# Representations of Women and Wealth in Hip Hop Videos

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Opinnäytetyön tarkoitus oli tutkia naisten ja vaurauden representaatioita nykypäivän amerikkalaisissa valtavirta-hip hop –videoissa. Tavoitteena oli selvittää, minkälaisia merkityksiä hip hop –kulttuurissa ja eritoten videoissa naisten ja vaurauden esittämiseen liitetään, sekä pohtia historiallisia, sosiaalisia ja kulttuurisia syitä tiettyjen representaatioiden syntyyn. Tutkimusmetodeina työssä käytettiin kulttuurintutkimusta, 'rodun' kulttuuriseen tutkimukseen keskittyvää ns. Black Studiesia, semiotiikkaa (hyödyntäen erityisesti Roland Barthesin mytologia-käsitteistöä), musiikkivideotutkimusta ja Laura Mulveyn psykoanalyyttista feminististä elokuvateoriaa.

Tutkimuksessa selvisi, että orjuuden historia on luonut Yhdysvaltoihin rodullisesti epätasa-arvoisen yhteiskunnan; epätasa-arvo näkyy sekä sosiotaloudellisissa seikoissa että representaation tasolla. Työssä kävi myös ilmi, että mustien miesten orjuudessa alkanut systemaattinen emaskulointi ja nöyryytys on johtanut maskuliinisuuden ylikorostamiseen; kriitikot argumentoivat, että orjuutta seurannut mustien Amerikkalaisten historia – mukaan lukien 60-luvun musta ihmisoikeusliike – on määrittynyt monilta osin mieheyden symbolisena palauttamisena. Historia ja edelleen jatkuva rasistinen politiikka ovat johtaneet afro-amerikkalaisen elämän kriisiytymiseen, joka on osaltaan vaikuttanut esimerkiksi seksismin ja materialismin esille nousuun hip hopissa. Myös musiikkiteollisuudella on ollut osansa näiden teemojen ja esitystapojen vakiintumisessa kyseisessä genressä.

Videoanalyyseissä nähtiin kuinka vaurautta performoidaan toisinaan suorastaan ylitsevuotavasti. Karnevalistisen esitystavan nähtiin osaltaan johtavan sosiaalisten hierarkioiden symboliseen kumoamiseen. Vaurauteen liittyviä teemoja katsottiin käsiteltävän myös ghetto-motiivin kautta; videoanalyysissä näimme kuinka ghetto saatetaan käsitteellistää jopa ristiriitaisesti – viljellen samanaikaisesti afrosentrisiä, yhteisöllisiä sekä individualistis-kapitalistisia huumekauppaan liittyviä merkityksiä. Lisäksi näimme kuinka järjestäytyneen rikollisuuden teemaa ja kuvastoa käytetään hip hop –videoissa luomaan myyttiä hip hop –tähden vallasta ja vauraudesta. Vaurautta käsittelevän kappaleen päätteeksi loimme katseen vastavirtaisiin representaatioihin – artisteihin, jotka kyseenalaistavat valtavirta-hip hopin materialismia.

Naisten representaatioita analysoitaessa kävi ilmi, että hip hop –videot noudattavat länsimaisessa mediakulttuurissa vakiintuneita objektivisoivia ja fetisoivia käytänteitä, joiden avulla naiset kuvataan suurelta osin passiivisina seksualisoituina objekteina. Mies-rap-artistit puolestaan näyttäytyivät voimakkaina subjekteina, joilla on valta katsoa ja määrätä naisten käyttäytymistä. Tutkimuksessa käsiteltiin myös parittajahahmon (*pimp*) yleisyyttä mustassa amerikkalaisessa kulttuurissa ja sen merkityksiä videoissa. Hahmon todettiin juontavan juurensa mustaan oraaliseen ja kirjalliseen traditioon, jossa sen voima on nähty nimenomaan verbaalisena. Analysoidussa videossa parittajahahmon avulla nähtiin luotavan myyttiä rap-artistista lähes kaikkivoipana patriarkaalisena voimana. Viimeisessä analyysiluvussa keskityttiin parodiseen perinteeseen hip hopissa. Vaikka parodian nähtiin osaltaan kyseenalaistavan sosiaalisia rotuhierarkioita, huomattiin, että parodisetkin hip hop –tekstit saattavat vahvistaa negatiivisia mustien naisten stereotyyppejä – analysoidussa videossa erityisesti onnenonkija-myyttiä. Lopuksi käsiteltiin ei-seksistisiä ja naisartistien tuottamia hip hop –representaatioita naisista.
Asiasanat: Hip hop, mustat, naiset, representaatio, vauraus, videot.

## Contents

# 1 Introduction

Hip hop culture has grown from its meager beginnings in inner-city New York to a globally influential phenomenon. So much so, in fact, that *Time* magazine has dubbed our times ”an age of hip hop” (Holmes Smith: 79). Localized hip hop cultures have sprung up from Finland to Fiji; hip hop style is appropriated and used in everything from McDonald’s advertisements to mobile phone games on Finnish television, and hip hop music is the best-selling segment of the American music industry, reaching annual sales counted in the multi-millions. It is not unfair to say that the influence of hip hop pervades more or less every aspect of 21st century popular culture. According to Bakari Kitwana (2002: 202) “rap music has become the primary vehicle for transmitting culture and values to this generation [of young African Americans]…” Although the same does not probably apply to most other groups of people, hip hop certainly has an important role in these respects because of its global influence on youth cultures. In this environment it is crucial – not to mention interesting – to try and understand the meanings embedded in hip hop discourses (primarily hip hop music, containing lyrics, and music videos) and the way those cultural expressions of pleasure, power, anger and fear are articulated in hip hop.

My intention in this pro gradu thesis is to analyze American mainstream hip hop music videos especially with regard to two aspects in them – the representation of women and wealth. What makes these motifs particularly deserving of study is their sheer, unadulterated extremity of representation. In contemporary American mainstream hip hop representations wealth is on extravagant display in the form of shining cars, jewelry and such; and females tend to always appear in skimpy clothing, their function seemingly being the pleasing of the male rapper as well as the (male) spectator. I will seek to connect my analyses to their larger socio-cultural frameworks in order to not only reveal how and what kind of meanings related

to these motifs are constructed in hip hop videos but also to find reasons as to why these particular expressions have developed.

I have chosen to look at music videos, specifically, because they have become an essential part of the fabric of post-industrial youth culture. Moreover, hip hop videos are an intriguing point of intersection for mainstream commercial interests, self-expression of an oppressed class, and post-modern audiovisual form. It is safe to say that the meanings in hip hop videos can not be collapsed to any single one of these components but are the result of their interplay.

The videos I will be analyzing more closely are Chingy's 'Balla Baby'; Twista's 'Sunshine'; G-Unit's 'Poppin Them Thangs'; Mystikal's 'Danger (Been So Long)'; '50 Cent's 'P.I.M.P.'; and Kanye West's 'Workout Plan'. All of these videos have been chosen as representatives of a certain common theme or tendency in hip hop videos; the first three appear under the discussion of wealth, the latter ones under gender. I will not argue that my analyses can hope to drain the discussed themes of meaning and stake a claim to comprehensiveness, but analyzing a limited number of videos allows a more detailed – and thus more revealing – deconstruction of many of the significant topics related to wealth and gender in hip hop. My objective is to study hip hop in its contemporary manifestations, so, accordingly, I have only chosen videos produced in the 21st century.

The artists under analysis belong to the US (and thus, global) mainstream of hip hop. With its mainstreaming, hip hop's sub-genre boundaries have become fluid: most of the commercial artists conform to the same type of values and aesthetic norms as regards the representation of gender and wealth. While gangsta rappers certainly brag about their possessions, other rappers like to 'floss' (exhibit their wealth) as well. Portrayals of women do not differ much from one sub-genre – if they can indeed even be distinguished – to another. The commercialization of hip hop has acted as a leveller of hip hop's thematic and

aesthetic constructions. This being the case, I do not see discussing different hip hop sub-genres as relevant to this study. 50 Cent and his group or posse, G-Unit, are usually categorized as gangsta rap, but when it comes to women and wealth, similarities outweigh discrepancies. Kanye West is the one that differs the most from the others: he is usually identified as a 'conscious' or at least more positive rapper.

The videos were gleaned from MTV Nordic's program *The Block*, which is the station's program concentrating on – mostly American – black music, hip hop and r'n'b. The program concentrates on predominantly new releases from the American mainstream, and the videos shown on it have received heavy rotation on American MTV. The videos were chosen from numerous hours of material on the basis I explicated previously.

In the interests of explicating my position in relation to the subject of this study I must admit that my initial impetus for studying mainstream hip hop was a sort of bafflement at the portrayal of women and flaunting of material wealth in hip hop texts. I would like to think, however, that I was not in the grips of moral hysteria, and was not trying to defame but rather understand hip hop. This type of moral panic has served as the starting point for many pundits from white right-wing politicians to African American scholars in their attacks on hip hop (cf. Ogbar 1999). Often times hip hop culture and music represented something completely debased for these critics. An outspoken critic, right-wing politician Robert H. Bork, for instance, has described hip hop as nothing more than a "knuckle-dragging sub-pidgin of grunts and snarls, capable of only expressing the more pointless forms of violence and the more brutal forms of sex", and he is hardly alone in his opinions (ibid.: 166-167). To me this indicates a brazenly ignorant – and latently racist – stance I would not hope to partake in.

I did not come to hip hop as an outsider: I had listened to the music and been interested in other hip hop -inflected segments of popular culture, such as basketball, for some years. Thus, I was at least more familiar with hip hop than its conservative critics, many of whom had only

the most superficial knowledge or understanding of it (ibid.: 166-168). I would even claim that I was more familiar with hip hop music – if not African American culture – than some of the African American scholars writing about hip hop, since, as Tim Brennan (1994: 666) has argued, "it continues to be a mistake to assume that many of [hip hop's] critics, even the interesting ones, listen to very much of it."

However, somewhere herein lies a problem: I was and am writing about a culture that was created by and still gives expression to a particular ethnically defined people, African Americans. Since I am not a black American, the danger of falling into the conventional trap of wielding hegemonic power by defining a group of people – speaking from a subject position while denying voices from the objects of study – always looms large. bell hooks (1990: 53-54) has argued that such a tendency coupled with latent racism runs through much of white academics' writing about race. I hope to avoid this as best as I can by remaining alert to the possibility of personal prejudices lurking under the surface, and by rooting my findings in their rightful contexts. This includes seeing the cultural expressions in hip hop in a broad socio-historical context; one that includes a history of total subordination of a people and a continuum of American racism which manifests itself on many different levels, chief among these socio-economic conditions and the representational level.

Hip hop is worth researching partly because research in this area has been surprisingly scarce despite the culture's ubiquity. I can locate three reasons for this state of affairs. Firstly, hip hop, unlike widely researched topics such as advertisements and TV shows, is a relatively new phenomenon. Hip hop is a rather late development in the history of popular music, the rich heritage of African American popular music, to be more exact: it developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s in New York, and only broke into the mainstream after the mid-80s, reaching its current ubiquitous status in the late 90s. The academic world usually takes its time reacting to new areas of research.

Secondly, hip hop is popular youth culture. Despite developments in the past decades, academic research in arts and humanities still seems to be leaning towards established, "serious" cultural products. Despite certain parties' – notably cultural studies' – efforts to usher in more open-minded views about popular culture, the distinction between high and low culture still exists in large parts of the academic world. The distinction is there, but it is possible to move from the margin closer to the center: previously dismissed forms of popular culture such as motion pictures have gradually had prestige bestowed upon them as serious works of art but hip hop has not had the time to achieve this.

Thirdly, hip hop is black American culture; a fact which may have scared some white researchers (who, let us face it, make up the vast majority of western academia) away from the topic for fear of accusations of racism and others for that exact reason – actual deep-rooted racist prejudices. African American scholars have certainly tackled the subject with vigor, but my point is that there simply is not that great a number of them compared to non-blacks in the academia.

Much of the most noted research on hip hop (Toop 1991; Rose 1994) was written already in the early 1990s, by which point hip hop had certainly grown into a globally recognized phenomenon but had not reached its current height of popularity and ubiquity. Hip hop only took over in the 1990s. Christopher Holmes Smith (2003: 69) has argued that "during the Clinton 90s…the ensemble of aspirations and practices that constitute hip hop culture became accepted as common-sense elements of the American experience". During this shift in the cultural landscape, hip hop culture changed in some respects. To name but one development, in the early 1990s most hip hop videos still used the ghetto, with all its pertinent motifs such as gun violence, as their backdrop. During the 90s the videos moved to more luxurious settings associated with ostentatious wealth, signaling a wider trend in hip hop's thematic. In

the past decade MTV has also become an even more dominant music media, with localized versions sprouting all over the world.

Hip hop videos and the wider themes of gender and race representations in videos have been studied, but far from extensively, as Rana A. Emerson (2002: 117) has shown. Even less space has been afforded to analyses of black female representation in music videos: all of the studies Emerson mentions date back to 1994 at the least. Emerson's article does tackle the subject but from a different viewpoint: she has studied the representation of black female performers using a quantitative content analysis, which method fails to delve much deeper than the surface level.

My intention is to analyze the portrayal of females in male-dominated hip hop videos and the complex ways in which associated meanings are constructed and woven together in them. I will be analyzing the visual content and lyrics in the videos, but music will be for the most part excluded from the analysis since, due to its abstract nature, it presents a complication that would expand this study beyond its scope, and because I do not believe the musical content to be of essence as regards the subjects of my study.

To my knowledge there have been no studies explicitly tackling representations of wealth in hip hop videos. Some (Rose 1994; Holmes Smith 2003) have discussed issues related to the importance of wealth in hip hop texts[1], but not its explicit portrayal in music video images and lyrics. I find trying to analyze and explain the overemphasis on opulence in mainstream hip hop culture a puzzling and fascinating subject worthy of study.

This pro gradu thesis will depart from a cultural studies perspective, which means it will incorporate several disciplines. The object of cultural studies has always been to produce the best possible information about culture in its rightful contexts by using the most suitable intellectual and theoretical means (Grossberg 1995: 18). Academics such as John Fiske and

[1] At this point it might be useful to note that I use the word 'text' in its broader definition of any "signifying construct of potential meanings on a number of levels" (Fiske 1989a: 43).

Simon Frith were among the first to start studying popular music as culture – that is, the kinds of meanings popular music has with regard to its contexts and intertexts. Many of the academics who have studied popular music have been especially attuned to the ways in which punk, for instance, provides subjugated groups such as young working-class males with ways of making meaning out of their situation. Cultural studies has not ever shirked popular or 'mass' culture, but embraced it, so it is therefore suitable that academics working within its loose boundaries – especially in communication and journalism studies – were also the first to focus on the music video as a viable study subject in the first part of the 80s (Modinos 1999: 13-16).

In terms of politics, this thesis will be informed by a range of writing on 'race', gender and African American culture and its representations, including hip hop, that can be gathered under the loose headline Black Studies. This is where I will turn for the most part for sociological and cultural perspectives on the issues at hand.

When it comes to analyzing the videos, I will be using semiotics: specifically its basic concepts as they have been formulated by Gillian Rose (Rose 2001) for use in analyzing visual materials, and a strain of semiotics defined by one of 21st century's pre-eminent thinkers, Roland Barthes, in his book *Mythologies* (Barthes 1973). The usefulness of these methods, for me and in this study, is in their combination of functionality and politics. Semiotic study is interested in questions of power, difference and representation; in showing that meanings we take as given, natural, are in fact ideological constructs. What semiotics also has is a wide range of tools to analyze how meanings are created in texts – audiovisual and otherwise.

My analyses will also be informed by other pertinent approaches to visual analysis, such as Laura Mulvey's seminal concepts in feminist psychoanalytic approaches to film studies, and, of course, music video studies.

In conclusion, I want to clarify some points. Although what I have thus far stated may carry implications as to that effect, I do not want to suggest that hip hop is, in rapper Mos Def's words, "a giant living by the hillside"; a homogenous entity with unified morals and ideas. Quite on the contrary, hip hop is in fact a sprawling heterogeneity of voices that range from Necro's serial homicidal fantasies to Common's hippiedom. Yet I am adamant that there are tendencies in mainstream hip hop that are wide-spread enough to be analyzed as common denominators of the genre. I will, however, contrast these expressions with counteracting expressions in hip hop.

Next, a few words about terminology. Much confusion prevails over the terms 'hip hop' and 'rap' in common usage. The terms are pretty much substitutable for each other, but in strict terms rap or rapping is just one element of hip hop culture (the others being DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti painting), whereas hip hop can be used to refer to both the music and the culture. These terms do not, however, signal slightly different styles of music, as is sometimes believed. I have chosen to use the term hip hop since it is technically the right term and most commonly used nowadays.

I have used the terms 'black people' and 'African Americans' to refer to the section of American populace with African heritage. Although the usage is commonly seen in academic writing, I have not used a capital b with the word 'black'. I recognize that the use is probably political, used to indicate the importance or worth of an oppressed people – much like many feminists replace the commonly used personal pronoun 'he' with 'she' – but seeing as 'white' is usually written with a lower-case letter, I find this somewhat essentialistic. If we are to work from an understanding that all ethnic groups are equal, it is hardly in keeping with that principle to prioritize some group on the linguistic level – even if they have suffered from subordination on all possible levels.

# 2 Theory

## *2.1 Cultural Studies and Black Studies*

In this chapter I will be briefly outlining the history and tenets of cultural studies – including popular music studies – and black studies, and showing how they are relevant to my thesis.

Since it is culture – in every possible meaning of the word, except as a distinction between 'high culture' and 'lower' forms of entertainment – and meaning I am researching and since music videos and hip hop are both such multidimensional phenomena, cultural studies seems the most logical point of departure. This is how Lister and Wells define a cultural studies that is geared towards analyzing visual materials:

> Cultural studies centers on the study of the forms and practices of culture (not only its texts and artifacts), their relationships to social groups and the power relations between those groups as they are mediated by forms of culture…Culture is taken to include everyday symbolic and expressive practices…and 'textual practices' in the sense that some kind of material artifact or representation, image, performance, display, space, writing or space is produced…A distinctive feature of cultural studies is the search to understand the relationships of cultural production, consumption, belief and meaning to social processes and institutions. (Lister and Wells 2001: 61.)

This, to me, is a neat summation of what I am trying to accomplish with this thesis. The authors go on to state that cultural studies is generally understood as an "interdisciplinary field, which appropriates and re-purposes elements of theoretical frameworks and methodologies from other disciplines, wherever they seem productive in pursuing its own enquiries" (ibid.: 63).

Cultural studies developed mostly in the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s with such theorists as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams leading the way (Grossberg 1995: 6). However, cultural studies only really gained ground in the academic world in the 1980s and

90s, being an essential factor in the so-called linguistic turn in humanist sciences. Since then such scholars as John Fiske, Frederic Jameson, Lawrence Grossberg, and many others, have produced hugely influential texts analyzing popular culture in all its diversity – from ball games to the TV show Dallas to leisure in Victorian England.

Many different phenomena define the project of cultural studies, phenomena symptomatic of the post-industrialist era: the growing influence of globalization, the medialization of culture, and the slide from political to corporate power. Mae G. Henderson has identified two aspects as the most important defining characteristics of cultural studies: identity politics and its emphases on the construction of gender, class, 'race' and nationality, and the eradication between the boundaries of 'low' and 'high' culture as study subjects (Henderson 1994: 42). These are all important aspects as regards my study: I am, after all, trying to get to the meanings of gender and wealth – which, obviously, is related to class – produced by a specific sub-culture that was and still is associated with an ethnically and nationally defined group of people, African Americans; and how the participants in that culture utilize those meanings in constructing their identities. My study is also tangible proof of the other point Henderson discusses; the acceptance of 'low' cultural products as worthy subjects of study. I imagine this type of study might have met with some staunch opposition in our department even ten or fifteen years ago. Further, according to Grossberg, cultural studies aims to investigate the relations between context, knowledge and power; yet in doing so, it tries to evade easy answers, instead focusing on the necessarily complex and contradictory nature of human relations (Grossberg 1995: 18-19).

According to Roy Shuker, "to study popular music is to study popular culture" (Shuker 2001: 1). This statement reflects a different set of priorities to the traditional form of study into music, musicology, whose "preoccupation with the text in and of itself omits any consideration of music as a social phenomenon" (ibid.: 22). My intention, as must be clear by

now, is precisely to study the social and cultural dimensions and meanings in hip hop, which makes the school of research Shuker represents, popular music studies, part of the framework I am working within.

Popular music studies has not been popular in the academic world for long. Simon Frith, who is by far the most prominent scholar within the field, and some others such as George Lipsitz and Lawrence Grossberg, did produce texts on popular music in the 1970s and 1980s, but it was not until the 1990s that research into popular music exploded (Shuker 2001: 1-2). Shuker attributes this to a recognition of popular music as a globally influential cultural phenomenon with ties to a multi-billion dollar industry and part of a many-faceted youth culture.

Popular music studies is part of the project of cultural studies; its aim, too, is to investigate the interrelations of lived cultures, symbolic forms, or texts, and the economical institutions and processes which create the texts (ibid.: 11). In other words, instead of concentrating exclusively on some aspect – say, the textual elements – of popular music culture, popular music studies as it is understood here tries to take into account all the different – perhaps even contradictory – elements participating in the production and consumption of popular music. Granted, my study does not contain the consumption, or audience, aspect of cultural production – primarily because it would expand the study beyond limits expected of a pro gradu thesis –, but it does take into account the different forces participating in the construction of meaning in hip hop videos, including the social (American society), cultural (specific black cultural practices), institutional (MTV), and others.

I have already implicated that this thesis will be *informed* by cultural studies. What this means is that I will be concentrating on themes cultural studies is preoccupied with (power, gender, 'race', and others, and their relations), and will be using what I have deemed the most

pertinent methods from different disciplines in analyzing the specific texts at hand, which will be elaborated on in this chapter and chapter 3.

Black Studies is, for the most part, a newish field of research. The ancestry of Black Studies can of course be traced back to at least the early 20th century and godfather of African American scholarship, W.E.B. Dubois, but the fact is that Black Studies as it is construed here only really took form with the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Henderson 1994: 43). Moreover, while the mass media has been studied for several decades, most of the academic writing on African Americans' position in the production, texts and consumption of the mass media, dates no further back than the 1970s (Dates & Barlow 1990: 16).

Also known, variously, as African American Studies, Black American Studies and Afro-American Studies during its existence, Black Studies, in contrast to most other disciplines, was not principally a discipline driven forward by theorists in its first decades: it developed as part of the larger movement for establishing the worth and rights for black Americans, and took its form in college and university courses (Jones et all 1994/1995: 91-93; Smith & Yates 1980: 269-271). Its most influential figures have not been solely academics but also black American critics, artists, and intellectuals. Some of its early proponents were DuBois, Charles Wesley and Zora Neale Hurston, and later others, such as James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Henry Louis Gates jr., bell hooks and Michele Wallace have continued in their tradition (Henderson 1994: 46).

