

Andrzej Antoszek  
Catholic University of Lublin  
English Department  
American Studies  
Al. Raclawickie 14  
20-950 Lublin, Poland  
tel./fax. (081) 5332572  
e-mail: antoszek@kul.lublin.pl

## HOPPING ON THE HYPE: DOUBLE ONTOLOGY OF (CONTEMPORARY) AMERICAN RAP MUSIC

In a revealing interview with Elisabeth A. Frost, Harryette Mullen, one of the most enthralling African-American poets, tries to answer the question of contemporary black identity and authenticity, the search for which seems to the interviewer to be a rather “nostalgic gesture.” Mullen’s answer, the response of a literary figure who is-- at the same time-- a person living and teaching in Los Angeles and thus familiar with all the latest *fads* that black communities adopt, is full of concern for the inevitability of the changes that the global culture imposes on once unique identifying characteristics. Mullen observes that “part of what is tricky and difficult is wondering whether we even know what we believe about ourselves. So often we are performing, and we are paid for performing – we are surviving, assimilating, blending in. When are we ourselves? Beyond being either a credit or discredit to our race, who are we?” (Frost: 416).

Mullen’s words, a shrouded lament for the disappearance of the singular and distinctive in favor of the global and homogenized, could easily be applied to the phenomenon which has soared from its Compton ragged origins to the riches of the luxurious corporate environment, turning poor boys with ghetto blasters into moguls of show business. Contemporary rap music has acquired in the course of a decade or so a double, triple, or even multiple ontology, capitalizing on its initial niche and vaguely ominous character and exchanging the message for endless permutations of the form. The genre of rap and hip hop music has evolved from a relevant black voice to a marketing cow, milked mercilessly by the white and black alike. Like Fitzgerald’s Daisy, whose voice is full of money, many contemporary black artists hardly care about whom they sing for and what they sing: the most relevant thing is to get their string of pearls, *pardon*, their 24-karat gold chain.

The evanescent nature of contemporary rap music excludes, as a rule, any unanimously accepted and firm definitions. Out of the many attempts to define this music, the most

common definition assumes that rap is a form of expression that finds its roots imbedded deep within an ancient African culture and oral tradition, which can be associated with the reciting of rhymes to the beat of music. However accurate this statement may be, it neglects some elements which characterize the miscellaneous and ever-changing face of the genre. Thus, from today's perspective, it may be claimed that throughout the history of America there has always been some form of verbal acrobatics or jousting involving rhymes within the African-American community. "Signifying," "testifying," "Shining of the Titanic," "the Dozens," "school yard rhymes," "prison jail house rhymes," and "double Dutch" jump rope rhymes are some of the names and terms which various forms of rap have adopted throughout history. Tricia Rose, an academic writing her thesis on rap music offers a more scholarly and theoretical definition of the genre, dressing the language of the street in the metonyms of literary theory. She says that rap music "is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America. Rap music is a form of rhymed story telling, accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music. It began in the mid-1970s in the South Bronx in New York City as a part of hip-hop, an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. From the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America. Rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer or narrator" (Rose 2).

In her study, Rose acknowledges the shifting borders of the phenomenon, writing that "rap's stories continue to articulate the shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture" (Rose 3). This assumption that rap is inseparably connected with the United States, takes for granted that performing the music outside its territory is in fact following and referring to the patterns set elsewhere. Even though many national varieties of rap have developed – for example Snap (England), House of Pain (Ireland), or Mc Solar or NTM (France) – it is only in the New World that the co-existence of black and white communities, on such a large scale, has been part of culture for such a long time. The relationship between black and white people in America has been subject to numerous transmutations, such as slavery, Martin Luther King's peaceful resistance, or the Black Panther Movement, and each one has always given rise to social expression – rap being one of its forms. This essay seeks to demonstrate how the genre of rap – once an indigenous voice offering an insight into a culture pushed beyond the limits of the legitimate and "proper" – has appropriated and been appropriated by contemporary (white) culture and turned into another commercialized and conventional utterance, a copy whose origins are barely traceable little

more than two decades after it came to light; how the difficult but nonetheless salient problems of harassment, prostitution, and street killings pervading the socially and economically deprived minority of African-Americans living in the ghetto have become banalized in the pap of contemporary rap productions.

