

**From “Life’s a Bitch” to *Life Is Good*:  
Urban Context and Identity Construction in Nas’s Rap Lyrics**

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Tutkielmani käsittelee urbaanin kontekstin merkitystä yhdysvaltalaisen rap-artistin Nasin (Nasir Jones, s. 1973) lyriikoissa. Keskeisenä hypoteesinani on, että sanoituksissa kuvatulla kaupunkitilalla sosiaalisine normeineen on merkittävä yhteys siihen, kuinka Nas kuvaa itseään ja identiteettiään. Analyysini koostuu kahdesta osasta. Aluksi selvitän, kuinka Queensbridge Houses, rikollisuuden ja väkivallan leimaama slummialue New Yorkissa, on vaikuttanut Nasin omakuvaan hänen varhaistuotannossaan. Tämän jälkeen vertaan saatuja tuloksia vastaaviin tilan ja identiteetin kuvauksiin Nasin myöhemmillä levyillä, joiden tekohetkellä hän ei enää asunut kyseisessä kaupunginosassa.

Tutkimusaineistonani on neljä levytystä: *Illmatic* (1994), *It Was Written* (1996), *I Am...* (1999) ja *Life Is Good* (2012). Analyysini pääpaino on näistä ensimmäisellä, joka on henkilökohtainen ja paikoin kaoottinen kuvaus nuoren mustan miehen menestymisenhalusta ja selviytymiskamppailusta vaikeissa olosuhteissa. *Illmaticin* maalaama yksityiskohtainen kuva gheton sosiaalisesta todellisuudesta toimii vertailukohtana myöhemmille levytyksille. Tämä pätee sekä tutkielmaani että Nasin lyriikoihin, joissa palataan nuoruusvuosien traumaattisiin kokemuksiin vielä vuosikymmenien jälkeen.

Tutkimusotteeni on monitieteellinen. Lähtökohtinani ovat afrikkalaisamerikkalainen ja hip hop -kulttuurin tutkimus, jotka luovat välttämättömän teoreettisen pohjan hip hop -musiikin luotettavaan tulkintaan. Gheton sosiaalisten normien analysoinnissa käytän lisäksi apuna esimerkiksi sosiologian ja filosofian käsitteistöä. Kulttuurintutkimuksen sanastosta keskeiseen asemaan tutkimuksessani nousee identiteetin lisäksi tilan käsite, joka arkimerkityksestään poiketen kattaa tarkastelussani myös sosiaalisen ulottuvuuden. Täten tutkielmani yhdistyy laajemmassa kontekstissa niin sanottuun tilalliseen käänteeseen, jolla viitataan kulttuurintutkimuksen piirissä useita vuosikymmeniä kasvussa olleeseen tilan korostamiseen kulttuurillisten ja sosiaalisten merkitysten tuottamisessa.

Analyysini Nasin varhaistuotannosta paljastaa, että ghettokonteksti liittyy voimakkaasti hänen identiteettinsä muodostumiseen. Hänen klaustrofobinen kuvauksensa esittää Queensbridgen urbaanina viidakkona, jonka asukkaat ovat kääntyneet toisiaan vastaan darwinistisessa eloonjäämiskamppailussa. Huumekaupasta tulonsa saavien nuorukaisten hallitsemassa kaupunginosassa pidätykset, aseelliset yhteenotot ja kuolemantapaukset ovat jokapäiväisiä. Tässä ympäristössä Nas esittää itsensä kovapintaisena selviytyjänä ja kertoo ylpeästi olevansa roisto, joka ei kaihda väkivaltaa puolustaessaan itseään tai omaisuuttaan. Paremmasta elämästä unelmoiva Nas hakee tyydytystä seksistä ja päihteistä.

Myöhemmillä levyillä taiteilijaidentiteetti alkaa vallata alaa rikollisuudelta Nasin omakuvassa. Vapauduttuaan vahvimman oikeuden periaatteella toimivasta ympäristöstä hän alkaa nopeasti uskoa toimijuuteen ja ilmentää rodullista solidaarisuutta pyrkimyksissään valistaa muita. Nas korostaa edelleen edustavansa Queensbridgeä, mutta samalla kyseenalaistaa gheton sosiaalisia normeja. Yksittäisenä esimerkkinäkin Nasin identiteetin nopea siirtyminen kohti yleisiä amerikkalaisia arvoja antaa viitteitä siitä, että ympäristön haastavuus on oleellisessa osassa slummialueiden sosiaalisten ongelmien synnyssä.

Avainsanat: tilallisuus, tila, identiteetti, ghetto, rap, hip hop, Nas

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## 1. Introduction

In his otherwise convincing analysis of “The Genesis” (the introductory track of *Illmatic* by rapper Nas), Adilifu Nama assumes Nas’s utterance “niggers stop fucking burning Phillies” to mean that Nas “implores his crew to stop” using cannabis (23). However, in the context of the sprawling exchange that forms “The Genesis”, it is more likely that Nas’s words are actually meant to voice his bemused astonishment of the fact that his companions, who seem to be content with their shots of cognac, are *not* lighting up any cannabis cigarettes to further enhance the mood. Nama’s misinterpretation, apparently based on Nas’s discerning mention of cannabis-induced memory loss in another song, is a telling example of the difficulties connected with the analysis of rap music. One cannot simply expect to find a neatly consistent message that characterizes all of an individual artist’s output, since rappers frequently bring forward varied selections of marginalized viewpoints in unapologetic form, which act is called ‘representing’ in hip-hop parlance. Regardless of his critical comments on substance abuse elsewhere, in the particular context of “The Genesis”, Nas represents a nonconformist inner-city mentality which entails seeking instant gratification through drug use, which must be taken into account when making interpretations of his words.

In this thesis, I endeavor to produce accurate and valid readings of a selection of rap lyrics by the New York rapper Nas (born Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones, 1973) through a rigorous examination of the complex relationship of urban space and African American identity. Nas’s debut album *Illmatic* (1994) gained accolades for its exceptionally vivid depictions of the psychological effects of the squalid conditions in the infamous Queensbridge Housing Projects in New York City. However, along with the artist’s actual living conditions, the narrative perspective of his lyrics has since gone through substantial change. Despite these changes, questions of ethnic identity and urban context have served as a recurring motif in his lyrics during his career. Because the themes of race and space are profoundly intertwined, especially in America, they cannot be satisfactorily analyzed in isolation. Also on a general level, themes concerning the role of social space have been growing

in importance in the field of cultural studies for several decades, as outlined by Chris Barker (*Cultural Studies* 347). However, meticulous investigation of the relationship between the inner-city context and the lyrical content of American rap music is a rather new pursuit that has slowly gained momentum. Because of this oversight, the contextual factors of hip-hop culture are often discussed in simplistic terms, even in academic texts.<sup>1</sup>

Notable exceptions to this relative shortcoming in hip-hop research are the incisive contextual analyses written by Tricia Rose and Murray Forman. Rose's seminal work *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994) and Forman's *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (2002) are widely used in my thesis. Like many hip-hop scholars, Rose and Forman mostly discuss general issues rather than concentrate on in-depth examinations of individual artists. Perhaps due to this tendency in hip-hop research to keep a wide focus, there are only a handful of academic texts on Nas's lyrics I am aware of, despite his prestige as a rapper. As for noteworthy works on Nas in particular, *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic*, a collection of essays on *Illmatic* that I quoted in my opening paragraph, is a rare example of extensive examination of Nas's lyrics. For the most part, however, the authors' aims seem more personal and speculative than academic, whereas my approach is centered on thorough contextualization.

The central goal of my thesis is to examine the powerful impact that the urban context has on Nas's identity construction. More specifically, I will look into how his portrayed self-image relates to and changes along with the depictions of his urban surroundings, focusing especially on the influence of the inner-city environment, which I expect to be of great significance.

Concentrating on these particular key points – self-portrayal and urban context – is a natural choice because, as Rose points out, “rap's primary thematic concerns” are “identity and location” (*Black Noise* 10). I argue that my analysis of Nas's personal development will also cast light on the commonplace problems in identity construction that many African American men grown up in the

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<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion of such problems, see, for example, Forman (xx).

ghetto encounter. Thus, my work may provide valuable insight into the unique situation of urban black Americans struggling to find their place in society. I believe that my contribution to the academic study of hip-hop culture will demonstrate the usefulness of hip-hop analysis as a way to gain deeper understanding of the lived reality of urban African Americans. My own academic ambitions aside, I feel that such understanding is called for, since rap music, as stated by Rachel Sullivan, has not only received a considerable amount of negative media attention, but often the logic behind the criticism has been outright racist (608). I am cautiously optimistic that scholarly interest in hip-hop culture may ultimately impact also general attitudes outside the academia.

Nas has released a great number of albums during his career, both as a solo artist and in collaboration with others. Of this extensive body of work I will mostly discuss his early work, *Illmatic* (1994), *It Was Written* (1996), and *I Am...* (1999). Of these, *Illmatic* receives by far the most attention. The spatial, racial, and social issues in the early lyrics will then be contrasted with an example of his more recent output, *Life Is Good* (2012). The temporal distance between the albums provides a solid foundation for examining the changes in the portrayed identity. My analysis of the lyrics is divided in two chapters, the first of which focuses on the elements in Nas's identity that have a clear connection to the social norms of the ghetto, and the second deals with Nas's gradual detachment – both physical and mental – from Queensbridge Houses. Although the latter theme becomes more pronounced as Nas's career progresses, this division is not strictly chronological; for example, I have chosen one song from *It Was Written* to exemplify Nas's ghetto-mindedness, while another track from the same album is used to represent his endeavors to step out of the inner-city perspective.

In the framing of the theoretical background, as well as in the analysis, my approach is interdisciplinary: my starting point is African American studies, and I utilize theoretical concepts used in cultural studies, particularly those of space, place, and identity. I will provide detailed definitions for these concepts in chapter 2, where I also explore their relevance in the study of hip-

hop culture. Here it will suffice to say that the role of the concept of space surpasses that of a useful tool in this thesis. I argue that analyzing the lyrical content of rap side by side with the relevant urban spaces is of essence for the production of convincing interpretations of rap lyrics.

In the larger scheme of things, my thesis connects to the so-called spatial turn, a movement that emphasizes the significance of space as an influential factor in social life. Forman defines the spatial turn as a growing tendency to “explain social and cultural phenomena in relation to various human, institutional, and natural geographies” (2). The term ‘geography’ may evoke associations of mapping as an act of producing physical two-dimensional images that form symbolic depictions of space, but here the term refers to charting in a wider sense. As suggested by Robert T. Tally, also “stories frequently perform the function of maps”, inasmuch as they provide “points of reference” that help the audience to “orient themselves and understand the world in which they live” (2). To put this idea into the context of hip-hop, city maps reveal where the inner-city is situated in relation to other boroughs, whereas rap lyrics show the distance between the social reality of the ghetto and the white suburban world. In order to keep my theory chapter manageable in length, I shall not try to outline the history of the spatial turn there. Of the central theorists associated with the movement, I will incorporate ideas from David Harvey, Doreen Massey, and Michel Foucault into my theoretical discussions, insofar as they are relevant to the themes concerning space and hip-hop culture.

Even when concentrating on spatial factors of hip-hop culture, racial considerations cannot be overlooked. Although widely utilizing the contested term ‘race’ in my thesis, I will take a non-essentialist approach to matters of ethnicity. That is to say that, while acknowledging race as a contributing factor, I avoid using it as an explanation without striving to establish the underlying social structures responsible for racial differences. Essentialism, which refers to a belief of a shared core of identity within a group (such as black Americans) manifesting itself through different forms of cultural self-expression, is such a difficult position to defend in scientific or philosophical terms

that, as pointed out by John Su, the sheer amount of academic rebuttals targeted against it can be considered absurd (361). Yet, Su notes that “many scholars and the public at large continue to associate identity with essence” (362). Evidently, it is necessary to be on guard against the appeal of presenting descriptive labels as explanatory tools. That said, I agree with Keith Negus, who argues that even such a problematic and generalizing label as ‘black music’ will have a relevant meaning as long as the art is based on shared experiences of “racism, social segregation and economic inequality” (112). In addition, rap artists themselves often emphasize the racial aspect of their art and depict racial stereotypes in a way that may be seen as supportive to essentialist viewpoints, underscoring the importance of making a clear stance on the issue when discussing rap academically.

There are several points in my methodology and terminology that require further clarification. For the most part, I deal with the lyrics as if they were written texts. In line with this approach, I have not tried to transcribe pronunciation features of African American Vernacular English, apart from very obvious cases. My primary reasons for this decision are that I deemed it unnecessary and potentially distracting. Furthermore, although all speakers of the English language vary in their pronunciation, the difference from standard English is not usually reproduced in written transcriptions, with the exception of Black English. When white writers treat black speakers as a special case and emphasize the supposedly exotic difference to white standards, it is difficult not to interpret the practice as racial othering, albeit most often likely to be done without malignant intent. However, in my own theoretical discussion, I do use the term ‘gangsta’ to refer specifically to certain inner-city issues (expounded on in the following chapter) and the related subgenre of hip-hop music in order to make a distinction to the primary dictionary definition of ‘gangster’.

Perhaps the most noticeable consequence of my style of transcription is the written form of the controversial word ‘nigger’. Regarding this phrase, there is a huge ideological debate on how the alternative form ‘nigga’ relates to it in meaning and connotations. Although the non-rhotic



variant is often said to lack the pejorative aspect of the standard form, it is also used as an insult by black Americans and can be argued to exemplify internalized racism. Surprisingly, in academic texts on hip-hop, the form ‘nigga’ is widely used without any commentary on the reasons behind the choice. With my consistent use of one form, with all the racist connotations intact, I wish to avoid unscientific romanticization of hip-hop diction.

In a similar attempt to refrain from romanticization, I use ‘rap music’, ‘rap’ and ‘hip-hop music’ synonymously. ‘Rap’ is often associated with the outward form of the music genre, whereas ‘hip-hop’ refers to the wider cultural movement, which includes rapping (or emceeing), deejaying (i.e., manipulation of vinyl records to create rhythmic compositions), breakdancing, and graffiti. However, when the terms ‘rap’ and ‘hip-hop music’ are used by people identifying with hip-hop culture, the distinction between them is often dependent on the speaker’s personal taste. Thus, ‘rap’ is frequently used for any rap music, while ‘hip-hop music’ basically means ‘good rap’ that is culturally valuable in the speaker’s opinion. Similarly to the question of the word ‘nigger’, there is a vast ideological dimension in the use of these terms. The same applies also to ‘conscious rap’ and ‘gangsta rap’, but I use the terms strictly to differentiate between two subgenres, the former of which is characterized by a didactic tone and strong emphasis on racial identity, whereas the latter reflects a nihilistic inner-city perspective (although adopted by a number of artists for purely artistic or commercial reasons regardless of their background). These terms are not to be understood to connote my opinion on the value of such self-expression.

As a final note, my interpretations of specific phrases are based on my own understanding – acquired through years of first-hand research – of how they are commonly used in context. In general, I am very skeptical of the accuracy of the readily available online dictionaries of urban slang. Related to this point, I have noticed that, although online sources of transcribed rap lyrics are used even in academic texts, they contain an unacceptable amount of errors, some of which have been reproduced in peer-reviewed articles of otherwise high scientific standard. Amazingly, lyrics

printed in the inlay booklets of the original CDs may be more inaccurate than collectively produced transcriptions found on the Internet. Thus, the quotes of the primary material are my interpretations of the audio source, and I apologize for any inadvertent errors that may remain therein.

## **2. Hip-hop, Space, and Identity**

This chapter aims to establish the theoretical framework used in my analysis of Nas's lyrics. It consists of two subsections, each of which introduces one of the two most important themes discussed in this thesis: the urban context and identity. In section 2.1, I shall first try to operationalize the extensive and somewhat vague concept of 'context' by dissecting it into more manageable terms utilized in cultural studies. After offering definitions to the central terms, I will be able to employ them in my discussion on the relationship between space, race, authenticity, and commercial issues. Understanding the circumstances of how and why these themes are present in hip-hop will be of great importance in deciphering the actual lyrics in the subsequent analysis chapters.

The multifaceted concept of identity serves as a central point in section 2.2. Again, I begin by defining the typical usage of the term 'identity' as it is understood in cultural studies. Although hip-hop culture in itself provides substance for identity construction, it does so in unison with such wider concepts as ethnicity, locality, and age. As these different aspects of identity provide relevant explanatory tools that help to shed light on the artistic choices made by Nas, their connection to the hip-hop culture and the broader social issues is discussed in some detail in this chapter. Although my central terminology is mostly that used in the field of cultural studies, in my endeavor to find overarching answers to the questions raised in sections 2.1 and 2.2, I will not follow any single outlook but rather draw freely and combine relevant elements from multiple theoretical approaches, such as African American studies, sociology, and philosophy.

It should be noted that although gender, in addition to the factors previously mentioned, is an essential component of identity, I abstain here from detailed examination of gender performance, mainly due to the limited scope of this thesis. However, it must be kept in mind that, while some issues I do cover in my analysis, such as certain effects of racial and spatial inequity, are applicable – at least to some extent – to both men and women, other points may not necessarily be so. In

particular, gangsta culture is markedly male-centered, although a number of women also identify with it. Additionally, the same phenomenon may be experienced differently depending on one's gender. Due to the gender of the artist in question, the point of view in the lyrics analyzed in chapters 3 and 4 is obviously a male one unless otherwise indicated.

## **2.1 Hip-Hop and the Urban Context**

In this section, I elucidate the significance of spatial considerations and specifically the urban context in regards to hip-hop culture. I argue that the historical, cultural, and spatial factors relevant to the forms of expression have such a strong influence on the lyrical content of rap that any analysis failing to take these elements into consideration is rendered fundamentally inconsequential by such oversight. To some extent, a similar claim holds true with any genre, but the pronounced emphasis on spatial concerns found in rap lyrics makes possessing a certain level of sensitivity to the particular context a critical point here. Stressing the importance of having a sufficient grasp of the specific spatio-temporal situation, Tricia Rose claims that approaching hip-hop either from the interpretive viewpoint of postmodern theory or considering it primarily a single phase in African American oral tradition “fail[s] to do justice to its complexities” (*Black Noise* 22). It does not necessarily follow that such frameworks are essentially useless in hip-hop analysis, but they may be misleading unless combined with a careful investigation of the inner-city context. However, in order to tackle the complex question of how space, race, and genre conventions intertwine, suitable theoretical terminology is required.

According to Chris Barker, space and time are not “separate entities but . . . inextricably interwoven together” (*SAGE Dictionary* 186). This is due to the currently accepted scientific view that time is created by objects moving in space, which in turn is defined by these objects' relative positions. While such notion of physical time-space may seem overly theoretical for the purposes of popular culture analysis, understanding this mode of thinking is essential for avoiding certain

analytical pitfalls when assessing the effects of spatial contexts. Firstly, space is not to be seen as a mere backdrop where events happen to take place but as a dimension produced by events in time. Secondly, the spatial circumstances of events do not remain constant over time because the temporal and spatial aspects cannot be separated from each other. These principles also apply to spaces produced by human actions. However, Edward Soja claims that, whereas such terms as ‘historical’ and ‘political’ are effortlessly understood to entail human activity, the mechanistic feel of the term ‘spatial’ frequently evokes naive associations of space as a neutral container (80).<sup>2</sup> The naivete of such views comes from the failure to realize that, unlike inanimate particles, human beings are conscious agents whose decisions are influenced by the web of social meanings associated with the space they currently operate in. To battle simplistic notions of space, Soja recommends an approach “which recognizes spatiality . . . as a social product (or outcome) and a shaping force (or medium) in social life” (7). Among similar lines, Doreen Massey speaks of the perpetual interplay between social relations and space, space itself being a dimension “constructed out of social relations” (*Space, Place and Gender* 2). To borrow Barker’s synopsis of such ideas, “space can be understood as a social construct with the social itself being spatially organized” (*SAGE Dictionary* 186). When this framework is applied to rap, the urban spaces examined in the lyrics may be said to obtain their meaning through people acting in them or talking about them. Similarly, these actions and their meanings are defined by the spaces they concern or occur in.

Human actions transpiring in space produce sites with specific sets of meanings associated with them, thus creating ‘places’. As stated by Barker, a place is a location “marked by identifications or emotional investments” (*SAGE Dictionary* 144). Thus, ‘place’ is distinguished from the more abstract concept of ‘space’ by the fact that the former term emphasizes “human experience, memory, desire and identity” (Barker, *Cultural Studies* 350). One should keep in mind that, since the definition of a place is tied to human experiences that naturally vary heavily, the

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<sup>2</sup> To avoid this, Soja uses the term ‘spatiality’ to denote a socially produced space. However, I use a single term, ‘space’, throughout my thesis.

meaning of a place is never universally shared but remains perspective-dependent. For example, although the black population of run-down urban areas share many of the negative associations of the ghetto with the outside world, for them it also represents home and a place that provides a basis for local identity. As stated by Forman, inner-city regions “are invested with value and meaning by those who inhabit them” (64). In fact, when talking about their local identity, rappers often refer to their immediate surroundings as the ‘hood’ (short for ‘neighborhood’), which emphasizes the communal aspect, whereas the term ‘ghetto’ has more general and derogatory connotations (ibid.). The contradiction between the need for local identity and the dissatisfaction of the squalid conditions puts the inner-city dwellers in a peculiar position, a theme which is very visible in hip-hop.

