time in their life narratives. These authors include DMX, Ja Rule, 50 Cent, Ice-T, Scarface, Prodigy, Flavor Flav, Snoop Dogg, Rakim, Rick Ross, Gucci Mane, Russell Simmons, Trick Daddy, and U-God. Several authors have passed through multiple levels of the prison system and experienced varying degrees of isolation. Authors describe their time in juvenile detention centers, minimum security units in local jails, protective custody, correctional facilities, communal cells, double cells, and solitary confinement. These authors de-romanticize the prison experience by addressing the unmitigated isolation, inadequate food, and loneliness behind prison walls. For example, Snoop Dogg

explicitly addresses his intended audience, black youth, with a personal pronoun, warning them that prison is

the loneliest place in the world. You got iron cages and lockdowns and guards with gats and fences topped off with razor wire, but you never get the feeling that you're safe and secure. The food will rot out your guts, the air is stale and full of smoke, and the beds feel like they've been stuffed with gravel, but if you're in there long enough, it gets to feeling like home (1999: 84).

The author explicitly acknowledges discomfort and isolation, thereby assigning similar attributes to the prison as to the inner-city community. Snoop Dogg connects the confinement, surveillance, and monitoring used to control the prison population and the strategies of spatial confinement that occur in the inner city. The author suggests similarities when he states that “the joint is like the ghetto, a place where you are caged in and kept an eye on and never left alone long enough to think about where you are and how to get out” (1999: 83). His statement echoes the close connection between the inner city and the prison as examples of public spaces where power is spatially maintained.¹⁰⁹ In addition to the alleged similarity of the prison to the inner city regarding confinement and surveillance, it is striking that the authors emphasize the poor quality of food. Snoop Dogg points out how food affects the health of inmates who do not exercise regularly (1999: 150). Food is also addressed by Flavor Flav, who, referring to the lack of amenities in prison, states that he has learned to appreciate simple things like a sandwich (2011: 86).¹¹⁰

Authors try to advise young readers, mainly because they have experienced the immediate and long-term effects of incarceration, resulting in a ‘vicious cycle’ between the inner city and prison. For example, Snoop Dogg calls attention to the high incarceration rates of primarily African Americans who are targeted, arrested, and incarcerated. He likens the frequency of incarceration to a “vicious circle, a revolving door,” alluding to the reciprocal effects between inner-city crime and the aggravating effects of the prison system on current and former inmates (1999: 84; Flavor Flav, 2011: 100).¹¹¹ Prodigy attempts to disrupt the myth that prisons lend street credibility by directly informing readers that there is “nothin’ cool or glorifying about being locked up” (2012: 235).¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ In the first chapter, I addressed the similarities of the prison and the inner city (see p. 49).

¹¹⁰ Five years after his release from prison, Prodigy published a cookbook (2016) with author Kathy Iandoli, listing the favorite meals he prepared in prison to manage his diet due to sickle cell anemia.

¹¹¹ See also p. 49.

¹¹² Scarface (2015: 212), Ja Rule (2014: 234), and Gucci Mane (2018: 49, 145, 266) also portray their prison experiences in a predominantly negative light.

Incorporating references to disadvantaged, poor, and violent inner-city spaces into their life accounts serves as a way for authors to sketch out their youth and claim street credibility and Hip Hop realness. This strategy is employed by numerous artists who have well-documented histories of inner-city struggles, drug abuse, run-ins with the law, and even arrest and incarceration. However, this narrative takes on another level of significance when authors from middle-class backgrounds appear to adopt narrative elements that promise credibility and a sense of realness. In my corpus, Darryl McDaniels, DJ Run, Common, Questlove, Rick Ross, and Russell Simmons do not portray their upbringings as decidedly disadvantaged. Class plays a crucial role here as authors with middle-class backgrounds emphasize their community, their parents' work ethic, and the sense of community in their neighborhood.

One example is the neighborhood of Hollis, Queens, home to Darryl McDaniels and DJ Run of Run-DMC, and his brother Russell Simmons. None of the authors pretend that Hollis, during their childhood and adolescence in the 1970s and 1980s, was not a place that would grant Hip Hop realness. DJ Run describes Hollis's middle-class background when he lists the amenities, including "[nice] homes, manicured lawns" (2000: 27; see also R. Simmons, 2001 14f). By pointing to the quality of the lawns in the neighborhood, the author already characterizes the community as one that values hard work and its public image. Moreover, manicured lawns are a "physical manifestation of the American Dream of home ownership," underscoring the middle-class character of Hollis (D'Costa 2021; see also Chambers, 2020: 71). Compared to Hollis, inner-city neighborhoods are characterized by housing projects where residents have little access to green space, much less lawns. McDaniels' image of Hollis further illustrates the differences with inner-city communities as a "blue-collar neighborhood whose streets were a testament to the ambition and work ethic of our parents. ...it was a place where children could play and families could grow" (2016: 91, 89f).¹¹³

It is striking that, despite their relatively safe middle-class communities, these artists attempt to establish spatial proximity to areas that supposedly confer realness. As if to compensate for their advantaged childhoods, the authors directly contrast their descriptions of safety and privilege with the dangers of the inner city. DJ Run, for example, adds to his description by noting that danger was always nearby: "it wasn't like we were sheltered from the world. There were some places where we could still see the drug dealers on the corner" (2000: 27; see also Darryl McDaniels, 2016: 91). McDaniels goes on to characterize Hollis as an ambiguous neighborhood that "had its challenges – drug abuse, random crime, occasional outbursts of

¹¹³ See also McDaniels (2001: 8, 58), Common (2011: 90), Questlove (2013: 8, 15), and Rick Ross (2019: 59).

serious violence” (2016: 91). In describing his childhood recreational activities, McDaniels hints at the possibility of violent and criminal encounters: “You could get robbed. You could get shot. At times, it was a tense environment” (2001: 8). The ‘bad’ neighborhoods and the inner city are directly related to the likelihood of crime and violence.

While DJ Run and McDaniels attempt to overcome their apparent lack of Hip Hop realness and street credibility by establishing a sense of spatial proximity to the dangers of the inner city, Questlove addresses his apparent lack of authentic Hip Hop identity. Conspicuous emphasis is placed on the author’s perceived status as an outsider within his community, among his peers, and within the culture of Hip Hop. Questlove’s introverted personality, reclusive childhood (2013: 15, 46), and taste in all types of music, including white artists like the Beach Boys (41), all contribute to his reputation as an apparent outsider at odds with Hip Hop identity, fashion (55f), and street credibility (75). His later bandmate, Tariq Trotter, however, embodies what Questlove considers inner-city life par excellence, fascinated by Trotter’s life as “surrounded by crime and violence, ...so fundamentally different” from his own (75).

This group of artists seems to compensate for what separates them from complete spatial ‘realness’ by emphasizing proximity to the dangers of the inner city. By suggesting that the dangers of the inner city are nearby, McDaniels and others *fabricate* exposure to these dangers to claim a share of street credibility. However, their self-representations, career paths, and framing suggest the opposite. Moreover, the descriptions of fellow artists sometimes reveal more about the artist’s background. For example, McDaniels admits that Run-DMC’s street aura, represented by their style, iconic fashion, and confident demeanor, came from Jam Master Jay, who “was street for real,” while McDaniels and DJ Run “weren’t street guys. We were nerds from Queens” (2016: 147). Their examples suggest that the realness of Hip Hop is construed as embedded in, or at least close to, the dangers of the inner city.

New York

Among the many cities and metropolitan areas addressed in AA HH LW, New York is given considerable importance, mainly because it symbolizes the birthplace of the culture. Like a Hip Hop version of Frank Sinatra’s popular line, the authors express a longing for the attention and recognition that New York artists and audiences have to offer. As a result, not only is New York the most frequently referenced city in AA HH LW, but its symbolic meanings far exceed its material significance. New York authors Alicia Keys and Jay-Z even collaborated on a song celebrating their hometown (Keys, 2020: 138). While all authors, regardless of background, speak highly of the city, the city’s artists are particularly vain about the importance of New

York in Hip Hop. New York artists seem to be associated with a more advanced form of Hip Hop authenticity.

New York has been the ‘place to be’ for every rap artist since the early days of Hip Hop. Major record labels set up offices, opened studios and assembled the city’s best producers, DJs, and artists. Aspiring artists from all over the country flocked to the Big Apple to soak up the atmosphere, find inspiration, network with other artists, and sign with major record labels. New York became and remained the mecca of the Hip Hop nation, a term occasionally used by authors of AA HH LW. For example, Ice-T (2012: 98) and Common (2011: 198) describe New York as the mecca of Hip Hop, underscoring the city’s appeal. It is not only the city itself but also the various locations, including clubs, that are given special significance due to their location in New York. New Jersey native Queen Latifah, for example, equates Manhattan clubs with “the mecca of hip-hop in the mid-1980s” (1999: 47). She claims to have visited New York frequently to adopt the music, styles, and fashion and bring them back to her home in New Jersey: “My posse started to depend on me to bring them some New York flavor every week, and...I was spreading the culture” (1999: 50; see also Scarface, 2015: 15). Her exposure to the ‘real’ Hip Hop culture in New York gave her a competitive advantage over her peers in New Jersey.

Sandra Denton, herself a New Yorker, notes that *The Fever* was a New York club where “real rappers performed” (2008: 50). Although all of the contributors to the corpus are Hip Hop performers, it is the New York rappers and DJs who are considered as the most ‘real’ and authentic. West Coast rapper Ice-T even goes so far as to deny the success of rappers from other parts of the country, stating that “never gaining acceptance in New York was essentially like not being a rapper at all” (2012: 98; 92, 166f). Houston rapper Scarface adds to the authenticity of New York artists when he concludes that “New York had a legitimate claim. ...New York had set the bar” (2015: 85f). It is not only New York artists who are given more significance, but also the audiences and fans who decide about the success or failure of rappers and DJs. According to Bronx rapper Sha-Rock, New York audiences “would most definitely be the first to let us know” whether they liked a performance (2010: 187).

In their memoirs, Houston rapper Scarface (2015: 66) and Southern producer Jermaine Dupri (2007: 21) express gratitude to New York audiences and view their approval as an authenticating factor. New York and the New York way become the norm by which other cities are measured. Even New York landmarks are appropriated for their symbolic meaning, as when Miami rapper Rick Ross alludes to Harlem’s famous Apollo Theater and its notoriously critical audience when describing the clientele of a Miami club that had “earned...the nickname

‘Apollo South’” (2019: 80). These examples suggest that, in the case of New York, space becomes a crucial factor in the attribution of Hip Hop realness.

While New York artists implement descriptions of the city to contextualize their upbringing and use the city’s lore and reputation to claim Hip Hop realness, authors from other regions mention the city to pay homage and demonstrate their Hip Hop knowledge. New York proved to be an irresistible draw for aspiring artists from other parts of the country. Permanent or temporary visits to New York changed the lives of many artists, including Rick Ross, who describes his visit to the city as “surreal” (2019: 98).¹¹⁴ New York’s role as the birthplace of Hip Hop and the site of pivotal historical events and cultural developments gives the city an allure that radiates far beyond its borders.

Descriptions of violent encounters and incidents of crime occurring in public spaces are common in AA HH LW publications. Their inclusion serves two purposes: first, to reinforce the impression that the authors grew up in desolate and disadvantaged conditions. Second, the authors admit to their involvement in crime to emphasize their realness and commitment to the streets and the street code. Both serve to present violent confrontations and crimes committed to accumulate material wealth and respect as natural occurrences of inner-city life. These activities are primarily described as occurring outdoors, in the streets, on street corners, or in publicly accessible but abandoned inner-city spaces. The frequency with which exclusively male authors write about their violent and criminal pasts highlights the male dominance of public inner-city spaces. It is mainly male authors who share their active participation and particular interest in the drug trade. Most often, this takes the form of liaisons with drug dealers and criminal kingpins. The female authors in my corpus do not admit to any active involvement. At the time when many of the authors grew up, the drug trade was still primarily conducted in public spaces, a male-dominated space.¹¹⁵

The depiction of life in disadvantaged neighborhoods is a recurring theme in the rap lyrics of many Hip Hop artists. In addition, male artists from these neighborhoods, in particular, have developed a self-image throughout their careers that relies heavily on affirming their street credibility. Poverty, crime, and violent confrontations, on the one hand, and the struggle for respect and the pursuit of quick money and status symbols, on the other, demonstrate the two sides of street credibility. Artists who identify strongly with street culture and the code of the street and are known by their fans for these themes tend to integrate this narrative into their life narratives. They do this by referencing the public spaces of their neighborhood and portraying

¹¹⁴ See also Dean (2008: 35, 72), Common (2011: 196f), and Mac Mall (2015: 50f).

¹¹⁵ See the next chapter for a discussion of gendered spaces.

themselves as opportunistic criminals who did what was inevitable by participating in street culture. While proving their street credibility and realness, by adopting this approach, the celebrity authors present themselves as real people who, before gaining respect through the nonviolent practices of Hip Hop, had to gain respect in other ways.

AA HH LW's preoccupation with the dangers of the inner city as a means of asserting the realness of Hip Hop also affects authors from middle-class backgrounds. These authors create spatial proximity to various dangers, be it the risk of altercations, nearby drug dealers, or shootings, to present themselves as more authentic. The struggles, difficulties, and obstacles associated with inner-city life are seen as inducing authenticity and realness. Authors from more privileged backgrounds, however, cannot claim this reputation. Some authors try to legitimize their position in the culture by 'embellishing' their living conditions. It seems, then, that at least for the artists in question, the origin remains a decisive factor.

5 | Creative and Performative Spaces

Hip Hop has developed as a lived and practiced subculture whose adherents have appropriated urban public spaces for various expressive practices. In their life narratives, the authors acknowledge various public spaces as sites for creativity, experimentation, and learning the ropes of Hip Hop performance. Because many inner-city communities lack educational institutions such as community or youth centers, many creative spaces used by performers and artists are improvisational. However, this reflects the mentality of independence and self-sufficiency that has characterized Hip Hop since its inception, and it has become a highly prized virtue among rappers, producers, and entrepreneurs to make something out of nothing (McCabe, 2020: 231). The reference to urban public spaces as sites of creativity and performance allows the authors to inscribe themselves as contributors to the historiography of Hip Hop. The improvisational nature of these spaces reflects a DIY mentality that may seem antiquated to contemporary readers but serves as an authenticating factor. In addition to highlighting their place in Hip Hop historiography, the authors participate in the fifth element of the culture by sharing their knowledge of the beginnings of Hip Hop.

The Streets and the Hood

Block parties are one of the most vivid examples of early Hip Hop lore, reflecting the improvisational nature of Hip Hop in the 1970s and 1980s. As sites for various musical and performative actions, block parties are events for public gatherings and social interaction, as

well as sites for musical and artistic performances (Rubin, 2016: 6).¹¹⁶ Municipal lampposts were tapped to provide unlimited power for DJs and their equipment. Music became the key to the crowd and breakdancing crews. Gang members mingled peacefully with the crowd as New York block parties demonstrated safe havens for deprived inner-city youth and provided space for peaceful, if temporary, encounters (Williams, 2007: 30f).

Among the authors describing New York block parties are female rapper Sha-Rock and Grandmaster Flash, who offers a rare look at the role of the DJ. Competing with Kool DJ Herc, Grandmaster Flash honed his DJing skills in a variety of public spaces, including the streets, parks, gyms, house parties, and nightclubs in the South Bronx (2008: 96). Sha-Rock, who attended these block parties as a performer, describes the scenes in her memoir:

You could be seven or eight blocks away from the jam and you still would be able to hear every rhyme clear as through you were there. The New York City Police Department never really had a problem with us throwing jams at the parks. ...Sometimes, you would find one or two old ball officers who wanted to know if we had gotten permission to use the electricity from the lamp post or buildings [sic] (2010: 104).¹¹⁷

According to Sha-Rock, block parties were held in all venues, including outside spaces such as “parks, school yards, and local community centers” (2010: 105; see also 61f; McDaniels, 2001: 9).

Grandmaster Flash adds a fascinating perspective on the decline of the DJ. As Hip Hop became increasingly commercialized, live DJs were soon replaced by corporate DJs who provided beats and samples for MCs.¹¹⁸ In his memoir, the artist laments these profound changes, noting that block parties began to decline in frequency:

Hip Hop was starting to go mainstream, and it was leaving its roots behind. Hollywood was pimping it with movies like *Breakin’* and *Beat Street*, but the DJs weren’t out on the corner, at the park or the gyms, the way we used to be. The ghetto blaster had replaced the sound system and the mix tape had replaced the live set. Crack was hitting the streets hard and hardly anybody threw block parties anymore. Block parties and the club flavor was gone from the Bronx. Disco Fever and all the old spots were closing down (2008: 200).

Although the block parties of the early Hip Hop culture have declined since the 1990s, Hip Hop practitioners have continued to rely on public spaces for their performances and creative activities. Questlove, one of the few artists not to pursue a career as an MC, describes street and

¹¹⁶ In 2005, comedian Dave Chappelle organized a block party in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, which was recorded and released as Dave Chappelle’s Block Party (Joel, 2016: 6; see also Williams, 2007: 31).

¹¹⁷ Block parties and public celebrations are also acknowledged by Denton (2008: 45), Trick Daddy (2010: 179, 187), Prodigy (2012: 38, 146), Rakim (2019: 10), and U-God (2018: 44, 55).

¹¹⁸ See the first chapter on the History of Hip Hop (p. 17).

park busking as follows: “we set up on Passyunk Square [in South Philadelphia], and he [Tariq Trotter] was freestyling, and I was playing. We had a crowd right away” (2013: 76f). Keys, like Questlove, went busking with band members and played “in parks and rec centers, schools and cafés, anyplace where [they] could draw an audience” (2020: 31f). Watkins also writes about drawing crowds, but more for her breakdancing performances at an Atlanta roller rink. There, Atlanta’s youth gathered for informal fashion shows, breakdancing events, and parties (2017: 39f). These various forms of street performance confirm that Hip Hop is a culture that is lived and practiced in public spaces.

In addition to repurposing public spaces for Hip Hop practices, the authors also describe themselves as always being in a creative process, constantly writing song lyrics. This creative process is fostered by the improvisational nature of Hip Hop, which allows rappers to use the simplest means to pursue their art (U-God, 2018: 110). Furthermore, the streets are described as the site of grassroots promotion of albums and mixtapes. Echoing the DIY mentality of the early Hip Hop culture, several authors acknowledge how they have promoted their art through buzz marketing or trunk sales of albums. Jay-Z, for example, states that his lack of knowledge about the music business forced him to rely on his street smarts: “Like a lot of underground crews on a mission, we were on some real trunk-of-the-car shit” (2010: 247; see also Trick Daddy, 2010: 243; U-God, 2018: 174).

The Prison Cell

In addition to block parties, parks, clubs, courts, and streets, several male authors acknowledge the prison as a creative space. Authors reflecting on their time in prison state that they have found activities to fill their time with meaning, sometimes through personal growth or learning. However, the accessibility of Hip Hop, and MCing in particular, is evident in the accounts of authors who indicate their time in prison to write lyrics. Prodigy, for example, concludes that his prison sentence “gave [him] plenty of time to reflect,” which he used in part to write new songs (2012: 303, 235f; Gucci Mane, 2018: 146, 253; Rick Ross, 2019: 17). By describing how their lyrical and musical performances continued even in prison, the authors suggest the image of the relentless artist whose creative potential cannot be limited even by prolonged incarceration. On the one hand, transforming a prison cell into a space of creative energy can be explained by the loneliness and boredom accompanying prison sentences. On the other hand, these anecdotes prove how little is needed to practice the art of rap and lyricism creatively.¹¹⁹ Deprived of personal possessions and focused on themselves, these artists return to the principle of independence central to Hip Hop and make the most of what little they have.

¹¹⁹ See the first chapter on the History of Hip Hop (p. 15).

The portrayal of public spaces as places of creativity serves the authors of AA HH LW as an opportunity to present themselves as committed and tenacious artists who are not deterred from pursuing their dreams and their art by the infrastructural deficiencies and hopelessness of their surroundings or by the sparse furnishings of a prison cell. Persistence and perseverance are what set these writers apart, or so they would have the reader believe. By constantly working on their Hip Hop skills, producing and refining lyrics and songs, the authors present themselves as artists who have worked hard for their success and celebrity status. In this context, it is particularly interesting that male writers and fewer female writers present themselves as creators in public spaces. Particularly for women in Hip Hop, it is crucial to present their fame and success as the result of hard work and not as a result of their sexual attractiveness.

By locating creative practices in public spaces, the authors continue to express the improvisational character of early Hip Hop culture. Growing up in an environment of poverty, hopelessness, and violence, they were largely unable to practice their skills in protected private spaces. Still, they had to rely on making public areas their own and appropriating them for their purposes. On the one hand, this illustrates the DIY mentality of the early Hip Hop movement. On the other hand, it reinforces the success of their careers. While the beginning of their career is characterized by scarcity, the peak of their career is marked by abundance and luxury.

Surprisingly, the ‘cypher’ as a public creative process is largely absent from the authors’ descriptions. The ‘cypher’ demonstrates a creative performance or, as Perry notes, “a conceptual space in which heightened consciousness exists” (2004: 103).¹²⁰ In the corpus of AA HH LW, the ‘cypher’ is addressed by DMX while in prison, Wyclef Jean in the school cafeteria (2012: 90), and Jay-Z, who describes it as “a circle of scrappy, ashy, skinny Brooklyn kids laughing and clapping their hands, their eyes trained on the center” (2010: 4). As an elementary component of collective rapping in public spaces, the absence of references to the ‘cypher’ is a surprising characteristic of AA HH LW. This may be explained by the authors considering the practice too small or incidental to be specifically mentioned. Even in the publications of DMX, Wyclef Jean, and Jay-Z, the ‘cypher’ is only described in passing.

6 | Spaces of Sexual Encounters

The disclosure of salacious details and memories of sexual encounters is one of the incentives of celebrity life writing. In AA HH LW, the specific gender politics and spatial particularities of inner-city communities must be considered, as the authors acknowledge various public and

¹²⁰ See Baptiste (2019: 20) and Kuttner and White-Hammond (2015: 46f) for a definition and the implications of the ‘cypher’ in Hip Hop.

unconventional spaces for the performance of sexual acts. In particular, the first sex is treated as a milestone in personal development and is given considerable attention in the life narrative. While the first time often takes place in or near the domestic space of the parental home, subsequent sexual acts, often with multiple sexual partners, are accentuated primarily by their location. In Common's memoir, for example, the author randomly lists the locations of intercourse: "behind a bush, in a car, on the floor, standing up" (2011: 85). Similarly, DMX outlines his straightforward stance on sexual intercourse when he lists "the park, on the roof, in the staircase" as appropriate places for intimacy (2002: 80). While the disclosure of such details undoubtedly serves shock value and satisfies the readers' expectations of salacious details, male authors also emphasize their claim to hypermasculinity and their domination of public spaces. Moreover, this strategy may serve as a marker of masculinity in competition with other men.

By localizing sexual experiences in public spaces, the authors present themselves as attractive and hypersexual men who are not deterred by unconventional places if there is a chance of sexual intercourse. The two selected examples are interesting because they embody contrasting notions of Hip Hop masculinity. DMX can be categorized as a stereotypical rapper for whom women are objects of gratification. On the other hand, Common has a reputation as an intellectual black activist and 'conscious' rapper and presents himself accordingly in his memoirs. While DMX's statement will surprise few readers and is more of a confirmation of his public image, Common's statement may be an attempt to deconstruct his image as a soft rapper. He may do this to generate headlines that ultimately help sell his book.

7 | Spaces of Rehabilitation and Reflection

In keeping with the incentives of celebrity memoirs, authors disclose painful and less glamorous stages of life, thus including hospitalizations. Among the public spaces acknowledged by the authors of AA HH LW, the hospital is described as a place of physical and mental rehabilitation and contemplative reflection. Authors with documented illnesses, such as Prodigy (2012: 4-6) and Watkins (2017: 5-12), include their hospitalizations for sickle cell disease to share the details of their illness. Additionally, Rick Ross, who has been hospitalized for seizures due to substance abuse (2019: 206, 281), dispels rumors about his condition and 'rewards' readers for purchasing his book by sharing personal information. DMX (2002: 248) and 50 Cent (2005: 190) both describe hospitalization as an opportunity to heal physically after surviving severe seizures.

In addition to these descriptions, hospitals are included as places of contemplation after a life-changing incident. Faced with a prolonged state of inactivity due to injury and forced to

spend time alone, the hospital becomes a turning point in the narrative. For example, Ice-T describes this process when he was hospitalized after a motorcycle accident: “Being immobile gave me a long time to lay there and think, to reflect on my situation. To finally see life on balancing scales” (2012: 83). While Ice-T questions his life choices, Grandmaster Flash’s drug overdose caused him to question his DJing talents: “sitting on the edge of my hospital bed, trying to figure out whether I needed to loop the lace to the right or the left, I seriously wondered whether I’d smoked up my ability to keep the beat” (2008: 198). Both authors were confronted with their mortality and, perhaps, with the hybris they displayed as part of their public image.

These few examples suggest the hospital’s transformative power as a space revisited under certain conditions. Thereby, it is not only the condition of an injured body or mind that makes the hospital a crucial space but also its importance for the narrative arc. Thus, an underlying narrative strategy becomes discernible, echoing the characteristics of a bildungsroman, as also indicated by Balestrini (2015: 228).¹²¹ As a public place of rehabilitation and reflection, the hospital serves as a turning point in the bildungsroman narrative of AA HH LW publications. Many authors include their hospitalization to portray themselves as reformed people who renounce alcohol, drugs, and other perceived sins. As a result, they realize that life, health, and family are significant to them.

8 | Symbolical Spaces

Throughout their life narratives, authors invoke spatial myths about their hometowns or regions, including the ‘West,’ the ‘South,’ the ‘city,’ or the ‘country,’ and, on a smaller scale, the hood, and the streets. Used mostly adjectivally, these terms suggest that the referenced spaces symbolize more than mere places revisited for particular purposes. These spatial metaphors suggest that spaces influence the agents who act, move, and traverse within them. As clusters of symbolic meaning, U.S. history has profoundly shaped myths shared, understood, and perpetuated by larger groups across the continent. Foundational myths, including those associated with the ‘West,’ form a U.S. “repertoire of a foundational mythology that entails the creation of a ‘usable past’ ... and the ‘invention of a tradition’” (Paul, 2014: 12).

In addition to claiming Hip Hop authenticity by being from New York, some New York authors go further and describe the styles of their community as particularly different from other cities or even boroughs within New York. Prodigy, for example, describes his neighborhood of Queensbridge as having “its own way of doing things,” citing various examples of fashion, style, and language, some as trivial as lacing one’s shoes (2012: 60). Moreover, in terms of

¹²¹ Balestrini has mentioned the aspect of the bildungsroman in the context of Hip Hop Life Writing, see p. 97.

language, the residents of Queensbridge, according to him, have invented a unique catalog of slang:

We even had slang terms for money – a one-hundred dollar bill was called a ‘man,’ fifties were ‘half a man,’ twenties ‘dubs,’ tens ‘demons,’ and a five was a ‘fever.’ We called the police ‘jakes’ from the eighties TV show Jake and the Fatman, and a phone was a ‘jack,’ jewelry was ‘shine’ or ‘special effects’ (2012: 61).

This and similar statements by other authors (Scarface, 2015: 34; Common, 2011: 246) emphasize the author’s identification with the community they call home. Furthermore, the invention of styles and language that deviate significantly from mainstream usage signifies how youth practice and identify with Hip Hop and street culture to distance themselves from mainstream society. AA HH LW's authors also include examples of representing their respective cities and legitimizing themselves as worthy ambassadors.¹²²

Rural Spaces

The authors of AA HH LW ascribe a wide range of associations to the Southern states and their inhabitants. The perception that the South is particularly racist and perpetuates racial stereotypes has already been discussed earlier in this chapter. Non-Southern authors may describe their family’s struggles and migration from the South to Northern states. Regarding proper nouns denoting more significant regions, it is striking that authors from the ‘third’ coast frequently prefer identifying with spatial markers that denote a larger Southern region and its meanings. For example, New Orleans rapper Mia-X alludes to the myth of southern hospitality when she describes herself as being “so southern” for having taken on the role of “(The Mother) cooking, cleaning, and looking after the boys” (Mia-X, 2019: Ch. 8, 70). Regarding the attribution of meaning to the South, her memoir becomes highly relevant as it draws significant attention to aspects such as hospitality, family, and community, all connected through cooking.

Furthermore, the South is distinguished from the metropolises of the East and West coasts by its rural character. Several authors from this region refer to their homes as “country” (Timbaland, 2015: 10).¹²³ In doing so, the authors invoke various associations with the South and its people, such as having a special relationship with nature or being less sophisticated than people from metropolitan areas. For example, when producer Timbaland refers to his roots in rural Virginia and helping his grandfather on the farm, he proudly mentions his love of nature

¹²² Another interesting example is rapper Rick Ross, who represents his hometown of Carol City, part of the larger Miami metropolitan area, as the Miami *he* knew. In and of itself, this is similar to other artists who represent their hometowns in their music. However, Ross’ attachment to his hometown is represented in the dedication of his memoir as he dedicates it to his “big brother. Carol City” (Ross, 2019).

¹²³ See also Faith Evans (2009: 15), Gucci Mane (2018: 50), and Rick Ross (2019: 16).

and working the land. The celebrity author presents himself as a down-to-earth person who has learned to appreciate hard work through his rural upbringing: “Even now, when I sit down to eat, I know my meat comes from animals on a farm” (2015: 11). By representing the rural South in this way, Timbaland reduces the South to manual labor and subsistence farming, romanticizing life in the South and its people as an antithesis to the consumer society that may exist in the North. He does this to present himself as a grounded celebrity who appreciates manual labor and hardworking people, a perception he carries over into his music-making.

New Jersey resident Faith Evans invokes a similarly romanticized version of the South when she talks about her family in Dade City between Tampa and Orlando. Evans describes her Florida family as “straight-up unapologetic country folk” (2009: 15). As a city person, Evans reads a solid connection to nature and a lack of sophistication into her Florida family when she describes their preference for eating turtles and possums (15). Moreover, the author states that her childhood in Florida was far less supervised as she “would run around outside barefoot and explore,” while in New Jersey, she “never left the house without an adult chaperone” (16). Like Timbaland, Evans presents herself as connected to the supposed simplicity of rural country life. Although she is known for her close ties to New York, Evans uses this example to identify with the people in the South.

The solid connection between Hip Hop and space is expressed in this section. Various authors express their identity by transferring characteristics of their lifeworld onto themselves. They present themselves closely tied to their city, neighborhood, streets, or housing projects. By this, the authors appeal to readers with similar experiences and differentiate themselves from other communities, mainly white mainstream culture, through their language, fashion, and styles. The authors are irreplaceable originals with solid ties to their neighborhoods. This authenticity is a unique characteristic that appeals to readers.

The urban spaces are in stark contrast to the rural spaces that some authors address. Rural spaces are presented as characterized by agriculture and a strong relationship with nature. The authors draw on old and romanticized notions of the South as an agricultural paradise where people still live off the land. These old myths are unreflectively taken up and propagated in the memoirs and autobiographies. Characterizing the countryside as a haven for children contributes to romanticizing the South. It also creates an apparent dichotomy between the dangerous urban space and the peaceful and paradisiacal rural space. This can be understood as the authors’ pandering to their Southern readers. Moreover, by emphasizing the relationship with nature, linked to hard manual labor through agriculture, the authors characterize themselves as people who do not shy away from hard work. Despite their luxury, wealth, and

comfort, they have grown up with and retained a working-class mentality. This idea of authenticity appeals to readers more than a display of wealth.

3.1.2 Private Spaces (and Gender)

1 | Spaces of Family Life

When AA HH LW authors describe their upbringing and family life, their notion of home becomes crucial as they ascribe various positive and negative meanings to their homes. Chambers has argued that the ideal home in the Western imagination is “routinely depicting intimacy and belonging in the form of a heterosexual nuclear family, usually in a detached, suburban owner-occupied house” (2020: 7). Few authors in my corpus grew up within a nuclear family or in a sheltered suburban environment; for most, the opposite is the rule. Against the backdrop of inner-city communities, many authors’ homes take on a different form, and some authors describe unconventional public spaces as home. Inner-city problems such as poverty, drug abuse, crime, and a lack of gainful employment have led to the replacement of nuclear family structures with single-parent families.¹²⁴ The prevalence of alternative family structures is addressed by just over half of the artists in my corpus, most of whom grew up without their biological fathers.¹²⁵

Authors rarely question the prevalence of single motherhood, but rather portray it as a fact of inner-city life. Snoop Dogg summarized the prevalence of fatherless families as “the curse of American blacks” (1999: 11). Ja Rule describes his Queens neighborhood as “filled with Black single mothers” while the streets “were lined with men who had abandoned their children for the street” (2014: 19; see also Sister Souljah, 1996: 9f). Throughout his memoir, Ja Rule repeatedly addresses his fatherlessness as a deficit he is sharing with friends and acquaintances (2014: 41, 73).¹²⁶ Alicia Keys, however, acknowledges a sense of discomfort because her family life did not conform to the notion of an ‘ideal family’ consisting of two parents (2020: 205).

Many authors who grew up with single mothers indicate the absence of fathers as caregivers, role models, and breadwinners. As a result, many authors focus on their mothers’ and families’ efforts to compensate for the father’s absence. While mothers juggle parental responsibilities

¹²⁴ Smith and Hattery (2016), as well as Eddy and Poehlmann-Tynan (2019), have examined how the incarceration rates of African Americans affect their families and communities.

¹²⁵ Among the authors who acknowledge an estranged relationship with their father or indicate growing up without their biological father are: DMX, Ja Rule, Common, 50 Cent, Scarface, Grandmaster Flash, Prodigy, Watkins, Flavor Flav, LL Cool J, Snoop Dogg, Jermaine Dupri, Mia-X, Sha-Rock, Mc Lyte, Mason Betha, Alicia Keys, Faith Evans, Gucci Mane, Lecrae Moore, Terrance Dean, Sister Souljah, and U-God.
See Figure 4 Author’s Family Background.

¹²⁶ See also 50 Cent (2005: 7), Scarface (2015: 42), Grandmaster Flash (2008: 231) and Common (2011: 91).

and work, other relatives often take on childcare responsibilities to avoid leaving children unattended for long periods. As a result, many authors write about spending considerable time with their grandparents. Grandparents, who rarely must raise their children or work full time, can take on childcare responsibilities. The grandparental home provides comfort and attention that often cannot be matched by the single-parent home. Alicia Keys, for example, remembers her grandparents as her “mother’s primary safety net” in whose “unfailing embrace [she] thrived” (2020: 20). Ja Rule exuberantly portrays his grandmother’s house as a place that “hugged [him] with the aroma of fried chicken and collard greens...while feeding [him] forkfuls of joy” (2014: 20).¹²⁷

There are two central tendencies in the way artists describe their grandparental household. First, the spatial conditions of the grandparents’ home is portrayed as the antithesis of a cramped and restrictive dwelling often found in the parental home. For example, Ja Rule describes his grandparents’ home as located in a “small deceptive enclave of ‘suburban’ homes” (2014: 20; see also Timbaland, 2015: 25 and DMX, 2002: 34). Second, the spaciousness of the grandparents’ home provides a meeting place for the entire family. In addition, male authors tend to acknowledge the multiple responsibilities of their mothers while at the same time longing for male role models or surrogate father figures. As a result, the grandparents’ home is portrayed as the only place where family life takes place. Again, Ja Rule portrays his grandmother’s house as “full of life” because of the uncles, cousins, and other relatives who spent time there (2014: 20).¹²⁸ When the grandparents’ home becomes a gathering place for the entire family, the authors contrast the boredom and isolation of their home with the vibrancy of the grandparents’ household. Scarface, for example, concludes that “[there] was always something going on at Grandma’s house and there was always something to learn” (2015: 101f). 50 Cent appreciated that family members were “around, talking on the phone or watching TV,” whereas his mother’s home was characterized by an uncomfortable silence (2005: 12f).

The attention many authors received from their grandparents and extended family led some to prefer the grandparents’ household over their actual home. Therefore, it can be argued that extended family and kinship relationships play a significant role for children growing up in the inner city. This is further evidenced by authors such as DJ Run, Darryl McDaniels, Questlove,

¹²⁷ The grandparents demonstrate important attachment figures for various artists, including DMX (2002: 34), 50 Cent (2005: 12), Timbaland (2015: 25), Dupri (2007: 14f), Dean (2008: 14, 63), Gucci Mane (2018: 9ff), and Moore (2016: 17, 38).

¹²⁸ See also LL Cool J (1997: 17), Dean (2008: 14f), Timbaland (2015: 25), and Watkins (2017: 31).

and Sandra Denton, who were raised by their parents and significantly less often mention their grandparents.

In addition to the plethora of artists who grew up with only their mother in an inner-city community, a small number of artists describe an upbringing that was detached from the turmoil of the inner city. For example, Common, Queen Latifah, Questlove, and Darryl McDaniels acknowledge their parents' efforts to provide a safe and protected home. Queen Latifah paints an especially vivid picture of her home, juxtaposing the interior of her apartment with the dangers of the inner city that threaten her sense of comfort and safety:

Outside it looked like any other inner city: the barren steps leading into the complex were caked with soot and grime; the halls and courtyards filled with noise and craziness every evening, especially in the summer; horns blared up and down the street....When you walked in, the first thing you noticed was its sweet, delicate smell....My mother wanted 3K to feel like our space (1999: 27f).

Despite the unpleasant conditions surrounding their home, her parents created a space that the artist associated with comfort, solace, and safety. Other writers, including Questlove, Darryl McDaniels, Sandra Denton, and Wyclef Jean, grew up in middle-class communities and associated their homes primarily with comfort, privilege, and love. Questlove, for example, recalls that his "life had been so stable that it was the envy of most of the people [he] knew" (2013: 126).

A few authors attach negative associations to their homes, either because they experienced abuse and sexual violence or because they were confined to the home while longing to be outside. LL Cool J, for example, states that he was beaten and abused by his mother's boyfriend, which he describes as the "most horrible experience" (1997: 30). Sandra Denton describes sexual abuse at the hands of her boyfriend's grandfather, who molested her at the friend's house (2008: 18ff). These descriptions show that the authors are familiar with domestic violence and make their narratives more accessible to readers with similar experiences. At other times, authors describe being placed under house arrest or locked indoors because no adult was available to supervise them or because adults wanted to protect them from the dangers of the inner city (Sha-Rock, 2010: 50; see also DMX, 2002: 21, 32). Sha-Rock and DMX articulate their longing to play outside and interact with other children. In these cases, the private space of the home becomes a space that allows only limited participation with the outside world, usually through windows, but otherwise prevents the author's potential for social interaction with peers.

The retelling of childhood and early family life is an integral part of autobiographies and memoirs and forms the beginning of the chronological sequence of the life account. In this way,

AA HH LW authors fulfill their readers' expectations of learning more about the earlier and private life of the prominent author. In addition, the authors explain their identities in terms of how they grew up, whether sheltered, privileged, or lonely. References to adverse circumstances, such as the absence of fathers or cramped housing, can be seen as building blocks of the authors' life trajectories. By including private spaces of family life, authors portray themselves as approachable family members who adore their mothers and have persevered despite the adverse circumstances that single-parent families often face. Moreover, in the context of single mothers and grandmothers as additional caregivers, it shows that it is primarily women who bear the burden of the absence of men in the inner-city community. As will be shown in the next chapter, which focuses on representations of masculinity and femininity in AA HH LW, the authors tend to portray their mothers as particularly influential in shaping their identities.

2 | Creative and Performative Spaces The Basement Studio

Playing and sharing music in the family home is an intergenerational transfer of musical knowledge, tastes, and preferences. Stoeber has pointed to the importance of mothers in their children's artistic awakening, challenging the myth of individual black men creating Hip Hop on their own. Even founding fathers like Afrika Bambaataa or Grandmaster Flash were profoundly influenced by their mothers' musical preferences (2018: 3f). The authors of AA HH LW attribute significant creative potential to various private spaces, most of which are in or near the parental household. Snoop Dogg, for example, compares the availability of music in his home to "a movie soundtrack" that inspired him to become an artist (1999: 15; see also Questlove, 2013: 17; Common, 2011: 62). However, when it comes to the musical and artistic development of the artists, another domestic space stands out for its references and the importance attached to it.

In contrast to the abundance of publicly accessible creative spaces is the makeshift basement studio. The abundance of descriptions of improvised basement studios indicates this private space as particular for Hip Hop creativity and realness.¹²⁹ Isolated from parental supervision and protected from unwanted visitors, male and female Hip Hop artists value the basement within the parental or grandparental home as a private and intimate space for experimentation and practice. First, basement studios are described as isolated spaces that offer a degree of

¹²⁹ See also LL Cool J (1997: 54, 60, 141), DJ Run (2000: 19), McDaniels (2001: 10), Denton (2008: 46), Evans (2009: 42), Sha-Rock (2010: 79), Jay-Z (2010: 40, 247), Common (2011: 97, 112), Prodigy (2012: 65), Gucci Mane (2018: 50ff, 122), Rakim (2019: 18, 20, 43), and U-God (2018: 43, 55, 266).

privacy not found in the rest of the home. As such, basements are ideal havens for the consumption of both music and illegal substances. Ja Rule, for example, values the privacy of his basement and recalls how his friend's mother gave him "*space*" to consume marijuana (2014: 41). Questlove valued his parents' basement because it allowed him to pursue his passion for drumming and secretly listen to records his parents deemed inappropriate (2013: 63).