Like cultural studies – which has been intertwined with Black Studies in many instances – Black Studies is an umbrella term and its aims political as well as scientific. The research done under its reach does not conform to any particular methodology but applies the most appropriate methods to its subject of inquiry in order to come up with pertinent and insightful knowledge about issues of 'race' in their contemporary contexts.

The authors who I will be mostly referring to are hooks, Bakari Kitwana, Tricia Rose, Christopher Holmes Smith, and others, who, in addition to shedding light on African American history and culture in general, have also tackled hip hop culture and music, specifically. The concepts of slavery as a determining force and the resultant socioeconomic status of African Americans and gender inequality in black culture, and the struggle for power and identity are just some of the key ideas I will be incorporating to this thesis. The representation of race and gender in the mainstream media as well as hip hop's relationship with these issues also runs through the writings of these scholars. Many of these concepts will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 3.

### *2.2 Semiotics and Music Video Studies*

In this chapter I will discuss the general theory and history of semiotics, and provide a brief overview of music video studies. First, I will explore the basic vocabulary of semiotics, and then expand to Roland Barthes' theory of second-level semiotic systems, or mythologies.

Semiotics is clearly preoccupied with "laying bare the prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful," as Margaret Iversen has defined the field (cited in Rose 2001: 69). It has to do with exposing the ideology governing representations and structures of meaning that seem transparent, natural. Therefore, much semiotic study has been about cultural institutions that are deeply ingrained with the logic of capitalist economy and/or the interests of the power bloc, such as advertisements and television news. These genres (ads and news), clearly, are not associated with the lower classes or any kind of subcultures on the level of production. Hip hop, however, is different. It is a cultural formation that saw its genesis in the ghettos of the Bronx as disenfranchised African American youths sought to find alternatives to both the dominant socio-cultural structures that denied them a fair chance in the society and the gang-

affiliated forms of sociality the circumstances had begotten. Since its early days hip hop culture has grown exponentially, to the point that it now forms the largest sector of the US recording industry (Holmes Smith 2003: 76). It has been incorporated into, and, if you will, appropriated by mainstream culture, but it has curiously retained its counterhegemonic status. Hip hop is not, in other words, a semiotic Trojan horse of the ruling classes, but rather a nexus of different interests and discourses, particularly the commercial drive of the record company (but also of the artist) and self-expressive aspirations of the hip hop artist.

This does not in itself preclude the use of semiotics, or some of its aspects, in analyzing hip hop videos, but it does signal a situation where precedents to this kind of semiotic study are hard to come by. In the overwhelming majority of examples where semiotics has been used to study the construction and representation of 'race' and ethnicity, the method has been systematically employed to reveal how dominant discourses and media portray non-white people as objects, as 'Other'; and how any number of negative attributes are attached to them. What this is meant to say is that studying, for instance, how the predominantly white US media portray hip hop culture would in all probability offer a much more straight-cut case, where the researcher's main task would be to unearth the racism inherent in the portrayals (although this can only be argued if we are to be totally honest, since most researchers would probably insist they had no preconceived assumptions as to the results of their study – which is, of course, a dubious claim at best). Studying a cultural formation that gives expression to the views of an oppressed people – "the black CNN" as legendary Public Enemy frontman Chuck D has famously dubbed it – presents a different inflection of the use of semiotics, but, as I hope will become clear in this chapter, its methods are still valid for my study.

Semiotics (also known as semiology) is a widely theorized field of research, whose methods draw upon the work of many of the twentieth century's most important theorists, including Althusser, Barthes, Foucault, Gramsci, Lévi-Strauss, Marx and de Saussure, to

name but a few. Therefore its methods and emphases vary and are still debated in the academic world; there are numerous approaches to semiotics and its use (Rose 2001: 69-71). Semiotics is part of the larger tradition of structuralism, which ushered in a new way of thinking about the world and how people make sense of it: structuralism denied the possibility of objective, scientific knowledge about the world and instead chose to investigate how cultures organize meaning and perception through their conceptual structures (Fiske 1990: 115). However, the basis for semiotics was laid before structuralism took hold in the 1960s. In 1915 Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure published *Course on General Linguistics*, the seminal book based on a university course he had given that introduced the basic concepts of semiotics. However, as Hodge and Kress (1988: 13-15) maintain, only a small part of it deals with semiotics directly, which leaves the book somewhat wanting when it comes to its use as source material. According to Hodge and Kress (1988: 13-15), the other "founding fathers" of semiotics are American philosopher Charles S. Pierce, Freud and Valentin Voloshinov, who worked within the Bakhtin school of thought. De Saussure and those who have followed in his footsteps have often been accused of excluding the social, the ideological, that is, real uses of language (or other signifying systems) from their formulations of the workings of those systems (ibid.: 15-18).

Thus, while we need the basic vocabulary of semiotics, we also need a formulation that takes the socially determined nature of signifying systems into account, and this is where Barthes' concept of 'mythology' comes into play. But let us first concentrate on the basic concepts of semiotics.

Semiotics deals with meaning head-on: it has a wide range of analytical tools for disassembling meaning and connecting it to larger meaning structures. The basic component around which semiotics operates is the 'sign'. Rose (2001: 74) states that the sign is "a unit of meaning, and semioticians argue that anything which has meaning – an advert, a painting, a

conversation, a poem – can be understood in terms of its signs and the work they do". This concept of the sign was developed by de Saussure. His formulation of the sign consists of dividing it into two parts, the signifier and the signified. The signified is the concept – say, 'a small container with a handle out of which people drink' – being referred to, and the signifier is the sound or image attached to it; in this case 'cup'. The relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, immediate proof of which is that there are other signifiers, such as 'mug' or the Finnish 'muki' that are attached to the same signified, ie. mean the same thing.

Analysing visual materials is somewhat more problematic, for as Rose (2001: 75) states, rephrasing Bal and Bryson: "it is often quite difficult to differentiate between visual signs, because often there are no clear boundaries between different parts of an image". Since the concept of the 'sign' is methodologically speaking somewhat crude, I will complement it with a theory of semiotics which includes the social and ideological dimension of signifying systems. It was created by one of the foremost theorists of the 20th century, Roland Barthes.

According to Van Leeuwen (2001: 94), Barthian visual semiotics deals with the layering of meaning. The layers are denotation and connotation. Denotation, for Barthes, is a rather straight-cut phenomenon: it is a case of recognizing the 'literal' meaning of an image, which we should be able to do based on the knowledge we have of the world. Here is Barthes' oft-quoted example: "On the cover [of Paris-Match], a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the *meaning* of the picture" (Barthes 1973: 125).

Connotation, on the other hand, is the concept or idea behind the people, places, etc. that are represented; their symbolic meaning. Barthes (ibid.: 124-126) postulated that on the second level – connotative level, that is – first-level signs become signifiers, which have their own signifieds. For clarity's sake, Barthes called the second-level signifier 'form', in

distinction to first-level signifieds, which are called ‘meaning’. Signifieds he continued to call ‘concept’ and second-level signs ‘signification’.

The second-level meaning, or signification, of Barthes’ example is, according to him: “France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this young Negro in serving his so-called oppressors” (ibid.: 125). Barthes called this second level of meaning, or second-level semiological system, ‘myth’. Mythology is a system that presides above individual signs; it is the meaning derived from their concatenation. For instance, signs in an advertisement that uses intertextual film imagery mean rather little if they are to be analyzed separately; it is only in the “discursive reading of object-signs” (van Leeuwen 2001: 98) that we can extract the mythology the advertisement is referring to (this might be, for instance, the mythology of nuclear family security and bliss that many advertisements for insurance companies and banks employ). Thus, Barthian visual semiotics deals with signs as they relate to each other; in their larger contexts, that is.

Beyond this rather complicated, inter-related set of concepts, Barthes was clearly interested in the ideological dimension of his theory – how it produces knowledge about the social world we live in. Here is how Rose (2001: 91) summarizes this aspect of Barthes’ theory: “The contingency and history of the meaning become remote, and instead a myth inserts itself as a non-historical truth. Myth makes us forget that things were and are made; instead, it naturalizes the way things are. Myth is thus a form of ideology”. Barthes himself said about the mythological ‘concept’ that it does not contain reality itself, but rather knowledge about reality that is defined in a certain way (Barthes 1973: 129). According to him, the knowledge contained in the concept is contradictory and constructed of yielding, shapeless associations; the nature of the mythological concept, thus, is open. The basic quality of a mythological concept is to be appropriated; i.e. it is realized only in real-life instances.

Barthes' methods are on the one hand rather functional, and on the other, rooted in reality, in the contemporary social and cultural landscape, which the analyst using his methods must be extremely familiar with if he or she is to be able to interpret the myth. John Fiske has stated: "No myths are universal in a culture. There are dominant myths, but there are also counter-myths" (Fiske 1990: 90). Correspondingly, in hip hop the myths that are constructed are connected to the wide-spread, dominant myths in the US society but they represent African Americans' aim to reverse those myths and construct counter-myths that portray themselves in a more favorable light as well.

Barthes (ibid.: 149-151) saw myth in the context of the French society in the 50s and connected it strongly with the concept of the bourgeoisie; it was mainly myths of the petit-bourgeoisie that Barthes was analyzing. In my view this does not preclude the use of the method. The petit-bourgeoisie society of France and the American society are both capitalist societies, the similarities of which outweigh their differences. It could be argued that the construction of myth is the same regardless of the specific form of (at least capitalist) society. Moreover, most prominent scholars (Rose 2001; Fiske 1990; Hall 1997a; etc.) seem to deem Barthes' methods as wholly applicable to the analysis of modern-day phenomena in western cultures.

Although music videos have certainly been studied, much of the research took place already in the 1980s when videos were still a newish phenomenon. Also, as Carlsson (1999) has shown, music videos are a many-faceted, multidiscursive phenomenon. Videos combine at least lyrics, images and music – and not necessarily in that order. I have already argued that hip hop videos are a nexus of different voices and interests: those of the artist seeking to express ideas and emotions pertaining to his subjectivity and the African American experience, while at the same time trying to possibly maximize his own earnings; the record label wanting to promote their product; MTV and other music channels imposing their

institutional, commercially based limitations on the videos (a blatant example of which is the editing out of banned words, including curse words, in videos); but also the music video director's artistic visualization of the subject matter.

Kitwana (2002: 202) has argued that hip hop music in general has been "relatively unfiltered by the corporate structures that [carry] it." For him, this is evidenced by the music – even in cases of so-called clean versions of songs and albums – both reflecting black youth culture consistently and resonating with African American youths. Understandably, hip hop videos are more problematic for the aforementioned reasons, but I am still going to treat them as primarily bearing the meanings and themes prevalent in hip hop culture. There are two rather simple reasons for this. One, hip hop videos carry hip hop lyrics, which can be said to present – leaving aside academic disputes over the intent of the author vs. the meanings consumers of texts produce – the artist's views in comparatively unhindered form. Two, similarly to Kitwana's argument about hip hop music, hip hop videos reiterate the same themes, representations and attitudes encountered in other embodiments of hip hop culture – music, magazines, film, etc. I will, however, keep in mind the other factors that potentially influence the formation of meanings and representations in videos, and will bring them up them at relevant points, in addition to which I will discuss these aspects more extensively in chapter 3.5.

Although music videos have existed, in the form of promotional video clips, since the early 1970s, these were mainly played in other environments – night clubs, stores, etc. – than television in the United States (Banks 1996: 28). Music Television, or MTV, which debuted on August 1981, was the very first avenue to provide major playing time for music videos, thus being the most important facilitating factor in the development of this new format (ibid.: 34-35). In effect, MTV gave birth to the music video, providing – like cinema before it –

another example of art forms developing in conjunction with commercial interests and technological advancements in the 20th century.

In its formative years MTV virtually excluded black artists' videos from its programming. Although MTV executives claimed this was due to the channel targeting a (white) rock audience, most critics and black artists were not convinced. CBS Records throwing their weight behind the video for Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean' in 1983 proved a turning point for black artists getting exposure on MTV, but they were still underrepresented in the mid-80s (ibid.: 39-41). Hip hop videos were therefore born – much like black culture – in a commerce-driven environment historically hostile to them.

Although some research into music videos already appeared concurrently with the launching of MTV in the early 1980s, most research has been conducted in the second half of the 80s and later, as Finland's pre-eminent music video researcher Tuija Modinos (1999: 14) has argued. In its early stages music video studies tended to conceive of videos and MTV as nearly synonymous; the idea that MTV had championed a new type of televisual form, a post-modern flow, ran through most research (ibid.). Many early studies focused on trying to trace the historical antecedents to music videos, while others set their sights on gathering quantitative data of the sexual, violent and racist content in music videos, or conducting audience-participant tests, whose aim was to measure the effects this type of content had on its viewers – especially children (Modinos 1990: 15-19).

Modinos (1990: 21) has stated that music video research of the 1980s and 1990s can be divided along a different thematic axis as well. According to her, first-generation research into music videos mainly concentrated on the visual images, while second-generation research concentrated more on the musical elements as the primary vehicle for meaning in videos. As she notes, this is quite curious, since music videos communicate meanings through the complex interplay of all of their elements.

My choice of mostly excluding the musical elements from this study has primarily been influenced by the simple fact that, although it might be interesting to try and trace how musical elements may participate in the construction of meanings of wealth and gender, it presents a complication that is far beyond the scope of this pro gradu thesis. The semiotics of music is an obtuse field of research and its pertinence to the study of clearly sociological phenomena such as wealth and gender unclear to say the least, so I have decided, for the most part, to omit discussing the musical elements in the videos. I will, however, pay attention to both of the elements I have judged to be essential in conveying meanings of gender and wealth in the videos – visual material and lyrics. In this respect I see myself as participating in the third generation of music video research – i.e. analysis of both visual and aural material – which Modinos (ibid.) has propagated as the way forward in video studies. Since I am not mostly interested in the music video as a unique signifying construct, but rather in certain themes – gender and wealth in hip hop – in music videos, I will not be drawing too heavily on methods developed within the field, whose main object has appeared to be formulating a unique language for speaking of the aesthetic, formal and structural concepts underlying the music video.

# 3 Gender, 'Race' and Wealth in America

During the following sub-chapters I will be recounting central themes in the discussion of wealth, 'race' and gender in the American society. This chapter will act as a pathway between the chapter on theory and the analysis chapters: it will both delve deeper into the subjects presented in the previous chapter on a more general level and provide background information for the analyses. I will start by recounting the effects slavery has had on African American people – and especially black males' sense of masculinity – and their socioeconomic status. Then I will continue by looking at African American women and the gender relations the history of oppression has created. I will connect these themes to a discussion of hip hop. Next, I will take a brief look at hip hop's history, tracing the obsession with money through its phases, while discussing the specific period that produced gangsta rap in the process. Finally, I will discuss the role the music industry, and especially MTV, plays in regulating cultural production and steering representations into certain directions.

## *3.1 Slavery, the African American Male, and Hip Hop*

This sub-chapter deals with the effects slavery has had on African American men and the black community, which effects can, in turn, be witnessed in hip hop.

Hip hop, as anyone who has ever laid eyes on a mainstream hip hop video can attest, is a decidedly masculine culture. Most hip hop artists are men and the range of positions women can inhabit especially in its audiovisual representations is very limited. In US mainstream hip hop videos the main role reserved for a woman is to be an impersonal sex object and possession of the rapper. Although it can be argued that hip hop has taken the representation of the female body to its logical conclusion – a sum of its eroticized parts (close-ups of

breasts and bottoms, for instance) – this is by no means unique when it comes to music videos or other visual media such as cinema and magazines. It is important to keep that fact in mind in the face of mostly conservative attacks on sexism in hip hop. As Rose (1994: 15) notes, many criticisms of hip hop "deny the existence of a vast array of accepted sexist social practices that make up adolescent male gender role modeling that results in social norms for adult male behaviors that are equally sexist, even though they are usually expressed with less profanity". It is a key point Rose makes: the main difference between US mainstream and hip hop representations of women is probably one of degree; what 'The Bachelor' and Hollywood movies only imply, hip hop spits in your face with a 'bitch' thrown in for good measure.

Music videos in general are entrenched in a long history of audiovisual practices that serve to objectify the female body. Keeping this in mind, it would be nevertheless foolish to deny the often extreme sexism in hip hop videos and lyrics; giving a free pass to these kinds of representations only serves to "reinforce myths about black inferiority and insulate the new problems in African American culture from redemptive criticism", as Kitwana (2002: xxi) has argued.

However, to understand contemporary African American representations of gender, we must first understand the weight of black history. Traces of slavery can be detected in most, if not all, aspects of black life in today's America. Since hip hop is a male-dominated culture, we need to look at slavery's effects on the black male.

According to Stuart Hall (1997b: 262-263), one of slavery's main strategies of oppression was the infantilization of the black male: all black males were talked down to as if they were children and even older males were systematically called 'boys'. Conceptualizing black men as infant-like also validated the ideological construction and project of colonialism; after all, people with infantile capacities need 'guidance' and 'tough love', which the slave masters were more than happy to provide – in the form of grueling work, lashings and sexual

domination of black women. The African-American male was stripped of all authority: the humiliation was so thorough that he was not even allowed to act as the head of his own family. This was coupled with a paranoid fear and envy of black masculinity. Consequently, black males were largely portrayed as sexually deviant predators (only one example being the stereotypical 'black Buck' character Gus in *The Birth of a Nation*[2] whose rape of a white girl is offered as justification for the founding of Ku Klux Klan), and the symbolic protection of white womanhood became grounds for total submission of black males (Ross 1996: 11). Alleged rape was the top reason for lynchings, although, in actual fact, it was the white slave owners doing most of the raping – systematic rape of black females was another way of emasculating black males and thus rendering them powerless, harmless (hooks 1990: 58).

Hall (1997b: 263) has argued that the denial of authority and infantilization led to black males overemphasizing macho qualities such as physical strength and sexual prowess. Contrary to the desired effect, this resulted in the confirmation of stereotypes of African-American men as over-sexed and overly aggressive, which, then, served as further proof that they had to be forcefully controlled.

This aspect of African American history is one that, according to bell hooks (1990: 16-17, 57-59), has undermined all black liberation struggles. Even the Civil Rights movement was cast in gendered metaphors that called for recapturing a lost manhood, which was equated with freedom. It was thought that women had to 'stay in their place' in order for a strong black family – and thus a strong black community – to emerge. Prominent forces in the struggle for black rights, such as the Black Panthers, were overtly sexist in their attitudes; the author of influential tome *Soul on Ice* (1968) and 'Minister of Information' for the Black

[2] The status of 'classic' bestowed upon D. W. Griffith's 1915 film, which was based on Thomas Dixon's blatantly racist novel *The Clansmen,* speaks volumes about the willingness of western societies to ignore issues of racism.

Panthers, Eldridge Cleaver[3], openly argued for rape as a weapon to be used in the liberation struggle, and this was never questioned. However, as hooks argues, sexism and racism are interlocking systems that sustain each other, and as long as feminist arguments are opposed for fear of betraying the black race, much progress will not be made.

American history has produced a society that is still divided according to race lines in socioeconomic terms. In the 90s, the median income for black families was less than half of that of white families. The number of black families at the bottom of the earnings scale was also over three times the number of white families. Statistics show that black people with similar education will only earn 745$ for every 1000$ earned by their white counterparts. They also indicate that black women are getting ahead in the workplace while black men are less likely to have jobs at all (Hacker 1997: 146-151).

That is not all, of course; there are several other factors making life hard for African Americans, especially men. In the late 1990s approximately 1/3 of all black males between the ages of 20 and 29 were incarcerated or on parole; and over 1 million black men were under some kind of correctional supervision. Gun homicide has been the leading cause of death among black males aged 15-34 since 1969, but the 80s still saw a staggering increase of 80% in homicide statistics in that group (Kitwana 2002: 20, 51).

These harsh facts are further proof of racial inequality in America. They do not bear much explanatory power in themselves, but they show that African American men still occupy a lowly position in the American society. Structural racism – manifestations of which have been recounted in this chapter – has created a complex situation where forces from both within and without the black community serve to hinder the progress of gender equality among African Americans.

[3] Cleaver suggested, disturbingly, that raping black women should be used as exercise for raping white women, which he thought was an insurrectionary act that would help reverse race hierarchies.

In the American society, much like in societies around the world, patriarchy is still very much the norm. Deeply entrenched in the culture, it defines gender roles in minute detail yet goes often unnoticed because of its ideological nature. In the present situation it is increasingly difficult for black males to meet the requirements patriarchal society sets for manhood – in both practical and symbolic terms. The overwhelming majority of critics agree that this has lead to an overemphasis on masculine qualities and the subjugation – symbolic and otherwise – of women in African American culture. hooks, for one, has stated that disenfranchised black males find sexist domination to be the "only expressive access to patriarchal power", which all males are told is their birthright (hooks 1994: 110). In hip hop representations the domination obviously happens on the textual level, in the lyrics and audiovisual portrayals – it is symbolic. Tricia Rose writes:

> …rappers also tend to reinforce the male sexual domination of black women and confirm and sustain the construction of black women as objects and status symbols. Although sexism in rap has been described as a means by which young black males buttress their socially devalued sense of patriarchal privilege, these attacks against black women are not critiques of social oppression and in too many instances they are frighteningly regressive. (Rose 1994: 103-104)

This is certainly true, and in some cases hip hoppers' real life does mirror the representational plane. There are some reported cases where well-known rappers have been sentenced on sexual assault charges. From the late Tupac Shakur to the artist providing one of the videos analyzed herein, Mystikal, there have been enough cases to prove that the misogynist attitudes expressed in hip hop are not pure fantasy, "just stories", as they are often justified, but extend their influence to the real world as well, reflecting and arguably even shaping it to a degree. Then again, they *are* mostly fictional: hip hop lyrics and videos mostly do not represent straight-up lived experiences of the artists – and, for the most part, audiences understand this. I am making this distinction because there is a real danger of equating hip hop texts with real life due to the symbolic bond between them that rappers themselves forge and the American

media and society love to uphold because it makes for good copy by ostensibly validating racist hysteria. The relationship between reality and narrative, as Eithne Quinn (2000: 133) has shown, has always been one of the most misunderstood elements in black narratives from trickster tales on. Thus, while hip hop's representations of women have their roots in not only a mode of expression but in lived experience as well, these two are emphatically not equivalent. Most of the big-name rappers who peddle a pimp persona in public are in fact married with children. This points to the role of the media in acting as a facilitator of meanings.

### *3.2 African American Women and Gender Relations*

In this chapter I will be concentrating more on women's position in the minefield that is African American life; on questions such as feminism in the black community and real women's role in perpetuating certain roles. I will connect these themes to a discussion of gender roles in the African American community.

While all the evidence points to African American men being ever more tightly stuck in the vicious circle of American racism, African American women have had a little more success in the US society. Just to draw on a couple of examples, black women complete undergraduate and graduate studies at twice the rate of black men; and between 1970-1996, the number of black women getting law and medical degrees increased by 219 % compared to 5 % for black men (Kitwana 2002: 109). This breeds resentment among both sexes towards the other: African American women despise men for not getting ahead and men resent women because they believe (probably rightly so) that women have an easier time succeeding since white society does not perceive them as much of a threat as it does black men.