One of the defining features of any city area is the condensation of people and urban phenomena. The perpetual proximity to these elements produces unavoidable repercussions – both beneficial and adverse – on the city dwellers. Harvey, who terms this constant flow of urban interactions ‘externality effects’, notes that such effects rise from both public and private actions (58). Patrick Turmel suggests that, since the positive and negative externalities, as he calls these effects, cannot possibly be avoided in urban environment, they should be accepted as a “part of the essential nature of the city” (151). When encountering the concept of externality effect, it is useful to keep in mind that the range of phenomena it covers is vast. Examples of concrete negative externalities include pollution or traffic noise, but the term may be also used to describe abstract forms of effects caused by urban condensation, such as fear of crime or feeling of claustrophobia. It is this latter sense that is the most relevant to Nas’s lyrics, although the abstract phenomena occasionally have very concrete manifestations, such as stray bullets mentioned on several tracks.

Having briefly defined the central theoretical terminology, I will now look into the background of the spatial emphasis in hip-hop. As touched on earlier, it must be realized that although many of the tropes found in rap music are undoubtedly rooted in African American oral

tradition, hip-hop cannot be exclusively reduced to that heritage. Rather, as outlined by Rose, hip-hop culture was born in very specific spatial and temporal conditions as a multiethnic enterprise of self-expression by underprivileged communities in the post-industrial New York of the 1970s (*Black Noise* 34). However, Rose also emphasizes the racial aspect of hip-hop by describing rap music as “a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America” (*Black Noise* 2). Since the time of writing, hip-hop has transformed into a global movement crossing all ethnic boundaries, but in the American context of the early 1990s, Rose’s claim was mostly justified. The crucial question is, then, why is race linked to marginality in urban America?

According to Massey and Denton, living in ghettos is “the paradigmatic residential configuration” for the African American urban population (19). They also maintain that the birth of racially defined inner cities in the course of the twentieth century was no accidental consequence of natural socioeconomic development but a result of a series of premeditated decisions made by the white America in order to fortify the system of segregation (*ibid.*). Likewise, in her account of hip-hop’s beginnings in the 1970s, Rose points to the ruthless nature of the political decisions made in New York regarding the route of an expressway through the city, a project which eventually caused widespread destruction to working- and lower-middle class neighborhoods due to forced relocation (*Black Noise* 30-31). She states that the massive housing rearrangements required by the construction harmed black and Hispanic population disproportionately (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the white residents who are forcefully relocated in such situations are in an advantageous position by virtue of their greater level of mobility. As noted by Massey and Denton, the housing market is profoundly affected by racial preconceptions, which sustains black segregation regardless of income level (11). Therefore, it can be argued that racism in America has been largely mediated through spatial factors. In addition, much of the spatial inequity remains intact in spite of the fact that openly racist rhetoric has become socially unacceptable. The relationship between ethnicity and

ghetto residency not only has significant implications to rap's spatially minded content but to the aggressive and nihilistic tone of gangsta rap as well. This theme, however, will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

The previous arguments notwithstanding, racism is not the only explaining factor to the birth and persistence of American ghettos. The additional viewpoint I raise here will be of some significance in the following subchapter as well as the analysis chapters. According to Soja, capitalism "builds upon . . . spatial inequalities as a necessary means for its continued survival" (107). These inequalities are usually understood to occur between industrialized capitalist states and underdeveloped third world countries, but the basic principle also applies to the current, smaller scale discussion of ghettos. Returning to my previous point concerning the tenacity of spatial inequity despite the social unacceptability of racism, I wish to argue that ghettoization is not to be seen as an unfortunate byproduct of free market economy but as a part of a business venture that is likely to continue as long as it remains lucrative. I shall first present two points to support my argument, after which I draw the relevant connections to the commercialization of hip-hop. Firstly, in the early 1970s, Marxist theorist David Harvey presented evidence that the condensed low-quality housing of the ghetto is "more profitable for property owners than we would expect" (61). After four decades similar claims are still voiced, also from the opposite end of the political spectrum; for instance, Reihan Salam argues that "slumlords continue to exploit artificial scarcity in the housing market to the detriment of poor people, a disproportionately large share of whom are nonwhite" (21). Naturally, without the racial restrictions to mobility, few middle-class blacks would choose to willingly live in the relatively high-priced and poverty-stricken slums (Massey and Denton 9). It may be concluded that racial prejudice in the housing market is not necessarily an end in itself, but it can be used as a tool for gaining financial advantage. Secondly, the high rate of crime in ghettos produces a steady supply of inmates to the incarceration system, which arguably constitutes an enormous commercial enterprise in the U.S. For example, Marie Gottschalk notes



that the hypothesis of a large number of individual citizens as well as corporations profiting considerably from the prison industry is based on abundant evidence (29). The typical prevalence of crime in poor urban areas combined with racial segregation ties criminality and ethnicity together leading to a situation where, according to the statistic cited by Bakari Kitwana, one half of the inmates in federal and state prisons are black (53). It would seem that as long as financial gains rather than social considerations direct political decisions in capitalist America, segregation and ghettoization will continue their existence. Despite the bitter ire frequently targeted at the concrete manifestations of this oppressive machinery, rappers who actively use their status in effort to dismantle the underlying political structures are few and far between. The blame for this, however, is not wholly on the artists themselves, as we will see next.

Rather ironically, also rappers who sell their art as a commercially profitable product – the allure of which is at least partially due to the unapologetic articulation of the black ghetto experience – benefit financially from the perpetuation of racial and spatial injustice which gives rap its cultural significance. As phrased by C. H. Smith, for a ghetto-born rapper, “local knowledge of misery [is] the exportable commodity to be wrought from the otherwise arid soil” (347). Ultimately, being a successful rapper may provide a way out of the adverse conditions. Record sales can be hardly ignored by any pop artist, but considering the underprivileged origins of many rappers, it is quite understandable that the public taste dictates the lyrical content of rap to a notable degree. Somewhat surprisingly, the most aggressive and nihilistic elements of rap’s thematic content have also proven to be the most commercially lucrative, which has caused the focus of mainstream rap to shift towards an increasingly pronounced and provocative gangsta mentality, a phenomenon Rose terms “hyper-gangsta-ization” (*The Hip-Hop Wars* 3). As a natural consequence of this transition, rappers who contest the irresponsible and self-destructive outlook present in much of mainstream rap have diminished both in visibility and significance. Rose keenly points out that, although gangsta lyrics do reflect the actual conditions of the inner cities to some extent, they also exploit the

deep-seated stereotype of black males' inherently violent nature (ibid. 25). Furthermore, she explains that the impact record company executives have on the lyrical content of rap is greater than commonly recognized, and the up-and-coming artists may be brazenly coerced to comply with what is considered to represent black authenticity (ibid. 223). Her implication here seems to be that it is the very compatibility with the well-established racial prejudices that makes gangsta rap highly marketable. These arguments have a significant connection to the notion of places as social constructions discussed earlier. The commercially influenced generic conventions of rap music directly contribute to the production of conceptions associated with black ghettos. Simply put, our racial attitudes and understanding of the inner-city environment are not only shaped by news, statistics, and personal experience, but by hip-hop culture as well. Because such mental conceptions – consciously or unconsciously – affect personal decisions and public policies concerning, for example, housing, law enforcement, and delinquency, it can be argued that commercial rap music participates in the continuation of the spatial inequity it is known to frequently reprove.

It is now time to examine how the issues discussed above are manifested in hip-hop tradition. As an exhaustive inquiry on the spatial elements of breakdancing and graffiti art is beyond my scope here, I shall focus on how the urban context of hip-hop culture is showcased in the musical and lyrical conventions of rap music. In such undertaking, certain caution is required, however. Rose correctly argues against the simplistic view that urban spaces as such would produce the content of hip-hop through direct causality (*The Hip Hop Wars* 6). Additionally, originality is highly respected in hip-hop and individual differences between artists may be vast, which is why Douglas Kellner maintains that “it is . . . a mistake to generalize concerning rap” (176). Kellner is basically right in his assertion, although in addition to emphasis on innovation, rap is simultaneously characterized by a strong adherence to tradition. Intertextuality and self-referential communication are essential components of rap's discourse manifesting themselves both in the music style and the lyrics, which makes an adequate level of generic knowledge necessary for

accurate analysis. Nevertheless, Kellner's warning ought to be kept in mind, and the following examples are by no means meant to apply to all of rap.

According to Kellner, rap songs form “collage[s] of urban sounds” by utilizing sounds typical to the cityscape, such as snippets from radio, television and recorded music, as well as “other familiar sounds” (176), which include traffic noise and street conversations frequently used on rap albums as transitions between individual songs. In the modern city, such sounds are constantly present, and thus, hip-hop music roots itself to the urban experience by sonically mimicking the constant flow of externalities. The disjointed sound of the archetypal hip-hop instrumental<sup>3</sup> built by the DJ using samples<sup>4</sup> played from vinyl records harks back to the urban block parties, where record players, microphones, and loudspeakers were easier to acquire than musical instruments. The use of a drum machine or the looping of a rhythmic, bass-heavy sample to produce a new composition functioning as a monotonous backing track for the lead instrument, the MC's<sup>5</sup> voice, clearly originates from rap's roots as party-oriented dance music, but Tricia Rose rightly claims that there is also a deeper level of significance in the form itself (*Black Noise* 65). She argues that the commonplace dismissal of rap as musically unimaginative often stems from the misplaced attempt to estimate its artistic value based on the Western standards derived from classical music, where harmony and melody, rather than rhythmic patterns, are considered to be the decisive elements (ibid.). Combined with the tradition-conscious allusions to the black music of earlier generations via sampling, rap's adamant disregard of the commonly accepted (white) standards suggests a spatially oriented interpretation of the musical form. When hip-hop spread from New York to other cities with similar racial layouts, it formed a novel communication network for a previously voiceless minority living in destitute urban areas otherwise characterized by such a complete social isolation that Massey and Denton – rather polemically – choose to call them “black

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3 Commonly referred to as ‘the beat’, emphasizing the rhythmic quality.

4 Samples are short portions of other recorded songs used to create a novel composition, occasionally used in such a creative manner that the original sampled song may remain unrecognizable to the untrained ear.

5 Roughly speaking, ‘MC’ is synonymous with ‘rapper’. However, in practice, the term ‘MC’, as well as the derivative verb ‘emcee’, often carries connotations of high artistic and cultural value.

reservations” (57). For the black population of the ghettos across America, hip-hop music’s prioritized rhythm and frequent references to soul, funk, jazz, and blues may have functioned as recognizable manifestations of culturally familiar self-expression, thus connecting the ethnically linked but spatially divided groups.

Kellner observes that hip-hop music “articulates a very distinct sense of place and time” (180). Indeed, it is customary for rappers to speak out the name of the city or borough they represent, as well as the year of production. This practice communicates to fellow-artists and rap fans from other areas the rapper’s participation in the latest changes of the shared cultural movement. According to Rose, rap’s local emphasis also “satisfies poor young black people’s profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized and celebrated” (*Black Noise* 11). The pronounced locality notwithstanding, the lyrical depictions of the rapper’s own ’hood undoubtedly appear familiar to a person living in a socioeconomically similar district. In this sense, the celebrated act of ‘representing’ or ‘repping’ one’s ’hood through rapping, which entails merging regional idiosyncrasies with shared generic practices, functions as a verbal equivalent of sampling in the ethnically uniting capacity suggested above. Supporting a similar view, Forman sees the intertextual elements of rap music as a means to build a “cultural connection across time and space” (66). Significantly, this notion implies that hip-hop can reinforce a cultural identity based on ethnicity despite the exceptional spatial isolation experienced by disadvantaged urban blacks in America.

The communicative aspect of hip-hop is also accentuated in rapper Chuck D’s famous claim that rap is the black equivalent of CNN. When examined more thoroughly, this comparison evokes the important question of presumed reliability. News or rap do not, and indeed cannot, reflect reality in an objective manner. As noted by Rose, rap does resemble news media in the sense that it regularly produces “homogenized and deeply problematic representations” (*The Hip Hop Wars* 268). Forman points out that, like news editors, also rappers choose local events they deem relevant

to report on national level (251). It follows that the ghetto imagery put forward in rap – as is the case in any verbal communication – is always based on subjective interpretations and consequently, should not be taken at face value. However, rappers often deliberately refuse to clearly separate imagination from personal experience, as a result of which rap is “not pure fiction or fantasy . . . but neither is it unmediated reality” (Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars* 41). This issue is further complicated by the fact that willingness to openly address the adverse conditions faced by urban blacks is strongly connected to the concept of authenticity in hip-hop, a phenomenon which has created the tenet of ‘keeping it real’. For a layperson, this often repeated credo may be misleading. According to Forman, “[t]he streets and the ’hood are generally conceived as the primary sites where the real coheres” (190), which is to say that the rap sense of ‘real’ does not necessarily refer to outspoken truths in general, as one could assume, but rather it is spatially defined. Considering also the record industry’s tendency to favor the negative aspects of the ghetto for commercial reasons, extracting a realistic picture of inner-city life from rap lyrics boasting to ‘keep it real’ is a challenging task indeed.

Of course, the meaning of ‘real’ is not only dependent on the spatial context but on the temporal as well. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when gangsta rap gained a preeminent status as a hip-hop subgenre, its cultural significance was notably different from similar content released now. Swearing to ‘keep it real’, gangsta rappers uncompromisingly voiced a previously unrecognized ghetto perspective despite the massive public reprimand targeted at them. As noted previously, gangsta ideology has become the mainstream standard and the most commercially viable stylistic option during the last two decades, which has depoliticized the gangsta discourse and changed its position as a counter-hegemonic voice. Providing a humorous example of this shift, Rose proposes that if Tupac Shakur, who remained a controversial and debated public figure until his violent death in 1996, had started his career a decade later, he would have been labeled “a socially conscious rapper”, excessively political and contemplative, and consequently, less ‘real’

(*The Hip Hop Wars 3*). Discussing the temporally varying meanings of ‘keeping it real’, Dipa Basu notes that a broad distinction between two groups of hip-hop aficionados has appeared: those who identify more with the artistic aspects of hip-hop deem the rapper’s high verbal dexterity “emblematic of rap’s authenticity”, whereas those who prioritize the ghettocentric elements are drawn to the “nihilistic formulations” in rap lyrics (374). On a very general level, ‘real’ as a hip-hop tenet may be said to refer to maintaining personal integrity, but as we have seen, the manifestations of it are various.

Despite having suggested above that rap lyrics present a somewhat distorted picture of American inner-city life, my intention is by no means to argue that this notion diminishes the value of hip-hop expression. Rather, I concur with Toby Jenkins in his estimation that hip-hop offers a worthwhile opportunity to hear “real stories of the cultural experience” (1233). The effect of the previously discussed commercial factors notwithstanding, even the most nihilistic gangsta stories ripe with excess, exaggerations, and violent fantasies are ‘real’ in the sense that they give valuable insight into the anguish and frustration actually experienced by segregated urban blacks. Thus, it is quite fruitless to debate whether the picture of ghetto life given in rap is accurate or fictional. Reconciling to Forman’s assertion that ghetto space discussed in rap is “simultaneously real, imaginary, symbolic and mythical” (198) immediately opens up a new avenue of more productive argumentation. I agree with his suggestion that the proper question to be asked is, in fact, *why* does such a great number of young blacks “choose these dystopic images of spatial representation to orient their own places in the world?”(ibid.). This question is best answered with the help of the concept of identity, which is the topic of the next section.

## **2.2 Hip-Hop and Identity**

Following the commonly used approach in cultural studies, I previously defined urban space as a social construct which obtains its meanings through human actions. In the current subchapter, I turn

my focus on the human actors operating in space and introduce the second major theme in my thesis: identity. The concept of space will be prominently present here as well, since it plays a central role in the identity construction process by functioning, as stated by Balshaw and Kennedy, “as a modality through which urban identities are formed” (12). As was the case with ‘space’, also the academic usage of ‘identity’ differs somewhat from layperson’s understanding of the term, which is why I must begin the present discussion with a definition.

Barker notes that in the Western world identity has traditionally been understood as an essential core of one’s personality, a “true self” which manifests itself through personal preferences, thoughts, and choices (*Cultural Studies* 220). However, such a view is not compatible with the current scientific knowledge of the socialization process, development of personality, or human neurology. Indeed, Barker continues that, despite the appeal of perceiving identity as a ‘thing’ that is possessed, it is more sensible to understand it “not as a fixed entity but as an emotionally charged discursive description of ourselves that is subject to change” (ibid.). There are two points in this definition that require further clarification. Firstly, identity as a ‘discursive description’ is based on such discourses as ethnicity, gender, and religion. Rather than simply mirror reality in a neutral manner, language plays an active role in the construction of these concepts. Thus, linguistic conventions and the cultural norms they manifest direct the formation of a subjective self-image, and the endeavor to construct a meaningful narrative of oneself within the available interpretive frameworks is not a mere attempt to reflect one’s true essence, but the very process itself creates what we call ‘identity’. Secondly, since the autobiographical narrative is continuously recreated by adding new material to it, identity is bound to slowly change over time. As stated by Anthony Giddens, in order to keep the on-going life story compatible with the external world, one must incorporate factual events as parts of the personal narrative (54). This view sees identity as a project that is never finished, which explains why Barker describes identity as a “snapshot” of the current set of meanings a person attributes to the constituents of his or her self-description (*SAGE*

*Dictionary* 94).

Naturally, members of a society not only strive to create meaningful narratives of their own lives but of other people's as well. The descriptive image of a person created by others' views and expectations is named 'social identity'<sup>6</sup> by Barker, distinguishing the concept from the autobiographically produced 'self-identity' discussed above (*Cultural Studies* 220). Despite the fact that this distinction may be made, I wish to stress that social identity and self-identity are deeply interdependent, since the expectations and opinions expressed by peers unavoidably affect one's conceptions about oneself, which in turn influence the notions held by others. Stuart Hall explains that, according to the traditional sociological view, a person's self-identity interacts with the outside world and is thus "formed and modified in continuous dialogue" with the surrounding society and the prefabricated models it offers (597). However, this conception of identity still presupposes the idea of a 'true self', a single inner core of identity that is modified by the surroundings. Yet, within a society, there are several varying sets of norms and expectations, and consequently, we are perceived and perceive ourselves differently depending on the situation at hand, the awareness of which has arguably increased in the postmodern era. In Hall's words, the conception of self has become "fragmented, composed, not of a single, but of several" components that are not necessarily compatible with each other (598). In general, theorists in cultural studies understand identity to be, in fact, an accumulation of multiple context-dependent and often contradictory identities (Barker, *SAGE Dictionary* 94).

The interplay between the multiple convergent identities and social expectations is of particular significance for black Americans, who may have to face negative stereotypes concerning their ethnicity. This was noted as early as 1903 by W. E. B. Du Bois, who described the African American "double consciousness" as a persistent feeling of "two-ness", with which he referred to a continuous strife between the African heritage and American citizenship in people constantly forced

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<sup>6</sup> To avoid misunderstandings, one ought to keep in mind that this nomenclature differs from that of social psychology, where the same term may be used to refer to a person's own attachment to a social group.



to assess themselves from the largely hostile perspective of the white America (8). When discussing the unique position of American blacks as perpetual outsiders in their own country, he also alludes to the myth of a seventh son, an exceptional individual “gifted with second-sight” (ibid.). According to Brent Edwards’s interpretation, the double consciousness is simultaneously a gift and a curse, with the second sight – a special perspective allowing African Americans to acutely comprehend the intricacies of America – representing the positive aspect of it (xiv). Both of these themes, the second sight and double consciousness, are still visible in today’s hip-hop culture. For instance, the MC is occasionally seen as a nearly mythical character who, due to his or her ability to switch between the viewpoint of a typical urban youth and that of a supposedly neutral commentator, is able to recognize and verbalize underlying causalities of urban phenomena most people are blind to.<sup>7</sup> In addition, gangsta rappers in particular have to balance between two identities that are seemingly contradictory: the street-hardened delinquent and the professional entertainer. Again, I wish to point out that, in the commercial reality of the music industry, the former identity may in fact be a requirement for the latter. As pointed out by Michael Quinn, the capitalist society concurrently castigates gangsta rappers for their non-progressive message and commends their commercial success (78). Thus, black hip-hop artists seem to be financially pressured to portray characters that conform with racist stereotypes in order to be included in the respected caste of hard-working and thriving citizens manifesting the American Dream. Harking back to Du Bois’s depiction of the inextricable inner conflict between two incompatible identities, wealthy rappers identifying with a gangsta lifestyle simultaneously assume the roles of a good American and a bad African. I will return to the topic of delinquent identity in due time, but before the complexity of the theme can be fully appreciated, a more general discussion of identity construction in the inner-city context is needed.