Second, basements are often described as spaces where artists can pursue their creative potential by practicing performing skills, experimenting with equipment, composing music, or setting up an improvised recording studio. The improvisational nature of these basement studios is often emphasized and proudly remembered. Lacking sophisticated technology and consisting of homemade equipment, the basement studio resonates the do-it-yourself, independent aesthetic ingrained in Hip Hop. This DIY mentality is best exemplified by DJ Grandmaster Flash, who in the 1970s dug through the garbage piling up on vacant lots in his Bronx neighborhood in search of electronic parts for his DJ equipment (2008: 27f). Moreover, Atlanta rapper Gucci Mane describes the process of recording music in the basement as "crude and unrefined" (2018: 52). Despite its apparent shortcomings, artists express pride in having created something out of nothing. Ja Rule alludes to the improvised status of his recording studio by stating that the facility "was so hood," embracing the crudeness and imperfection also found in inner-city public spaces (2014: 93; see also Sha-Rock, 2010: 66).

In addition, the basement studio's literal underground location echoes the complex anti-mainstream aesthetics of the Hip Hop subculture. It underscores the claim of many artists to create a counter-image to commercial rap music (Harrison, 2009: 29ff). The basement studio, however, invokes an underground aesthetic in claiming a secluded space for creative improvisation. The domestic basement is often the only space with the necessary space and connections for speakers, turntables, and additional DJ equipment. When artists talk about experimenting with samples, beats, and lyrics in a place hidden from prying eyes and ears, they revisit the underground attitude ingrained in the subculture. By describing their inventive spirit, authors portray their early career and the beginning of Hip Hop as fueled by innovative youth who met resistance, structural deficiencies, and poverty with ingenuity and improvisation. Similarly, artists look back on their makeshift studios, which starkly contrasted to corporate-owned studios in terms of equipment, sophistication, and technology.

However, not all makeshift studios are located in the basement of a house. Producer Timbaland, for example, had set up a studio in his bedroom to serve the needs of aspiring artists in his neighborhood: "[there] were wires snaking everywhere and machines, most of them bought secondhand, stacked around my bed" (2015: 53; see also Keys, 2020: 42). Houston

rapper Scarface often visited the recording studio located in a strip mall to make demo tapes (2015: 22), while Snoop Dogg states that he used a toolshed to practice (1999; 132f). Russell Simmons repeatedly refers to the attic of his parent's house as the secluded space where Run-DMC's career was launched (2001: 61).

While many authors describe the basement as a closed-off space, it is only sometimes a restricted area. Grandmaster Flash used a friend's basement to experiment with DJing equipment and installed a clubhouse that could accommodate an audience (2008: 34). The basement, as a source of creativity, is given a different twist by Wyclef Jean. Throughout his autobiography, Jean repeatedly refers to the basement of his grandmother's house as the "Booga Basement, and in that studio *The Score* was recorded" (2012: 77, 116). Rather than alluding to the seclusion of the basement, Wyclef Jean describes the makeshift studio as an extension of the hood pouring in its creative streams:

The Booga Basement was a unique space, and the 'hood was a character all its own. The people that came in and out of that place every day all those years – the thugs, the dealers, the gangsters, the murderers, the innocents, the hustlers, the lost souls, the good, the bad, and the ugly – they are all a piece of that record. Their energy was in that room because the door to the Booga was always open (171f).

Many authors describe the basement in their memoirs as a space of independence, freedom, experimentation, and safety and as one that is free from parental supervision or intrusion. Due to the cramped living conditions, the basement is often the first private space that the artists control entirely.

Mentioning the private basement studio in an autobiography or memoir serves several purposes, some of which are interrelated. On the one hand, it allows authors to point to their authenticity as readers find an artist's career that began in simple and unglamorous circumstances more appealing. In addition, writers emphasize their creative and musical potential at the beginning of their careers by pointing out that they owe their early success to simple techniques and that they got by without a fully equipped studio. Furthermore, few practices and references illustrate the artists' DIY and grassroots approach as clearly as the improvised basement studio. Their music was created in a personal and intimate space, which is more attractive to the reader than a highly equipped studio with all kinds of tools. Lastly, the deliberate reference to the improvised, unfinished, and poorly equipped basement studio is also a counterpoint to the glamorous celebrity world in which readers might place the artists at the time of the publication of the memoir. By emphasizing the artist's humble beginnings, the

basement studio becomes part of the narrative, and references to it serve as a reminder of the artist's humble roots.

3 | Spaces of Sexual Encounters

The third spatial function that AA HH LW authors assign to private spaces is the description of sexual experiences. Private indoor spaces such as bedrooms are described as primary spaces for sexual intercourse, regardless of whether it is the first time or not.¹³⁰ Interestingly, some authors also describe the basement studio, usually used for creative experimentation, as a private space repurposed for sexual encounters (Common, 2011: 85).¹³¹ Other authors report using the home environment to gain their first sexual experiences (LL Cool J, 1997: 117; McDaniels, 2001: 94; R. Simmons, 2001: 73). Although most of the authors who acknowledge private spaces as sites for sexual encounters are male, a few female authors locate sexual intercourse in the private home (Queen Latifah, 1999: 130; Faith Evans, 2009: 129).¹³²

These private spaces are not only described as spaces for first sexual experiences and the pure enjoyment of sexuality but also become sites of initiation into masculinity. In the AA HH LW corpus, there are several examples of the acceptance of non-consensual sex with older women as an affirmation of masculinity. Authors accept sex, even in the form of statutory rape, as an initiation into masculinity and a way to gain approval from other men.¹³³ The fact that authors interpret these acts as affirmations of premature masculinity underscores the importance of premature sex as a marker of hypermasculinity. DMX, Ja Rule, Prodigy, Grandmaster Flash (2008: 35), LL Cool J (1997: 117), Jermaine Dupri, and Flavor Flav all admit to having their first sexual experiences with older girls or adult women. Among them, DMX, Ja Rule (2014: 61f), Prodigy (2012: 67f), Jermaine Dupri (2007: 31f), Flavor Flav (2011: 72), and U-God (2018: 14) admit to having experienced statutory rape with older women in a private bedroom.

Although Jermaine Dupri admits to having experienced statutory rape when he was seduced by an older woman at the age of thirteen, even as an adult, he fails to condemn the act sincerely and instead expresses his approval (2007: 31f). This and other examples of equating rape with initiation into manhood demonstrate the conditioning of boys and men to welcome and celebrate sex if male desires and expectations are met, even in the case of non-consensual intercourse.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ The few authors who deviate from this were mentioned in the previous subchapter, see p. 125.

¹³¹ See also Grandmaster Flash (2008: 34) and Prodigy (2012: 24).

¹³² Sandra Denton admits to sexual abuse in the private spaces of a friend's home, see p. 208.

¹³³ In addition to status symbols, respect and women, hypersexual men also 'collect' sexual experiences to validate their masculinity, see p. 28.

¹³⁴ This aspect is revisited in the first case study, see p. 178.

It can be assumed that some authors draw attention to their first sexual encounters to provide a complete history of their lives and to capitalize on readers' desire for private details. However, some male authors seem to refer to early sexual encounters to emphasize their sexual appeal, virility, and ability to please women, all of which are highly valued aspects of hypermasculinity. The authors' ability to attract and please adult women earns them additional respect and reinforces their claim to a dominant masculinity. After their apparent initiation into manhood, sexual intercourse with multiple women becomes a perpetual quest that enhances their reputation without inviting sexual double standards regarding promiscuity. In this context, it is interesting to note that older women are portrayed as validating the masculinity and virility of young men. In contrast, it is mostly younger women that the artists seek to attract once they have matured.

3.1.3 Conclusion

The ghetto, the streets, and the hood represent highly gendered public spaces. As shown before, hypermasculinity is most often performed in the public spaces of the streets and the ghetto, where men's masculinity is approved in interaction and competition with other men. Deviant masculinities and femininity are ostracized and marginalized in public spaces and relegated to the private sphere. The predominance of hypermasculinity in public spaces is also evidenced by how authors describe public space and the functions they assign to them. These functions include Hip Hop practices, crime, or engaging in street culture. Male artists refer significantly more often to public spaces than female authors. Male authors describe the neighborhood and the streets as places of everyday life where they engage in creative practices, educate themselves, and encounter adult life as part of their struggle for survival and realness.

Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to say that all male AA HH LW authors identify inner city spaces as their primary living environment. Among the male authors, some artists cannot refer to the inner city and thus either willingly (as in the case of Questlove) or reluctantly (as in the case of Common) forgo an unambiguous connection to Hip Hop authenticity. Although public spaces in AA HH LW are not limited to the inner-city neighborhood, they remain primary points of identification assigned with multiple functions. However, this is mainly due to the high number of male authors who choose to present themselves as hypermasculine in their life narratives and require public spaces to re-enact this performance of masculinity. Spaces of Hip Hop realness and spaces of survival encompass mostly public spaces.

Female authors, however, are less likely to describe public inner-city spaces in their memoirs. This might be attributed to the perception that girls and women are vulnerable and threatened by (sexualized) violence in public spaces. Parents monitor girls much more than they would control boys of the same age. Thus, adolescent girls are more likely to spend their time inside or monitored whereas boys are more often allowed to freely roam the streets and alleys of a city.¹³⁵ Consequently, female Hip Hop artists do not refer to a youth spent in inner-city spaces and are more likely to refer to these spaces as an adult.¹³⁶

The prison demonstrates a public space that is described significantly often by male authors. Although the prison, like the public inner-city space, is represented as crucial for a performance of and a claim to hypermasculinity, as well as fulfilling creative and educational functions, male Hip Hop authors do not describe the prison as a place that lends credibility or authenticity. Instead, they emphasize negative effects of a prison sentence, including humiliation, isolation, poor nutrition, solitude, and mental health issues. By doing so, these authors paint a picture that is different from depictions of prison sentences in song lyrics and music videos. This may bear the chance of deterring young readers from interpreting prison experiences as ‘cool’ or enhancing one’s credibility or standing. However, by not explicitly condemning or expressing regrets for the crimes they committed in public spaces, authors fail to instigate a change in thinking in young readers.

Compared to the many references to public spaces, male authors relatively rarely describe private spaces. This can be explained by the temptations of public spaces and the presence of women in private spaces. Male authors need other men to have their claim to hypermasculinity and respect approved. However, the basement studio is portrayed by both male and female authors and authors of different generations as a private, creative space. The private basement studio epitomizes the DIY mentality of Hip Hop. Due to its frequent occurrence in various publications, the basement studio can be seen as a central narrative of Hip Hop Life Writing. However, the question arises about how authentic the reference to the basement studio is and to what extent authors use it to emphasize their authenticity when so many authors claim it for themselves by describing their tentative steps in Hip Hop.

¹³⁵ See p. 108.

¹³⁶ See the third case study on Sandra Denton (p. 208) for more insights into how female Hip Hop artists navigate the public/private divide.

3.2 Representations of Gender in AA HH LW

While the previous chapter drew attention to the most significant spaces addressed by the authors, I will now examine the representations of masculinity and femininity that appear in AA HH LW. Although contemporary rappers have expanded the diversity of masculinities and femininities in Hip Hop, the early days of Hip Hop and rap music, especially the era of gangster rap, were characterized by less diversity. When gangster rap was popular, rappers were challenged for their stances on issues such as sexuality, sexualized violence, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. Several artists in my corpus have capitalized on the appeal of gangster rap and paraded a performance of masculinity congruent with the tenets of gangster rap and hypermasculinity. On the other hand, the female authors in my corpus position themselves against the prevalent sexualization of women in Hip Hop. Because their careers partially overlap with periods of increased commercialization in rap music, some AA HH LW authors present masculine and feminine performances consistent with this era. However, some authors present a gender identity that challenges the gender conventions of the culture. Although this is done only by a minority of authors, it highlights the diversity of representations of masculinity and femininity in AA HH LW. In terms of their gender identities, however, all the authors, without explicitly stating, acknowledge the binary gender order and thus identify themselves as men or women.

In this chapter, I explain how and whether the authors affirm these behaviors in their life narratives and their references to other people or gender identities. At the same time, I look at the female authors and the patterns of femininity they choose to present in their life narratives. In addition, when discussing elements of femininity in AA HH LW, I refer to celebrity memoirs and the role of women in Hip Hop.

3.2.1 Representations of Masculinity

1 | Stereotypical Hip Hop Masculinity

Hypermasculinity legitimizes violence as a path to success and defines success as the accumulation of social status that includes property, material wealth, and women. In addition, hypermasculine rappers go to great lengths to distinguish themselves from supposedly weaker masculinities, such as those embodied by homosexuality. Men who compete for wealth, and

women often adopt what resembles a ‘warrior’ mentality.¹³⁷ The use of violence and risk-taking has already been amply demonstrated in the discussion of inner-city spaces in the previous chapter.

In AA HH LW, the way authors address urban public spaces shows the strong connection between space and gender. The streets, the ghetto, and the hood are portrayed as the domain of men, not only by male artists but also by women, as Mia X states that “the streets are a man’s playground” (2018: Ch. 6, p. 27). The dominance of hypermasculine aesthetics, values, and power in public spaces is described as ‘natural’ and rarely challenged by authors, leaving femininity and other forms of masculinity at the margins. In this ‘playground,’ men compete for respect and material wealth and are rarely prohibited from engaging in violent outbursts and criminal activities. For example, Snoop Dogg reinforces the above description of public spaces by identifying the relevant agents on the streets as men, whom he blames for “doing the damage to [themselves]” and urges them to “take responsibility for being a man in a man’s world” (1999: 36). The dominance of men and hypermasculinity in urban public spaces led to a reframing of public spaces for various purposes, including the induction of maturity. Instead of teaching valuable and positive aspects of masculinity, being a man is associated with accepting and engaging in violence.

A significant number of male authors identify with a stereotypical performance of masculinity and devote large portions of their life narratives to describing a hypermasculine, dominant, and misogynist self. A central aspect of hypermasculinity is the rejection of behaviors considered weak, feminine, or reserved for ‘lesser’ masculinities, and a wide range of these attitudes is evident in AA HH LW.¹³⁸ To become read as ‘real,’ these authors adopt a ‘street warrior’ mentality that does not allow for the expression of emotion and weakness, as both are considered liabilities on the streets (Trick Daddy, 2010: 32, 140). According to the authors, living in dangerous inner-city environments requires an uncompromising attitude to survive. Again, alluding to the animal world, rapper 50 Cent describes the situation in his neighborhood:

In the jungle, combat comes with its own rituals: hissing, roaring, chest beating, marking of territory, all sorts of shit to serve as warnings. For the most part, no wild animal wants to engage in unnecessary mortal combat – it would rather scare off an opponent or escape a predator. It’s pretty much the same in the streets. It’s only right to let people know what they’re getting themselves into (2005: 109).

¹³⁷ Warrior masculinity is deeply rooted in hypermasculinity, see pp. 30ff.

¹³⁸ See p. 30.

This statement vividly establishes the performance of hypermasculinity as a requirement for survival in the inner city. The author's list of typical animal behaviors reiterates aggression, dominance, and intimidation, all behavioral aspects of hypermasculinity used to demonstrate power and assert dominance. These and other metaphors portray inner-city life as a constant struggle for survival with limited options: lethal combat or avoidance.¹³⁹ While placidity is not even considered a plausible response to these circumstances, the will to use violence through the performance of hypermasculinity serves to scare off opponents and assert one's will over others.

Male authors who present themselves as hypermasculine address several incidents of self-adaptation, especially in public spaces, to avoid being read as weak or feminine. For example, Ice-T states that he "was known in the streets as 'Trey'" after changing his first name, Tracy, because it "sounded like a girl's name" (2012: 28). Authors also acknowledge self-policing behaviors in response to crying. DMX, for example, reflects on a childhood visit to a group home for boys where he restrained himself from crying so as not to "let anyone think I was a bitch" (2001: 69). Here, the prospect of showing emotion is immediately associated with women because the pejorative "bitch" is reserved for discrediting women or feminizing men who fail to display toughness and dominance (Adams and Fuller, 2006: 945). However, the authors of *AA HH LW* suggest that the expression of emotion is permissible when it occurs in private spaces (Prodigy, 2012: 152; Moore, 2016: 15).

In addition to crying, compromised states of vulnerability threaten the authors' claims of hypermasculinity and their 'warrior' persona. 50 Cent, for example, describes his hospitalization as disheartening to his peers. Much of the author's public image revolves around a dominant and intimidating appearance, which he has demonstrated with various full-frontal shots of his upper body on album covers and posters. His first two albums, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* and *The Massacre*, feature the artist's naked torso and toned physique. In addition, 50 Cent has written a workout book in collaboration with fitness author Jeff O'Connell (2012). In his memoir, the rapper states that he did not allow visitors into the hospital to avoid seeing him "in a compromising space" because he "didn't look so strong" (2005: 190). By maintaining a public image of inviolability, the author's body becomes his instrument for performing hypermasculinity and remains so, even in a more fragile state. In this case, weakness is explicitly linked to the body's inability to symbolize strength, toughness, and dominance.

¹³⁹ Among the metaphors used are "warzone," and "ground zero" (see p. 111).

Besides street culture, many male authors indicate that they have learned to reject weakness and embrace toughness because of their upbringing. Authors recall how families and relatives demanded them to “man up” (Dupri, 2007: 178) or that they adopted ‘manly’ behavior from male role models within and without the family.¹⁴⁰ Flavor Flav, for example, explains his apparent lack of emotion as a behavioral preference he inherited from his father, who showed no emotion “[even] when his own mother passed away” (2011: 128f). The authors see mutual comforting and emotional support as primarily reserved for women and inappropriate for men. A rejection of weakness is ingrained in the ‘warrior’ mentality, and thus stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity because crying or admitting vulnerability are considered feminine behavior and therefore avoided.

States of intense vulnerability in the form of addiction, illness, mental health problems, or suicidal ideation have been addressed by several authors. While the individual causes of these health problems are varied, they are usually explained with the peculiarities of inner-city life or the increased stress of celebrity status. None of the authors describe drug or alcohol addictions as a mechanism for coping with the burden of their creativity. Instead, authors portray drugs as a habit adopted in inner-city communities, for example, for escapist reasons. While drug addiction represents a weakness that is coded as indicative of inner-city communities, confessions of physical and mental illness come at the cost of being read as vulnerable. However, male authors who address these issues in their life writing do not appear to reduce their claim to hypermasculinity. Instead, authors frame the acknowledgment of vulnerability as a motivation to reveal intimate details without risking being read as less masculine. This is where the specific nature of celebrity life-writing comes into play, as autobiographies and memoirs allow authors to present a complete and differentiated self-image that, in some cases, differs significantly from the public image.

2 | Objectifying Women

While some male authors reveal objectifying and misogynistic attitudes in their descriptions of relationships with women and girlfriends, it is their claim to hypermasculinity that leads them to degrade and objectify women in general.¹⁴¹ As a sign of social status, which is also closely linked to a stereotypical performance of Hip Hop masculinity, a significant number of male authors express a condescending perspective toward female fans, girlfriends, and fellow artists. The casualness with which many authors describe their sexual adventures reinforces the idea

¹⁴⁰ See also Snoop Dogg (1999: 79), Dean (2008: 139, 206f), Questlove (2013: 229), and Moore (2016: 26).

¹⁴¹ See LL Cool J (1997: 114f), Snoop Dogg (1999: 116f), DMC (2001: 95), 50 Cent (2005: 76), Common (2011: 85), Ja Rule (2014: 62), and Mac Mall (2015: 74f).

of black men as hypersexual without having to face the negative connotations often attached to women. While women who frequently change their partners are insulted by offensive vocabulary, men are much less vilified and sometimes even praised for the same behavior (Hensums, 2022: 24ff; see also Milhausen and Herold, 2022).

Becoming a popular and sought-after artist is presented as a crucial threshold that divides the artist's career into a period of little or no female attention and effortlessly collecting female advances. For example, Prodigy's autobiography is filled with anecdotes of a promiscuous lifestyle, as the rapper writes about seeking out sex with older women at the age of sixteen (2012: 53), attending an orgy (162), or forcing himself on female artist Lil Kim (182) – all while being in a partnership with his future wife. The rest of the sexual antics described in his autobiography indicate that women's bodies were a constantly available source of pleasure for the rapper. According to him, women were available on a whim, such as during an orgy: "Females were walking all over the house in bikinis or nothing on at all" (162). The orgy instrumentalizes sex as a celebration and an event of potential male bonding.

The authors of AA HH LW cite increased attention from women and a higher frequency of sexual encounters once they achieve celebrity status. New York rapper Ma\$e,¹⁴² while recounting his 'sinful' rap career before finding his true calling as a pastor, writes about women's changing attitudes toward him: "Once you get to a certain status.... All I had to was walk into the room and speak what I wanted into existence" (2003: 114; 20f, 87, 115f).¹⁴³ Female attention is available because popularity equals access and power, two integral components that authors exploit to instrumentalize sex in their claims of hypermasculinity. Moreover, their celebrity status relieves male artists of the effort of courting women.

Authors specifically address the touring life as a time when women become available to them. On tour, moving from city to city, the celebrity status is confirmed, and the pace of touring allows for easy sexual encounters. DJ Run, for example, uses the metaphor of a child in a toy store to describe his joyful excitement at the abundance of 'things' to play with: "But back then I was a kid at Toys 'Я' Us and there were enough skateboards to go around" (2000: 30). The rapper not only objectifies women as 'things' acquired for the sole purpose of bringing pleasure to their 'owner,' but also implies that women were exchanged in between members of the group.

LL Cool J, who has stylized himself as a ladies' man throughout his early career, summarizes his encounters with groupies on tour in a specially labeled chapter titled "Excess XXX." By

¹⁴² Betha's memoir can be considered a spiritual narrative, see p. 90.

¹⁴³ See also Snoop Dogg (1999: 94, 117f), DJ Run (2000: 30), DMX (2001: 79f), McDaniels (2001: 97; 2016: 174), and Timbaland (2015: 135).

equating touring with “whoring,” LL Cool J suggests that he exhibited characteristics of a sex worker (1997: 119; see also Timbaland, 2015: 135). This example invites negative connotations ascribed to promiscuous women, including irresponsibility, carelessness, and a superficial preoccupation with appearance while establishing these lifestyles when pursued by men, as characteristic of Hip Hop masculinity. Similarly, McDaniels acknowledges touring life as a source of indiscriminate sexual encounters, to the point of viewing women as objects guaranteed to provide him with sexual pleasure (2001: 99; 2017: 174; see also Moore, 2016: 55).

These examples indicate that the male authors of AA HH LW present themselves as sexually active, promiscuous men interested in heterosexual practices with a variety of women. Moreover, the tenets of hypermasculinity turn women into readily available objects of male pleasure to be acquired by powerful men.¹⁴⁴ As male authors describe their sexual advances and relationships with women, objectifying practices of sexualized female bodies become legible. As a result, authors often choose to foreground the physical characteristics, including sexual attractiveness, body proportions, or skin color, of their mistresses, girlfriends, or wives.¹⁴⁵ For example, Ice-T foregrounds his wife’s bodily features, whom he describes as having “these ill Jessica Rabbit measurements. Superhourglass: 39-23-40” (2012: 186). Similarly, Hip Hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons describes a preference for models and actresses (2001: 104).

By describing women in this way, AA HH LW authors present themselves as hypermasculine artists whose celebrity status allows them to attract the attention of models and actresses. Like money and status symbols, attractive women are flaunted to reinforce the author’s claim of hypermasculinity and gain approval from other men as part of homosocial enactment. Male authors who have flaunted stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity throughout their careers can be expected to share anecdotes of promiscuity and sexual adventure. Black men are often portrayed as hypersexual in the media and popular culture. Male rappers have adopted this image in their lyrics and music videos. As a result, AA HH LW authors risk being read as uninterested in women or being accused of being less than a man if they do not share their adventures of promiscuity in their autobiographies and memoirs.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ See p. 42.

¹⁴⁵ See DMX (2001: 134), Betha (2003: 112), Flavor Flav (2011: 193), Ice-T (2012: 95) Prodigy (2012: 67).

¹⁴⁶ Hollway (1984) suggested that it is seen as natural for men to act out their sex drive with women, see p. 29.

In addition to the objectification of women to satisfy male sexuality and the claim to hyper-masculinity, a few authors of the corpus take the appropriation of the female body as an object to extremes. Ja Rule, Ice-T, and Mac Mall identify directly with the figure of the pimp, one of the archetypes of black masculinity in Hip Hop and state to have deliberately exploited women for personal gain. Like the drug dealer, the pimp is a romanticized symbolic figure who has achieved prestige and material status symbols through criminal activity. Trick Daddy expresses his admiration for pimps as defined by “basic economics” (2010: 114).

Ja Rule, for example, used his celebrity status to attract women whom he “pawed off to [his] crew” (2014: 173; see also Prodigy, 2012: 125f). Like the orgy Prodigy described above, Ja Rule’s procurement of women for other men serves as an act of male bonding and enhances his position among other men. At another point, the author legitimizes the exploitation of a woman by objectifying and reducing her to her sexual attractiveness, invoking the ‘Jezebel’ stereotype of black women as lustful and ready to please men.¹⁴⁷ According to the author, the woman’s “sexual appetite was robust and she had no problem with having sex with as many men as she could in one night” (2014: 74).

Instead of using violent means to fight over territory, Ice-T describes pimps as hustlers who “are about making money, twenty-four-hour scheming, always trying to get paid” (2012: 54). The author attributes his fascination with pimping to the fictional and non-fictional accounts of former pimp Robert Beck (Iceberg Slim) and even cites Beck’s writing style as inspiration for his lyrics (52). The author’s glorification of Beck and his Iceberg Slim character culminated in the 2012 documentary *Portrait of a Pimp*, executively produced by Ice-T (Turner 2015). In addition, Ice-T released an adult film titled *Pimpin’ 101* in 2022.

Unlike his idol, Ice-T does not explicitly address the use of violence but rather the manipulation of women into trusting him and working for him. Ice-T sees money as the “big determining factor in the male-female dynamic” because he considers women’s supposed desire for status symbols and men’s desire for sex as making pimping profitable (2012: 68f). Ice-T’s impersonation of the pimp character romanticizes the pimp as a sophisticated street criminal who cunningly manipulates women without the use of violence.

The deliberate objectification of women is a bold transgression to disclose in a life account, especially for Ice-T, who enjoys worldwide popularity, partly because of the longevity of his rap career and his acting on the television series *Law & Order*. Despite the potential to attract

¹⁴⁷ See p. 43.

readers unfamiliar with his rap career and pimping antics, the author chooses to speak unequivocally about his admiration for the pimp, accepting that he may repel some readers. However, his memoir is only part of a larger agenda through which the rapper has expressed his curiosity about the pimp figure over the years. Thus, addressing his interest in pimping does not serve as a confession to seek redemption, nor does it represent a particular marketing strategy of revealing salacious details. Instead, pimping has become part of Ice-T's self-image as a street entrepreneur who combines coolness with the romanticized allure of street crime.

Again, Mac Mall's celebrity status brought him unprecedented female attention, which he exploited through pimping. In addition to the promise of money, he explains that a deep resentment toward women fueled his interest in pimping because of disappointing relationships:

Like every male, when I was younger, I had my heart broken and was pretty much ignored by girls, but when I started rappin', it was different. ...I was sort of using sex as a way to control women...They would fuck me porno style, but if I had a cold and needed a bowl of chicken soup, they were nowhere to be found (2015: 74f).

The author's statement reveals an unequal power dynamic and the use of sex as manipulation. While reducing women to sexual objects to be exploited to satisfy his sex drive, Mac Mall also expects women to fulfill the role of nurturing caregivers. The author is motivated by physical control and does not shy away from disciplining women (2015: 87, 90f, 110). His memoir seems to revolve around shocking and intimate details that satisfy the readers' desire to know more about the rapper's violent past.

3 | Admitting Weakness

While rappers typically refrain from admitting weakness and vulnerability in their music due to the tenets of hypermasculinity and street culture, authors of AA HH LW admit weaknesses in their autobiographies and memoirs. These admissions can be read as marketing strategies to capitalize on the incentives of celebrity memoirs by showing readers the private self behind the public persona. Several male authors use their life writing to admit vulnerability, depression, regret, weakness, or sensitivity. Many authors attribute suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, and other forms of mental illness to post-traumatic stress disorder caused by witnessing murders, addiction, poverty, or the loss of friends or family.

Some authors express regret and self-loathing for the sexual antics they engaged in as part of their celebrity lifestyle. True to the tales of rock musician's antics on the road, male artists boast about the frequency and quality of their sexual encounters. However, a significant number of artists look back on these episodes of promiscuity with regret and condemnation when viewed from a more mature perspective. By the time his autobiography was published, LL Cool J had moved

on from rap music to become a sought-after actor, appearing in the comedy-fantasy film *Toys* and his sitcom *In the House*. It was probably his reputation as a family-friendly actor that led to a warning note preceding the chapter “Excess XXX” in his autobiography (1997: 113). In the note, the rapper warns readers against the explicit anecdotes that follow while expressing his regret for participating in such lewd episodes. There is also an all-audience edition of his book, which is cited alongside the note. Given his family-friendly public image, acting career, and stylization as a romantic womanizer, this note can be read as an attempt to appease his readers. Compared to later contributions to the genre, audiences are much more accustomed to artists’ sexual antics.

Masculinity and the ‘Other’

Another aspect of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity is the degradation of homosexuality.¹⁴⁸ Especially since the commercial success of gangster rap, rap musicians have flaunted homophobia in both lyrics and music videos. However, hypermasculinity and the simultaneous rejection of perceived weakness is, as Hutchinson has argued, an attempt to join the ranks of mainstream white America in disdaining homosexuality and thereby reclaiming masculinity denied to black men (2001: 3). Rappers tend to avoid explicit, homophobic statements, at least in their life accounts, and references to homosexuality remain comparatively rare. Instead, authors who do acknowledge homosexuality do so with ambiguous remarks.

For example, Prodigy seems to be using his life account to out his uncle: “I hope he doesn’t get upset with me for sharing this, but my uncle Lenny is gay. He doesn’t show it at all (2012: 40). In addition, he acknowledges his friend’s homosexuality by stating that he “was gay as hell but I grew up around a lot of gay dudes at my grandmother’s school so it didn’t bother me.... He was like family” (57). In both cases, the homosexuality of friends and family members is constructed as unproblematic, all the more so because of the author’s long familiarity with them. Despite his emphasis on tolerance, Prodigy fails to recognize that coming out is not necessarily positive, especially when it is done without consent. Addressing homosexuality in his circle of acquaintances lends an aura of tolerance that is not sincere as long as rival rappers are discredited with homophobic slurs. Describing fellow rapper Ja Rule’s choice of clothing, Prodigy concludes that “[it] looked real homosexual” (2012: 157; see also Rick Ross, 2019: 40). In this case, homosexuality is used as an insult to feminize and reduce the other person’s claim to masculinity. The prevalence of homophobic language is illustrated by the example of Common, who expresses regret for homophobic lyrics while admitting that he never questioned

¹⁴⁸ See p. 30 and p. 38.

the language “we used growing up” (2011: 105).¹⁴⁹ At the same time, failing to examine the gendered meanings behind homophobic slurs, Common points to the prevalence of homophobia in Hip Hop and street culture (Higgins, 2009: 93).

The 'Other' Speaks

Among the rappers and performers of AA HH LW, the extent of references to homosexuality and homophobia remains negligible. Terrance Dean’s memoir, however, suggests a latent gay subculture that resists the bravado, machismo, and overt homophobia prevalent in Hip Hop and its business affiliates. From a supposedly insider’s perspective, Dean describes a personal struggle as a closeted gay man who hides his sexuality for fear of negative consequences to his personal life and career. Particularly in his position as a black man in the entertainment industry, Dean addresses the incompatibility of being black and gay: “we [black men] are only acceptable in the heterosexual world. No one wants to associate with you if you are gay, especially other blacks, for fear of being found guilty by association” (2008: 69). Throughout his memoir, Dean recounts how he lived out his homosexuality in private and performed a heterosexual masculinity in public while simultaneously struggling to accept his own identity as a heterosexual black man.

For much of his life, the author has preferred to remain in the closet while acting out internalized and learned behaviors to be read as a heterosexual man: “When I was around straight men, I talked the talk – cars, sports, women” (83f). In addition, surrounding himself with women while in public, suppressing his desires, participating in homophobic banter, and lying to his family and friends demonstrate behaviors associated with Dean’s struggle as a black man in the closet (66, 70, 191, 232, 253). Although the author reflects on the pain and trauma that homophobic slurs like ‘faggot’ or ‘homo’ caused him, he writes that he became complicit in their perpetuation as part of his strategy to perform heterosexual masculinity (132f, 232). Dean’s survival strategy demonstrates how gender identity can be learned and performed to be read by others as the intended gender. In this case, it is particularly interesting as the author mimics behaviors, language, and preferences to avoid revealing himself as a homosexual black man. The author lists behaviors other rappers engage in their quest to be read as hypermasculine.

The problem with Dean’s memoir, however, is that while the author promises deep insights into the shadowy existence of homosexuality in Hip Hop, he refrains from making any substantial references to well-known artists and people other than himself. Because of the sensitivity of the subject and Dean’s discretion, his accusations against rappers and music

¹⁴⁹ Common’s homophobic comments in the past have already been mentioned in Chapter 1.2.2 (see p. 37).

industry figures are superficial and remain unverifiable. However, Dean's example as a now openly heterosexual black man provides insight into the impact of hypermasculine notions on the performance of masculinity in Hip Hop. To avoid inadvertent outings and subsequent ridicule, some homosexual men attempt to inscribe themselves into the ranks of accepted heterosexual masculinity by adopting performances of hypermasculinity.

4 | Deviant Masculinities

Within the AA HH LW corpus, performances of hypermasculinity dominate. Many male authors include anecdotes demonstrating their street bravado, objectifying attitudes toward women, or pursuit of status symbols. In addition, many of these authors grew up in disadvantaged inner-city communities and were exposed to the dangers of inner-city spaces. Some authors, however, do not choose to portray themselves as hypermasculine, nor do they describe women in sexist terms. Instead, these authors construct a self-image that characterizes them as introverted and shy. Interestingly, most of these authors do not look back on an inner-city upbringing. Authors such as Questlove, Wyclef Jean, McDaniels, and Common use their memoirs to portray a masculinity that deviates from stereotypical Hip Hop performances and one that would have been interpreted as weak and inauthentic in commercial rap music.¹⁵⁰

Questlove uses his memoir to present himself as a non-stereotypical performer with a masculinity that differs from many artists. In addition to being an "indoor kid" (2013: 46),¹⁵¹ the author makes several statements that significantly oppose stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity. First, Questlove states that he has always been responsible with his money and has not pursued jewelry or accessories like other artists (244). Second, his desire for mobility seems less pronounced, as he admits that he did not get his driver's license until he was in his thirties (257). Moreover, Questlove chose an inexpensive model, "the car of a thoughtful artist, a man who didn't live through his material possessions" (259). Questlove's avoidance of wealth and status symbols sets him apart from stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity, as does his lack of references to women as sexual objects.

Romance and love rarely appear in the memoirs of stereotypical Hip Hop performers. These rappers describe romance as an inconvenience or annoying necessity of courtship, such as DMX, who shows a limited understanding of romance when he expresses his annoyance at the effort required to persuade women to be intimate (2002: 79; see also Snoop Dogg, 1999: 113). Moreover, DMX and other authors also express a sense of disappointment when their courting

¹⁵⁰ See Case Study 2 for an in-depth analysis of Common's two memoirs.

¹⁵¹ Questlove's introverted personality was mentioned in the previous chapter (see also p. 119).

efforts are not ‘rewarded’ with sexual intercourse. A set of unspoken rules causes men to expect sex from women as a consequence of their courting, convincing, and appeasement (Mooney-Somers and Ussher, 2010: 362). However, artists such as Common and Wyclef Jean devote considerable space to describing romance, love, and affection for women. Although Common also describes anecdotes of increased promiscuity during adolescence, romance plays a crucial role in his self-image as a thoughtful gentleman (2011: 206). His second memoir (2019) is devoted entirely to the artist’s various conceptions of and relationships with love. Jean speaks at length about his relationship and love for the artist Lauryn Hill (2012: 133, 156) and his wife (159), relationships that sometimes ran parallel. He expresses his deep love for his wife, who has stayed with him from the beginning, through setbacks and despite his infidelity (224). By exploring romance and love and acknowledging their deviations from stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity, authors emphasize the diversity of Hip Hop masculinity.

5 | Perceptions of ‘Real’ Men

Male authors of AA HH LW make explicit statements about what they perceive to be the behavior of ‘real’ men. According to their descriptions, the concept of ‘real’ men involves hypermasculine behavior and accepting family responsibilities. On the one hand, independence, decisiveness, and a willingness to use violence are often cited as ideal masculine behavior. New York rapper Rakim, for example, states that “a real man rules himself, the toughest run the streets, and if the streets knock you down, you’ve gotta come back ten times harder” (2019: 230).¹⁵² Furthermore, the suppression of emotions is desirable under challenging situations. Explaining his friend’s reaction to not being chosen for their band, Ja Rule writes, “he did what men do, he said nothing” (2014: 137; see also Betha, 2003: 52). This description echoes the idea of the ‘strong and silent’ man who accepts perceived mistreatment without resistance or showing emotion.

Although a few male authors address their relation to homosexuality, only Terrance Dean explicitly acknowledges homosexuality as undesirable in Hip Hop. In his memoir, Dean states that in a heteronormative world, and by extension in Hip Hop, mutual desire can only exist between the opposite sexes and is ridiculed as unnatural when it occurs between persons of the same sex (2008: 34). From his own experience, the author acknowledges how homosexual men are excluded from the realm of ‘real’ men because of their apparent inability to perform an aggressive and dominant masculinity. Dean concludes that “most people think gay black men are not masculine men. ...Gay men are soft and weak” (268; see also 207). It is their perceived

¹⁵² See also U-God (2018: 30) and Rick Ross (2019: 52).

inability to perform hypermasculinity that makes gay black men less masculine than heterosexual black men.

On the other hand, many male authors associate the acceptance of care work with the behavior of ‘real’ men.¹⁵³ However, the extent and definition of this work varies, as some authors describe the provision of money as a priority. For example, according to Jermaine Dupri, providing consists solely of securing financial and material means while women are relegated to traditional care work. He states that he “can’t be the parent 24/7. If I did that I wouldn’t be able to be the provider” (2007: 181; see also 193; Flavor Flav, 2011: 18). This notion not only neglects childcare as a gendered responsibility but also contributes to a divide between ‘real’ men and men who seem to lack these financial resources. Dupri’s insight fails to acknowledge his privileged situation as a wealthy man. Therefore, his definition of childcare is not only profoundly gendered but remains dependent on class and financial stability. LL Cool J states that he held a similar view of caregiving before realizing that “to give money and make sure [his] kids had clothes and food and things” was not enough to be a father (1997: 166).

In the AA HH LW corpus, several female authors also describe what they perceive as ‘real’ men. Against the backdrop of numerous traumatic experiences with men, Sandra Denton resolutely expresses her desire to raise her son to treat women fairly because “real men don’t hit [women] ...Girls are to be treasured” (2008: 101). Sister Souljah takes a similar line when she educates her readers on how men should treat women and provide for their families: “A real man respects his women. A real man claims his children, serves as father and provider. ...A real man – even in bad times – has life-affirming goals” (1996: 357). Like Denton, Sister Souljah’s perception of ‘real’ men describes the performance of hypermasculinity as encoded in street and Hip Hop masculinity and as undesirable for young boys.

6 | Male Role Models

AA HH LW authors often associate the articulation of ‘real’ men’s behavior with male role models. These role models are described as a prerequisite for adopting and internalizing a form of masculinity most men accept. In AA HH LW, male role models are intertwined with the specifics of space and gender, as male authors are describing to have looked for substitute role models in other places, including the streets. Although not all fatherless male authors mention a desire for substitute male role models, artists rely on them for their embodiment of attributes traditionally associated with men, including authority and discipline. Despite this, authors

¹⁵³ See also LL Cool J (1997: 134, 166), DMX (2001: 21), Betha (2003: 135), Ice-T (2012: 33), Common (2011: 168f), and Ja Rule (2014: 84, 101).

express gratitude and affection toward their mothers, often highlighting their multiple responsibilities as caregivers and main breadwinners.¹⁵⁴

However, authors who grew up without fathers identify a deficiency in their upbringing, as if only fathers could model a performance of masculinity. For example, Lecrae Moore describes his predicament of growing up without a father by listing the teachings he did not receive: “I didn’t have anyone to teach me to shave or talk to me about women or answer my questions about what it meant to grow and mature and act responsibly” (2016: 19).¹⁵⁵ According to Moore, mastering behavior coded as masculine depends on a male role model, implying that only fathers can instill masculine behavior in boys. Male role models are often associated with traits traditionally coded as masculine.

Furthermore, Ja Rule associates his father’s demeanor and voice with discipline and authority as “the sound of his voice would have scared me a little more than Mom’s feminine voice did” (2014: 47). Terrance Dean attributes a similar effect to the authoritative and disciplinary potential attributed to father figures. Dean links his longing for a father to his desire to live a heterosexual life, implying that his sexual identity is a consequence of an absent father: “I longed to have a father to talk to or even chastise me. I needed discipline, a strong hand” (2008: 34). Discipline and authority are described as attributes that result from the physical performance of masculinity and cannot be generated by the loving devotion of mothers.

Because of the absence of their fathers, a significant number of authors write about finding surrogate fathers or substitute role models among other men. Some authors state that they found a relevant role model in their grandfathers.¹⁵⁶ Other authors have accepted their stepfather (Scarface, 2015: 207; Snoop Dogg, 1999: 20; Betha, 2003: 137) or their football coach (Rick Ross, 2019: 68) as a father figure. The multitude of examples suggests that male authors value male role models and actively seek out other men for their potential to teach them aspects of masculinity, the performance of which allows the authors to be read as men themselves.

Many male authors who grew up in inner-city communities identify drug dealers and other street criminals as their role models. Drug dealers symbolize an ideal of masculinity that embodies success, material wealth, and status. Against this backdrop, it is less surprising that authors write about their admiration for drug dealers. Rapper 50 Cent writes that, as a young boy, he admired the generosity of drug dealers and the respect with which they were treated in

¹⁵⁴ See DMX (2001: 27), Dupri (2007: 23), Common (2011: 25, 39; 2019: 83), DMC (2016: 172), Rick Ross (2019: 42).