Moreover, according to the US Census for the year 2000, there are only 85 African American men for every woman; if other variants, such as incarceration rates, are factored in, the proportional figure rises to a dramatic five men for every ten women (ibid.). African American female scholar Marlene Kim Connor (1995: 167-168) has argued that this situation where eligible black men are few and far between has resulted in black girls having to chase boys instead of the other way around. As a result, black males – especially the ones that succeed in the rap game – have become ego-maniacal and complacent about females. Although this may be a rather sweeping generalization, it necessarily contains some element of truth. Connor also maintains that young black females have been conditioned by the same ghettocentric mentality – which she calls 'cool' – that has its ties to black male attitudes towards women. For Connor, 'cool' is a mentality, survival strategy and way of achieving social acceptance; it has its roots in slavery and is typified by the concealment of emotions and difficulty of coping with other people showing theirs. Instead of striving for a healthy relationship young black females may end up bottling up their emotions and seeking to gain acceptance in terms of sexual appeal.

Although Connor's arguments are for the most part lucid, she now and again stumbles on some rather essentialist notions of human behavior. For instance, she argues that the reason black females chase the most successful males is nature: females have tried snaring the strongest males "since the beginning of time", as her argument goes (Connor 1995: 160). She also maintains that the male's strongest drive is the sexual drive – which idea corresponds distressingly closely with traditional, racist notions of black male sexuality (cf. Hall 1997b) –, and were he to direct all that energy to other areas of life, he would be successful (Connor 1995: 158). To top it off, she even goes on to argue that there is an inherent link between nature and the American way of life; namely, that the possibility of giving birth makes women yearn for a more stable existence, which the successful male can provide (ibid.:176).

Despite a massive body of research refuting its claims about the racially determined nature of qualities such as intelligence, sociobiologism continues to eke out a living, so to speak, in academic circles; and Connor's arguments, despite being sociobiologist nonsense to any self-respecting proponent of cultural studies, prove that these ideas still hold some sway in the American academia.

Returning meanings of race and gender to biological determinism only serves to reinforce the status quo: if nature ordains the behavior of men and women, there is not much cause for rethinking gender roles, for instance. The same applies to race: black males waste all their energy on sexual impulses, so it must be their own fault that they have not gotten ahead in life. Consequently, self-discipline and personal effort instead of altering government policies and media representations become to be defined as the primary means of achieving change. The individualist ideology behind this kind of thinking is, of course, very much an American product. What Connor has done here is (subconsciously) channel American mythology about individual determination and hard work being the only keys needed to unlock the gates of economic prosperity and happiness.

Connor (ibid.: 38, 175) has argued that the abundance of single mothers and the lack of mature male role models contributes greatly to dismissive attitudes toward women; boys grow up perhaps blaming their mothers for their harsh living conditions, with no models of respectful behavior towards women to draw from. Thomas Cripps has wondered about the situation's effect on the Lacanian psychoanalytic model of child development, which Laura Mulvey's theories about constructing females as objects of the male gaze on the screen (which will be explored in chapter 5.1) are based on. Cripps (1990: 127) writes that the Lacanian model is based, partly, on the child's sense of difference from patriarchal authority, and asks: "how does this translate into poor, black moviegoing audiences where one-parent families headed by a lone woman are the norm, or what is Oedipus' role in a matriarchate?".

He goes on to argue that in such circumstances the "entire spectrum of posturing, dressing, and acting the 'bad nigger' or 'hardman' may arise from a rebellion against a matriarchy where no man is ever present" (ibid.). Although Cripps' interpretation of the Lacanian psychoanalytic model may be somewhat literal-minded, or even a misinterpretation, as it happens[4], his statements point towards plausible – if only partial – explanations as to the attitudes of black male culture towards women.

Surely hip hop representations of females can not be pure fantasies; in all probability, in addition to drawing from a rich tradition of sexist representations in the American – black and otherwise – culture, they must have some grounding in reality, since they exhibit such uniformity. Most accounts and analyses of sexism in hip hop fail to address this side of the equation at all, as Emerson (2002: 116) has argued; they mostly discuss sexist attitudes in males, which is rather telling in itself.

Kitwana has argued that 'Hip Hop Generation' (as he calls the post-Baby Boomer generation) black women and feminists have not come out strong enough when it comes to opposing sexism. He attributes this – handing out a rather mixed message – to either there not being the same type of gender war going on with Hip Hop Generationers as there was with the Civil Rights generation (which is quite a confusing argument, given that he has spent several pages defining a HHG gender war), or this generation's feminists not being so politicized around gender issues (Kitwana 2002: 93). A more likely reason, as hooks (1990: 59), among others, has argued, is the prioritizing of 'race' over gender when it comes to political expression and black uniformity in an oppressive society.

Kitwana argues as well that one of the reasons for females' apparent acceptance of sexism in hip hop is that some black feminists try to downplay and rationalize male sexism and misogyny "like someone caught in an abusive relationship" (Kitwana 2002: 94). It is true that

[4] As I understand it, Lacan was talking about the child's discovery of sexual difference through a complex adoption into the symbolic order (language), which does not have to do so much with actual men in their surroundings or lack thereof. Cf. Mulvey 1975.

there seems to be a trend in black American female criticism of laying at least a portion of the blame on women for male sexism – perhaps rightly so; after all, most patriarchal domination works using ideological power, not brute force. Even renowned black feminist bell hooks has argued that what she calls 'rape culture' (exemplified by gangsta rap, etc.) among blacks is hard to defeat because heterosexual women have not unlearnt responding erotically to masculine-coded male behavior (hooks 1994: 110). This, to me, reeks suspiciously of the age-old tradition of blaming the woman for her rape, since she has 'invited it' by dressing in a 'suggestive' way or has sent the 'wrong kind of signals'. More to the point, hooks has also suggested that not only men are sexist: according to her, black women learn mainstream heterosexist values through uncritical consumption of the media as well (gangsta rap being the most blatant example) (ibid.: 121).

Which leads us from feminist scholars to 'common' black female culture and real women. Do they really offer a real-life basis for the representations of females in hip hop? Are there really 'hoes' and 'gold-diggers' out there in their abundance? Probably not, but it seems that the same socioeconomic and cultural forces that have created the black male, have shaped black females' behavioral patterns so as to create the present situation. Emerson has contended that the circumstances have produced in black female culture "ambivalence regarding contradictory messages about Black female sexuality, namely, the coexistence of hypersexual images and the denial and denigration of the beauty of the Black female body" (Emerson 2002: 128). This ambivalence, or confusion, might be argued to exhibit itself in women taking part in perpetuating sexualized norms of female behavior and representation.

Further, as we saw earlier, given the incarceration rates and other such factors, there are only about five African American men to every ten woman. According to Connor, the situation has lead to women having to chase men, which, in turn, has created a situation where

the black man – especially successful man – has a wide variety of possible candidates to choose from when it comes to women. Perhaps too wide. All of the research I have read seems to point to the same conclusion: that the African American woman wants a man who can support her, who has money. Connor attributes this to nature, most others to culture. The idea of a woman wanting a man who can support her financially is certainly a global one, and a very traditionally patriarchal one as well. What seems a little puzzling about it holding such sway in the African American community is that statistics clearly show that black women are getting ahead in the workplace and in life, and thus need black men in terms of economic support in decreasing amounts. Perhaps that is one of the reasons black male hip hop culture feels such a compelling need to denigrate black women on the symbolic, textual plane. The reason for black women seeking partners mostly among black men might be the one pointed out earlier – 'race' solidarity.

### *3.3 Hip Hop and Wealth in the Early Stages*

We have already seen some of the economic effects the legacy of slavery has had on African Americans. In this chapter I will be concentrating on hip hop culture's relationship with wealth in its first decade. I will seek to show that, on one hand, hip hop was not about money in the beginning, yet, on the other, it never existed in direct opposition to capitalism.

Hip hop has a curious relationship with wealth. To understand the nature of this relationship we must take a look back at its history. When hip hop first blossomed in the South Bronx, there was virtually no money involved. Hip hop was African American folk culture, made by the people for the people. Hip hop music can be traced back to the block parties of the late 1970s and early 1980s where DJs would bring their equipment to a park or hall, sometimes tap into the electrical supply system through a lamp post, and start playing.

These parties were promoted with flyers that were distributed hand-to-hand, and attending them cost little or nothing – just enough to satisfy the DJs' constant craving for new old vinyl.

At this stage, the DJ was the unquestionable star: in the very beginning, the MC, or rapper, was a tangential figure, at best. DJ Kool Herc is the DJ usually credited with kick-starting modern DJing, or turntablism, creating the platform for hip hop music in the process. Accompanying him as the most influential figures of this new underground culture were DJs Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa. These young black men invented most of the DJ tools – sampling, cross-switching, cueing, scratching, etc. – hip hop and post-modern dance music are based on. The most essential invention, however, was taking the climactic instrumental sections of records, the breakbeats, and making these parts last longer by switching to the other turntable. These breakbeats, or breaks, formed the basis for hip hop (Ogg & Upshal 1999: 13-37).

There are several points of interest here. Hip hop was African American underground culture with strong overtones of resistance to social norms and city laws. This was exemplified by graffiti artists reclaiming public spaces for disenfranchised inner-city youths by painting on surfaces such as trains and concrete buildings and DJs – along with the young people attending their parties – doing the same by using city electricity and public places for their performances. Although money was not very visibly on the agenda of the people involved with hip hop at this stage, the culture has always had its ties with the commodity system, as Tricia Rose (1994: 40) has suggested. DJs employed the latest technology (turntables, quality microphones) and existing cultural products, creating new forms out of these, and rappers in early 80s New York began marketing themselves with some zest once they realized they could profit from the rap game, as it is so often called. In other words, "the contexts for creation in hip hop were never fully outside or in opposition to commodities; they involved struggles over public space and access to commodified materials, equipment, and

products of economic viability" (ibid.). Tellingly, hip hop's first recording, 'Rapper's Delight' (1979), on independent Sugarhill Records became an overnight success, eventually selling an estimated 14 million copies (Ogg & Upshal 1999: 43, 45). This is another example of how hip hop has always embodied a duality between mainstream commercial success and poor urban (which is mostly understood as a racially coded term) background.

Still, the industry was under the impression that hip hop would be a passing fad, and tried to cash in on it quick. Despite Run DMC becoming the first group to truly cross hip hop over to different segments of the audience, it was only after the mid-80s with the arrival of acts such as LL Cool J, The Beastie Boys[5] and, first and foremost, Public Enemy that hip hop really established its staying power and financial clout. In 1985 independent hip hop label Def Jam, home to all of the afore-mentioned acts, became the first hip hop record label to sign a distribution deal with a major record company, CBS (Lommel 2001: 36).

However, money was not high on the rapper's agenda when it came to subject matter. Or rather, money was not so much on the agenda, the lack of it figured in their rhymes. Rappers recounted tales from poor neighborhoods; about parties, street life, relationships, religion, politics, and, yes, a desire for money (ibid.: 79). However, rappers simply did not have that much of it since hip hop had not been established as a multi-million dollar business, so bragging about it was not on the cards.

[5] The place of The Beastie Boys in the hip hop canon is somewhat contested. Them being white along with their devil-may-care hard core punk attitude certainly helped bring hip hop to the attention of the white demographic, which, in turn, secured them the first top position for a hip hop record (*Licensed To Ill*, 1986) on the Billboard charts, but there is a sense that they have never been accepted or belonged in the black hip hop community – in contrast to other white rappers such as Eminem and Bubba Sparkxxx who emulate black culture more faithfully.

### *3.4 The Crisis in Black Life, and Gangsta Rap*

This chapter will be about the crisis in African American life that happened in the 1980s and early 1990s and the cultural formation it can be seen to have birthed, gangsta rap.

The advent of the obsession with money is hard to pinpoint but two points in the chronology of hip hop could be argued to have played essential roles – the birth of gangsta rap and the emergence of Puff Daddy and the *nouveau-riche* ethos in hip hop that he became to personify. These were both the result of complex socio-economic and cultural shifts in the American landscape that happened in the 1980s and 1990s and lead to a deteriorated quality of life for young African Americans. This period in time is one characterized by such phenomena as Reaganism, neo-conservatism, yuppies and unhinged globalization.

Previously we witnessed some of the economic effects the history of slavery has had on the African American community. Bakari Kitwana (2002: 9-22) has argued that the 1980s and first part of the 1990s saw changes that affected black people in America profoundly – and led to the present situation. He argues there were at least six major phenomena shaping African Americans' position in socio-economic and cultural terms.

Firstly, globalization hit the black community hard – much as any minority community. Jobs were moved out of the inner-city areas populated by blacks to third world countries, wages decreased in the lowest paid sectors of the market, and unemployment rose dramatically – the unemployment rate for young blacks is still today twice that of whites.

Second, discrimination persisted in an US that preached integration and democracy. Examples abound, but one need only to consider the following: in addition to disproportionate unemployment rates compared to whites, blacks with equal skills and education also received less pay for work; housing policies lead to blacks being segregated from others; and electoral

politics formed unequal settings for policy making – only two black people have ever been voted to the Senate, for instance. All of these facts still hold true today.

Third, the overall living standards for black people deteriorated: many of them were and are poor and working poor. It has been estimated that 60 % of America's poor youths are African American, although blacks only comprise 13 % per cent of the population.

Fourth – as we have already seen a glimpse of – images of black youths emerged in the media during this period. This was mainly due to hip hop exploding onto the national stage and black-dominated sports, such as basketball, gaining more prominence as culture and sports became ever more medialized. Consequently, rappers became the public voice of this generation of African American people. However, the emergence of images of black people was tightly interwoven with commercial interests and commodity promotion. When one thinks of Michael Jordan, one of the most recognizable and admired African Americans ever, there is another image that clings to his image like a corporate appendix – that of the Nike swoosh. Visibility in the national media lead to the formation of a unified black culture and what Cornel West (cited ibid: 10) has called the Afro-Americanization of American white youth and, one might argue, white youth everywhere[6].

At the same time – and this is the fifth point – mainstream media representations of black youths continued to be demonized. Although this might appear to contradict the previous point, that may not be the case. The one position blacks have always – from Minstrel shows to athletes – been allowed to occupy is that of an entertainer, which rappers, basketball players and actors all are. Moreover, rappers do not necessarily contradict or denounce demonized images of blacks, but use them as currency, providing us with what Holmes Smith (2003: 83)

[6] What is meant by a unified black culture is that regional black styles, dialects and the like, which had been very significant, lost much of their currency in the face of nationally (and globally) distributed hip hop music and videos, black films and magazines and so forth: according to Kitwana (2002: 9), black youths from all social classes all over America nowadays share "similar dress styles, colloquialisms and body language". The same phenomenon can be witnessed – to a lesser degree – with the Afro-Americanization of white youths.

calls "the 'ghetto sublime', which means [they] can grant us thrilling proximity to a form of social danger of truly monumental proportions while simultaneously providing us safe remove from the object of our fascination". Thus, while black youth culture became a tradable product, white mainstream images of blacks in news reports and such continued to reiterate age-old stereotypes of blacks as violent and criminal. This, as Kitwana argues, was central to selling the War on Drugs to people.

Sixth, alterations in public policy on criminal justice had clear racial implications. The Reagan administration's War on Drugs was in effect a War on Blacks. It shifted the focus from rehabilitation to punishment, while doling out different sentences for drugs that are chemically the same but were clearly marked for race and class – powder and crack cocaine. Crack was very cheap and spread to America through poor black inner city areas[7], whereas powder cocaine was expensive, enjoyed by Hollywood glitterati and the like. Sentences for crack offences were almost a 100 hundred times harder than for powder coke crimes. By 1990 most crack users were white but 90 % per cent of the people sentenced for crack offences were black.

This points to a later development: in 1992 the Bush I administration launched The Violence Initiative, which was geared towards finding biological markers for violence in inner city male youths, which, obviously, can amount to little else than trying to prove black males are genetically violent. Next, the Clinton administration earmarked astronomical amounts of money for building prisons and instituted the death penalty for crimes associated with African American and Latino gangs, among other things. Also, steps were made to make policing more forceful, and this lead to rising rates of police brutality – especially on ethnic minority youths.

[7] There is a strong belief expressed by many in the African American community that the arrival of crack cocaine to black ghettos was devised by the American government in order to pre-empt social uprising.

This fertile breeding ground of poor economic conditions, limited opportunities, gang and drug culture and oppression is what spawned the next big thing in hip hop, gangsta rap.

Gangsta rap was born on the West Coast, specifically Los Angeles, where gang culture was rampant. As ever, different sources credit different people for making the first gangsta rap record. According to Lommel (2001: 43), it was Schoolly D with his single 'PSK What Does It Mean' in 1985; Ogg and Upshal credit former military man and gangbanger Ice-T for establishing the blueprint for gangsta rap with his track 'Six 'N The Morning' (1986), which, by all accounts, was the first hip hop record to blatantly use criminal activity as subject matter (Ogg & Upshal 1999: 114). What is certain, however, is that others, most notably N.W.A. and Snoop Doggy Dogg (who later dropped the 'Doggy' part of his name), followed suit in the late 80s.

Gangsta rappers all had some sort of ties with gangs and they chose to depict the lifestyle – guns, drug dealing, violence and, yes, money – with no small amount of glorification. What is ironic about this is that in the early days hip hop culture sought to offer alternatives to gangs, trying to erase them in the process. Gangsta rap is also widely recognized as having established misogyny as one of hip hop's major themes. Event though, as we have seen, sexism has persisted throughout African American (and general American) history, East Coast hip hop in the 80s was, on average, decidedly less sexist in its attitudes than gangsta rap and much of 90s hip hop it influenced.

Money is, of course, the main motivating factor in the drugs trade, and significant amounts of it are circulated constantly. The necessary mindset involved in drug dealing must be that of cynically minded ultra-capitalism which is willing to exploit other human beings and dispose of rivals by any means necessary. The aforementioned conditions that faced young African Americans had produced a situation where they felt stripped of viable means of getting ahead in life while many others in their home country could be seen enjoying the fruits of success,

which, in turn, had created a mentality that is manifested in the oft-repeated rap mantra "gotta get that money". The lyrics of gangsta rap reiterated this mindset – to huge financial success, which certainly did not diminish its value or popularity as the subject matter of choice for many rappers.

The other major event was the emergence of Sean 'Puff Daddy' Combs, who later renamed himself P. Diddy in an effort at reinventing his public persona. Puff Daddy came into the music business as an intern at MCA Records, later branching out into producing, performing, clothing and god knows what, finally founding his own record label, Bad Boy Records, in 1992. His point of departure was thus different – first and foremost, that of capitalist ownership and commodity production. Combs was college-educated and career-orientated; when label executive Andre Harrell offered him accommodation in his home, then 19-year-old Combs saw the spoils of success firsthand.

The artists on Bad Boy Records, chief among them the late Notorious B.I.G., employed a different type of gangster imagery compared to their West Coast peers. This was a set of motifs and images that had more to do with ostentatious Mafia gangsterism than ghetto hustling, and, similarly, their videos hung in the balance between Miami Vice and inner city decay in terms of mise-en-scene, drifting further from the latter as the 90s progressed. Most of the videos for B.I.G., Puffy and his later cohort Mase were co-directed by Combs alongside the most renowned hip hop video director of all time, Hype Williams, whose signature style became to symbolize the new hip hop aesthetic: hordes of scantily clad women dancing, a very high-tech look, shiny surfaces, ostentatiousness and the rest. The videos displayed expensive speed boats, extravagant mansions and other such signifiers which carried connotations of Latino drug lords and Mafia families. Sharp businessman as he was, Puffy probably understood the sensational value attached to these types of images: not only were gangster films such as De Palma's *Scarface* (1983) and Scorcese's *Goodfellas* (1990) hugely

popular in general, but they had specific ties with hip hop culture, where they were – contrary to the white film press's perception of them as classical, cautionary tragedies – commonly perceived as inspirational rags-to-riches tales. The same period of time from about 1995 towards the end of the decade saw other rappers, including Jay-Z and Ja Rule, adopting the same type of image. According to Holmes Smith, the gangster motifs of "fast cars, fast women, fancy clothing, strong liquor and a 'never say die' attitude" are the hip hop artist's way of "expanding the options for social performativity normally afforded blacks or Latinos" (Holmes Smith 2003: 81). In other words, the African American performer effects an identity shift by creating a myth where he is seen possessing the signifiers of upward social mobility society normally denies him or her.

Of course, the emergence of gangsta rap and the P. Diddy empire can not by themselves completely explain material wealth becoming such a prominent motif in hip hop but they – along with socio-cultural and economic determinants – point towards plausible explanatory frameworks.

### *3.5 The Music Industry as Regulator of Meanings*

In this chapter I will attempt to show how the music industry – in the case of music videos chiefly MTV – vicariously regulates representations and topics by means of commercial power and, especially, its unwritten rules and restrictions.

Holmes Smith (2003: 74) has argued that during the 1990s hip hop went from "symbolic anathema" of the capitalist society to one of its symbolically most effective instruments. He attributes this to two phenomena: the ability of African American people to make the commercial market place a space for identity formation and white youth's appropriation of black style. Holmes Smith maintains that these are part of the larger phenomenon of the American empire incorporating "the people's rhetoric of emancipation" within its postmodern

capitalist system and, similarly, it using black culture as a source of performativity "it needs to sustain itself as a global Leviathan" (ibid.: 73-74).

When hip hop became commercially more successful[8] due to its ability to win over audiences from different backgrounds, it meant that the artists became wealthier and suddenly had money to brag about; being a millionaire was fast turning from utopia into reality. Jack Banks (1996: 138) has written that "the record companies' funding for videos for certain types of music depends upon a music genre's current prominence on major exposure media, most notably MTV". Hip hop being a viable commodity meant that it was sensible to earmark more money for promoting it; bigger video budgets ensued, which enabled hip hop artists and video directors to dream up more lavish sets displaying more expensive luxury items. This in turn influenced what up-and-coming artists thought possible and redetermined up to a point the whole hip hop aesthetic. Moreover, when it became apparent that this type of imagery did enhance the possibility of air play on MTV and other channels, it became established as the new norm.

This is a good case in point of how commercial music industry interests intermingle with those of the artist, producing specific forms. MTV, by far the most powerful music video outlet in the world, plays a major part in this. Tricia Rose (Rose 1994: 14) writes that it has "its own standars and guidelines for airing videos. These guidelines, according to several frustrated directors, producers, and video commissioners, are inconsistent and unwritten." The guidelines are also riddled with hypocritical double-standards: although MTV has consistently allowed such imagery as close-ups of bikini-clad women's gyrating behinds and breasts, it has disallowed – among other things – the use of the word 'prophylactic' and the showing of condoms in videos, although these were steeped in a safe sex discourse (ibid.: 15). This points

[8] In addition to issues we have already discussed, Holmes Smith (2003: 74) sees hip hop's commercial success being partially motivated by it embodying so well a transitional phase in American history, the re-emergence of 'no-brow' culture and the New Economy of the 90s.

to one conclusion: in determining what can be shown, MTV has discouraged certain themes (one could venture to guess, themes that could be seen as inflammatory by right-wing fundamental Christian lobby groups, which hold substantial sway in the US entertainment industry) and encouraged others. Excessive flaunting of wealth has obviously been deemed acceptable while other themes such as hard-hitting – even revolutionary – social commentary has been mainly noticeable for their absence on MTV – although it does exist in hip hop.