In order to look at the present situation of rap music in the United States, it seems worthwhile to take into consideration the paradigms that have traditionally demarcated the boundaries of the genre itself. The first and, perhaps, most conspicuous one, was the clear dividing line between the black and non-black (white) communities, limiting the former to the environment to which black people have been relegated, or in which they have segregated themselves for various reasons: namely the ghetto.

Even though in the geographical sense the black ghetto is still one of the landmarks of the American landscape, rap music has long since crossed the boundaries of the slums. *Rappers Delight*, released in 1979 by Sylvia Robinson, the first rap compilation to top the charts, 2Pac Shakur with his *Me Against the World* album, L.L. Cool J, the first rap artist to reach No1 on the American Billboard's Black Singles chart, with "I Need Love" in 1987, and many other rap performers who have reached the tops of the charts, have already proven that the popularity of the genre is not limited to the relatively esoteric group of the black citizens of the U.S. The fact that rap and hip-hop records are purchased in huge quantities by white Americans means that either the message incorporated in rap music and traditionally perceived as anti-white and anti-establishment has lost its strength, at least to the point of allowing white people to accept the material supposedly offensive to them, or that the message has simply vanished from sight. Whichever theory holds true, it is undeniable that the unique status ascribed to rap music has been lost. The appearance of several "white" groups playing rap music – Beastie Boys or House of Pain – and simultaneously employing the whole repertoire of black themes (ghetto) and devices (sampling) only proves that the genre is no longer inimitable. Interestingly, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, rap music began to be perceived by various "alternative" groups from East-Central Europe as an antidote to the growing Americanization and commercialization of the former Soviet Bloc countries, represented by the influx of pretentious Hollywood productions, "music for everybody," and other Western products of mass culture. Perceived as anarchistic and therefore appealing to the contesters of the new market economy, black music was soon "domesticated" producing, as a result, the Polish or Czech rapper, at first glance a very weird hybrid. Such African-American notions like "brothers," "neighborhood," or "black pride" were translated into indigenous forms, leaving the black heritage adapted to the local, yet still very traceable.

Whereas joint productions and concerts of “real” American rappers were rare – with the exception of Liroy’s<sup>i</sup> duet with the Lords of Brooklyn or Coolio’s performance for employees of a telecommunications company – the influence of American rap music was best to be seen in the styles various Polish groups adopted (baggy trousers, oversized shirts, baseball caps worn backwards), the themes they touched upon in their music (loneliness of poor project dwellers or long distance school commuters) or in the vocabulary used to express these problems. A great number of words and phrases used by American rappers in their productions, including “the yard,” “homies,” “yo,” or “represent” got translated into Polish, creating some rather comic borrowings. Sometimes the translation is almost literal, like in the case of “the yard,” bringing back to life the Polish word *podwórko*, which, had it not been for the genre of rap music, would have ended in the trashcan of contemporary culture. The word “bitch” on the other hand, overused and abused by rappers young and old (see Snoop’s and his son’s lyrics!) got a rather nice Polish equivalent *foka*, meaning the seal (animal). However, despite its still growing popularity, Polish hip hop remains very much an underground phenomenon, limited to non-commercial radio stations, clubs, and specialist magazines.

It is interesting to notice that the spreading popularity and range of rap music coincided with a momentous statement of Dr Dre, a leading representative of gangsta rap and probably the best rap producer, who, on leaving Death Row Records in March 1996, said that rap is dead. In order to appreciate the resonance of this statement it is worthwhile to have a quick look at the figure of Dre and the label itself. The prodigy DJ Dr Dre, along with Eric Wright aka Eazy-E, joined later by Ice Cube, had in fact started what eventually came to be called “gangsta rap,” a style which replaced the “Electropop” sound dominating Los Angeles at that time (1988) and described as a mixture of techno-Rap with a bit of Disco in it. Forming the now legendary NWA group – “NWA” standing for “Niggers with Attitude” – Dre and his “homies” released *Straight Outta Compton* compilation in 1988, the first all Gangsta LP. The track “Fuck Tha Police” caused the FBI to send a letter to Ruthless, the Label owned by Eazy-E. In 1991, after receiving no money for more than a year, Dre left the group to eventually set up his own label called “Death Row Records.” “Death Row Records” was started in 1992 by Dre and Suge Knight (CEO), releasing the multiplatinum album *The Chronicle*, which proved that Dre was the best producer on the West Coast. The new label signed among others King Tee, RBX, The DOC, Snoop Doggy Dog, Dogg Pound, Rage, Warren G, Tupac Shakur, and The Lady of Rage and Hammer. The estimated value of the company, at the time Dre left it, was one hundred million dollars. One may ask the question why an artist would choose to leave a label that easily delivers platinum albums no matter who is on it?