¹⁵⁵ See also Mc Lyte (2014: 53), Trick Daddy (2010: 27, 31), and U-God (2018: 199).

¹⁵⁶ See LL Cool J (1997: 19), Dupri (2007: 15, 20), Common (2011: 65), Mac Mall (2015: 1f), and Gucci Mane (2018: 9).

the community (50 Cent, 2005: 25; see also Rick Ross, 2019: 60). Gucci Mane focuses on the street credibility, coolness, and the reputation of drug dealers (2018: 24). In addition, Sister Souljah addresses the rationale behind admiring drug dealers: “If a son is raised with no father, he will lack the criteria for understanding what it is to be a man. Instead, he may look to the guys on the street” (1996: 351). The admiration of drug dealers as role models reflects the lack of positive role models in inner-city communities, where many families lack men as caregivers and fathers. Moreover, it is the allure of street culture, status symbols, respect, and easy money that make drug dealers role models. By portraying street life and street crime in this way, 50 Cent and Gucci Mane contribute to the romanticization of these archetypes of street masculinity.

7 | Prison Masculinity

As mentioned above, many male authors describe their experiences in prisons and jails. The prison is portrayed as an isolated public space where the performance of hypermasculinity not only commands respect but also ensures the authors’ survival. How AA HH LW authors portray their performance of masculinity while in prison reflects a focus on strength, assertiveness, and violence, whereas displays of weakness are considered a liability. DMX, for example, describes his display of a “real hard-ass attitude” upon arriving at a new prison, which prevented him from engaging with other inmates (2002: 119). Adherence to the principles of prison masculinity requires independence, so the slightest interaction or cooperation with strangers is read as a sign of weakness. Reflecting on his mistaken arrest at a young age, Rakim shows similar behavior when he overplays his fear by stating that he “didn’t let anyone know I was scared” (2019: 82; see also Trick Daddy, 2010: 201ff, 214). Both examples show that expressing emotion results in being read as weak or less of a man.

Men who fail to perform hypermasculinity are subject to ridicule and domination by other men. Those who cannot fend for themselves and rely on outside protection are seen as weaklings. Flavor Flav states that “[protective] custody is for suckers. I’m a *man*, so I went GP - general population” (2011: 160). The disapproving slur implies homosexual innuendo. Moreover, claiming to be a *man* implies self-reliance and confidence that hostilities and attacks can be fended off independently. This attitude resonates with the willingness to use violence and rely on oneself to resolve conflicts. The intertwining of prison and street masculinity is best exemplified by Ja Rule, who writes that provocations with other inmates brought “the hood out of [him]” (2014: 115). The hood, as was shown earlier, is associated with a relentless and improvised rawness combined with violence. In prison, the author falls back on behaviors he adopted on the streets to face conflicts.

In their life narratives, these anecdotes demonstrate the authors' power and control to underscore their claims of hypermasculinity. Ice-T's account of his prison experience vividly illustrates how hypermasculinity is performed to avoid assault: "Everybody in there acting hard. Everybody lying about what they did" (2012: 132). Equating the performance of hypermasculinity with acting resonates with Butler's gender performance theory, according to which a set of behavioral codes is observed, internalized, and enacted to convince others of one's claim to masculinity and to be accepted as masculine.

In addition to performing hypermasculinity in prison, inmates use their bodies to intimidate other men and assert dominance. Gucci Mane addresses the division of the prison population into inmates who successfully perform hypermasculinity and men who fail or choose not to assert dominance. Using an allegory from animal life, the author distinguishes between "wolves and sheep," before clarifying that the prison is full of wolves because it is "a place full of men with nothing to lose" (2018: 264). The use of animal comparisons reiterates a sense of survival not unlike that of the streets. None of the artists present themselves as willing to resolve conflicts through diplomacy or restraint. Gucci Mane underscores his willingness to use violence by stating that "anyone [who] tried to approach or handle me in any type of way, it should not have been a move that would end in their favor" (2018: 146; see also Snoop Dogg, 1999: 86; Ja Rule, 2014: 116).

Descriptions of prison experiences in AA HH LW serve not only to prove the authors' street credibility and successful performance of hypermasculinity. However, they may also establish the author's status as a celebrity among ordinary men. Several authors describe situations in which they were recognized as celebrities and applauded by other inmates and even wardens for their music and celebrity status (Prodigy, 2012: 236). Other authors, however, were denied special treatment. Ja Rule, for example, describes how correctional officers showed "no respect for any of us, not even me" (2014: 3). By pointing out the lack of preferential treatment, the celebrity author is humanized and can thus connect with his readership. Fully accepting the consequences of his actions without relying on additional support or protection also serves to enhance his claim to dominant masculinity.

Conclusion

The masculinities represented in many AA HH LW publications reflect the tenets of street culture and Hip Hop authenticity. Many authors prioritize the portrayal of toughness, dominance, and intransigence to remain congruent with their public image. The representation of a hypermasculine street warrior persona dominates their life writings. Their examples show that it is not so much musical success that underpins their claim to Hip Hop authenticity but

their connection to street culture and inner-city life. Their life writings demonstrate that even after they left the inner city behind and had successful musical careers, these authors continue to define their gender identity with experiences in inner-city spaces.

Thus, identification with these public spaces significantly impacts the authors' gender identities. It is noteworthy that many of the writers who were raised by single mothers in inner-city environments have spent considerable time unsupervised in public spaces, participated in violent and criminal activities, and began their careers at a young age. Once signed to a label, these writers have continued to display the hyper-aggressive, dominant, and sexist masculinities they adopted on the streets. In addition to conforming to their masculine power, presenting themselves as hypermasculine serves as a reflection of the culture they perform for. To conform to their public image as hardened street rappers, these authors frame their life writing in a way that fans and readers have come to expect and want to consume.

The focus of Hip Hop masculinity is on demonstrating strength and avoiding weakness. These traditional aspects of masculinity were instilled in early childhood through disciplinary measures and internalized as characteristics of masculinity. In addition, objectifying women and ridiculing men who are perceived as weak is a process of demarcation that serves to cement hypermasculine power and become accepted as men among other men. Women are portrayed as available objects for male pleasure. This is even more evident when authors describe how celebrity status enhanced their appeal to and control over women. Like material wealth, respect, and status symbols, women become commodities used to reinforce men's claim to masculinity and power. A few artists articulate their appeal to black archetypes of street masculinity and attempt to emulate this gendered behavior in their life writing. Ice-T, Mac Mall, and others address pimping as a vehicle for expressing street masculinity and exercising power through physical, sexual, and emotional exploitation. This reiterates outdated gender concepts of women as submissive and dependent on dominant men.

Hip Hop masculinity defines itself in relation to its 'other,' including femininity and other masculinities. Although AA HH LW is not free of homophobia or homophobic slurs, it does not reflect the extensive homophobia found in rap lyrics or music videos. However, Terrance Dean's memoir attests to the dilemma that gay men face in Hip Hop because they cannot act out their sexuality without being ridiculed. Moreover, Dean's example has shown that the performance of (hyper)masculinity is not limited to heterosexual men but represents a set of learned behaviors, the mastery of which allowed Dean to be read as a heterosexual and hypermasculine black man.

The street and the prison are the places where hypermasculinity is most often and most clearly described. This can be explained by the fact that the public sphere has always been dominated by masculinity and that U.S. prisons are homogeneous in terms of gender. The streets and the prison are characterized by the dominance of masculine performances and competition between men and youth for respect.

Although hypermasculinity is the dominant form of masculinity in AA HH LW, it is by no means the only one. Some authors present their gender identity as less stereotypical and offer more diverse interpretations of Hip Hop masculinity. Authors such as Common and Questlove describe a more positive view of women and even address their lack of Hip Hop authenticity. As much as stereotypical Hip Hop performers engage in hypermasculinity to conform to their public image, these authors describe a softer masculinity, thereby distancing themselves from masculinity that has fallen into disrepute for its negative portrayal of women and men. This ‘deviant’ Hip Hop masculinity is described by authors whose public image is not associated with violence, misogyny, or street crime, not least because authors like Common or Questlove have no connection to inner-city life.

These authors present themselves as the antithesis of stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity, eschewing status symbols and not participating in the quest for respect. Instead, these authors choose to present a self-image characterized by shyness, introversion, romance, and an embrace of the scholarly archetype of black masculinity. By deliberately constructing a difference from dominant masculinity, the authors present themselves as ‘good’ men who are interested in enhancing femininity or at least not participating in the ridicule of women. However, despite their positive image of women, these authors fail to address the gendered hierarchy between masculinity and femininity.

Reflecting on their experiences as men growing up in urban America and achieving celebrity status in a highly masculine culture, the AA HH LW authors offer their opinions on what ‘real’ men are. Their characterizations echo the tenets of hypermasculinity, emphasizing independence, toughness, and the avoidance of ‘weak’ behavior. In addition, the care of family and children is cited as the responsibility of artists whose celebrity status has allowed them to become providers. The absence of biological fathers leads many authors to express a longing for father figures who physically display attributes traditionally associated with men, including discipline, authority, and assertiveness. While expressing genuine admiration for their (single) mothers, many authors deny their mothers the ability to raise men, arguing that women cannot physically perform masculinity. Interestingly, it is usually authors with a claim to hypermasculinity who attempt to educate readers on what ‘real’ men’s behavior includes.

The different representations of masculinity suggest that male role models were important for the authors to learn how to perform masculinity and be accepted by other men. This insistence on male role models is evident in the search for role models among other men, including family members, relatives, and drug dealers. As many authors have not found positive role models in their immediate environment, the displays of hypermasculinity on the street and in rap music become a substitute they imitate. Archetypes of black masculinity, such as the gangster, the hustler, or the pimp, provide an example of aggressive, dominant, and relentless masculinity on the streets where respect is earned by not showing weakness and by accumulating material wealth. The streets are described as a dangerous playground where boys and adolescents, without parental supervision but in interaction with other peers and adults, emulate the displays of masculinity performed on the street and rewarded by street culture. The choice of drug dealers as role models underscores the appeal of street culture to male youth. Dealers embody power and wealth in the inner city and because of their respectability and relative wealth, street criminals are ascribed with the highest capital of street credibility and masculinity, demonstrating the interconnectedness of gender and space.

Although their ridicule is sexist and primarily reserved for women in general, many writers exclude their mothers and wives from any ridicule. In contrast, rappers choose complimentary vocabulary when referring to their wives, whose personalities and characters usually receive more attention than their physical features. This partially confirms Tyree's findings about artists who frame their lyrics with gratitude and appreciation for their mothers while openly expressing contempt for other women.¹⁵⁷

3.2.2 Representations of Femininity

In AA HH LW, authors from different generations of Hip Hop describe their lives and careers in relation to the culture. Some of these authors' careers preceded the widespread commercialization of rap music while others benefited from the appeal of mainstream and gangster rap. Before the extensive commercialization of rap music, female artists could make a name for themselves as eloquent lyricists and compelling performers. In a commercialized rap business, however, many women have been relegated to the role of eye candy, embellishing music videos and ensuring the appeal of rap music to male audiences. From the position of performers whose careers preceded the commercial turn of Hip Hop, influential artists such as

¹⁵⁷ See p. 33.

Mc Lyte, Sha-Rock, and Queen Latifah attempt to write the history of Hip Hop from a feminist viewpoint, a *herstory*, and evoke a nostalgic longing for a culture not yet affected by commercialization and misogyny.

In their life narratives, female authors address various issues related to their self-understanding as women. First, the authors describe how they negotiated their gender identity in inner-city public spaces dominated by masculine aesthetics, norms, and ideals. Second, the authors provide insight into how they positioned themselves to misogynistic attitudes by either conforming to or defying established standards of beauty and gendered expectations.

Third, the female body as a target of sexualized violence becomes significant in this context. It has been shown above that female celebrity authors pay considerable attention to their bodies, for example, in terms of beautification, maintaining a presentable appearance, or dealing with assaults. The previous chapter showed how male authors tend to include misogynistic remarks in their autobiographies and memoirs. This subchapter focuses on how female authors portray incidents of sexualized violence. With relation to celebrity memoirs written by women, Yelin has argued that these publications tend to a “constant monitoring of the self” and that, therefore, “autobiography is necessarily a form of self-surveillance as the author’s identity and life experiences are scrutinised, accounted for, analysed and given meaning through discursive regimes” (2020: 34). Thus, the women’s publications are approached with a postfeminist lens that prioritizes how women construct their identities with a focus on individualism, conformity to beauty standards, and the idea of sex as an instrument of power. Against this postfeminist agenda, it is necessary to ask to what extent (if at all) female authors use their memoirs to claim their participation in or call for a collective feminist movement.

Fourth, just as male authors address stereotypical masculine behaviors, female authors describe feminine behaviors that they were taught and followed into adulthood. Complying with these behaviors and gendered expectations guarantees that the artists are read as women, but this may result in increased stress, mental health issues, or identity conflicts. Fifth, while these four aspects primarily describe femininity as endangered and unstable, female authors also ascribe an empowering potential to Hip Hop and the rap business. Some female artists have reinterpreted their roles as women through their involvement in the culture. Finally, in addition to perceiving Hip Hop as an empowering culture, the authors assign an identity-changing potential to motherhood. Becoming a mother is often accompanied by reflecting on one’s femininity and role as a woman in Hip Hop.

Most AA HH LW publications portray urban public spaces as places of male dominance where femininity and non-dominant masculinities are threatened, ridiculed, and marginalized. The portrayal of women and girls as ‘naturally’ vulnerable to the dangers of public space stems from the construction of the female body as weak. As a way of participating in Hip Hop, female practitioners, performers, and consumers spend considerable time in public spaces where they are exposed to the male gaze. While male authors portray inner-city public spaces as violent playgrounds that offer numerous opportunities to gain respect, female authors describe the same spaces as precarious and threatening. New York-based Sister Souljah, for example, describes the ghetto as “an endless maze in which a wrong turn could result in a little bleeding, a ‘casual rape,’ a critical beatdown, or even death” (1996: 9). It is not the public urban space that the author fears, but the presence of men who prey on women in their performance of hypermasculinity.

The threat of sexual violence turns urban spaces into perceived no-go areas for women (Minh-ha, 1994: 15).¹⁵⁸ Alicia Keyes uses animal metaphors to describe men, almost portraying them as sex-driven ‘weirdos.’ According to Keyes, the men had “animalistic stares” and “drooled at the women,” following their movements with “raw desire in their eyes” and an “urge to lunge and grab what seemed theirs for the taking” (2020: 202). Her use of wilderness metaphors reinforces the portrayal of the inner city as a lawless jungle devoid of control and order. Moreover, her characterization echoes stereotypical portrayals of black men as animalistic and sex-driven.¹⁵⁹

In street culture, hypermasculinity is associated with dominance, while the female body is equated with weakness, vulnerability, and submission. Moreover, women are seen as a ‘commodity’ whose acquisition confers respect, like material wealth and status symbols. Exposed to the male gaze whenever they move through public spaces, the female authors of AA HH LW address adaptations in their appearance, dress, and overall behavior to vanish from the male gaze and avert acts of (sexualized) violence. Among the tools of survival, Sister Souljah lists the so-called ‘fronting,’ a habitual and deliberate misrepresentation of one’s circumstances, “a survival tactic ... to conceal any inner weakness or vulnerability” (1996: 173). Survival on the streets means avoiding public spaces and hiding one’s identity and emotions because emotions are seen as a burden (Jones, 2009: 92). Alicia Keyes addresses her

¹⁵⁸ See also p. 51.

¹⁵⁹ For example, 50 Cent’s description of inner-city hypermasculinity, see p. 141.

change in dress and a subsequent preference for clothing that is not only less revealing but also conceals her femininity:

And in my baggy jeans and Timbs [Timberland boots], I could escape notice. With my curls pressed down and tied away into a bun, there was no hint of flirtation, no provocation of fantasy. My loose-fitting sweatshirts became my uniform of survival, my safe place away from the prying eyes and whistles of strangers. There were no bright-red lips to draw stares my way, no formfitting dresses to display my curves and betray my vulnerability (2020: 202).¹⁶⁰

Her statement reveals the ambiguity of women's clothing in street culture, which requires women to remain presentable and beautiful to others to become read as women. At the same time, their very appearance makes them vulnerable to harassment and sexual assault. According to Keyes, men tend to misinterpret clothing that is considered provocative and revealing as a tacit agreement to sexual advances. On the other hand, subdued or 'boyish' clothing, although preventing harassment, may invite other kinds of ridicule (Ilan, 2015: 46).¹⁶¹

The typical Hip Hop attire, consisting of baggy pants, oversized shirts, boots, and hoodies, hides the women's feminine features well. Participation in Hip Hop can lead to adopting styles and aesthetics that suggest an assimilation of female and male artists. This clothing does not primarily accentuate the female body. Watkins, for example, addresses the evolution of her sartorial preferences and demonstrates her nonconformity to the ideals of female beauty prevalent in society and Hip Hop. While she dressed girlishly in her childhood, her style changed as a teenager to resemble a "tomboy," leading to her nickname as the "brother with the lipstick" (2017: 41f). She maintained her boyish style even after being pressured into a more 'girly' clothing style (45). While 'tomboy' usually describes a "stigmatizing label" attributed to girls who supposedly fail to conform to notions of femininity, Watkins confidently uses the term as a self-description (Compton and Knox, 2016: 1202). Iandoli emphasizes the role model function of the group, and Watkins in particular, in teaching young girls to remain authentic to themselves (2019: 89). Queen Latifah has always been known to wear typical Hip Hop attire. In contrast, Sandra Denton, and her group, Salt-N-Pepa, were "fly girls who wore spandex and thigh-high boots" (Queen Latifah, 1999: 58).¹⁶² Thus, Salt-N-Pepa turned away from the typical Hip Hop clothing and embodied their interpretation of Hip Hop femininity.

¹⁶⁰ At another point in her memoir, Keys adds that scanty clothing "could get you mistaken for a hooker" (28). See also Sister Souljah (1996: 64).

¹⁶¹ The 'Queen Mother' is an example of an archetype of Hip Hop femininity whose sexuality is obscured, for example, through clothing (see p. 39).

¹⁶² See also Denton (2008: 50ff) and Evans (2009: 257).

Watkins attests more diversity to the development of her personal style as she began as a tomboy before growing into “sexy women” (2017: 85).

In addition to wardrobe adjustments, female authors acknowledge learned behaviors that are supposed to ensure safe movement through public spaces. Once again, Keys recalls how her mother’s advice and her observations provided her with the rules for safely navigating Manhattan: “Walk the other way. Never stare. Don’t engage. And at all times, keep moving” (2020: 27). The advice indicates that it is the women who are burdened with the responsibility of adapting to inner-city conditions to avoid incidents of sexualized violence. In their memoirs, female authors emphasize their femininity and vulnerability by pointing out the adverse effects of public spaces. If they would portray themselves at ease with the dangers of the inner city, female artists would diminish their femininity in readers’ eyes. Being too comfortable in the public sphere and around men results in a likewise masculine characterization.

2 | Hip Hop Beauty Standards

While male authors of AA HH LW describe their bodies as sources of intimidation and power, they rarely emphasize physical flaws or transport problematic readings of their bodies. Female authors, however, pay considerable attention to their bodies as sites of discomfort, pride, and abuse, and as sites mapped with gender expectations. Various social, cultural, and ‘racial’ expectations, including perceptions of ‘typical’ feminine behavior, unattainable standards of beauty, and the obligation of beauty work to remain ‘presentable,’ are projected onto the female (black) body. Even female authors who seem to object to sexualized readings of their bodies draw attention to their bodies as sites of resistance to ideas of a marketable Hip Hop femininity. Female celebrity authors focus on their bodies to invite female audiences to “judge both stars and themselves” (Yelin, 2020: 31). The exaggerated scrutiny of women’s bodies and the superficiality of celebrity culture exacerbate the stress that women face and address as authors (Yelin, 2020: 30f). The female celebrity body, as Holmes and Negra conclude, becomes “the key terrain upon which discourses surrounding female celebrity are mapped” (2011: 7).

The fulfillment of beauty standards and the public perception of the artist are central themes in the life accounts of female celebrity authors. As a result, artists write about the beauty work required to remain presentable in the private and public spheres, such as preparing for interviews, performances, and red-carpet events. Daily and extensive beauty work, such as makeup, hairstyles, or fitness regimens, confirms the readers’ image of a typical celebrity lifestyle. This impression is further substantiated by authors who acknowledge the celebrity industry’s strategies to ‘correct’ imperfections and commodify artists for maximum profit.

Alicia Keys, for example, describes being subjected to demands to make her public image more appealing to target audiences: “They wanted my mass of curls blown straight and flowing down my neck. They wanted me to lose weight. They wanted my hemlines shorter, my teeth whiter, my cleavage on full display” (2020: 54). More than other women, female celebrity authors, are subject to socially constructed notions of beauty. Their bodies are altered to meet society’s expectations, and celebrities are constructed to embody an unattainable ideal of feminine beauty for many. This idea of beauty has been constructed and primarily associated with an “Anglo-Saxon ideal” (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2012: 9). The concepts of ‘beauty’ and ‘perfection’ demonstrate social constructs that reflect the preferences of those in power. For example, in predominantly white societies, the idea of a white ideal of beauty is dominant (Fitts, 2008: 188f). As Afro hairstyles do not conform to the dominant beauty image of white celebrities, Keys’ allusion to changing her hairstyle implies a de-emphasis of black aesthetics. Thus, adjustments to her appearance were aimed at shaping her into a marketable persona resembling a white beauty ideal.

On the one hand, references to extensive beauty work and physical correction underscore the authors’ focus on the female body and help them to present themselves as celebrities. On the other hand, rejecting these corrective measures allows female authors to highlight their authenticity and individuality. For example, Keys also criticizes the celebrity industry by pointing out that “there’s seldom space for imperfection, for celebrating our perfectly imperfect bodies” (2020: 174; see also Watkins, 2017: 120). She addresses gender expectations that place unrealistic standards on the appearance of celebrity women, and by emphasizing her nonconformity to these standards, she gains individuality.

Queen Latifah acknowledges her shortcomings when it comes to beauty ideals while criticizing the media and the celebrity industry: “When I open fashion magazines, I never see women who represent me and others like me. I see models who are so thin and undeveloped that some of them look like little boys” (1999: 141). In contrast to Queen Latifah and Keys, singer Faith Evans expresses less remorse about conforming to society’s ideal of beauty, even when it involves appearance-altering measures. Evans, marketed by Hip Hop mogul Puff Daddy as the First Lady of Bad Boy Records, writes about accepting abdominoplasty surgery and diet pills to become a showpiece for target audiences (2009: 90f, 107f).

In addition to meeting the demands of the celebrity industry, female authors also acknowledge the imperative to conform to beauty ideals during their childhood. Watkins, for example, states that she was “taught to present [herself] well no matter the circumstances” despite the lack of sophisticated means of beauty work (2017: 22). Sister Souljah makes a

similar statement about her mother's encouragement to emphasize her beauty to attract boys while, paradoxically, discouraging long-term relationships (1996: 42). While there may be benefits to dressing up, such as increased self-confidence, these are not the primary concerns of the artists. Instead, female authors stress that beauty work is required to become validated by men. However, female authors describe the stress of pleasing others and meeting social expectations as coming at the cost of hiding aspects of their identity.

Some authors acknowledge feelings of inadequacy because they do not conform to beauty standards and address their shortcomings by referring to a larger framework of beauty standards from which they feel excluded. Watkins, for example, alludes to the Southern beauty ideal of a voluptuous physique: "When I was a teenager, I was super skinny. I didn't have the big old butt you were supposed to have. ...especially growing up in the South" (2017: 120). Sandra Denton identifies a similar preference when she describes her younger self as "this flat-chested, skinny girl" and implicitly emphasizes her perceived shortcomings concerning stereotypes of black women as voluptuous (2008: 23; see also Queen Latifah, 1999: 140).

Either because they do not conform to beauty standards or to protest prevailing beauty standards, some female authors portray themselves as defying norms that dictate how women should dress, behave, or appear in public. Singer Alicia Keys, for example, writes that she refused to wear makeup and expresses her dissatisfaction with oppressive gender norms to find a new sense of identity as she started to defy social expectations (2020: 209f). After portraying the boyish lesbian Cleo in the 1996 heist film *Set it Off*, Queen Latifah faced comments about being queer, because she did not meet prevalent beauty standards and failed to live up to gender expectations of women (1999: 123f). By listing "kickball, basketball, and softball, [climbing] trees and fences, [fighting] boys, whipping their asses" among her childhood recreational activities, Queen Latifah presents herself as nonconformist to the dominant idea of femininity and the associated ideals of girls' interests and preferences. (17). Interestingly, however, she seems to tend to identify with typically feminine traits, as her self-imposed pseudonym, 'Latifah,' denotes "delicate, sensitive, and kind" (17). In another instance, she writes about her openness with regards to sharing interests and participating in activities traditionally associated with men: "But cars and sports (and even guns) are stuff that I am genuinely into; I don't have to fake just to be down with a brother" (155). By implication, she presents typically masculine interests as incompatible with a performance of femininity that expects women to be delicate and sensitive.

3 | The Female Body as a Target of (Sexual) Violence

In addition to societal expectations of beauty and ideal femininity, female AA HH LW authors draw attention to their bodies as targets of sexualized violence. Pointing out the vulnerability of the female body creates an illusionary bond with the reader, as testimonies of sexual violence in childhood, relationships, or marriage provoke “a gendered dynamic of popular interest and pleasure in the misfortunes of female celebrities” (Holmes and Negra, 2011: 1; see also Yelin, 2020: 237). Female artists and readers form a bond based on shared experiences revolving around sexualized violence. Despite having some power as celebrities in the public sphere, the female authors write about impassivity and powerlessness in the private sphere of their families and homes. Furthermore, the prevalence of these incidents reveals how men of all ages exploit their status of power and display a sense of entitlement over black women’s bodies.

Several male authors portray themselves as abusive partners and incorporate objectifying attitudes into their life accounts. When they acknowledge victimization at all, male artists describe primarily childhood abuse.¹⁶³ Female artists, on the other hand, address traumatic incidents at the hands of boyfriends, relatives, and strangers ranging from childhood to late adulthood and even marriage. Singer Alicia Keys recalls a painful experience of vulnerable exposure at the age of eleven that she describes as leaving her “judged. Naked. Embarrassed. Exposed” (2020: 3). She also recalls how, at the age of 19, a photographer violated her personal space and forced her to pose semi-nude. At this point, the autobiographical ‘I’ expresses her inner turmoil by contemplating the possible consequences of her refusal to conform: “*If I say no, what doors will be closed to me?*” (3f). Her statement reveals the internalization of ideas that constitute women as dependent on men, both in terms of career prospects and control over their bodies. It could be argued that this insight served as a justification for her compliance during her early career. However, once Keys and other female artists have gained agency through their popularity, they increasingly resist objectifying readings of their bodies.

Domestic violence is addressed by many of the female authors and plays a central role in their life accounts.¹⁶⁴ What many of the female authors have in common is the forgiveness for sexual offenses, the return of the woman to her partner, and the continuation of the relationship. In her memoir, Faith Evans concludes that she has forgiven her abuser “the way many women in abusive relationships do” (2009: 32).¹⁶⁵ As successful artists, these authors can hardly claim financial dependence on abusers as a reason for staying. Instead, internalized notions of ideal

¹⁶³ See also p. 93.

¹⁶⁴ See Sandra Denton’s memoir in Case Study 3 (p. 208) for an in-depth discussion of sexual abuse in the life writing of a female celebrity author.

¹⁶⁵ See also Mia-X (2019: Ch. 11, p. 63) and Sha-Rock (2010: 44).

female behavior require women to be submissive, passive, and in need of harmony. As a result, the authors claim to have behaved loyally in the face of betrayal and are more likely to excuse violent behavior.

By acknowledging sexism, misogyny, and sexualized violence in the family, on the streets, and Hip Hop, female authors help to expose patriarchal and sexist notions. As Yelin has argued, contemporary celebrity memoir overlaps with the thematic emphases of postfeminism, for example, when authors present themselves as “examples of ‘empowered’ femininity and offer advice such as ‘it’s your choice who you are’” (2020: 34). While Yelin’s study suggests that female celebrities use their memoirs to demonstrate an individual feminist effort rather than inscribing themselves into a collective feminist cause, the examples of AA HH LW suggest, at least to some extent, an ambivalent perspective. When Sandra Denton, Faith Evans, or Mia-X share personal experiences of abuse, they create an illusory bond and capitalize on their readers’ interest in intimate details.

4 | Acquiescing Feminine Behavior

While many male rappers have normalized performance of hypermasculinity to appeal to Hip Hop audiences, women describe behaviors that primarily occur in response to heteronormative practices that subordinate women and curtail their freedom of self-expression and personal development (Weber, 2019: 207). While the exact nature of this behavior and its relationship to hypermasculinity remains controversial, a central element is a performance of femininity that defers women’s wishes, desires, and prospects, especially when interacting with men.¹⁶⁶ Accordingly, female AA HH LW authors describe behaviors and attitudes that are coded as ‘typically’ feminine or, as Sandra Denton puts it: “That’s what women do. We become the banker, the mother, the sister, the friend. We become Mrs. Fix-It for everyone but us” (2008: 127). In her memoir, Denton often states that she put her desires aside in favor of her partner’s needs, echoing reservedness, sensitivity, support, and passivity as stereotypical female traits. Singer Alicia Keys addresses the habit of women “to be liked, to be seen as the nice girl, to accommodate others even if that meant dismissing my own needs” (2020: 86). In doing so, Keys writes about creating a facade behind which she hides her true feelings and inner turmoil: “If I woke up feeling down or lethargic..., I’d taught myself never to show it...convincing the world that, behind my smile, all was as perfect as it appeared” (2020: 10; see also MC Lyte, 2014: 49).

¹⁶⁶ See also p. 32.

Paradoxically, although women have traditionally been seen as compassionate, female authors state they have been discouraged from expressing emotion – much like their male counterparts, though for different reasons. While men perform unemotional masculinity to appear strong and independent, female artists avoid being seen as a problem, as taking up space or inconveniencing others. Denton states that her manager expected her to be submissive despite his apparent financial mismanagement of the band, threatening to have her replaced when criticized (2008: 75). Her assertiveness is seen as disruptive, especially in a business traditionally reserved for men. In her memoir, this anecdote takes place when the author still conforms to stereotypical notions of female behavior, underscoring the author's inexperience at a younger age before becoming more confident as an artist and a woman.

Accommodating the desires of others is also acknowledged by other female artists, particularly in relation to ensuring the sexual pleasure of their partners. This reiterates the notion of women as the source of men's sexual pleasure in heterosexual relationships. Echoing her grandmother's voice, rapper Mia-X describes how male courtship is designed to make women feel "beautiful and to validate [them]....A woman will find herself trying to dumb down to please him" (2019: 54f). The example of Mia-X's gastrography convincingly shows how the socialization of girls is geared toward enabling them to fulfill the role of nurturers, for example by teaching girls primarily how to cook, how to care for children, or how to run a household. Her memoir emphasizes learning how to feed the entire family, with frequent references to the kitchen as a traditionally feminine place (2019: 153).

Faith Evans presents herself as both sexually pleasing and capable of feeding her husband, Notorious B.I.G., who was known for his corpulence and appetite. Evans emphasizes her suitability as a good wife, stating that she provided him "with steak and eggs, just so he knew I was talented in the kitchen as well as in the bedroom" (2009: 129). Evans' statement echoes traditional gender roles according to which domestic and sexual skills constitute the ideal specimen of a woman and wife. Satisfying her partner's needs allows her to assume the role of a caring woman. Dependence on male approval is also addressed by Queen Latifah, who states that she felt validated as a woman in her younger years because of a relationship with an older man (1999: 130). Despite this, Queen Latifah adamantly presents herself as a strong woman who does not conform to gendered notions of femininity and strongly rejects acquiescing feminine behavior. Like Denton, Queen Latifah's memoir indicates a personal evolution that led her to embrace a public image and rap persona based on feminist activism and status as a role model for young girls. She lives up to her role model identity when she proclaims that she does not "act the way society dictates that a woman 'should'" (126).

Male artists rarely question their dominant position in Hip Hop. In contrast, female artists are likelier to emphasize the specificity of their careers in a male-dominated business. Given the predominance of male performers, audiences, and themes tailored to mainstream male expectations, it is unsurprising that some female performers use sex appeal to gain recognition. While emphasizing physical attributes is seen as a strategy to achieve this goal, some authors also perceive it as the path of least resistance and explicitly emphasize the effort they put into their careers to distinguish themselves from other artists. Yelin characterizes this strategy as a common feature of female celebrity memoirs, arguing that the authors aim “to be taken seriously as workers” (2020: 33). In this context, Watkins addresses the plight of female artists in Hip Hop:

There are people in this industry who will want to control you and who will try to force you to use your sexuality in a way that male performers never have to. There will be female artists who take their clothes off and think that’s the best way to sell records...Being a woman in music is a strike against you, and being a black woman, another strike. If you buy into the idea that girls need to get butt-naked onstage or on TV to make it or be successful, well, it’s just not true. I’ve worked for what I’ve achieved, and I haven’t taken my pants off to do it (2017: 224).

She exposes the disreputable strategies used to market femininity in Hip Hop, but refrains from going a similar path. As a forerunner to rap groups like TLC or Sandra Denton’s Salt-N-Pepa, Sha-Rock, one of the first female MCs, shares her view of female performers who combine lyrical skill with sex appeal and seems to agree with Watkins:

I truly believe that it is nothing wrong with putting on a nice dress and feeling good about yourself. There was time when Hip Hop was being blamed for destroying women’s self-esteem. You could hear it in a rap song or see it in a video. It is not only in Hip Hop do we see women being disrespected, it is happening in every aspect of the media (2010: 207).

Both artists do not condemn female artists who emphasize their bodies while challenging the notion that sex appeal is the only path to success for women. Instead, Sha-Rock and Watkins show that there are different ways for women to become successful in the music business. In addition, Watkins addresses the gender inequalities and double standards prevalent in the rap business, highlighting the intersectional discrimination that black female artists face. Consequently, using their bodies and becoming complicit in the further sexualization of black women would only contribute to the stereotypical representation of black female artists in Hip Hop. Both authors have managed to refrain from using their sex appeal to gain popularity and present themselves as artists who rely on their performative and musical talents.

Male artists are perceived as the standard for Hip Hop performance because of their predominance as rappers, producers, and entrepreneurs. As a result, it has been difficult for female rappers to be considered rappers in their own right. Sandra Denton addresses this notion when she writes about her initial definition of rappers as exclusively male (2008: 45). Female artists faced not only skepticism from audiences but also from male rappers, as Sha-Rock recalls how a rapper “looked at us like he was shocked that we wanted to be MCs” (2010: 80; see also 63). Male rappers rarely accepted women as sympathizers or even performers of Hip Hop.

Comparing or equating their performance styles with male artists causes female artists to express honor and pride. Mia-X recalls being complimented for writing “rugged, real, and raw rhymes like a dude” (2019: Ch. 8, p. 79).¹⁶⁷ Sha-Rock, who has contributed to the evolving Hip Hop culture as a trailblazing female artist, emphasizes her and other female artists’ roles as “bad ass MCs” (2010: 180). Adjectives like “hard,” “raw,” or “bad ass” suggest that female artists claim a Hip Hop authenticity that is as unrefined and unpolished as underground Hip Hop and the performances of male artists. However, female artists add their twist by carefully navigating the perception of appearing too masculine. To avoid being read as masculine or even boyish, female rappers emphasize their femininity by engaging in behaviors that are considered reserved for women or by emphasizing their bodies and sex appeal with appropriate clothing.

The achievement of being the first female MC and, thereby, laying the groundwork for Hip Hop femininity is discussed by older artists Sha-Rock and MC Lyte. In her memoir, Sha-Rock emphasizes that “the way that I represented Hip Hop as a female was the most important thing” (2010: 132). Reflecting on her career and the evolution of the culture, she trusts Mc Lyte as her successor and expresses the hope that future female rappers “would be respected as lyrical MC and [treated] with the same respect as anyone would give a prolific male MC” (2010: 198). Acknowledging the emergence of gangster rap and the few positive examples of female performers, she laments that “[female] representation was null and void” (2014: 60f). Angered by what she perceived as the demise of Hip Hop, Mc Lyte turned her disappointment into a positive leadership role to educate “young girls about the importance of defining themselves for themselves” (2014: 62).

Much more than their male counterparts, female Hip Hop artists express concern about how women are represented in Hip Hop and how rap music influences young girls’ self-image regarding body positivity, sexuality, and positive role models. Striving to be positive performers with a lyrical message, the female artists of AA HH LW lead by example to provide an

¹⁶⁷ See also Sha-Rock (2010: 98).

alternative to the primarily negative and stereotypical representations of women in rap music. Female authors describe upbringings influenced by traditional gender stereotypes and behaviors – not unlike those of female readers and fans. However, the authors also include moments of personal growth, showing how they abandoned traditional notions of femininity to embrace their identities. Although Hip Hop, as a predominantly male culture, has created additional obstacles for them, female artists recognize its potential for empowerment, giving women a form of expression and an opportunity to challenge misogyny and sexism.

The female authors of AA HH LW rarely address feminist activism. Alicia Keys uses her memoir as a platform for feminist activism, writing about her efforts to launch an initiative to empower girls and women by improving education, promoting LGBTQ rights, and closing the gender pay gap (2020: 189). Although the initiative predates her memoir and thus might already be familiar to readers, Keys uses her memoir to educate readers about the motivations and challenges of her initiative. Queen Latifah, active before the turn of the millennium and thus exposed to a slightly different form of misogyny in rap music, firmly links her feminist activism to her musical work. Her 1993 song “U.N.I.T.Y.” underscores her commitment to a feminist cause, especially in the face of an increasingly sexist Hip Hop culture. While she criticizes misogynistic lyrics in general, Queen Latifah is most concerned about “female rappers buying into it” and becoming complicit in their ridicule (1999: 3). In her memoir, Queen Latifah expresses concern about the next generation of girls internalizing misogynistic ideas about women’s inferiority as motivation. However, this is about the extent to which a coherent feminist movement can be discerned in the publications of female AA HH LW authors.

6 | Motherhood

Female authors write extensively about their gender identity by emphasizing the importance of motherhood. Almost all authors draw attention to pregnancy and their role as mothers.¹⁶⁸ A few artists address motherhood’s impact on their understanding of life and partnerships. Like male authors, female authors admire single mothers for handling multiple responsibilities in providing financial security and care. For singer Alicia Keys, her mother is a “hero,” (2020: 13, 37) while rapper Sha-Rock describes her mother as a “role model” (2010: 43).¹⁶⁹ However, while male artists express admiration for the achievements of their mothers, they still lament the absence of fathers. Conversely, while some female authors also express a longing for their

¹⁶⁸ See also Denton (2008: 86), Evans (2009: 70ff), Sha-Rock (2010: 133), Watkins (2017: 135-156), Mia-X (2019: 19), and Keys (2020: 157f, 191).

¹⁶⁹ See also Queen Latifah (1999: 4), Evans (2009: 11ff), Watkins (2017: 22), and Mia-X (2019: 27).

biological fathers, they rarely describe this absence as a hindrance to their personal development. Here, the sociocultural conditions of African American communities, including the prevalence of single motherhood and the disproportionate incarceration of black men, have a severe impact on the individual development of girls and boys.

In terms of performances of femininity, female authors acknowledge their single mothers as role models and paragons of intransigence and independence. Watkins, for example, credits her mother with teaching her “how to hustle” while working multiple jobs and facing poverty (2017: 22f). Singer Alicia Keys also remembers her mother in this way, stating “Mommy hustled” (2020: 16). Once again, a relentless and tenacious approach to parenting and caregiving is not interpreted as a maternal trait, but rather as ‘hustling,’ an activity typically associated with black archetypes of street culture. In addition, female authors often praise their mothers for their independence, pride, and beauty in challenging situations.¹⁷⁰

Like male artists embrace their roles as fathers, many female artists describe a shift in their sense of self after becoming mothers. Often, motherhood is equated with assuming a new sense of identity, completing the cycle begun by their mothers. Charged with caring and nurturing responsibilities, female artists perform the gendered behaviors and tasks taught during childhood. Alicia Keys portrays the experience of motherhood as empowering when she writes that motherhood has transformed her into a “lioness” who, like the animalistic paragon, fiercely protects her children and, by extension, her community (2020: 188).¹⁷¹

7 | (No) Love in the Hood

While female authors describe public spaces as places of discomfort and threat, most male authors consider them as places of power and violence. In the urban cityscape of the ghetto, love and romance are presented as elusive comforts, while casual sexual intercourse is portrayed as ubiquitous, at least by male authors. New York rapper Ja Rule, for example, portrays sexual intercourse as “the universal escape, so it was always plentiful in the hood” (2014: 29). The acknowledgment of promiscuity by male authors can be interpreted as an extension of the hypermasculinity enacted on the streets and in Hip Hop. By portraying themselves as promiscuous lovers who attract many women, these authors present themselves as men who deserve respect.

Male authors write about a variety of unconventional public spaces frequented for sex. The availability and the pursuit of sexual advances suggest a lax attitude toward sex and the

¹⁷⁰ See Queen Latifah (1999: 4), Evans (2009: 1), Sha-Rock (2010: 43), and Mia-X (2019: iii).

¹⁷¹ See also Denton (2008: 86), and Evans (2009: 70ff), Sha-Rock (2010: 133), and Watkins (2017: 179).

responsibilities that come with it. Ja Rule's statement also implies a lack of commitment to romantic interests and further characterizes the hood as a place where residents seek to escape from because of poverty, crime, violence, and a lack of perspective. As many residents lack the financial means to leave the inner city, they present drugs and promiscuous sexual intercourse as escapist leisure activities.¹⁷²

While predominantly male authors portray urban ghetto spaces as sites of fleeting sexual encounters, both male and female authors agree on the lack of sex education and the insufficient and inappropriate transmission of knowledge about romantic relationships during adolescence. Adolescents often seek answers about love, romance, and sex among their peers or in interaction with other adults on the street. However, according to Sandra Denton, "the streets ain't no place to learn about love" (2008: 101). Sister Souljah underscores Denton's view, pointing to the precarious position of inner-city girls and women in terms of parental or adult guidance on love, romance, and sex. According to her, advice on these topics was lacking and amounted to: "one, don't do anything that you don't want to, and two, don't get pregnant. There was no instruction on how to meet a man, how to judge a man, test a man, love a man, or keep a man" (1996: 39; see also Snoop Dogg, 1999: 113). Given the prevalence of teen pregnancy and single-mother families in the inner city, preventing unplanned pregnancy seems like a reasonable directive.