Although people are, at least in the Western discourse of free will, generally understood to

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Nas frequently refers to himself with such epithets as ‘the prophet’, ‘The Golden Child’, and ‘Nastradamus’ and talks about his ability to see hidden truths. Likewise, several other rappers make constant references to their ‘third eyes’, a metaphor with a marked similarity to Du Bois’s ‘second-sight’.

purposely steer their own lives, in reality identity construction is heavily modulated by the spatial context. According to Ronald Sundstrom, identity is dependent on spatial factors, such as affluence or lack thereof, affecting physical and mental health and available opportunities to such a degree that “place, through these effects, inhabits us” (91). As noted by Giddens, personal choices one makes regarding, for instance, clothing, eating, and behavior function as building blocks for self-identity (81). However, he also argues that the great amount of possible modes of acting does not imply that all options are available for everyone, since in practice lifestyles are shaped “by group pressures and the visibility of role models, as well as socioeconomic circumstances” (82), which in the ghetto context are notably different from, say, the suburbs. Harvey proposes that the urban citizens’ “cultural values are affected by . . . the opportunities created in the city environment” (83). The implications that such theories have for the urban identities demonstrated in hip-hop culture are far-reaching on account of hip-hop’s preoccupation with the ghetto. The central question here is: if the surrounding conditions have such a profound role in the individual development, how does the association with the ghetto – a place characterized by lack of opportunities and outside contact – affect black identity construction, and how is this reflected in hip-hop? Harvey notes that, in order to be able to effectively utilize the available urban resources, a person living in an inner-city area requires a different set of cognitive skills than, for example, his or her suburban counterpart (82). As pointed out by Massey and Denton, the level of racial isolation experienced by American inner-city blacks inevitably leads to extreme alienation from the dominant cultural norms (160). This divergence in ways of thinking and acting creates a base for a cultural difference. Growing up in the ghetto teaches its inhabitants to be hard, cynical, and suspicious towards other individuals as well as institutions (ibid. 172). Although this separation from the dominant values is mainly judged negatively by the rest of America, within the ghetto context the unorthodox modes of behavior displayed by a number of inner-city blacks may be seen to represent a rational response to the harsh reality (ibid. 165-166). When negotiating the boundaries of acceptable behavior in a public space,

many ghetto dwellers adhere to a loose guideline known as the ‘code of the streets’. According to Elijah Anderson, this set of informal rules follows the law of retaliation (“eye for an eye”), and persons known or assumed to be able to exact revenge on transgressors gain respect (*Code of the Street* 10). Due to the relatively weak law enforcement in the ghetto, people are also deemed responsible for their own safety (ibid.). Rap lyrics frequently manifest this so-called ghetto culture adapted to the inner-city conditions, and, as rap is listened to by both black and white audiences, also white Americans come in contact with this side of their home country. Thus, hip-hop in itself forms a virtual space where the racially and spatially formulated identities are juxtaposed.

In few issues is the clash between African American ghetto culture and the wider society more conspicuous than regarding attitudes toward imprisonment. I suggested earlier the prevalence of crime in rundown urban areas as an explanatory factor to the correlation between incarceration and race in America. However, backed up by two separate studies, Kitwana argues that African Americans do not necessarily commit substantially more crimes than whites but are simply arrested and prosecuted more often, as well as given longer sentences (64). Be that as it may, the fact remains that blacks are statistically overrepresented in the American criminal justice system; according to Devah Pager, nearly one third of black males are expected to be imprisoned in their lifetime, with 12 percent of under 30-year-old African American men currently in prison (3). Two interrelated conclusions concerning black culture and imprisonment may be drawn from these statistics. Firstly, prison as a socially constructed place is likely to carry a different set of meanings for ghetto blacks than for the rest of America, which must be kept in mind when encountering references to incarceration or prison culture in rap lyrics. Secondly, such high numbers are certain to have a profound effect on black inner-city identities, first and foremost because the massive incidence of criminality cannot be reasonably explained in terms of personal failure without relying on essentialist views of African Americans as inherently lacking in moral fiber. When the influence on spouses, children, relatives, and neighbors of the imprisoned blacks is taken into account, it is

clear that a phenomenon with such a wide impact on the black communities must be somehow integrated as a part of an urban black identity. There are two obvious ways to achieve this: either to internalize the dominant view of blacks as a problem race or eschew the typical conception of incarceration as stigmatizing sign of personal shortcomings. Therefore, it is not surprising that, as stated by Kitwana, the lines between prison culture, street culture and African American youth culture in general have blurred, which can be detected in the thematic changes within hip-hop culture (77).

In his discussion of the prison system as an institution, Michel Foucault claims that incarceration not only fails to diminish criminality but in fact produces delinquents (265-266). His point is obviously not to claim that prisons create crime as a phenomenon, but that their function is to help formulate a mental map of criminality and associate it with a criminal class – to produce “the delinquent as a pathologized subject” (277). Defining crime as a deviancy committed only by a certain group of individuals also determines what is *not* to be counted as an illegality: most importantly, the abuse of power by the authorities. In the American context, criminality is evidently defined using a racial and spatial framework. Elizabeth Hinton convincingly argues that the supposedly preventive official policies targeting those labeled as “potentially criminal” have in effect “criminalized urban youth of color by drawing class and geographical distinctions between types of delinquency” (810). As an example of the practical results of such actions, the majority of those receiving a prison sentence for drug possession are black, although blacks comprise a minority of the substance-using population (Kitwana 53). The construction of the urban black youths as a menacing criminal component of American society has had a significant impact on their self-images; as noted by Quinn, “[f]or some groups, delinquents clearly are not a dangerous other, but are instead most demonstrably themselves” (73). This means that, for a segment of urban black population, crime has ceased to represent an alien and frightful element in society. In hip-hop, this is perhaps most notably present in gangsta rap.

The commercial factors and popularity of the gangsta rap subgenre notwithstanding, it is clear that rappers do not portray criminal characters only to benefit financially from the white America's infatuation with urban tales of violence and desperation. Indeed, Rose argues that if hip-hop music's intended purpose was to simply satisfy white voyeurism, its ghetto imagery would not have to be as detailed and complex as it is, and therefore it may be concluded that rap lyrics are clearly targeted for an audience capable of interpreting ghettocentric messages (*Black Noise* 12). Regarding the significance of rap for inner-city listeners, I have previously alluded to hip-hop's role as a component of ethnic identity for black ghetto dwellers, but I must now discuss in detail how the gangsta tropes in particular connect to African American identity. Gangsta rappers identifying with their squalid surroundings quite surprisingly succeed in "constructing a relatively coherent identity out of the urban debris" (Forman 198). Rose points to a psychological benefit of a gangsta identity by suggesting that "the ghetto badman<sup>8</sup> posture-performance" functions as a mental shield against the hardships experienced by inner-city blacks (*Black Noise* 12). It follows that gangsta posturing is not likely to be a mere symptom of a deviant ghetto identity, but rather an active method of dealing with adverse conditions. However, in order to understand how the destructive and predatory behavior depicted in gangsta lyrics may aid to construct a functional self-identity, one needs to be familiar with the historical background of such characters in African American tradition.

In *Stagolee Shot Billy*, Cecil Brown argues that gangsta rap represents a modern reiteration of the story of Stagolee, a mythical outlaw character frequently referred to in American blues tradition (4). Stagolee's materialistic and recklessly violent pimp persona, with his obsessive attention to articles of clothing that carry special significance for his fellow-inhabitants of the slum environment, certainly bears a striking resemblance to today's gangsta portrayal. Reminiscent of the modern hip-hop convention of mixing facts and fiction, the embellished legend of Stagolee (also spelled Stagger Lee and Stag-O-Lee) is most likely based on an actual historical person, Lee

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<sup>8</sup> In the context of African American oral culture, 'badman' denotes an unlawful character who is antisocial and feared, yet admired for his strength.

Shelton, who shot and murdered a black man named Billy Lyons in 1895 (Brown 3). Despite the obvious irony of Stagolee's violent deed being targeted against another African American, Brown's book emphasizes the significance of Stagolee and other similar badman figures as symbols of opposition against white authority. According to Brown, Stagolee is a prototype for antihero characters, "who embodies and perpetuates a counterculture" (13).<sup>9</sup> On the whole, Brown's argumentation is burdened by factual errors that weaken its overall credibility,<sup>10</sup> but the tenacity of his central claim that Stagolee forms "a metaphor that structures the life of black males from childhood through maturity" (2) nevertheless deserves to be considered.

Providing support to the view that a seemingly despicable criminal figure may have an important function as a countercultural metaphor, Mich Nyawalo explains that, in the post-emancipation America where racial oppression was within the bounds of the law and most lynchings of blacks went unpunished, Stagolee's celebrated status as an outlaw hero drew attention to the legal system and questioned its integrity (466). Along similar lines, Quinn notes that gangsta rap uses delinquency to formulate a black identity, and, within the ghetto context, embracing the stereotypical views of black criminality is seen as "a real response to a lack of power" (71). I now come back to Rose's argument about the badman character being used as protection against urban adversities. In essence, identification with the gangsta culture by a number of segregated blacks may be seen as an attempt to break free from the social stigma of a worthless underclass by creating an alternative value system that allows them to exercise agency. As remarked by Krohn and Suazo, this is evident in gangsta rap, which uses misogyny, promotion of drug use, and violence "as a way to achieve empowerment through symbolic verbal action" (140). Both the traditional Stagolee tales as well as modern gangsta stories often have tragic endings, but more importantly, they also show

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9 It is worth noting here that the mythical outlaw hero is not an exclusively black trope. For instance, examples of wronged heroic figures operating above the law in search of justified revenge are abundant in wider American culture.

10 For example, he calls Grandmaster Flash's "The Message" from 1982 "the first rap" (Brown 92), although at that point rap songs had been recorded and sold commercially for several years. In the same passage, he fails to recognize that Grandmaster Flash was the name of the DJ, not the vocalist, and consequently, the lyrics were not written by Flash.

empowering examples of African Americans who, according to rapper Ice-T quoted by Quinn, “don’t take no shit from nobody” (72). In his discussion on the appeal of ghetto-themed crime films, Liam Kennedy makes an analogous point by noting that the violent black characters’ appeal to African American viewers is based on them “challenging white powers and taking control of urban space” (130). Also Forman interprets the violent rhetoric of gangsta rap and the hyperbolic depictions of crime-ridden neighborhoods in terms of a power struggle; according to him, they indicate “control through domination, ghetto style” (197). As mentioned in the previous section, most rappers exhibit strong local pride, but in gangsta rap local identity is occasionally manifested by hostile territoriality. Such attitude can be made intelligible with the help of Massey’s view that “drawing of boundaries is an exercise of power” (*A Place in the World?* 69). From this notion it follows that power is used when urban blacks are closed in ghettos, but also gangsta rappers use power when construing their neighborhoods as urban battlegrounds too dangerous for outsiders to enter. However, due to the level of racial isolation in the inner cities, much of this violent and desperate struggle touches mostly other blacks while being largely ignored by the wider society. As argued by Massey and Denton, segregation forces urban blacks to “bear the social costs of their own victimization” (16). Gangsta rap commonly presents the ghetto as an environment where racial solidarity is incompatible with one’s own interests. ‘The urban jungle’ and ‘the survival of the fittest’ are oft-repeated metaphors in rap, and within such framework, portraying oneself as the predator, rather than the prey, signals determination to control one’s own fate.

Although the badman figure has been a prominent part of African American, as well as wider American culture for well over a century, the antisocial behavior present in the modern gangsta culture is arguably unprecedented. Anderson writes: “(i)n his alienation and use of violence, the contemporary poor young black male is a new social type peculiar to postindustrial urban America” (*Against the Wall* 6). Suggesting a connection between the nihilistic mentality and the exceptional social conditions, the birth of gangsta rap in the 1980s coincides with a time period

when, as pointed out by Quinn, the homicide rate for young African American men nearly doubled within a decade (65). Thus, despite the obvious similarities between the century-old Stagolee stories and the contemporary representations of criminal characters in hip-hop, gangsta posturing cannot be explained away as a manifestation of African American tradition. Neither is it an inescapable logical consequence of segregation. Rather, I wish to combine these two partial explanations into a more dynamic model and suggest that the appeal of the culturally familiar badman figure emanates from the ruthlessness of the postindustrial urban context which may make assuming such a persona seem a fitting response to the surrounding reality. According to my suggestion, gangsta stories may serve a similar function in the contemporary context as did the badman narratives in the Jim Crow era. As Nyawalo points out, the ideologies that affect the lyrical content of rap music “cannot simply be seen as the external by-products of certain social conditions, but rather they must be viewed as operating *with* and *within* a given social reality” (462, emphasis in original). In the social reality of the American ghetto, seeking empowerment through delinquent identity is a compelling option, and yet it is essentially a personal choice – albeit selected from a limited amount of options available in the inner city – that divides black Americans both in general and among those identifying with hip-hop culture. It is quite obvious that resisting oppression by attacking, as put by Krohn and Suazo, “racism with more racism” is not without its problems (140). Anderson, while acknowledging that the badman image “can serve . . . as an important defensive strategy for the black male”, also notes that it sustains racial stereotypes and hinders upward mobility, and thus many African Americans deliberately distance themselves from any stereotypical manifestations of street culture (*Against the Wall* 7). As a logical consequence of the self-referential nature of rap, this dichotomy is apparent within hip-hop music itself, with the ghetto often serving as the battlefield where the conflicting worldviews of gangsta rap and conscious rap collide.

Smith observes a generational difference between the politically conscious rappers of the 1980s, who endeavored to expose the social ills of the inner cities in order to eradicate them, and



the gangstas of the 1990s, who sold bleak ghetto images as a commodity (346). As mentioned previously, in mainstream rap this shift in attitude has continued through the following decades with each subsequent generation of new artists becoming even more nihilistic than the previous. From the perspective of sociology, such evolution is not only unexceptional but in fact quite predictable. For ghetto dwellers, self-assessment against the impossible-to-reach societal standards is psychologically taxing, which creates the need for them to position themselves against the dominant values (Massey and Denton 172). The position of direct opposition is nevertheless still based on and defined by those dominant views. However, as described by Massey and Denton, the continual isolation and poverty experienced by ghetto blacks have caused, generation by generation, their values and attitudes to “become progressively less connected to those prevailing elsewhere in the United States” (ibid.). Gangsta rappers and conscious rappers alike rarely address such underlying mechanisms directly. Instead, gangsta rap prioritizes the right to instant gratification by any means necessary and offers empowerment but simultaneously strengthens negative racial stereotypes, whereas conscious rap emphasizes the racial aspect of identity construction over the spatial but frequently fails to put forward any other solutions for the current predicament faced by urban black Americans than that already offered by the white hegemony: namely, personal responsibility. It is noteworthy that many conscious rappers target a notable amount of their lyrics directly against gangsta rappers and black-on-black violence and in the process unknowingly buttress the myth of African Americans as a problem race. As Rose points out, despite the well-meaning motivation of such statements against black self-destruction, the uncritical promotion of a “self-help agenda fit[s] comfortably into the social pathology discourse” (140). This is to say that the premise of the most acute issue being the disorderly behavior of blacks rather than their economic and social predicament is left unquestioned. Ironically, here pro-black rap comes fairly close to the conservative right’s often criticized practice of blaming the victim. Based on observations such as these, I would argue that Du Bois’s double consciousness remains as relevant a concept today as it

was a century ago.

Whenever considering the differences between the subgenres of rap music, it is of essence to realize that the artists do not necessarily label themselves as gangstas or conscious rappers, nor do they resolutely follow the subgeneric conventions. Most importantly for the current discussion, Nas cannot be neatly placed in the category of conscious hip-hop despite his Afrocentricity and critical commentary on social issues. While he frequently emphasizes his ghetto perspective and portrays himself as a remorseless criminal, the label of gangsta rapper is similarly ill-fitting for him. The themes concerning these subgenres discussed in this chapter offer a useful framework for placing his artistic choices in a context, which is why I have examined them, especially gangsta rap, in considerable detail. However, in the following two chapters, I shall investigate Nas's lyrics not primarily as examples of any particular subgenre but as a way to gain a glimpse into the challenges faced by an urban black man.

### 3. “New York State of Mind”: The Construction of Ghetto Identity

In this chapter my task is twofold. In section 3.1, I shall analyze some illustrative examples of Nas’s early lyrics in order to extract a rudimentary overall picture of how he portrays the social reality of New York’s Queensbridge Houses in the early 1990s when he started his professional career as a rapper. The primary goal of this effort is to form a basis for my subsequent analysis of Nas’s identity construction by focusing on a few key points that appear most relevant in regards to the accepted rules of conduct, attitudes, and practices in the ghetto environment, which can be seen as significant for the shaping of an inner-city identity. Having done that, I move on to the narrator himself and examine Nas’s self-representations, seeking connections between his self-portrayal and the previously discussed themes concerning the social construction of the ghetto. This endeavor constitutes section 3.2. I hypothesize that this approach will provide support to an anti-essentialist argument that identity construction in the ghetto is governed by the spatial context to a notable degree.

Different individuals react to the same environment in various ways. Elijah Anderson divides the denizens of impoverished inner cities into two categories which he calls, following the nomenclature used by ghetto residents themselves, ‘decent’ and ‘street’ (or ‘ghetto’) (*Code of the Street* 35). As was explained in the previous chapter, stressful ghetto conditions may elicit alienation from the dominant societal values, gradually deepening and spreading with each consecutive generation forced to deal with segregation and poverty. The terms ‘decent’ and ‘street’ are used to mark the level of such alienation: people remaining fairly close to values that most Americans share, such as diligence and helpfulness, are labeled decent, whereas residents blatantly opposing the dominant norms and prioritizing their own personal gain are seen to represent a street orientation. This division is not a strict dichotomy; as Anderson points out, many ghetto inhabitants learn to “code-switch”, which entails changing one’s behavior according to the current situation (ibid. 36). Both ends of this behavioral spectrum are represented in Nas’s early lyrics, although the

street mentality mostly remains the more prominent of the two. In the current chapter, as well as in chapter 4, I use these terms as descriptive labels following the definitions given above, and thus my terminology is not to be understood to represent any value judgment on my part.

When assessing the image of inner-city life provided by Nas, it should be remembered that, as discussed in section 2.1, the conceptualization of space is highly subjective. As a consequence, Nas's take on Queensbridge, while certainly of great significance in regards to the construction of his own identity, is not the only possible way of perceiving the ghetto environment and its influence. It must also be noted that, based on the biographical information available, it seems highly unlikely that Nasir Jones, despite his frequent references to real-life events and persons, has actually participated in the majority of the activities that Nas, the narrator, describes. In addition, the lyrical content of one song may often contradict that of others. This may seem too obvious a point to bring up, but given the tradition of mixing personal experiences with wider social considerations in hip-hop music (which is manifested in such tropes as using a first-person narrator to emphasize the MC's status as a communal spokesperson), the intentionally blurred boundary between the artist and the narrator can appear perplexing for a person not well versed in the characteristics of rap music. Discussing the use of a badman persona in representation of shared inner-city issues, Nyawalo writes: "the 'I' of the badman and the 'I' of the artist become interwoven" (469). This means that personal representation and communal representation do not simply alternate but are fused together. Rose connects this phenomenon to African American oral tradition, in which the role of original authorship is seen inconsequential (*Black Noise* 86). However, the issue is further complicated by the fact that rappers do emphasize also their own contribution to the cultural continuum by frequently referencing to themselves, which merges the composer and performer together (Rose, *Black Noise* 87). As a result, a rapper employs his or her unique voice even when reciting borrowed words. Because of these issues, and for the sake of simplicity, I use 'Nas' synonymously with 'the narrator' in my analysis. In consequence, my view of his identity is based

on how he has chosen to portray himself, and thus it stays close to the definition of identity as a description or a narrative of one's perceived position in the relevant cultural framework.

Although my analysis does not follow a strict chronological order of Nas's work, most of the excerpts investigated in this chapter come from *Illmatic*. This is due to the gradual thematic shift in Nas's lyrics: his debut album *Illmatic* mostly deals with issues of inner-city life, whereas his recent work is more concerned with wider social questions. Nevertheless, Nas never completely abandons his ghetto perspective even after years of being a celebrated artist, and, additionally, indications of his ability to negotiate the boundaries of ghetto mentality are visible early on.

### **3.1 Construction of the Ghetto**

As can be deduced from the recognizable sound of a passing railroad car opening the introductory track "The Genesis", *Illmatic* is firmly anchored in the urban context of New York City. Starting from the anguished "N.Y. State of Mind", the first actual song after the prologue, *Illmatic* unfolds like a series of vivid, if somewhat chaotic images of inner-city life. On his debut album, Nas's narratives rarely take the form of coherent stories with clear beginnings and endings; rather, he presents the listener with vignettes tied together by a common theme or mood. His point of view is seldom removed from the Queensbridge Housing Projects, and very few sites besides the public spaces of his neighborhood are mentioned, aside from the recurring references to prison. Violence and danger are presented as natural characteristics of these places, as demonstrated by the matter-of-fact tone in the opening couplet of "Represent": "Straight up, shit is real, and any day could be your last in the jungle. Get murdered on the humble, guns'll blast, niggers tumble." The metaphor of 'jungle', which is referred to on several occasions, carries connotations to the concept of survival of the fittest, a principle which has to be accepted in order to strive in the ghetto. The idea is far from novel; in fact, as noted by Forman, "the jungle is a long-standing thematic concept" as a shorthand for the city, which has appeared in numerous popular works and can be considered "common, even

clichéd” (91). Although the metaphor has an obvious connection to the African origins of black inner-city inhabitants, Forman argues that the real motivation behind employing the jungle discourse is the allusion to “the law of the jungle” (92). This is certainly true on *Illmatic*, where Nas makes numerous references to the predatory behavior of the inner-city population.