Moreover, in a strange reversal of unwritten standards of the entertainment industry[9], it is violence, not sex, that has been omitted from music videos. In 1994, hip hop video producer Gina Harrell said regarding MTV's codes on violence: "…you can hold up a gun in one frame and then cut to the person being shot in the next frame, but you can't have a person shooting at another person in the same frame" (Rose 1994: 14-15). It seems that MTV's unwritten guidelines have become stricter in this regard: there were no guns shown in all of the video material I went through. There were a couple of shooting victims, and one quick still shot of a person being shot in Eminem's 'Toy Soldiers' video, but no guns were shown. There has not, however, been a comparable downturn in hip hop's fascination with gun violence in other media: magazines and CD booklets are still plastered with images of guns, and rappers are quick to 'pop niggaz' (shoot people) in their lyrics[10]. The same is not true of hip hop video representations of women, which, although perhaps somewhat tamer than at the turn of the millennium, still consist mainly of bikini-clad – or otherwise scantily clad – voluptuous female bodies gyrating to the music. My point is that, while images of violence have been

[9] Abundant film and television violence is sometimes seen as being a substitute for the taboo subject in America, sex.

[10] There is no actual censorship in the American recording industry comparable to that of television and radio broadcasting. Incendiary material is not edited out from records, but industry regulations require records containing such material to be marked with a sticker proclaiming 'Parental Advisory: Explicit Content'. Then again, to counter this, record labels usually release 'clean' versions of hip hop albums as well.

quite apparently reined in, MTV has obviously deemed sexist portrayals of women acceptable, thus actively encouraging them. To be fair, it must be noted that MTV does not differ in this respect from any other media institution, be it major television networks or the magazine industry. On the same note, hip hop videos mainly depart from other music video representations of women in degree (if even that: the concept of objectifying the female form is not exactly foreign to videos from pop stars such as Britney Spears and Shakira) and certain stylistic characteristics.

When certain types of motifs and representations are seen occupying a central position in the cultural arena that MTV is, it also shapes production of hip hop music on the basic level. We can draw a parallel here to another form of cultural production. If an aspiring television scriptwriter were to write a sitcom pilot episode tackling themes of abortion, misogyny and right-wing religious political clout he would not stand a chance of it getting into production. Institutional constraints and generic conventions delimit what can be said and how.

What has been said above about MTV can also be applied to major record companies, of which there are only an ever-diminishing handful (because of corporate mergers) left in the world. The relationship between record companies and MTV, record sales and video play, is symbiotic. Record labels and MTV are both commercial apparatuses which depend on advertising revenue for their profits. The record company wants its artists' videos on heavy rotation, which helps boost record sales and secure radio play. MTV, on the other hand, wants hit videos by popular artists to play in hopes of increasing their ratings, which correlate directly with the amount of advertising revenue they can accumulate (Banks 1996: 137-144). When certain type of thematic has proven to shift copies, the record company – motivated by profit-making interests only – will only make deals with people that are willing to discuss those subjects, and will probably steer their artists towards those areas where possible. As Banks (ibid.) has shown, record companies govern which of their artists are allowed to make

videos, and which of their songs are featured in videos. Further, they have a controlling influence on the content and style of the video.

It is like one of the most respected and successful hip hop artists ever, Jay-Z, said on the track 'Moment of Clarity' from *The Black Album* (2004) – purportedly his last one: "If skills sold, truth be told, I'd probably be/lyrically, Talib Kweli/Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/But I did five mill' – I ain't been rhymin like Common since/".[11]

[11] Talib Kweli and Common are one of the only major league hip hoppers constantly tackling social issues and politics with astute observation and lyrical wit. In a great example of the rich intertextual tradition in hip hop, Kweli answered on his next album, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2004), on the track 'Ghetto Show': "If lyrics sold then truth be told/I'd probably be just as rich and famous as Jay-Z/Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/Next best thing I do a record with Common Sense/" (and, indeed, Common is the featured artist on this self-same track). These rhymes explicitly critique the mentality expressed by Jay-Z: after all, instead of talking the talk, Kweli is walking the walk; he has kept his integrity, has kept on producing challenging lyrics in spite of a relative lack of commercial success.

# 4 Representations of Wealth in Hip Hop Videos

In the following sub-chapters I will be analyzing the representation of wealth in hip hop videos. The chapters exhibit certain prominent themes – excessive play with signifiers of wealth, the ghetto and organized crime imagery – related to the representation of wealth in hip hop. The three analyzed videos are Chingy's 'Balla Baby', Twista's 'Sunshine' and G-Unit's 'Poppin Them Thangs'. I will also be discussing several other topics relevant to the representation of wealth in hip hop – such as 'ballin', jewelry, violence, and many more.

## *4.1 Excessive Wealth*

In this chapter I will analyze the video for Chingy's track 'Balla Baby' off the album *Powerballin'* (2004). Chingy is part of a cadre of younger rappers to have burst onto the scene in the last few years. These artists could be seen to represent the next generation of post-Jay-Z money-obsessed rappers, raised on a steady diet of P. Diddy, Snoop Dogg, and others. As such, he represents – in his mediocrity – the average of mainstream hip hop; he is not extreme, not especially gangsta (the word can be used as an adjective as well), but not in any way opposed to that ethos either. He is mainstream hip hop personified. The video exemplifies well a common tendency in hip hop videos to exhibit money and luxury items in their over-abundance so as to almost make it a parody of itself – albeit probably unintentionally. It was directed by photographer and video director Jeremy Rall, who has made videos for mainstream hip hop artists from Snoop Dogg to Ludacris, and some for more 'conscious' acts such as Floetry and Talib Kweli as well. The focus in this analysis is mainly on issues of money, wealth and power and how they are manifested and tied to the meanings

of the rapper in the video; that is, on the way such visual signifiers as money, luxury cars, women and clothes contribute to the semiosis of the video.

The video begins with a close-up of a coin being inserted into a pinball machine. The next shot shows Chingy in a television game show type of a setting where his name is produced on the wall behind him in flamboyant letters; placed next to his name are four electronical counters (resembling the so-called millennium counters) which are running upwards. In the background two black girls, wearing hot pants and midriff-revealing tops, are dancing. This scene is intercut with extreme close-up shots following the ball as it bounces about in the machine. Chingy raps: "You know the definition/of a balla/that's me/C-h-i-n-g to the y/.

Next, in a short scene the rapper arrives with a cohort to a record company's offices and shakes hands with a black male (presumably) from the executive level. In rapid succession we see the following images: Chingy in the game show setting (with dollar signs flashing behind him); him in the record company offices with a bagful of money on the table; a shot of a female dressed in a skin-hugging dress with a deep cleavage, accompanied by the word 'flashy' literally flashing behind her; the rapper in a steel vault full of dollar bills and gold bullion; a shot of a silver Rolls Royce; a shot of a woman dressed in a policewoman's uniform that is modified to leave her sides bare and show her cleavage with dollar bills flying around her; a scene where the rapper is shown at a casino dice table; a scene with him at a roulette table with a wad of cash in his hand; a scene with Chingy, some black males and more scantily clad females dancing in front of three silver luxury cars; a scene with Chingy and his entourage, or posse, in the vault, dollar bills again floating in the air. Next there is a sequence where Chingy tells us: "I like them black, white, Puerto Rican or Haitian/Like Japanese Chinese or even Asian/", where shots of females of the respective nationalities are cut to accompany the words. The rest of the scenes are variations of these: females dancing in front of the cars, in front of flashing signs spelling out the words 'baby', 'bonus', 'girls, girls,

girls' and 'powerballin', Chingy rapping in front of another flashing sign shaped in the form of a shooting target, close-ups of playing paraphernalia (chips, dices, roulette ball, etc.) and, curiously, a white owl.

Clearly, the video in question is not of a narrative kind. Instead, it uses techniques that are common in music videos – performance, spectacle and direct address (Stockbridge 1987: 110-112). The concept of spectacle, often associated with the freezing of narrative flow, is closely linked with the pleasure of looking (and therefore scopophilia, which, along with related concepts, will be discussed in chapter 5.1). For Stockbridge (ibid.: 113), music videos commonly contain both performance and direct address: "…through technological reproduction music video clips produce performances of 'popular art' which, while removing the performer's presence, include many aspects of live performance including the simulation of speech directed at the spectator, or, direct address". Out of these elements the video for 'Balla Baby' concocts an escapist fantasy world of play, leisure and abundant sex where the rapper is undeniable king.

The images help position Chingy semiotically in the center of the video; he is placed laterally in the middle of each frame; he is also foregrounded by always having him appear closer to the camera than the rest of the people and objects. Also, as is the norm in hip hop videos, he addresses the audience directly by looking into the camera almost without fail. In other words, there is no question about who occupies center stage in the video.

There is abundant play with signifiers related to money and wealth in the video. Some, such as the flashing dollar signs and chips, quite simply signify money on the very basic level. Then there are objects, such as expensive cars and jewelry, that signify a broader concept, wealth, along with a host of other things. Money itself (in the form of dollar bills as well as other signifiers), on the other hand, signifies a number of things. Here we see how semiosis is

always a complex phenomenon: signifiers are interconnected and signify something which signifies something else, and so forth.

Money is such a powerful sign – in capitalist societies most signification returns to money; it is the basis for the whole structure – that its signifieds may be somewhat hard to explicate. However, there are some signifieds of money (which is itself basically an abstract concept, with dollar bills and other signifiers only representing it) that most people would agree on. Money equals power, and different types of power – economic, political and others – are intertwined in capitalist economies. It can also signify freedom, luxury, success, leisure or, indeed, work.

In the video money is firmly connected to a discourse of play, leisure, success and power. Work does not exist in the video's world and the structures of capitalism are omitted; in fact, the rapper himself is equated with wealth. He is the "definition of a balla"; in other words, he *is* wealth and luxury. The video also emphasizes the merging of the meanings of the protagonist and money visually: in one scene he is shown in a medium shot with two dollar signs, equal in size, sharing the screen, while most other scenes recapitulate this message by showing him in close proximity to other signifiers of wealth and money.

One of the more interesting aspects of the video is how it connects the concept of playing with that of being a 'balla'. The word is a slang transformation of the word 'baller', a signifier with rather complex signifieds. It means someone who has overcome their underprivileged situation by means of entrepreneurship (which might include illegal activity), talent and determination, and who is very wealthy and can claim to be better than others in his field. Rappers, drug dealers and NBA players can all equally well claim to be players. The word probably has its etymological origins in basketball, where the best players, but only the best, can escape their social confines by getting into college on a scholarship, and later, if good

enough, by becoming professional players. Web site Rap Dictionary[12] concurs with the meanings I have proffered, and suggests the word has derived from notorious Los Angeles gang the Bloods.

In the video, there are a number of signifiers of gambling and play. The signifiers associated with gambling (dice, roulette, chips, etc.) are money and risk – venture capitalism, in effect – and their product, power. The game show –like set, however, connotes a more popular (as in mass culture) form of playing. The counter and flashing dollar signs do signify money, but that is tempered by the context: game shows are a decidedly lower-class form of entertainment where the participant does not actually have to invest money to win, nor can he or she lose any (other than money earned in the show). Thus, the TV set represents a different inflection of the playing theme from that of the casino.

The cars (Rolls Royce and Bentley among them) signify a curiously aristocratic type of wealth. Of course, this is nothing new in hip hop, where people associated with the culture have adopted and subsequently redefined several high-end brands. Writes *Vibe* magazine: "Hip hoppers rocked Polo [Ralph Lauren] to look as pampered and affluent as the waspy preps in the Ralph Lauren ads, but, in the end, they inadvertently redefined what the little horseman stood for" (Louie 2005: 146). The same has partially happened with these cars – especially Bentley, which has become the vehicle of choice for all those wanting to establish their hip hop star credentials. They signify no more only aristocratic wealth but 'ghetto fabulous' wealth as well.

The scantily clad women are presented as objects as well; they have no position in the video outside of confirming the rapper's sexual prowess, desirability and success. Here the lyrics provide so-called 'anchorage' as well – they steer interpretation to a certain direction (Rose 2001: 81). Chingy raps at one point:

[12] http://www.rapdict.org/Baller, 26.5. 2005

Instead of God it's me girls is praisin'
Meet me at about 6 at the Days Inn
Five of 'em, one of me, I'm feelin' caged in
I'm a pimp, I'm gon' keep on playin'
You know I love em for that one night
I could take on ten with my one pipe

It is quite clear from the lyrics and the dress, appearance and activity (dancing) of the women that they are offered up as possessions of the rapper. They signify seductivity and sexuality, but also submissiveness; they can only exist in this make-believe world because the rapper has created it, in a sense, and presides over it as the central character. Stripped of other qualities, they are almost pure signs of eroticism.

Oyama and Jewitt (2001: 143-144) have argued that analyzing so-called symbolic structures is one efficient way of making sense of visual images. Put succinctly, symbolic structures are divided into two, where the identity or meaning of one participant (the carrier) is established by another (the symbolic attribute). This process is approximately similar to Williamson's concept of 'meaning transference', where images shift signifieds from one signifier to another (Rose 2001: 83). This is the way that advertisements, for instance, attach the meanings and values of the persons and objects shown to the product marketed.

This is how the video employs its various signifiers of wealth; the signifieds, or meanings, embodied by the signifiers are transferred to the rapper. In what Barthes would have called the mythology of the video the rapper thus becomes an almost all-powerful figure whose lifestyle is characterized by luxury, play and leisure, not to mention sexual desirability – the ultimate baller, that is. Meaning transference, however, does not happen on the textual level; it depends on the spectator to do the semiotic work. Thus, the opportunity for what Fiske, citing Allen, calls 'syntagmatic gaps' appearing in the text opens up (Fiske 1989a: 121). Through these gaps the viewer can make her or his own interpretations of the text. In 'Balla Baby' this particular spectator found it rather hard to attach the signifieds of the concepts

'pimp' and 'shot caller' (decision-maker, boss man) to this young rapper who I have seen appear polite, even a little shy, in an interview. This points to two issues: the chasm between hip hop representations and the real lives of rappers, and the fact that all texts are necessarily open to interpretation although the text, context and other factors may seek to guide the interpretation.

Another important, not to mention fascinating, aspect of the signification of the video is related to the rapper's clothing and accessories, which are an all-important aspect of hip hop culture, the main visual identity-making tool at hip hoppers' disposal – much as in any culture, sub- and otherwise. The clothes worn by Chingy represent rather typical hip hop fashion. He wears three different outfits, which do not differ from each other significantly. There are loose-fitting shirts with collars, baggy pants, do-rags (bandannas) and hats, and a rhinestone-encrusted denim jacket cut in the shape of a suit jacket. Chingy also wears a large belt buckle, ear rings, a medallion, and rings, all diamond-encrusted. It is worth quoting Harris at some length here:

> Hip hop fashion…has the dual strategy of aggression and containment. By this I mean that with men the multilayered, oversized clothing, the bandanas, and the baggy pants revealing boxers are fashionably aggressive in their appropriation of 'street' and couture, celebrating the accoutrement of prison and gang culture with the sophistication and timeliness of prêt-a-porter. At the same time, men's hip hop fashion is containment, through concealment, of the body…The resulting image is on of an aggressive, combative, tightly held masculinity. (Harris 1999: 66.)

Here Harris brings to the fore several of the multiple signifieds of hip hop clothing. Prison and gang culture is, historically, the basis for modern hip hop wear. Baggy clothing was worn in prisons in order to be able to conceal items such as weapons and drugs underneath them. The criminal associations are still present in the signification of hip hop clothing but as hip hop culture has evolved and spread all over the world it can be argued that many of these meanings have fallen by the wayside. The symbolic or discursive construct that is the 'streets', on the other hand, is still very much a part of the meanings of (male) hip hop

clothing; it does indeed signify an aggressive, tightly held masculinity. In contrast, women's hip hop fashion is very different – usually revealing, feminine and sexy, it corresponds much more closely to conventional ideas of female clothing than men's hip hop style.

Although traces of the streets can be detected in all hip hop clothing, Chingy's clothing signifies more the couture end of hip hop, the 'fashion' in hip hop fashion. Often dubbed 'urban fashion', it is a branch of the fashion industry that generated $2 billion in 2003 in the US alone. Urban fashion lines, such as P. Diddy's Sean John Clothing and Russell Simmons' Phat Farm, have also recently been moving closer and closer to more upscale, tailored – that is, in many ways more conventional, and more expensive – fashion (Louie 2005: 140-146). The clothes worn by Chingy (the rhinestone denim suit jacket, collared baby-blue shirt, leather hat) are mostly of the ilk not worn in the American inner cities or seen in urban clothing stores designed to cater to teenagers; they signify a more luxurious, more *fashionable*, type of hip hop fashion. As always, meaning-making also depends on difference. In the video the rapper's more wealthy, more extravagant style is confirmed by the clothing worn by his posse. Their clothes correspond to widely held ideas of hip hop style (baggy, sporty), but are a lot more mundane than the rapper's. Their clothing, mostly consisting of oversized hoodies, tees and baggy jeans, is not interestingly designed and the colors are muted; it is the kind of clothing anyone could afford. Semiotically, this creates a contrast which emphasizes the sumptuousness of the rapper's clothing. Chingy's clothing signifies both street style and couture fashion, and this concoction of signifieds is, of course, transferred to him.

As is customary in hip hop culture, Chingy wears large, extravagant pieces of jewelry in the video. Moreover, the jewelry are high-lighted by close-up shots or the rapper showing them to the camera. Jewelry – 'bling-bling' or just 'bling' – is important in hip hop culture.

Pieces of jewelry, such as rings or necklaces (more appropriately neck chains), have a prominent role in hip hop imagery, but also in its semiotic process.

In the early stages rappers did sport extravagant jewelry but its meaning was different from today. In those days, jewelry was quite obviously fake; the 'gold' chains were very thick and their significance was to remind of the chains the rappers' enslaved forefathers were shackled with and to mock the gold fetish in Western trade – among other things (Rose 1994: 38). I would argue that nowadays those meanings have lost some, if not all, of their relevance. Nevertheless, it can be argued that by its excess and size, hip hop jewelry does at least negotiate or carnevalize the conventional meanings of jewelry – Julia Roberts or the princess of Sweden would not be caught dead wearing a pendant the size of a small plate.

There are other signifieds besides wealth associated with hip hop jewelry. Usually there are pendants with letters or words hanging from the chains; the names or initials can refer to the owner, a close friend, relative or the group (or click, crew, posse) he belongs to, his neighborhood, or other such things. The pendant, therefore, is part of the identity work that is so important in hip hop; it can be used to confirm and promote the importance of its wearer or his crew (ibid.: 36).

Of course, the usual signifieds of jewelry – luxury, wealth, upper-classness – are all present as well. The gleam is important: rappers often talk of 'shining', which carries both literal and metaphorical connotations (no wonder then, that the jewel of choice in hip hop culture is still the diamond, or 'ice'). The shine sets a counterpart for poor economic conditions – in poor neighborhoods there really are not many shiny surfaces. The signifieds related to shine – newness, luxury, wealth – are not partial to hip hop; the signification of shiny surfaces operates in the same way in the broader culture.

The excessive play with signifiers of money and wealth evokes Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin (1968: 6) theorized that the carnival is characterized by excessiveness,

bad taste, offensiveness and degradation, and its function is to disrupt the rules of the established order, to suspend rank or social hierarchy. Thus, to him, carnivalesque pleasures were pleasures of the subordinate; their way of resisting the social order and insisting on their right to a place in the culture.

John Fiske writes about Bakhtin's theory:

> Carnival is an exaggeration of sport, the space for freedom and control that games offer is opened up even further by the weakening of the rules that contain it. Like sport, carnival abides by certain rules that give it a pattern, but unlike sport (whose rules tend to replicate the social), carnival inverts those rules and builds a world upside down, one structured according to the logic of the "inside out" that provides "a parody of the extracarnival". (Fiske 1989b: 82.)

Elsewhere Fiske (1989a: 139), drawing on Bakhtin's theory, has analyzed how sometimes the pleasure experienced 'reading' popular cultural texts can derive from their excessiveness, the over-abundance of signifiers. In the video everything is excessive in nature: money sits in big piles in the vault, floats in the air and big stacks of it are handled by the rapper. Similarly, there are various signifiers of money – the flashing dollar signs, playing chips, etc. – and an even greater variety of signifiers of extravagant wealth. This type of excessiveness would generally considered to be in bad taste in western societies, as would the kind of bragging about money and sexual conquests seen in the lyrics. Money is floating in the air and casually peeled off wads and left descending wherever it may go; because it is ubiquitous and handled without much respect, it has lost some of its prestige, been subject to degradation. The video inverts the labor-related associations and values of money, and makes it part of a discourse of carnivalesque play. It thoroughly questions social hierarchies and norms by associating capitalism's primary signifiers of class status, money and wealth, with a subordinate people, African Americans, whose free labor has historically produced wealth for the dominant group

in the society, white slave owners, and been part of the foundation American prosperity was built on.[13]

What is more, the video employs signs of playing and games, which, as Bakhtin argued, are associated with the carnival and offer space for freedom and control. The game show and casino act as symbolic forms of resistance to the socioeconomics of a society; commonsense ideas about blacks' position in the US social hierarchy are reversed – the video offers a parody of the extracarnival. Part of the pleasure experienced by the spectator could be argued to derive from this excessiveness itself; in the video's world there is no work, only play, and the meaning of money has been degraded to a point. Fiske writes: "Excess is overflowing semiosis, the excessive sign performs the work of the dominant ideology, but then exceeds and overspills it, leaving excess meaning that escapes ideological control and is free to be used to resist or evade it" (Fiske 1989b: 114). The play of signs becomes pleasurable beyond conventional signification, and is used to resist the control of the social.

There has recently been a shift in the evolution of hip hop videos. In the late 90s and early 00s most opulent hip hop videos took place in real-life settings – often times mansions and clubs. Now they often feature more pared-down, minimalist visuals. Recent videos by Snoop Dogg and Destiny's Child both featured abstract, immaculately white backgrounds, while The Game's breakthrough video consisted mostly of night-time Los Angeles cityscapes, the rapper driving around. These examples might point to a conclusion that hip hop is skimming down its ostentatiousness in favor of a more 'mature' look, but it is too early to tell.

[13] As Mos Def formulated it on 'Mr. Nigga' (*Black on Both Sides*, 1999): "If white boys doin' it, well, it's success/When I start doin' it, well, it's suspect/Don't hate me, my folks is poor, I just got money/America's five centuries deep in cotton money/You see a lotta brothers all caked up, yo straight up/It's new; you livin' off of slave traders' paper/".

### *4.2 Rewriting the Ghetto*

There are other videos that represent different inflections of the money theme. In this chapter I will be analyzing the video for Twista's 'Sunshine' (*Kamikaze,* 2004), especially as regards its attempt to rewrite the ghetto – in partially contradictory terms.