Sister Souljah's observation seems to place the responsibility solely on girls and women. Rapper Snoop Dogg contributes a similar perspective when he writes that "in the ghetto, love means getting into some bitch's panties, and if that means she ends up with a baby that's got your face, well, that's on her" (1999: 113). It is primarily female artists who describe the younger generations' lack of rudimentary knowledge about how to enter and maintain romantic relationships, balance partners' desires, and recognize the qualities of a partnership.

Conclusion

Female authors of AA HH LW, unlike their male counterparts, ascribe danger and intimidation to the public spaces of the inner city. Because of street culture and men competing in the performance of hypermasculinity, female authors associate the streets and the public spaces of the neighborhood with discomfort. It is their gender, stereotypically associated with vulnerability and weakness, that endangers women in public spaces, especially in the inner city. They escape the dangers of the public sphere by adapting their behavior and concealing their identities. In this context, typical Hip Hop clothing becomes a form of representation and

¹⁷² The variety of unconventional public spaces frequented in search of sexual intercourse, mentioned in the subchapter on spaces of sexual encounter (see p. 125), vividly illustrated this point.

identification with the culture *and* a tool for survival. At the cost of concealing their female bodies, women are read as less feminine and more masculine.

In addition, knowledge of behavioral adaptations is passed from mothers to daughters or exchanged among peers. These arrangements severely restrict women's access and movement in public spaces. The various anecdotes shared by female authors suggest that it is primarily women who feel compelled to adapt their behavior to escape sexual assault and violence. On the other hand, male authors rarely choose to acknowledge warnings or codes of conduct for safe passage through public spaces. Instead, most male authors invoke the dangers of inner-city communities to emphasize their street credibility and sense of resilience, deliberately avoiding descriptions that would make them appear less capable of defying the dangers of public spaces.

Despite the dominance of male artists and, in some cases, the prevalence of misogyny and sexism, all female authors have made a name for themselves in Hip Hop and become successful performers, either by entirely relying on their performance style and lyrical message or by capitalizing on their sex appeal. Common to all is an awareness of their impact as role models and a responsibility to their female fans to embody alternative and positive images of women through music and performance. This has led some female writers to express concern about the future of Hip Hop and rap music, in which men and sexist themes threaten to take over. The authors experienced this firsthand while writing about their struggle for recognition alongside established male rappers. To be taken seriously as a female rapper by male rappers, competitors, and audiences requires a performance that relies less on physical charms and more on a strong lyrical message and compelling delivery. Accordingly, more than male authors, female authors go to great lengths in their memoirs to clarify that they have worked for their success and do not owe it to their feminine charms.

The observation that public spaces are portrayed as the domain of men is not particularly surprising, given the traditional gendered distinction between the public and private spheres. However, private spaces do not necessarily represent a much safer environment for female artists, several of whom describe childhood and domestic abuse. Female authors acknowledge internalized gendered behaviors that require women to be passive, forgiving, and acquiescent. While these behaviors have led to painful experiences, all female authors describe challenging these ideas of stereotypical female behavior. Female authors use their personal experiences to bond with their readers, who may have had similar experiences, and to draw attention to the everyday sexism from which female celebrity authors are not exempt.

Unlike male authors, female AA HH LW authors do not describe a lack of personal development due to absent fathers. They express admiration for their single mothers' ability to

juggle multiple responsibilities and emulate their mothers' resilience. In addition, many female artists experience a transformation in their sense of self after becoming mothers.

Compared to the male authors of AA HH LW, space seems less relevant to female authors. Female authors address gender issues in relation to a predominantly male culture whose male performers and audiences tend to objectify and ridicule women. The female body becomes relevant in many contexts, either as something to hide, something to accentuate, something that deviates from an ideal of beauty, as a target of violence, or as a matter of personal growth. Even when female authors declare their bodies to be non-issues, for example, to explain their success, the focus on physical issues remains prominent. This can be attributed to the focus of celebrity memoirs on the female celebrity's body and its policing in the face of unattainable beauty ideals, as well as the readers' desire to access the celebrity's private life. In the context of Hip Hop, this becomes even more significant, as rap music has benefited from the staging and consumption of the black female body.

The female body also reveals the ambiguity of Hip Hop clothing, as women who fully participate in Hip Hop may inadvertently hide their femininity. Consequently, many women who prefer baggy pants to a dress are read as less feminine and ridiculed as 'tomboys' or lesbians. On the other hand, assimilating into the Hip Hop culture and adopting its styles and aesthetics allows women to escape ridicule and sexual harassment based on ideas that objectify black femininity.

One aspect that stands out when looking at female authors is that there is more diversity and personal growth in the memoirs of female authors than in most male authors' publications. Only a few male authors question their behavior and performance of hypermasculinity. The majority of male rappers, however, identify as misogynistic machos who benefit from this masculinity performance's appeal on the streets and in Hip Hop. They are even rewarded for doing so, for example, with respect, success, female attention, fan applause, or money. Thus, male artists are rarely challenged with reinterpreting their identity or gender performance. Female artists, on the other hand, are confronted with stereotypes that portray women either as submissive sex objects or degrade them for not complying with the rationale of male desire. This contrast compels female artists, more so than male artists, to reflect and challenge their identity and position within Hip Hop.

The bildungsroman aspect of AA HH LW underscores this characteristic prominently.¹⁷³ Female artists describe their life as a journey from suffering under stereotypical gender

¹⁷³ See p. 97 and p. 126.

expectations during adolescence to embracing Hip Hop, moving away from gender expectations in favor of empowerment, only to be confronted with and potentially overcome similar gender expectations in Hip Hop. This variation of triumph and defeat, as well as conflict and contradiction, hardly exists in the publications of male authors. The variety of personal developments represented by many female writers leads to more diverse interpretations of femininity, both in the lives of individual authors and within the female corpus of AA HH LW.

So far, the character of African American Hip Hop life writing has been primarily discussed in terms of its representation of space and gender, its infatuation with celebrity life, and the plurality of subgenres. The next part presents four individual publications in their entirety, examining them in terms of textual and paratextual representations of space and gender.

Part IV

IV. CASE STUDIES

4.1 Introduction

In this section, I focus primarily on the peritextual character of the publications. The four publications were chosen for their potential to illustrate the diversity of AA HH LW. Each case can be read as an example of a larger group of publications with similar characteristics, styles, and aesthetics. Although this implies the risk of reducing the corpus to an easily identifiable set of characteristics (which it is not), this strategy allows for a profound insight into AA HH LW's thematic and peritextual spectrum. I also note that these four publications were chosen to include photographs and represent issues relevant to discussing space and gender in AA HH LW. The epitexts, namely all the texts surrounding the memoir's publication, play a secondary role and are consulted only when they provide valuable insights.

Arguably, this selection of case studies represents a biased perspective, as all authors are from the East Coast of the United States. However, this is explained by the nature of AA HH LW and the selection criteria used. On the one hand, the number of publications that included photographs and were considered eligible for peritextual analysis is limited. Many publications in the corpus do not include photographs of the author. On the other hand, the combination of photographs, the presentation of topics central to the discussion of AA HH LW, and the peritextual characteristics argued for the selection of the four publications. For example, while many publications can be used to demonstrate the performance of stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity, the connection between street masculinity and urban space is rarely as prominent and visually present as in DMX's autobiography.

Paratexts

As much as a final publication consists of more than just a manuscript, more people than the author are involved in the publication process. The author is assisted, guided, and represented by editors, publishers, proofreaders, and other agents. Thus, the final publication is surrounded by other texts, some closely related to the manuscript, and some merely accompany and follow the publication. Coined by Genette, paratexts consist of "*peritext* (all the materials inside the book) and *epitext* (elements outside it such as interviews and reviews)" (Smith and Watson, 2010: 99).¹⁷⁴ As such, paratexts constitute the framework within which a text exists, describing the actions that precede, accompany, and follow its production. In the context of collaboratively written memoirs, it is in the paratexts that the contributions of co-authors, editors, publishers, and other genres become discernible (Couser, 2001b: 223; see also Lee, 2014: 1268).

¹⁷⁴ See also Genette (1997: 2-7) and Bode (2019: 364).

Reading Peritexts and Epitexts

According to Lee, paratexts, or extratextual devices as she calls them, have the purpose “of clarifying and authorizing the relationship between the authors and the circumstance under which they work” (2014: 1262). It is in the peritexts that the division of labor is most evident. Introductions, forewords, acknowledgments, prologues, or epilogues are read as references to the real world. They are given more authenticity because they are usually signed with the proper names of real people. Similarly, Bode has argued that proper names or personal pronouns in the title(s) establish the author as “its extradiegetic reference” (2019: 367).

Genette has helped develop reading practices that recognize paratexts as meaningful rather than neutral, reflecting the whole production, guiding its marketing, and influencing its reception. Marketing strategies influence the design of paratexts as books are designed and presented to appeal to specific reading audiences and their preferences. Moreover, the appearance of a book may change in different countries or at different times (Smith and Watson, 2010: 100). In addition to the makeup and design of the product, Whitlock argues that the epitexts, so those texts and practices that are separate from the actual work, are shaped by publishers and marketing departments to set the stage for the book’s consumption (2007: 56-59). These epitexts include interviews, book reviews, readings, posters, or promotional events. These texts create a corpus of references that may affirm or contradict the ideas of the main text. Various peritextual and epitextual practices are used to encourage specific forms of reading. Adding genre labels such as ‘autobiography’ or ‘memoir’ to a publication can lead to different readings and affect the reception and consumption of a publication. Designing the book’s peritext accordingly and supporting it with a thematically sensitive epitext can predetermine the reading and customize the readership (Smith and Watson, 2010: 100f).

Photographs

Around the same time that autobiographical writing became fashionable, the invention of photography added new ways to visualize the self and keep memories alive (Marcus, 2018: 97). Visual additions such as photographs, paintings, scribbling, or sketches play an extraordinary role in autobiographical writing. Especially concerning celebrities, an overemphasis on attention capital makes the celebrity network an “ecosystem dependent upon a regular flow of new images and the audience’s recognition of them” (Yelin, 2020: 203). At first glance, life writing and photography seem to have little in common, however, both “participate in a system of signs that we have learned to read...as highly indeterminate and unreliable” (Rugg, 1997: 13). Scholars have emphasized that photography and autobiography, alone and in combination,

are highly ambiguous and represent a complex hybrid that requires informed reading strategies (Christen, 2019: 653). Rugg, for example, suggests that a proper reading of photography considers the conditions under which a photograph is taken and consumed. Moreover, photographs visualize the self in different stages, achieving what the text cannot: “the unification...of author, name, *and* body” (1997: 13).

Barthes has argued that photography, as a keeper of the past, “does not invent; it is authentication itself” (1981: 87; see also Christen 2019: 653). While the written text refers only to itself, photographs provide a link to the ‘real’ world beyond the text and thus contribute to its authentication (Rugg, 1997: 2). From this, a second pact, based on Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, ensures the congruence between the verbal statements and the person presented in the photograph (Christen, 2019: 651). Visual evidence of relatives, friends, companions, places revisited, or significant life stages immediately authenticate the written text. However, photographs are never just a way to embellish the written text. They can “support, or be in tension with, or contradict the claims of the verbal text” (Smith and Watson, 2010: 96). In celebrity life writing, photographs become another way to create an illusion of intimacy by marketing the idea of access to a more ‘authentic’ version of the celebrity author (Yelin, 2020: 203). In the photographs accompanying the written text, the staging of the unmasked celebrity self comes into full effect.

However, the way photographs are integrated into the narrative betrays their status as stagings. The arrangement of the visuals is never careless, as celebrity authors, co-authors, editors, and publishers work together to create a specific public image and frame the celebrity according to an underlying agenda, ensuring maximum appeal to specific readerships and inviting explicit readings (Linke, 2019: 19f). Regardless of their function, photographs rely on verbal enunciations, such as captions, to make sense within the text (Christen, 2019: 650). Titles, captions, catalog entries, or superimposed writing contextualize the photograph and allow the viewer to *read* the photograph with the intended context in mind. Photographs without captions or written descriptions are contextualized by how they are embedded in the narrative and read by the viewer (Burgin, 1982: 144). Then, the internalized knowledge of the world, the social and historical meanings, and the photograph’s setting guide their understanding.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Note to the reader: In the following four case studies, I will examine the publications of Earl ‘DMX’ Simmons, Rashard ‘Common’ Lynn, Sandra ‘Pepa’ Denton, and Percy ‘MF Grimm’ Carey. In their respective publications, these authors present their lives and careers. In doing so, they refer to themselves by their real names and use their stage names only when referring to themselves as artists. In my analysis of the case studies, I respect this self-identification and use the artist’s real names.

For the sake of readability, I will refrain from including the year each time I quote from a case study.

An Urban Outlaw: DMX - *E.A.R.L. The Autobiography of DMX* (2002)

Contextual Background

Raised in the projects of Yonkers (New York), Earl Simmons, better known by his rap alias DMX, has maintained a lifelong connection to the streets. They are both ingrained in his identity as an artist and evident in the aesthetics of his autobiography. At the beginning of his career, his street identity made him almost unmarketable to the rap music popular in the 1990s. His music videos were shot in New York's poor neighborhoods and featured the rapper performing bare-chested amidst a male posse. His style was at odds with the pretentious visualizations of wealth by popular rappers like Ma\$e, P. Diddy, or the Notorious B.I.G. Simmons maintained his street authenticity well into his career and became notorious for his long-running legal troubles, which included charges of robbery, assault, carjacking, drug possession, probation violations, and tax evasion. He had a long history of prison sentences, drug rehabilitation, and relapses until his death from a drug-induced heart attack in 2021 (Slotnik 2021). Throughout his career, Simmons maintained strong ties to his hometown of Yonkers, and the Yonkers City Council commissioned a mural near the artist's former home on School Street (Fielding 2021).

Before releasing his autobiography, *E.A.R.L.*, in 2002, Simmons had already released three studio albums. He also appeared in the action films *Romeo Must Die* (2000) and *Exit Wounds* (2001). While four studio albums followed *E.A.R.L.*, Simmons starred in another twenty films, mainly as a drug dealer, thief, or pimp.¹⁷⁶ In 2006, the BET reality series *DMX: Soul of a Man* documented the rapper's life in six episodes (Nielsen 2021). In 2012, he appeared on VH1's *Couple Therapy* to reconcile with his wife but caused a stir when the TV therapists nudged him to open up about his estranged relationship with his mother. Brought to tears, Simmons acknowledged on television the abuse and neglect he suffered during his childhood (FyeStuff 2013).

His autobiography provides ample insight into a life and career shaped by drugs, violence, crime, and the quest for street respect. Raised by a single mother in Yonkers, an inner suburb of New York City, Simmons encountered the adult world of the streets at an early age. Like no other artist in the corpus, he emphasizes the relevance of urban public space to his approach to Hip Hop, his performance of masculinity, and his self-presentation as an outcast in society and the rap business. Simmons is considered a stereotypical rapper in terms of his self-representation, performance of masculinity, and penchant for violence. However, the author

¹⁷⁶ In her 25-year analysis of the roles in which rappers have been cast, Tyree concludes that DMX is part of a group of rappers who have frequently been cast in crime or drama films (2017: 134). She concludes that a high frequency of film roles allows rap artists to transcend their roles as rappers (2017: 140).

occasionally reveals his vulnerability. Thus, *E.A.R.L.* is more than the life story of a stereotypical male Hip Hop artist.

Peritextual Indices of Space and Gender

The title of Simmons' autobiography is a play on his real name, Earl, and a self-created motto expressing his approach to life: "Ever Always Real Life." Published by Harper Entertainment, an imprint of Harper Collins, *E.A.R.L.* runs to 346 pages, making it one of the most comprehensive accounts in the corpus. His co-author, Smokey D. Fountaine, is a former editor of the celebrity magazine *Giant* and has interviewed several music artists for his radio show (Fountaine, n.d.). Their collaboration is noted on the cover with an 'as told to' denominator and further specified by Fountaine in the prologue as the "oral history of DMX" (3). The collaborative agreement also manifests in the author's and co-author's contributions to the life account. Fountaine reflects on the interview situation by shifting the point of view from the rapper to the co-author in the prologue, epilogue, and five so-called interludes. The publication also includes an appendix of song lyrics, a notes section that mainly lists references to lyrics quoted in the text and the acknowledgments.

The cover of *E.A.R.L.*, characterized by black and rust-brown tones, features a full-length portrait of the artist in a pose with his head resting on his arms crossed in front of his chest. The visible body parts are uncovered, and the rapper wears a large ring and a gold bracelet. Above the portrait is the title of the autobiography in bold, rust-brown letters. An additional title appears below, clearly identifying the publication as an autobiography. The depiction of the artist's arms, shoulders, and clean-shaven skull foreshadows a vulnerability the author addresses later in the main text. The posture suggests a self-protective stance while his gaze seems pensive. The display of his bare chest emphasizes the author's toned physique and masculinity. This portrayal is congruent with Simmons' performance in music videos, presenting readers with a familiar image of the artist. However, his posture and thoughtful gaze add a tone of vulnerability to the full display of his body.

Through the combination of dark colors indicating a sinister tone and the artist's implied vulnerability, the cover can be seen as a juxtaposition of Simmons' street reputation and a promise to readers to get to know the artist's 'softer' side. His eyes do not engage with potential readers but imply a contemplative mood. In her analysis of celebrity memoirs, Yelin portrayed this as a sign of "denying access to...subjectivity," thereby refusing to become a transparent celebrity commodity (2020: 209). In addition, the two indecipherable jewelry pieces speak to the artist's restrained display of material wealth. The cover sets the tone for the following narrative, as it underscores the artist's performance of masculinity characterized by hardness,

implied here by the exhibition of his physique *and* more vulnerable aspects of identity, indicated by the public exposure of his naked body.

The large ‘X,’ interposed across the cover, is reminiscent of the most recognizable part of the artist’s alias while also alluding to the author’s ‘dark’ side, strictly speaking, a struggle with mental health. As a visual symbol, the ‘X’ is often quoted throughout Simmons’ career, for example, in the names of his albums or songs. As a result, Simmons has translated his rap alias to ‘Dark Man X’ in his lyrics and album aesthetics. In African American culture, the association of the ‘X’ with the Civil Rights Movement and Malcolm X quickly comes to mind. However, Simmons derived his alias from the Oberheim DMX, one of the early digital drum machines that became indispensable to beat-making and mixing in early Hip Hop (Nielsen 2021).

The book wrap and back flap add further context to the rapper’s life and supposed legacy. For example, the first part of the wrap hails Simmons as an “international superstar” whose story is equated with “the kind of rags-to-riches story that has molded some of the best American heroes” (book flap). Moreover, he portrays himself as an outsider whose “hate and distrust [for] the world around him” may have led to a violent and criminal past but ultimately culminated in global success and appeal (book flap). In the usual fashion of celebrity memoirs, the back of the book flap lures readers with the promise of unprecedented access to a “dark journey of a boy who became a man, the man who became an artist, and the artist who became an icon.” Here, the artist’s maturation from boy to international superstar is as straightforwardly articulated as the author’s social advancement.

The Photo Section: A Documentary of Public Spaces

While *E.A.R.L.* is extraordinary in its sheer length, the scope of its visual apparatus is unparalleled among the publications of the corpus. The autobiography contains seventy-eight photographs that vary in size, color, and placement. Among them is a high-quality photo inlay consisting of fifteen color photographs placed in the center of the publication. Most of these photographs are promotional shots that have appeared on studio albums. Their style, color, size, portrait character, and prominent placement contrast with the considerable number of sixty-three black-and-white photographs scattered throughout the main text. Of the sixty-three black-and-white photographs, twenty-six pictures show the rapper in various stages of life, including childhood, adolescence, or in the company of family members. A second group of twenty-three images focuses exclusively on urban settings such as buildings, streets, yards, and corners. A third, smaller group of fourteen photographs features posters, flyers, promotional shots, graffiti tags, art, and handwritten lyrics that document the author’s journey as a rapper. The

juxtaposition of photographs, images, and additional visual elements creates a dense intertextual network that provides context for the main text.

Photographs and images, placed alongside the text, enrich the personal anecdotes, and provide the reader with an immediate reference to the event. Childhood memories mentioned in the main text are directly framed by photographs showing the artist as a toddler in the company of his mother, siblings, or other relatives. Here, the author appears exclusively in interiors of a private or public nature. Ten photographs show the artist as a child in various interiors of the family home (6-19), while three photographs show him as a student at school (17, 24, 28). The restriction to childhood photographs of interiors is due to the author's limited freedom of movement because of his mother's strict upbringing (21). Years later, his young mother's overburdening of the boy manifests itself in what the author describes as abuse and isolation. Long periods of loneliness and no opportunity to leave the house or interact with other children contributed to the author's development as a loner. Simmons describes how he was shunned by other children when he went outside because "parents got scared of kids they never saw outside" (32).

While childhood memories are typical in life narratives, the photographic motifs shift to public exteriors as soon as memories of adolescence come into play. Most photographs are of buildings, houses, and yards, with no distinguishing features or people visible. A few of the photographs have captions that provide additional information. Because of the lack of information, the reader is confronted with a series of empty urban spaces that only gain meaning through the author's narrative. This arrangement suggests a strong dependence of the visual narrative on the main text. The written narrative, supposedly from the author's perspective, gives meaning to these places.

The number, positioning, and quality of the photographs depicting only urban spaces suggest a high relevance of the public sphere space to the author's personal development and musical career. In addition, personal anecdotes that revolve around homelessness, street crime, and drug abuse underscore the relevance of urban space. It frames Simmons as an artist influenced by street culture, the quest for respect, and the appeal of Hip Hop practices primarily performed in public. The following sections explore the author's self-image as an outcast, which I argue is most evident in his youth and rap career descriptions. The significance of many public and few private spaces further informs the author's performance of a typical 1990s Hip Hop masculinity.

Public Spaces: Between Freedom and Isolation

In his autobiography, Simmons draws attention to various public and private spaces. In addition to emphasizing inner-city areas in the main text and the photo section, he preferentially assigns positive meanings to exterior spaces. Urban landmarks such as streets, street corners, public courtyards, or abandoned buildings are associated with freedom, independence, or the potential for solitude. For example, the author recalls a time when, as a student, he chose not to live with his mother and instead became homeless: “I did a lot of thinking when I was out there by myself. I was lonely, but I was determined not to go home” (64). In addition to escaping an alienated home and the prospect of undisturbed thinking, freedom of movement was a motivating factor in seeking out public spaces. The opportunity to run made him “feel free and powerful” (72). As a result, he spent considerable time in the public spaces of his neighborhood, where he sought respect and power. While frequenting these adult spaces, Simmons, then a minor, engaged in beatboxing, the pursuit of respect, or crime. In this way, the streets contributed significantly to his maturation as a man and an artist.

As a homeless adolescent still in need of protection, the author presents himself as a pariah who finds comfort in the company of other outcasts. Instead of relying on a male posse for protection, he expresses a preference for stray dogs, which he values for their loyalty and tenacity. Simmons describes the dogs as providing companionship and compensating for his vulnerability on the streets. He recalls how he gained confidence, demanded respect and, as a result, perceived adult public spaces as less threatening (67, 167-171).

Transformed into his life world, Simmons appropriated public exteriors for practices usually reserved for private settings, including sexual intercourse. The author expresses a preference for sexual intercourse in public spaces, including “the park, on the roof, in the staircase” (80). In his case, even sexual acts, and thus, sexualized spaces, are relocated to urban exteriors. Concerning the sexualization of urban spaces, Simmons explicitly mentions the “AK,” a side street in Yonkers. This place is highlighted for its potential for sexualized violence “because of how dark it was at night, it’s also where a lot of girls in Yonkers got raped” (113f). However, as a man with a violent reputation, Simmons presents himself as immune to the dangers of urban space, moving through such spaces unharmed and even using them to evade police patrols.

Simmons writes about seeking out women he persistently courted for sex, calling himself a “wolf” to emphasize his animal-like sex drive and imply a hunting instinct (79). Here, consciously or not, the author repeats the narrative of the unbridled, animal-like sex drive ascribed to black men to justify their enslavement, segregation, and corporal punishment. The

sexuality of black men has been misrepresented and exaggerated for centuries, paraded in rap music, and circulated in mainstream media and popular culture.¹⁷⁷ The metaphor of the wolf transcends beyond negative notions of black masculinity. In both his life account and his lyrics, Simmons employs animal metaphors to group the population of his neighborhood into wolves and their prey, namely women, whom he calls “‘hood rats who hung out in the street...and didn’t mind fucking a nigga outside” (80). The use of ‘rats’ alludes to the habit of spending time outdoors, either to escape cramped living conditions or to work as prostitutes. According to the author, these women did not resist his sexual advances but seemed to consent.

One of the many crimes Simmons discusses in his autobiography is car theft. While robbery and theft are a means of making money in the inner-city neighborhood, he portrays car theft as a fun pastime. Stolen cars, however, are not a means for him to explore the boundaries of his neighborhood or escape the dreary existence of his district because, according to him, “[there] wasn’t anywhere to go. I just wanted to ride” (109). The numerous cars that Simmons claims to have stolen in his autobiography were only used for a few days so that he could get rid of them and avoid the police. Car theft was less a means to an end than an adventure, with the thrill of theft and police chase adding to the appeal. The author’s statement that there was no place worth fleeing reflects the attachment to his Yonkers neighborhood. Even distant journeys made possible with a car are not an interesting destination for him. Crossing his neighborhood in a stolen car is of particular value to him.

From an early age, Simmons was involved in adult public spaces and committed various crimes. The crimes of his youth and adolescence are well documented in his autobiography, where Simmons enthusiastically and unrepentantly describes robberies, beatings, and other criminal activities. He justifies his violent crimes with the need to support himself, equating them with work: “It was a thrill, but it was also a job” (109). Consequently, indulging in a performance of street masculinity contributes to the author’s perceived maturation, his frequenting of more adult spaces, and a series of conflicts with the law, as well as several jail terms during the author’s adolescence.

Prison Masculinity: Aggression and Creativity

Simmons began committing crimes as a child and reflects on several prison sentences in his autobiography (54). Toughness and violence, as the defining characteristics of street masculinity, play a role long before the author describes his prison experience. However, it is in prison where the author’s performance of masculinity is most pronounced. From an early

¹⁷⁷ For example, in blaxploitation movies, see pp. 3 and 33.

age, the author internalized that it was unacceptable to show weakness and vulnerability. Reflecting on his first arrest for shoplifting at the age of seven and his subsequent transfer to the juvenile division of the city jail, the author notes a crucial difference between street and prison masculinity. Before his arrest, Simmons “thought [he] was the man” as he accumulated material wealth and respect by committing crimes such as robbery or burglary (54). However, the younger self’s confidence is undermined when he confesses his fear of frequenting the public spaces surrounding the city jail (54). This example illustrates the inner conflict of Simmons as a premature person striving to be accepted as a man but cannot hide the insecurity and fragility of his age. However, the author’s attraction to public spaces frequented mainly by adults led him to drugs, violence, and a life of crime. Those around him did not ignore this direction, and the author acknowledges attempts by family and strangers to dissuade him.

Two anecdotes invoke the potential for sexualized violence among prison inmates as a deterrent. While a police officer scares Simmons with an explicit warning of sexual abuse (55), family members only hint at “what they do to boys in jails” (119). Both warnings include not only the fear of sexualized violence and physical harm but also, to a much greater extent, the fear of being perceived as weak, less than a man, and deserving of victimization. Remarkably, the people who issue these warnings do not consider the humiliation of incarceration, the loss of freedom and privacy, or the absence of family as persuasive arguments for ending the author’s criminal career. These constraints are considered tolerable for men who commit crimes. Far worse is the potential defamation and loss of power as a man on the receiving end of homosexual intercourse. Paradoxically, the rationale of prison masculinity determines that the inmate who forces sexual intercourse on another man is not automatically considered homosexual. In contrast, the person who is unable to resist rape attempts or who voluntarily agrees to sex in the hope of protection is characterized as weak, feminine, and presumed to be homosexual (Martyniuk, 2014: 6). More dominant and aggressive inmates often use this twisted logic to legitimize sexualized violence against younger, inexperienced, and vulnerable inmates. As a result, in order to survive in prison, inmates must rigorously and convincingly perform hypermasculinity (Pemberton, 2013: 168).

Simmons embodied this strategy throughout his various prison terms. In his autobiography, the author emphasizes his attitude upon entering a minimum-security prison on Long Island: “Don’t say nothing to me... don’t even fucking look at me... I’m not saying nothing to nobody and I ain’t going to ask you for shit, so don’t ask me for shit!” (119). His statement vividly articulates the claim to independence and autonomy coupled with aggressiveness. Interpersonal behavior, asking for or accepting help from others, is interpreted as a sign of weakness and can

invite victimization. Simmons cultivates hypermasculinity through his various prison sentences and maintains it outside of prison. As he ages, his street reputation facilitates his performance of prison masculinity and allows him to take advantage of weaker inmates (120).

On several occasions, however, this led to an increase in his prison sentence in the form of solitary confinement. The author portrays himself as already hardened to long periods of solitude because of his childhood, life on the streets, and other prison sentences. During an extended stay in a juvenile detention center, the author once again portrays himself as a loner who, although he has access to outdoor activities, prefers to read in the library. While he is content to read alone, a confrontation with other students reveals racial undertones: “All you ever do is read. What? You wanna be a white boy, or something?” (71). This statement implies an attitude that renders solitary indoor activities, such as reading, reserved for whites and atypical for African American youth. Here, reading is constituted as a proxy for classical, standardized education, which is often viewed with suspicion by groups living under the value systems of street culture. Schools, as formal places of learning, are rejected in favor of the streets, which provide more practical skills. Moreover, it implies a class distinction underpinned by ‘race,’ suggesting that reading as a substitute for middle-class education reserved for white children is futile for African American youth.

Loneliness permeates the autobiography, manifesting itself, for example, in the emptiness of the photographs that accompany the text. Interestingly, Simmons’ loneliness is both self-imposed and a result of his addictive and criminal behavior. Although he experiences long periods of solitude, the author characterizes these periods not as depressing but as providing him with time for reflection and, thus, an enhanced sense of self. In the isolation of a prison cell, he feels “freedom and comfort” and, stabilized by his Christian faith, writes song lyrics and prayers and hones his skills in verbal battles with other inmates (209). Like other rappers, Simmons uses the prison cell as a creative space. Reflecting on the loneliness of his prison experience, Simmons describes his lifelong frustrations as a free-flowing source of creativity:

The jail was X’s home. See, DMX was the rapper. But X, X was someone different. X was hunger. X was rage. And when I found X locked up in that cell, I knew that I was losing Earl....I was still writing, but now my phrases were hostile and my stories were dark. Unconsciously, my words formed sentences that were loaded with the anger and frustration I carried with me every second of every day (177).

With no means of social interaction, Simmons embraces his ‘dark’ side - frustration, depression, and a tendency toward violence - as part of his identity. Thus, different layers of his identity develop depending on the spaces he inhabits. Born as Earl Simmons, the author preserves this

identity in private circles among family and friends. On stage and during Hip Hop performances, he becomes DMX, the rapper and lyricist. In the isolation of a prison cell, however, his anger emerges as 'X,' an even more ruthless identity, and manifests in his lyrics, which he uses to express his individuality.

Given the isolation and inaccessibility of prisons, the lack of images showing prison interiors is not surprising. The visual apparatus does, however, include several photographs of prisons, jails, and rehabilitation facilities from the outside. The narrative includes black and white photographs of the Andrus Children's Home (42, 50), the Yonkers City Jail, the Alexander Street Youth Division (54), and the Children's Village for Boys (70). Again, the black-and-white photographs show the buildings only from a distance and are captioned to contextualize the otherwise inexpressive image. An exception to this, however, is a photograph from the McCormick Juvenile Hall that shows the author posing with a radio recorder (101). The photo underscores the author's motivation to rap because he decided to become a rapper while serving time.

Hip Hop Practices

Given the importance of public spaces in the author's childhood and adolescence, it is unsurprising that they also play a crucial role in his creative awakening and path to Hip Hop, not least because the culture is primarily performed in public spaces. Radio broadcasts in the Children's Village in the early 1980s ignited his passion for Hip Hop. Specifically, he mentions the radio stations 98.7 KISS FM and WLBS, which did not play rap music for fear of alienating listeners at the time (74f). Challenged by rap competitions with other youths, Simmons honed his rapping skills to join the 'game' and found a niche in beatboxing. He made a name for himself as a talented beatboxer but lost interest when he noticed how much (female) attention MCs attracted (102).

Released from prison with songs in his head, Simmons used the public spaces of his community to market himself by writing lyrics, selling mixtapes (139), and challenging other artists in rap battles (126). In numerous public exchanges of freestyle lyrics, Simmons defeated and verbally 'emasculated' his opponents with insults and ridicule in front of their posse and female companions. He describes a sense of power derived from dominating rap battles and publicly embarrassing other artists (128). His preferred music video aesthetic powerfully illustrates the author's interpretation of Hip Hop. To demonstrate his street authenticity, his music video had to be "as dirty and grimy as possible" to contrast his style with the "superclean, grass is so green, sky is so blue, multicolored look" of the highly commercialized artists of the time (280). Both in prison and on the streets, Simmons presents himself as an eager songwriter

who needs little more than a few ideas and a piece of paper. The descriptions of his first attempts to break into Hip Hop are characterized by a relentlessness and determination that cannot be stopped even by further prison sentences. His hypermasculinity is expressed when he replaces beatboxing with rapping, hoping to attract more women whose accumulation will earn him respect in other men's eyes.

In addition to using the streets of his neighborhood as a stage for rap battles, Simmons, like few other artists in the corpus, traces his early career stages both verbally and visually. He participated in rap battles and live performances at the local community center and his school's gymnasium. Both public venues are depicted in the publication; however, while the image of the gymnasium shows an empty gym (143), the community center is represented in two images, one from the outside (103) and the other showing the artist during a live performance in front of a crowd (106). As Simmons addresses his early rap career, the motif of the photographs shifts to career memorabilia that reflect the improvisational aesthetic of his early Hip Hop career.¹⁷⁸ These images include an early mixtape (124), his first publicity shot (133), flyers for live performances (140, 145, 165, 189), a first written biography (166), and merchandise articles (186ff). Thus, in true Hip Hop fashion, the artist presents his humble beginnings with a series of 'firsts,' engaging in the production of Hip Hop knowledge and identifying with a narrative arc common in celebrity life writing.

Simmons' careful attention to public space contributes to his framing as a social outcast. The artist represents himself as a pariah who, from an early age, preferred the freedom of the streets to the company of his family members. Several examples from the visual narrative support this framing. First, most photographs showing the author among family members are deliberately placed along passages dealing with dependence (childhood) or responsibility for others (family photos). The remaining images are primarily of public spaces and buildings known only to the author, objects from his Hip Hop career, or stage performances that focus on the author himself.

Second, the author's descriptions of his time on the streets and his fondness for stray dogs underscore the lonely and independent tone of the autobiography. Like stray dogs, Simmons portrays himself as a loner who willingly leaves the safety of his home. Despite the harsh conditions, he imbues his self-chosen life on the streets with a sense of serenity. The example of Simmons vividly illustrates how inner-city conditions, including cramped housing, crowded living situations, and the prevalence of single-parent families, can contribute to reframing the home from a comfortable and protected private space to a space that is rejected and fled. Instead,

¹⁷⁸ The photographs reflect the do-it-yourself mentality ingrained in early Hip Hop culture, see p. 99 and 134.

as his example shows, the public spaces of the hood and the streets become inclusive, while the parental home is associated with isolation and discomfort. Although a preference for public spaces is evident, the autobiography contains a crucial exception: the grandparental home.

Isolation in Private Spaces

The manuscript and the visual narrative of *E.A.R.L.* emphasize the importance of public spaces in the author's identity development. In contrast, private spaces seem to play a secondary role, both textually and visually. Nevertheless, private spaces are distinguished by the meanings that the author assigns to them. Private spaces are typically associated with the potential for interpersonal relationships, familiarity, and comfort. However, the previous sections have indicated that Simmons presents himself as appropriating, preferably public spaces, for these purposes. On the other hand, private spaces, especially the author's maternal home, are almost entirely rejected as spaces of confinement, isolation, and loneliness. Moreover, the romanticization of the grandmother's home as the only place of comfort and family life highlights the conflicts that arise in single-mother families, many of which are found in inner-city and suburban neighborhoods.¹⁷⁹

Like other artists, Simmons addresses significant relationships, influential figures, and momentous events, such as his parents' separation, in describing his childhood and adolescence. At this point, the photographs exclusively feature family scenes in private interiors, depicting the author's mother, father, sister, and other relatives. In addition to several photographs showing the author as a child, there is only one photograph showing his mother (15) and father (23). The author illustrates his young single mother's challenges in raising two young children in "a small, dark, one-bedroom apartment" while living on welfare (8, 13). The family's location in one of the city's many high-rise projects limited his mother's ability to care for the young boy. As a result, Simmons was rarely allowed to play outside with other children (21, 56). For example, he describes his compulsion to appropriate his immediate surroundings, for instance, by playing in the project hallways or the children's room. While he coped well for the time being, his loneliness fueled his imagination, compulsion to move, and desire to leave home (21). The isolation, loneliness, and discomfort the author felt in his mother's home contrasted sharply with the freedom he experienced in the public spaces and the comfort and tenderness associated with his grandparents' home.

¹⁷⁹ Over the time of his career, DMX has expressed profound gratitude for his grandmother whom he dedicated the song "I Miss You" on his 2001 album *The Great Depression*.

Like many other writers who grew up in inner-city communities, Simmons gives his grandmother's house a positive meaning. The rapper writes that many of his family members "lived in the projects or tiny apartments" and frequently visited his grandmother's house, which became "the home base for [his] father's side of the family...and anytime I could make it over there, four or five of my aunts and uncles would be there, too" (34). In addition to the spacious interior where family gatherings occur, the house's exterior is highlighted by a backyard providing space for almost unimpeded movement.¹⁸⁰ This passage of the text is accompanied by three photographs showing the exterior of the grandmother's house (33, 35, 36). In terms of the quality and depth of the photographs, however, there is no striking contrast to the earlier photographs showing inner-city buildings. Although the author's grandmother is considered an important attachment figure, there are no photographs of her in the autobiography. The number of photographs depicting female family members or companions is relatively small. Besides Simmons' wife (160, 287), only his mother, sister, and aunt appear in photographs. Given that the author presents himself as promiscuous in many of his lyrics and the autobiographical text, the diminished role of women in the visual apparatus is striking. However, this may be due to his attempt not to interfere with his wife's reputation or children's lives.

Several male rappers acknowledge their first sex in their life writing. Simmons also describes his first sexual encounter with an older woman at fourteen.¹⁸¹ He recalls the incident in his autobiography, emphasizing its non-consensual nature and stating that he "was nervous as hell...and almost died in the process. But I was in the game" (79). The author's declaration of instant maturation portrays sex as an initiation into masculinity that dispenses with external validation. Being a man is thus closely linked to attracting and pleasing (older) women. At the same time, membership in the 'game' of masculinity is exclusive and becomes a prize worth suffering for. The ability to sexually attract older women at a young age is considered proof of masculinity and potency. With this anecdote, the author can support his claim of hypermasculinity at a young age. That he did not even enjoy his first sexual intercourse speaks to the fact that it serves as an entry into men's ranks and endured to gain respect and recognition.

Conclusion

As an artist, DMX embodied grit, hypermasculinity, and street authenticity throughout his rap career. He was cast as a strong and silent character in numerous Hollywood action films and

¹⁸⁰ See p. 118.

¹⁸¹ Incidents of statutory rape, although rarely identified as such, have also been acknowledged by other male rappers, see p. 136)

transferred a similar aesthetic to his lyrics and music videos. Remaining faithful to his hometown of Yonkers, DMX became synonymous with ‘keeping it real, even more so in his rejection of mainstream Hip Hop aesthetics and styles. The central themes of his autobiography are the influences of street culture, street and prison masculinity, and a criminal career. The rapper’s interpretation of street authenticity translates into a high exposure to public spaces and makes public exteriors a central theme of the autobiography. Public exteriors dominate the life account in both the written and visual narratives. The author characterizes public exteriors as meaningful spaces used for various purposes, including maturation, the accumulation of respect, the performance of hypermasculinity, sexual intercourse, and various Hip Hop practices such as beatboxing, rap battles, graffiti, or self-marketing.

The example of Simmons has shown that high exposure to public spaces fosters an inclination toward hypermasculinity, as it is necessary to engage in street and prison culture. The prison is described as a public space that, upon reflection, prompts the rapper to admit vulnerability after being confronted with mental stress. The prison cell as a secluded interior is described as a creative space for reflection and lyrical composition and allows for the admission of vulnerability.

Although Hip Hop practices such as graffiti, beatboxing, and rapping play a role in the author’s autobiography, and the author also addresses practices such as rap battles, the basement studio is absent as a private creative space. Given the frequent appearance of the studio throughout the corpus, its absence in Simmons’ autobiography indicates a strong focus on public spaces. Simmons presents himself as an artist whose circumstances left him no choice but to embrace the public spaces around him and reinterpret them for his purposes. In addition, his departure from the familiar Hip Hop video aesthetic of lavish parties, luxury, jewelry, and provocatively dressed women stems from his strong connection to the street and his credo, “Ever Always Real Life,” which reflects his street credibility that he continues to build even after a successful career.