Dre said that the main reason why he decided to quit was the growing commercialization of both the genre and the label itself and that plenty of new and unknown artists were being signed in order to cash in on the label's success. Putting Dre's name as a producer of the record simply guaranteed better sales.

As a matter of fact, the problem of the genre's mutual permeation seems to have become a vicious circle out of which rap music cannot break. Apart from the customary acknowledgment lists including God, mothers, brothers, sisters, and friends, the records of black rappers contain scores of names of other artists who have supposedly contributed to the final shape of the album. For example, the Fugees' hit album *The Score*, includes some 160 names, including Notorious B.I.G., Cypress Hill, Salt n' Pepa, and Coolio. This is not to be confused with artists featuring in other artists' recordings, the famous "courtesy of" lists. Out of 27 songs from 2Pac's *all eyez on me* album, 13 include at least one sample from other artists' production. In "You Can't Seem Me," the big Dre himself appears, responding to 2Pac's enthusiastic "Dr Dre all day!" Puff Daddy's latest productions feature samples, or specifically a cover of David Bowie's "Let's Dance," intertwined with Lisa Stansfield's "All Around the World." It seems that the actual message hidden behind the cover of meta-music, which, by the way, leaves very little scope for originality, is attracting fans to buy another "homie's" record.

What is more, it is often the case that hit records of rap groups are followed by solo albums of their members, and one may assume that financial factors are of greatest relevance here. A case in point is the famous Wu-Tang Clan who after the ground-breaking *Enter The Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* album have released a couple of others, under the names of its members: Method Man, ODB, Raekwon, Genius and Ghostface Killah. Wycleff Jean of the Fugees announced, after releasing his excellent solo album *The Carnival*, that there would be no third Fugees album until the other members, Lauryn Hill and Prakazrel "Pras," issued their own solo recordings. In the meantime, Wycleff got involved in numerous commercial activities ranging from a duet with Carlos Santana to running one of the Music Awards ceremonies. Needless to say, Wycleff's album features all the members of the Fugees.

Actually this mutual permeation of the genre is not limited to music only. Successful rappers (Puff Daddy or Will Smith) go on to become show business stars, successful athletes try their hand in business. As Nelson George puts it, "music and African-American athletics have been linked since Louis Armstrong sponsored a baseball team, Armstrong's Secret Nine of New Orleans, in 1931" (George 144); however, a question arises, how many of these attempts reflect genuine passion and a black voice *per se*, and how many of them are an

attempt to convert “black pride” into more tangible assets. Shaquille O’Neal, for instance, plays in movies (appalling!), raps, releases records for his own label (nothing to write home about), and leads Los Angeles Lakers from one NBA title to another (something really to write home about). A more interesting case is perhaps Allen Iverson, the Philadelphia 76ers star, whose career has been developing not unlike the paths of many now acclaimed rappers. Child of a 15-year-old mother, Iverson was drafted by the 76ers after playing only two years at Georgetown University. His promising career was almost prematurely terminated when at the age of seventeen he was sent to prison for five years for participating in a race riot in a bowling alley in Virginia. As it turned out, he had been tried under a law that had been evoked only once in the history of Virginia, and he was eventually cleared of all charges. Having gone through this “black” rite of passage Iverson, quite appropriately, joined in the mainstream of show business African-American stars. As George observes, Iverson is now on the path many other “homies” had trodden in the past: “True to hip hop, Iverson has formed his own production company, Crew Thick; the first artists signed were two of Iverson’s pals known as Madd Rigid. And, Iverson’s appearance, with his hat to the back, on the cover of *Rap Pages*, a national hip hop mag, certified his place in the culture’s constellation” (George 153).

Another factor which considerably contributes to impairing the message of contemporary American rap music is the sudden emergence of a number of groups playing “hip-hop,” a softer and thus less violent in terms of lyrics and music variety of rap. Richard Shusterman’s definition of hip hop describes it as a construct built up on the foundations of the genre proper (rap): “Hip hop actually designates an organic cultural complex wider than rap. It included breakdancing and graffiti and also a stylized but casual style of dress, where hightop sneakers become high fashion. Rap music supplied the beats for the break-dancers; some rappers testify to having practiced graffiti; and hip-hop fashion is celebrated in many raps, one example being Run DMC’s “My Adidas” (Shusterman: 629).