In addition to the risk of gun violence, the street-oriented ghetto dwellers are perpetually fearful of ‘jakes’ (the police) and, according to Nas’s rather paranoid depiction, under constant surveillance by the law enforcement: “The streets is filled with undercovers, homicide chasing brothers, the Ds<sup>11</sup> on the roof trying to watch us and knock us, and killer coppers even come through in helicopters” (“Represent”). Despite the apparent danger from all directions, Nas seems to spend a considerable portion of his average day on the streets; in fact, he claims to be a “street dweller who’s always on the corner” (*ibid.*). He is not alone in this preference, and the public spaces are repeatedly described as being crowded to the brim by the criminal elements of the neighborhood. For example, in “N.Y. State of Mind”, he claims the sleepless city to be “full of villains and creeps”, and, similarly, in “Represent”, he talks about the street corners being “full of mad criminals.” As demonstrated by the repetition of such phrases as ‘full of’ and ‘filled with’, Nas often discusses the ghetto experience in spatial terms, which is especially evident in “N.Y. State of Mind.”

In the beginning of “N.Y. State of Mind”, before launching into a feverish report of street life, Nas seems to be, oddly enough, hesitating for a moment. Following a typical convention in rap songs, he first introduces himself by stating the place he hails from. Rather than naming his borough or city, though, he chooses to utilize a spatial metaphor and claims to originate from “the fucking dungeons of rap, where fake niggers don’t make it back”, which can be read as a boastful reference to his underground status, suggesting that he is willing to represent his people by ‘keeping it real’ (in the spatially defined meaning discussed in section 2.1). However, after the apparently improvised introduction, he falls silent and continues with a much lower, timid voice: “I don’t know

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11 Most likely a reference to the DEA (The Drug Enforcement Administration).

how to start this shit, yo.”<sup>12</sup> This seemingly failed introduction gives the impression that an emotionally troubling element in his own spontaneous words made him momentarily lose his train of thought and confidence. The metaphor of the perilous “dungeon” where his less ‘real’ counterparts are apt to lose their way, as well as his own reaction to his choice of words, introduce a central theme in “N.Y. State of Mind”: inner-city confinement and its psychological effects.

In *Born to Use Mics*, Sohail Daulatzai correctly argues – albeit without going into details – this reference to a dungeon to represent one of several allusions pointing to an intense feeling of claustrophobia in “N.Y. State of Mind” (34). Some of these hints are conspicuous depictions of the dangerous, yet inescapable conditions, such as Nas’s mentions of stray bullets and “niggers . . . running through the block shooting.” The stressful situation, though providing Nas with material for his writing, also seems to place immense strain on his mental well-being: “I got so many rhymes I don’t think I’m too sane, life is parallel to hell but I must maintain”. Showing such vulnerability is somewhat atypical for a street-oriented rapper, yet there are several, similarly forthright references to the connection between the ghetto and mental health also elsewhere on *Illmatic*; for instance, Nas says in “One Love”: “You see, the streets had me stressed something terrible, fucking with them corners have a nigger up in Bellevue.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to straightforward commentary on the effects of ghetto life, in “N.Y. State of Mind”, Nas also describes his surroundings with a figurative analogy that doubles the earlier reference to a dungeon that cannot be easily escaped: “Each block is like a maze full of black rats trapped”. While the mental image of distressed animals experimented on may evoke sympathy, likening people to rats also alludes to the sub-human status of ghetto blacks. Nas’s simile suggests that urban concentration, which forces the frustrated ghetto inhabitants to bear the brunt of the omnipresent negative externalities their predicament produces, has the dehumanizing potential to reduce people to the level of instinctual animal behavior. He continues

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12 Spontaneity is such a respected quality in rap that in many rap songs the vocal track is left in a seemingly unedited state, and it may thus include impromptu couplets, as well as the rapper’s remarks or questions targeted to the audio engineer or the producer. This is common to the extent where it is impossible to tell whether this residue from the recording process is actually spontaneous or strategically placed in the song to create a credible atmosphere of sincerity.

13 New York’s Bellevue Hospital Center offers psychiatric treatment for acute cases.

with another spatial observation: “plus the Island<sup>14</sup> is packed, from what I hear in all the stories when my peoples come back, black.” According to Nas’s vision, not only is the ’hood characterized by an extreme lack of space, but so is also the only imaginable place his peers leave the ghetto for: the prison.

In “N.Y. State of Mind”, the motifs of compactness and entrapment are repeated even in lines concerning inanimate objects. For instance, such elements are present in Nas’s description of a life-threatening situation caused by his submachine gun malfunctioning during an armed conflict between two street groups: “Gave another squeeze, heard it click, yo, my shit is *stuck*. Try to cock it, it wouldn’t shoot, now I’m in danger. Finally pulled it back and saw three bullets *caught up in the chamber*” (emphasis added). His obviously anxious reaction to such a dangerous mishap aside, also a mundane example of an object being physically trapped is met with displeasure; in the second verse, Nas identifies with a cassette tape in risk of being stuck in a faulty player: “Never put me in your box<sup>15</sup> if your shit eats tapes.” However, in this particular case, the metaphor of entanglement is juxtaposed with the preceding couplet pointing to the important role of his self-expression: “I’m taking rappers to a new plateau, through rap slow. My rhyming is a vitamin, held without a capsule.” Although such braggadocio comparing the artist to other rappers can be argued to be fairly common in rap, there are several significant points to be noted here. Firstly, by referring to the “new plateau” Nas suggests that, even within the hip-hop culture largely built around the concept of ‘real’, the level of brutal honesty in his ghetto depiction is unprecedented. Secondly, his reference to a vitamin hints at the positive effect of hip-hop culture as a health-supporting element which may help both Nas himself and his listeners to maintain their equilibrium in the trying conditions. Finally, among the recurrent images of people and objects being tightly enclosed, the open space and the lack of encapsulation explicitly mentioned in this couplet draw attention to their potential significance in the context. Although drawing such a conclusion requires some speculative

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14 Rikers Island, New York City’s correctional complex.

15 Boombox, a portable cassette player.



interpretation, this can be read as one of the early examples of Nas pointing to hip-hop as an outlet with a potential to set one free from physical or mental boundaries. In general, it is quite impossible to determine whether the constant repetition of expressions referring to confinement is deliberate or subconscious on the artist's part, but the uniformity of these metaphors nevertheless strengthens the powerful atmosphere of spatial anxiety that echoes on all tracks on *Illmatic*.

Nas's depiction of the stress caused by lack of space is in accordance with Sundstrom's claim that difficult spatial conditions have a negative impact on mental health, especially in segregated areas with high levels of poverty (91). A possible mediating factor for this connection was mentioned in passing above: namely, negative externalities. As discussed in the previous chapter, constant proximity<sup>16</sup> to the deleterious consequences of concentrated poverty, such as crime and violence, causes all ghetto inhabitants to be affected by them, regardless of their own affinity or lack thereof for such activities. The theme of being unable to avoid the effects of criminality and, specifically, escape the ever-present lethal danger has been visible in Nas's lyrics all through his career. In fact, although depictions of the harsh conditions in inner cities typically constitute a large part of the content matter in ghettocentric rap, the unusual fervor with which he returns to the rather specific topic of collateral damage even as late as 2012 on *Life is Good* suggests that it may have some personal significance for him. Because of this somewhat uncommon emphasis, the themes of danger and lack of safety deserve closer examination.

According to *Illmatic*, there are hardly any safe spaces in Queensbridge, a borough where a person may be murdered over an item of clothing: "I reminisce on park jams, my man was shot for his sheep coat" ("Memory Lane"). The few occasions on *Illmatic* where Nas mentions home (or the equivalent in rap parlance, 'crib') highlight notable differences between the common understanding of the word and how it is construed in the ghetto context. As noted by Massey, the concept of 'home' is ordinarily understood to carry connotations of tranquility and protection, but such notion

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<sup>16</sup> Harvey uses 'proximity' specifically to denote closeness to phenomena that are not useful (the antonym of which is 'accessibility') (57). My usage of the term here is very close to his.

does not necessarily hold true for all groups of people (*A Place in the World?* 64). Indeed, in “One Love”, Nas explains that when the mental load of his everyday life becomes unbearable, he temporarily leaves his neighborhood: “So I be ghost from my projects . . . A two day stay, you may say I need the time alone to relax my dome, no phone, left the nine<sup>17</sup> at home.” Instead of depicting his home as a place of retreat and safety, Nas refers to the very lack of respite therein, which is further emphasized by the mention of leaving his weapon behind. In the same vein, he also talks about “bullet holes left in [his] peepholes” (“N.Y. State of Mind”). There is a strong possibility that the word sounding like “peepholes” is actually “peoples”, pronounced in an unorthodox manner in order to form an assonance with the phrases “street clothes” and “defeat foes” appearing in the subsequent line. However, both alternatives have a similar effect: they underline the distressing proximity to unpredictable violence that cannot be escaped.

The bulk of such violence seems to be linked to the widespread underground economy, most notably distribution of illegal drugs. “I think of crime, when I’m in a New York state of mind”, Nas raps in “N.Y. State of Mind”, sketching Queensbridge Houses as a contested area where various street gangs frequently quarrel over the control of the lucrative areas for drug sales. The high population density translates to a large amount of potential customers for the local illegal substance distributors, but it also means competition from other similar groups seeking to expand their clientele. Alluding to a set of shared rules being followed, Nas uses the word ‘game’ to refer to the drug trade, but recently he has noted gradual changes occurring: “It’s like the game ain’t the same; got younger niggers pulling the triggers, bringing fame to their name and claim some corners, crews without guns are goners.” Apparently, use of deadly force has become an essential part of the business and a natural practice in dealing with territorial disputes. The lyrics also reveal that respect in the ‘hood is earned through homicide, but, perhaps even more disturbingly, the armed participants of the drug-related altercations endeavoring to elevate their street status are notably

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17 9mm handgun.

younger than before.<sup>18</sup> As described by Anderson, most residents of the troubled inner-city areas come into acceptance with their neighborhoods being dangerous places where survival requires a certain amount of personal strength and sufficient knowledge of the rules (*Code of the Street* 30), which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, are commonly known as the code of the street.

Abiding to the code, Nas has learned to be constantly aware of his surroundings in the urban jungle in order to avoid being preyed upon: “I never sleep, ’cause sleep is the cousin of death” (“N.Y. State of Mind”). However, he has become uncomfortably aware of the ripple effects caused by the violent lifestyle, especially when they involve underage denizens of his neighborhood. As a concrete and a rather extreme example of negative externalities arising from crime, in the passage concerning the aforementioned shootout where his weapon jams, Nas raps: “Heard a few chicks scream, my arm shook, couldn’t look.” Here he acknowledges the possibility that, while attacking his enemies with an unreliable automatic weapon, he may have accidentally injured by-standers, but because he has to prioritize his own survival, he is unable to ascertain what happened. A moment later in the story, a new, similarly drastic situation arises: “So now I’m jetting to the building lobby, and it was full of children probably couldn’t see as high as I be.” It is not clear in the context whether the children being mixed in the armed skirmish are a part of the adversaries’ crew or present by happenstance, but, nevertheless, noticing the presence of minors in such an episode is the very observation urging Nas to remark that the rules of the game seem to have changed. Although the narrator himself is undeniably responsible for adding to the dire conditions of his inner-city neighborhood, as demonstrated by the several references to his use of firearms, he is also clearly bothered by the harmful consequences touching the whole community.

In “One Love” on *Illmatic*, Nas approaches the same subject from a slightly different perspective. In a letter relaying local news to an associate in prison, he says: “But yo, guess who got

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<sup>18</sup> Writing approximately five years after the release of *Illmatic*, Elijah Anderson observes a significant transition in street violence: according to him, firearms have always been present in the inner cities, but weapons being carried by street youths under the age of 15 is a relatively new phenomenon (*Code of the Street* 119).

shot in the dome piece?<sup>19</sup> Jerome’s niece, on her way home from Jones Beach.” Rather than presenting the victim of a shooting as a faceless casualty, she is given a cursory backstory, and her connection to the narrator is explained. Almost twenty years later, on *Life is Good*, Nas brings up an identical (most likely the very same) incident with some added commentary: “And for that girl who made it home, shot in the dome. How they gon’ kill that beautiful sister?” (“Accident Murderers”). Quite surprisingly, such mentions of collateral damage are rather scarce even in rap songs depicting the grittiness of street life, as exemplified by the fact that Rick Ross, who features as a guest artist in “Accident Murderers”, leaves the central topic of Nas’s verses and the chorus virtually untouched and chooses to rap about his drug use, weapons, and expensive cars instead. This tendency makes it even more noteworthy that, in “One Love”, Nas discusses the communal aspect of criminal lifestyle explicitly. In the final verse of the song, he describes a conversation between himself and Shorty Doo-Wop, a twelve-year-old drug dealer from his ’hood wearing a bulletproof vest and claiming to “pack a black trey deuce” (i.e., carry a .32 caliber handgun). In this situation, Nas clearly assumes the role of an older mentor trying to affect his community in a positive manner by warning his young comrade against reckless behavior, but the actual content of the advice he gives speaks volumes of the social reality in which the exchange takes place:

I had to school him, told him don’t let niggers fool him,  
 ’cause when the pistol blows the one that’s murdered be the cool one.  
 Tough luck when niggers are struck, families fucked up.  
 Could’ve caught your man, but didn’t look when you bucked up.  
 Mistakes happen, so take heed,  
 never bust up at the crowd, catch him solo, make the right man bleed.

Strikingly, the fact that such a young person carries a firearm and feels the necessity to make decisions regarding use of lethal force is not questioned at all. Nas does note on the boy’s young age, apparently feeling responsible for educating him, and yet he completely abstains from trying to sway him from violence. Instead, he accepts the code of the street as an irrefutable premise and concentrates his efforts on minimizing unnecessary harm to outsiders by reminding Doo-Wop of the

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<sup>19</sup> Head.

human tragedy caused by brash actions. The moral issue arises purely from the possibility of stray bullets hitting persons deemed innocent, whereas the intended target's point of view or family are not given any consideration, which undoubtedly stems from the presumed certainty that Doo-Wop's opponents would have no qualms with using deadly force against the young drug dealer in turn. Despite the somewhat cynical pragmatism of his advice, in the context of the urban jungle, Nas seems to consider his guidance uplifting: "Words of wisdom from Nas, try to rise up above." Based on what can be gathered from *Illmatic*, the behavioral practices and moral guidelines that ghetto denizens follow are chiefly dictated by the characteristics of the space they operate in, and in turn, following the unforgiving code of the street contributes to the harsh conditions, completing the feedback loop.

The strong influence that Nas portrays ghetto conditions to have on the inhabitants, further amplified by the frequent mentions of impressionable children exposed to such environment, raises a question of the role of agency in a place where personal survival has to be given the highest priority. Supporting their argument with quantitative data, Massey and Denton maintain that poverty and isolation increase the odds of low academic and economic achievement regardless of personal attributes or abilities (179). Correspondingly, on *Illmatic*, Nas describes his neighborhood as a place where life choices are mostly governed by circumstances, and people have relatively little control over their future. Of course, it must be recalled from the discussion in the preceding theory chapter that the spatial effect is never directly causal; rather, the network of subjective and shared meanings, expectations, and behaviors associated with certain spaces influence decision making. For example, when Nas mentions having dropped out from high school in "Represent", he justifies his decision by explaining the frivolousness of formal education in ghetto conditions: "'cause life ain't shit but stress, fake niggers and crab<sup>20</sup> stunts, so I guzzle my Hennessy while pulling on mad blunts."<sup>21</sup> Since he feels his own actions cannot change the antisocial behavior of others or the fundamental

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20 For a discussion on the term 'crab', see 3.2.

21 'Blunts' are cigar wrappers (from Phillies Blunts) filled with cannabis.

principles of ghetto life, Nas sees relieving the psychological load with copious consumption of alcohol and cannabis as a more sensible option than investing in school education.

Although utilizing a genre-typical dichotomy dividing people to ‘real’ and ‘fake’, at times Nas also uses expressions that de-emphasize the role of personal traits as well as conscious decision making, as a result of which human actions in the ghetto space seem to turn into inherent characteristics of the space itself. For instance, in “Memory Lane”, he occasionally omits the human agents completely from his narrative and talks about having grown up in a place with “murderous nighntimes, knife fights, and blight crimes”, where his “window faces shootouts [and] drug overdoses” (note the connection to the earlier discussion concerning lack of safe spaces). Furthermore, attributing success in the underground drug economy to chance rather than any such advantageous traits as street smarts or toughness, Nas bluntly points out in “Memory Lane” that “pumping<sup>22</sup> for something, some’ll prosper, some fail.” Similarly, in “Life’s a Bitch”, he notes that “niggers [he] used to run with is rich or doing years in the hundreds” without specifying any other factors contributing to their differing fates than sheer luck or lack thereof, which somewhat deviates from the typical outlook associated with the metaphor of urban jungle by omitting the concept of survival of the fittest. According to Nas’s succinct explanation, as a natural and necessary consequence of living “among no roses, only the drama”, his own life is now defined by guns and drug use: “A nickel plate<sup>23</sup> is my fate, my medicine is the ganja”<sup>24</sup> (“Memory Lane”). However, perhaps the most salient example of Nas’s bleak views regarding diminished agency in the inner-city context is found on his second album *It Was Written*, in “I Gave You Power”, which gives an unusual and insightful glimpse into the constituents of ghetto identity and is for this reason discussed in detail in the next section.

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22 Selling drugs.

23 A metonym for a nickel-plated handgun.

24 Cannabis.

### 3.2 Ghetto Identity

In the current subchapter my aim is to analyze how the previously discussed inner-city context affects the formation of Nas's ghetto identity in his early lyrics. My analysis is mostly based on *Illmatic*, with a few contrasting excerpts taken from *It Was Written*. Although street life and criminality are prominent parts of Nas's self-portrayal on both *Illmatic* (1994) and *It Was Written* (1996), the general tone between these two albums is notably different. Whereas *Illmatic* is largely a melancholic account of a young black man spiraling inevitably towards a life of marginality and alienation, *It Was Written* borrows heavily from stereotypical gangster (rather than gangsta) imagery depicting luxurious lifestyle. There are several possible explanations for this rather rapid shift. Despite the critical acclaim received by *Illmatic*, its initial sales were relatively modest. As Rose points out, the content of rap is "heavily shaped by music industry demands" (*Black Noise* 104). In the temporal context of the mid-1990s, the commercial success of mafioso-themed rap on the East Coast and that of gangsta rap in the West, combined with the pressure – either internal or external – to exceed the sales of *Illmatic*, may have encouraged Nas to incorporate references to organized crime in his lyrics on *It Was Written*. That aside, to some extent the shift may also be reflective of an actual change in the artist's life situation – at least as far as imported vehicles and lavish lifestyle are concerned – adapted to fit a familiar cultural framework acquired from motion pictures and music. However, I will discuss this theme in greater detail later in this chapter, after outlining Nas's self-representation first on a more general level.

In a fashion typical for many rappers, Nas gives detailed accounts of his clothing and jewelry in several songs on *Illmatic*. According to "N.Y. State of Mind", he is an "addict for sneakers", and in "Halftime" he raps about being "a Nike-head", who wears "chains that excite the feds". Forman explains that, in the context of capitalist America, the emphasis on attire and accessories in hip-hop culture can be seen as "semiotic appropriation of the signs of wealth" (103). In this regard hip-hop fashion agrees with the wider societal norm of consumerism, esteeming

affluence and visible signs of it, although the particular items considered fashionable may differ notably from middle-class standards. However, Nas's mention of federal agents paying close attention to his jewelry suggests that the law enforcement presumes him to be involved in the underground drug economy simply on the basis of his appearance. As Anderson points out, also law-abiding young inner-city males often "admire drug dealers and emulate their style", which makes it challenging for outsiders to distinguish between criminal and non-criminal residents of the ghetto (*Code of the Street* 110). It is not disclosed in the lyrics whether the assumptions hit the mark, but such passages nevertheless demonstrate the blurred distinction between criminality and ghetto culture in general. This phenomenon also clarifies why seemingly irrelevant details concerning swagger and fashion choices may appear side by side with lyrics discussing delinquent identity, as is the case in "Represent": "Cold be walking with a bop and my hat turned back. Love committing sins, and my friends sell crack."