As this case study showed, male authors often present their masculinities as characterized by hypermasculinity, a devaluation of women, and an identification with inner-city public spaces. Although Simmons’ autobiography also reveals cracks in the author’s performance of hypermasculinity, it can be considered as representative for a significant group of male authors who identify with stereotypical masculinity and draw their credibility from public inner-city spaces. Within AA HH LW, only a few authors do not identify themselves with this popular representation of masculinity. Lonnie Rashid ‘Common’ Lynn is one of these exceptions, as he presents himself as an alternative to stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity in both of his memoirs.

However, his memoirs also show parallels to an ideal of masculinity that strives for acceptance in the public spaces of the inner city and among other men.

An Atypical Rapper: Common - *One Day It'll All Make Sense* (2011), *Let Love Have the Last Word* (2019)

Contextual Background

In 1992, Chicago rapper Lonnie Rashid Lynn released his first album under his previous pseudonym, Common Sense. Since then, his musical output has grown to include more than a dozen studio albums and several film songs, including *Glory*, which was featured in the 2014 historical drama *Selma* and won an Academy Award. Instead of dealing with machismo, misogyny, and anecdotes of violent encounters, Lynn blends his lyrics with social criticism, political activism, and interpersonal relationships. As a result, his music has become synonymous with ‘conscious’ rap, a label he initially rejected as synonymous with “a label of self-righteous” that “disconnects [an artist from] the street and the average people” (Yarbrough, 2005: 56). However, when he compared himself to other black artists considered ‘conscious,’ including Marvin Gaye, John Coltrane, or KRS-One, Lynn came to embrace the label (56).

As of 2024, however, Lynn’s fame extends beyond his accolades and accomplishments in music. He has starred in several films alongside Hollywood actors, including Denzel Washington (*American Gangster*), Keanu Reeves (*Street Kings*), and Morgan Freeman (*Wanted*).¹⁸² Ten years before his first memoir, he authored two children’s books dedicated to inspiring self-love and independence in young readers (Common and West 2005, 2006). His most recent contribution to the book market came in early 2024 when he published a book on mental and spiritual healing. In 2011, Lynn participated in a celebration of American poetry at the White House hosted by Michelle Obama. His embodiment of a ‘conscious’ rapper and his work with children, “especially trying to get them to focus on poetry as opposed to some of the negative influences of life on the streets,” prompted the invitation (MacAskill 2011). The conservative news channel Fox News criticized his performance at the White House and cited false arguments about the rapper’s negative influence and alleged controversies.

By the time his first memoir was published, Lynn was already known to a wide audience for his work on nine studio albums, ten feature films, and the much-discussed White House performance. His self-identification as a ‘conscious’ artist and his ‘atypicality’ in terms of Hip Hop authenticity is manifested in his two memoirs, *One Day It'll All Make Sense* and *Let Love Have the Last Word*. Besides Lynn, only Darryl McDaniels has published two memoirs in the AA HH LW archive. Interestingly, both artists devoted their first memoirs primarily to their

¹⁸² Tyree’s findings that apply to Simmons may also apply to Lynn (2017:140; see p. 178). Although she does not mention Lynn’s acting career, he may also have transcended his rap persona through his long acting career.

lives and music careers, while revealing newfound personal tragedies in their second memoirs.¹⁸³

Peritextual Indices of Space and Gender

Lynn's first memoir, *One Day It'll All Make Sense*, was published in 2011 by Atria Publishing Group, an imprint of Simon & Schuster. The memoir was written in collaboration with Adam Bradley, a professor of English and founding director of the Laboratory for Race and Popular Culture at the University of California (Bradley, n.d.). The book is 305 pages long and includes an additional style guide provided by Lynn's mother, Dr. Mahalia Hines. His mother, a former teacher and principal and president of the board of the author's Common Ground Foundation, is an influential female figure. Her significance to the author's life is manifested in an additional voice commenting on the son's life and career in the preface and the main text.

Compared to many AA HH LW covers colored in black, gray, or blue, the memoir stands out for its striking cover design in bright yellow. It contains thirty color photographs printed on photographic paper and inserted in the center of the publication. This photo inlay traces the author's life from childhood (Photos #3-10) through adolescence (Photos #11 and 12) and adulthood (Photo #13) to his early career (Photos #14-16). In addition, a trinity of sepia-toned images (Photos #17-19) depicts past performances in the studio and on stage, while numerous images show the author in the company of former lovers, fellow artists, his daughter, fans, Barack Obama, and on a movie set (Photos #20-25 and Photos #26-29). Finally, one photo (Photo #27) shows his mother in the company of Donda West, the mother of fellow rapper and close friend Kanye West. The final image of the photo insert shows Lynn speaking his mind at the Lincoln Theatre in Washington D.C. in 2010. Each photograph is accompanied by a short explanation written from the author's point of view. The chronological arrangement of the photographs and the self-reflexive tone of the captions create a visual narrative detached from the main text, as there are no mutual references between the written and the visual narrative.

The cover of *One Day It'll All Make Sense* features the title, the names of the author and co-author, and the book's praise as a *New York Times* bestseller. Instead of a genre label, the book is identified as a memoir by an excerpt from a review by African American civil rights activist Maya Angelou. Close to the spine on the left side of the cover is a visual replica of the Chicago skyline, while all textual elements are arranged in the center of the cover. As the author of the memoir, Lynn is prominently featured on the right side, giving readers a visual reference to the

¹⁸³ While McDaniel's rap career is best represented in his 2001 memoir, *King of Rock*, his second memoir, *Ten Ways Not to Commit Suicide*, published 15 years later, focuses on personal issues such as depression and alcoholism, as well as the artist's discovery that he was adopted.

name on the cover. The author's appearance on the cover demonstrates his atypicality among other AA HH LW authors. The front cover of *One Day It'll All Make Sense* shows the author dressed in a suit and polished shoes.¹⁸⁴ This appearance reinforces the author's embodiment of a professional artist whose interests go beyond rapping and include acting, activism, and political involvement. By choosing this persona and refraining from implicit rap references on the cover, readings of the author as a stereotypical Hip Hop practitioner are avoided. Instead, the artist's appearance suggests a higher-class background, epitomized by the suit and professional demeanor that allows the author access to higher circles of politicians, activists, and influential figures.

While the cover withholds any further details, the blurb purposefully leads the reader to recognize Lynn as "a conscious artist...embracing themes [like] love and struggle in his songs." The blurb's content description refers to Lynn's status as a less stereotypical rapper when it highlights his penchant for "love and struggle in his songs." Furthermore, a review by Chicago-based magazine *Soul Train* on the back cover marks the difference between stereotypical Hip Hop artists and Common's approach to rap by stating that "[in] a world where [Hip Hop] is filled with egos, swag, and gossip, *One Day It'll All Make Sense* brings a conscious and encouraging change." *Soul Train* intends to place the author in a camp of rappers who feign disinterest in the display of material wealth, fame, and narcissism. Including this description in the publication further frames Common as an atypical rapper who embodies a critical and 'conscious' voice in a culture primarily focused on superficiality and self-centeredness.

The pages immediately preceding the manuscript praise the publication with a list of eight endorsements from a literary review magazine (*Kirkus Reviews*), an online Hip Hop magazine (*Hip Hop DX*), activist Maya Angelou, writers James McBride, Jelani Cobb, and Touré, record producer Quincy Jones, and rapper Queen Latifah. The combination of voices from different entertainment industry sectors reflects the author's artistic commitment and signals a professional career beyond rap music. Reviews effusively praise Common's skills as a "true artist and a writer of deep talent," and even a "poet" who has delivered a "powerful... thoughtful and beautiful book." While the description leaves Common's achievements in rap music unclear, the reviews emphasize his interest in writing. Another example of this framing is a short list of children's books written by the artist. It is irrelevant whether readers are familiar with Lynn's previous literary works, as the list merely adds 'author' to his skill set, further distinguishing him from stereotypical rappers whose primary interest is rapping.

¹⁸⁴ The publications of Wyclef Jean, DJ Run, Timbaland, and Jermaine Dupri also feature their authors in business clothing.

In the book's preface, Lynn lays out the path of his narrative and gives the reader insights into how to read *One Day It'll All Make Sense*. He also lays out his preference for writing, which manifests itself in the form of letters, lyrics, notes, books, or journals (2011: 6f). To reflect on this preference, each chapter of the memoir begins with a letter from the author to a person, real or imagined, or to an event that has influenced the author's life. These include letters to his parents, his daughter, his former partner Erykah Badu, a deceased cousin, fellow artists Kanye West and Jay Dilla, his unborn child, his younger self, Chicago native and lynching victim Emmett Till, and Hip Hop itself. The diversity of addressees and the variety of intimate relationships addressed in the course of the main text mark a distinct difference from the public demeanor and textual self-representation of rappers like 50 Cent, DMX, Prodigy, Rick Ross, or Ice-T, to name but a few. The memoir also begins with a rare glimpse into his mother's initial reservations about her son's journey into Hip Hop.¹⁸⁵

Let Love Have the Last Word

Only eight years after *One Day It'll All Make Sense*, Lynn released his second memoir, *Let Love Have the Last Word*, a collaboration with Mensah Demary, editor-in-chief of *Soft Skull Press*, an independent publisher of books on art and culture. It was published by Atria Books and is over 215 pages long. Each chapter is preceded by a quote from an influential African American political activist, author, or popular figure, including Martin Luther King, Frederick Douglass, Khalil Gibran, Muhammad Ali, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. While Lynn's mother's voice appears several times in his first memoir, his second publication contains no viewpoints other than the author's. In *Let Love Have the Last Word*, Lynn attempts to unravel his sense of self by exploring love in its many forms. He openly reflects on failed relationships, romantic advances, personal defeats, well-being, or his role as a father. Rather than pursuing an individualistic agenda, he foregrounds the multiple, complex relationships that have influenced his life and goes beyond the range of intimate concessions other rappers are willing to address in their life accounts.

The cover of *Let Love Have the Last Word* continues the framing of him as a non-stereotypical rapper. The author appears on the cover casually dressed in a white sweater and pants on the cover, directly facing the reader in a full-frontal portrait. While the cover of *One Day It'll All Make Sense* seems to imply movement, on the cover of his second memoir Lynn appears static and awaiting the reader's interrogation. The book's cover introduces the reader

¹⁸⁵ In the AA HH LW archive, only two artists besides Lynn directly incorporate other people's voices into their narratives. While Questlove allows input from his editor, only Alicia Keys incorporates her mother's voice.

to the contents of the memoir and provides peripheral information about the author while primarily framing Common as a multi-talented and respected artist.

The cover identifies the book as a memoir, followed by a statement of purpose addressed to the reader. The epilogue contains the acknowledgments and a list of songs that influenced the author's writing process. The memoir is complemented by 28 grainy, black-and-white, partially overlapping photos of various sizes documenting Common's Hope and Redemption Tour in 2017 and 2018, which took the artist through several California prisons as part of his nonprofit organization *Imagine Justice*. The photos, which appear without captions, show Lynn interacting with various inmates and performing for prison audiences. Interestingly, these photos exclusively show the author in public settings, interacting with other people. As a result, the photo inlay provides a visual narrative that contrasts with the highly intimate and private tone of the main text. However, this may be the essence of the memoir: finding love in strange places and showing love to marginalized and otherwise neglected groups.

Like Lynn's first memoir, the blurb for *Let Love Have the Last Word* frames the author as a "[courageous], insightful, brave, and characteristically authentic" artist. Here, the similarity to Darryl McDaniel's second memoir is compelling, as his memoir deliberately markets a revelation of childhood abuse as "his first public reveal." It is surprising, however, how quickly the topic is dealt with in the main text, where it is covered for seven pages at the end of the memoir. While *One Day It'll All Make Sense* blends a retrospective of Lynn's Hip Hop career with insights into relationships with his mother, daughter, and former partners, *Let Love Have the Last Word* eschews extensive references to Hip Hop and his rapping career. Although Lynn's emotional range is more pronounced in his second memoir, both of his memoirs illustrate the artist's self-identification as a 'conscious,' less stereotypical rapper, and considerate artist and activist.

In his second memoir, *Let Love Have the Last Word*, private spaces are even less visually articulated, as the photo section contains only images from Common's tour through California prisons. As a result, Lynn's second memoir presents an interesting paradox between a written narrative that contains highly emotional and personal encounters from the author's life and a visual narrative that neither contradicts nor supports these passages. The introductory chapter of *Let Love Have the Last Word* illustrates the focus on privacy and intimacy well and sets the tone for the remaining memoir. Over five pages, the introduction mentions the word 'mirror' four times (2019: 5-9). The introduction reiterates a literal look into the self by using the motif of the mirror as a tool for self-reflection several times before introducing reflection as the main purpose of the memoir.

Public spaces play an important role in Lynn's memoirs and self-image as a 'conscious' rapper and influential activist. Typically for a rapper, he also pays tribute to his hometown of Chicago. The cover of *One Day It'll All Make Sense* brandishes the Chicago skyline, emphasizing the artist's hometown as a central place endowed with symbolic capital. Indeed, throughout his first memoir, Lynn repeatedly invokes Chicago's influence on his life, artistic development, and personality: "One of the strongest emotions I felt outside of my family was for a place, for Chicago. Chicago is in my blood" (2011: 18).¹⁸⁶ After the Great Migration, Chicago became a center of African American culture and identity. In addition to being his hometown, the artist associates the city with his family's history and commitment to African American issues. He does this, for example, by beginning a chapter with a letter to Emmett Till, with whom he shares Chicago origins (7, 33). In another instance, Lynn expresses gratitude and praise for Jeremiah Wright, his and Barack Obama's Chicago-based pastor (43). Chicago's symbolic capital for African American history, epitomized by African American figures such as Till, Wright, and Obama, figures prominently in Lynn's first memoir.

However, the author also explicitly states that a move to New York, the mecca of Hip Hop at the time of his artistic awakening, advanced his development as an artist.¹⁸⁷ This move is alluded to on the cover, as the juxtaposition of the city's skyline on the left and the artist's image on the right, coupled with the author's implied gait toward the right exit of the cover, suggests the author's move away from Chicago. The move to New York broadened his artistic horizons and contributed to his personal growth: "My individuality was coming out...Chicago made me an MC, but New York made me an artist" (196f). Here, Common not only seems to appreciate the history of Hip Hop but also extends his praise to the general artistic landscape that New York had to offer.

However, the most relevant connection between public space and class is Lynn's middle-class upbringing and his attempt to fabricate an inner-city authenticity in his first memoir. Visual evidence of his middle-class affiliation can be seen in photograph # 11 of the photo inlay. The photo shows Lynn, at the age of fifteen, standing in front of his mother's house next to his first car. While the photo focuses primarily on the car as a status symbol of mobility, the background shows row houses with manicured lawns and trees planted along the driveways.¹⁸⁸ Inner-city spaces deemed as dangerous have been characterized as necessary to claim Hip Hop

¹⁸⁶ See also pp. 88, 232, 246, and 2019: 88.

¹⁸⁷ The role of New York in Hip Hop has already been mentioned, see p. 120.

¹⁸⁸ This feature of more privileged communities has already been invoked in DJ Run's description of Hollis, Queens, see p. 118.

authenticity. However, the marginal presence of these spaces in Lynn's first memoir is significant. The author's 'atypicality' is reiterated in his decision not to include visual references to pertinent urban Hip Hop spaces and instead to foreground interior spaces in his visual apparatus.

In the written narrative, Lynn introduces his upbringing with an almost apologetic tone. He emphasizes his experiences with drug abuse, gang violence, and criminal enterprise but adds that

maybe there weren't as many shootings and stabbings where I lived. Maybe you had two parents raising their children in single-family homes with a hoop out front and a lawn in back. But if you got caught slipping, if you let your guard down at all, Eighty-seventh Street niggas would rob you blind (90).

The author lists the characteristics of American suburbia: a yard in the front, a lawn in the back, and a house for each family, precisely the conditions lacking in the inner city. Although he was raised by a single mother, Lynn characterizes his upbringing as advantageous and therefore inauthentic in terms of Hip Hop realness. However, his apologetic tone, the amenities he chooses to list, and the implication of impending danger suggest a strategy of downplaying his privileged upbringing to claim a Hip Hop authenticity informed by inner-city experiences of danger and scarcity.

Lynn's inability to reference relevant urban Hip Hop spaces is turned into an asset in the peritexts of *One Day It'll All Make Sense*. On the page of praise for the book, record producer Quincy Jones applauds Common for he "never needed to 'pimp the hood' to achieve his deserved success." Here, 'pimping the hood' refers to the habit of bragging about an inner-city upbringing that lends Hip Hop authenticity and facilitates the artist's rise to stardom. Lynn, however, cannot claim this upbringing, and so in his memoir he frames himself as a 'conscious' artist.

His mother, Dr. Mahalia Hines, adds to the artist's middle-class and 'conscious' framing. Hines' occupation as a teacher and principal marks her (and her son's) background as middle or upper middle-class. The author's appreciation for his mother's work ethic is a recurring theme in Lynn's first memoir and reveals the implications of space and class. The author repeatedly uses 'hustler,' a label to designate the efforts of overcoming the challenges of the underclass by relying on ingenuity and tenacity.¹⁸⁹ His mother, whose voice appears throughout the first memoir, describes hustling as "knowing how to survive in a world that's set up for you to fail" (14). However, Lynn applies this label of street survivalism not to overcoming the

¹⁸⁹ See p. 36.

challenges of abject poverty or inner-city dangers, but to taking on the double burden of being a single mother (83, 91; 2019: 83).

The photo inlay of *One Day It'll All Make Sense* continues the framing of Common as an artist with diverse interests beyond rap music. Several photographs of award ceremonies, public panels, and photo shoots (Photos # 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30) exclusively show Lynn dressed elegantly for the occasion in public scenes. The difference in style is even commented on when the author reminisces about his “bohemian days” in a caption to a photo showing him with former lover Erykah Badu. Of the 30 photographs of the author, more than half are of public scenes. These scenes are deliberately included in the memoir’s catalog of photographs, cementing a strategy of public self-representation.

On another level of spatial abstraction, it is striking that the photos of public events are almost exclusively indoor scenes, portraying Common as an artist whose access to public urban spaces is limited. Instead, the photos give the impression that Common’s class background and status as a ‘conscious’ rapper give him access to spaces inaccessible to many other artists. On the one hand, Lynn’s middle-class upbringing compromises his claim to Hip Hop authenticity. On the other hand, his upbringing enhances his acceptance in more privileged middle or upper-middle-class social circles. Photograph #26 is particularly interesting, as it shows Lynn “[thugged] out on the set of *Street Kings*” dressed in street clothes, mimicking a street criminal. The artist’s disguise is a visual break in a series of public appearances that show the author in a suit and tie. While the scene is marked as staged for a movie set, the photograph gives the impression that Lynn *can* pretend to be from the streets because he is not. Like a visual parallel to his manuscript, he fabricates a spatial proximity to an inner-city upbringing. Moreover, in his earlier acting career, he was regularly cast to play criminals (*American Gangster*), assassins (*Wanted*, *Smokin’ Aces*, *Run All Night*, *John Wick 2*), or fighters (*Terminator: Salvation*). It seems that the author often creates characters who belong to a different social class, who act out stereotypical masculinity, who solve their conflicts primarily with violence, and to whom authenticity is ascribed.

In the photo inlay to *Let Love Have the Last Word*, the question of access is interestingly reversed. The photographs in the first memoir deny visual access to the spaces frequented by Lynn while giving the impression that he primarily frequents the interiors of public spaces. On the other hand, the photographs included in his second memoir expand visual detail while depicting scenes exclusively from the public spaces of California prisons. Although the author is seen here traversing both the interior and exterior spaces of various prisons, the public space of the prison is marked as an enclosed public space with highly controlled access, limited

privacy, and restricted mobility. Specifically, Common's role as an African American artist who gains the power and access to enter prison spaces voluntarily is crucial in this regard. His position as a less stereotypical, 'conscious,' and middle-class artist provides an unparalleled passage into and out of prison spaces.

In addition to his acting career, Lynn's access to public spaces through his 'conscious' rapper persona and middle-class background is evident in his activist engagement. In both of his memoirs, there is much evidence of his activist involvement in the form of photographs. For example, in *One Day It'll All Make Sense*, photograph # 14 is an autographed photo of him and Louis Farrakhan, founder of the Nation of Islam, taken in 1997. Photo # 23 shows Lynn among a crowd of students as part of his Common Ground Foundation. Finally, his political involvement culminates in photo # 29, which appears to be a snapshot of him talking to Barack Obama at a campaign rally in 2010. The chronological arrangement of the photos, which recount activist involvement over a decade, implies a long-standing interest in political causes, emphasizing that activism is an integral part of Lynn's public identity. The visual testimony to his ongoing activism continues in the photo inlay of his second memoir, which exclusively features photographs of Common's visits to various California prisons.

In doing so, Lynn presents himself as an activist who is particularly invested in the plight of African American communities. His commitment to improving the lives of black people is evident in his admiration for influential black figures. In *One Day It'll All Make Sense*, Lynn presents himself as being on good terms with Louis Farrakhan, the controversial leader of the Nation of Islam, and Barack Obama, illustrating his access to more influential spheres of society and powerful representatives of black communities. In addition, quotes of prominent black leaders such as Michelle Obama and Maya Angelou appear on the book's cover and are referenced in the main text of the memoirs. In his first memoir, Lynn shows an awareness of past incidents of racism by using the case of Emmett Till to contextualize his traumatic experiences with racism. In *Let Love Have the Last Word*, the artist's admiration for black political figures continues as each chapter is preceded by a quote from a black author, thinker, or politician.

Public spaces appear in Lynn's first memoir primarily to frame him as an artist with political influence and friends in high places. His middle-class background and rejection of stereotypical Hip Hop behavior give him access to these public spaces. However, Lynn also acknowledges the public spaces of his neighborhood as spaces of coming of age and maturation. In this context, he describes a performance of masculinity that is defined by physical confrontation in exclusively male bonding experiences.

Sometimes we would just roam the streets looking to start something. Other times we'd just stay around the crib and fight one another. Looking back, I think there was something more going on when we fought. The fights were more than just rites of passage. My friends and I were making one another into men (91; see also 88).

Adolescent fisticuffs are described as expressions of affection among boys who have learned that other expressions of affection are highly regulated and forbidden by stereotypical notions of gender. In his memoir, Lynn's mother acknowledges his interest in fighting and dismisses it as less dangerous than fighting with guns and as part of the transition to adulthood for boys (93). This statement seems to be the only reference to the artist's adolescent activities in public spaces. Raised by a single mother and among a multitude of women, Lynn's description of fisticuffs with other boys serves as an affirmation that the artist has indeed experienced the streets and can relate, albeit in a limited sense, to what is perceived as an authentic Hip Hop identity and masculinity. Nevertheless, this description remains one of the few references he makes to the streets. Thus, Lynn's (gender) identity is not as closely tied to public spaces as it is for most AA HH LW publications. Private spaces and the author's relationship to his mother and other women are more important.

The author's access to public spaces expanded once he was given a car by his mother at the age of fifteen. Paradoxically, his mother gave him a car so that her son would avoid dangerous situations in the neighborhood (92). For the author, however, a car "represented youth and fun. It represented freedom, but also responsibility. I've got to drive the fellas around" (97). In addition to using the car as a place to socialize with friends, the car meant mobility and enabled Lynn to reach places otherwise unavailable to him. Eventually, the car even brought him into contact with drug dealers, leading to one incident where he "decided to get involved in that street stuff" (2011: 97). For him, the car has fulfilled the promise of mobility and freedom.

Private Spaces: A Romantic Gentleman Raised by Women

A significant reason for Lynn's inexperience with inner-city public spaces, in addition to his middle-class upbringing, is his close relationship with his mother, Dr. Mahalia Hines, and women in general. Lynn is far from the only artist raised primarily by a single mother, nor is his admiration for her unparalleled in the AA HH LW archive. However, including his mother in the memoir is a distinct feature that further characterizes Common's identity and masculinity as less stereotypical than other rap artists. His mother's influence on his life is *written* all over the first memoir, as she appears as an autonomous voice in the foreword, the main text, and the study guide. In addition, a photograph of his mother begins the photo section, and she is featured

a total of five times. In the acknowledgments, Hines is mentioned next to Lynn's grandmother and daughter. A review by author James McBride on the praise page attests Common to "[embody] the strength of the brilliant woman who raised him" while the description on the back cover highlights Common's understanding of love as "rooted in his relationship with...his mother." Even before reading the first sentence of the book, the reader is led to interpret Common as not conforming with a 'stereotypical' performance of masculinity due to the strong female influences surrounding him.

If his two memoirs are *read* as deliberate sites of the publication of an individual's private life, the inclusion of Lynn's mother in his first memoir is striking compared to other publications. In visually separated paragraphs scattered throughout the book, Dr. Mahalia Hines characterizes her son as an exceptional student (xi), as having "potential for great things" (36), as having "a strong work ethic" (39), as fitting her definition of a "mama's boy" (86), as a humble actor (243), and praises his "charity, his spirituality, his humility" (275). The virtues mentioned by his mother hardly match the exuberant and ostentatious behavior of many stereotypical rappers. Her description provides a more personal and private perspective on an artist whose otherness and benevolence were lifelong traits, not just an identity performed in public. Hines legitimizes and authenticates the artist's public image as a compassionate, atypical Hip Hop artist. Before applauding her son for becoming a 'conscious' rapper, Hines once again characterizes him as a talented writer: "Sure, I knew he could write. He always got As in English" (xi). By emphasizing his writing talent and prudence, Hines adds introversion and thoughtfulness to her son's character, both of which are rare in the self-representations of most rappers. Although extensive writing habits are typical for artists in the music industry, especially when self-penned lyrics are considered the pinnacle of authenticity, Common's penchant for writing stems from his reflective and prudent mind.

Although his mother's presence is less pronounced in his second memoir, the intensity of their relationship is further characterized in the text of *Let Love Have the Last Word*. In recalling his upbringing, Lynn specifically recalls his mother's love and guidance as influential: "I had a rich childhood on the South Side, not in terms of wealth or material possessions but with respect to opportunities and a firm, sound foundation of nurturing love and stern discipline from my mother" (2019: 169). In another instance, Lynn describes his identity with a strong connection to his hometown of Chicago while also characterizing himself as a son with a close relationship to his mother: "I'm still that lanky Black dude from the South Side of Chicago; ... who loved his mother, and loved his father yet was aware of his absence" (32f). Even this characterization is influenced by an admiration for his mother.

In addition to having a close relationship with his mother, Lynn's atypical and considerate performance of masculinity stems from his upbringing around women. Recalling time spent in his grandmother's salon as a child, Lynn states that the "customers and workers loved me, and I loved them. Maybe that's why I've always been so comfortable around women. I've been surrounded by them my whole life. I thrive on their energy" (2011: 21f). His two memoirs are notable in this regard because the author repeatedly expresses a universal appreciation for women that goes beyond maternal admiration and affectionate expressions of romantic interest. Throughout his memoirs, he is portrayed as a gentleman who seeks to empower women. With his self-image as a 'conscious' and politically engaged artist, Common inscribes himself into the scholarly archetype of black masculinity, which forbids an engagement in overly sexist innuendo but prioritizes political activism, social criticism, and eloquence.¹⁹⁰

The author acknowledges his lack of street credibility when he concludes that his exposure to women has made him "definitely softer than the rest of [his] friends" (86; see also 84). Interestingly, softness, a trait that distinguishes the author from his friends and many male rappers, is associated with femininity. His public embrace of softness makes Common an atypical artist in terms of masculinity. Despite this relatively progressive stance, he responds to established gender stereotypes by reiterating the logical fallacy between female parenting and the occurrence of feminine character traits in men. Moreover, his statement reveals the intertwining of gender and space, as the author's 'privileged' middle-class background and exposure to women significantly reduced his time on the streets and, as a result, his ability to claim street authenticity. Although the author does not clarify this, his upbringing can be interpreted as significantly tied to private spaces. While his middle-class background allowed for less cramped housing and, thus, fewer reasons to frequent public spaces, the author's reference to growing up around women situates his upbringing in the private sphere.

The photo inlay of *One Day It'll All Make Sense* suggests the relevance of supervised spaces for Lynn's socialization. Instead of photographs depicting public spaces that are frequented to escape parental or adult supervision, such as the streets or project hallways, the photographs in his first memoir primarily show spaces where adult supervision is provided. For example, photographs # 7 and # 8 show the educational space of the school to emphasize the author's ambition in learning. In photo # 6, Lynn is seen as a boy with his mother on a trip to Jamaica. The remaining photos from his childhood (# 5 and # 9) depict indoor scenes, with companions present or implied. In direct comparison to the visual narratives of other authors, it is striking

¹⁹⁰ See p. 36 for a discussion of 'conscious' Hip Hop artists.

that Lynn's memoir does not contain clear visual references to public spaces that ensure a claim to Hip Hop authenticity, such as creative engagement in neighborhood performances in the form of 'cyphers,' block parties, or rap battles. The absence of public space is significant in the case of his memoir, as his example reiterates the division of public and private spaces between men and women. In extension, it can be argued that because a strong female influence characterized his upbringing, the author mainly frequented interior spaces and chose to represent his life accordingly.

Lynn's apparent ease around women, facilitated by his maternal influence, is further illustrated in the photo section of *One Day It'll All Make Sense*, where women seem to serve as companions in their roles as either mother, partner, or daughter. For example, photo # 20 shows Lynn with his former partner, Erykah Badu, photo # 22 portrays him as a loving father with special emphasis on his relationship with his daughter. Consequently, it can be argued that women are purposefully included in the memoir not primarily to give the reader a visual reference to anecdotes involving them, but to make the reader aware of Common's roles as a "father, son, and friend" as alluded to in the blurb of his first memoir. Although Photo #23, a group photo of his Common Ground Foundation program, is not related to his family, it shows his willingness to surround himself with women rather than a male posse, which is a usual trope of Hip Hop artists.

In the blurb of *One Day It'll All Make Sense*, readers are confronted with Common's spectrum of identity as "a man in full. Rapper. Actor. Activist. But also father, son, and friend." The public and private aspects of the author's identity are juxtaposed in a single sentence. The addition of "man in full" and the list that follows suggest a masculinity composed of activities that facilitate his roles as a provider (rapper and actor), a recipient of care (son), a companion (friend), and a caregiver in the collective (activist) and individual (father) sense. This description outlines Lynn's self-identification as a man who assumes traditional gender roles.

Moreover, he reveals a penchant for personal and intimate identity aspects that were coded as 'weak' and inauthentic in Hip Hop. Interestingly, Lynn continues to define himself as "father, son, and friend" in his second memoir, acknowledging a relational role he still struggles to fulfill: "I'm still a son, a father, a friend, a man of God. But not a husband" (2019: 18). Unlike many male rappers who boast about their attraction to women, Lynn foregrounds his inability to find or keep a suitable partner. Publicly acknowledging his longing for a loving partner once again underscores his identity as an atypical artist who admits vulnerability and the desire for partnership.

In his first memoir, Common addresses Hip Hop in a letter acknowledging his 1994 song “I Used to Love H.E.R.” He personifies Hip Hop in the song and describes his relationship with the culture as if it were a woman. Their story follows innocent encounters, periods of estrangement, and the author’s promise to rescue ‘her’ from the grip of gangsters (gangster rap). In his memoir, he continues this metaphor by saying, as if addressing a woman, “I love you. I love you so much that if I see you doing something I don’t like, I’ll tell you” (2011: 137). It is rare in rap music and AA HH LW for writers to express their appreciation for the culture that has enabled them to live a life of fame and pomp. It is even rarer for Hip Hop to be equated with a woman whose attention must be won over and who might become alienated. As a ‘conscious’ artist, Common approaches Hip Hop from a creative and spiritual side, seeing the culture as more than a cash cow that brings fame, wealth, and respect. Equating Hip Hop, a culture dominated by male norms and performers, with a woman once again demonstrates Lynn’s appreciation for women.

The only photographs of his first memoir that capture ostensibly private scenes are two sepia-toned photographs of Common in the studio and the vocal booth (Photos # 17 and #18). These photographs blend the public space of the recording studio with a seemingly private act of artistic expression. The full-frontal view of the author, as well as the sepia tint added to the photograph, lends an aura of intimacy that is hardly matched by reality. Despite romanticizing recording music as a solitary and devotional task, the recording studio remains a creative but public place, crowded with agents, producers, and other artists. However, this bustling activity is not depicted in the photograph to underscore the author’s seriousness and dedication as an artist.

The color modification added to the photographs romanticizes the author’s past musical work. By the time the memoir was published, Lynn had already developed into more than a rapper. The sepia tone of the photograph suggests this historicization. The contrast becomes more pronounced as subsequent photos depict success in other fields, including activism, acting, fatherhood, and debating. The number of photographs showing the author in the company of family members, friends, and fellow artists is striking. Out of thirty images, only eight depict Lynn alone. This choice of arrangement suggests a marketing strategy that emphasizes the author’s kinship with other successful artists over the individualistic agendas that dominate the music industry.

Conclusion

Lynn’s memoirs stand in stark contrast to the first case study and similar AA HH LW publications by authors who demonstrate a willingness to resort to violence, hypersexuality,

machismo, street culture values, and criminal activity. Instead, Lynn emphasizes a businesslike demeanor, well-mannered public appearances, a considerate and sometimes even shy approach to women, and a primary interest in the artistic and poetic aspects of Hip Hop. A close reading of Lynn's two memoirs and an analysis of the visual narratives they contain suggests that Lynn presents himself as a Hip Hop artist whose public demeanor, artistry, self-image, and marketing correspond to the artist's public rap persona. However, through his self-presentation and framing by others, including his mother, it becomes clear that both *One Day It'll All Make Sense* and *Let Love Have the Last Word* characterize Common as a rapper who is conspicuous for more than his 'otherness' compared to stereotypical rappers. His 'otherness' is invoked through spatial and gendered implications, well represented in both memoirs.

First, both of Lynn's memoirs go to great lengths to highlight the author's various interests outside of rap music. Thus, Lynn's public persona is characterized by activism, acting, philanthropy, and a commitment to African American issues. The visual apparatus of his second memoir focuses on marginalized groups in prisons. Moreover, the rapper is praised for his activist contributions in reviews and introduced as such in the content descriptions of his first memoir. By drawing attention to interests beyond rap music, Lynn presents himself as an artist who interprets social grievances for more than just commercial reasons.

Second, Lynn's first memoir vividly demonstrates the relevance of public space in AA HH LW. In his case, however, the absence of typical Hip Hop spaces is crucial to understanding his self-representation, masculinity performance, and definition of Hip Hop authenticity. The absence of pertinent urban public spaces, both in the main text and the visual narrative, is crucial to Common's self-definition as a 'conscious' artist and activist. In addition to a sheltered upbringing, his family's middle-class background prevents him from fully claiming Hip Hop authenticity. At the same time, his middle-class background allows him access to social circles typically closed to stereotypical rappers. Compared to them, Lynn's class background, public demeanor, 'soft' character, and 'conscious' music have made him more acceptable to society at large.

Third, Lynn presents himself as 'soft' in character and interprets a strong female presence in his upbringing as the reason. He readily addresses personal weakness, vulnerability, and interest in 'softer' topics such as love or romance in his lyrics and memoirs. In doing so, the rapper chooses a form of self-representation that is idiosyncratic to Hip Hop. Lynn's portrayal of masculinity is not characterized by a sense of rivalry, misogyny, and selfish individualism. Instead, the rapper links his 'soft' character with being raised by a single mother. Here, however, it appears Lynn is establishing a causal link between 'softness' as a typical female

trait that is transferred to boys through strong mother figures, the absence of fathers and male role models.

It is primarily his first memoir that best articulates the intricate entanglement of public persona, gender performance, and the relevance (or lack thereof) of public space for claiming Hip Hop authenticity. While the main text reveals a strong personal relationship between the author and his mother through several interjections of her voice, the reviews, praise, content descriptions, acknowledgments, dedications, and other peritexts contribute to the overall framing of Lynn's public image as a 'soft,' 'conscious,' romantic, less stereotypical, and considerate artist.

Navigating the Public/Private Divide: Sandra “Pepa” Denton - Let’s Talk About Pep (2008)

Contextual Background

Prior to the widespread commercialization of rap music and the subsequent objectification of women, female rappers were still able to compete with men by focusing on their lyrical delivery. In addition to their rapping skills, groundbreaking artists such as Sha-Rock, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Salt-N-Pepa achieved fame by addressing issues relevant to female fans, including partnership, independence, self-confidence, and abuse. In addition, like their male counterparts, female rappers started fashion trends embraced by both male and female audiences. Salt-N-Pepa, consisting of Cheryl “Salt” James, DJ Spinderella, and Sandra “Pepa” Denton, made history as the first commercially successful female rap group. In 1986, their debut album set a precedent for album sales by a female group, making it easier to promote female artists (Rose, 2004: 294). After disbanding in 2002, the group reunited three years later and has since performed in several shows, award ceremonies, and tours. In 2022, Salt-N-Pepa was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Shortly before the release of Denton’s memoir, she and James appeared on a reality show documenting the group’s rise, breakup, and reunion. While the peak of her rap career had passed years ago, the show set the stage for a renewed interest in Denton’s public and private life.

In this memoir, Sandra Denton traces her journey from her Jamaican roots, her upbringing as the youngest of many siblings in Queens, New York, to a life of fame as a founding member of Salt-N-Pepa. Throughout her memoir, the author is framed as a rap pioneer who inspired many artists after her. Space and gender constantly intertwine as Denton navigates the divide between public and private spaces. Recalling her childhood home, Denton describes how she abided by the rules of her conservative and religious parents and how she refrained from acting out to the same extent as her older sister. In addition, Denton acknowledges childhood and domestic abuse in the privacy of her home.

However, the author maintains an image of a fun-loving and happy ‘fly’ girl in public spaces. In doing so, Denton identifies as one of several interchangeable archetypes of Hip Hop femininity that were described by Keyes.¹⁹¹ The ‘fly’ girl in Hip Hop refers to female artists who wear fashionable clothing and accessories and draw considerable attention to their appearance and demeanor. The female body of the ‘fly’ girl is emphasized for its erotic capital, allowing artists to reframe their bodies from objects to independent agents. Although this rap

¹⁹¹ See p. 40.

image began to fall out of vogue due to the desire of many female rappers to be recognized for their rap skills, it was Salt-N-Pepa, according to Keyes, who

canonized the ultimate fly girl posture of rap by donning short, tight-fitting outfits, leather clothing, ripped jeans or punk clothing, glittering gold jewelry ...long sculpted nails, prominent makeup, and hairstyles ranging from braids and wraps to waves, in ever-changing hair coloring (2004: 269).

The juxtaposition of public and private spaces is a central theme of Denton's memoir. It results in several shifts in the author's personal development that may seem contradictory at first but prove the diversity of her personality and ultimately make her less one-dimensional. These 'contradictions' represent a significant difference from the previous case studies of DMX and Common, who, unlike Denton, seem to present their lives more consistently. As much as Denton's memoir differs from the publications of male authors, *Let's Talk About Pep* serves as a vivid example of female Hip Hop Life Writing in its reuse of pertinent life writing tropes, such as the targeting of the female body by the male gaze, sexuality, sexual violence, and survival.

These questions involve the revelation of unprecedented and intimate details, echoing the 'spectacle' of the female celebrity body, a trope commonly found in female celebrity memoirs. In contrast to Denton's self-presentation as a happy and carefree performer in public spaces, her attraction to men performing stereotypical street and Hip Hop masculinity led to traumatic and painful experiences that occurred exclusively in private spaces. As a result, she describes her memoir as a self-therapy that helps her process her trauma and speaks for other victims of abuse. Throughout her memoir, Denton acknowledges many roles, including the obedient daughter, the naive middle-class girl, the rebellious teenager, the pioneering artist, the victim of abuse, the mother, the wife, and the celebrity. Despite the multiplicity of roles, Denton pays considerable attention to her public identity as a fun-loving, vivacious 'fly girl' who managed to hide personal misfortunes behind a public façade. It is in her memoir, however, that these tragedies are finally revealed. Incidents of childhood abuse, failed relationships, and her marriage to the lead rapper of Naughty by Nature provide cause for personal turmoil.

Peritextual Indices of Space and Gender

Let's Talk About Pep was published in 2008 by Pocket Books, an imprint of the publishing group Simon & Schuster. At over 210 pages, Denton's memoir is one of the shorter releases by female rap artists. The main text of the memoir is divided into 23 chapters, preceded by a dedication, acknowledgments, an introduction written by fellow rapper Queen Latifah, and an

epilogue by rapper Missy Elliot. With contributions from two influential female rappers representing Hip Hop's past and present, Denton is presented as an important and integral icon of female Hip Hop identity. *Let's Talk about Pep* features a visual apparatus of 33 captioned photographs placed in the center of the book. The photographs loosely follow milestones in the author's life and show Denton as a daughter, performer, partner, mother, and celebrity. The prominence of gender issues is evident as most of the photographs show Denton as a partner to men or in the company of her band members. Many photographs depict the author in public spaces in the company of other celebrities from various entertainment industry branches.

Queen Latifah and Missy Elliot emphasize the influence of Salt-N-Pepa on their lives and careers, describing Denton as an influential Hip Hop icon who inspired subsequent female artists (xii, 208). It must be assumed, however, that Denton's collaboration with both rappers significantly enhances her cultural capital and publicity among readers long after her rapping career has ended. Queen Latifah, for example, recalls her initial admiration for Denton after seeing her in a New York club and emphasizes the group's influence on her career: "[Salt-N-Pepa] were the queens from Queens who helped make it possible for this queen to become Queen Latifah" (xii).¹⁹² New York and Hip Hop have been intertwined since the inception of the culture and the rise of Run-DMC from Queens has put the borough on the map of Hip Hop lore. However, the association of Hip Hop with an inner-city mentality and lower-class background, as in the first case study, is avoided in the case of Denton. Denton's background is tied to Queens, but she describes her home as "the biggest house on Anderson Road" (11). This characterization hardly qualifies for Hip Hop authenticity defined at the time.

In addition to her parents, Sandra Denton has dedicated her memoir to the many women who, like her, have suffered from sexual violence and domestic abuse. In doing so, Denton not only draws attention to the victims of sexual abuse but also sets the tone for the rest of the memoir. Much of her life account revolves around her suffering from sexual abuse, her physical and emotional recovery, and her commitment to acknowledging sexual abuse and speaking out on behalf of other women.