The ghetto as visual motif and confirmation of credibility has slowly been working its way back into visual culture – even though it never went away completely. Recent efforts by such hip hoppers as Jadakiss, Nas and The Game have taken place in the ghetto. What is more, some artists from genres other than hip hop have flirted with ghetto imagery in their videos. The irony is that many of these artist have had blatantly nothing to do with the ghetto in their lives; Destiny's Child have been especially keen on boosting their street credentials with no less than two videos off their latest album *Destiny Fulfilled* (2004) showcasing aggressive ghetto imagery, even though it is patently clear these young women were brought up in safe middle-class surroundings. This, however, falls under an altogether separate discussion.

Nonetheless, the video I have chosen to represent hip hop interpretations of the ghetto is Twista's 'Sunshine'. Twista is most renowned for being, allegedly, the world's fastest rapper, which merit has earned him numerous invitations to feature on major hip hop and r'n'b artists' tracks and videos. These include people from R. Kelly (lately notorious for the scandal involving a sex tape featuring him and an underage girl, and for black stand-up comedian Dave Chapelle producing his own take on the situation in the spoof song 'I Wanna Piss On You') to P. Diddy. He exemplifies well the breaking down of hip hop's sub-genre boundaries; he is not usually recognized as a gangsta rapper but he does rap about drug dealing and other subjects traditionally related to that genre. The video was directed by African American female director Nzingha Stewart who has made videos for a diverse group of artists and

bands, yet has mostly concentrated on hip hop and nu-soul artists from Erykah Badu to 50 Cent.

'Sunshine' begins with a shot of Twista getting out of bed on a sunny morning and putting his slippers on; the sunny motif of the song plays in the background. There is a young boy playing on the verandah of his house. Twista shows a stack of money and says "gotta get that money, man", before getting into his silver-colored SUV (sports utility vehicle) and driving to what appears to be a popular meeting place of ghetto residents, where there is a hustling and bustling crowd of people. Black men are playing craps in large circles and money is seen exchanging hands; women are chatting with each other or dancing to the music. There are children and elderly people as well, sitting around or playing. Many people are smiling. Towards the end there is a scene where the police arrive in the middle of a craps game; most men flee, but one stays, trying to pick up the dollar bills left behind from the game, and gets detained. The setting is not the type of inner-city 'projects' usually associated with hip hop imagery, but more the kind of sub-urban ghetto seen in films such as *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), with houses and even some vegetation instead of apartment buildings and concrete yards.

The video subverts many conventional signifieds of the ghetto; in the video it is not a world of squalor, violence and threat, but rather a communal space for African Americans typified by sociality and belonging. The video effects this signification by showing large groups of black people in every shot, interacting with each other with smiling faces. Twista himself is wearing ordinary, non-flashy hip hop sports clothes, and drives an SUV; he is also seen holding wads of cash and he sports gold teeth. The signifiers clearly mark him as wealthy, but far from superstar-wealthy; rather, ghetto wealthy. The whole concatenation of signifiers attaches him to the ghetto, while emphasizing the importance of 'getting paid' – especially in the lyrics.

The visual and lyrical levels connect money to what Kitwana calls "the underground economy", i.e. the drugs trade (Kitwana 2002: 13). One passage of the lyrics goes: "If I can't legally make a knot**,** then I gotta get back on the block/And if it ain't no work, we do a stick-up and whip up a concoction". Here the lyrics touch base with the socioeconomic reasons of the drugs trade's prominence in African American communities: when conventional avenues of earning a living are blocked (as they often are for lower-class black youths, save for minimum-wage employment), one might be forced to resort to criminal activity. Earlier in the video there is a blink-and-miss scene where the lyrics go: "Peep how we movin' them rocks and the pounds of dro' before I double my shit/I can serve 16 ounces plus 6 and get back 96", and concurrently we see a small plastic bag and cash exchanging hands. This clearly signifies dealing drugs, and the rapper's involvement in it is confirmed on the lyrical level even if he is not either of the participants in the shown transaction. The lyrics also equate selling drugs with making music as a form of 'hustling' (this either-or proposition appears commonly in hip hop lyrics) : "A hustler's definition is a hustler for scratch/…/I'm makin' money off verses when I spit 'em on tracks/And when I ain't sellin' no records, I'm servin' 'em packs/". In the mythology of the video – and in hip hop mythology in general – making music and dealing drugs present themselves as the only avenues to overcoming a poor ghetto background and achieving one's dreams, to 'gettin' that money'.

There are references in the lyrics to the violence involved in the drugs trade, but the mental and physical toll drug use takes on the user is elided, as is usual in hip hop, where drugs culture is represented solely as an economic activity yielding profits to the narrator/dealer/rapper of the lyrics. This elision is particularly blatant since the effects drug use – chiefly crack cocaine – has had on the black community have been devastating; it is therefore understandable that the self-appointed representative of the ghetto might want to try and conceal the fact that the actions he describes in fact contribute to the downfall of his own

community – albeit that its actual reasons can be found in historical, state-sponsored racism in America and in current government policies. For the same reason, Twista and other rappers subscribe to the individualist ethos, which is portrayed in the following lines: "I got the mentality and the motive, I'm on a mission/For the money, you can get it too, it's all about your ambition/". According to Holmes Smith (2003: 83), in these type of cases, the rapper presents himself as "an elect member of the ghetto community, the speculative confidence man extraordinaire, and he regards himself as an activist of sorts, an example to others of what they could make of their lives if they would simply seize the right opportunity when the time comes". This super-individualist ethos is, of course, part of a very American ideology; in this respect hip hop mythology validates general myths circulated in the US society.

The video is shot in soft focus and it uses light colors; the evening sun is shining and people are kidding around and smiling. There are various signifiers of afrocentric blackness such as afros being picked. What is more, the African Americans in the video are generally dark-skinned as well. For obvious reasons, dark skin color – as opposed to lighter shades, 'high yellow' and such, which carry upper-class, integrationist connotations – has always been one of the most important signifiers of an afrocentric discourse. Moreover, the theme of communality so significant to afrocentrism is prominently on display in the video, as I argued before. The fact that there are people from different age groups in the video is particularly significant when it comes to representing black communality, which has historically been based on the concept of the strong black family – which implies different generations interacting and co-existing in harmony (hooks 1990: 16-17). One might hazard a guess that the inclusion of the afrocentric and communal visual elements in the video have been influenced by its female director, Nzingha Stewart, whose other work suggests she may veer towards those types of visual themes. For instance, here is how she describes the concept for megastar female rapper Eve's video for 'Satisfaction' which also takes place in the ghetto:

"Since she has been shown as a fashion diva, I wanted to show her on her day off. […] So I went for something more relaxed and didn't have anything to do with 'money'. Just a great vibe and no huge fashion pieces or cars"[14].

What emerges as the mythology of the video is ghetto life – including drug dealing and gambling (craps) as its most prominent economic activities – as nostalgia; seen through the soft-focus lens of the filmmaker, economically disadvantaged neighborhoods appear as care-free havens of afrocentric – that is, referring to a more politicized era in African American history – communality. There is an intriguing conflict between the visuals and lyrics of the video, where the lyrics reference drug dealing and the importance of getting rich – hip hop's new ideology – while the visuals, although consolidating the lyrics to a point, also steer the representation towards afrocentric ideals. What is positive about the video is the reversal (an attempt to construct a counter-myth) of stereotypical representations of the ghetto, but seeing drug dealing as an unproblematic part of this secluded paradise and the omission of socioeconomic structures governing African American communities still deprave it of much of its subversive potential.

### *4.3 Representing Gangsterism*

Yet another way in which wealth is signified in hip hop videos is the symbolic appropriation of the organized crime – usually Mafia – theme, which we touched upon earlier on. Representations of the organized crime thematic and imagery, violence, and how they are utilized to accentuate the rappers' wealth and power are the most prominent topics in this chapter. G Unit's video 'Poppin Them Thangs' (*Beg for Mercy*, 2004) represents this trend. G Unit is rapper 50 Cent's posse, who have shot to fame in the aftermath of his personal

[14] http://mvwire.com/dynamic/article_view.asp?AID=10761, 26.5.2005.

success. As their moniker might suggest, G Unit ('g' standing for 'gangsta') overtly identify themselves as gangsta rappers and freely use that imagery in their lyrics, videos and other promotional material.

The video is the first of three videos in this study that were directed by the same veteran director, Little X. I was not aware of this when choosing the videos, but it actually was to be expected given the situation. There is only a limited number of directors whose way most of the work in the fields of hip hop and r'n'b is steered; they all have massive CVs, are all African American, usually male, and seem to work exclusively on black music genres. Yet they have usually made videos for a wide spectrum of black artists; Little X, for one, has worked with everyone from puppy dog-faced teen idol Craig David to angry man rapper DMX. What is more, the versatility does not apply only to artists but styles as well, so it is rather problematic to try and extract the semiotic or stylistic contribution of the director from the videos – except in some cases, where several factors point to the same conclusion, like we saw with the video for 'Sunshine'.

'Poppin Them Thangs' has a short narrative, where three G Unit members meet in a large warehouse with the heads of crime organizations from all over the world. The dialogue in the video is subtitled. First one of the men introduces the others; present are representatives from New York Mafia, Hell's Angels, Japanese Yakuza, Chinese Triad, Russian Mafia, Colombian drug cartels, and 50 Cent as the head of G Unit. After the introductions are done with, the unidentified moderator makes it known that the rest of the organizations disapprove of G Unit. The man from Moscow interjects: "You're reckless; you're shining a light into our darkness with your theatrics." The Triad representative adds, "you're bad for business," and the New York Mafia don concludes, "you don't deserve to sit in that chair." 50 Cent replies that they all got rich when he was in jail, but "meanwhile, the streets are starving." Now, he tells them, he "wants in" on all of their action from "sanitation contracts in Chicago" to

"corporate takeovers in Japan". All of the men spring up from their seats and approach 50 Cent threateningly, at which point the doors to the warehouse open, and several expensive-looking cars drive in and a large number of black males in hip hop clothes step out of the cars. The crime lords look very startled. "Gentlemen, do we have a deal?" 50 Cent asks. In the last scene an Asian man comes into an office where 50 Cent sits behind a desk and gives him an envelope full of money.

The lyrics of the track, however, do not correspond with the visual images in the video. In them G Unit members 50 Cent, Lloyd Banks and Young Buc mostly recount how wealthy they are ("choosin which whip to drive by what matches my clothes") and how this position translates to the treatment of women ("hell yeah, I fuck fans"), but what separates it from our earlier examples – and connects it to the visual material in the video – is that it interconnects meanings of wealth with those of violence more overtly. In the first verse 50 Cent raps: "I got a fetish for the stones, heavy on the ice, man/If I ain't got a pistol on me, sure I gotta knife, man/Get outta line and I'm lighting your ass up/Semi-automatic spray, I'll tighten your ass up." In the third verse Young Buc also raps: "The ice and the Jacob watch make a broke nigga take sumthin/So I gotta keep the four fifth with no safety button." The lyrics mostly do not have a strictly narrative or logical strain running through them, and this is usual enough in hip hop lyrics. They present certain themes and topics which are then often repeated during the course of the verse. The semantic connections are created through rhyme and proximity, as is the case in 50 Cent's verse. It is not right away apparent why he needs to warn people to behave or he will shoot them ("light your ass up"), but Young Buc's verse sheds some more light on the relationship between hip hop wealth and violence. Because he has diamonds ('ice') and a watch from renowned merchant of luxury goods Jacob the Jeweller, he feels he has to protect his possessions with firearms ('four fifth' refers to a .45 millimeter hand gun) for fear of them being stolen by some poor black male. This, along with other references in

the lyrics to "fake niggas" and "snakes back in the hood" are examples of how wealth in hip hop is attached to notions of paranoia, social exclusivity and superiority.

Holmes Smith (2003: 83) has argued that the hip hop star determines his or her status via "social isolation from, and antagonism toward, less successful ghetto residents." What this means is that, although the hip hop star must retain symbolic ties to the ghetto to back up his claims of street credibility, he determines his position by accentuating the difference between himself and the ghetto hoi polloi by flaunting his signifiers of wealth and luxury. Also, when those who have not been able to escape the ghetto betray signs of envy, and become "'playa-haters', they simply let the mogul know that he has done 'the right thing', further reinforcing his solipsistic moral code" (ibid.). The motif of 'playa-hatin' is one of the stock motifs in hip hop lyrics, and one that, to me, seems to have more to do with paranoia than reality. As Holmes Smith implicates, the whole notion is based on self-aggrandizement through juxtaposition with others belonging to the same ethnic/social group, which is indicative of internalized racism; the rapper projects his self-loathing onto others in the same group of people, who he sees as the culprits for their own situation.

Let us get back to the video's visual side. When 50 Cent claims in the subtitled conversation that "the streets are starving", he is doing exactly what we have discussed earlier: posing as a representative of underprivileged blacks, a Robin Hood of the ghetto, he tries to justify his own greed by making a vague semiotic link to the ghetto community. This represents the flipside of Holmes Smith's (2003: 83) argument: although the hip hop star may underscore his status by separating himself symbolically from the ghetto masses, he must simultaneously align himself with them to maintain his street-credibility, which is, after all, his claim to fame. This is an interesting conundrum, and one that I would argue the concept of 'ghetto fabulous' (that allows both extravagant wealth and the symbolic appropriation of the ghetto simultaneously) was partly created to negotiate.

The video is not very rich visually, and its semiosis is mainly dictated by the subtitled dialogue. The crime boss characters are adorned with rather stereotypical visual signifiers (the Russian mobster is bald and smokes what seems to be a filterless cigarette; the Triad leader sports a long 'Chinaman' moustache, etc.) that help viewers identify them. The connection with money is effected through intertextual signification: the characters' style of dress signifies organized crime (or rather it signifies televisual and cinematic representations of organized crime), the logic of which is determined by very large sums of money – and we know this from countless fictive portrayals of the Mafia and other such organizations, which, tellingly, are very popular all throughout the Western world.

There are not many visual signifiers of ostentatious wealth in the video, except for the obligatory neck chains and luxury cars. As I have already mentioned, the representation of money-related issues operates on the conceptual level. In the video, there is a battle over power (which translates to money), which G Unit wins. The other crime organizations perform the equivalent of a dog lying down on its back – total surrender – which subsequently means complete domination and a steady stream of profit for G Unit. The main signifier transferred to the group – and especially 50 Cent since he is positioned as the leader – is thus power, economic and otherwise. Crime organizations represent power in its most vile embodiment, power acquired through fear and force. All of the characters signify this, and since they are seen quite literally surrendering their power (the final scene, where they can be witnessed paying protection money to G Unit, is the ultimate proof of the surrender of power), the video's mythology represents G Unit as an absolutely dominant, all-conquering force.

### *4.4 Oppositional Voices*

This chapter deals with representations and artists that go against the grain when it comes to the mainstream ethos on wealth in hip hop.

The videos we have discussed exemplify many of the common themes related to the representation of wealth in hip hop, but they can not hope to encompass all of them. The first thing to keep in mind is that hip hop is a vastly more heterogeneous culture than its most commercial representatives would seem to suggest. There are and have always been counter-argumentative voices in the hip hop community; those that are not afraid to engage in direct confrontation with their peers. One problem with studying mainstream hip hop is that the critique may overshadow those oppositional voices and participate in creating a monolithic, negative image of hip hop, all the while ignoring that the criticized values and expressions exist in and are indeed largely produced by the larger society. If it can sometimes appear that hip hoppers are not critical enough of the sexism and rampant materialism in hip hop, it is because they recognize the fact that the same values and ideas are circulated freely in the dominant culture yet often go unnoticed since they have been naturalized as part of its ideological, mythical structure. As Ogbar (1999: 166) writes, "on one front, [conscious] rappers direct criticism at their hypermaterialistic peers and, on another, disdain is directed at the capitalist society at large that copiously glorifies overconsumption and materialism." He points out several artists, such as De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, and The Roots, as examples of hip hop groups questioning and even parodying the superconsumerist gangster imagery. The Roots, for instance, have a video called 'What They Do' (*Illadelph Halflife*, 1996), in which the ostentatiousness of hip hop videos is brought into dubious light. The video begins with a shot of a mansion, accompanied by the text "The Goldstein estate, day rental". By modifying the meaning of this signifier of wealth from property to rental, the

video effects an undermining of the semiotic work done by signifiers of wealth in hip hop videos; it situates the whole imagery closer to fantasy than reality. In the video there is also a scene where the rapper sits with three gorgeous women, and the caption reads "Yeah, right", and another where he is seen in front of some luxury cars and the caption poses the question, "Can we afford this?". The captions obviously serve to parody and question hip hop videos' representations of opulent wealth and women as possessions of the rapper.

The problem is nonetheless that these representations fall into a smallish minority when it comes to music videos; in trawling through hour upon hour of hip hop videos gleaned from MTV, I could only really find one that overtly criticized materialism in hip hop, Kanye West's 'All Falls Down' (2004) – and even that video only did it on the lyrical level. Moreover, groups with oppositional views have been largely consigned to the fringes of hip hop – at least compared to their counterparts in the early and mid-nineties. Of the groups Ogbar mentions, Digable Planets and A Tribe Called Quest have gone to hip hop heaven; political torchbearers Public Enemy and KRS-One have more or less fallen off the wagon and lost their cultural interest and clout; and Ras Kass, The Coup and Jeru The Damaja never really got off the ground (and, ironically, Ras Kass has done his part in solidifying widely held hip hop stereotypes – he was released from prison just prior to my writing this). De La Soul and The Roots are still around, but the former have become largely marginalized, and the latter could be argued to be well on their way on the Black Eyed Peas route to fame – formerly vibrant hip hop troupe watering down their music and message and adding a hefty dose of pop to make it more marketable (although the jury is still out on them).

There are contemporary artists interested in getting across their views that go against the grain of mainstream hip hop, chief among them Talib Kweli, Common, Dead Prez, Kanye West and Jurassic 5. Talib Kweli offered this critique of money-obsessed rappers in the liner notes to his and Mos Def's Black Star project's self-titled album (1998): "I always thought

[player hater] was a curious expression. We started to see cats shouting 'player hater' to anyone who had nerve to critique they wack shit. A lot of rich players are making wack-ass music, that's the bottom line. I remember when the worst thing you could be was a sell-out. Then the sell-outs started running things." The fact remains, however, that these artists reach the visibility afforded to mainstream rappers only fleetingly – with the exception of Kanye West.

Thus, I would argue that mainstream hip hop representations and ideas overshadow views and artists that go against the grain. If one were to poll people on the street on their views of hip hop portrayals of wealth, for instance, they probably would not offer many meanings besides those we have seen.

In chapter 4 we saw how hip hop videos' strategies of representing wealth include the extravagant, excessive display of signifiers of money and luxury, and how these are employed to carnivalize and reverse conventional meanings related to social hierarchies. The significance of playing, of 'ballin'', and how it is used to connote success were discussed as well, among other issues. We also discussed how the ghetto is used in hip hop videos as a visual motif that may engender different, even conflicting, ideas about black sociality and wealth. In our video example, Twista's 'Sunshine', the ghetto was rewritten as a counter-myth trying to displace its conventional signifieds with a sense of afrocentric communality. Yet this tendency was contradicted by a simultaneous individualist stress on money and on drug dealing as a viable means of procuring wealth. The appropriation of the organized crime thematic was seen to relate to a signification of absolute power and its product, wealth. The relationship between violence and wealth was argued as being connected to notions of social exclusivity and superiority of the rapper to lower-class black people (even though he must simultaneously maintain a symbolic proximity to them). We saw as well that there are rappers who critique hip hop's emphasis on materialism.

# 5 Representations of Women in Hip Hop Videos

In the following sub-chapters I will be discussing issues related to the representation of women in hip hop videos. The analyzed videos – Mystikal's 'Danger (Been So Long)'; '50 Cent's 'P.I.M.P.'; and Kanye West's 'Workout Plan' – have been chosen because they exemplify prominent themes regarding the representation of females in hip hop; fetishizing objectification of women, masculine power, the pimp ethos, parody and fears about women as 'gold diggers'. In the first sub-chapter I will be introducing and applying Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic film theory which concerns the audiovisual objectification of women.

## *5.1 Fetishized Women*

The first video I will take up for analysis is 'Danger (Been So Long)' (2000) by US rapper Mystikal, who used to shift records in the multi-millions before being imprisoned on sexual assault charges. The video is a prime example of the representation of women in hip hop videos as visual spectacle, as fetishized, pornographic body parts controlled by the male rapper. The video's director is the same one who I discussed in the previous analysis chapter, Little X.

The video has a short narrative, which begins in the desert where Mystikal has landed on a parachute. He is picked up on a motorcycle by a woman clad in leather bikinis, and is whisked away to a bar in the desert. The bar is brimful of women wearing extremely revealing clothes dancing to the song; many of their moves seem to come from the 'adult' industry. Many of the women cast lustful glances at Mystikal; one crawls on all fours through the length of the counter, and licks his cheek. Later, the rapper is shown in a harem-like setting surrounded by women who are caressing him. This storyline is interjected with shots

of the featured artist Nivea singing her lines and dancing. At the end the whole story is revealed as Mystikal's dream or hallucination as he wakes up in the desert still wearing his parachute.

Now, at this point, before moving on, I would like to include the ideas feminist film critics working with psychoanalysis – especially Laura Mulvey – have brought into the discussion about gender and audiovisual form. Mulvey theorized in her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey 1975) that women are constructed as objects of the male gaze (of the hero and the spectator) in cinema. She argued that in a patriarchal world, the pleasure of the gaze is divided into active/masculine and passive/feminine, and that the masculine gaze projects its fantasies onto the appearance of the woman, which is coded for strong visual and erotic effect. Women are put on display and they are looked at. The pleasure that derives from subjugating a person to an object of the gaze is called scopophilia. The act of observing somebody unbeknownst to the them, voyeurism, is also a source of pleasure, and it is built into the cinematic (and televisual) form. Fetishization, on the other hand, emphasizes the physical beauty of the object and makes it a source of pleasure in itself. (Mulvey 1975: 6-18.) Although Mulvey's hugely influential theory has been subject to various strains of criticism – especially the problematic of the female gaze / man as object – (cf. Saper 1991) since its inception, I deem its basic methods to be still valid when analyzing the audiovisual objectification of women, since they account for phenomena that are hard to deny based on lived experience; that women are represented as sexual objects more than men, and that looking at them gives pleasure to men.

In our video example, the rapper is a signifier of masculinity and power: like in the Chingy video, he is positioned at the center of the video both spatially and symbolically; he is also active (singing and gesturing), and the women perform their dancing for him. The video constructs an identification of the viewer with the rapper by offering the women as objects of

both parties' gazes; using such techniques as selection of clothing and camera angles, the video fetishizes and objectifies the women, while it constructs the rapper's subject position by having him rap his rhymes directly to the camera – thus addressing the audience directly (which, as we have seen, is the dominant mode of expression in hip hop videos). The position offered to the viewer is the same Mystikal occupies; that of the watcher – and this implies power.

One of the methods used in constructing this voyeuristic position is the way the women are filmed looking away from the camera most of the time, which diminishes the chance of identification, as Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 122-123) have argued. What is more, the video uses several fetishization techniques, which render the women objects of erotic scopophilic pleasure. Casting is one such technique: only women who correspond to soft porn-esque ideals of beauty were selected for the video; women with slender but extremely curvaceous bodies, large breasts apparently being a particularly prominent selection criterion – all of which points to a surgically enhanced body.