In addition to causing him to be targeted by the police, Nas's attire also speaks of his position among other ghetto residents. As mentioned in the previous section, Nas depicts his 'hood as a place where a person may be assaulted for seemingly mundane objects, such as a sheep coat. Thus, elevating one's self-esteem by wearing ostentatious clothing in the public spaces of the ghetto comes with a certain risk, as such items can be stolen. In "Halftime", Nas displays awareness of this danger by explicitly mentioning the possibility of being a victim of a robbery: "I drop jewels, wear jewels, hope to never run it."<sup>25</sup> Anderson stresses the symbolic significance of items stolen in street robberies, stating that their importance as tokens of strength may be far greater than their actual value in money, as they represent an ability to dominate others in public spaces (*Code of the Street* 75). This is to say that, whether stolen or bought, publicly displayed eye-catching items indicate a young man's readiness to not only obtain but also defend them, and thus, they function as symbols of toughness. Therefore, the fact that Nas never wears anything "less than Guess" ("Represent") not

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25 To 'run one's jewels' is to have one's chain robbed at gunpoint. The repetition of 'jewels' in the quote is a play on words: the first instance refers to the artistic quality of Nas's raps, the second to actual jewelry.



only announces a detail about his fashion taste but also points to his courage and fortitude.

On *Illmatic*, Nas presents himself as a formidable character both willing and capable to protect his personal safety and belongings, thus following the code of the street. As seen in the previous section, he makes frequent references to violence and use of firearms on *Illmatic*. A few of such passages describe situations classifiable as self-defense, whereas some others display predatory behavior. In “N.Y. State of Mind” the two are combined; he warns potential assailants that he is not “the type of brother made for you to start testing”, as he himself is sufficiently ruthless to rob people for their clothes: “Give me a Smith & Wesson, I have niggers undressing.” An aspect worth noting here is that, rather than referring to a weapon he owns, he urges the listener to supply him with a gun, repeating a similar request made in the first verse: “Bullet holes left in my peepholes,<sup>26</sup> I’m suited up in street clothes, hand me a nine and I’ll defeat foes.” Especially in the context of the aggression targeted against him and/or his peers depicted in the preceding line, this request seems to dare the listener to arm him and face the consequences, and thus it slightly blurs the boundary between actions the narrator regularly performs and what he claims to be prepared to do in frustration. This rather minute detail within these overt threats of violence gains significance from the social context of the inner city. As noted by Anderson, even ghetto residents identifying with decency rather than a street orientation frequently display aggressive and seemingly violent behavior in order to deter aggressors (*Code of the Street* 41-42). Therefore, these passages where Nas dares anyone to test his grit can be interpreted to represent a protective act intended to convey an image of toughness.

However, in addition to mere threats, “N.Y. State of Mind” also contains lines where Nas summarily dispatches a rival street group with the help of an automatic weapon: “The Mac<sup>27</sup> spit, lead was hitting niggers, one ran, I made him backflip.” Yet, also this passage is preceded by a couplet establishing the situation as self-defense and Nas himself as a probable victim, had he not

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<sup>26</sup> Possibly ‘peoples’, see the discussion in the previous section.

<sup>27</sup> M-10 submachine gun, commonly known as ‘Mac-10’.

acted swiftly: “Once they caught us off-guard, the Mac was in the grass, and I ran like a cheetah with thoughts of an assassin.” The reference to a cheetah evokes associations to the metaphor of urban jungle but with an unusual perspective: here physical prowess is needed to evade danger, suggesting that the predator may become the prey in an instant when two hunters meet. Although Nas boasts to be a “jungle survivor” (“Memory Lane”), he also seems to be aware of the precariousness of such position, as demonstrated by this life-threatening situation depicted in “N.Y. State of Mind”. Because of such awareness, he considers reaching his twentieth birthday “a blessing” and explains that his “physical frame is celebrated ’cause [he] made it one quarter through life” (“Life’s a Bitch”), which may appear quite striking from a more privileged point of view.

Forman notes that gangsta rappers who speak of alienation as a negative element prompting them to act criminally may also “expound their own versions of alienating power” in attempt to raise their own status by subjugating others and depreciating other ’hoods (197). As seen above, in a fashion similar to gangsta rappers, the *Illmatic*-era Nas obviously uses badman posturing to portray himself as a survivor. He generally refrains from the extreme displays of spatial dominance through wanton black-on-black violence frequently found in gangsta rap of the time period, although he does occasionally showcase aggressive territoriality. For instance, in “Represent”, he sends a warning to any outsiders trying to enter Queensbridge: “We all stare at the out-of-towners, they better break North before we get the four-pounders<sup>28</sup> and take their face off.” As another example of territorial behavior, in “One Love”, Nas pleads a comrade in prison to bide his time, as he believes they will be able to easily regain control of their old turf as soon as Nas’s accomplice is released: “But maintain, when you come home the corner’s ours. On the reals, all these crab niggers know the deal. When we start the revolution, all they probably do is squeal.” Here Nas’s tone comes close to that of gangsta rap; he and his crew are presented as the fit survivors of the urban jungle, who are able to overpower their competition due to their inherent fortitude. However, when analyzed more thoroughly, the passage also contains a subtle hint to the detrimental effects of ghetto confinement.

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28 A large-caliber handgun.

The pejorative ‘crab’ often used by Nas associates with so-called crab mentality, which, according to Jeremiah Lasquety-Reyes, “is named after the behaviour of crabs in a basket that try to climb out and in the process drag each other down so that none of them ever manage to get out” (74-75). The phrase ‘crabs in a basket’ originates in Filipino culture, but Lasquety-Reyes notes that it has also been used to describe African Americans (75). I wish to emphasize that the basket is an essential part of the metaphor: crabs show crab mentality only if artificially confined by humans. Thus, Nas’s term ‘crab’ adds a spatial element to the concept of jealousy; the desperation incited by confinement pits inner-city blacks against each other. On a general level, his lyrics displaying open hostility against other ghetto blacks can be seen as manifestations of a power struggle over self-esteem in the poverty-stricken environment.

The symbolic struggle and jealousy notwithstanding, the prevalence of violence, crime, and strife over the control of the city space in the overpopulated inner city depicted on *Illmatic* also has a more straightforward explanation, which is money. According to Massey and Denton, in the early 1980s, as many as 54% of all under-30-year-old black men living in large cities were without a steady job (73). Keeping in mind that the legal earning opportunities that do exist in inner-city areas are mostly low-wage positions, the wide-spread reliance on illegal sources of income, especially drug trade, seems to follow as an predictable result from the conditions. That said, it must be understood that the significance of money is not only practical but also simultaneously symbolic. As hinted at in the earlier discussion concerning clothing, wealth in itself is an important part of American culture. Anderson argues that economic self-reliance and the ability to sustain a family is a “traditional American mark of manhood”, which young men of the ghetto have been denied of by the lack of opportunities (*Code of the Street* 147). However, when Nas explains the need to secure a steady income by any means necessary, his plainspoken justification rises from basic needs rather than the symbolic value of self-reliance:

What up, niggers? How y’all? It’s Nasty, the villain.  
I’m still writing rhymes but besides that I’m chilling.

I'm trying to get this money, God, you know the hard times, kid.  
 Shit, cold be starving make you want to do crimes, kid. ("One Time 4 Your Mind")

The verse is presented as Nas's response to a person in the recording studio pleading him to "kick that for them gangsters." Referring to the shared experience of destitution with the addressees, Nas shows sympathy for his peers resorting to criminal methods for their income. He mentions his own rapping as a feasible source of money in the near future and continues by stating that he prefers it to criminal means: "But I'm a lamp, cause a crime couldn't beat a rhyme". Nevertheless, he introduces himself as "Nasty", a badman and a villain qualified to function as a spokesperson for the desperate ghetto denizens compelled to break the law. Although the song is mostly targeted at members of his own community, as evidenced by the terms of address ("niggers", "God",<sup>29</sup> "kid"), there is also a tinge of double consciousness in the bluntness of his rationale. From the point of view of the street-oriented peers he addresses, justifying the life choices they have made in such plain terms would be superfluous as they are already aware of their own predicament. However, two points must be kept in mind here: firstly, hip-hop serves as a communication channel observed by both ghetto dwellers as well as the wider society, and secondly, even listeners who have never experienced starvation are likely to understand its power as a motivator. Thus, Nas's down-to-earth explanation of the prevalence of crime in his neighborhood has the potential to evoke compassion also in the audience less familiar with the ghettocentric frame of mind rather than alienate it. In a similar fashion, Nas's depiction of his criminal activities in "The World is Yours" portrays him more as vulnerable and desperate than menacing:

I need a new nigger for this black cloud to follow,  
 'cause while it's over me it's too dark to see tomorrow.  
 Trying to maintain, I flip,<sup>30</sup> fill the clip to the tip.  
 Picturing my peeps not eating can make my heartbeat skip.

Again, criminal deeds are justified in highly practical terms: Nas's drug dealing, which requires him

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<sup>29</sup> Members of the religious organization known as the Five-Percent Nation call black men 'Gods' and black women 'Earths'. Although not officially affiliated with the movement, Nas often makes references to the Five-Percent Nation.

<sup>30</sup> Sell drugs.

to arm himself, is motivated by the torment of imagining his friends starving (which, of course, may be interpreted as a metaphor for poverty in general). As mentioned previously, Nas deviates from typical Staggolee posturing on *Illmatic* by repeatedly alluding to the painful mental load caused by the squalid conditions. His inability to “see tomorrow” speaks of debilitating depression, incited not only by his own predicament but that of others’ as well. Although worried for the well-being of his companions, Nas still wishes that the “black cloud” of hardships would pass on to “a new nigger” rather than simply dissolve, which is especially telling of the lack of hope that the situation could improve for ghetto blacks in general.

Based on *Illmatic*, becoming an outlaw is not a conscious decision for a young man from the ghetto but a logical end result of a socialization process starting from early childhood. According to Anderson, being surrounded by street-oriented adults, children who grow up on the street learn to defend themselves in an aggressive manner and, in some cases, forage for food and money (*Code of the Street* 49). Also in Nas’s description of his childhood, his initial contact with street life and a delinquent lifestyle happened at an early age:

I used to wake up every morning, see my crew on the block.  
Every day’s a different plan that had us running from cops.  
If it wasn’t hanging out in front of cocaine spots,  
we was at the Candy Factory, breaking the locks. (“Represent”)

Nas’s account describes an environment where the youth learn to feel enmity towards the police very early on. Such attitude may be well-grounded; Hinton describes a case where an 8-year-old inner-city boy was arrested for trespassing when playing at the playground of a school he attended (816). In Nas’s lyrics, the step from petty theft to a criminal identity is a rather small one due to the available role models and peer pressure. In “One Time 4 Your Mind”, Nas tells that he was attacked as a child for not abiding to the rules of inner-city conduct: “And I’m from Queensbridge . . . as a kid when I would say that out of town, niggers chased us.” Presenting the process as a natural progression, he explains that his experiences have since taught him to accept the rules of the ghetto and to act accordingly: “But now I know the time, got a older mind plus control a nine”. ‘Knowing

the time', i.e., being aware of and following the code of the street, is depicted as an essential part of growing up to be a ghetto survivor. Nas also seems to equate carrying a weapon for self-defense with maturity.

The impact of the street-oriented role models is underscored by the fact that in Nas's depiction of Queensbridge there are few appearances of people who are not drug dealers, other criminals, or somehow connected to the underground economy. Naturally, "fiends [who] fight to get crack" and "baseheads<sup>31</sup> trying to sell some broken amps" to support their habit ("N.Y. State of Mind") are not held in high regard by young Nas, but neither are the decent "old folks" who "pray to Jesús,<sup>32</sup> soaking their sins in trays of holy water" ("The World is Yours"). As described by Anderson, "righteousness [and] religion" are characteristics of "the decent daddy", a traditional strong role model who embodies "grit and backbone" in black communities (*Code of the Street* 182). In several songs on *Illmatic*, Nas lashes out at religion, questioning its ability to provide guidance or explanations for inner-city denizens. For instance, in "Represent" he interrupts his chilling report of the violent street life to comment on how meaningless religious faith is in the ghetto context: "Won't even run about gods, I don't believe in none of that shit, your facts are backwards. Nas is the rebel of the street corner, pulling the Tec<sup>33</sup> out the dresser, police got me under pressure." Unlike the previous generation, Nas relies more on weapons than prayers when dealing with the harshness of life.

Because Nas depicts crime as almost necessary in the prevalent conditions, delinquency seems to carry very little shame. Thus, it is no wonder that in this worldview also imprisonment has lost the stigma it has for the wider society. In "One Love", where the first two verses represent letters written to incarcerated partners, the gravest error that a convict is accused of is having allowed oneself to be arrested to begin with: "When the cops came you should have slid to my crib. Fuck it, black, no time for looking back, it's done." Thus, when advising against harboring regrets

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31 Addict of crack cocaine.

32 Nas uses the Spanish pronunciation.

33 Tec-9 semiautomatic pistol.

in such a situation, Nas is actually referring to the fact that his friend momentarily forgot to be watchful rather than to the criminal deed itself. While his unlucky comrades are in prison, Nas feels responsible for looking after their and their families' well-being to his best ability. In the first verse, he mentions that he "left a half a hundred" in his friend's prison commissary account. In the second verse, Nas tells that he has given his imprisoned friend's "mom dukes loot for kicks" (i.e., provided his mother with money to buy shoes) and also vents his own frustration at her sorrow: "I hate it when your mom cries, it kind of makes me wanna murder". As evidenced by the mention of Nas intervening in the activities of a person who has started "pumping on [Nas's friend's] block", it is strongly suggested that the money Nas uses to support his incarcerated friends and their families comes from the same drug operation his comrades were imprisoned for. Using drug money to provide for the members of the community emphasizes the ambivalence of drug trade as a phenomenon, which, in turn, makes incarceration seem more akin to an occupational hazard than a sign of moral failure. Furthermore, since Nas appears as a compassionate and a loyal friend who feels strongly not only for his street family but their relatives as well, street orientation and decency appear to be somewhat fused together in "One Love".

In addition to "One Love", which revolves around the theme of imprisonment, also several other songs on *Illmatic* contain references to incarceration. Despite not being a convict himself, imprisonment seems to be a significant part of the imagery Nas employs to assemble his identity. For example, he frequently portrays himself as a prisoner of a sort; he claims that "even [his] brain's in handcuffs" ("The World Is Yours") and that his "brain is incarcerated" ("One Time 4 Your Mind"), suggesting that being confined in the ghetto and living in constant fear is a prison-like form of existence as such. Furthermore, Nas frequently shows overt solidarity for people in prison; for instance, he begins the first verse in "Memory Lane" by stating that he raps for "listeners, bluntheads, fly ladies, and prisoners". There are traces of profound frustration in his gestures of sympathy, as shown by his desperate plan to aid an incarcerated comrade by "sneak[ing] a Uzi on

the Island in [his] army jacket lining” (“It Ain’t Hard To Tell”). Impossible as it may be to actually smuggle a firearm into a prison during a visit, the line itself functions as a symbol of deep empathy.

His strong identification with his imprisoned peers is made intelligible by the several passages suggesting that, despite his particular status as an MC, in some regard, he feels no different from any prison-bound ghetto youth. In “One Time 4 Your Mind”, he discusses his conflicting social identities as an artist and as a member of a problem population: “I’m new on the rap scene, brothers never heard of me. Yet I’m a menace, yo, police want to murder me.” The strong term ‘murder’ implies that the police’s motivation is more personal than professional. Despite portraying himself as an actual criminal in several other songs on *Illmatic*, “One Time 4 Your Mind” emphasizes Nas’s playful and artistic side and, as mentioned above, explicitly states that he prefers rhyming to crime. Thus, in this particular context, no other pretext is given to the exaggerated aggression on the part of the law enforcement officers than Nas’s ghetto origins, which portrays antagonism between inner-city blacks and the police as a law of nature. Nas explains this axiom with a more serious tone in “The World Is Yours” and seems to infer a causality from spatial marginality to trouble with the law by claiming that “dwelling in the rotten apple, you get tackled, or caught by the devil’s lasso, shit is a hassle”. With an ironic allusion to the Big Apple and the connotations of limitless possibilities that the nickname carries, Nas describes his ‘hood as “the rotten apple” whose denizens have only two likely fates: to be killed or otherwise defeated by other ghetto dwellers, or to be apprehended by ‘the devil<sup>34</sup>’, i.e., the police. It seems that, along with the control over one’s life, segregation has removed guilt and responsibility from the inner-city population. Thus, despite participating in several criminal acts, Nas portrays himself and his peers as the real victims, as demonstrated by his disheartened words in “N.Y. State of Mind”: “Cops could just arrest me, blaming us, we’re held like hostages.”

The acute awareness of the danger and uncertainty concerning the future shown on *Illmatic*

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34 Members of the Five-Percent Nation frequently call white people ‘devils’. Thus, Nas’s phrase can be understood to refer not only to the law enforcement, but also the white America as a whole.



is psychologically incompatible with long-term planning. As pointed out by Massey and Denton, the ubiquitous poverty may drive inner-city inhabitants “to seek gratification through more accessible channels” than the practically unattainable work- and family-related goals promoted by the dominant American norms, which explains the high number of sexual relations and the prevalence of heavy substance use in the ghetto (171). Such disposition is visible in most songs on *Illmatic*, with alcohol and drug use depicted as a daily pastime. For example, in “N.Y. State of Mind”, Nas states that he is known to “keep some E&J, sitting bent up in the stairway”, and, in “Represent”, he describes himself as a “Moët-drinking, marijuana smoking street dweller”.<sup>35</sup> The sharp contrast between the wider American values and the ghetto mindset prioritizing instant gratification is also embodied in Nas’s description of his typical morning routines, as he reveals that, “after being blessed by the herb’s essence” (i.e., experiencing the mind-altering effect of cannabis), he goes back to bed “where [he] got the honey at” and, when engaging in sexual intercourse with this unnamed partner, makes sure to employ contraception, which he calls “lifestyle protection” (“One Time 4 Your Mind”). Of course, avoidance of parenthood at young age is a norm for most middle-class Americans as well, but the pragmatic wording of the rationale given for it in “Halftime” stems from an obvious inner-city mentality: “I won’t plant seeds, don’t need a extra mouth I can’t feed. That’s extra Phillie change, more cash for damp weed.” This resolution of dedicating one’s – in all probability, rather short – life to conscious escapism is perhaps best epitomized by Nas’s fellow rapper AZ in the refrain of “Life’s a Bitch”, where he raps: “Life’s a bitch and then you die, that’s why we get high, ’cause you never know when you gonna go.” In a seemingly ironic manner, in his own verse in “Life’s a Bitch”, a song which explicitly discusses nihilistic street mentality, Nas makes a marked nod toward values of decency, which, as described by Anderson, include “a certain amount of hope for the future” (*Code of the Street* 37). As an example of the maturity he has attained in his twenty years of life, Nas explains that he has

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35 As was the case with items of clothing as signs of wealth, also repeated references to brands of alcoholic beverages can be seen to actually buttress the American ideology of consumerism, although superficially opposing the dominant norms.

“switched [his] motto”, and now, “instead of saying ‘fuck tomorrow’” and constantly escaping the reality through inebriation, he reflects on the fact that the “buck that bought the bottle could’ve struck the lotto” (“Life’s a Bitch”). However, considering the overwhelmingly low chance of improving one’s economic status by winning a lottery, Nas’s juxtaposition of such far-fetched optimism with the instant gratification provided by sex and drugs, in fact, further highlights the appeal of embracing a street-oriented identity manifested in the chorus of the song.

The ghetto mentality described above also affects Nas’s perspective on cultural items shared with the rest of America, such as motion pictures. Nas’s early lyrics contain numerous references to crime films, especially *Scarface* by Brian De Palma. Consistent with his self-proclaimed identification with crime, Nas explains that when watching a film he “root[s] for the villain” (“One Time 4 Your Mind”). Keeping in mind that the procedures followed by the police in the twentieth-century America were, as noted by Hinton, based on “[t]he idea that criminality was a pathological trait among . . . black youth” (811), it seems feasible that, as a member of this vilified population, Nas finds antihero characters more relatable than the supposedly heroic lawmen protecting American values. As a case in point, Tony Montana, the titular character of *Scarface*, meets a gruesome end in the film, but, for a short while, he nevertheless manifests the American Dream by rising from utter poverty to a life of luxury. As can be concluded from the previous discussion concerning collateral violence, in Nas’s view, even abstaining from dangerous ways to gain wealth cannot guarantee personal safety or a long life expectancy in the inner city. In general, a number of ghetto dwellers have been desensitized by the omnipresent street violence to a degree where they, as summarized by Anderson, may feel indifferent towards their own death (*Code of the Street* 135). Thus, the strong agency displayed by Montana in his determined journey from rags to riches may seem a more salient lesson than does the lethal tragedy that follows his actions. In this sense, crime films with non-black protagonists are apt to have a similar empowering significance for a portion of inner-city audience than the traditional Stagolee/badman stories (which also often end tragically),

although such films are likely to read somewhat differently for a more privileged viewer. This aspect of empowerment may in turn explain the high number of rappers' stage personae modeled after famous fictive antiheroes, such as Scarface.