The memoir's focus on personal details and intimate secrets from the author's past continues in the acknowledgments. Denton collaborated with journalist and talk show host Karen Hunter, who at the time of publication had already co-authored the autobiographies of rappers LL Cool J (1997), Queen Latifah (1999), and Mason Betha (2003).¹⁹³ Hunter's status as a successful author is prominently featured on the cover below Denton's name. In the acknowledgments,

¹⁹² In her own memoir, Queen Latifah also acknowledges the club encounter with Salt-N-Pepa (1999: 49).

¹⁹³ See p. 88.

Denton describes the nature of their collaboration as making her “go deeper than I wanted to,” thereby foreshadowing the revelation of deeply intimate and personal details from the artist’s life. In addition, Denton’s evolution from passive victim of sexual abuse to active accuser of injustice and spokesperson for other women is foreshadowed in the acknowledgments. Next to a series of heartfelt acknowledgments to her parents, her family, her band, her co-author, and her publisher, Denton ‘thanks’ the men who have abused her. She expresses ‘gratitude’ to them for showing her “all of the things I need to avoid in my future” and ‘thanks’ her former abusers for allowing her to “help others to learn from my story.”

From the cover’s look, however, readers cannot infer the significance of the author’s suffering for the memoir. The cover of the memoir bears no trace of Denton’s negative experiences or the reasons for her commitment to women. Instead, it depicts Denton smiling into the camera, in full view, as a fashionable artist dressed in a black dance dress that exposes only her legs. The layout of the cover reflects the author’s tendency to present herself as a vibrant ‘fly’ artist in public spaces. Readers unfamiliar with the author’s life are reminded of Denton’s Hip Hop connection by textual references to Salt-N-Pepa and the collaborations with Queen Latifah and Missy Elliot, whose names appear on the cover.

A rupture can already be seen between Denton’s portrayal as a seemingly cheerful and happy woman on the cover of her memoir and her allusions in the dedication and acknowledgments, as well as in the rest of the text. This rupture is reflected throughout the memoir and is characterized by the dynamic between her performance in public and private spaces. Denton carefully navigates the public/private divide: in public spaces, she appears as a confident celebrity artist, while far from glitz and glamour, she appears vulnerable and less confident.

The contradiction continues on the back cover, where a smiling Denton poses confidently for the camera. To the left of her picture are seven quotes from her book entitled with sensational headings. Although taken out of context, many of these quotes paint a picture of Denton that does not quite match her public image as a confident and happy woman, as portrayed by the portrait on the cover. The first quote, “I felt like a phony...a fraud,” is accompanied by the word “Success,” suggesting an inconsistency in her personal life and career. The headline “Sex” appears in conjunction with the quote, “It’s hard for people to believe that I am celibate.” While “Sex” serves as a sensational keyword to grab the readers’ attention, the quote immediately reverses this notion by addressing a lack of sex through celibacy.

Typical of celebrity memoirs, the cover of the publication appeals to readers by promising insider information about artists such as LL Cool J or Lisa Lopez (TLC), referenced on the book

wrapper. Denton's collaboration with past and present rap artists, as well as the promise of lurid details about Hip Hop artists, frames her as an important figure of the Hip Hop culture. This is further implied on the inside binding of the book where Denton is characterized as a "pop culture icon" who tells a "captivating and provocative" story of her life as a "true pioneer, fighter, survivor, and inspiration to women everywhere." Survival is one of the dominant motifs of Denton's memoir and it is implicit in the advertising texts, which draw attention to her suffering in the form of abuse and failed relationships. The main text of the memoir follows the classic narrative arc of defeat, survival, and redemption, symbolized by the dissolution of the group, the author's personal turmoil, and her self-discovery and renunciation of men.

Overall, the peritextual design of the memoir characterizes Sandra Denton as a celebrity who has paved the way for many female rappers. However, despite her remarkable career, the author remains grounded and empathetic to the experiences of many abused women for whom she strives to be a voice. Much emphasis is placed on the suffering of Denton's female celebrity body, shattering the illusion of the celebrity author as an untouchable superhuman with no personal problems. Missy Elliot cites the revelation of Denton's private side as one of the crucial benefits of her memoir: "People need to see the other side of Pep, too.... They need to see the sadness. They need to see the imperfections" (209). Neither the peritextual indices of the cover design nor the visual apparatus reveal the causes of her ordeal, but it is the main text that provides the context for her suffering.

Public Spaces: Maintaining a Celebrity Facade

Denton's home country of Jamaica is one of the public spaces referenced in the main text and the visual apparatus. As urban spaces are dominant in AA HH LW, Denton's view of Jamaica broadens the spatial scale represented in the genre.¹⁹⁴ The author's memories of her Jamaican childhood include free exploration without restrictive parental supervision: "We lived in what they called the country, and I just remember running free and not having a care in the world" (6). Denton portrays her rural upbringing as allowing her to move around almost independently, an activity denied to many girls growing up in urban spaces. This lack of concern ceased, however, ended when immigration to the U.S. caused a "culture shock" (11). Moving into a spacious house in Jamaica (Queens), she remembers a family life characterized by less space due to her large family and her parents' habit of hosting friends and relatives (11). Although the extent of the "culture shock" is not further elaborated on, Denton attributes freedom to her

¹⁹⁴ Denton's memoir is only one of two publications that tell the story of an immigrant. In addition to Denton, Wyclef Jean immigrated to the U.S. from Haiti as a child.

Jamaican childhood, thereby romanticizing her rural homeland. Despite its tranquility and lack of relevant Hip Hop authenticity, Denton's rural past is presented as part of a genuine black identity shaped by rural life and freedom.

In the rest of her memoir, public spaces are included primarily to present Denton as a 'fly' rapper and celebrity. This self-presentation is also manifested in the text and the visual apparatus of *Let's Talk About Pep*. While the main text revisits various public spaces, the accompanying photographs primarily present Denton as an artist enjoying the company of other celebrities. The visual narrative consists of a series of public celebrity shots of the author in the company of band members and other artists, including En Vogue, rappers LL Cool J, Doug E. Fresh, P. Diddy, Hip Hop producer Fab Five Freddy, sports agent Gary Sheffield, and actor Tom Hanks. In these photographs, Denton appears in public spaces, smiling and appearing to enjoy the company of the celebrities. This presentation supports Denton's self-characterization as the "fun-loving half of Salt-N-Pepa," as she reminds her readers from the outset (1). Public spaces in clubs, at award shows, in music videos, or on concert stages are presented as stages for the artist's self-presentation as a female celebrity. The deliberate public display of her persona in numerous photographs underscores her claim to celebrity stardom.

Conspicuously, Tom Hanks is the only non-black celebrity to appear in the visual narrative. As one of Hollywood's most famous actors, his inclusion in the visual narrative functions as a reference to Denton's celebrity acceptance. Furthermore, the photograph's caption reads: "Yes, I'm [Hip] [Hop] but I love me some Tom Hanks!" (Photo # 31). It implies an apparent incompatibility between Hip Hop as a predominantly black cultural form rooted in lower-class communities and Hollywood as a predominantly white, upper-class enterprise. By posing with Hollywood actor Tom Hanks, Denton vividly underscores her and Hip Hop's transcendence of boundaries set by 'race,' class, and space. The focus on Denton's celebrity lifestyle recalls the cultural capital that Denton has held in the past. Moreover, by displaying examples of the author's past fame in photographs, the visual narrative shows how female celebrity is constructed and maintained, and how celebrity memoirs become steppingstones in the accumulation of attention.¹⁹⁵

Inner-City Authenticity and Class

Her memoir contains no visual references to significant inner-city spaces. This can be attributed to Denton's sheltered childhood and adolescence in a middle-class neighborhood in Queens. Despite this, Denton fabricates proximity to these spaces through anecdotes and her appeal to

¹⁹⁵ The publication of a memoir can serve as an opportunity for celebrities to expand their attention network and accumulate attention capital, see p. 83.

men who perform street masculinity. For example, she recalls an anecdote about an involuntary visit to a housing project in South Jamaica (Queens), where she and a friend narrowly escaped a gang rape. This passage, retold from a female perspective, underscores Denton's vulnerability as a woman traversing urban public spaces dominated by masculinity and street culture. Coming from a middle-class community, Denton is seen as a stranger and is constantly preyed upon by men. Her retelling of the experience is replete with expressions of alarm and impending danger (34f). Reflecting on this episode of youthful ingenuity, Denton concludes that she and her friend "weren't project chicks. We were a little on the naïve side. We weren't wild and slutty" (37). This experience illustrates the constant danger of sexual violence that women face when they enter inner-city spaces dominated by street culture and heteronormative notions.

However, Denton's conclusion of this experience reveals a peculiar hierarchy of women tied to class and space. In distinguishing between her middle-class identity and "project chicks" who, according to her, are more open to sexual intercourse with (multiple) men, she hypersexualizes (black) femininity in inner-city spaces. At this point, she distances herself from "project chicks" who engage with men from the streets. Her characterization of "project chicks" reinforces stereotypes of women in inner-city communities as 'commodities' available for men's pleasure. Denton echoes ideas about the availability of women in Hip Hop that are shared primarily by male rappers, including DMX and similar artists.¹⁹⁶ Paradoxically, she changes her stance on dangerous men and the value of sex later in the memoir. At this point, however, Denton uses this anecdote to highlight the naivety of her younger self before she herself became attracted to hypermasculine street thugs.

A second strategy for fabricating proximity to inner-city spaces is found in Denton's attraction to men who embody street masculinity. Although the visual narrative includes several photographs of Denton in loving embrace with various partners, including her husband, it is in the main text that she describes an attraction to "thugs and hoodlums, the jerks and mean guys" who "referred to women as 'bitches'" (76). This attraction leads to a narrow view of masculinity that causes her to reject the advances of men who, in her view, perform a considerate and 'soft' version of masculinity, including fellow rapper and actor Will Smith (76). Denton's attraction to the hardened street criminal can be interpreted as a desire to belong to this authentic part of Hip Hop culture. This is further illustrated by the title of the seventh chapter of the memoir, which recounts her liaison with a drug dealer, as "My Scarface" (53), alluding to the crime drama of the same name that has romanticized the figure of the criminal in popular culture.

¹⁹⁶ See the case study of DMX (p. 183).

Once again, her personal growth leads to ruptures and contradictions that make her memoir more attractive to the reader. Fully aware of the type of men she is attracted to, Denton sheds her middle-class naivete and moves closer to becoming one of the “project chicks” she had previously condescendingly called ‘slutty’ and ‘wild.’ Her attraction to ‘thugs’ leads to several relationships with men who physically and sexually abuse her. However, she assures readers that she “ruled over every man [she] was with” (86). On the one hand, her attraction to violent men serves as evidence of her claim to street credibility. On the other hand, her association with street thugs who embody street culture through their physical strength, assertiveness, toughness, street capital, and behavior toward women underscores her claim to ‘realness.’ In another instance, Denton justifies her attraction to ‘thugs’ by equating violent hypermasculinity with Hip Hop: “But I guess you attract what you’re around. Rap and [Hip Hop] attract a certain element....I was a thrill seeker, and these street guys were edgy and scary and fun” (84f). Here, Denton oversimplifies Hip Hop masculinity as exclusively embodied by ‘street guys.’ In this context, her infatuation with rapper LL Cool J, vividly summarized in a photograph caption as “[my] crush” (Photo # 11), raises questions. LL Cool J, who was considered ‘soft’ and became famous for the first rap ballad, does not meet her criteria of ‘real’ men, yet he appears among her love interests in both the text and the visual apparatus.¹⁹⁷

Hip Hop Performances

Although the visual narrative traces her celebrity identity through publicity and promotional shots, music video stills, and award show appearances, only one photograph shows a public space used for a performative purpose. In this color photograph (Photo # 17), Denton is strolling across the stage as she raps into the microphone. She is dressed casually in jeans that show only her stomach. This photograph gives only a hint, but it is on stage, one of Hip Hop’s performative and creative spaces, that Denton’s non-conforming gender identity becomes most apparent, especially given the conventions of Hip Hop performance at the time of her career. Salt-N-Pepa’s rap performance, attire, and onstage aesthetics contribute significantly to Denton’s success and status as an influential rap artist. Two other photos (Photos #16, 21) demonstrate the band’s aesthetic style, emphasizing the female body without revealing too much. These aesthetics set Salt-N-Pepa apart from artists who wore Hip Hop attire like baggy pants and oversized shirts, and performers who wore clothing designed to accentuate their sex appeal. Denton’s clothing style accentuates her femininity without distracting from her rap skills. The

¹⁹⁷ See p. 97.

group's distinctive aesthetic is acknowledged several times throughout the memoir. In the prologue, Queen Latifah describes the group's performance as "hard but soft. They were cute and had their own style. And they were real" (xii).

Reflecting on the formation of the band and their entry into Hip Hop, Denton makes another interesting observation about the gendered conventions in place. First, she confirms that male rappers set the standard for the entire rap scene. Second, she discredits the "few girls who were out there" as being "either weak or hard" (45), that is, either too feminine or too masculine in their appearance. Appearing too feminine might invite ridicule because of its association with softness. However, appearing too 'hard' as a female artist carries the risk of being read as too masculine. Denton, however, managed to avoid both extremes by competing with male performers and rapping hard while still emphasizing her femininity. As part of the larger music business, rap music and Hip Hop are governed by gendered mechanisms of power and control that particularly disadvantage female performers. Sandra Denton acknowledges these mechanics by describing the band's dependency on male managers who controlled their style (49) and (mis)managed their royalties and success (72-73). In addition, the band's longtime manager threatened to replace her, stating that he could "find a new Pepa anytime" (75), implying that neither her rapping skills nor her looks were irreplaceable. On several occasions, the author discusses her efforts to separate from her management and take control of her career (77-80, 151). When she finally succeeded in this endeavor, Denton writes that she felt "empowered" and ready to "handle my business" (80).

In the epilogue, Missy Elliot proclaims that the band's style "made you want to dress like them. They had the swagger" (208). In her memoir, Denton echoes Queen Latifah and Missy Elliot's characterizations, summarizing Salt-N-Pepa's performative style as: "hard but...sexy – that was our twist" (52). In particular, the combination of 'hard' with 'soft' and 'sexy' implies the author's tendency to overemphasize her femininity in order to avoid being read as too 'hard' or, by implication, too masculine in a male-dominated culture.¹⁹⁸

In *Let's Talk About Pep*, public spaces are used primarily to present Denton as an outgoing, happy, and confident celebrity artist. In addition, the car figures prominently in her memoir as a symbol of mobility and competition. In several instances, the author emphasizes that, as the youngest child in the family, she always had access to a car, emphasizing the middle-class background of Denton's family (34, 47, 82, 167). For Denton, however, the car is not only a guarantee of mobility but also represents her nonconformity to stereotypical gender attributions.

¹⁹⁸ Female Hip Hop artists must carefully negotiate their performance of femininity in a male-dominated culture, lest they be read as too masculine, see p. 168.

Denton emphasizes that she was known for her driving skills on the streets of Queens and New Jersey (82, 85, 168). She also demonstrated her driving skills in drag and road races, triumphing over male drivers. Later, she even participated in a rally through Europe: “Guys were either impressed by my driving skills or they got punked” (82, 85). These anecdotes underscore Denton’s versatility as a woman and a performer. She can perform as a confident artist and compete successfully in a male domain such as racing. Her transcendence of gender boundaries in public celebrity spaces, the Hip Hop stage, or racing, starkly contrasts her presentation in private spaces.

In addition to driving and racing, Denton acknowledges her equality in another supposedly masculine domain: consuming alcohol. On several occasions in her memoir, Denton describes herself as a heavy but unaffected drinker (109, 197). In the epilogue, Missy Elliot compares her drinking skills to those of men and concludes, “I don’t know any dudes who could do that. Pep is no joke!” (209). While her drinking habits might otherwise be also interpreted as a coping mechanism or the result of peer pressure, the comparison with men characterizes Denton as a woman who transgresses gendered boundaries in the public sphere, competing with men in various activities that are commonly associated with masculinity rather than femininity.

Private Spaces: Conformity to Traditional Gender Roles

In *Let’s Talk About Pep*, the author characterizes the home she shares with her parents and siblings as a place where traditional gender roles were taught and internalized. Raised by religious and conservative Jamaican parents and several older siblings, Denton grew up relatively privileged in a large house in middle-class Queens. The author reflects on her desire to be a “good girl,” to fit in without attracting unwanted attention (7), mainly out of fear of her father’s strict parenting. This behavior reflects conformity to traditional gender roles that require women to behave, conform, and stay out of trouble. While she wanted to be liked and accepted by others, Denton describes her sister Dawn as the family’s “rebel, the black sheep,” the epitome of disobedience to strict parenting and stereotypical expectations of female behavior (8). The author summarizes the differences between the two siblings by emphasizing her sister’s rebellious acts, which occurred exclusively in public spaces. Her sister incurred her father’s wrath by “hanging out with the wrong crowds, staying out beyond the curfew...and eventually [turning] to drugs” (7). Denton’s admiration for her sister, expressed on the same page, suggests an attraction to behavior that deviates from parental expectations. Moreover, her sister, despite her tragic death, appears as the primary female role model in Denton’s memoir,

along with a few references to her mother. However, Denton presents herself as compliant and obedient in the parts of her memoir that concern private spaces.

In her memoir, private spaces are primarily associated with conformity to traditional gender roles and experiences of abuse, trauma, and pain. Although her experience of a gang rape suggests vulnerability in public spaces, it is the private home to which Denton ascribes the greatest danger. She recounts multiple incidents of nonconsensual sex from her childhood to her marriage. In doing so, she describes what Yelin referred to as typical of female celebrity memoirs, which address the “violability of the female body, her loss of control, and her fungibility under the male gaze” (2020: 250). Reflecting on the sexual abuse at the hands of her friend’s grandfather when she was still a child, Denton reveals that she may have internalized victim-blaming: “I was also embarrassed and may have felt that it was my fault...But you can’t help but think that maybe you did something” (18). Although her lack of consent is marked in her retelling of this experience, allusions to victim-blaming, even if only to invoke her childhood mindset, do not explicitly condemn her abuser’s actions. Instead, her description echoes the acquiescence, compliance, and nonresistance she has internalized in her youth.

Raised with conservative ideas about family and marriage, as well as romanticized ideas about love and courtship, Denton emphasizes her affinity for romantic love as imagined in fairy tales and acted out in soap operas (20f). Recalling her first harmless teenage love, readers learn of Denton’s infatuation with romantic love and courtship. Moreover, like the gang rape anecdote above, this example provides insight into female objectification from a female perspective, a rare occurrence in AA HH LW. With the revelation that her teenage crush tricked her into having sex, Denton’s romanticized notions of courtship, love, and sex, a result of her traditional upbringing, are shattered, especially since the “neighborhood prince” apparently met all the requirements of courtship and was to her mother’s liking (22). The sexual intercourse mentioned in this scene takes place in a basement and is thus consistent with the spaces of sexual encounter that recur in AA HH LW.¹⁹⁹ In Denton’s, however, the basement intercourse is not primarily mentioned to constitute the author as sexually active or to emphasize her attraction to men. Instead, the anecdote serves to highlight the exploitation of the female body in private spaces, a consistent motif in Denton’s memoir.

Denton’s experiences of abuse continued into mature relationships, leading her to misinterpret physical abuse as a sign of affection and to conclude that “love was about pain” (101). Interestingly, Denton, who grew up in a sheltered middle-class home with a large family

¹⁹⁹ Several male and female writers acknowledge sexual encounters in private spaces, including the basement, see p. 136.

and both her parents, cites her exposure to the streets as the reason for her string of unhappy relationships. Reinforcing the character of inner-city spaces as inappropriate for learning how to have healthy relationships, Denton states that she “had no guidance but the streets. And the streets ain’t no place to learn about love” (101).²⁰⁰ This statement is one of the few Denton makes to construct a closeness to street life and claim Hip Hop authenticity. One result of her lack of knowledge about relationships is her infatuation with the romantic love depicted in fairy tales. Stories of damsels in distress and knights in shining armor reinforce gender stereotypes that portray men as dominant saviors and cement women’s dependence on men (Haase 2004). Raised to be compliant to the desires of others, Denton writes that even after suffering numerous incidents of abuse, she always remained “passive and obedient” in her relationships (133). For example, Denton defends her husband and returns to him despite numerous violent outbursts and incidents of marital rape.

Another example of Denton’s traditional and compliant performance of femininity is manifested in her concept of marriage. Faced with an unexpected pregnancy, she felt compelled to marry the child’s father because she came “from an old-fashioned, traditional family.... That’s what you were supposed to do. You got married and you had children” (87). Her partner rejects her romantic notions of love and family, while Denton remains obedient and submissive, a stark contrast to her appearances in public. The author’s concept of romantic love and traditional family life is revisited in photo inlay, where four photographs, two with each child’s father, show Denton in seemingly happy union. One photograph in each set is captioned with an allusion to a normative concept of family, consisting of wife, husband, and child. The photographs (photos # 6, 9, 10, 12, 13) frame the author as a woman who seeks and finds comfort in relationships with men. The main text of the memoir, however, reveals that these relationships failed, in part because of the ongoing domestic abuse Denton experienced. While she presents herself in public spaces as a confident and happy celebrity artist, the descriptions of private spaces revolve around her suffering and disappointed expectations of romantic love.

Throughout her memoir, Denton acknowledges several instances of sexual abuse (118, 124, 131, 137) that form the story of her trauma. The experience of marital rape, however, is a pivotal event that led to her hospitalization and serves as the turning point of the memoir, after which she abandons her idea of partnership altogether. Denton recalls the incident(s) of marital rape also by emphasizing her fragility and vulnerability, stating that her “whole body was just a ball of pain” (132). Her husband’s abuse is thus presented as indicative of a masculinity that feels

²⁰⁰ See also the discussion of gendered inner-city spaces (p. 170).

entitled to sex and uses violence to appropriate the female body. In this context, it is paradoxical that she describes her husband as embodying the very ideals of street masculinity that she previously defined as attractive. Despite enduring the abuse, Denton does not leave her husband primarily because he acts “all vulnerable and sad,” which in itself is the opposite of her perception of an ‘ideal’ performance of masculinity (118). Her reasons are indicative of her performance of a traditional gender role and include her fear of being alone as a single mother, her infatuation with the idea of the nuclear family, and the fact that the illusion of a happy couple was maintained in public (127).

Reflecting on her past relationships and her attraction to men who perform hypermasculinity, Denton identifies the prospect of and desire for sexual intercourse as the impetus for violent masculinity. However, she fails to challenge the control of power her partners have and instead chooses to withhold her body and sexuality from future partners. She concludes that avoiding sex protects her from violent abuse because men can “be themselves when they aren’t working to get into your panties” (198, 96). By denying men access to sexual intercourse, Denton claims a position of power and breaks the paradigm of compulsory sexuality and, by implication, ceases to be a provider of sex (Mooney-Somer and Ussher, 2010: 362). While the denial of access to a woman’s body is a consequence of Denton’s experiences of sexual abuse, her conclusion appears to be informed by a one-dimensional perspective of black masculinity that generally describes men as violent and hypersexualized. Furthermore, her conclusion is driven by the idea that women are forced to change themselves and curb their desires to prevent harm and abuse.

Conclusion

Public spaces play an important role in the autobiographies and memoirs of most AA HH LW writers. Primarily male authors present themselves in public spaces to underscore their claim to street credibility or their idea of Hip Hop authenticity. Sandra Denton, however, presents herself in public spaces to recall her (former) celebrity status, primarily pointed to in the visual narrative. Various photographs show the author in the company of icons from the music and entertainment industries. Her memoir can thus be read as a space in which private and intimate details are made public in exchange for cultural capital that enhances her popularity.

In addition, by showing herself to be attracted to street thugs and drug dealers and by attracting hypermasculine men, Denton fabricates Hip Hop authenticity in her way. Denton’s incorporation of public spaces embodied in men from the streets is reminiscent of Common’s strategy in the previous case study. Whereas Common sought to establish street authenticity by fabricating proximity to the dangers of the streets, Denton constructs ‘realness’ through her

choice of ‘problematic’ partners. Unlike Common or similar artists from middle-class backgrounds who have no actual contact with the inner city, Denton, like many women, cannot simply visit the inner city without being immediately and relentlessly targeted. However, she gains power from her ability to appeal to hardened street ‘thugs,’ but is ultimately victimized by her choice of men. In doing so, the author justifies her (poor) choice of men by her participation in Hip Hop, which, according to Denton, is dominated by ‘thuggish’ rappers. While the rap business does, to some extent, promote ideas of violent hypermasculinity, her preference of men ignores the variety of Hip Hop masculinity in general, not least because Denton rejected the advances of artists who were perceived as soft. While in public, she maintains an illusion of happiness and ease. Her suffering is kept private until the publication of her memoir, and then serves as an incentive for readers.

Acknowledging the survival of childhood abuse, racism, conservative parents, an exploitative music business, and domestic rape, Denton presents herself as a survivor who has overcome obstacles in many areas of life. The private spaces mentioned in Denton’s memoir are limited to her childhood and adult homes, places generally associated with comfort and safety. In *Let’s Talk About Pep*, however, they are transformed into sites of physical and sexual violence. Survival emerges as a dominant motif in this context, determining how the author reflects on her life and marking a distinct difference from previous case studies.

Sandra Denton navigates the public/private divide like few other AA HH LW authors. Descriptions of a happy and carefree celebrity artist are juxtaposed with admissions of traumatic abuse. On the one hand, this contrast creates several contradictions that make the memoir more appealing to readers. On the other hand, the memoir’s marketing strategy is designed to deliberately exploit these contradictions to appeal to readers. An intense focus on the targeting, suffering, and exploitation of the female celebrity body is a recurring motif in publications written by female AA HH LW authors.

Denton navigates between a compliant and submissive woman in private spaces and a self-confident artist and celebrity in public spaces. This dynamic is not only hinted at in the main text through numerous anecdotes and recollections but also supported by the peritexts. In addition to the dedication, the acknowledgments, the introduction by Queen Latifah, and the epilogue by Missy Elliot, the cover design and the selection of reviews allude to Denton’s dichotomy in public and private spaces. In addition, the design of the cover can be seen as a deliberate marketing decision that steers the reception of the memoir from the onset. The use of catchy, easy-to-remember slogans such as “Sex,” “Success,” “Breakup,” and “Life,” combined with sometimes contradictory quotes from the memoir, promise intimate details and

revelations from the author's life. However, these are counterbalanced by the life-affirming and sanguine portrait of the author. This arrangement represents Denton as a survivor who presents herself as a self-confident artist because of, or despite, her traumatic experiences.

An Imagery Tale of an Educated Thug: MF Grimm - *Sentences: The Life of MF Grimm* (2007)

Contextual Background

While there is a significant number of commercially successful rappers with worldwide popularity, there is an even greater number of Hip Hop artists without millions in record sales, packed concert halls, and side jobs in the film industry. However, many of these artists have found a niche in Hip Hop as underground rappers and made a name for themselves on a smaller scale. Among these rappers is Percy Carey, who goes by the rap alias of MF Grimm. Raised in Manhattan, Carey's career in the entertainment industry began as a child actor on *Sesame Street*. His interest in Hip Hop grew as a teenager, and he toured with rappers such as MC Lyte, Snoop Dogg, and Tupac Shakur. However, a series of criminal charges put a stop to his burgeoning music career, and his involvement in the drug trade changed his life forever. A shootout with rival gangs left his half-brother dead and himself paralyzed and dependent on a wheelchair. After the shooting, Carey served time in prison but continued to produce music and devoted himself to studying law while in prison. He became an advocate for prisoners' rights and had his sentence reduced. After his release, Carey returned to the underground rap scene, collaborating with several artists, releasing albums, and reactivating his label. Today, he is best known for his collaboration with rapper MF Doom.

Sentences: The Life of MF Grimm differs from the rest of the archive in that the artist's life and career are told in the form of a graphic memoir, which Hescher (2016: 49) has defined as a subgenre of nonfiction narrative.²⁰¹ Baetens and Frey claim that graphic novels have often been dismissed as less serious than traditional novels, in part because of their close association with supposedly childish cartoons (2015: 177f). Examples such as *Maus*, John Lewis' *March*, or Colin Kaepernick's memoir *Change the Game* show how graphic novels are increasingly used to depict realistic and adult life worlds. Moreover, it demonstrates how they are particularly suited to present autobiographical or semi-autobiographical material because "the self is harder to remove when a work is drawn as well as narrated" (177). Furthermore, graphic novels depict life in innovative ways that are harder to implement in traditional novels, including the flow of time or the depiction of abstract or disturbing life events (177f).

Carey's *Sentences* follows the tradition of graphic novels that depict gritty, realistic, and traumatic events. In typical fashion of Hip Hop Life Writing, Carey and his illustrator, Ronald Wimberly, chronicle the rapper's upbringing in Manhattan, his subsequent rise as an

²⁰¹ I have discussed the graphic memoir in Chapter 2.2.2 Secondary Genre Elements (p. 96).

underground rap icon, his criminal past and prison sentence, and the momentous attack on his life that left him paralyzed. While Baetens and Frey (2015: 179) have noted a trend in recent graphic novels that distance themselves from action-oriented superhero comics, the same does not apply to *Sentences*. The memoir contains various scenes of shootings, beatings, and chases replete with visualizations that underscore the momentum of the scene. In Carey's, the focus on action is reminiscent of superhero comics, which are closely tied to Hip Hop culture and appeal to younger readers who are accustomed to superhero comics' aesthetics. Thus, the appeal of comics and the potential to innovatively tell a story could be seen as one reason for choosing the graphic memoir genre. However, there is more to unpack here, as the artist's self-image and musical work are significantly intertwined with comic book-based depictions and allusions to superheroes and villains on his album covers, in his lyrics, and collaborations. Thus, *Sentences* illustrates the genre diversity of AA HH LW and testifies to the interweaving of Hip Hop and comic books.

The Intertwined Histories of Comics and Hip Hop

Sentences is currently the only graphic memoir in the AA HH LW archive.²⁰² However, the intertwined histories of comics and Hip Hop go back to the beginning of Hip Hop and have manifested themselves in various forms ever since. Byatt (2019) even goes so far as to classify comics as the sixth element of Hip Hop. Although I cannot verify this claim here for reasons of scope and space, a few remarks about the intertwined histories of Hip Hop and comics help understand the significance of MF Grimm's *Sentences* for AA HH LW.

One of the most obvious links between Hip Hop and imagery is graffiti. Graffiti has significantly influenced Hip Hop performers, rappers, and artists for over fifty years. Castleman (2004) and Hebdige (2004: 226) have shown how graffiti originated in New York in the early 1970s when artists wrote nicknames or 'tags' on public surfaces, preferably trains. Thus, the widespread use of graffiti as an example of Hip Hop imagery again demonstrates the culture's attachment to urban space. In addition to graffiti, further visualizations emphasize the links between Hip Hop and comics. First, in 1986, artists Keith Haring and Eric Orr published what is now widely considered the first Hip Hop comic book (Jackson 2017). Second, from the earliest days of Hip Hop, rappers have alluded to superheroes and villains in their lyrics. For example, Superman was referenced in "Rapper's Delight," the first commercially successful

²⁰² In 2009, New York rapper 50 Cent published a graphic novel titled *The 50th Law*, a graphic novel about the business strategies that helped him become a successful rapper and turn himself into a brand. The publication, which is only partially autobiographical, was not included in the archive because of the artist's memoir. In 2022, Darryl McDaniels published *Darryl's Dream*, a picture book designed to teach children about creativity and self-confidence.

rap song. With stage aliases, rappers create a second identity that allows them to say and do things on stage that would otherwise be unthinkable. Carey's longtime partner, MF Doom, is an example of a rapper whose stage name references a comic book character: the Marvel villain Doctor Doom (Markman 2014). In a sense, this stage of identity becomes a protective shield, not unlike the armor worn by comic book characters.

Third, album covers exemplify the connection between Hip Hop and comics. Although they offer limited space for visual articulation, album covers are an indispensable adjunct to an artist's musical work. They often portray rappers as central figures in the soundscapes created on albums and the life worlds evoked in lyrics. More than a few rappers stylize themselves as superhuman characters to emphasize their claim to lyrical supremacy.²⁰³ Fourth, graphic novels, comic books, or mangas are among the favorite reading materials of urban youth and can promote reading habits (Hughes-Hassell, 2010: 47). While recalling their youth, several rappers from the archive present themselves as comic book fans or even connoisseurs. In his memoirs, Darryl McDaniels describes himself as an introverted comic book nerd (2016: 52f). In 2014, McDaniels started his own publishing company, *Darryl Makes Comics* (DMC), to pursue his passion for comic books as an adult.

Finally, Hip Hop and comic book cultures share the same spatial roots because both are inextricably linked to New York City. Batman is probably the most popular comic book hero from Gotham City, a fictional imitation of New York. Two of the largest comic book publishers, Marvel and DC Comics, are based in New York. The city of New York is as important for Hip Hop artists as it is to the imagination of fictional tales of good versus evil in comic books. Moreover, the roots of Hip Hop and comic books are tied to the city and have undergone a similar transition in their development from a largely underground phenomenon to a highly commercialized form of expression (Hescher, 2016: 195). Although rappers have expressed their admiration for comic books and comic book characters numerous times, it was only after rap music became a profitable business that the favor was returned. Comic book artist Ed Piskor created the *Hip Hop Family Tree* as a visual documentation of the culture's most influential artists (Byatt 2019). Given the intertwined history and cross-references between the two art forms, as well as Percy Carey's affinity for comics, it is not surprising that he chose the graphic memoir, an offshoot of the comic book, as the medium in which to recount his life. As the main character of *Sentences*, Carey becomes his comic's (anti)hero.

²⁰³ For example, the various members of the Wu-Tang Clan have repeatedly used references to superheroes and villains on their album covers. Among these are GZA's 1995 album *Liquid Swords* and RZA's 1998 album *RZA as Bobby Digital*.

In 2007, *Sentences* was published by Vertigo Comics, an adult imprint of DC Comics. Unlike other archive publications, *Sentences* is clearly advertised as a collaborative effort, with Carey credited as a writer, Ronald Wimberly as an artist, Jared K. Fletcher as a letterer, and Lee Loughridge as a colorist. Fletcher has designed the logos for various comic books while Loughridge has worked on the *Batman Adventures* series. The overt display of collaboration can be explained by the effort involved in producing the graphic memoir. While authors can be expected to *write* their memoirs themselves (though this is rarely the case with celebrity life writing), they are not expected to be able to *draw* their lives. Smith and Watson (2010: 169) have pointed to graphic novels as a poignant example of the collaboration of different actors whose individual traces the graphic memoir does not attempt to hide. As Wimberly's first book-length project, *Sentences* was awarded two Glyph Comics Awards in 2008 for Best Cover and Best Story, an award that acknowledges explicitly the experiences of people of color (Glyph 2020).

The graphic memoir consists of four chapters framed by a prologue, an epilogue, and brief biographical information on Carey and Wimberly.²⁰⁴ The graphic novel follows a non-chronological narrative, beginning with the near-fatal attack on Carey's life, before illustrating the artist's childhood and adolescence. Except for the cover design, the memoir is devoid of color, and dominated by a black-and-white visual style that affects all the characters. While the visual narrative dominates the memoir, the story of *Sentences* is driven by the written narrative appearing in text boxes and speech bubbles. These provide a visual cue that attracts attention, both in their appearance and arrangement within the panel or on the page (Baetens and Frey, 2015: 152). For example, onomatopoeiae, such as gunshots, cheers, or body sounds, take up space within the panels and attract attention through their lettering, font, size, and placement.

The cover of *Sentences* features a sketch of Carey sitting in a wheelchair, facing the reader. Above the sketch is the title in bold black letters on a white background. Around the title appear the names of the publisher and authors, the subtitle, and a single review. The cover's color scheme varies between black, white, and red. This arrangement subtly implies connections to Hip Hop and comics. First, the cover is modeled after a sketchbook, which both rappers and comic book artists use to scribble lyrics or draw sketches. This design gives the impression that the graphic novel results from a spontaneous and improvised act of creativity. The

²⁰⁴ At this point, I point out that the graphic memoir does not contain any page numbers, complicating the subsequent interpretation and referencing. Therefore, I attempt to describe the text passages as precisely as possible.

improvisational, do-it-yourself character is inherent in drawing comics and writing lyrics. Furthermore, the font design of the subtitle is reminiscent of the graffiti style used to ‘tag’ an artist’s name on public surfaces. Finally, the title *Sentences*, in combination with the notepad design of the cover, becomes ambiguous. On the one hand, the title alludes to actual sentences written in a sketchbook, for example, to compose lyrics and notes. On the other hand, ‘Sentences’ refers to the very real prison sentences the author had to serve because of his crimes.

While the artist’s connection to Hip Hop is subtly implied on the cover, Carey’s physical disability is prominently featured. This is an interesting break from superhero comics, which typically show the main character in action, flying or doing the impossible. Framing Carey as the apparent antithesis of this superhero image underscores the adult focus of the graphic memoir. Moreover, in the context of rap music, the image of a man sitting passively in a wheelchair differs from the dominant images of masculinity as capable, active, and intimidating. Thus, from the outset, the memoir and its protagonist are defined by their difference from established categories of the comic book genre and performances of masculinity prevalent in Hip Hop.

However, the demonstration of Carey’s disability on the cover, combined with the title, could also be interpreted as a claim for Hip Hop ‘realness,’ after all his condition is the result of a gang-related shooting. His paralyzed body serves as a reminder that he was affected by street crime and survived. While a significant number of writers testify to their involvement in various crimes, there are only a few in the archive who were physically harmed. Curtis Jackson (50 Cent) is an artist who has repeatedly justified his claim to Hip Hop ‘realness’ with a near-fatal attack on his life. On the other hand, Carey draws attention to the downside of street life by presenting himself in a wheelchair on the cover. One statement in the memoir may further illuminate this discussion. Describing the aftermath of the shooting in Chapter Three, Carey contextualizes the significance of his survival:

Nowadays, being shot is some kind of FUCKED-UP PREREQUISITE to be an emcee, but we’re talking about the early ‘90s here, when A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul were the big acts.

The two groups mentioned were successful and ‘conscious’ Hip Hop formations of the 1990s. In addition to embracing a distinctly different Hip Hop aesthetic, these two groups “attempted to open a space where blackness could be understood through parody and the interrogation of multiple identities...., while simultaneously making subtle political statements” (Baldwin, 2004: 163). In this way, Carey emphasizes that at a time when atypical political rappers were popular, inner-city struggles and getting shot did not enhance one’s credibility. In contrast, ‘nowadays,’

meaning at the time of the publication of *Sentences*, rappers seem to claim street credibility from getting shot. Carey, however, distances himself from the idea that getting shot results in an enhanced realness and does not claim it for his identity as a rapper. It is conceivable that Carey is using his memoir here to launch a veiled attack, a ‘diss,’ on fellow New York rapper 50 Cent, whose embodiment of commercially successful rap music contrasts with Carey’s understanding of ‘real’ underground rap music. Given that *Sentences* was published shortly after Jackson’s memoir, Carey’s assertion can be interpreted as challenging 50 Cent’s claim to ‘realness.’

While the allusions to Hip Hop on the cover are subtle at best, it is on the back of the book where a connection between Hip Hop, inner-city spaces, and street crime is established. The word ‘Hip Hop’ is prominently displayed on the back cover. Underneath is a short text describing the culture for Carey as “an escape from life on the streets” and associated with “excessive wealth and abject poverty.” References to street crime and street culture are found throughout the back cover, which praises *Sentences* as “[an] urban folk tale” with a “raw and gritty true story” that “[transports] [Hip Hop]’s braggadocio energy.” These descriptions inevitably link the author and his memoir to urban spaces where street culture and violence are prevalent.

The Graphic Novel as a Space of its Own

Before looking at the representation of different spaces in the memoir, I briefly acknowledge how the graphic memoir uses its page space. The graphic memoir is a canvas on which the illustrator sketches the story line by line and panel by panel. Depending on the level of detail, a drawn narrative can stand on its own and does not necessarily require further instructions on how to read the story. Adding the narrator’s voice, which appears in frames next to the panels and speech bubbles, enhances the liveliness of the memoir. Space is also important, as characters and objects are always set against a background or in a particular environment. If a page or a panel is drawn without a visible background or appears to be set in an unrecognizable space, it will affect the story’s reception. Thus, each page, whether blank or filled, offers space for imagination (Baetens and Frey 2015, 164-169).

Sentences uses a form that differs from the conventional and serialized three-panel grid common to many comic books. The life of Percy Carey is not told in a consistent grid of panels but shifts between different panel arrangements, alternating between rows of two or three images that suggest a sequential reading, while at other times, a single visualization dominates an entire page, or several panels overlap. The panel shape also varies between square and rectangular. The style of the page layout can be characterized as irregular and ostentatious, to

use Groensteen's categorization of page layouts (Baetens and Frey, 2015:123). The ostentatious nature of the panel layout is suggested by overlapping action scenes, visualizations that dominate an entire page, or merging with each other. In graphic memoirs, panels "convey mood, indicate character, signal movement and reveal theme" while also having the potential to "reinforce the emotional state of its narrator" (Rosen, 2009: 59). While a seemingly disorderly arrangement characterizes many pages, the order becomes striking and relevant when panels of identical shape and size are arranged to imply an immediate sequence of events and causal connection. This occurs, for example, when the narrative illustrates Carey's monotonous daily routine as part of his drug dealing or his process of maturation. In both cases, an organized sequence of similar panels demonstrates a time lapse and illustrates the passage of time on one page.

Sentences also includes a black page entitled "Intermission," placed between the second and third chapters, which interrupts the flow of the narrative with its emptiness. While the last panel of the second chapter depicts the final seconds before the life-altering attack on Carey, the first panel of the third chapter shows him collapsed on the floor, followed by an arrangement of three images depicting rescue efforts on a black page. The page in between, a literal blank space, visualizes the blackout Carey succumbed to because of his injuries. It is a liminal space between consciousness and the lack of it, expressing Carey's perception of events as well as functioning as a climax in the narrative that goes back to the beginning of the memoir.