Another fetishization technique is the choice of clothing. The women in the video are clad in revealing fashion: they are clothed in tube tops, mini skirts and bikinis which do not leave much to the imagination. Yet another technique is the use of lighting. The women are lit with a powerful light from the front side and another located high above their heads. The light coming from above has the effect of emphasizing the contours of their bodies, and the stronger frontal light creates a sort of sheen, a glow on their dark skin. Thus, by prioritizing the surface, sort of detaching it from reality and the women's inner selves, and by therefore emphasizing the physical beauty in a manner that borders on total commodification of the body, the lighting operates as a fetishizing technique. This is contrasted rather pointedly with the male rapper who is fully clothed in light-absorbing black, thus not being exposed to the influence of the lights, which is another way of differentiating between him and the women

and of persuading the spectator to perceive him in terms of the inner self – intellect, emotions – as opposed to the outer.

This almost ritualistic fetishization of the female body and its parts is reflected in the lyrics as well:

> Go head though, bounce them titties
> Shake that ass, drop that pussy, but stay in line hoe
> Fuck a cain't, cuz you can can
> Cocked up, head down, pussy poppin on a handstand
> Leave that pussy smokin
> If you gon' do somethin then bend over, and bust that pussy open

Here attention is drawn primarily to erogenous female body parts (‘titties’, ‘ass’, ‘pussy’) as pure objects; they are separated on the textual level from the rest of the body, and their meanings are related to the controlling aspect of pornographic imagery. The male rapper exhorts women to act and pose in positions (‘bounce them titties’; ‘bend over, and bust that pussy open’) whose only motivation can be providing scopophilic erotic pleasure to the spectator. At the same time, there is a warning against disobedience of any kind (‘but stay in line hoe’). In this, the rapper becomes the text’s internal pornographer, and the women, obviously, porn stars in his film.

If Mystikal signifies activity, power, and also culture (he bears the signs of culture – language, clothes that conceal the body, etc.), the women signify submission, impersonality, sexual pleasure, and, finally, nature. Several elements in the video construct the women as submissive. Them being fetishized and constructed as passive objects to be looked at obviously marks them as submissive. Moreover, all of their activity is geared towards catering to the rapper in some way: they perform their dancing for him and gather around his sultan-like persona to caress him collectively in the harem setting. Looking mostly away from the camera, not allowed any sort of communication with the spectator, the women are not constructed as subjects. The aforementioned fetishizing techniques mark them out as sexual objects of the male gaze.

Yet, like all texts, this video is not without its contradictions. Although only the representations of the dancing women have been analyzed so far, there are two other types of representations of women in the video. First, there is the black woman who picks Mystikal up in the desert, who, despite being constructed as a fetishized object through her revealing clothing (leather bikinis), she is associated with activity and subjectivity as well. She is represented as more of an active subject than the dancing women by having her control a powerful machine. The motorcycle, the "steel horse", is a strong signifier of masculinity, power and freedom in western – and perhaps especially American – mythology. It represents a perceived masculine yearning for the open road (freedom), but, ironically, this freedom is achieved through control – taming of the steel horse, if you will. Nevertheless, the woman in the video obtains some of the motorcycle's signifieds (power, freedom) associated with it through meaning transference. Also, she does not offer herself as an object of the rapper's gaze or even appear interested in him in any way.

The character is thus a different representation of femininity, one associated more with independence and control of her surroundings. Then again, some degree of objectification is effected through her scant clothing and denying her a voice. Moreover, she appears from the desert like an apparition and again vanishes into it quickly; her leather bikini is a stylized signifier of primitiveness and there is no communication with the spectator through eye contact or speech. She thus remains closer to nature, the desert she appears from, than any kind of human personality or agency.

Secondly, there is the position occupied by the songstress Nivea. This role, along with that of the pure sex object, seems to be the most common role women are afforded in hip hop videos. They are the sexy sidekicks who are allowed some degree of agency, yet are simultaneously objectified and fetishized, and placed in an inferior position to the rapper. They are located somewhere in the middle ground between the subject (rapper) and object

(dancing women) positions. In the video the rather unfortunately named female singer is looking into the camera when singing, thus engaging in a contact with the spectator, but her facial expressions and body language signify something altogether different from those of Mystikal (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 122-123). Whereas the rapper's expressions signify anger and authority, Nivea's expressions seem to signify seductiveness. Her dance moves (swaying of hips, "oriental" hand movements, etc.) also signify seductiveness but clearly in a less explicit manner than the moves of the women in the bar, whose dancing incorporates moves reminiscent of so-called exotic dancing, which really is an euphemism for strip dancing. Thus, although the singer engages in contact with the spectator, the function of that engagement is different from that of the rapper. Whereas the male rapper addresses the audience and even challenges it, the female singer is offered up as a sexualized object.

The video thus constructs a mythology connecting women with nature, with passivity and sexuality, while the male rapper is associated with control and subjectivity. He is also the video's internal pornographer who subjects women's bodies to his (and the spectator's) gaze and even goes so far as to actually order them to take pornographic poses. However, the female singer offers a different representation of femininity, one associated more with subjectivity, although, in the end, she is also fetishized.

It is true though that in the majority of popular cultural texts –especially music videos – women have had to endure objectification to a degree in order to be able to speak, i.e. enter the subjective domain. This could be witnessed, for instance, in the mid to late nineties popular culture phenomenon, the Spice Girls. The group was portrayed in the popular cultural discourse as purveyors of "girl power", which was purportedly a watered-down feminist look on life. Although it may be true that some of their lyrics propagated an assertive, powerful womanhood, all of this was tempered by the fact that the girls were clothed in push-up bras, mini skirts and tube tops in their videos and during their performances. In order to be able to

speak to adolescent females, they had to be objectified for the male audience. This is a prime – if somewhat banal – example of how the patriarchal structures of society and the music industry mould representations of women.

Similarly, I think it may not be inconsequential that Missy Elliott, who has been one of the only successful women in hip hop projecting a powerful presence that does not conform to sexualized norms of female beauty (she was overweight, fully clothed, assertive) went on a heavy diet a couple of years ago, which transformed her to average weight. The media was informed that the weight-loss was due to health reasons, but one might suspect otherwise. In all fairness, it must be acknowledged that slimming down has not much affected her image.

### *5.2 Pimp Mythology*

There is a curious hero figure that is part of the African American oral tradition and later developments in black representation – the pimp. In this chapter I will be analyzing the portrayal of the pimp character in contemporary hip hop through 50 Cent's 'P.I.M.P.' (2003) video, along with its associated themes of power, masculinity and control.

The pimp is a 'fly' (cool) dresser who drives a nice car and always has a cadre of beautiful women around him; an all-around arbiter of cool, he is hero to everyone in the neighborhood. Eithne Quinn argues that the pimp figure goes all the way back to 19th century African American folklore in that it is associated with the trickster figure, both of whom use their verbal skills (toasts, signifying) to resist oppression and assert their mastery over the opponent (Quinn 2000: 118-119).

The modern-day black pimp character, to all intents and purposes, has its more immediate roots in the latter part of the 60s: notable black novels, such as Iceberg Slim's

autobiographical tomes[15], presented the audience with pimp characters who represented power and a stylish take on resistance, of "sticking it to the Man". The same applies to blaxploitation movies of the 1970s, such as *The Mack* (1973) and *Superfly* (1972), which had heroic pimp characters. For Quinn (2000: 122), the subcultural pimp's position as an "'aristocrat' who is admired and recognized" is related to the tradition of signifying; the pimp figure prioritizes style over substance and word over deed. In doing so, he "constitutes an icon of upward social mobility for black working-class males, spectacularly refusing through [his] heightened style politics, the subservient typecasting that has historically been imposed by the dominant social order" (ibid.: 123-124).

In hip hop, the pimp is undisputably a positive figure. From Too $hort, the self-proclaimed 'pimp rapper' to Jay-Z and, especially, Snoop Dogg, many rappers have utilized pimp imagery in their lyrics and videos. Of course, it is true that hip hop culture has – as well as partaking in the tradition of pimp representations – transformed the meaning of the word even further, crafting a verb ('pimpin'') out of the word in the process as well. The signifier 'pimp' nowadays carries connotations of wealth, style and control. When the term is modified into a verb, 'pimpin'', its signifieds do change: 'pimpin'' does not usually mean 'acting as pimp'; its signifieds are very close to those of the terms 'mackin'' and 'ballin''. They all connote a high-flying, luxurious life style characterized by expensive clothes, cars, and the rest, but it, significantly, does contain the idea of access to willing women in their dozens. Of course, hip hop slang is notorious for being subject to constant reapproriation and change, so the terms' meanings are in constant flux and partly depend on the context and time of use. Although the term 'pimp' mostly does not carry the literal meaning of 'organizer and seller of prostitutes', it does entail that type of mindset: as I argued in the passage on Chingy, to the hip hop

[15] His best-known novel is *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1969), which is still referenced in hip hop continually. Quinn (2000: 123) agrees: "The influence of Iceberg Slim's literature on black urban culture has been considerable".

'pimp', women are to be treated indifferently but enjoyed sexually. There is a certain amount of the Casanova myth embedded in this, where all women always want the male rapper, but hip hop has applied a more sinister twist to that particular myth: whereas the Casanova character – prevalent in much western fiction – takes time to woo women and is the world's greatest lover to boot (in other words, he takes women's enjoyment into consideration), the rapper turned pimp seems to think he is mainly wanted for his money, and consequently wants to completely control his women. It is valuable to keep in mind, though, that this is done on the verbal level, for, as Quinn (2000: 118) states, "verbal mastery is equated with sexual dominance" with the mythic pimp character.

These tendencies are well presented in the lyrics to Jay-Z's "Big Pimpin'" video, where he explicitly raps: "I'm a pimp in every sense of the word, bitch". This implies something I wanted to point out: even though the signifieds of the word 'pimp' have been transformed in hip hop, it does not mean that it would have lost all – or even most – of its original meaning. "Every sense of the word" quite clearly indicates that Jay-Z, for one, has not forgotten about its original meaning. Jay-Z raps: "You know I – thug em, fuck em, love em, leave em/cause I don't fuckin need em/Take em out the hood, keep em lookin good/But I don't fuckin feed em/". In this passage the pimp rapper proclaims his independence, or sovereignty, from women. He also describes how he, basically, "keeps" these women ("take em outta hood, keep em lookin good"), but is not going to pursue serious relationships with them, which would necessitate a joint economy ("but I don't fuckin feed em"). Later the women's position as primarily his sexual play things is quite clearly stated in the following passage: "In the cut where I keep em/Till I need a nut, till I need to beat the guts/Then it's beep beep, and I'm pickin em up/Let em play with the dick in the truck/". Not only does he primarily need them for sexual favors ("beating the guts" means sexual intercourse), but the lyrics indicate a desire to keep the women in their place, under control, waiting for him ("I keep em in the cut").

Later the reason is revealed: “Many chicks wanna put Jigga fist in cuffs/Divorce him and split his bucks”. Here the lyrics exemplify a common paranoid fantasy of women as ‘gold-diggers’ or ‘chicken heads’, only after the rapper’s money. All of this obviously connects with Quinn’s argument that the pimp in gangsta rap is a mythic, fictional icon of resistance, and is not to be equated with the real rapper, and that rap narratives are to be treated as part of an oral and literary tradition. While this is undoubtedly a fair assessment, the sidestepping of sexual politics still baffles me. Quinn, for instance, takes the “stark misogyny in the lyrical content of [gangsta rap] tracks as a fairly well-documented ‘given’” and leaves it at that (Quinn 2000: 117). It certainly does serve a (political) point to rescue African American culture and hip hop from criticism that has seen it as a subhuman “knuckle-dragging sub-pidgin of grunts and snarls”, as we saw Bork describe rap (Ogbar 1999: 166), but it emphatically does not serve the interests of gender equality (African American or otherwise) to give a free pass to sexist or misogynist representations within hip hop – whether they are part of a tradition with subversive social aims or not.

Next I will cast a longer glance at one video that tackles the pimp issue quite explicitly, ‘P.I.M.P.’ by 50 Cent. Now, this is already the second time 50 Cent crops up in this study, but I deem that to be wholly appropriate given his status: now that Jay-Z has retired and left hip hop’s top position open, 50 cent is, along with Eminem, the biggest rapper in the business. In March 2005, 50 Cent performed a feat last seen over 40 years ago when the Beatles reigned supreme: he had four singles simultaneously in the top ten of the US Billboard singles chart[16]. He is mostly identified as a gangsta rapper, partly because of his violent subject matter, partly because of his personal history (few articles on him fail to mention that he was once shot nine times and lived to tell the tale). The video’s director, Chris Robinson, is an industry veteran who has shot a great number of videos for black artists ranging from Jay-Z to Alicia Keys.

[16] http://www.vh1.com/artists/news/1499248/03302005/50_cent.jhtml, 26.4.2005

The video begins in an ostentatious mansion, the interiors of which are mostly decorated in white colors. Three black women clad in pure white bikini-like tops and pants are helping 50 Cent to get dressed in a 'wife-beater' (sleeveless shirt), straight pants and a brimmed hat, all of which are white as well. He is seen rapping in this outfit throughout the video. The footage of him getting dressed is shot in slow motion, and the camera lingers on his muscular torso, which the tight-fitting tank top accentuates.

The song begins with the chorus: "I don't know what ya heard about me/But a bitch can't get a dollar outta me/No Cadillac, no perms, you can't see/That I'm a motherfuckin P-I-M-P". He is rapping in the mansion, frequently grabbing his crotch. Next, we see him travelling from the mansion to a different one, accompanied by the women. There is a shot of 50 Cent leaning against the car (a Rolls Royce), where a woman, wearing a mini skirt, a midriff-revealing top and high heels, rubs herself against him. The text on the screen reveals the location to be "Headquarters – Pimp Legion of Doom".

In the next scene 50 cent stands in front of the members of the Pimp Legion, who are seated behind a half-moon-shaped table. The members are clothed in flamboyant, camp pimp clothing; pink and green suits, brimmed hats, star-shaped sun glasses, colorful fur coats and feathers, long nails, etc. The music stops and the pimps go "Pimp-pimp – Hooray!". Next, the leader, played by Snoop Dogg, tells the others that 50 Cent does not drive a Cadillac or have a perm, and asks him why he should be let in the Legion. 50 answers, basically, that he is a pimp, and he has "the magic stick", whereupon he shows them his silver cane, which blinds all the other pimps, and they acquiesce.

Next Snoop Dogg, 50 and Lloyd Banks take turns rapping in the mansion. In most of the scenes they are surrounded by black women who are wearing bikinis, mini skirts, revealing evening dresses, high heels, and the like. There is a scene where the women surrounding 50 Cent get up and leave, only to be replaced by others, and another where a fully-clothed

woman is ‘walking’ two others who are dressed in hip-length see-through night gowns and have leashes around their throats. There are other close-up shots of women looking at the camera in a flirtatious way, and some medium, low angle shots of a bikini-clad, voluptuous woman dancing.

To me, the gist of the lyrics is summed up in these lines: “I ain’t that nigga trying to holla cause I want some head/I’m that nigga trying to holla cause I want some bread/I could care less how she perform when she in the bed/Bitch hit that track, catch a date, and come and pay the kid/”.

First off, let us deal with the signifiers of ‘pimpness’. In the opening scene 50 is holding a silver-colored cane, which is strongly related to pimp imagery. The cane is a rather obvious signifier of masculine power, of the phallus. Richard Dyer (2002: 114) has argued that the penis can never achieve the mythic quality of the phallus, which is why images of men are overloaded with phallic symbols. The penis is referred to in the video by having 50 Cent grab his crotch, but, in the end, it is substituted for by the cane, which is ultimately revealed as the ‘magic stick’[17], an all-powerful sign that yields 50 Cent power over the other pimps, and, of course, women. The pimp cane, which in all probability is used by pimps regularly to beat their employees (prostitutes), is thus a conglomeration of masculine symbolic power: not only is it a pure phallic symbol, but a symbol of patriarchal power by use of force as well. This can be seen to clash with Quinn’s formulation of the pimp’s power as purely verbal, of him being able to cajole women to perform to his wishes. In having the cane shine a blinding light (connoting magic, even divinity) on the other pimps, the video goes out of its way to emphasize its signification of power.

There are other signifiers of ‘pimpness’ in the video, one of which is the brimmed hat, worn by 50 Cent and the pimps of the Pimp Legion. Whereas 50’s hat is a stylish white, the

[17] In a later video by the same artist, ‘Candy Shop’, the ‘magic stick’ clearly refers to his penis in the lines “I’ve got the magic stick, I’m the love doctor”.

other pimps' hats are over-blown and colorful. The same is true of their other clothes, which signify a humorous retro-camp approach to the pimp image: this kind of clothing could be seen in 70s representations of pimping, in blaxploitation movies and TV shows such as Starsky & Hutch, which had the informer-pimp character Huggy Bear (who, not insignificantly, was played by Snoop Dogg in the Hollywood film remake of 2004). 50 Cent represents a new generation of pimps, who set a counterpart to the older generation, who are presented in a comedic light (the chant of "Pimp-pimp – Hooray!" being only one example of this). This interpretation is heightened by 50 Cent telling the Pimp Legion members, "Whoever said progress is a slow process wasn't talking about me, I'm a P.i.m.p", and one of them later saying "don't doubt him, crown him" to general applause. In the mythology of the video, 50 Cent is thus a new, sleeker type of pimp, who is wielding the almighty power of the 'magic stick', the super-phallus. On the other hand, the inclusion of retro-pimp imagery could in itself be seen to emphasize the fictional roots of the pimp concept in the video, and hence to stress the divorce between the real Curtis Jackson and his nom-de-rap 50 Cent.

The video uses more or less the same techniques in fetishizing the women as we saw in the analysis of the Mystikal video – clothing, casting, camera work, and lighting. Similarly, the women are constructed as passive objects by denying them voices or active-participant roles in the video. They only exist around the rappers, both figuratively and literally: as we saw in the earlier discussions, the rappers are always placed in the centre and foreground of the screen, and the women surround them.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 122-123) have argued that looking into the camera encourages social proximity between the spectator and object of gaze and looking away discourages it. In the majority of the cases in the video, the women avert their gazes away from the camera, looking down or to the side, which serves to further objectify them. When they look at the camera, they do it in a fashion that signifies submission or an erotic

invitation. Dyer, analyzing male imagery, has argued that the way the character in the image looks at the camera is important as well as whether he or she is looking at all. According to him, male characters in pictures stare at the spectator, even beyond him or her, trying to penetrate the image and thus define themselves. With female characters, on the other hand, there is usually an invitation of sorts, most often related to their facial expression, especially the expression of the mouth (Dyer 2002: 104-105). In the cases where the women in the video look at the camera, their facial expressions signify either shy, submissive femininity (an upward, wide-eyed look from under the eyebrows, shy smile) or the kind of erotic invitation popularized by pornographic representations (half-shut eyes, parted, puckered lips). The male rappers' expressions (deep stare into the camera, 'sneering' smile, otherwise expressionless stare with head tilted slightly back), on the other hand, signify self-confidence, contempt and hardness.

The physical body of the male rapper is on display in the video as well. 50 Cent's upper body is extremely muscular, and he usually appears shirtless at some point in his videos and in many promotional pictures as well as on the cover of his sophomore album *The Massacre* (2005), where the contours of his muscles are outlined in broad ink strokes, which serve to accentuate them and evoke connotations of comics super heroes. Muscular black male bodies are by no means rare in hip hop videos – rather the other way around. Revealed torsos exemplify the other (along with hip hop clothing's concealed, tightly held masculinity we discussed in chapter 4.1) tactic of representing the masculine body in hip hop. John Fiske writes that in patriarchal capitalism the body has become politicized; Western societies have always tried to control and discipline the body, deny its pleasurable aspects and make it conform to the norm (Fiske 1989b: 90). Therefore the excessive, strong, "grotesque" body becomes a site where subordinated groups can resist social power (ibid.: 96-97).

This is what 50 Cent's excessive musculature signifies; resistance to the oppressive powers in society and declaration of power, but it also "speaks" racial and class meanings of subordination, as Fiske (ibid.: 98) says of the black muscular body. In the context of this video, it most definitely represents masculine power over women, too. Fiske argues that muscularity may represent "to the subordinated their only conceivable means of achieving masculinity, however symbolically" (ibid.: 136). Although, as we have seen, there are other ways for subordinated men to achieve masculine signification, muscles are certainly a potent signifier of masculine power – in this video and otherwise. In hip hop the revealed upper body also serves as a badge of honor and resilience and acknowledgement of history and community. In 50's case, his torso bears visible scars from nine bullet wounds. As is typical in hip hop, his upper body is covered in tattoos, which are usually associated to meanings of place (the 'Southside' tattoo on his back), community (names of deceased family and friends; also those of black cultural figures, mostly rappers) and identity (his large '50' tattoo).

The video represents a "fantasy of total domination over women", as Rose (1994: 172) has called certain misogynist representations in hip hop. This is quite fitting to the pimp ethos the video panders. In contrast to seeing the pimp concept in hip hop referring mainly to fictional precedents, there are some instances where the video refers to the real-life subjugating practices and power relations of pimping. First, there is the scene where the two women are led on leashes. It is hard to imagine a more powerful signification of seemingly benevolent domination which is ultimately based on coercion than equating women with house pets. It is probably not inconsequential that, as Lola Young (1996: 61-64) has shown in her discussion of the history of western representations of black people, black females (and males) have been strongly linked with animal imagery but also the African jungles, both of which provided a rich breeding ground for arguments and metaphors of domination, conquering. The women on leashes signify, on one hand, a continuation of representational links of black women to

animals, and, on the other, the subjugating power relation between the pimp and the prostitute.

In another scene, Snoop Dogg raps "Yeah girl, I got My Now & Later gators on/I'ma 'bout to show you how my pimp hand is way strong", and gestures with his hand as if about to administer a back-handed slap. This is an explicit reference to domination by violence, or the threat of violence, which is, along with money, the main means by which pimps control the prostitutes on their payroll. In the lyrics which I already quoted, 50 Cent makes explicit what he needs women for: he is not pursuing ("tryin to holla") them because he wants sex ("cause I want some head"), but because he wants them to earn him money ("cause I want some bread"). This idea is reiterated in the lines that follow.

Thus, although the signifieds of the term 'pimp' vary in hip hop and the whole concept is part of a fictional tradition, in this video the term retains some of its conventional meaning. In the mythology created in the video, the rapper is an omnipotent patriarchal force, whose symbolic phallus both proclaims and guarantees this power. Women are rendered voiceless, with a hint of subhumanity added to their representation. Their purpose is to serve the patriarch, whose income seems to rely on them, and who seems to hold nothing but contempt for them. In the original lyrics to the song (the video is a remix; purportedly for fitting the guest stars' lines in, but more likely to avoid having to beep, or rather shush, most of the lyrics, which get increasingly inflammatory towards the end), 50 Cent provokes himself into a near-frenzy near the end, leveling off this litany of abuse: "Hoe make a pimp rich, I ain't paying bitch/Catch a date, suck a dick, shiiit – TRICK".[18]

[18] 'Hoe' and 'trick' both mean 'whore'; the rest of the lyrics are probably intelligible.