When Nas declares in "N.Y. State of Mind" to be "like Scarface sniffing cocaine, holding a M16", he is not portraying himself as an actual drug lord but, in fact, using the well-known violent scene as a metaphor for the ferociousness and desperation of his lyrical "composition of pain", as evidenced by his subsequent reference to his writing: "See, with the pen I'm extreme". The themes of drug economy and hip-hop music appear together again in "Represent", where Nas notes that "somehow the rap game reminds [him] of the crack game." To decipher his meaning it must be understood that, although a rap career offers a legal opportunity for upward mobility with less personal risk than becoming a drug dealer, both avenues are characterized by fierce competition and a relatively low rate of long-term success, often with little regard to personal capabilities. From this perspective, the ironic title of "The World Is Yours" – taken from an advertisement Tony Montana sees on a blimp – is more likely to embody Nas's urgent need to grasp any slim opportunity to advance in life, be it hip-hop or drug distribution, rather than a glamorizing attitude toward criminal lifestyle.

As touched on previously, Nas's tone regarding such themes undergoes a notable change from *Illmatic* to *It Was Written*. On his debut album, rather than directly claiming to be a criminal kingpin, Nas fantasizes of becoming one. In "N.Y. State of Mind", he says that he is "having dreams that [he is] a gangster" able to secure the required wealth to invest "in stock" and sew "up the blocks to sell rocks" (i.e., expand his drug operation to adjacent city blocks), but in reality, he remains "a nigger, walking with his finger on a trigger". A moment later he returns to his reverie: "I dream I can sit back and lamp like Capone, with drug scripts sewn, or the legal luxury life, rings flooded with stones", but again his daydreaming is interrupted by the thought that "life is parallel to hell" and he and his peers are "held like hostages" (ibid.). In *Social Justice and the City*, Harvey

discusses views that high-income groups of the city “make active use of space”, whereas less wealthy ones are restrained by urban space (83). The essence of these theories is that urban people who are free to move within the city learn to take advantage of their environment to access various resources, whereas low-income inhabitants may be conditioned to territorial thinking (ibid. 82-83). However, Nas seems to cast off such conditioning and shift from the latter population to the former remarkably quickly: on *It Was Written* his ghetto-induced claustrophobia has changed into “doing ninety on the Franklin D. Roosevelt” in his Lexus (“Watch Dem Niggas”) and references to “city lights” that “spark a New York night”, as his crew controls the city space driving “ten [BMW] M3s” and riding “twenty . . . Kawasakis” (“Take It In Blood”).

As demonstrated by these excerpts, on *It Was Written*, Nas frequently portrays himself as a leader of a massive drug cartel, and – making a reference to his lyrics on “Life’s a Bitch” – he explains that he now sees his “‘fuck tomorrow’ motto through the eyes of Pablo Escobar” (“Watch Dem Niggas”). In “Affirmative Action”, he again calls himself “Señor Escobar”, explaining his ability to save his drug operation by bribing federal agents with huge sums of illegally earned money: “Feds cost me two mill’ to get the system off me.” Furthermore, Nas’s daydreams of luxuries have become reality: he raps about “seventeen rocks gleam[ing] from one ring” and other “highlights of living”, such as a “Lex [i.e., Lexus] with TV sets” (“The Message”). As suggested earlier in this section, such passages may reflect an actual change in the artist’s lifestyle brought about by the newly-gained wealth from rapping, expressed in a romanticized and exaggerated form. American popular culture offers few black role models who have succeeded to attain the American Dream, and thus, it is natural that Nas continues to employ the same imagery he used on *Illmatic* to articulate his desperation and aspirations of escaping inner-city poverty to also verbalize his subsequent success on *It Was Written*. In short, *It Was Written* portrays Nas as a gangster who has triumphed. His sophomore album marks the beginning of the second era of his changing identity, presenting a young artist who has successfully transformed himself from *Illmatic*’s Nasty Nas, a

self-proclaimed “rebel of the street corner” (“Represent”), to Nas Escobar, who “made out, Montana way” (“The Message”).

Despite the somewhat glamorizing overall tone of *It Was Written*, the album also contains the melancholic “I Gave You Power”, which articulates a profound sense of powerlessness, thus matching the mood of *Illmatic*. In the song, Nas tells a detailed story of an unlicensed handgun used in street crime from the first-person perspective of the weapon. “How you like me now?” Nas asks in the refrain, noting that he (as a pistol) represents “that shit that” makes “every ghetto foul”, reminding the listener of the adversities he is responsible for: “I might have took your first child, scarred your life, crippled your style.” These actions, of course, are a natural extension of a firearm’s identity because, as Nas explains, the purpose of his “creation was for blacks to kill blacks.” Consequently, he is “always . . . in some shit.” However, spurred by his experience of being stored together with an older weapon, who is “tired of murdering” and “’bout to fall to pieces ’cause of his murder career”, the narrating weapon begins to develop a consciousness of his own role in the events he participates in. As a result, he forms a plan to “jam right in [his] owner’s hand” next time he is used. Indeed, when the critical moment arrives, he refuses to stay in his given role: “He squeezed harder, I didn’t budge, sick of the blood, sick of the thugs, sick of the wrath of the next man’s grudge.” However, his owner’s opponent is wielding a weapon with no such qualms: “What the other kid did was pull out, no doubt, a newer me in better shape.” After his owner is killed, the narrator experiences a brief moment of contentment but, despite his determination, ultimately fails to achieve freedom through his actions: “Now I’m happy, until I felt someone else grab me. Damn.”

Given the reverence of originality in hip-hop, the rather peculiar artistic decision of identifying with a firearm may at first glance be written off as nothing more than a conscious attempt at innovation. However, the spoken introduction of “I Gave You Power” suggests an allegorical interpretation:

Damn. Look how motherfuckers use a nigger. Just use me for whatever the fuck they want. I don't get to say shit, just grab me, just do what the fuck they want. Sell me, throw me away, niggers just don't give a fuck about a nigger like me, right? Like I'm a f-, I'm a gun. Shit, it's like I'm a motherfucking gun. I can't believe this shit. Word up.

Based on the introduction, the weapon is not the focal point of the story in itself. In the opening lines, the point of view is originally that of Nas's, and the main content is his lamentation of not being able to control his own life. The subsequent narration from the handgun's perspective is motivated by Nas's sudden realization of the similarities between himself and the inanimate object. Interpreting the narrative as an allegory of the position of a black inner-city man gives an exceedingly somber view of the possibility to rectify the problems of American ghettos by exercising personal responsibility, which is, as was noted in the previous chapter, the principal solution offered by conscious rappers and conservative, right-leaning politicians alike. Echoing a Foucauldian view of delinquency as a concept created by the powers that be, Nas stresses that he has not chosen his identity himself; rather, weapons are "made to kill", which is "why they keep [him] concealed under car seats". When the narrative is read as an allegory, the concealment of a lethal weapon can be seen to pertain to the containment and exploitation of the supposedly dangerous black population in the isolated ghettos. As was discussed in chapter 2.2, associating criminality with a group of people considered pathologically deviant helps to legitimize the use of power by the ruling class. "I gave you power, I made you buckwild", Nas raps in the refrain, hinting at a correspondence between criminals using weapons as tools of control and policy makers abusing their power over the likes of Nas. The song's ending, which returns to the starting point, suggests that conscientious actions of individuals cannot eradicate negative phenomena – such as urban violence – that stem from institutional power structures. Nas's take on the plight of the African American ghetto population is a gloomy one, but simultaneously, "I Gave You Power" demonstrates his capacity to recognize the multiple levels of power relations at work, as well as his own position in the equation. This ability to see beyond the conditioned ghetto mentality is the topic for the next chapter.

#### 4. “Act Like I’m Civilized”: Life Beyond the Ghetto

Thus far, my analysis has focused on how the inner-city environment and its social practices have affected Nas’s lyrical choices. Although his connection with the Queensbridge Housing Projects is an essential constituent of his identity and Nas represents his neighborhood proudly, the harshness of that environment also induces a great deal of mental distress, which is especially evident on *Illmatic*. In the current chapter, I turn my attention to the development of Nas’s identity during his later career, which includes his enterprise to liberate himself from the harmful elements of a ghetto mindset. His endeavors bring about a specific dilemma concerning his on-going participation in hip-hop culture. As seen in the previous discussion on *Illmatic*, Nas’s particular take on the hip-hop tenet of ‘keeping it real’ occasionally leads him to divulge rather intimate information – such as his unease over his deteriorating mental health under the constant pressure of the trying environment – even when doing so may be at odds with his own badman posturing. The potential problem this approach produces is as follows. In his later career, strict adherence to such principle of honesty would entail scrutinizing also his current environment in a similar fashion and, by extension, discussing the compatibility of the street orientation taught by his inner-city experiences with his present situation in life. However, in hip-hop culture, the ghetto is commonly “considered as being somehow more ‘real’ than other spaces and places”, as phrased by Forman (60), from which it follows that rappers who detach themselves from that framework risk undermining their perceived authenticity and harming their popular appeal, especially in the climate of ‘hyper-gangsta-ization’ discussed in chapter 2.1. Because of this issue, a number of ghetto-born rappers who have established themselves in the music business continue to define themselves through their inner-city origins, regardless of their actual living conditions. It must be understood that this choice does not necessarily contradict the credo of ‘keeping it real’, since, as Forman explains, a rapper’s status as a celebrity may be seen as a “false skin”, which covers “his or her ‘true’ identity” formed by the inner-city neighborhood of his or her origin (236). In some cases, wealthy artists may willingly

remain in the 'hood and announce their decision as a sign of authenticity. It is also worth noting that associating the ghetto with the 'true' identity of black artists may be seen to buttress an essentialist perspective of a natural connection between marginality and ethnicity.

Keeping the above considerations in mind, in section 4.1, I examine the changes in Nas's post-*Illmatic* depictions of the urban context. By doing so I follow a structure similar to the previous chapter and aim to first lay a spatial groundwork for the subsequent section, which will investigate Nas's evolving identity. Rather than concentrate on the frequency of references to specific inner-city issues, which has unsurprisingly declined, I focus on how Nas approaches themes regarding the ghetto. In addition, I shall pay close attention to any notable discussions concerning the spatial aspects of life outside the ghetto. Section 4.2 delves again into the questions of identity construction. Specifically, I will observe Nas's attitudes towards street orientation and decency, especially in socially constructed spaces that operate differently from his earlier surroundings, as well as his views on the concept of agency.

#### **4.1 Escape From the Ghetto**

As seen in the previous chapter, the themes Nas discusses on *Illmatic* are closely connected to the experience of being a young African American man dwelling in an inner-city area. More specifically, on *Illmatic*, Nas mostly represents the street-oriented end of the attitudinal spectrum, which colors his portrayal of the social reality of ghetto space. Because of this, Nas's depiction of Queensbridge and its denizens on *Illmatic* is dominated by themes of violence and criminality, despite the fact that, as Anderson points out, most inner-city residents can be categorized as decent or at least striving for decency (*Code of the Street* 36). However, rather than wholeheartedly embracing all aspects of ghetto mentality, which tendency characterizes much of gangsta rap, Nas has been endeavoring to voice his displeasure with the social ills of the ghetto from the beginning of his career. This ability to detect and verbalize social issues is a necessary first step in becoming



aware of how the environment shapes one's instinctive outlook on different situations, and thus, it can be understood as a requirement for gaining true agency. On his sophomore album, *It Was Written*, Nas makes a notable attempt to step outside the ghetto frame of mind and observe the inner-city life from a new perspective, the result of which is "If I Ruled the World".

In "If I Ruled the World", Nas refers to several classic hip-hop songs. Firstly, the title and the chorus, as well as a melodic sample used in "If I Ruled the World", are borrowed from rapper Kurtis Blow's song by the same name, released in 1985. In addition to the similar refrain and melody, both songs share a lyrical theme of inner-city issues. However, updating the song to match the prevalent tone of rap music in the 1990s, Nas's version changes the rather cheerful lyrics of the original chorus into a commentary on incarceration of African American population: whereas Kurtis Blow fantasizes how ruling the world would enable him to "love all the girls", singer/rapper Lauryn Hill, who provides the chorus for Nas's remake, yearns for power to "free all [her] sons." Secondly, in the spoken introduction of "If I Ruled the World", Nas makes a less overt reference to "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five by saying: "Life. I wonder, will it take me under? I don't know." This allusion connects the subsequent verses to the thematic foundation laid down by "The Message", in which Melle Mel famously raps: "It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under." Significantly, these lyrics by Melle Mel marked the starting point for the wide-spread use of the urban jungle metaphor in hip-hop, with all its Darwinian connotations. As described by Forman, the spatial preoccupation of "The Message" moved "rap form toward an incisive critical content, introducing what eventually became a standard and dominating rap discourse" of ghettoentrism (83). Alluding to these two spatially minded songs provides Nas's "If I Ruled the World" with context and content: it represents his participation in the ghettoentric discourse started in hip-hop music over a decade prior.

However, on account of sampling the upbeat melody of Kurtis Blow's hit song, Nas's version positions differently in the virtual space of hip-hop music than his work on *Illmatic*. The

sonic atmosphere on *Illmatic* is in line with the somber content of the lyrics, whereas the lighthearted, danceable quality of “If I Ruled the World”, augmented by the memorable chorus by Lauryn Hill, gives the song a wider popular appeal. Therefore, while the song is certainly *about* the ghetto, it is not exclusively *for* the ghetto. As noted by Tricia Rose, African American culture has always been to some extent “bifocal” in the sense that it speaks to simultaneously to black and white audiences (*Black Noise* 5). While perhaps compromising some of his authenticity in the eyes of his inner-city listeners (as well as others who prefer the more austere sound of *Illmatic*), Nas gains a new position as an emissary of inner-city issues speaking to a more numerous audience than previously.<sup>36</sup> Obviously, this shift does not follow strict color lines; a number of African American listeners may also find the radio-friendly sound of “If I Ruled the World” more inviting than the obscure samples and bass-heavy rhythms of *Illmatic*, which represent a musical hip-hop tradition located firmly in the street context, as the term “Jeep beat” mentioned by Rose suggests (*Black Noise* 65). As explained in chapter 2.1, rap music participates in the social construction of ghetto space. Thus, also Nas’s lyrics affect the web of associations connected to American inner cities, and, by widening his mass appeal, Nas gains a tiny increment of the power he fantasizes about in “If I Ruled the World”.

Considering the claustrophobic feeling that characterizes *Illmatic*, it is little surprise that lack of confinement plays a large role in the urban utopia Nas depicts in “If I Ruled the World”. Thus, references to open spaces and free movement, such as mentions of “blue Bahama waters”, “trips to Paris”, and “feel[ing] the wind breeze in West Indies”, appear side by side with lines that discuss freeing political prisoners and lack of police misconduct. In regards to the social dimension of American ghettos, Nas displays a certain level of the ability Du Bois calls second sight when he comments on the harmful effect that racial stereotypes concerning African Americans may have on their identity. To mitigate the detrimental internalization of racist views, Nas wishes to help ghetto

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<sup>36</sup> The same also applies to “Street Dreams”, another single release from *It Was Written*, which recycles the highly recognizable chorus of “Sweet Dreams” by Eurythmics.

children to “open they eyes to the lies” and see that “history’s told foul”, so that they can grow to realize that they are valuable beings – as the chorus says, “black diamonds and pearls”. However, this goal is not possible to achieve in the prevalent social reality of the ghetto, which has lead Nas to “vision the better living, type of place to grow kids in.” He also notes that personal wealth as such is not sufficient to bring about significant changes as long as the social reality remains unaltered, since in the current situation a black person can “have all the chips, be poor or rich” and “still don’t nobody want a nigger having shit.” In addition to white racism, this claim is likely to include also envious attitudes of other African Americans, as hinted by the subsequent mention of “jealousies” that Nas would remove, had he the power referred to in the song’s title.

In “If I Ruled the World”, Nas articulates understanding of the changing public expectations concerning the lyrical content of rap music. He borrows a line from “The Bridge” (released 1986) by Queensbridge rap pioneer MC Shan, but changes Shan’s “You love to hear the story . . . of how it all got started”, which refers to the birth of hip-hop culture, to “You love to hear the story how the thugs live in worry, ducked down in car seats, heats<sup>37</sup> mandatory”. The allusion suggests that the thematic changes that have taken place in hip-hop culture during the previous decade have been spurred by the listening public’s growing fascination with inner-city issues. As a professional entertainer, Nas himself is also affected by these expectations, but, in the following lines, he reveals that if he had the power to change the world to his liking, there “wouldn’t be no such thing as jealousies or B felony.” Ironically, such change would also instantly render his own street-oriented lyrics less relevant, but, apparently, that would be a small sacrifice, all things considered.

Despite the spatial and social awareness that the above passages demonstrate, the practical solutions Nas proposes for the issues presented in “If I Ruled the World” range from non-existent to ambivalent in meaning. On a metaphorical level, his notion to “open every cell in Attica<sup>38</sup> and send [the inmates] to Africa” can be understood to signify a symbolic yearning for a place where black

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<sup>37</sup> Firearms.

<sup>38</sup> The Attica Correctional Facility.

Americans can feel they belong, repeating a similar sentiment presented in “The Album Intro”, where Nas, portraying an African American slave, says: “Ain’t no place for black folk here. Man, promised land calling me, man.” On practical terms, however, such a plan would be far from sensible. As put by James Peterson, the concept seems “immature . . . and maybe just plain stupid” (91), although similar ideas has been actually promoted by, for example, advocates of Pan-Africanism, such as Marcus Garvey (Bradley 72). Presenting the relocation of black convicts to their ancestral home as a possible solution to America’s problematic culture of incarceration can be argued to uphold the view of African Americans as perpetual outsiders in their own country, hinting at their inherent and permanent inability to function as productive parts of American society.

There is a similar feel of ambiguity also in Nas’s description of “the better living”, when he envisions a city with “no welfare supporters”, where black people are “more conscious of the way [they] raise [their] daughters” (“If I Ruled the World”). As outlined by Massey and Denton, in mid-1980s, prominent right-wing politicians conjectured the wide-spread reliance on supposedly “generous welfare benefits” to be the primary cause of the low level of employment in American inner cities, rather than seeing welfare dependency as an outcome of the meager job opportunities available in such areas (143). Of course, in ideal society the role of the welfare system would be naturally diminished due to healthy employment rate, but Nas’s lyrics do not clarify whether he regards the prevalence of “welfare supporters” as a result of inner-city problems or a causing factor. Because of this vagueness, the line can be interpreted either as criticism of the spatial oppression forcing a large portion of African American inner-city population to rely on government support or as endorsement of a conservative attitude attacking the welfare system. The same inconclusiveness applies to Nas’s advocacy of conscious parenthood, which is compatible with the discourse of blaming the victim discussed in chapter 2.2. As a side note, his concern is also oddly gendered; it is specifically “daughters” who are in dire need of better parenting, although the harmful effects of ghetto socialization arguably touch inner-city boys even more severely than girls. Regardless of

Nas's intention, presented in tandem these two images have a striking similarity to the right-wing doctrine of black Americans being somehow culturally disadvantaged and inadvertently causing their own predicament. The belief in a self-sustaining "culture of poverty" as an explanation for the comparatively low socioeconomic status of African American population has been criticized by, for example, Massey and Denton (8). I argue that it represents a thinly veiled modern version of biological racism, inasmuch as it ignores the effect of the spatial context and presupposes a disadvantageous inherent trait eliciting harmful cultural practices in black Americans. With "If I Ruled the World", Nas clearly aspires to widen his perspective beyond the confinement of the ghetto and manages to make a number of rather perceptive observations on the social reality of inner cities and hip-hop culture, but, nevertheless, parts of the song can be also interpreted to contain some hints of internalized racism.

Quite predictably, on *Life Is Good* from 2012, Nas's perspective is much farther removed from the ghetto context. However, he continues to write lyrics about inner-city themes, for which several possible reasons can be found. Firstly, his early experiences growing up in Queensbridge may have been distressing to the extent that he still feels a psychological need to return to these issues. This explanation is supported by his extensive mulling over the theme of collateral violence, already discussed in this thesis and further explored later in the current chapter. Secondly, considering the seminal role of inner cities in American hip-hop culture, it is somewhat expected that the ghettocentric tradition of rap music continues to shape Nas's lyrical content, regardless of the relevance to the artist's actual day-to-day life at the present. In general, a certain level of ghetto-mindedness has become such a self-evident part of the rap as a genre that it cannot be simply ignored; even many artists with middle-class backgrounds feel compelled to state their attitude towards street or ghetto orientation in their lyrics. Related to this point, public taste and the record industry influence artistic decisions in a substantial way, as mentioned several times in this thesis. In practice, artistic and business motives naturally overlap. Commenting on rap artists' need to

maintain “their legitimacy by not growing too distant from the ’hood that initially formed them”, Forman explains that the inner-city neighborhood of one’s origin commonly “continues to provide a grounding for the lyrical themes” (236). Places are understood in relation to each other, and on *Life Is Good*, Nas frequently uses Queensbridge Houses as a reference point to construe his current situation in life.