Public Spaces: A War Zone and Underground Hip Hop Scene

Public spaces are the dominant theme of *Sentences*, rendering private spaces virtually irrelevant. In doing so, Carey shows himself in public spaces for several purposes, many of which have been identified as relevant to AA HH LW: familial interaction, education, crime and violence, creativity, and performance. While the school, the touring stage, the hospital, and the prison are acknowledged in the context of specific life stages, the neighborhood, with its streets, street corners, projects, parks, and courts, is described as the nexus of Carey's life. Not surprisingly, much of the memoir takes place on the streets of New York. But, as Carey describes his rise in Hip Hop, the narrative extends to places like Iowa and Los Angeles.

The story of *Sentences* begins with the "Prelude," which recounts the life-changing attack on Carey and his half-brother on the streets of Harlem. The streets and street violence are a compelling element of the memoir, all the more so as the prelude ends with the artist lying badly wounded in the street, heightening the narrative tension. The first chapter begins by describing Carey's role as a child actor on *Sesame Street*. Conspicuously, the author is merely

sent around the film studio by the adults present and does not have a voice. Only when the passage through the movie set is complete does the narrator's voice begin to tell Carey's story: "My story begins on the streets... SESAME STREET, that is." At this point, the streets have already been introduced through two interpretations. First, through witnessing the consequences of street violence and foreshadowing the calamitous impact on the artist's life. Second, the artist's attachment to the streets is again demonstrated through a pun (Sesame Street) based on the negative association with streets. Nevertheless, this introduction firmly links Carey to street life. Carey then shows a third interpretation of the street by introducing his neighborhood community, where he spends time on the streets doing various activities.

The neighborhood community is central to Carey's narrative, and the artist acknowledges his appropriation of streets, corners, parks, yards, and courts for different purposes depending on his age. At this point, the depiction of the neighborhood community serves two functions. From a young boy's perspective, a sense of community manifests itself primarily through the sharing of parental responsibilities among the adults in the neighborhood: "Like that old saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child'? THAT was the neighborhood motto." In this context, the narrative emphasizes the sense of community in the ethnically diverse neighborhood, which is portrayed as a familial space that facilitates the author's coming of age.²⁰⁵

Carey's inner-city community is invoked at the beginning of the narrative by introducing the author's mother as an important role model whose strong and independent attitude left a lasting impression on the author. The textual cues in this passage praise his mother as a funny, helpful, but protective woman with the courage to stand up to men on the street. This is reinforced by the visual narrative, which depicts his mother violently resisting the advances of a pimp. The scene emphasizes a child's perspective by giving Carey's mother almost superhuman abilities while diminishing the pimp in both size and defensibility. It is also important to note that this scene remains the only incident in which a woman takes center stage and receives agency. The rest of the memoir focuses exclusively on Carey's journey through Hip Hop and street crime and features men as characters. In this context, the importance of his mother as a strong, independent person is particularly compelling.

A War Zone

The author's maturation in public spaces of the inner city is further illustrated when Carey's sense of space shifted during adolescence, and he spent significantly more time on the streets and without adult supervision. The boy appropriated the public spaces of his community as a place to gain a reputation as a "street fighter." Accompanied by a group of friends, the

²⁰⁵ Several authors represent the inner-city community as the primary site of their coming of age, see p. 108.

neighborhood continues to serve as a space that provides a sense of community and belonging. This is evident, for example, in the way children use a street corner as a primary reference point to negotiate who belongs and who does not: “You could be from 80th, 83rd or 96th street, so long as you stood on ‘The Corner,’ you was FAM.” The statement is visually reinforced by the depiction of an ethnically diverse group of children united by their allegiance to the same gathering place.

With advancing age and a growing desire to become a rapper, Carey is portrayed as spending much of his time either on the streets or frequenting creative spaces to practice Hip Hop. On the streets, he fools around with friends, commits petty crimes, and eventually participates in more severe acts of violence. Reflecting on his time in New York and Los Angeles, Carey invokes the code of the street as a moral compass for settling disputes, maintaining allegiances, and justifying acts of violence. Recalling various shootings in both cities, Carey highlights the everyday violence that has led him and many artists to view the inner city as a ‘war zone.’²⁰⁶

Facing defeat in a potentially life-changing rap contest near the end of Chapter Two, the artist summarizes life on the streets as “shoot-outs, ...running from the cops, ...worrying about who you can trust.” Despite these negative experiences, and even after the devastating attack on his life, Carey remains adamant that the “streets have their own codes and laws, and you have to RESPECT that.” This attitude characterizes Carey as a person who is unwilling to question his propensity for violence, even after suffering the consequences. After his recovery and still dependent on a wheelchair, Carey continues his crime spree by dealing drugs. He justifies his criminal turn with the need to make money because “after all my time in hospitals and all the surgeries I had, the medical bills started to really pile up, ...so it was back to dealing to make ends meet.” He continues to do so until he is finally arrested and incarcerated. Thus, the significance of public spaces in the neighborhood is related to their potential to provide respect, reputation, affiliation, and money – in addition to being the site of violence and war.

Carey’s youth and adolescence are characterized by him moving freely through the public spaces of his community, engaging in Hip Hop practices, socializing, or committing petty crimes. However, after the calamitous shooting that left him paralyzed, the rapper is much more often depicted as a passenger in a car. In *Sentences*, the car is portrayed as Carey’s primary means of transportation, a symbol of mobility and security. As Carey becomes more involved in crime, his car use becomes more frequent. Toward the end of Chapter Two, the rapper is shown driving around Los Angeles in a lowrider, one of the iconic cars featured in many West

²⁰⁶ See p. 111.

Coast rappers' music videos. As well as using the car to get from one place to another, there are several incidents where cars are used as cover during shootouts. Finally, the graphic memoir opens with a scene in a car, showing Carey and his half-brother up close, seconds before the life-changing attack unfolds. However, before this shooting, the number of scenes in which a car appears or Carey is shown in a car is significantly low.

After the attack and being paralyzed, Carey relies on a car and a driver to get around the city. He does this much more frequently than in the first half of the memoir, driving to meetings and even committing drive-by shootings from the passenger seat. In addition to his primary means of transportation, the car also becomes a mobile safety zone, allowing him to participate in street life and crime without being an easy target. As such, the car is an instrument of survival for Carey. Moreover, even before the shooting, he is always shown sitting in the passenger seat without the responsibility of driving and navigating. This allows Carey to present himself as the mastermind who determines the direction, pulls the strings, or does the drive-by shooting. Carey presents himself as more than a criminal who continues to find an identity despite his physical limitations.

Finally, just before his final prison sentence, the police stop Carey, arrest him, and put him in the back of a police car. There, although still being driven, Carey is no longer in power and unable to direct the direction of travel. His loss of power and control is visually represented as he is carried to the car by police officers and lies there handcuffed and vulnerable. Toward the end of the memoir, shortly before the epilogue, Carey is shown again sitting in a car, looking hopefully into the future, contemplating the lifting of his lifetime parole. In *Sentences*, the car symbolizes mobility, survival, and dependency.

Educational Spaces

In the first half of Chapter Two, the school appears among the public spaces revisited in *Sentences*. However, as described in the previous chapter on functional spaces, authors of Hip Hop Life Writing rarely present the school as an educational space. The same is true in *Sentences* in which the school and its premises are presented as serving various purposes, but learning and education are not among them. The author's learning about slavery caused his rejection of the school as a place of education, a sentiment shared by many AA HH LW authors.²⁰⁷ In the second chapter, Carey concludes that "I managed to fool myself into thinking I'd learn more in the hallways," thus shifting the potential for education away from the classroom and into the social spaces of the school. There, Carey learned not from the teacher

²⁰⁷ See p. 106.

but from his peers. As a result, the author appropriated the school's public space as a place for socializing or participating in rap battles.

It must be emphasized, however, that Carey does not present himself as an uninterested person, for he even uses the public spaces of the neighborhood to educate himself through reading. At the beginning of the second chapter, the boy sits on a box on a street corner and reads *To Kill a Mockingbird*. His friend ridicules him by using the insult "bitch nigga" to which Carey responds: "Oh, just cuz I do some gangsta shit means I should be illiterate?" This conversation reflects the perception that reading is associated with a form of weakness among African American youth. A similar attitude was observed in the first case study when Earl Simmons was insulted by his peers for his reading habits.²⁰⁸ In AA HH LW, schools are often dismissed as representatives of the state and mainstream culture, which are seen as racist. However, the solitary act of reading books is mainly associated with white mainstream society and therefore dismissed as a sign of weakness. As an author, however, Carey uses this anecdote to present himself as committed to education of his own choosing.

Hip Hop Practices

In addition to the streets, the author includes various public spaces where Hip Hop is practiced, and respect is accumulated without violence. From the beginning of his career, Percy Carey participated in rap competitions of various sizes. The depiction of a block party as a proxy for the creative range of Hip Hop in the 1980s vividly illustrates the advantage of graphic memoirs. Here, the memoir takes on a nostalgic tone as four elements of Hip Hop are depicted in harmonic unison. The visual and textual articulation present the block party as an intergenerational and peaceful appropriation of public space (the basketball court) for communal interaction, creativity, and performance. However, Carey describes the prevalence of street gangs and street violence as a constant presence. To him, street gangs are so closely related to Hip Hop that he considers them an element of the culture.

Throughout the graphic memoir, Carey portrays himself as a bystander, participant, and spectator at 'cyphers,' rap battles, concerts, and rap contests. This diversity underscores the importance of performative Hip Hop spaces to the author's self-image as an artist who has fought to the top of the New York underground scene. Carey perfected his rap skills to the point that he entered the *Battle for World Supremacy* in 1993. To enter the competition, an artist had to have a reputation, and winning the competition promised recognition beyond the

²⁰⁸ See page 185.

underground scene, potentially leading to a record deal. However, Carey mentions his defeat in the contest toward the end of the third chapter. Although he failed to earn the “respect of the quote-unquote ‘Professional Music Industry,’ I did get it from my peers and artistic heroes.” Conspicuously, Carey draws attention to this achievement rather than the release of one of his albums. He thus portrays his involvement in the underground scene as more important than any record deal or mainstream success. This confirms his self-image as an underground artist who thrives on the recognition of fans and fellow artists. However, underground artists are also dependent on exposure and sales, and Carey went on to found his record label, Underground Records.

The importance of performative Hip Hop spaces in the artist’s life is reiterated in the epilogue to the memoir. The first page of the epilogue shows Carey happily rising from his wheelchair onto an empty stage to rap into a microphone. His wheelchair remains behind him, relegated to the margins of the page and obscured by the artist’s shadow. The action is commented on with the words, “I can’t do it in real life... yet... might as well do it in my book!” finally transforming Carey into a superhero who achieves what is considered impossible in real life. It is implied that making music, symbolized by the microphone, has helped him to overcome his troubled past. However, the fact that Carey chooses to orchestrate this achievement on a stage underscores the importance of performative spaces to Carey’s life and his self-image as an artist. The importance of the stage is further underscored by the layout of the panels and the arrangement of the scene. Two panels are entirely devoted to the artist, standing or rapping, with no other elements to distract attention. The performative space of the (concert) stage, the ‘cypher’ or the rap contest confers power through the accumulation of respect and lyrical expression, a power that Carey could not acquire through violence or drug dealing.

Prison Life

It was violence and drug dealing that landed Carey in prison. The previous chapters on functional spaces and the first case study have shown that the prison is usually reserved for a performance of masculinity that tends to overemphasize toughness, independence, and violence. In *Sentences*, however, Carey’s suffering and dependence on others are foregrounded. In the second half of the fourth chapter, Carey is arrested and held in police custody, where he is harassed because of his inability to walk: “For 45 days, I literally had to crawl around the filthy county jail floor. What’s worse, without a chair, I couldn’t shower. It was HUMILIATING.” Reflecting on his life in various prisons, Carey provides a glimpse into the daily life of a disabled inmate in prisons that are rarely equipped for their needs. Due to the lack

of accessibility in various prisons, Carey was deprived of even the slightest mobility or had to stay in solitary confinement, which was often the only space accessible with a wheelchair. As a result, Carey could not assert himself and perform a typical prison masculinity. However, the artist found other ways of appropriating the prison spaces for his purposes, using the opportunity to educate himself or participate in various Hip Hop performances.

Despite Carey's inability to move freely, the artist portrays the prison primarily as an educational and creative space. As an educational space, the widespread illiteracy among the inmates proved advantageous to Carey, as he read and wrote for other inmates and became a pillar of the prison community. While other AA HH LW writers describe the prison cell as a space of discomfort and longing, Carey makes it the starting point of his liberation. Toward the end of Chapter Four, the artist is depicted in his cell working diligently on other inmates' letters while a line of inmates forms outside. In addition to personal matters, inmates also approached him with legal concerns so that Carey "started to learn facts about [his] case" that enabled him to challenge his sentence.²⁰⁹ After working on legal issues and writing letters to the authorities, Carey was promoted to a spokesman for prisoner rights. From this position, Carey worked to improve the conditions of other inmates and eventually challenged his case.

In prison, privacy and identity are limited by various restrictions or the compulsion to wear prison uniforms. Several AA HH LW authors have attempted to regain identity and self-control by performing hypermasculinity. Carey's reliance on a wheelchair and outside help prevent him from performing a typical prison masculinity. However, the rapper presents himself as finding other ways to maintain his identity. What he cannot do by displaying toughness or dominating others, he does by performing an educated masculinity whose membership of a higher class has been achieved through reading and self-motivated learning. Rather than conforming to the rules and principles of the general prison population, Carey has risen to a position of authority with certain privileges, including smuggling in sophisticated contraband and representing inmates before a prison committee. Since it is unlikely that these accounts will ever be verified, Carey is able to construct and portray a truth that supports his self-presentation as an educated thug.

While his promotion to a spokesman eventually led to his early release, it also facilitated his mobility within the prison system. This is vividly illustrated toward the end of Chapter Four when the artist attends a meeting with the prison committee. Although still effectively part of

²⁰⁹ Carey was imprisoned under the Rockefeller Drug Laws, which were introduced by former New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. According to these laws, even small amounts of drugs could result in sentences of fifteen years to life in prison. Carey faced such a sentence and was inspired, among others, by Jerry Rosenberg, who became infamous for being the longest incarcerated prisoner in New York State.

the prison, this scene does not show any of its characteristics. The meeting takes place in a spacious and clean room and Carey is placed opposite a group of authorities. The arrangement of the scene visually underscores the imbalance of power but is inverted due to the artist's role in this scene and the power it represents. Carey comments on the irony of the situation by stating: "I was in a room with people who HATED me, but they would have to address our demands." This panel is the last to show a prison scene and is immediately followed by the scene of his release from prison. Therefore, the panel starkly contrasts previous panels that depict Carey in the company of other prisoners or in confined spaces.

Carey also portrays himself as constantly writing lyrics and honing his rap skills in prison, which he acknowledges as a creative space in *Sentences*. Several panels show the artist in the company of other inmates, exchanging rhymes and participating in rap battles. The artist claims to have been recognized as MF Grimm by other inmates who showed him respect. In another instance, the artist uses a drum machine smuggled into the prison and kept hidden from the guards to create beats for an album. The album, which is placed next to the panels, demonstrates "a story about prison and how [he] went there," functioning as a reminder of his prison experience and a warning to others.

Interestingly, while Carey demonstrates his use of the prison as a creative space, he does so with a highly sophisticated item of equipment. In prison, a drum machine is a forbidden object that must be hidden, a fact that is alluded to in both prose and imagery. Most artists in the archive describe the prison as a creative space where they have returned to pen and paper as the basic tools for composing rap music. By choosing a drum machine as his tool, Carey departs from how other artists have used their time in prison. In addition, he seems to present himself as better than regular inmates, who may have had trouble smuggling regular contraband into their cells. Carey, however, was able to use a drum machine, underscoring his claim to be a dedicated artist whose creative work continues even behind prison walls.

Private Spaces: Rare Encounters with Women

Private spaces receive considerably less attention than the variety of public spaces acknowledged in *Sentences*. Private spaces only appear throughout the memoir in the form of the family home or the artist's apartment. While many public spaces depict the artist's relationship with exclusively male friends, fellow rappers, opponents, or state authorities, the artist's relationships with the women in his life are articulated exclusively in private spaces. *Sentences* features a limited cast of women, with only Carey's mother and his two sisters appearing as relevant female figures. The significance of his mother was already addressed

above in the discussion of the neighborhood community as a relevant public space. In this subsection, I will discuss how the rare encounters with women in private spaces are portrayed and further frame Carey's self-presentation.

Near the end of the first chapter, the author describes his two older sisters as significant influences on his musical tastes and style. Four consecutive panels of the same size show Carey standing in his sisters' bedroom doorway. From panel to panel, the sisters are seen dressing up, playing records, commenting on each other's style, or preparing to leave the room. One sister's face is always visible, while the other is in the foreground, mostly through her legs, her face only vaguely visible through the reflection in the mirror. Carey, however, remains standing in the doorway at the left edge of the panel. His position on the threshold allows him to observe his sisters' activities while remaining virtually excluded from participation. This arrangement implies the relationship between the siblings, whose age difference does not allow for direct interaction but results in the influence of the older siblings on the younger brother. Particularly in relation to Hip Hop, the sisters' influence on him was significant, as he states that his "sisters taught [him] about [Hip Hop], even though it really hadn't truly begun yet."

In addition to adopting their tastes in music and style, Carey matured by observing his sisters and "used to feel grown when I would hang out with them." His maturation process is poignantly imagined through the sequence of panels. While his sisters' activities could potentially occur in direct succession over a few minutes, a few details reveal a more significant leap in time. For example, the sisters' hairstyles, the dresser drawer, and the pictures taped on the mirror all change from panel to panel. The most profound difference, however, is Carey, who matures from the first panel to the last. He grows in size, his facial features become more pronounced, and his clothes change until he is wearing the iconic Adidas sneakers given to him by his sisters, who comment on them in the final panel. Compressed into one page, the arrangement of the four consecutive panels innovatively documents the artist's maturation. It also demonstrates the importance of the family home as a space for exchanging Hip Hop styles and aesthetics. However, Carey's position in the panels does not change, as he always remains on the threshold of his sisters' room and social life. Thus, Carey is presented as someone who has always kept his distance from female spaces and has not dared to enter spaces where femininity is dominant. This timidity is also evident in the absence of active female protagonists and meaningful relationships with women in his memoir. Carey does not acknowledge romantic relationships, nor does he mention a girlfriend, a wife, or other romantic interest.

A second scene in the family home shows Carey dressing his wounds after another shooting. In a rare conversation between him and his mother, his mother pleads with him to abandon

street life. The page layout shows a large scene of Carey sitting on his bed and his mother standing in the doorway, placing his mother in the passive role of the observer. In the bottom half of the page, three smaller images depict the conversation between Carey and his mother. Carey remains unperturbed despite his mother's urgent pleading: "As a man, I now see how right she was. But I was young, foolish, and I didn't care. ... You can understand how a young man like myself developed a GOD COMPLEX, right?" This statement refers to the invincibility he felt from surviving various shootings, beatings, and fistfights.

Moreover, in judging his younger self's naivety and justifying his past mistakes, Carey presents himself as a man who is not unaffected by his mother's concerns. Her concerns had a lasting effect on him, as he revisits them as an adult. On the next page, his children's room becomes a creative space as Carey processes his street experiences by writing lyrics. Interestingly, given the artist's choice of sophisticated music-making tools while in prison, his choice of a simple notepad and pen in his private home is surprising. The simplicity of using pen and paper could be associated with Carey's desire for introspection, a return to his roots, or even signaling privacy.

Finally, toward the end of Chapter Three, as Carey attempts to return to the rap scene after being paralyzed, he turns his apartment into a home studio. In three consecutive panels, Carey is shown sitting in his wheelchair in front of a mixing console while his partner, MF Doom, raps in the adjacent booth. Here, too, the recurring motif of the home studio, which has been defined as a significant aspect of many AA HH LW publications, is revisited. In *Sentences*, however, there is an intriguing twist. Most of the rappers in the archive describe a studio in their home's basement, underscoring the improvisational and underground aesthetic ingrained in Hip Hop culture.²¹⁰ However, using a wheelchair makes a *basement* home studio virtually impossible for *underground* rapper MF Grimm. The fact that Carey does not comment on this twist suggests that the motif of the basement studio seems to be more intrinsic to AA HH LW than to Hip Hop itself.

Conclusion

Public spaces play a prominent role in Percy Carey's *Sentences*, not only because most of the author's life is visually recreated in the streets, street corners, parks, and courts of his community. The visual narrative, the storytelling, and the peritexts characterize the author as a product of his inner-city environment and as a person who willingly engaged in the violent and criminal practices of street life. Carey did so primarily to gain respect, street credibility, and money. In addition, various public places in the neighborhood emerge as sites for socializing,

²¹⁰ The basement is one of the private spaces that is often used for creative purposes (see p. 134).

maturation, creative participation in Hip Hop, or education. With the diverse practices of Hip Hop in the neighborhood community, Carey underscores his involvement and commitment to the culture's various forms of expression. Moreover, by framing himself as a Hip Hop practitioner, he reinforces his affiliation with a 'true,' underground identity of Hip Hop that is celebrated and practiced on the streets and in the neighborhood as opposed to a mainstream, commercialized form of the culture that has lost its connection to its roots.²¹¹

Carey was involved in street culture and street crime from an early age. His performance of violent and hardened street masculinity manifests itself in his continued criminal career and his belief in his invincibility. His reliance on a wheelchair becomes a hallmark of his career and greatly affects his performance of masculinity, which is most evident in the public spaces of the prison. Although he has not been sexually assaulted (or chooses not to mention it), his performance of masculinity is significantly diminished. Nevertheless, like many other authors of Hip Hop life writing, Carey acknowledges the prison as a creative and educational space.

In prison, Carey represents a disabled, incarcerated black masculinity that provides unprecedented insight into how the categories of 'race,' masculinity, and disability intersect in prison. In public discourse about blackness and masculinity *and* in Hip Hop, disability rarely emerges as a significant factor. A common assumption about disabled black men is that "[with] their physicality and sexuality now assumed to be impaired, the fear-based social script that makes black men a 'problem' is now muted" (Santoro, 2016: 316). Although unable to perform a typical and *able* prison masculinity, Carey presents himself as having found other ways of claiming identity. It is in the prison that Carey's attempt to construct a multi-layered identity is most evident. For much of his memoir, he frames himself as a hardened and violent street thug and adds a layer of educated middle-class masculinity to his framing. By rejecting traditional state education such as school, Carey joins the mass of young men who turn to the streets to learn what they need in life. However, by presenting himself as consuming literature in the inner-city community and using his literary skills to become a spokesman in prison, Carey balances his portrayal as an educated street criminal.

Throughout the second half of the graphic memoir, Carey's primary means of transport is the car, symbolizing his dependence on others and his need for security in his vulnerable state. In *Sentences*, the car is not used to visit other places because Carey would not be able to visit the places without the help of others. Instead, the car allows Carey, despite his state of dependence and vulnerability, to continue his criminal career unharmed. It allows the author to

²¹¹ See p. 57.

continue participating in street life, underlining Carey's investment in street culture and crime. His continued involvement in crime, even after his paralysis, can be seen as an overcompensation for his lost abilities. His performance of street masculinity is exclusively tied to his violent actions and various crimes. This claim is poignantly and, at times, exuberantly illustrated in depictions of street crime and shootings. Moreover, the graphic memoir portrays Carey as an unaffected thug with a penchant for violence and without remorse.

The artist's family and adult home are the only private spaces acknowledged in *Sentences*. They are used primarily to show Carey's relationship to Hip Hop and rap music, a preference he acquired from his sisters. It is striking that the artist's relationship with women is addressed primarily in private spaces. This aligns with other rappers' accounts, reiterating the gendered division between the public and private sphere. In this respect, however, *Sentences* contains a relevant difference, as Carey does not acknowledge any relevant relationships with women other than his mother and sisters. His mother's position as a strong and respected woman is attributed in part to her persistence in the face of the objectifying gaze of the men on the street, personified by a pimp.

Carey's mother is the only woman who can be considered a strong female character, while his sisters are only mentioned for their adolescent influence on him. Other than that, however, acting women are completely absent from the graphic memoir. Although a few female characters appear in the background of shows, competitions, or on the street, Carey does not mention female childhood friends, girlfriends, a wife, or love interests as many other rappers do. Aside from the medium of the graphic memoir, the relative absence of women can be seen as the major difference between *Sentences* and other examples in the archive.

In Carey's case, however, the absence of love interests, relationships with women, or any statements about his attraction to women can be attributed to his impaired performance of masculinity. On the one hand, as noted above, disabled black men are assumed to be devoid of sexuality. On the other hand, Carey may refrain from acknowledging his masculinity in this regard to avoid being seen as 'less' than a man. His claim to masculinity is constituted less by his pursuit of women and sex than by his propensity for violence, crime, and the pursuit of respect, all of which he continues even after his paralysis. Rather than treating interactions with women as something he has difficulty with or is no longer able to do, Carey overcompensates for this inability by presenting himself as an able street thug, continuing his violent crime spree from the passenger seat.

His final transformation from a violent street thug to an educated middle-class man and spokesperson for the inmates marks Carey's path of self-improvement. This neoliberal agenda

requires the artist to learn from past mistakes and follow a path to a reformed and better self. Despite all the self-improvement, the artist suffers from his choices as a street thug and his involvement in crime. As a result, his rap persona remains incomplete, as he cannot perform on stage or engage in common Hip Hop practices.

4.2 Case Studies: Conclusion

This subsection aimed to demonstrate the diversity of AA HH LW through four different case studies that represent different subgroups of authors and publications in the archive. The case studies of Earl Simmons and Percy Carey represent male authors who present their (gender) identity as primarily shaped by an inner-city experience of violence, crime, and the pursuit of respect. Lynn's two memoirs can be seen as representing Hip Hop authors with a less pronounced performance of hypermasculinity and a middle-class upbringing far away from the dangers of the inner city. Sandra Denton's memoir follows the informal rules of celebrity life writing by creating the illusion of access to her life's most intimate and private aspects. Although male authors also engage in this celebrity contract to some extent, Denton's memoir, as a proxy for life writing by female authors, reveals a considerable infatuation with the spectacle of the female body. The marketing strategy embedded in the publication's design thrives on readers' enthusiasm for details about the female body as endangered, threatened, exploited, and abused.

Gender in Public and Private Spaces

The close ties between Hip Hop and public community spaces were demonstrated regarding the representation of public spaces. Male authors with an inner-city background, such as Simmons and Carey, frequent public spaces for various purposes, for example, representing their street credibility, engaging in Hip Hop creativity, or reinforcing their claims to hypermasculinity. Stereotypical rappers rely on public spaces in the inner city to act out their interpretations of hypermasculinity. In addition to the public spaces of the inner-city community, these two case studies have demonstrated the close connections between the experience of blackness and incarceration. It is in the prison that their performances of hypermasculinity are put to the test. While the representation of black incarcerated masculinity in AA HH LW provides insight into intersectional marginalization, the author's anecdotes of personal suffering and despair also deconstruct the prison experience as a prerequisite for Hip Hop authenticity.

The importance attached to inner-city street credibility and Hip Hop authenticity can be seen in the case of Lynn and Sandra Denton, whose middle-class backgrounds prevent them from being seen as 'real.' However, both devise different strategies to fabricate proximity to the inner city in their memoirs. In addition, both incorporate public spaces into the visual narratives of their memoirs primarily to perform a celebrity persona. Common's public appearances are closely tied to his self-concept as an educated 'conscious' artist whose middle-class background

and lack of stereotypical Hip Hop authenticity give him access to a public political and activist sphere inaccessible to most stereotypical rappers. Sandra Denton's public appearances underscore her claim as a celebrity artist who maintains the illusion of an ideal world even when confronted with personal trauma in the private sphere.

The strong emphasis on public spaces in the publications of Simmons and Carey leaves surprisingly little room for their articulation of activities that take place in private spaces. Moreover, this imbalance between public and private spaces reaffirms that (hyper)masculinity is primarily enacted in public spaces, where space-consuming activities such as violent crime and the quest for respect and wealth are pursued from an early age, unhindered and unmonitored. Moreover, these activities also occur in public in mutual competition with other men who affirm or challenge each other's claim to masculinity. While private spaces are virtually absent from Carey's memoir, Simmons describes them only from a negative perspective or to emphasize his attachment to his grandmother.

However, authors with less stereotypical performances of masculinity or femininity depend on private spaces and thus contribute little to deconstructing the gendered public/private divide, according to which 'weaker' and 'soft' gender performances are tied to the private sphere. Lynn devotes much attention and space in his memoir(s) to presenting himself as an atypical rapper and romantic gentleman, the latter primarily because of his mother and other women. His memoirs seem to reinforce stereotypical assumptions about women as 'soft' and men growing up to be equally delicate.

As a female artist, Sandra Denton partly reiterates the gendered public/private divide by drawing attention to how she has suffered from conforming to stereotypical gender roles. It is in the private spaces that much of her memoir takes place. By deliberately providing access to this private suffering, Denton's memoir can be seen as a typical female celebrity memoir that turns access to private details into a profitable marketing ploy.

In conclusion, regarding the representation of public and private spaces in the context of gender identity, the case studies have shown that stereotypical street masculinity unfolds primarily in public spaces. In contrast, atypical masculinity and femininity are relegated to the private sphere. As a result, AA HH LW has yet to offer a particularly innovative take on the gendered public/private divide. However, the multiple appropriations of public and private spaces demonstrate the diversity of AA HH LW, the approaches male and female authors take to representing their lives, and how the peritexts of memoirs support the author's intended framing.

Recurring Motifs

Each case study has shown that Hip Hop authors have employed different strategies for self-presentation in their autobiographies and memoirs. The peritextual analysis has provided evidence of how the cover design, photographs, additional voices, and the general layout of the publication support this framing. In addition to giving information about the various representations of space and gender, the analysis has shown that several motifs recur in all four case studies.

At first glance, none of the four examples explicitly reveal the author's affiliation with Hip Hop culture. While Simmons foregrounds a darker aspect of his identity, Lynn presents himself as a businessman, Sandra Denton as a 'fly' celebrity woman, and Carey as a disabled man. The authors seem to present themselves primarily as individuals. Only on the back cover or in the reviews is their affiliation with Hip Hop established and marketed accordingly. This could be interpreted as an approach to the mainstream market for autobiographies and memoirs. In particular, Sandra Denton's memoir exemplifies an approach to the celebrity memoir market, as her publication features several strategies common to female celebrity authors, including a focus on the female body, an infatuation with intimate details, the suffering under patriarchy, and survival motifs. Although male authors also reveal intimate details, the promotional strategy in the peritexts primarily distinguishes female authors. By presenting a complete personality, the authors offer a holistic view of their identity, taking on the character of classical autobiography.

By relegating their Hip Hop affiliation to the background, the authors focus more on sharing their journeys, struggles, and growth outside their musical careers. This orientation toward the classic narrative styles of classic autobiographies and memoirs may indicate that there is not yet a distinct style of Hip Hop Life Writing these authors could emulate. Instead, they copy highly profitable and marketable peritextual cues and narrative strategies that ensure a profitable reception for their publications.

A second recurring motif, also related to the copying of established life-writing tropes, is the author's self-improvement. All authors, some more and some less, recount their journeys, citing the experience of difficulties and overcoming obstacles as reasons for their self-improvement. This neoliberal rhetoric is more evident in the memoirs of Sandra Denton and Percy Carey. Protecting herself from future abuse and learning not to trust hypermasculine men seals her path to self-improvement and self-therapy, the latter of which she declares to be the purpose of her memoir. On the other hand, Carey paid a high price for his transgressions and only turned to self-improvement after a humiliating prison sentence. While Denton becomes a celibate

woman, Carey adopts an educated middle-class identity that contrasts sharply with his street identity. It is also significant that the artists turn to self-improvement once their narratives have reached the climax. In Denton's case, it is her marital rape and hospitalization that is presented as the climax of her narrative. The turning point in Carey's memoir is his emergence as a spokesperson for the inmates and his ability to challenge his sentence.

There is also a strong humanitarian aspect to surviving ordeals, recovering mentally and physically, and reflecting on past mistakes. When Denton draws attention to her history of abuse and suffering, she does so to present herself as an advocate for women, to become a spokesperson for abused women, and to accuse abusers publicly. In Carey's case, this humanitarian agenda may be less pronounced. However, it is still addressed when the author presents himself as a confidant to other inmates and represents their concerns before a prison committee. Lynn's self-representation also has a strong humanitarian streak, but it is presented less as a confrontation with past ordeals and more as the artist's personal drive.

AA HH LW authors often associate obstacles and difficulties with the realities of inner-city life. Growing up in impoverished inner-city communities, facing the prevalence of violence, and developing strategies for survival make up a classic 'rags-to-riches' narrative. The negative aspects of one's upbringing starkly contrast with the life of wealth, fame, and freedom many authors claim to have achieved by the memoir's end. The memoirs of Simmons, Carey, and, to some extent, Sandra Denton follow this narrative arc.

At the end of his autobiography, Simmons does not present himself as living a carefree life. However, his descriptions of inner-city life, survival strategies to gain respect and accumulate wealth, and exposure to public spaces are reminiscent of a narrative arc that begins in poverty and despair. The same is true for Percy Carey, whose inner-city upbringing, like Simmon's, is not contrasted with a life of luxury and fame. At the end of his memoir, Carey looks back on a life free of constraints but without the prospect of a promising rap career. Although Sandra Denton grew up in a sheltered middle-class home, she constructs proximity to the inner city by venturing into inner-city spaces and entering relationships with street thugs. As a result, her memoir sometimes seems to follow a similar narrative arc, even more so because she constantly presents herself as a celebrity artist living in a celebrity world. Ultimately, this imbalance in her memoir is due to the multi-layered person she seeks to present herself as.

Another recurring motif of self-presentation is the insistence on presenting a multifaceted identity. This motif can be attributed to the strategy of following established life-writing principles while presenting a holistic view of their personality and identity. The artists seek to present themselves as more than a rapper, more than a female celebrity, more than a stereotype,

or more than an educated middle-class activist. Earl Simmons confirms his public image as a stereotypical rapper exposed to the public spaces of his community, where he competes with other men for respect and money. Yet, he also allows for a more diverse self-image, incorporating softer aspects of identity rarely acknowledged in his music. Across two memoirs and a decade, Lynn presents himself as a ‘conscious’ rapper with a different background than most stereotypical rappers. Unable to claim street credibility, he constructs closeness to inner-city masculinity, which he cannot claim and is not known for. Given his infatuation with love, romance, and feminine issues, Common’s foray into inner-city (hyper)masculinity seems out of place but is part of his self-presentation strategy.

Sandra Denton’s multifaceted identity is even more pronounced in how the author navigates public and private identities, resulting in various ‘contradictions’ and underscoring her personal development on the cusp of celebrity stardom and private suffering. In public, she is portrayed as a wild and ‘fly’ celebrity artist who competes with men in supposedly masculine domains such as rapping, racing, or drinking. In private, however, she still clings to patriarchal notions of gender and gender roles, silently accepting abuse and suffering until she renounces sexual intercourse. Like Simmons, Percy Carey constructs a public image that does not avoid the acceptance and use of indiscriminate violence, involvement in crime, and the ordeal of prison. However, his interest in reading and education allows him to transcend his underprivileged upbringing and embrace an educated class mentality.

All artists play with the expectations of readers and fans, confirming already existing opinions and offering new insights into their lives and careers. In addition to presenting their lives in their entirety, the authors aim to offer themselves to a broad readership by ticking off as many life-writing boxes as possible. After all, the memoir market is an industry in which authors (and publishers) aim to maximize the book’s reception and profit.

The car is a recurring motif, not as dominant as the streets or the basement studio in AA HH LW, but present in all four case studies. As a symbol of American mobility, the car serves a different purpose for each author. For Earl Simmons, the car is at the center of an exciting leisure activity while giving him limited mobility. In addition, stealing cars is part of his quest for respect and helps him to demonstrate his cunning, thieving skills, and audacity. In Lynn’s case, the car is the classic symbol of mobility, independence, and separation from the parental home, and, thus, becomes a part of his maturation process. Finally, the car allows him to leave Chicago for New York and embark on his creative journey.

Although Sandra Denton also uses a car to reach otherwise inaccessible places, the car is primarily a symbol of empowerment for her. On several occasions, she boasts of her driving

(and racing) skills, which allow her to compete with men in this supposedly male domain. Given that the races occur in public spaces, the car emphasizes her claim to a public identity that contrasts with her private side. In public races, Denton is a wild and adventurous woman who does not shy away from conflict with men and derives power from the experience. In Percy Carey's memoir, the car has a very different symbolic meaning. Carey depends on the car as a means of transportation because of his physical inability to travel. Consequently, the car becomes a social space, as he depends on friends to drive him. Thus, the car is a mobile instrument of survival that allows the author to participate in street life and continue his criminal career from the safe and protected space of the car.

Part V

V. CONCLUSION

Main Research Findings

This dissertation aimed to determine how Hip Hop artists represent space and gender identity in their autobiographies and memoirs. One of the primary goals was to explore the functions that authors assign to spaces and how these spaces and gender intersect in African American Hip Hop Life Writing. In addition, this thesis sought to characterize African American Hip Hop Life Writing as a life writing subgenre by identifying the primary and secondary genre elements that inform Hip Hop autobiographies and memoirs. In the first part of this conclusion, I summarize the most significant findings of my thesis.

Based on a close reading of over forty publications and a paratextual analysis of four selected case studies from the corpus of African American Hip Hop Life Writing, it can be concluded that public urban spaces play a significant role in the authors' self-representation as authentic Hip Hop artists. Public urban spaces, such as the neighborhood community and the streets, are assigned various functions, including maturation, education, claiming Hip Hop authenticity, and engaging in creative practices. However, many of the activities that take place in these public spaces are associated with violence and crime, such as drug dealing, robbery, and assault. Such activities, which take place in the public spaces of the community, are embedded in the authors' quest for respect, wealth, and status symbols. Through their crimes and violent actions, the prison becomes an additional space frequently described by male authors.

The analysis of Hip Hop Life Writing has shown that both male and female authors represent inner-city public spaces as domains where ideas of hypermasculinity, machismo, and sexism marginalize femininity and masculinities perceived as weak. In this context, it is striking how space, gender, and class intersect in the representations of specifically male authors with an inner-city background. In their publications, these authors repeatedly present themselves as having grown up in single-parent families without a biological father. Faced with a lack of male role models and cramped living conditions, these authors present the inner city as a space frequented for the purposes of socializing, maturing, acquiring street knowledge, claiming Hip Hop authenticity, experiencing sexual intercourse, and engaging in creative Hip Hop practices. Their exposure and involvement in violence and crime, their survival of inner-city perils, their rejection of authority, their rootedness in street culture, and their dedication to the code of the street constitute the authors' realness in the eyes of the Hip Hop nation.

Although a few male authors address the negative consequences of drug abuse, crime, and prison, most male authors from inner-city backgrounds have internalized a performance of hypermasculinity that aligns with street, prison, and stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity. Authors such as Earl Simmons, Prodigy, Ja Rule, or Ice-T present the public spaces of the inner-city

community as gendered spaces where hypermasculinity is the ideal tool of survival, and weakness is equated with femininity. While adopting performances of masculinity from other men on the street, masculinity is confirmed by other men on the street. The affinity for hypermasculinity proved beneficial to their career in rap music, as many of these artists have capitalized on the appeal of street and ghetto aesthetics. Their street culture roots underpin their success and thus are perpetuated in their autobiographies and memoirs. Their performance of hypermasculinity helped them survive on the streets, prevail in prison, and become successful artists in Hip Hop. Because they have never had to adapt to other circumstances, self-reflect, or change their ways, their life-writing publications seamlessly continue their public framing.

Hip Hop authors mainly use urban space and their performance of hypermasculinity to represent themselves as genuinely authentic in the sense of Hip Hop. While the attention to masculinity in a male-dominated culture like Hip Hop is less surprising, my dissertation also showed that representations of masculinity in AA HH LW are more diverse. Less stereotypical representations of masculinity are closely tied to perceptions of space and class. Male Hip Hop authors who grew up in middle-class communities negotiate their claims to Hip Hop authenticity by shifting toward inner-city experiences. By portraying the dangers of the inner city as impacting their middle-class upbringing, authors such as Lonny Rashid Lynn, Questlove, Darryl McDaniels, and DJ Run invoke the ideas and perceptions associated with Hip Hop authenticity. However, their use of public spaces differs significantly from that of stereotypical rappers, as they do not present public spaces as places primarily used to accumulate material wealth and respect but to engage in creative Hip Hop practices or to carve out a niche for themselves beyond Hip Hop and rap music. This was vividly demonstrated by the example of ‘conscious’ rapper Common, whose involvement in public spaces is primarily used to frame him as a politically active artist. His identity as a less stereotypical rapper from a middle-class background allowed him to meet political figures and gain access to highly politicized spaces, promising access to power and participation.

Except for Lynn, less stereotypical artists such as Questlove, Darryl McDaniels, DJ Run, and Wyclef Jean were raised in a nuclear family with both parents present. They either claim Hip Hop realness by fabricating an exposure to inner-city spaces, as in the case of Common, or blatantly acknowledge their lack of Hip Hop realness, as in the case of Questlove. Their lack of a Hip Hop realness grounded in hypermasculinity, inner-city experiences, and crime leads to a more varied performance of masculinity and, consequently, a more varied self-reflection in their life writing. Because of their apparent lack of Hip Hop realness, they are not tied to representations of hypermasculinity and include a much more varied interpretation of

masculinity. Lynn, for example, includes themes antithetical to a stereotypical understanding of Hip Hop by including vulnerability, romantic love, and self-reflection. His atypicality is also manifested in the strong presence of his mother's voice in his first memoir. In addition, Questlove openly rejects Hip Hop materialism and describes himself as introverted. Unlike many stereotypical rappers, these authors renegotiate established notions of Hip Hop authenticity and incorporate their interpretations of what it means to be a male author in Hip Hop.