### *5.3 Parody, and Women as 'Gold Diggers'*

Kanye West began his career in hip hop as a producer making hit tunes for other rappers, such as Jay-Z and Talib Kweli. His debut album *The College Dropout* (2004) reached peak position in the US charts and sold in the millions, cementing his place in the hip hop mainstream. That he deviates from the average rapper-by-numbers is quite apparent: in his lyrics he has taken on issues such as materialism and faith; in appearance he looks like a cross between a clean-cut college boy and a rapper. Even though he is signed to Rocafella Records, home to Jay-Z, Memphis Bleek, Beanie Sigel, and other hard-edged rappers, he has aligned himself more with so-called conscious hip hoppers Common, Talib Kweli and Mos Def, and people such as nu-soul singer John Legend, who feature on his songs and in his videos and whose music he has produced. His debut won critical acclaim and three Grammys in 2004, and he was subsequently hailed as the savior of hip hop in the music press.

In this analysis it is my intention to show how even those rappers who in many ways challenge the dictates in hip hop still often tend to partake in perpetuating hip hop myths of women, especially black women. 'Workout Plan' can be generally characterized as parodic, as a 'spoof' of both infomercials and norms set for femininity, but, at the same time, it consolidates the myth of black women as 'gold diggers' and restricts the positions they can inhabit to a rather negative set of stereotypes. Representing women as 'gold diggers' (also, 'chicken heads') has its obvious ties to the issues discussed in chapter 3.2 – the discrepancy between the number of black women and men, and women supposedly having to chase men – but I view it as more of a discursive hip hop myth than a reflection of reality. The video is another example of director Little X's work.

The video begins in a setting that resembles a TV-shop infomercial; Kanye, a workout coach in a tight red, padded-out sporting outfit, and former Playboy model and reality TV star

Anna Nicole Smith are on-screen. A rotating video cassette and the text "Tape #1 Golddigger's Challenge" inside a star-shaped frame are placed on the bottom of the screen. Kanye speaks: "Welcome to Kanye's get-right-for-the-summer workout tape. By following these easy step-by-step instructions you can pull yourself a rapper, a NBA player, at least a dude with a car", while the words 'rapper', 'NBA player' and 'dude with a car' are shown in the kind of explosion-like frames familiar from comics.

Next, we see a group of black women in typical gym clothes (sweat pants, sports tops) in a brightly colored maze-like construction, where they sprint from one 'exercise point' to another. There are plaques that read 'Crunch', 'Weave Check-up' and 'Baby Pick-up'. Accordingly, the women do crunches, check their hair and pick up children from each respective point. The images respond to the lyrics: "1,2,3,4 and get them sit-ups right and/Tuck your tummy tight and do your crunches like this/Give head stop breathe get up check your weave/Don't drop the blunt disrespect the weed/Pick up your son don't disrespect your seed/".

The following scene takes place in a gym where four women in gym clothes and sunglasses are working out on exercise equipment. There are star-shaped text captions that appear as the camera pans from one woman to another; they read 'Gucci Climber', 'Walki Talki', 'Weave-Walk' and 'Baby-Mama Stroll'. All the women are acting in an excessive, over-the-top manner: the 'Gucci Climber' woman has a pink handbag and she is rolling her head in an expressive fashion; the 'Walki Talki' woman is speaking on a cell phone; the 'Weave-Walk' woman is combing her hair while looking in a pocket mirror; and the 'Baby-Mama Stroll' woman is cradling a baby on her arms.

Next we see two smallish screens superimposed on the screen, where the texts "3 Hot Tapes" and "Tape #2 Ultimate Trophy Wife" appear. On the screens we see a slim Anna Nicole Smith, and Kanye instructing women in a workout. After that, we see Kanye

continuing in his role as exercise instructor. He is kneeling behind a woman who is on her hands and knees, extending her leg backwards. In small print, the text, "Consult your plastic surgeon before beginning this workout", appears at the bottom of the screen. Next, there is a scene where the text "Consequence" appears on the screen and a group of black males ogle in an excessive manner at a woman's bottom.

The music is subsumed, and a sequence of 'confessional' scenes follows. First up is "Jill – Former 3rd Wheel", who tells the camera: "Hi, my name is Jill. I just wanted to say, thanks to Kanye's workout tape I was able to pull an NBA player, and now I shop every day on Rodeo Drive". The confession is intercut with a photograph of an overweight, depressed-looking Jill and the text "Before – Real Big!!!" which is transposed with a photo of a smiling, supermodel-thin Jill and the text "After – Holla!!!", and, later, the text "Lost Mad Weight!!!". There are similar scenes with other women; Lasandra, a "videohoefeshinal", and Ella-May (Anna Nicole Smith), "former trailer trash", who's been able to "date outside the family", resulting in "Kaching$$" as the text accompanying the 'before-after' photographs tells us.

There are some more scenes of women working out and Kanye rapping in the gym. In the last scene, the other women leave, and the one woman left produces a hamburger from her bag. Just when she is about to take a bite, she notices a cardboard cut-out of Kanye looking reproachingly at her. She looks annoyed and tosses the hamburger, whereupon the Kanye cut-out has changed again; it is now smiling widely and giving her the thumbs-up sign.

Again, what has been described here constitutes the 'meaning' of the video, in Barthes' terms. The video's visual richness works in a manner so as to almost eclipse the musical content; at various points in the video music is actually muted in order to prioritize other audio-visual elements – such is the case with the 'confessional' segments.

The most readily apparent aspect of 'Workout plan' is that it is parodic in nature; it makes fun of a variety of topics – TV shop infomercials and their products, the obsession to conform

to beauty norms and, ultimately, women. Now, the notions of parody and satire are by no means alien to hip hop. As we saw in the previous chapter, there is a tradition of African American oral and literary expression using bluster and verbal trickery which hip hop is part of. Similarly to Quinn's (2000) arguments, Rosen and Marks (1999) have maintained that gangsta rap is part of this well-documented, long-standing African American tradition, which uses satire, mockery and obscenity with transgressive aims. The genre it belongs to includes slave songs, the game of verbal abuse, the 'dozens', and funk lyrics, among others. For instance, they argue that gangsta rapper Snoop Dogg consciously drew from 80's rappers "Too $hort, Slick Rick and Biz Markie, all of whom established a taxonomy of generic parody and satire directed at themselves as well as others" (ibid.: 905). Other hip hop subgenres clearly partake in this tradition as well; in fact, only Too $hort can be classified as a gangsta rapper of the three hip hoppers mentioned.

As regards hip hop videos, particularly, many of them contain carnivalesque elements, as we saw with Chingy, but there is also a tradition of broad parody and satire within the genre. From caustic Public Enemy videos in the 80s which made much of sidekick Flavor Flav's colorful appearance to Busta Rhymes and Ludacris videos nowadays with their intertextual parodies of almost any conceivable popular culture genre, there has always been a strain of excessiveness and satire running through certain hip hop videos.

'Workout Plan' takes part in this tradition by casting the whole beauty industry – infomercials, beauty products, gyms, exercise coaches and so forth – in a broadly parodic light. It does this by making their signification excessive, preposterous, unbelievable. Right from the start, the video mimics commercials for beauty products (in this case the titular workout tape), and their often latent promises of beauty and happiness, but it goes further and makes explicit the fantastical claims associated with these products; not only will you obtain a supermodel figure by using the product, but that will also guarantee you the man of your

dreams – a rapper, an NBA player or at least someone with a car (which represents a parodic transgression of the former two). In its preposterousness the claim mocks the obscene wish-fulfillment fantasies pandered by the beauty industry.

The personal fitness coach, 'Ala-Wishous Simmons', is wearing a bright red jogging suit, under which are bulging what are obviously paddings instead of real muscles. The excessiveness, brashness and blatant inauthenticity of his sign make it laughable, and cast the whole profession in dubious light.

The 'confessional' segments echo the initial claim. Again, the claims made are absurd and so are the alterations in body shape in the 'before-after' photos, which are accompanied by humorous comments ("Real Big" and "Holla") cast in African American slang. The intertextual sign that is Anna Nicole Smith[19] is one that embodies the notions of 'trophy wife' and 'gold digger'. Having her appear as, variously, herself and 'Ella-May', jumbles categories of real and representation and serves to further parody the whole concept of beauty products; it pushes signification into the area of the carnival.

Another means by which the video effects satire is by including several warnings in small text, which represent either a reversal ("Not doctor recommended") or parody ("Consult your plastic surgeon before beginning this workout") of the disclaimers in these type of commercials, which are aimed at releasing the manufacturer from legal liability.

Although the beauty industry is clearly mocked in the video, so are the people who desire its products and – as the video blatantly states – the fantasies those products promote, women. Women are represented as having mainly one goal in life; getting fit and losing weight are not associated in the text with notions of personal health and happiness in any way, but as a

[19] Anna Nicole Smith had a widely publicized marriage with multimillionaire J. Howard Marshall who was 89 (as opposed to Smith's 19) when they got married; the marriage ended, obviously, in his death some years later, whereupon Smith inherited his millions. She was widely perceived in the media as having married him for his money. She also notoriously gained a lot of weight which she has shed after his death.

means of obtaining that goal – a wealthy man, who will make his economic means available to the woman. Perhaps this is not surprising, since, as Fiske (1989b: 93) has shown, advertisements promoting slimming products rarely refer to health issues. As we saw in the discussions of African American gender relations and in some of the videos, particularly 50 Cent's 'P.I.M.P.', the idea, or myth, of the 'gold digger' is rather prevalent in black culture. Even though placing it in a parodic context might be seen to question or carnivalize the whole idea, by offering this role as the only one for women, the video perpetuates the myth rather than deconstructs it.

The video constructs categories for African American women, or women in African American culture. The 'Walki-Talki' and others in the same scene are humorous conflagrations of types of exercise and woman, or at least traits associated with black women. Emerson, among others, identifies the following stereotypes of black women as being the most common in African American music videos: "the hypersexualized 'hot momma' or 'Jezebel', the asexual 'mammy', the emasculating 'matriarch' and the 'welfare recipient' or 'baby-momma' (a colloquial term for young, unwed mothers)" (Emerson 2002: 117). 'Workout Plan' contains traces of these and the 'baby-momma' stereotype as such, but mainly it represents variations on the 'gold digger' stereotype and some characteristics embodied as signs, which are constructed of the images of the women and the accompanying text.

'Walki-Talki' represents the loudmouthed stereotype of black woman, who is perhaps best exemplified nowadays by former rapper Queen Latifah's boisterous movie characters in hit comedies such as *Bringing Down the House* (2003). The stereotype bears traces of the 'emasculating 'matriarch'', but is less overpowering. The grandly gesturing 'Weave-Walk' and 'Gucci Climber' women represent variations of the 'gold digger' theme; self-absorbed, materialistic woman, who is mainly interested in getting rich so she can fulfil her hedonistic consumer needs. The 'Weave-walk' woman represents vanity run amok; she is holding a

mirror and tending to her hair even in the gym. Similarly, the 'Gucci Climber' woman is clutching a (supposedly Gucci) handbag, which denotes luxury.

Then there is the sign of the 'Baby-momma', which, too, is a recurring stereotype in black culture. Kitwana (2002:115-116) has stated that the word connotes an absence of a relationship between a child's parents, and the ensuing bitterness and hostility between them. In representations the baby-momma (or –mama) is somewhat of an oppressed figure: she might be dependent on the baby's father financially, but emotionally as well. The absent father is a stock character in movies depicting African American life[20], in which he is commonly portrayed as somewhat of a trickster or dead-beat, who is willing to use his baby-momma sexually but is uninterested in her emotionally. As it happens, though, rappers can use the word in a different sense evoking familial relations[21].

In the 'confessional' segments the video constructs yet other categories of women. These are clearly spelled out in graphics bars under the characters' names – in keeping with televisual conventions. Anna Nicole Smith's character is "Former Trailer Trash", but nowadays her 'title' is "Ultimate Trophy Wife". Lasandra is a "Former Booster" and current "Videohoefeshinal". The 'trophy wife' is a more of white upper-class stereotype, and here being fittingly represented by a white woman. That the woman is Smith, who has been represented in the media as a real-life trophy wife, is obviously very self-ironic, but the myth perpetuated here is another example of the larger myth reconstructed by the video; that women are greedy and mainly interested in men because of their money. Lasandra's title, 'videohoefeshinal', is a pun on the words 'hoe' (black slang transformation of 'whore', but

[20] Cf. *Save the Last Dance* (2001).

[21] Big Boi of Outkast does so on 'The Rooster' (*Speakerboxxx/The Love below*, 2003), where his baby-momma has left him, and he is pining after her: "My daughter, my baby, my baby mama all escaping me!/In the wind, she was my friend/Like Princess Di before she died/Therefore we tried and tried again/". Big Boi perceives his baby-momma as his friend and part of his family, not someone to be exploited either emotionally or sexually. This, again, serves as a reminder of hip hop's polymorphous nature and the fact that its terminology is resistant to stagnation, fixing into place.

not as severe as the stem word) and 'video professional', the connotation of which is that girls who appear in hip hop videos are basically 'hoes' – disreputable and worthy of contempt. Lasandra's vocal delivery and body language also contain traces of the loud-mouthed black woman stereotype.

Visually, the women in the video are not objectified, or at least not fetishized and eroticized, to the extent they are in most other hip hop videos. The women are wearing less-than-glamorous clothing (ordinary sweat suits and the like) and do not appear to have a lot of make-up on; on top of that there are not many close-up shots (which are traditionally thought of as emphasizing the surface; that is, fetishizing the object) or lighting that creates a shine on their bodies. The women selected for the video are also more varied in body shape and, for instance, height than in the other videos we have looked at; there are some pot-bellies and naturally large behinds that can be witnessed in this video.

In scenes where the women work out, following the lead of the fitness coach, not all of them are in sync with the music, some are even moving to the opposite direction from the others; there is a certain real-life warmth and slight chaos bubbling underneath the surface. Another example of slightly chaotic tendencies is the scene where the women are running through the exercise course, bumping into each other and generally acting over the top. A partial motive for their representation as such is the video's comedic tone. Representing the women as ever so slightly haggard or otherwise less than dazzling of course fits with the narrative and thematic concept of the video, where the females are supposed to be ordinary women attempting to slim down. But, and this is a big but (no pun intended), the women in this video are only fractionally more common-looking than the girls in an average hip hop video. It seems that, for fear of alienating the perceived audience for hip hop videos, the video has not strayed too far from the beauty norm of hip hop. In fact, the video seems ambivalent, even schizophrenic in its portrayal: even though it tries to sell these 'ordinary' women as

believable, even comedic (as in the scenes where they run), there are some scenes where the representation closes in on typical fetishizing techniques – the camera zooming in on slim, fit women working out on gym equipment in slow motion, etc. It could be argued – but not proved – that these tones are director Little X's professional codes[22] exerting their influence on the video; after all, his work has made ample use of the aforementioned techniques before – lest we forget, the Mystikal video analyzed in this study was one of his. Whatever the case, it would seem that the representational standards of hip hop videos are so dominant that they seep even into videos that are trying to accomplish something else.

The rapper, again, occupies center stage. He is the patriarchal, authoritarian voice exhorting the women to adhere to the strict regimen aimed at them becoming more beautiful: "1, 2, put in work/Move your ass, go berserk/Eat your salad, no dessert/Get that man you deserve/". As Fiske has argued, subordinate groups' (here women) pleasures of evading social power often center on the last available site, the body, and therefore the socially dominant party (here men) have tried to control subordinate bodies (especially those of women) throughout time, using such discursive tools as medicine (Fiske 1989b: 92-93). This, blatantly, is what these kinds of slimming-down products – usually aimed at women in lower socioeconomic groups – represent. Here the rapper, as ever, acts out the role of the patriarch whose disciplinary advice – and thus attempt to control – can be heard through the video. One of the more apparent examples of this is the final scene, where the Kanye cut-out (the implication being that he 'has eyes everywhere'), the representation of the seemingly benevolent yet all-seeing patriarch, controls even the eating habits of the women.

And so it is that even though the video offers a parody of the beauty industry, which by implication questions it, it offers women only certain stereotypes to inhabit, and offers them

[22] Professional codes include all the technical (lighting, camera work, etc) aspects that have a "techno-practical" nature and are therefore naturalized; decisions about them are based on concepts of professionalism, visual quality, etc. (cf. Rose 2001: 88-89).

as the root cause behind the whole industry: If women were not so vain, shallow, materialistic and greedy, and did not want to use their looks to snare rich men, there would be no need for the whole beauty industry, the video seems to be telling us.

The mythology the various woman signs creates of womanhood is exactly that: of 'gold diggers' and 'trophy wives', of greed, vanity and questionable morals.

### *5.4 Ambivalence and Non-Sexism*

Sexist representations of women are not the whole picture in hip hop, of course. In this chapter I will take a look at some of the artists that choose to portray women divergently from the mainstream, and some of the themes that are related to those representations. Mainstream hip hop does not deviate much from the norm, but certain artists operating a little farther from the center propagate different views about women. These are usually the same artists that offer critiques of hip hop's other blind spots – Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Common, De La Soul, The Roots, and others.

There is also a curious schizophrenic tendency in some mainstream artists' attitudes toward women. As Kitwana (2002: 97) has shown, artists such as Ja Rule can be celebrating 'ghetto love' and offering all-out misogyny even on the same album. The same applies to Nas, a critically and commercially successful MC, who is probably the most politicized rapper in the current crop of mainstream hip hop artists. On tracks such as 'I Can' (off the album *God's Son* (2002) – which title can be understood as implying a slight-to-middling Messiah complex) he offers encouragement to young black girls "to be anything in the world you want…an architect, doctor, maybe an actress" and warns precocious girls about mimicking what they see in videos and going "up in the club with fake Ids", telling them to "give yourself time to grow" because "some men be rapists". He recaps by going on to tell

adolescents that “No one says you gotta be gangstas, hoes/Read more, learn more, save the globe/”.

Then again, elsewhere he displays rather a different set of ideas. For instance, the track ‘The Making of a Perfect B****’ (*Street’s Disciple,* 2004) represents a lurid fantasy of assembling ‘the perfect bitch’ from different women – “ass of a stripper”, “Angelina Jolie lips”, cooking skills from a chef, etc. Here is a passage where the ‘perfect bitch’ has been constructed: “/She survived, she’ll be sucking me next/Dark nipples on a D-cup breast/So I can titty-fuck her while she do my taxes for the IRS/”. Granted, this particular song is an example of the grotesque, obscene and parodical tradition in black cultural representation we saw Quinn (2000) and Rosen and Marks (1999) discuss in the previous chapters, but my argument in this case – similarly to my earlier arguments and regarding their whole formulation – is that although the obscene, parodical elements can indeed be seen as having some transgressive or subversive power when it comes to challenging social norms regarding race relations, they do not challenge or deconstruct sexist or misogynist norms in any way, but rather validate them.

This is part of the larger problematic concerning gender relations in African American culture: questions of gender are drowned out by questions of ‘race’, which usually take prevalence even in the music of socially conscious hip hop artists. bell hooks (1990: 59) has argued that sexism has always been a political stance mediating racial domination, and that the black/white male bond is symbolically stronger than the racial bond between black males and females. This tendency is exhibited even in the work of some of the otherwise politically aware hip hoppers, such as Nas.

Yet, we must not gloss over the fact that there are rappers offering different portrayals of women, some of whom I already mentioned. Some of the themes these artists associate black womanhood with are natural black beauty, love and respect; all in all, afrocentricity figures

often prominently in the discourses – women are 'African queens', 'brown-skinned ladies', the rappers' daughters princesses and so on. For instance, Talib Kweli's 'Black Girl Pain' (*The Beautiful Struggle*, 2004) echoes a reaffirmation of the value of black womanhood for young girls: "/She four reading Cornrows by Camille Yarborough/I keep her hair braided, bought her a black Barbie/I keep her mind free, she ain't no black Zombie/This is for Aisha/This is for Kashera/This is for Khadijah/Scared to look up in the mirror/I see the picture clearer through the stain in the mirror/She has a black girl name, she livin' black girl pain/". Instead of getting stuck on the injustices visited upon black males in the American society, Kweli ruminates on the racial stigma and social pressure brought on black girls, but also highlights the importance of remaining proud of their heritage through evoking signifiers of an afrocentric discourse – the African-derived names, braids and Camille Yarborough's book. Similarly, Black Star's 'Brown Skin Lady' (*Black Star*, 1998) celebrates "lovable, huggable" dark-skinned African American females.

Music videos are a different matter, however. Due to several issues, among them institutional and commercial limitations imposed by MTV, hip hop videos by 'left-field' or socially conscious artists tend to sidestep the gender issue. These artists' videos certainly do not contain the sexist representations seen in mainstream videos, but rarely do they openly challenge them or engage in systematically creating more positive representations. Usually when women are included as a substantial theme, they act as the love interest of the rapper; while sweet, beautiful and certainly an improvement on the mainstream imagery, these representations are still not exactly what one would call feminist.

There is one obvious group of hip hop artists that has a different take on the gender issue, a group this study has not mentioned yet – female rappers. Many studies tackling hip hop have taken as their aim to show how women rappers challenge the sexism in hip hop and reverse the genre's gender-related power hierarchies. The trouble is these texts (cf. Rose 1994; Irving

1993; Roberts 1994) are somewhat dated and offer the same artists – Queen Latifah, M.C. Lyte, Yo Yo, Salt'n'Pepa and Roxanne Shante – time and again as proof of feminist voices in hip hop. I concur that these artists offered a healthy challenge to sexist norms in their time, but the fact is that none of them have any currency nowadays; they have either retired from music or occupy such peripheral positions on the hip hop map as to make them effectively non-existent.

The female hip hoppers who have succeeded them are mostly of two types – ones that can be seen as straight descendants of the pioneers mentioned above and the new breed of aggressive but over-sexed 'gangsta bitches'. To my mind, today there are only two female artists that exemplify the first type, Eve and Missy 'Misdemeanor' Elliott. These female rappers have not based their careers on marketing themselves as sex objects, and instead have opted for projecting a strong personality; in Eve's case, hard-boiled and self-confident, and in Missy's, brash, overflowing and self-assured ('freaky' is the word associated with her on many an occasion). Similarly, in their videos they have been represented as assertive subjects who do not have to rely on 'showing some skin' for their music to be heard – Missy Elliott's videos have even been often hailed as inventive.

The latter type, 'gangsta bitches' (which is by no means an established genre, but fills our descriptive needs here) are typified by artists whose representations are suspended somewhere between gangster and porn actress. The best-known exemplars of the genre are Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, both of whom appear in their videos and promo pictures wearing the kind of clothing typically found on the pages of Playboy – stockings, garter belts, corsets, and so on – or other kind of extremely revealing clothing, on top which their poses, body language and facial expressions signifies pornography more than anything else. These artists can be seen to have reversed hip hop gender roles to an extent by adopting an aggressive gangster subject

position, but it is highly questionable whether that can ultimately redeem their pornographic images.