On *Life Is Good*, Nas frequently reminisces his earlier life. Such passages are, for the most part, indicated by the use past tense, and one of their functions is clearly to build a contrast with the artist’s present surroundings. For example, in “No Introduction”, Nas raps: “I remember early mornings, syrup sandwiches, sugar water. Walking up the dark stairwells, elevators was out of order. Worth two hundred million now . . . flat screens and condominiums.” Unlike the rather generic depictions of his current luxurious lifestyle exemplified by the above passage, the flashbacks of his youth usually contain explicit details. For instance, earlier in the song, he names the public school that provided a meal for him when he was hungry as a child: “PS one-eleven had free lunch, embarrassed but managed to get a plate.” Similarly, in “Loco-Motive”, Nas’s teenage memories of robbing people as they exit a subway train are specifically set in the “42nd Street terminal” by the introduction of the song, but his present location is dealt with in a more cursory fashion: “Look at my upkeep, owned and sublease. I’m here y’all.” According to Soja, three interconnected aspects of space – physical, mental, and social – can be argued to overlap (120). Nas’s vague location of ‘here’ may be understood to refer to several such levels simultaneously. Firstly, Nas’s ‘here’ speaks of his current position on the evolving map of hip-hop culture. His successful career has lasted nearly two decades, and he believes to continue to be, to borrow the spatial phraseology of hip-hop lingo, ‘in the place to be’, which is to say he remains a relevant force in the cultural movement. Secondly, Nas’s being ‘here’, as opposed to being still ‘there’, emphasizes his survival and personal journey out of both the physical space of the inner city and the poverty-induced hardships connected to that place. Regarding the vagueness of his spatial

designations, it seems that few physical places outside the ghetto are socially significant enough to warrant explicit mentions in Nas's lyrics. For instance, in "The Don", Nas does go into details when describing his temporal progression in terms of vehicles used to traverse the city space – "in 97" he drove "the six, 98, the Bentley, now it's the Ghost Phantom" – but the locations of the "condominium roof decks" mentioned in the same song are never revealed. Almost two decades after *Illmatic*, he is still "repping Queens" ("The Don") rather than the less mythical (and presumably white) well-to-do neighborhood(s) he actually resides in at the moment.

The few places outside the ghetto Nas describes on *Life Is Good* are mostly constructed on the basis of differences compared to inner-city environment. In "Queens Story", Nas raps: "Now I'm the only black in the club with rich yuppie kids . . . No familiar faces, ain't got to grab the musket. It's all safe and sound, champagne by the bucket." Surrounded by wealthy white people, Nas feels out of place in the upscale night club and notes that he is not acquainted with any of the other patrons. At the same time, he acknowledges that, as socially awkward as the situation may be, it is by no means dangerous, and, unlike in ghetto context, there is no need to carry a weapon. However, his conscious observation in itself demonstrates a lingering ghetto frame of mind, as a person with a more privileged background would not be as likely to assess his or her own safety at all in such situation. Of course, another contributing factor may be the need to remain authentic in the eyes of his audience by emphasizing his street sensibilities. Nas discusses the theme of danger, or more precisely, the lack thereof, again in "Loco-Motive": "At night, New York, eat a slice too hot, use my tongue to tear the skin hanging from the roof of my mouth." There is an almost comical quality to the mundane annoyance of burning one's mouth while eating pizza when the passage is compared to, for example, his agitated depiction of the hectic nighttime in "the city [that] never sleeps, full of villains and creeps" in "N.Y. State of Mind".

Altogether, there is a predictable shift away from the archetypal spaces of street-oriented rap, such as street corners, and some new spaces associated with middle-class lifestyle are

introduced, such as a fitness club: “Little overweight, hit the gym. Let’s go get the abs in.” (“Summer on Smash”). Similarly to the episode with the hot slice of pizza, the passage shows how Nas’s present concerns are noticeably less grievous than the questions of life and death that characterize *Illmatic*. “The craziest things already happened to me”, Nas raps in “No Introduction” and portrays himself as a man who is evidently content with his currently less eventful life, as implied by the title of the album, *Life Is Good*.

“Daughters” on *Life Is Good* introduces a new space with its own social rules: the Internet. In the song, Nas – prompted by his daughter’s conduct on Twitter and Instagram – discusses the challenges of parenthood. Significantly, when Nas’s daughter displays online behavior that closely resembles the street mentality discussed in chapter 3.2, Nas admonishes these actions, which he considers “inappropriate shit”. “Daughters” offers an opportunity to observe the progression of Nas’s attitudes concerning family life. On *Illmatic*, Nas view’s on parenthood are marked by uncertainty of his ability to support a family in the economic reality of the ghetto, whereas “If I Ruled the World” from *It Was Written* comments on the social effects of the inner-city context in regards to child rearing. On *Life Is Good*, detachment from the physical space of the ghetto removes the need for such concerns, and Nas’s current environment is depicted as transparent in the sense that its effects seem to require no explicit evaluation. Thus, the remaining factor left for Nas to consider is his own role as a parent. This leads him to question his own actions as a role model and, by extension, induces him to reassess his patterns of behavior. As explained in chapter 2, several writers take the view that growing up in run-down urban areas socializes the inhabitants to behave in ways which contradict the wider societal norms but, in the context of the inner city, represent a useful adaptation to the particular challenges arising from the trying environment. From this it follows that social norms taught by inner-city experiences may be less sensible and even harmful outside the ghetto. Having removed himself from the projects, Nas’s final challenge is to remove the currently useless parts of the projects from himself without sacrificing too much of his identity



as an MC and a representative of troubled African Americans injured by the system of segregation. Lamenting over the lack of emphasis on black intellectualism in hip-hop culture, Jenkins argues that rappers “need to see themselves as more than the kid that made it out” (1248). The following section will examine to what extent Nas, a self-proclaimed intellectual, succeeds in this goal.

#### 4.2 A New State of Mind

As explained in section 2.2, what is commonly referred to as identity consists of several context-dependent and possibly contradictory identities. In the previous chapter, I focused on Nas’s street identity, which, to some extent, can be seen as a reaction to the urban context of Queensbridge Houses. Despite portraying himself as a desperate and alienated street criminal, making frequent references to illegal substance distribution in particular, already on *Illmatic* he simultaneously takes the role of an MC, an extraordinary individual able to surpass obstacles stemming from the difficult conditions of the ghetto. Although the harsh conditions function as an important source of inspiration for Nas’s art, his identity as an artist can be seen to partially contradict the cynical street orientation displayed in many of the excerpts analyzed in chapter 3. In fact, certain elements that comprise Nas’s identity as an MC, such as his outspoken assuredness of his ability to succeed, are congruent with the myth of the American Dream. However, this fluctuation is not to be understood as inconsistency on the artist’s part; rather, I wish to argue that such multivalence is an essential part of hip-hop communication. I agree with Tricia Rose, who suggests that “contradictions [are] *central* to hip-hop” (*Black Noise* 24, emphasis in original). By presenting several incompatible viewpoints simultaneously, hip-hop culture may cast light on the conflicts within American society, especially in regards to the problematic position of African American population. Again, I borrow Rose’s acute wording: “Rap music, more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant . . . ideologies” (*Black Noise* 102). On *Illmatic*, the most obvious clash takes place between the preminent American

ideology encouraging citizens to shape their own destinies and the day-to-day reality of inner-city environment which truncates most (legal) opportunities to actually pursue the American Dream. Since the ghetto as a physical space has ceased to be a paramount factor in Nas's life, this conflict has been largely replaced by another one on *Life Is Good*: namely, the difficulties of adjustment once his financial goals in life have been reached. However, before delving into that topic in detail, I will first sketch out the evolution of Nas's identity as an artist, examining how the artistic side of his persona relates to the questions of agency and street orientation.

As a spokesperson for the segregated population, the MC has the important function of bringing consolation to his or her oppressed peers by publicly voicing inner-city concerns that are largely ignored by the wider society. In addition to this somewhat bittersweet task, however, speaking to large audiences gives the opportunity to also bring about actual changes by raising awareness of problematic issues – to use a Du Boisian second sight to help others to see beyond the mental boundaries of the ghetto. This latter aspect of emceeing becomes more prominent in Nas's self-portrayal after *Illmatic*. For example, in “If I Ruled the World”, where Nas talks about the effects that the ghetto environment and the hostile views of white America have on child rearing, he claims to be aware of such things because he is “as wise as the old owl” and able to see “things like [he] was controlling”. On his third album *I Am...*, Nas discusses this change in his identity explicitly in a song aptly named “Nas Is Like”:

As far as rap go, it's only natural I explain  
my plateau and also what defines my name.  
First it was Nasty, but times have changed.  
Ask me now, I'm the artist, but hardcore, my science for pain.

“Nas Is Like” continues the voyage that begun on “N.Y. State of Mind”, where Nas claimed to emerge from the “dungeons of rap” and take the art form onto “a new plateau”. In Nas's imagery, his development as a rapper moves him upward and out of the confined spaces of the labyrinthine 'hood of his youth. Although his persona as Nasty Nas, a young street dweller with a dream to become a successful rapper, has given way to a *bona fide* artist observing America from a new

perspective, the artistic weight of Nas's lyrics is still based on his "science for pain" – that is, his ability to verbalize inner-city hardships in an analytical manner. Here the pronounced emphasis on being an artist arguably starts to supplant the earlier Scarface/Escobar imagery that focused on luxurious lifestyle. Although describing his journey "from the projects with no chips to large cake" and "owning acres" in such detail that it can be seen as braggadocio, Nas promptly dismisses the idea of wealth as an end goal in life: "But what it's all worth? Can't take it with you under this earth." Instead, he intends to achieve something that is not measurable in terms of money: "Before my number's called, history's made".

In comparison to the pessimism of such songs as "I Gave You Power", Nas exhibits a strong sense of agency in "Nas Is Like"; for example, he declares that he is "making choices that determine [his] future under the sky". Being no longer limited by the inner city, Nas certainly seems to feel more in control of his own life. However, this attitudinal shift also raises a question of accountability: if "life is what you make it", as Nas claims in "Nas Is Like", to what extent are the less successful ghetto-born blacks to be held responsible for their own predicament? As discussed in section 2.2, so-called conscious rappers occasionally promote a rather conservative self-help agenda, which may, in fact, reinforce the stereotypical view of black Americans as a problem race. Although somewhat less deterministic in his outlook than previously, Nas still recognizes the strong influence that ghetto environment has on socialization on *I Am...* For instance, in "N.Y. State of Mind Pt. II", he says: "Mama should've cuffed me to the radiator. Why not? It might've saved me later from my block." Physically preventing a child to leave the apartment seems such an obvious exaggeration that it is tempting to interpret the passage metaphorically. However, Anderson reports a case where parents residing "in a drug-infested neighborhood" have actually restricted the movement of their daughter to her home and (private) school and successfully shut out social contacts they deemed harmful, including most of her relatives (*Code of the Street* 53). Nas depicts the ghetto corner as a corruptive force; nevertheless, parents may be able to protect their children

from the streets, albeit doing so may require rather extreme precautions.

As for those who grow up to be “corner thugs hustling for cars that cost dough”, Nas seems to consider himself a source of inspiration: “I’m a poor man’s dream, a thug poet” (“Nas Is Like”). When he describes his lyrics as “street scriptures for lost souls in the crossroads”, the word ‘crossroads’ has two levels of meanings: a literal and a figurative one. Firstly, the word obviously refers the street corner where the ghetto youths spend their days, and secondly, it stands as a symbol for the choices they have to make. In addition to being a widely used as a metaphor for critical decisions, crossroads has a special significance in African American folklore. Cheryl Keyes notes that the concept of crossroads as a mythical place goes back to West African Yoruba tradition, and the idea of discovering one’s creative potential at the crossroads appears in both blues and rap tradition (234-235). Connected to this concept is the idea of a spiritual guide waiting at the crossroads, and apparently Nas sees himself as an enlightened mentor with the potential to help troubled inner-city denizens to overcome the circumstantial challenges. This is suggested by the abundant religious imagery in “Nas Is Like”, which portrays him as a spiritual leader; in addition to the previously mentioned “street scriptures”, he talks of himself as a “Messiah type”, “the prophet”, and “the pharaoh Nas” (note the reference to Africa in the last example). Similarly, in “Ghetto Prisoners” on *I Am...*, where Nas mournfully acknowledges that “some men become murderers and some girls become whores”, he also shows optimism regarding his own role as a teacher: “I’m like the farmer, planting words, people are seeds. My truth is the soil, help you grow like trees.” As for the question of accountability, the answer seems to lie between the two extremes; Nas neither sees ghetto inhabitants as helpless products of their environment nor admonishes them for succumbing under the pressure. Nevertheless, they do need guidance and Nas’s task as an MC is to provide it. He continues this mission also on *Life Is Good*; for example, in “Reach Out”, Nas says he wants to “teach and build with brothers” and fantasizes of being able to help others to break free from the daily struggle: “Beautiful life, often I dream that I can bring my niggers.” In this sense, he can be

seen to represent the hip-hop equivalent of the “Talented Tenth”, a term coined by Du Bois and defined by Edwards as “the portion of the intellectual elite committed to the uplift of the black population” (xviii).

There are two significant aspects to note in this revised iteration of Nas. Firstly, there is a striking change in the tone of his religious metaphors. Whereas on *Illmatic* Nas frustratedly stated that, once dead, he will “wait for God with the four-four”<sup>39</sup> (“Halftime”), on subsequent albums he has a more positive attitude towards religious faith, frequently even portraying himself as God’s chosen one. As seen above, in “Nas Is Like”, Nas refers to himself several times with religious terms. On *Life Is Good*, he explains his survival by claiming that “God want this nigger to live” (“Loco-Motive”) and, contradicting his earlier anti-religious outbursts, speaks of the importance of faith, including the religious kind: “We all need faith ’cause the world keeps changing” (“The World’s an Addiction”). The rather quick transition suggests that the spatial context may have a surprisingly strong effect on individual characteristics, such as overt religiousness. More precisely, it implies that the blasphemous imagery on *Illmatic* may have been a sign of frustrated cynicism set off by the surrounding hopelessness. Based on Nas’s marked inclination to religiousness in his post-*Illmatic* lyrics, I propose that the real significance of young Nas’s fantasy of “attack[ing] a reverend” with a “Mac-11” submachine gun in “One Time 4 Your Mind” is the connection between religion and authority, rather than any actual theological issue. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that, in “Halftime”, Nas’s assault on God is presented in the same couplet with aggression against enforcers of (white) law; he says he is also “putting hits on five-0.”<sup>40</sup>

Moving on to the second point, Nas’s racial solidarity contrasts starkly with the badman portrayal and also deviates from the code of the street. *Illmatic* pictured an environment where compassion beyond one’s closest and most reliable peers was mostly ill-advised. Despite his occasional misgivings about the unintended consequences of violent actions, Nas would mete out

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39 .44 caliber handgun.

40 Police.

revenge on any aggressor. However, in “Nas Is Like”, Nas can afford to be more forgiving: “Much success to you, even if you wish me the opposite. Sooner or later we’ll all see who the prophet is.” When compared, for instance, to the lyrical approach of stereotypical gangsta rap, his lenience can be interpreted as softness. My term ‘afford’ can be understood also literally: to a certain degree, Nas’s shift towards the identity of an enlightened guide poses a financial risk. As was suggested in chapter 2, one possible reason for the popularity of gangsta rap may be the compatibility with stereotypes of black Americans. In Toby Jenkins’s humorous words, “we want our thugs” (1235). Writing about the challenges of maintaining a positive outlook in rap lyrics, he argues that “mass culture is literally not buying the persona of the intelligent, socially aware, and politically critical Black man” (1235). This is not to be understood only as white prejudice; as posited by Kitwana, a ridiculing attitude towards “any remnants of Black consciousness” has become a part of “the new Black youth culture” (133), with which he refers to a similar outlook I have termed gangsta or street mentality in this thesis. However, Nas’s forays into the commercially risky area of conscious hip-hop on *I Am...* are counterbalanced by several tracks displaying an unmistakable gangsta mentality, such as “Favor For a Favor”, where he presents what he calls “the most dangerous side of” him, claiming to be “twisted”, and warns that nobody is safe from his murderous transgressions: “any nigger can get it.” Trying to determine to which extent these contradictory and exaggerated personae represent Nasir Jones as a person is ultimately futile, and, as discussed previously, they are best understood as a form of dialogue between different worldviews.

A similar juxtaposition of clashing worldviews is also visible on *Life Is Good*. On that album, Nas seems to be very conscious of the conflict between the ‘real’ in the spatially construed rap sense and the wider meaning of ‘real’, i.e., the actual state of things. After years of commercial success and celebrity status, it would seem dubious if Nas continued to portray himself as a destitute street dweller. He addresses the issue of temporal distance to his experiences of poverty directly in “Loco-Motive”: “I been rich longer than I been broke, I confess”. By assuming a

seemingly apologetic tone when discussing his wealth, he ironically acknowledges the supposed weakness he has as a rapper. Obviously this problem is not unique to Nas, since, as explained by Forman, many successful rappers must battle against the belief that becoming a celebrity “has the capacity to affect and erode their locally constituted identities” (236). The great irony of materialistically oriented rap music is that financial success, if used to escape the hardships of the inner city, distances the artist from the ghetto framework that originally created the pronounced emphasis on money. Visible wealth in form of clothes, jewelry, and cars are an essential part of hip-hop imagery of today, but, according to Anderson, actual upward mobility can be seen as “acting white” and thus be frowned upon by a number of ghetto inhabitants (*Code of the Street* 65), which suggests internalization of the idea of poverty as a natural part of black identity. Also in this matter the spatial and racial dimensions are intertwined: Massey and Denton argue that this hostility against “acting white” is “strongly reinforced by residential segregation” (170). This is to say that poverty becomes normative in a destitute area with little prospects of improvement, and attempts to raise one's social status by following norms associated with whiteness may be considered futile and undignified. Regarding Nas's street-oriented inner-city listeners, there is an apparent risk that he may appear affected by white values and alien to them, which may undermine his mission as an “oracle bred from city housing” who is “here to enlighten” (“Back When”).

Perhaps to counter this dilemma, on *Life Is Good*, not do the narrative perspectives only vary from track to track, but also within one song and even a single verse, which enables Nas to present critical views of inner-city mentality without venturing too far from the ghettocentric standard of rap authenticity. Simply put, Nas repeatedly reminds the listener about his authority to comment on such issues. For example, in “No Introduction”, Nas clearly establishes his inner-city background: “Hood forever, I just act like I'm civilized.” Mixed with such passages that emphasize his origins, there are lyrics that challenge certain attitudes typically advocated in street-oriented rap, such as glamorization of male promiscuity (to which I will return shortly). Similarly, in “Loco-

Motive”, Nas surrounds his brief deconstruction of two gangsta motifs – money and alcohol – with passages that reinforce his street credibility. First he confirms that he is capable of violence: “The truth is the truth, I really put my scars on niggers. They wear them lifetime . . . not bragging, I’m just honest.” Only after he has thus proven his street status – and his affluence by mentioning his “black Bentley” – he proceeds to explain that his current life is not good simply because of his “diamond piece” but due to the fact that he has “started finding peace”. In a verse that begins with Nas saying he is “staggering” due to inebriation, he later notes that “alcohol [is] aging [his] niggers faster than felonies”, suggesting that escaping one’s problems to intoxication may be more dangerous than the initial problems in themselves. Admittedly, this contradictory style muddles the social commentary, but it simultaneously prevents Nas from sounding preachy.

That notwithstanding, Nas’s tone does become more condemning in “Accident Murderers”, which returns to the theme of severe negative externalities produced by inner-city crime. After mentioning a case of a “beautiful sister” being accidentally shot and killed, Nas starts to ponder the frame of mind of the shooters: “Violent adolescents, homicidal with weapons. Not a lot of knowledge inside of their minds, that I’m guessing.” The emphasis on lack of education and social awareness as an explanation for violent behavior is a trademark of conscious rap and, as discussed previously, also a cornerstone of the covertly racist argumentation put forward by conservative white America. Also a number of inner city dwellers who consider themselves decent explain antisocial behavior with lack of knowledge, as indicated by the term “ignorance” used to describe ghetto mentality (Anderson, *Code of the Street* 50). Interestingly, despite his decent attitude in “Accident Murderers”, Nas underlines his street credibility in “The Don” by referring explicitly to the ignorance of his murderous street family: “My niggers is ign’ant, put lead in your pigment”.

As for the source of social awareness, Anderson explains that, in urban black communities, social knowledge has been traditionally provided by “old heads”, who were “once the epitome of decency in inner-city neighborhoods”, but whose role has greatly diminished due to the wide-spread



unemployment and the consequent rise of drug culture (*Code of the Street* 145-146). When talking about his difficulties to relate to the younger generation in “Accident Murderers”, Nas assumes the role of a decent old head, thus completing a full circle – on *Illmatic* he himself represented the alienated youth by questioning futile optimism, spirituality, and the usefulness of education. In “Accident Murderers”, Nas observes the young men of his former neighborhood, whom he used to know “when they was babies”, and says:

But they cold-blooded, homie<sup>41</sup> wonder where the respect went.  
 Can't play with these little niggers, gangster little niggers.  
 Can't hang with these little niggers, they killing, they reckless.  
 Wish I could build with them, but will they change really?