Finally, female authors use public spaces primarily to present themselves as vulnerable subjects exposed to a pervasive male gaze. Whether they recount experiences from their youth, as in the cases of Alicia Keys, Mc Lyte, Sha-Rock, and Sister Souljah, or whether they portray themselves as victims of street thugs, as in the case of Sandra Denton, female authors emphasize their vulnerability in public spaces. Once again, the street and the inner-city community become gendered spaces in which masculinity is portrayed as dominant and femininity is marginalized. Indeed, the analysis of women's memoirs has revealed how women are forced to hide their femininity to reduce the risk of sexual assault or harassment in public spaces. Here, space, gender, and Hip Hop intertwine in complex ways, as the typical, oversized Hip Hop clothing provides an ideal 'cover' for women moving through public space. In addition, female authors perceive public spaces as sites of creative practice, such as busking or performing on stage. Sandra Denton's case study has impressively demonstrated how public space is incorporated into life-writing to maintain the public façade of a celebrity artist. However, it was shown that public spaces are less relevant to female artists' publications. This reiterates the gendered public/private divide of space, confirming male artists as dominant and female artists as marginalized in public spaces.

Because of the many male stereotypical Hip Hop performers primarily invested in public spaces, private spaces seem less critical to AA HH LW. However, some private spaces are relevant to most authors and can be defined as characteristic. On the one hand, it is primarily male authors whose public image conforms to stereotypical Hip Hop masculinity who contribute to the maintenance of the gendered public/private divide in their publications. On the other hand, female authors and less stereotypical rappers increasingly refer to private spaces and assign different functions to them. In the case of Sandra Denton, private spaces are associated with trauma and pain and form an antithesis to her public framing as a happy celebrity.

Moreover, for many female artists, private spaces are associated with family and motherhood. In contrast, less stereotypical rappers use private spaces to emphasize their

differences from other artists, either by presenting themselves as introverted or by emphasizing their supposedly weaker characteristics because of a strong feminine presence. In other words, private space is associated with femininity and masculinity that differs from the standard Hip Hop masculinity. Thus, not only the representation of public spaces confirms the gendered public/private divide but also the relegation of anything perceived as non-masculine to the private sphere.

In addition to the private spaces of family life used primarily by female and non-stereotypical male artists, the basement studio is a recurring private space unique to Hip Hop Life Writing. Both male and female artists reference it, which may be characterized as significant to identifying a Hip Hop artist. The basement studio epitomizes the DIY mentality ingrained in Hip Hop's status as a subculture and fits the narrative arcs of many life writings that trace an artist's journey from humble beginnings to international success. The basement studio, usually located underground and protected from prying eyes, provides a safe space where artists pursue and hone their creative skills unhindered.

African American Hip Hop Life Writing

Regarding my second research question, the results of this study indicate that African American Hip Hop Life Writing is a hybrid of primary elements of African American, musical, and celebrity life writing on the one hand and several subsidiary life writing genres on the other. This hybrid character suggests that AA HH LW cannot yet be considered an independent genre, as authors still rely on established genre notions that have proven profitable in the memoir market. This explains the high number of memoirs that exhibit characteristics of life writing subgenres such as self-therapy, trauma, advice, addiction, and prison narratives.

In this regard, the discussion of publications by female Hip Hop artists has suggested that it is primarily female authors who incorporate motifs typical of celebrity memoirs, including a particular emphasis on the body as a target of (sexualized) violence and providing unfettered insight into their private lives by fabricating an illusion of intimacy and authenticity. In doing so, these authors draw on motifs and narratives that have proven profitable in a number of celebrity memoirs without necessarily exploring their Hip Hop roots in detail. This strategy suggests that AA HH LW has yet to exist as a distinct genre but that authors are adopting narrative trends that are well established and have proven profitable in the memoir industry. After all, Hip Hop writers are interested in maximizing their readership, even more so when their autobiography or memoir is seen as a vehicle to gain attention as a faded celebrity artist.

Another point that underscores the hybrid nature of AA HH LW is that many publications are not primarily emphasizing the artist's background in Hip Hop or rap music. In fact, with a

few exceptions, there are hardly any visual references to Hip Hop or rap music on the covers of most publications. Neither graffiti tags, street fashion, hand gestures, DJ equipment, symbols of luxury, nor verbal lettering establish a connection to Hip Hop. Most publications show only the author's face, similar to numerous examples of successful bestsellers in the genre, including those by white authors.²¹² Most authors follow the successful mainstream formula of the memoir industry in terms of narrative strategy and motif, as well as cover and book design, in order to sell books.

Despite this hybrid character, AA HH LW is still unique in how it captures the intersections of space, class, and gender that impact the lives of many authors. AA HH LW authors call attention to what ails their communities and thereby provide personal insights into marginalized communities. Urban spaces remain a strong motif that authors emphasize, even long after they have abandoned these spaces. Experiences of urban space are relevant for convincingly claiming Hip Hop authenticity and contributing to and aligning oneself with Hip Hop historiography. AA HH LW authors contribute to the Hip Hop Nation by sharing their knowledge of the culture, paying tribute to influential predecessors, or letting others participate in their music by providing insight into their lyrics. Various anecdotes about the beginnings of the culture, New York block parties, and highlighting the pioneering role of artists by pointing out 'firsts' add to the archive of Hip Hop knowledge.

In addition, the private space of the basement studio presents a recurring motif that epitomizes the underground and DIY mentality that has been a core element of Hip Hop culture since its beginning. The sheer number of publications that refer to the basement studio or a comparable retreat for creativity suggests that this private space is part of the authors' self-understanding as artists, representing a crucial component of AA HH LW. Unlike musicians in other genres, Hip Hop writers are not dependent on describing the learning of musical skills. Success as a rap artist requires less musical talent than the ability to interpret the world lyrically. As a result, artists depend on little more than a piece of paper, a pen, and a place to retreat. This immediacy, on the one hand, and resourcefulness, on the other, are characteristic of Hip Hop culture and are recurring motifs in AA HH LW publications.

²¹² Consider, for example, the successful recent memoirs by Prince Harry (2023), Britney Spears (2023), Elliot Page (2023), Pamela Anderson (2023), Paris Hilton (2023), or Patrick Stewart (2023), see also Roeloffs (2023).

Significance of the Study

This thesis has provided a deeper insight into how contemporary and former African American Hip Hop artists incorporate space and gender into the representation of their lives. The findings of this dissertation provide a new perspective on the study of Hip Hop, approaching the culture comprehensively from the perspective of autobiography studies for the first time. The study of AA HH LW opens up many interesting research avenues for Hip Hop studies. On the one hand, it adds an autobiographical lens to the understanding of Hip Hop, allowing the culture to be understood through firsthand accounts of its agents, main contributors, and pioneering artists. Close readings and paratextual approaches ensure an understanding of the strategies of self-representation within Hip Hop culture.

In addition, it allows conclusions about how Hip Hop artists market themselves, how they navigate the divide between the private self and the public alias, and whether there is a break in self-presentation when moving from the medium of music to life writing. Following an intersectional approach, an analysis of AA HH LW provides insight into how African American artists perceive their access to participation and power while processing experiences of discrimination and marginalization. In this way, a more complete picture of Hip Hop can be drawn without perpetuating the stereotyping and scapegoating of the culture that often occurs in the analysis of rap music. While the diversity of AA HH LW is primarily manifested in its aspects of gender performance and geographical scope, the AA HH LW corpus, spanning over twenty years, also has a temporal dimension. The juxtaposition of publications by current and former authors provides insights into the development of Hip Hop, the evolution of the authors' self-image under the influence of political changes, the growing popularity of rap music, or the influence of queer artists.

In the context of AA HH LW, Hip Hop, and autobiography studies are linked by an obsession with authenticity. While Hip Hop artists define authenticity primarily in terms of street credibility, the paradox of authenticity is evident in the fabrication of privacy and participation in celebrity memoirs. As the first comprehensive examination of the corpus of AA HH LW, this thesis has highlighted the importance of life writing at the threshold of Hip Hop, African American, musical, and celebrity life writing. The characterization of AA HH LW as a blend of different genres and subsidiary life writing elements characterizes Hip Hop Life Writing as a life writing subgenre whose further characterization invites additional future research.

One limitation of this work was that the corpus consisted primarily of publications by rappers. This is not surprising given the commercial success of rap artists, but it runs the risk

of reducing the perspective on Hip Hop to rap music. Although publications written by Hip Hop DJs and producers are included in the corpus, the large number of autobiographies and memoirs by rappers has often led to a focus on the contributions of rappers. A discussion of Hip Hop cannot do without the achievements of rappers. The danger of reducing Hip Hop culture to rap music is an integral part of Hip Hop studies and must be critically reflected upon by scholars. In addition, the analysis primarily provided an image of AA HH LW situated in the past, thus outlining the development of Hip Hop and Hip Hop Life Writing. Due to the large number of publications written by former artists and the lack of publications by contemporary Hip Hop performers, I could not outline a more current image of Hip Hop and its interrelationship with space and gender.

However, this would be a fruitful area for future Hip Hop Life Writing research. Further research is needed to expand the corpus by analyzing how white Hip Hop performers navigate the pitfalls of claiming authenticity, especially when they are not exposed to inner-city communities and have less precarious class backgrounds. In this context, a compelling question is the extent to which writers emulate non-stereotypical black rappers' strategies for claiming authenticity. The controversy surrounding the 1990s white rapper Vanilla Ice, who claimed authenticity by lying about his upbringing, has undoubtedly strained white rappers' self-identification within Hip Hop (Boyd, 2004: 326). Thus, examining how white performers position themselves in relation to a culture and art form that is characterized as antithetical to the personal circumstances of most white rappers would be a valuable contribution to the study of Hip Hop Life Writing.

Acknowledging the global impact of Hip Hop and rap music, the scope of the corpus could be expanded in its geographical dimension by exploring how European and British artists represent space, 'race,' gender, class, and other variables in their autobiographies and memoirs. Like white U.S.-American artists, non-U.S. artists may be compelled to negotiate their position within a predominantly African American culture. Moreover, non-U.S. performers can reinterpret Hip Hop aesthetics and notions of authenticity by incorporating their own experiences of class, space, and gender. Much of the future research to be conducted in the context of Hip Hop Life Writing depends on the release of additional publications by other commercially successful rap artists (for instance, the members of N.W.A.), influential white producers such as Rick Rubin, Jimmy Iovine, or Lyor Cohen, or contemporary and queer artists.

Pointing to future research by expanding the current AA HH LW corpus does not mean that the analysis of the current corpus is exhausted. On the contrary, the rich pastiche of life-writing subgenres that characterizes AA HH LW invites a variety of interdisciplinary approaches.

Spirituality and religion, for example, are strong motifs that I have not explored further for reasons of time and scope. In addition to a few publications identified as spiritual memoirs, writers include creeds, Bible verses, and references to Christianity or Islam for various purposes.²¹³ They foreground their faith, for example, when depicting periods of turmoil.

Moreover, exploring representations of space, gender, class, and ‘race’ in Hip Hop Life Writing allows for a more nuanced reading of constructions of authenticity in the culture, especially when comparing authors’ autobiographical references in lyrics or music videos with their autobiographies and memoirs. In this context, the relevance of cars and ‘knowledge’ as the fifth element of Hip Hop may be a promising approach. In particular, the case studies have shown the importance of cars as status symbols and representations of mobility and freedom. Given the prevalence of cars in music videos, future interdisciplinary research could investigate the functions assigned to cars in rap lyrics, music videos, and Hip Hop Life Writing. In addition to contributing to the understanding of materialism in rap music, this endeavor could answer the question of the extent to which Hip Hop identity and claims to authenticity are constituted through material possessions.²¹⁴ Finally, exploring the different understandings of Hip Hop ‘knowledge,’ for example, by comparing artists’ references in lyrics and life writing, could determine how knowledge is transferred within the Hip Hop Nation and how the culture’s historiography expands over time.

The Future of Hip Hop Life Writing

From time to time, scholars of autobiography studies ponder the question of what the future of autobiographical studies looks like. After the extensive analysis and characterization of AA HH LW, some reflections on the future of this life-writing subgenre are in order. The memoir boom has also left its mark on AA HH LW, as evidenced by the large number of memoirs written by Hip Hop authors. The characterization of AA HH LW as a blend of life-writing subgenres reflects the suitability of the memoir genre for recounting lives affected by illness, trauma, addiction, or prison experiences. More than a few Hip Hop writers have recognized the potential of memoirs to bring their names back into the spotlight. As long as the publication of private insights and intimate details remains profitable in the memoir industry, Hip Hop authors will publish memoirs to confirm celebrity status, attract attention, and generate profit. The dual publications of Common and Darryl McDaniels within ten years demonstrate the enduring

²¹³ Consider the various Hip Hop artists who acknowledge their faith in passing, or those whose memoirs bear a strong resemblance to spiritual life narratives, see p. 90.

²¹⁴ See p. 23.

appeal of memoirs for Hip Hop artists. The infatuation with individualism and identity expression we see in today's widespread use of social media may also contribute to the further expansion of Hip Hop Life Writing. After all, most Hip Hop artists identify as celebrities whose celebrity status must be maintained by making the private self available to a broad audience. Recognizing life writing as another component in maintaining and renewing celebrity status allows Hip Hop performers to define and disseminate their self-image, counter other people's descriptions, and market themselves as a brand.

Against the backdrop of a Hip Hop culture that is becoming younger and more diverse, however, the future of Hip Hop Life Writing seems ambivalent. In the 2020 coda to her book on Canadian women's autobiography, Katja Lee asks whether celebrity autobiography has a future in the digital age. She notes that celebrities are obliged to engage with social media, interact with fans, and are consumed by online audiences in ways that surpass the consumption of celebrity life in writing (Lee, Ch. coda).²¹⁵ Once again, celebrity status is confirmed as the result of a network of agents.²¹⁶ It can be assumed that current or future Hip Hop artists will increasingly present themselves on social media platforms and, thus, inevitably become online celebrities in their own right. Future Hip Hop artists may feel more comfortable making autobiographical references on social media to reach their intended target audiences.

However, the potential of biopics or autobiographical documentaries should not be ignored. Rappers have benefited in recent years from the growing popularity of online streaming services such as Amazon Prime, Netflix, and Hulu. Most recently, the Moroccan American rapper French Montana, who collaborated with rapper Rick Ross and producer P. Diddy, released the documentary *Khadija* (2023), which chronicles his rise from growing up in Brooklyn with a single mother to becoming a multi-platinum artist. Another example is *Free Meek* (2019), which Jay-Z produced for Amazon, focusing on U.S. rapper Meek Mill's experiences with the U.S. legal system. The same year, rapper Travis Scott released his documentary *Look Mom I Can Fly* on Netflix. The life of Roxanne Shanté, one of the first female rappers, was retold in the 2017 biopic *Roxanne Roxanne*. Outside the U.S., rapper biopics have also gained momentum, as seen in the 2018 biographical documentary *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A* about Sri Lankan-British female rapper M.I.A.

On the other hand, life writing is a classic and prestigious medium that allows for more comprehensive and varied representations. Individual innovative approaches in the AA HH LW corpus, such as the integration of diverse voices or the depiction of life in the form of a graphic

²¹⁵ See also Hipchen and Chansky (2017: 145, 151) and Eakin (2017).

²¹⁶ See p. 83.

novel, testify to the evolution of Hip Hop Life Writing. After fifty years of Hip Hop culture, older Hip Hop artists have primarily used traditional forms of life writing to reflect on their lives and careers. However, Hip Hop Life Writing is already evolving as younger artists have chosen documentaries and biopics to make autobiographical references. It remains to be seen whether contemporary and future artists will fully embrace social media as a channel for their autobiographical references or what other media they will develop to reflect on their lives. However, the evolution of Hip Hop into a global and, in many ways, more diverse culture will also lead to the representation of space, gender, and Hip Hop in more innovative and diverse ways than before.

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VII. Appendix

7.1 Appendix – The Corpus of Hip Hop Life Writing

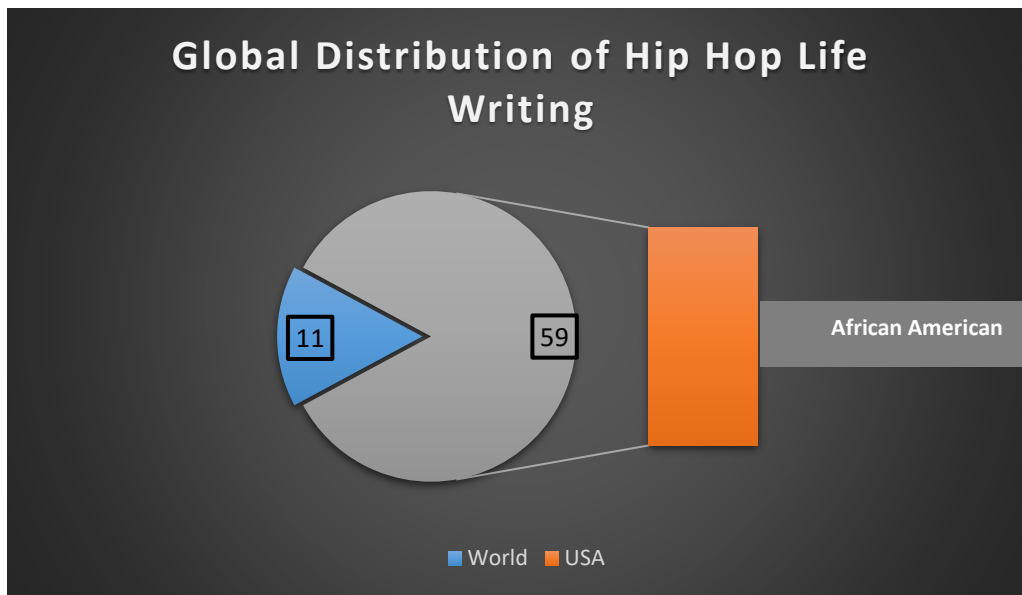


Figure 1: Global Distribution of Hip Hop Life Writing

Figure 1 shows the global distribution of Hip Hop Life Writing publications with an emphasis on African American authors. As of 2024, there are over sixty publications related to Hip Hop Life Writing, eleven of which were written by authors outside the United States. Of the remaining publications, forty-two were written by African American Hip Hop artists. [See p. 67]

Publ.#	Artist and Publication Background					
	Alias	Title	Year	Country	Profession	Gender
1	Bushido	<i>Bushido</i>	2008	Germany	Rapper	Male Artists
2	Abd Al Malik	<i>Sufi Rapper</i>	2009	France	Rapper	
3	Tinie Tempah	<i>My Story So Far</i>	2011	UK	Rapper	
4	Prof. Green	<i>Lucky</i>	2015	UK	Rapper	
5	Fler	<i>Im Bus Ganz Hint</i>	2015	Germany	Rapper	
6	Xatar	<i>Alles oder Nix</i>	2015	Germany	Rapper	
7	Dok2	<i>Illionarie Life</i>	2016	S. Korea	Rapper	
8	Haftbefehl	<i>Hayat</i>	2016	Germany	Rapper	
9	Wiley	<i>Wiley</i>	2017	UK	Rapper	
10	Tulisa	<i>Honest</i>	2012	UK	Rapper	Female artists
11	Mélanie Georgiades	<i>Diam's</i>	2013	Greece	Rapper	

Table 1 Overview Global Hip Hop Life Writing

Table 1 provides an overview of Hip Hop Life Writing with a focus on Europe. This overview clearly shows that Hip Hop Life Writing started much later in Europe than in the United States. It also highlights the imbalance between male and female rappers. [See p. 67]

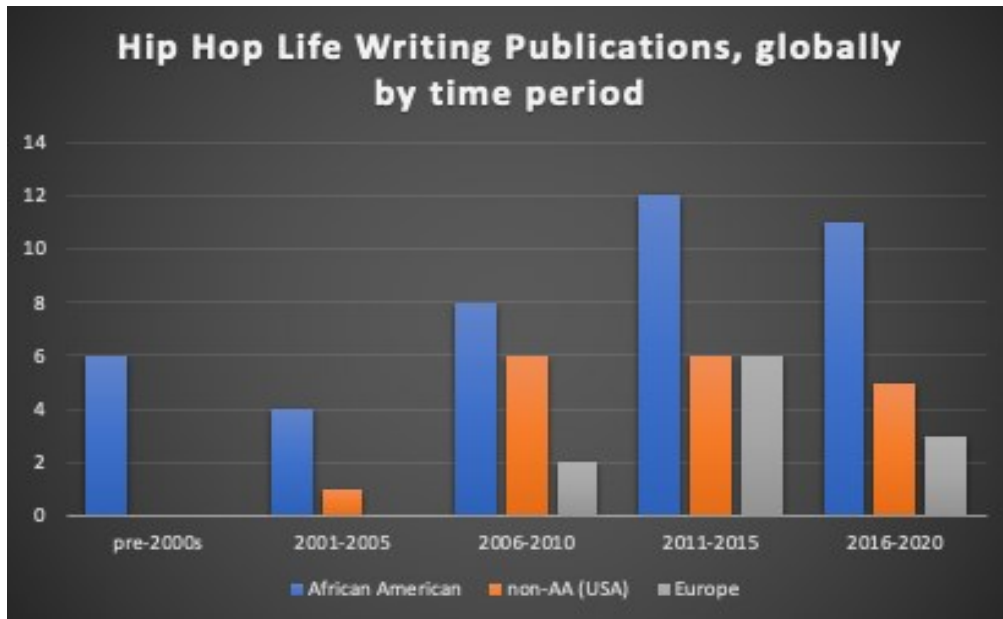


Figure 2 Global Distribution of Publications per Period

Figure 2 shows the global distribution of Hip Hop Life Writing publications per five-year period, emphasizing African American artists. It shows that African American artists were the first to start the trend of publishing life writing accounts and have been the most dominant group of authors ever since.

[See p. 67]

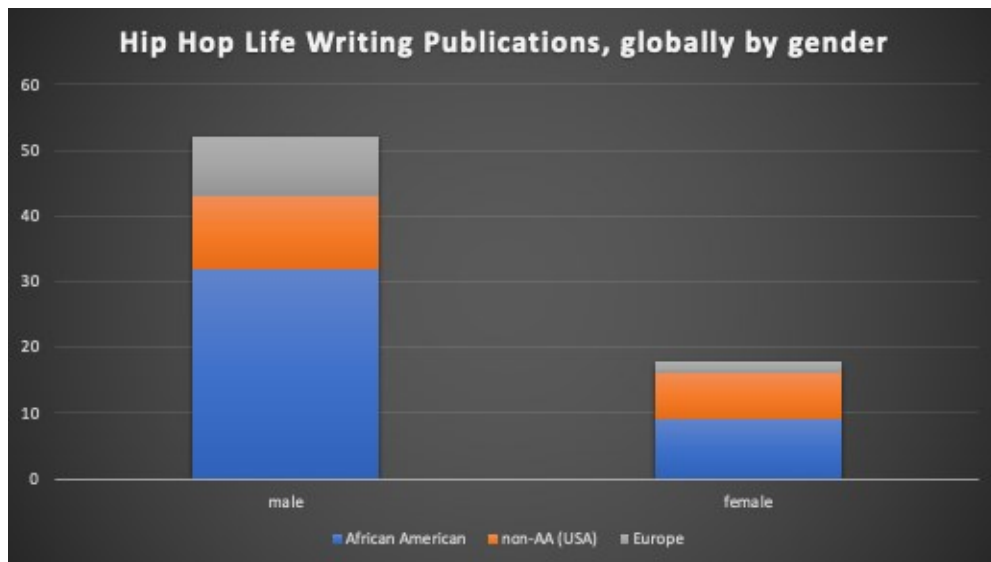


Figure 3 Global Distribution of Hip Hop Life Writing

Figure 3 shows the distribution of global Hip Hop Life Writing publications with an emphasis on gender. This overview demonstrates the imbalance between male and female authors worldwide and in the United States.

[See p. 68]

Publication Information					Artist Information					
#	Artist	Title	Year	Displayed Type	Displayed Co-Author	Gender	Region	City	Region	Gender
1	LL Cool J	<i>I Make My Own Rules</i>	1997	Memoir	Karen Hunter	Male	East	NY	East coast	Male artists
2	Chuck-D	<i>Fight the Power</i>	1997	Und.	Yusuf Jah	Male	East	NY		
3	DJ Run	<i>Reverend Run: A Memoir</i>	2000	Memoir	Curtis L. Taylor	Male	East	NY		
4	Russell Simmons	<i>Life and Def</i>	2001	Memoir	Nelson George	Male	East	NY		
5	DMC	<i>King of Rock</i>	2001	Memoir	Bruce Haring	Male	East	NY		
6	DMX	<i>E.A.R.L. The Autobiography of DMX</i>	2002	Autobiography	Smokey D. Fountaine	Male	East	NY		
7	Mason Betha	<i>Revelations</i>	2003	Memoir	Karen Hunter	Male	East	NY		
8	50 Cent	<i>From Pieces to Weight</i>	2005	Memoir	Kris Ex	Male	East	NY		
9	MF Grimm	<i>Sentences: The Life of MF Grimm</i>	2007	Graphic Novel	Ronald Wimberly	Male	East	NY		
10	Grandmaster Flash	<i>The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash</i>	2008	Memoir	David Ritz	Male	East	NY		
11	Terrance Dean	<i>Hiding in Hip Hop</i>	2008	Memoir		Male	East	Detroit		
12	Jay-Z	<i>Decoded</i>	2010	Autobiography		Male	East	NY		
13	Flavor Flav	<i>Flavor Flav: The Icon</i>	2011	Memoir		Male	East	NY		
14	Common	<i>One Day It'll All Make Sense</i>	2011	Memoir	Adam Bradley	Male	East	Chi		
15	Prodigy	<i>My Infamous Life</i>	2012	Autobiography	Laura Checkoway	Male	East	NY		
16	Wydef Jean	<i>Purpose: An Immigrant's Story</i>	2012	Memoir	Anthony Bozza	Male	East	NJ		
17	Questlove	<i>Mo' Meta Blues</i>	2013	Memoir	Ben Greenman	Male	East	Phi		
18	Ja Rule	<i>Unruly</i>	2014	Memoir	Kim Green	Male	East	NY		
19	DMC	<i>Ten Ways Not to Commit Suicide</i>	2016	Memoir	Darrell Dawsey	Male	East	NY		
20	U-God	<i>Raw</i>	2018	Memoir		Male	East	NY		
21	Rakim	<i>Sweat the Technique</i>	2019	Memoir	Bakari Kitwana	Male	East	NY		
22	Common	<i>Let Love Have the Last Word</i>	2019	Memoir	Mensah Demary	Male	East	Chi		
23	Snoop Dogg	<i>Tha Doggfather</i>	1999	Autobiography	Davin Seay	Male	West	LA	West coast	Female artists
24	Ice-T	<i>A Memoir of Gangsta Life</i>	2012	Memoir	Douglas Century	Male	West	LA		
25	Mac Mall	<i>My Opinion</i>	2015	Memoir		Male	West	Bay Area		
26	Jermaine Dupri	<i>Young, Rich, and Dangerous</i>	2007	Autobiography	Samantha Marshall	Male	Third Coast	Atlanta	Third coast	
27	Trick Daddy	<i>Magic City: Trials of a Native Son</i>	2010	Memoir	Peter Bailey	Male	Third Coast	Miami		
28	Trip Lee	<i>The Good Life</i>	2012	Memoir		Male	Third Coast	Dallas		
29	Timbaland	<i>The Emperor of Sound</i>	2015	Memoir	Veronica Chambers	Male	Third Coast	Virginia		
30	Scarface	<i>Diary of a Madman</i>	2015	Memoir	Benjamin Meadows-Ingram	Male	Third Coast	Houston		
31	LeCrae Moore	<i>Unshamed</i>	2016	Memoir	Jonathan Merritt	Male	Third Coast	Houston		
32	Gucci Mane	<i>The Autobiography of Gucci Mane</i>	2018	Autobiography	Neil Martinez-Belkin	Male	Third Coast	Alabama		
33	Rick Ross	<i>Hurricanes: A Memoir</i>	2019	Memoir	Neil Martinez-Belkin	Male	Third Coast	Miami		
34	Sister Souljah	<i>No Disrespect</i>	1996	Und.	Steve Wasserman	Female	East	NY	East coast	
35	Queen Latifah	<i>Ladies First</i>	1999	Und.	Karen Hunter	Female	East	NJ		
36	Sandra Denton	<i>Let's Talk About Pep</i>	2008	Und.	Karen Hunter	Female	East	NY		
37	Faith Evans	<i>Keep the Faith</i>	2009	Und.	Aliya S. King	Female	East	NJ		
38	Sha Rock	<i>Luminary Icon</i>	2010	Memoir	Iesha Brown	Female	East	NY		
39	Mc Lyte	<i>Livin' in the Lyte</i>	2014	Memoir		Female	East	NY		
40	Alicia Keys	<i>More Myself: A Journey</i>	2020	Autobiography	Michelle Burford	Female	East	NY		
41	Tionne Watkins	<i>A Sick Life</i>	2017	Memoir		Female	Third Coast	Atlanta		
42	Mia-X	<i>Things My Grandma Told Me</i>	2019	Memoir		Female	Third Coast	New Orleans	West coast	

Table 2 Corpus Overview African American Hip Hop Life Writing

Table 2 gives an overview of the African American Hip Hop Life Writing corpus. It lists all forty-two publications written by forty authors while categorizing them by region and gender. In addition, the co-author's names and the year of publication are displayed. [See p. 68]

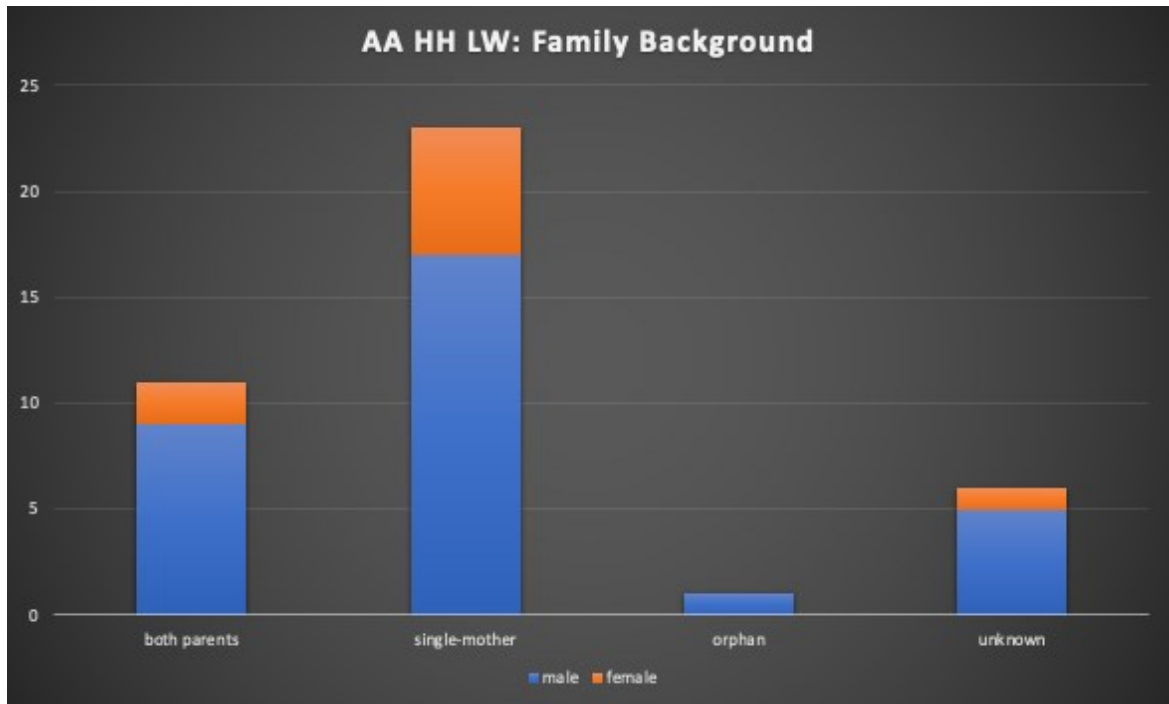


Figure 4 Author's Family Background

Figure 4 shows the authors' family backgrounds. While many authors were raised by a single mother, a significant number of authors grew up with both parents. [See p. 130]

Abstract

Hip Hop and its most commercially successful element, rap music, are often associated with less privileged urban spaces. This raises questions about the significance of these spaces, class backgrounds, and gender identities. Given the long history of Hip Hop and its influence on US society, life accounts of Hip Hop artists have received little scholarly attention. This is surprising, because Hip Hop performers have contributed to a significant corpus from 1996 to 2020. I approach this corpus with two research questions.

First, I examine which public and private spaces and gender identities (and their overlaps) are represented in life accounts. Of particular relevance are the functions ascribed to these spaces and the differences and breaks in the authors' representations. With the second question, I attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of the corpus. In doing so, I am investigating the extent to which this corpus imitates common genre elements or produces specific narratives.

Both questions require a broad and interdisciplinary theoretical framework that covers the research fields of autobiography studies, Hip Hop studies, gender studies, and spatial studies. The corpus is analyzed through close reading, in which the autobiographical references to space, gender, 'race' and class background are described. A paratextual analysis is used to examine four selected case studies closely.

Concerning the representation of space, common ideas of Hip Hop are confirmed. Particularly, stereotypical male rappers represent urban public spaces as relevant sites of performances of hypermasculinity. These spaces are characterized by street culture and the use of violence to gain respect and are required to claim an authentic Hip Hop masculinity. However, public spaces are also represented for creative, educational, performative, and sexual purposes.

This is contrasted by female authors who represent their gender identity as threatened and describe attempts to evade offensive masculinity through various forms of adaptation. Private spaces where femininity can be staged freely and safely are important for female authors. An increased emphasis on the female body and its vulnerability in private spaces can be observed in the life accounts of female authors. Finally, less stereotypical male authors predominantly present themselves as being influenced by a proximity to private spaces and female identification figures. Thus, they form a contrast to authentic Hip Hop masculinity but try to construct proximity to it through narrative strategies.

Overall, the corpus of African American Hip Hop Life Writing demonstrates a hybrid genre that mixes elements from the tradition of African American autobiography, musician autobiography, and celebrity autobiography. In addition, narrative elements from numerous subgenres, such as spiritual and self-therapeutic narratives, confessions or even cookbooks, are integrated. The corpus thus offers a comprehensive picture of the lives and careers of African American artists, providing research approaches to identity categories such as gender, 'race,' space, and class background.

Kurzzusammenfassung

Die Hip-Hop-Kultur und ihr kommerziell erfolgreichstes Element, die Rap-Musik, werden häufig mit weniger privilegierten urbanen Räumen in Verbindung gebracht. Daraus ergeben sich Fragen nach der Bedeutung dieser Räume, nach Klassenhintergründen und Geschlechtsidentitäten. Angesichts der langen Geschichte der Hip-Hop-Kultur und ihres Einflusses auf die US-amerikanische Gesellschaft wurden die Lebensbeschreibungen von Künstlerinnen und Künstlern bisher nur wenig beachtet. Dabei ist im Zeitraum von 1996 bis 2020 ein umfangreiches Korpus vor allem von Rapperinnen und Rappern entstanden. Diesem bisher wenig beachteten Korpus nähere ich mich mit zwei Fragestellungen.

Zum einen untersuche ich, welche öffentlichen und privaten Räume und Geschlechtsidentitäten (sowie deren Überschneidungen) Autoren darstellen. Von besonderer Relevanz sind dabei die Funktionen, die diesen Räumen zugeschrieben werden, sowie die Unterschiede und Brüche in den Darstellungen von Autorinnen und Autoren. Mit der zweiten Fragestellung versuche ich, das Korpus zu charakterisieren. Dabei gehe ich der Frage nach, inwiefern gängige Genrelemente imitiert oder spezifische Narrative hervorgebracht werden.

Beide Fragestellungen erfordern einen breiten und interdisziplinären theoretischen Rahmen, der die Forschungsfelder der Autobiographiestudien, der Hip-Hop-Studien, der Geschlechterforschung sowie der Raumforschung abdeckt. Das Korpus wird in seiner Gesamtheit durch die Methode des Close Reading erschlossen, bei der die autobiographischen Bezüge zu Raum, Geschlecht, ‚Rasse‘ und Klassenhintergrund herausgearbeitet werden. Für die nähere Untersuchung von vier ausgewählten Fallstudien werden zusätzlich paratextuelle Analysemethoden eingesetzt.

In Bezug auf die Repräsentation von Räumen können gängige Vorstellungen der Hip-Hop-Kultur bestätigt werden. Insbesondere am Beispiel stereotyper männlicher Rapper wird die Relevanz der dominanten Performanz von Männlichkeit in urbanen Räumen deutlich. Diese Orte werden als Inbegriff authentischer Hip-Hop-Männlichkeit dargestellt. Öffentliche Räume werden aber auch für kreative, bildungsbezogene, performative, und sexuelle Zwecke thematisiert.

Dem gegenüber steht eine als bedroht dargestellte Weiblichkeit, die sich durch verschiedene Formen der Anpassung einer offensiven Männlichkeit zu entziehen versucht. Gerade für Autorinnen sind private Räume, in denen Weiblichkeit frei und gefahrlos inszeniert werden kann, von großer Bedeutung. In ihren Lebensbeschreibungen lässt sich eine verstärkte Betonung von Körperlichkeit und Verletzlichkeit in privaten Räumen feststellen.

Brüche in den Darstellungen zeigen sich hingegen bei den weniger stereotypisierten männlichen Rappern. Diese stellen sich überwiegend als von einer Nähe zu privaten Räumen und weiblichen Identifikationsfiguren beeinflusst dar. Sie bilden damit einen Kontrast zu einer authentischen Hip-Hop-Männlichkeit, versuchen sich dieser aber durch narrative Strategien anzunähern.

Insgesamt stellt sich das Korpus der Lebensbeschreibungen afroamerikanischer Autorinnen und Autoren als ein hybrides Genre dar, das Elemente aus der Tradition der afroamerikanischen Autobiographie, der Musikerautobiographie und der Prominentenautobiographie vermischt. Darüber hinaus werden narrative Elemente aus zahlreichen Subgenres wie spirituellen und selbsttherapeutischen Erzählungen, Bekenntnissen oder sogar Kochbüchern integriert. Damit bietet das Korpus ein umfassendes Bild der Lebensumstände und Karrierewege afroamerikanischer Künstlerinnen und Künstler, das Forschungsansätze insbesondere zu Identitätskategorien wie Geschlecht, ‚Rasse‘, Raum und Klassenhintergrund liefert.

Curriculum Vitae

Persönliche Angaben

Geburtsdatum 10. Juli 1988
Geburtsort Rostock

Bildungsweg

- 11/2018 - **Promotionsstudium, Nordamerik. Kulturwissenschaften**
Universität Rostock, Philosophische Fakultät, Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik
▪ Betreuerin: Prof. Dr. Gabriele Linke
- Arbeitstitel: *Räumliche Konstruktionen von Geschlechtsidentität in Selbsterzählungen afro-amerikanischer Hip-Hopper*
- 10/2014 – 04/2017 **Master-Studium, British and American Transcultural Studies**
Universität Rostock
▪ Schwerpunkt: *Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Kulturstudien*
▪ Abschlussnote: **1,5**
- Abschlussarbeit: *Hip Hop as a Transcultural Phenomenon: Representations of George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's Presidencies in British and American Rap Music*
- 10/2011 – 09/2014 **Bachelor-Studium, Anglistik / Amerikanistik und Geschichte**
Universität Rostock
▪ Abschlussnote: **1,9**
- Abschlussarbeit: *(Self) Narratives of the 1968 Olympic Protest: John Carlos and Tommie Smith*
- 10/2009 – 10/2011 **Lehramtsstudium (abgebrochen)**
Universität Rostock
▪ Schwerpunkte: *Englisch und Spanisch*
- 2000 – 2008 **Abschluss Abitur**
Erasmus Gymnasium Rostock
Abschlussnote: **2,2**

Beruflicher Werdegang

- seit 02/2023 **Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter am Sprachenzentrum,
Lektorat Englisch**
Lehre C1.1/C1.2 Fachkommunikation nicht-philologischer
Fächer, inkl. Rechtswissenschaften, Wirtschaftswissenschaften,
Ingenieurwissenschaften
- 07/2022 – 07/2024 **Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter am Sprachenzentrum**
DiCaRo-Teilprojekt „Schreibkompetenzen entwickeln –
Studienerfolg sichern“ (SESS)
- 01/2019 – 09/2019 **Technisch-wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter** bei der Baltic
Engineering Flare GmbH
- 07/2018 – 09/2019 **Office Manager und Projektmitarbeiter** beim
Hanseatic Institute for Entrepreneurship and Regional
Development a.d. Universität Rostock (HIE-RO)
- 06/2016 – 03/2017 **Stud. Hilfskraft am Institut für Allgemeine Elektrotechnik**
- 09/2014 – 03/2017 **Stud. Hilfskraft am Institut für Medienforschung**

Lehrtätigkeit

- seit 02/2023 **Lehre Fachkommunikation Englisch nicht-philologischer
Fächer (Level C1.1/C1.2)**
Sprachenzentrum der Universität Rostock
- seit 06/2023 **Workshops zum Thema Academic Writing, wissenschaftliches
Arbeiten**
Sprachenzentrum der Universität Rostock
- seit 09/2018 **Kursleiter für Englisch (A1-B2)**
an der Volkshochschule Rostock
- WiSe 2021/2022
WiSe 2020/2021
WiSe 2018/2019
WiSe 2017/2018
WiSe 2016/2017 **Lehrauftrag am Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik** der
Universität Rostock, *Basic Study & Research Skills*

Stipendien und Auszeichnungen

10/2019 – 06/2022 **Stipendium der Landesgraduiertenförderung
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern**

Mitgliedschaften

seit Januar 2019 **Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien
Graduiertenakademie der Universität Rostock**