So, there are discourses and representations of women in hip hop music and videos that veer away from the mainstream norms, but these tend to get drowned out by the rumbling commercial machinery, which seems to favor overwhelmingly those stereotypical representations of women as shiny, beautiful surfaces. After all, as The Roots perceptively put it on 'Pussy Galore' (*Phrenology*, 2002): "Lorraine know it's real, 'cause sex controls America/Turn the TV on, it's in the open on the regular, yo/What the freaks in the video for?/Fuck a song, gimme a thong, and pussy galore/".

In chapter 5 we saw that one prevalent manner in which women are represented in hip hop videos is as muted, fetishized, semi-pornographic objects, whose signification veers closer to nature than culture. It was also argued that the rapper's representation as a powerful subject offers a stark contrast to the representation of the women. In sub-chapter 5.2 we discussed the prominence of the pimp character in African American culture, the term's signifieds and pimp imagery, among other things. It was argued that being part of a black oral and literary tradition does not diminish the fact that the gender politics mediated by the pimp figure remain regressive. In the video example, 50 Cent's 'P.I.M.P.', the rapper's pimp character was found to confirm his total patriarchal dominance over women. With the Kanye West video we saw that even parodically geared material in hip hop may perpetuate stereotypical representations of women – in this case as 'gold diggers'. Lastly, attention was drawn to the fact that not everyone in the hip hop community partakes in sexist representations of women**.**

# 6 Conclusion

In this study I set out to investigate two themes in hip hop videos, representations of gender and wealth, but also the reasons as to why those attitudes and representations have developed. We saw how the history of slavery has created a society based on unequal distribution of wealth and power and a black community in crisis. We saw as well how these complex circumstances have produced certain distortions in African American gender relations that are then played out in male-dominated hip hop videos. In addition, we discussed how the music industry influences and tries to actively regulate the meanings and themes in hip hop videos.

There were three main themes that were discussed in relation to the subject of wealth: the theme of 'ballin'', of being a 'playa', which theme is customarily signified in hip hop videos with an excess of signifiers of wealth; that of the ghetto and the 'underground economy'; and the theme of Mafia gangsterism. I chose these because I judged them to be the most significant themes related to exhibiting wealth in hip hop videos. We saw how a vast array of different signs and meanings are attached to these themes, and how, ultimately, they are used as a means of constructing a mythology where black people have money, power, control and pride in their own culture – to name but a few.

The analyses of female representations in hip hop yielded more or less expected results: female bodies are exhibited in videos as fetishized objects; and women represented as having little to no agency. The videos, variously, connect the meanings of being a woman with sex, obedience and nature (such as the desert and animals), among other things. Male rappers, on the other hand, are mostly portrayed as all-powerful patriarchs who, to all intents and purposes, wield symbolic power over women, who are mostly referred to in derogatory terms. There is also a tendency in male hip hop culture and in these videos to project a paranoid idea of women as 'gold diggers', as using their feminine wiles to procure finances for themselves from men. The roles women can inhabit were seen to be rather restricted.

There are elements of resistance, subversion and parody in the videos, but although they may offer a means of evading and carnivalizing social, racially determined power, they do not offer the same kind of resistance to sexist norms – quite the opposite; sexist representations were found to be a vital method for African American males to proclaim their masculinity in a society that has historically tried to strip them of it.

However, we did see that hip hop culture is much more heterogeneous than its mainstream image might seem to suggest, and that, indeed, there are voices of dissent in the ranks of hip hop artists. It is also significant to keep in mind that this study did tackle representation, which has ties to real-life experiences and lives of black men and women, but certainly does not correlate with them directly on a one-to-one basis.

This study is by no means purporting itself to be a definitive, be-all-end-all answer to questions concerning the representation of wealth and women in hip hop videos, let alone hip hop culture. It offers paths into the subjects, raises some pertinent themes and provides some initial answers. Others have preceded it trying shed light on the intricacies of hip hop culture, and yet others fill follow. Due to the quantitative (and temporal) restrictions of a pro gradu, several themes of import were not discussed or were only touched upon in this study. Some of those are a more thorough look at the representation – visual and otherwise – of men in hip hop videos; a discussion of the relation of violence to our themes; integrating the views of audiences to the study; and dissecting the influence of hip hop's overwhelming commercialization to its representations, values and position more profoundly. Yet another intriguing question related to hip hop is the relationship of nationally and ethnically differing variants (in this case, white and Finnish) of hip hop culture to black American hip hop – their similarities and discrepancies.

## VIDEOS

50 Cent: 'P.I.M.P.'(feat. Snoop Dogg and G-Unit), off the album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2003, Shady/Universal). Director: Chris Robinson.

Chingy: "Balla Baby", off the album *Powerballin'* (2004, Capitol). Director: Jeremy Rall.

G-Unit: 'Poppin Them Thangs', off the album *Beg for Mercy* (2004, Interscope). Director: Little X.

Jay-Z: 'Big Pimpin', off the album *Vol. 3: The Life and Times of S. Carter* (1999, Def Jam). Director: Hype Williams.

Kanye West: 'Workout Plan', off the album *College Dropout* (2004, Roc-a-Fella Records). Director: Little X.

Mystikal: 'Danger (Been So Long)', off the album *Let's Get Ready* (2000, Jive). Director: Little X.

Twista: 'Sunshine' (feat. Anthony Hamilton), off the album *Kamikaze* (2004, Atlantic). Director: Nzingha Stewart.

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# Chingy: Balla Baby

You know the definition of a balla
(Uh huh) That's me
C-h-i-n-g to the y
Lemme explain it to you though

I'm a balla (say what?)
High roller baby (baby, baby)
Shot caller (that's right)
Ain't nobody this crazy (like me)
You a hata (you a hata)
Why you tryinna play me (I don't think he know)
Fake playa (yeah, fake playa)
Ain't nobody killin' (hey I'ma ball for real)

Girl I know you do the nasty (nasty)
I could tell when ya (when ya) walked past me (past me)
And you're proud I be lookin' flashy
Everything's on your mind, just ask me
I know my ear-related stuff wasky (wabbit)
Carrots all in the dezzy, it's a habit
Wurr's my cash
Outside I gotta Jag and a Benz (both sittin' on chrome)
Is she down for gettin' dirty with a 'get it boy'
All I need is one night just hit it boy
After the star we can be checkin' in a five-star hotel
Get a suite and let me put sumthin' in your belly
Was your name Sheena?
Oh, that was you, Shelly
Don't matter four o'clock, just be ready
Forever solja probably won't come
Back from your momma
Must we think that's where ya get your back from

Now I know we keep it crackin'ask Em and Brit (what's up)
The girls on us so dirty who ya rollin' wit' (G-I-P)
From magic city to the pink slip in the lou (lou)
Them chicks love the diamonds that I get from rob jewels
We been in the spot man hang up flirtin'
We be surrounded by girls man and I ain't burpin'
All I know is money, cash, sex and j
And I got all three no I don't play
Chicks call me drama king like K-Slay
Cuz in the bed I bring it every night and day
Lettin' rounds off in 'em like an AK
You leavin' wit' me tell me is it free or do I have to pay

I like ’em black, white, Puerto Rican or Haitian
Like Japanese, Chinese, or even Asian
Don’t matter what color on this occasion (fo’ sho’)
Like smoke, take a hit of what I’m blazin’
I said to God it’s me girls is praisin’
Meet me at about six at the Days Inn
Five of ’em, one of me, I’m feelin’ caged in
I’m a pimp, I’m gonna keep on plain’
You know Ilove ’em for that night
I could take on ten wit’ my one pipe
Knock ’em all like a bowlin’ pin on site
Make ’em soak, change, girl look here, you better get your mind right cuz…

# Twista f/ Anthony Hamilton: Sunshine

"When I wake in the morning love..
And the sunlight hurts my eyes..
And something without warning love..
Bears heavy on my mind.."

[Twista]
Let's get them dollars, let's get this money
Y-yeah, keep my mind on my..

I keep my mind on my money, money on my mind
I got my finger on the trigger, stayin on the grind
Now when I wake up in the mornin I gots to hit a lick
Saw the 2003 Navi' on Sprees with a kick
Soon as my eyes see the sunshine
My thoughts is jukin the block and dodgin it one time
Peep how we movin them rocks and the pounds of dro 'fore I double my shit
I can serve 16 ounces plus 6 and get back 96
A killer for the scrilla, nigga, best not be stoppin
I gots to get them bigger, figures, fuck what you talkin
I represent the niggaz ballin with jewelry full of 'cicles
Down to the niggaz chasin million, that dream servin nickels
And I know - one day, I'm gon', come up
And when you see me don't hate, that I, roll up
Get paid whether you Legit when you slang, or tippin off 'caine
Until I take a dip in the Range I'm flippin them thangs
Gotta get some money mayn

[Chorus: Anthony Hamilton]
It's a lovely day, just got paid
Stack it up, be on my way
A lovely day, lovely day, lovely dayyyy
It's a lovely day, just got paid
Stack it up, be on my way
A lovely day, lovely day, lovely dayyyy

[Twista]
A hustler's definition, is a hustler for scratch
You serve a motherfucker, you serve him for that
I'm makin money off of verses when I spit 'em on tracks
And when I ain't sellin no records, I'm servin 'em packs
I got a - clip full of hollows, money-makin's my motto
Semi-auto when my blow's in a bottle 'til I hit the lotto
With dreams of ownin a record label flippin words
My nigga flippin buildings better than he was flippin birds
I got the - mentality and the motive, I'm on a mission
for the money you can get it too, it's all about yo' ambition
Play yo' position, provide the plans and follow procedures

And a six hundred blunted with a pocket full of hundreds and Visas
Love when I get that dust, hit 'em up, re-cop then I get back up
Love when I get that gig, get a crib, get a car when the grips stack up
And still in the evenin if I'm sleepin paper products
Soon as I get up, it's just another day another dollar
Gotta get that money mayn

[Chorus]

[Twista]
Got love for the corporate playas that's ballin rollin Jags
Got love for the thug niggaz who get it on the Ave
Love for those who can make a mil' and sit back and laugh
And love for the fine strippers who get it poppin ass
Love for the single parents that's workin through the struggle
Love for those who gotta make a livin movin muscle
Love for those who gotta watch the haters rollin bubbles
Causin trouble every time a young brother try to hustle
And if I can't legally make a knot
Then I gotta get right back on the block
And if it ain't no work we do a stick-up and whip up a concoction
I leave you face down in the dirt because hurtin's not an option
Gotta get that money mayn

[Chorus]

[Anthony Hamilton]
When I wake in the morning love, ohh-ohh-ohh..
And the sunlight hurts my eyes, ohh-ohh ohhh..
And something without warning love, ohh-ohh-ohh..
Bears heavy on my mind..

[Chorus] - fades out

# G-Unit: Poppin Them Thangs

[50 Cent]

Every hood we go through
All the ganstas around my whole crew (nigga what?)
We hold it down like we supposed to
Nigga front if you want, we be poppin' them thangs

[50 Cent]

After the WMAs my baby mama cuss my ass out
I kicked her ass, we back friends like Puffy and Steve Stout
Cut the crass around my clique so I could see those snakes
You see back in the hood it's cuz I see they fake
I preach a sermon about the paper like I'm creflo dollar
I'll pop you punk niggas like I pop my collar
I'm confused, I like Megan Monica and Mya
Missy's freaky and Brandy's shy, uh
Now take a look at how my life style changed up
I'm on now, god dammit I done came up
Now you could find me with the finest hoes
Choosin which whip to drive by what match my clothes
I got a fetish for the stones, heavy on the ice, man
If I ain't got a pistol on me sure I gotta knife, man
Get outta line and I'm lightin' your ass up
Semi-automatic spray, I'll tighten your ass up (what?)

[Hook x 2]

[Lloyd Banks]

Slow down little nigga don't exceed your speed
Cuz I will put g's on they fitted like Negro league
I got connects so I don't need no weed
I've been LA for a year now so I don't see no seeds
After I'm done you clappin' the crew
Hell yeah, I fuck fans
Guess what your favorite rapper does too
In a minute I'ma have the jeweller makin' my rims spin
My crew run wild at the Jamaica's at Kingston
Nuthin' but bling bling in your face, boy
That's why my face shine like one of them shirts Puffy and Mase wore
I done find a nympho as soon as I pop a bra
She had my balls head first just like soccer star
You can only stand next to the man if you proper
Ya'll take care of birds like an animal doctor

Been out and I'm buzzin', niggas just slept on me
So I'm out for revenge like one of the Bin Laden cousins

[Young Buc]

Read the paper, look at the news
We on the front page
Yeah we in the Bahamas with AK's on the stage
The ice and the Jacob watch make a broke nigga take sumthin'
So I gotta keep the four fifth with no safety button
G-Unit gettin' money
I know you see me comin'
Cuz on the front of the Maybach
It say payback for those who hated on me
I hate when niggas claim they bangin' a gang
You ain't no Crip like Snoop
You ain't no Blood like Game
See I've been havin' beef
I have my own bullet-proof vest
Most of my enemies dead I got about two left
Until my last breath I'm sendin' niggas bullet holes
Innocent bystanders get hit tryin' to be heroes
You know how we roll everywhere that we go
It's fo' fo's, Calicos and desert eagles

# Mystikal: Danger (Been So Long)

You know what time it is nigga,
And you know who the fuck this is
DANGER! DANGER! Get on the floor!
The nigga right yeah; sing it!

[Chorus]
Been so long (sing it!) Since, he's been on
So please (get on the floor!)
Show me (the nigga right yeah!)
What it is that you want to see

[Mystikal]

Go tell the DJ to put my shit on
I'm keepin you niggas and bitches in jump from the minute I get on
Takin they shirt off, showin they tattoos,
screamin and hollerin and all
Got the gift to come up with it,
put it together, deliver it, make them feel it, bitch I been on!
Sharp! Like you pulled me out the pencil sharpener
Bad! Like that student in the principal's office
Put rappers in coffins, they dive like dolphins
I'm the damndest lyrical marvel you come across often
So watch yourself!
Or fuck around and get beside yourself, I know!
Go head though.. bounce them titties
shake that ass, drop that pussy, but stay in line hoe
Fuck a cain't, cuz you can can
Cocked up, head down, pussy poppin on a handstand
Leave that pussy smokin
If you gon' do somethin then bend over, and bust that pussy open

[Chorus] - 2X

[Mystikal]

My fuckin concert line around the corner
Parkin cars, niggas lookin for they bitch, nothing on her!
You lookin good momma - Why? Pshh, what's up homie?
Sirens, limousines, and the club owner - ya bitch you!
If you late, ain't no gettin in this bitch cuz it's fillin up
Inside packed from the floor to the ceilin up
The building ain't big enough!
I'm backstage bouncin adrenaline buildin up!
The pussy cutter, did I stutter?

The heart flooder, make your woman drawers melt like butter
Down like Nelly, I'm +Hype+ like "Belly"
The rhyme seller! Kick ass like Jim Kelly!
Stand up, round out, boot up and frown
Tell a nigga if he wanna try it then bitch come on down!
No sweat, no blood, no tears
And if I tell you it's the shit then BITCH THAT'S WHAT IT IS!

[Chorus] - 2X

DANGER!
Talkin 'bout
DANGER!
Motherfucker look!
Get on the flo'!
The nigga right yeah!
DANGER!
(Motherfucker) Watch your back!

[Chorus] - 2X

DANGER! DANGER!
GET ON THE FLO'!
THE NIGGA RIGHT YEAH!
SING IT!
DANGER! DANGER!
GET ON THE FLO'!
THE NIGGA RIGHT YEAH!
HUH!
This is my motherfuckin flow!

# Jay-Z f/ U.G.K.: Big Pimpin'

[Jay-Z]

It's big pimpin baby..
It's big pimpin, spendin G's
Feel me.. uh-huh uhh, uh-huh..

You know I - thug em, fuck em, love em, leave em
Cause I don't fuckin' need 'em
Take 'em out the hood, keep 'em lookin' good
But I don't fuckin' feed 'em
First time they fuss I'm breezin'
Talkin' 'bout, "What's the reasons?"
I'm a pimp in every sense of the word, bitch
Better trust than believe 'em
In the cut where I keep 'em
till I need a nut, till I need to beat the guts
Then it's, beep beep and I'm pickin' 'em up
Let' em play with the dick in the truck
Many chicks wanna put Jigga fist in cuffs
Divorce him and split his bucks
Just because you give good head, I'ma break bread
So you can be livin' it up?  Shit I..
Parts with nothin', y'all be frontin'
Me give my heart to a woman?
Not for nothin', never happen
I'll be forever mackin'
Heart cold as assassins, I got no passion
I got no patience
And I hate waitin..
Hoe get yo' ass in
And let's RI-I-IDE.. check em' out now
RI-I-IDE, yeah
And let's RI-I-IDE.. check em out now
RI-I-IDE, yeah

[Chorus One: Jay-Z]

We doin'.. big pimpin', we spendin' G's
Check 'em out now
Big pimpin', on B.L.A.D.'s
We doin'.. big pimpin' up in N.Y.C.
It's just that Jigga Man, Pimp C, and B-U-N B

[Bun B]
Nigga it's the - big Southern rap impresario

Comin' straight up out the black bar-rio
Makes a mill' up off a sorry hoe
Then sit back and peep my sce-nawr-e-oh
Oops, my bad, that's my scenario
No I can't fuck a scary hoe
Now every time, every place, everywhere we go
Hoes start pointin' - they say, "There he go!"
Now these motherfuckers know we carry mo' heat than a little bit
We don't pull it out over little shit
And if you catch a lick when I spit, then it won't be a little hit
Go read a book you illiterate son of a bitch and step up yo' vocab
Don't be surprised if yo' hoe step out with me
And you see us comin' down on yo' slab
Livin' ghetto-fabulous, so mad, you just can't take it
But nigga if you hatin I
Then you wait while I get yo' bitch butt-naked, just break it
You gotta pay like you weigh wet wit' two pairs of clothes on
Now get yo' ass to the back as I'm flyin' to the track
Timbaland let me spit my pro's on
Pump it up in the pro-zone
That's the track that we breakin' these hoes on
Ain't the track that we flows on
But when shit get hot, then the glock start poppin' like ozone
We keep hoes crunk like Trigger-man
Fo' real it don't get no bigger man
Don't trip, let's flip, gettin throwed on the flip
Gettin blowed with the motherfuckin Jigga Man, fool

[Chorus Two: Bun B]

We be.. big pimpin', spendin G's
We be.. big pimpin, on B.L.A.D.'s
We be.. big pimpin down in P.A.T.
It's just that Jigga Man, Pimp C, and B-U-N B

[Pimp C]
Uhh.. smokin' out, throwin' up, keepin' lean up in my cup
All my car got leather and wood, in my hood we call it buck
Everybody wanna ball, holla at broads at the mall
If he up, watch him fall, nigga I can't fuck witch'all
If I wasn't rappin' baby, I would still be ridin' Mercedes
Chromin' shinin' sippin' daily, no rest until whitey pay me
Uhhh, now what y'all know 'bout them Texas boys
Comin' down in candied toys, smokin' weed and talkin' noise

# 50 Cent: P.I.M.P.

[Chorus]
I don't know what you heard about me
But a bitch can't get a dollar out of me
No Cadillac, no perms, you can't see
That I'm a motherfucking P-I-M-P
(Repeat)

[Verse]
Now shorty, she in the club, she dancing for dollars
She got a thing for that Gucci, that Fendi, that Prada
That BCBG, Burberry, Dolce and Gabana
She feed them foolish fantasies, they pay her cause they wanna
I spit a little G man, and my game got her
A hour later, have that ass up in the Ramada
Them trick niggas in her ear saying they think about her
I got the bitch by the bar trying to get a drink up out her
She like my style, she like my smile, she like the way I talk
She from the country, think she like me cause I'm from New York
I ain't that nigga trying to holla cause I want some head
I'm that nigga trying to holla cause I want some bread
I could care less how she perform when she in the bed
Bitch hit that track, catch a date, and come and pay the kid
Look baby this is simple, you can't see
You fucking with me, you fucking with a P-I-M-P

[Chorus]

[Verse 2]

I'm bout my money you see, girl you can holla at me
If you fucking with me, I'm a P-I-M-P
Not what you see on TV, no Cadillac, no greasy
Head full of hair, bitch I'm a P-I-M-P
Come get money with me, if you curious to see
how it feels to be with a P-I-M-P
Roll in the Benz with me, you could watch TV
From the backseat of my V, I'm a P-I-M-P
Girl we could pop some champagne and we could have a ball
We could toast to the good life, girl we could have it all
We could really splurge girl, and tear up the mall
If ever you needed someone, I'm the one you should call
I'll be there to pick you up, if ever you should fall
If you got problems, I can solve'em, they big or they small
That other nigga you be with ain't bout shit
I'm your friend, your father, and confidant, BITCH

[Chorus]

[Verse 3]

I told you fools before, I stay with the tools
I keep a Benz, some rims, and some jewels
I holla at a hoe til I got a bitch confused
She got on Payless, me I got on gator shoes
I'm shopping for chinchillas, in the summer they cheaper
Man this hoe you can have her, when I'm done I ain't gon keep her
Man, bitches come and go, every nigga pimpin know
You saying it's secret, but you ain't gotta keep it on the low
Bitch choose with me, I'll have you stripping in the street
Put my other hoes down, you get your ass beat
Now Nik my bottom bitch, she always come up with my bread
The last nigga she was with put stitches in her head
Get your hoe out of pocket, I'll put a charge on a bitch
Cause I need 4 TVs and AMGs for the six
Hoe make a pimp rich, I ain't paying bitch
Catch a date, suck a dick, shiiit, TRICK

[Chorus]

Yeah, in Hollywoood they say there's no b'ness like show b'ness
In the hood they say, there's no b'ness like hoe b'ness ya know
They say I talk a lil fast, but if you listen a lil faster
I ain't got to slow down for you to catch up, BITCH

# Kanye West: Workout Plan

One and two and three and four and get them sit-ups right and
Tuck you tummy tight and do your crunches like this
Give head stop breathe, get up girl and check your weave
Dont' drop the blunt and disrespect the weed
Pick up your son, don't disrespect your seed
It's a party tonight and oh she's so excited
Tell me who's invited – you, your friends and my dick
What's scary to me is Henny makes girls look like Halle Berry to me
Thank you, God bless you, good night I came
I came…
I came…

It's been a week without me
And she feel weak without me
She wanna talk it out but
Ain't nuthin' to talk about
She's talking about freakin' out
And maybe we can work it out

Oh girl your silhouette make me wanna light a cigarette
My name Kanye from the Jigga set, Twista set, get it wet
Ooh, girl your breath is harsh
Cover your mouth up like you got SARS
Off them track yea' I bought them cars
Still kill a nigga on 16 bars
We ain't sweatin' to the oldies, we jukin' to a cold beat
Maybe one day we can bone so you can brag to
All your homies now
But I still mess with a big girl, If you ain't fit girl I'll still hit girl
One and you brought two friends OK three more now hop in the Benz
Four door, do you know the difference between a 5, 6, 7, 8
All the mocha lattes
You gotta do Pilates
You gotta pop this tape in before you start back dating
Hustlers, gangstas, all us ballas