By talking about his wish to “build”, Nas voices his willingness to guide the young generation to a more productive direction, but he also questions his ability to produce a substantial change. He “can’t hang” with the members of his former community, as they, in their recklessness, appear now threatening and alien to him. Conversely, also Nas has become an outsider in their eyes, as suggested by Nas’s remark about the lack of respect. Perhaps this is due to the changes in Nas’s perspective, or a sign of the progressively deepening alienation of each new generation of ghetto dwellers, or a combination of both.

There is a hint of Nas’s old pessimism in “Accident Murderers”, especially in the refrain which emphasizes lack of true agency: “Accident murderer, act like you killed on purpose.” On surface level, Nas’s “accident murderer” refers to people who have unintentionally shot a bystander and later exploit their error to garner respect in the ’hood by claiming to have “killed on purpose.” However, the words can also be interpreted as commentary on black genocide through intraracial violence, which Nas explored in “I Gave You Power”. The young men of the ghetto become murderers accidentally also in the sense that the process is heavily shaped by circumstances and is thus incidental rather than a result of conscious decisions stemming from inherent characteristics. Indeed, contingency on circumstances is one of the definitions of ‘accidental’ – according to *A*

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Homie’ or ‘homeboy’ refers to a person from the same ’hood, and thus, Nas’s usage of the term here emphasizes his ghetto origins.

*Dictionary of Philosophy*, the word 'accident' is used to denote non-essential properties in Aristotelian logic (Flew 4). Although this connection to the use of the term in philosophy is unlikely to be intentional, Nas's remark that "streets are full of" killers who are not nearly as intentional in their actions as it may seem is nevertheless accurate on more than one level.

In line with his role as an old head, in "No Introduction", Nas puts forward views that counter the way intimate relationships are typically presented in rap, although these views alternate with lyrics that portray a rather generic pimp persona. Describing his lavish lifestyle, Nas mentions having sex with "Brazilian women", which sounds like a fairly stereotypical boast of sexual prowess. However, anticipating the probable reaction to this, he remarks: "I'm pushing forty, she only twenty-one. Don't applaud me, I'm exhausted, G." As Nas proceeds to promise his listeners that "the tales [they] hear is the truth of [him], who wasn't the most faithful husband", he moves on to juxtapose his promiscuity with an opposite viewpoint on the issue. In the final verse, he announces the purpose of his writing: "I wrote this piece to get closure. Some of y'all might know Kelis, this goes to her with love." Here Nas refers to singer Kelis Rogers, his ex-wife and mother of his son. Although rap lyrics frequently incorporate names of real persons, particularly those of the artist's street family, it is highly untypical for rappers to mention their significant others by name and even more exceptional to publicly announce their affection for them, especially after a separation. This goes directly against the standard of objectification of women in street-oriented rap, which category includes a great number of Nas's earlier lyrics (recall his encounters with the unnamed "honeys" discussed in chapter 3) as well as those parts in the very same song where he talks about unspecified "Brazilian women" and "girls [who are] all up on him." Ghetto-based hip-hop and Nas's current physical surroundings form two socially constructed spaces with conflicting social norms, and Nas's perspective seems to alternate between them.

In "Bye Baby" on *Life Is Good*, Nas returns to the theme and voices explicitly his disagreement with the stereotypical ghetto perspective on marital relationships. He raps:

And all I seen was selfish cowards,  
 under their breath saying: “Why did Nas trust her?”  
 But look at yourself, speak louder, bro’.  
 You live with your baby moms and scared to make an honest woman out of her,  
 and make her your bride.

In the excerpt, two notions of manhood collide. Nas takes pride in his courageous decision to try out the traditional role of a husband. However, as described by Anderson, many inner-city men see marriage as an constraint and consider it to be at odds with the notion of manhood based on personal freedom (*Code of the Street* 175). Also, Nas’s phrase “your baby moms” contrasts with “my wife” he uses to refer to Kelis in the song. Regarding such terms as “baby momma” and “baby daddy”, Kitwana asserts that these phrases, which “are used routinely by hip-hop generationers to signify individuals who share a baby together”, suggest that it is the child that connects the parents to each other, rather than mutual affection (115-116). He further argues that these terms “point to the antagonism brewing between young Black men and women” (116), which is manifested by the misogynistic language widely employed in rap music. According to Kitwana, it is obvious that the problematic relationship between African American men and women stems from the economic conditions (118). Also Anderson connects the disregard of traditional relationships – the reluctance to “play house” – common among inner-city men to the lack of financial resources required to support a family (*Code of the Street* 38). As a solitary example, Nas’s lyrics seem to lend support for the argument that the inner-city context plays an important role in such matters; coinciding with Nas’s gradual detachment from the ghetto, there is a noticeable change towards the dominant norms from the more cynical attitude seen on *Illmatic*. That said, moving away from nihilistic street mentality does not automatically entail progressive thinking, and Nas’s remark that it is the man’s task to make “an honest woman” out of his female partner is arguably regressive and sexist in its own right, albeit closer to the white middle-class norm of gender roles. As for the explanation for Nas’s changing attitudes, in addition to his detachment from ghetto mentality, age may be an independent contributing factor. Additionally, as pointed out by Massey and Denton, rap lyrics “do

not ‘prove’ the harmful effects of growing up in a ghetto”; instead, “hard evidence” in form of statistical analyses is required to map out the complex network of cause and effect (178), which naturally applies also to the current discussion. Nevertheless, I wish to argue that these ruminations in and on themselves point to the value of hip-hop analysis as a source of insight into the black experience in urban America.

In addition to challenging ghetto-conditioned views of others, on *Life Is Good*, Nas also questions his own demeanor. This takes place, for example, in “Daughters”, where he talks about his relationship to his daughter and discusses the discrepancy between his roles as an entertainer and a father. When Nas suspects that his daughter has “had that chronic lit”, i.e., used cannabis, and says he has “a problem with it”, his attempts to protect his daughter are undermined by his own public image as a rapper: “She look at me like I’m not the cleanest father figure.” Later in the song, Nas rebukes his daughter’s “inappropriate” conduct in social media, such as her pointing to her multiple sexual liaisons by uploading images “of herself underdressed” and “a box of condoms on her dresser.” Again, his task as a parent contradicts with his own previous actions – in the first verse, he raps: “she’s seen me switching women, pops was on some pimp shit.” Although Nas’s vexed reaction to his daughter’s conduct seems quite expected from the perspective of the dominant American values, it is obviously ironic to hear Nas voice these concerns, considering his street persona. Firstly, his condemnation of drug use clashes with lyrics of “Loco-Motive” on the same album, where he states that “reefer is [his] religion”. In addition, in “Halftime” from *Illmatic*, written when Nas was himself a teenager, he boasts that he is never “in the streets without a ton of reefer.” Secondly, while disturbed by his daughter’s self-objectification, Nas has written many lyrics which appoint women to the role of trophies that prove the success of a man, and even in the same song there is a sly sense of pride in his mention of his “pimp shit.” The views on drugs and sex manifested in a number of Nas’s lyrics are closely connected to the social norms of the inner city, and now that Nas has a “place to raise kids in” he yearned for in “If I Ruled the World”, he is forced

to reflect on how the ghetto and his current environment differ in terms of social acceptability. His daughter's sexually provocative behavior turns Nas's attention to his own adequacy as a father: "At this point I realized I ain't the strictest parent. I'm too loose, I'm too cool with her. Should've drove more times to school with her. I thought I dropped enough jewels on her." Following a regretting line of not spending enough time with his daughter, Nas's mention of "jewels" is easily interpreted as a metaphor for wise words. Nevertheless, also the literal sense is significant here: it symbolizes Nas's recognition that providing material well-being for one's children is not sufficient parenting on its own.

In "Daughters", Nas's protective attitude towards his daughter collides with yet another central part of his identity: imprisonment. On *Illmatic*, Nas showed great solidarity to black convicts, which tendency continues in "You Wouldn't Understand" on *Life Is Good*, where he raps about his friend in "the federal joint": "Twenty years getting money in the dirty South. That's alleged, you see my nigger's a stand up dude. So I'm yelling 'free my nigger!'" He understands that the incarceration system is racially biased and refuses to believe the guilt of his friend. Yet, in "Daughters", where Nas finds out that his daughter corresponds with "with some boy her age who locked up", his initial reaction is very different: "First I regretted it, then caught my rage, like how could I not protect her from this awful phase?" Remarkably, the boy's status as a prisoner seems to define him as a person, which renders Nas's daughter's friendship with him an "awful phase". Soon Nas realizes the contradiction and concedes: "if her husband is a gangster, can't be mad, I'll love him." Nevertheless, he still has reservations and advises his daughter to be cautious: "Wait 'til he come home, you can see where his head's at." Due to his current wealth, Nas is in a different position than the young rapper who wrote letters to his incarcerated partners in "One Love" and realizes the risk of both him and his daughter being victimized: "Niggers got game, they be trying to live . . . I'm sure he know who your father is." There is a possibility that the imprisoned boy may try to use Nas's daughter simply as a means to profit from Nas's success. Nas is well aware of the

conditions that drive inner-city youths to desperate deeds, and, while he is understanding towards these young men who are “trying to live”, that is, survive by any means necessary, he cannot let his racial solidarity blind his judgment. Thus, the connection based on shared racial identity is partially superseded by the rift created by the difference in spatial circumstances.

In the previous chapter, in my discussion of *Illmatic*, I suggested that Nas’s explorations of a ghetto frame of mind represent double consciousness: as if addressing an outside observer, he occasionally explains in very plain terms the level of desperation inner-city youths experience. I argued that this may have the positive outcome of garnering sympathy even from listeners with no personal connection to ghetto life. This aspect of his lyrics becomes more pronounced on *Life Is Good*, where Nas, reflecting on his personal history from his current perspective, seems somewhat bothered by his past actions and tries to justify them to the audience. Although his violent tales are useful as proofs of his street credibility, such memories continue to cause emotional distress, and his reminiscing contains signs of regret. For instance, in “Loco-Motive”, Nas says: “I get high, forget who bled, who we stomp kicked in the head, and who we left for dead.” Nas used starvation as a metaphor for desperation on *Illmatic* and continues to do so in “No Introduction”, where he builds a case to defend himself, starting from his childhood: “We was kids hungry. Mom’s working, I was famished, she getting home late. So I decided, now I’m in charge, either stay full or starve.” He explains how his determination to succeed eventually lead him “to move that hard”, i.e., distribute crack cocaine. Nas seems to be answering presumed accusations – emanating from conservative white America or possibly even his own current point of view – when he raps: “How could I not succumb? How could I not partake? Fifteen I got a gun, sixteen I robbed a train. Licked off a shot for fun, what’s got inside my brain?” As described by Kennedy, American conservatives have presented “individual not social conditions” as the most prominent explanation for inner-city problems (91), and Nas’s last question seems to echo this conservative viewpoint on the so-called American underclass. However, when Nas wonders what it was that contaminated him as a youth,

the question is arguably a rhetorical one. He has not only answered it previously in the same verse but already on *Illmatic*, where he also refers to starvation as an alternative to crime. As noted in the previous chapter, starvation is a powerful metaphor: it is difficult to castigate ethical choices made by a juvenile experiencing actual physical hunger. Double consciousness may be seen both as a gift and a curse, and, having seen the both extremes of urban life in America, Nas has the potential to function as a cultural intermediary. There is certainly a need for such voices in America, since, as Nas accurately points out in “Reach Out”, “conservatives don’t understand slang linguistics.”

As the title of the album implies, on *Life Is Good*, Nas seems content with his current life, and it is clearly easier for him to maintain a positive attitude in his current surroundings. For example, when he talks about lying awake at night with “money problems pop[ping] up”, he soon finds a simple solution: “Whatever happens, happens. I keep making my millions” (“Reach Out”). Having reached the highest imaginable plateau, he raps in “Queens story”: “This is the top”. However, he is immediately dragged down by the awareness of how many of his *Illmatic*-era acquaintances have not succeeded to escape: “Where them niggers I shouted out on my first shit?” Arguably, the claustrophobia that has vanished from his lyrics may have been partially replaced by survivor’s guilt, but, nevertheless, also the “life’s a bitch” motto has been replaced by a more hopeful one; in the beginning of “Summer on Smash”, Nas repeats “life is good” with mantra-like commitment.

Although Nas’s grievances on *Life Is Good* are relatively minor compared to those of his underprivileged youth, finding his place has not been totally without its problems. In a sense, he is situated between two worlds, neither of which he is fully comfortable with. Nas explicitly speaks this out in “Reach Out”, where he raps: “When you’re too ’hood to be in them Hollywood circles, and you’re too rich to be in the ’hood that birthed you.” A moment later, he explains his need to reflect on himself and uses a mirror as a metaphor: “Life become clearer when you wipe down your mirror and leave notes around for yourself to remember”. To understand his current situation, he

needs to remove the residue of his past life from his self-image. However, in order to retain the wide perspective that his personal journey has provided, he needs to hold on to the lessons learned from his experiences – to “leave notes around” for himself. Being an MC, Nas has been doing exactly that his whole life: writing down the details of his various ordeals and pleasures in his lyrics. On *Life Is Good* he continues this undertaking, although in a different spatial context than the teenage rapper who wrote *Illmatic*. In the hesitant introduction of “N.Y. State of Mind”, young Nas mumbled that he does not “know how to start this shit”, yet he managed to convey a compelling picture of his urban surroundings. Almost two decades later, in “Loco-Motion”, he goes back to his original notion of keeping it real: “So much to write and say, yo, I don’t know where to start. So I’ll begin with the basics and flow from the heart.” In this sense, Nas has not changed at all.



## 5. Conclusions

In this thesis, my goal has been to demonstrate the paramount significance of the urban context in Nas's self-portrayal, and, by extension, illustrate the effects of spatial factors in the lived experience of African American men grown up in the inner cities. My findings show that New York's Queensbridge Houses has had a powerful impact on Nas's identity construction, as I hypothesized. In addition, Nas's depictions of the inner-city environment correspond closely with those found in the theoretical writings on American ghettos, which underlines the importance of incorporating such information in hip-hop analysis.

Nas's commercial success has taken him away from the inner-city environment, which is reflected in his lyrical content in an attitudinal shift towards American mainstream values and increasing criticism of street mentality. Despite *Illmatic*'s strong emphasis on street life, Nas's lyrics present several different perspectives already in the beginning of his career, including viewpoints that are relatively close to the dominant norms. My analysis reveals that Nas does not depict himself as a monolithic entity, but rather he uses the different aspects of his persona to make observations on diverse attitudes and behavioral patterns and their relation to urban spaces. His role as a communal spokesperson who represents simultaneously several different viewpoints provides a fascinating glance into the various ways how African American men perceive their surroundings and their own position in American society. However, my personal experience of writing this thesis suggests that efficient utilization of this valuable source of insight requires both theoretical understanding of the social construction of space and extensive knowledge of hip-hop culture, the latter of which can be only acquired through an extensive amount of first-hand research.

My first analysis chapter focused mostly on the depiction of the ghetto environment and its influence on the first version of Nas's textually constructed identity on his debut album *Illmatic*. Nas's perspective on *Illmatic* is very much tied to the Queensbridge Housing Projects, which he pictures as an urban jungle characterized by street crime and constant danger. The harsh

environment has three significant outcomes that appear prevalently in Nas's lyrics. Firstly, Nas displays signs of claustrophobia and frequently utilizes metaphors that allude to confinement. The combination of extreme population density and lack of free movement seems to be a source of great mental distress, and at times Nas seems clinically depressed. Secondly, the daily struggle pits the inhabitants against each other, making it difficult to practice racial solidarity. Instead, ghetto denizens follow the unforgiving code of the street, which in turn adds to the social problems. Thirdly, the opportunities to make meaningful choices are truncated to such extent that Nas has adopted a very bleak view on matters of agency and occasionally portrays the social issues as characteristics of his neighborhood rather than results of conscious human action. As I pointed out in chapter 3, this depiction of ghetto life is based on Nas's individual perception of reality and should not be incautiously generalized. Nevertheless, it arguably reflects emotional responses of a number of young black men to the challenging conditions of American inner cities.

Several components of Nas's identity on *Illmatic* can be traced back to the environment. Living in a place characterized by strife and desperation, he uses badman portrayal to shield himself against aggressors. Occasionally, he displays predatory behavior in his own attempts to gain dominance in the cramped ghetto space. He is also preoccupied with questions of money, which he explains in terms of basic needs and survival. The difficult conditions have taught Nas to seek instant gratification through sex, drugs, and alcohol, and he disdains the useless consolation provided by religion. For the most part, Nas's outlook closely matches the so-called ghetto culture described in sociological literature on American ghettos. However, despite his generally cynical attitude, Nas feels strong sympathy towards his incarcerated peers and, due to the pervasiveness of imprisonment in the black inner-city community, has incorporated incarceration as a part of his self-identity. This points to the merging of street culture and prison culture in black inner cities.

Nas's sophomore album, *It Was Written*, presents a new, less anguished Nas, but his self-image is still mostly built upon the framework of criminality and money. Although this new

iteration of Nas – modeled after fictive and real criminal celebrities such as Tony Montana and Carlos Escobar – celebrates his survival against the odds, *It Was Written* also contains one of Nas's most pessimistic songs, "I Gave You Power", which equates black men of the ghettos with illegal weapons, portraying them as nearly insentient tools of black genocide. This view may be understood to buttress the idea of young black men as a violent and dangerous element of American society; nevertheless, it simultaneously challenges the white hegemony that exerts power over them.

In my second analysis chapter, I endeavored to juxtapose the street identity presented in the previous chapter with Nas's attempts to break free from the gloomy determinism induced by the ghetto environment. My analysis shows that, although Nas has the ability to use his second sight to examine American inner-city life in a critical manner, his early efforts are also tinged with signs of internalized racism. His later work introduces some new spaces, but the ghetto remains a significant theme in his lyrics. Furthermore, his depictions of his current surroundings are vague and based on the differences to the inner-city experiences of his adolescent years. However, he does provide some textual mapping of the black experience in predominantly white space. Nas also occasionally uses spatial metaphors to describe his position within hip-hop culture, making references to an upward journey.

As Nas's career progresses, his persona as an artist gains prominence in his self-portrayal and starts to gradually replace criminality as the central constituent of his identity. With amazing quickness, Nas becomes a strong believer in agency and spiritual guidance. Although Nas continues to acknowledge the massive impact that ghetto environment has on its inhabitants, he starts to search for ways to help others by spreading social awareness. To some extent, he has been doing this since *Illmatic*, but on *I Am...* this endeavor is connected to his new identity as a religious leader. The rapid shift from the earlier cynicism to the spiritual, optimistic, and compassionate Nas coinciding with his commercial success suggests that these characteristics may have a close connection to the spatial circumstances. Although such change in itself was expected, I found the

swiftness of the religious transformation in particular somewhat surprising. Altogether, these observations lend some support to the argument that the so-called culture of poverty is not a self-sustaining phenomenon but rather upheld by segregation.

On *Life Is Good*, Nas occasionally represents values that are fairly close to the dominant norms. In addition, he frequently voices critical arguments against ghetto mentality, both that of others and his own. However, as was the case on *I Am...*, such views alternate with contradicting street-oriented attitudes. To some extent, this may be due to the genre conventions of hip-hop. Despite his substantial changes, Nas never ceases to be a product of Queensbridge, nor does he try to deny his past. On the contrary, he simply adds new elements and viewpoints to the narrative of his life. Having acquired a wider perspective, he often looks back into his own actions as a teenager and feels the apparent need to justify them. Due to his current position as a celebrity among both black and white Americans, his double consciousness may have a positive effect inasmuch as it enables him to verbalize the black inner-city experience in terms that also people outside the ghetto can relate to. Although Nas still depicts some problems in adjusting to life outside the ghetto on *Life Is Good*, none of these are serious enough to shake his optimism, especially when compared to the overwhelming pressure of the inner-city squalor depicted on *Illmatic*.

I believe that, by examining the excerpts side by side with the relevant urban context, I have succeeded in my goal to produce convincing interpretations of Nas's lyrics. Yet, I am aware of the fact that my work, which is based on the perceptions of a single person, is severely limited in terms of generalizability. Because of this limitation, in my initial research plan, I contemplated examining lyrics from several artists with experiences similar to those described in Nas's material. However, such approach would be a large undertaking even for a doctoral dissertation and, if carried out in the scope of the current work, would require a considerably less detailed analysis. In addition, there are several areas in my thesis which I have dealt with in a somewhat cursory fashion, but which would warrant a detailed examination of their own, such as religion, parenthood, and black masculinity, to

name a few. That notwithstanding, I hope I have managed to illustrate the importance of meticulous contextual analysis in the interpretation of rap lyrics in particular and of African American culture in general. I also wish that the work I have done here may inspire other researchers to delve into these themes in even more width and depth in the future.

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