This somewhat misleading definition of “hip-hop” – graffiti art, break dancing, ripping mics, and maneuvering turntables – refers, supposedly, to man’s voyage through the mind, soul, and body to create the long term existence in the super conscious; as a matter of fact “hip-hop” attracts at the moment a large number of American teenagers, who often consume drugs – specifically amphetamine and ecstasy – during these gigs. Those drugs were “traditionally” taken during techno and rave events, much less often during rap performances. One thing, often overlooked in the analysis of the genre of hip-hop, is its different approach towards the lyrics, the sphere recognized by many as the most relevant and revealing part of

rap's message. Whereas most "traditional" rap lyrics are either stories from the ghetto woven throughout the song and intertwined with a refrain, or stories of (white) oppression (Public Enemy, 2Pac, Ghetto Boyz), hip-hoppers seem to pay much more attention to rhythm and music itself, where lyrics are supposed to fit in the rhythmical pattern rather than be the focus of a song. MC Lyte's hit single "Cold Rock a Party" is in fact a repetition the same phrase – "I got the power" – to the changing pattern of music. As a matter of fact today's lyrics differ significantly from the radical lyrics of the 1980s, rapped by Public Enemy for example. Often, as in the case of Snoop Doggy Dog's many songs, it can be said that they have indeed gone to the dogs; singing "Give me ten bitches and I'll fuck all ten," the "artist" demonstrates how far he has departed from the roots of the genre.<sup>ii</sup> It is indeed very difficult to mark a clear boundary between rap and hip-hop, but, nonetheless, the border still exists. One of Dr Dre's compilations, under the label of his new record company Aftermath, is a perfect example of how you can indiscernibly pass from gangsta rap to what may actually be defined as soul music. The record opens with classic rap tracks "East Coast/West Coast Killas" (Group Therapy) and "Shittin' On The World" (Mel-Man), and then continues with hip-hop hits such as "Choices" (Kim Summerson) or "Got Me Open" (Hands-On). Surprisingly, a couple of the tracks which follow – "Sexy Dance" (RC) and "No Second Chance" (Whoz Who) are typical soul hits. The ultimate purpose behind this "maneuver" is, again, to make the category of rap more open and thus more accessible and profitable.

The problem of so called black racism has also considerably altered the seemingly uniform message of rap music. Black racism is perceived as dividing "Niggaz" into the "right" MCs (masters of ceremony) and their "homies" and "gooks," either members of the opposite "camp" (see the West Coast East Coast feud) or simply less skilled performers. Those divisions are made even within these supposedly poorest districts of the black ghetto. 2Pac Shakur, for example, declares explicitly on his *all eyez on me* album how he is going to solve the problem of the "homies" who had got him into trouble: "Ahh, Suge what I tell you nigga, I was gonna start diggin' into these niggas chest, right Grab your bulletproof vest nigga cause its gonna be a long one Now me and Quik gonna show you niggas what it's like on this side Now, on this ride there's gonna be some real mutha-fuckas Y'all got ta be careful about who you fuck with and who you don't fuck with"(Shakur, "Hertz of Men").

2Pac adds, in the very next song, a revealing verse refuting in some way the stereotype of the black-white antagonism perceived as the only source of the misfortunes happening to the black: "And they say It's the white man I should fear But, it's my own kind Doin' all the killin' here I can't lie Ain't no love, for the other side" (Shakur, "Life Goes On").

As a matter of fact it is the Fugees who were accused, on the release of their *The Score* album, of propagating black racism which is still a taboo subject in many African-American communities. In "The Mask" Wycleff describes the situation of a Burger King employee who is offered a pay-raise by his black boss, provided he spies on his co-workers.

Probably the most conspicuous and illustrious example of black racism is the West Coast/East Coast feud, where both sides claim their superiority, usually by means of guns and violence. Whereas Compton, the black suburb of LA, is traditionally perceived as the cradle of gangsta rap, East Coast MCs claim that rap music became so commercialized on the West Coast, that it can no longer be perceived as a legitimate voice of black protest. One of the theories connected with 2Pac's death maintains he was murdered by killers hired by the rappers from the East. Other theories include the FBI's intervention, conspiracy, and even a marketing device to increase the number of sales.

While rap and hip hop records are still selling well, one may wonder why it seems a common assumption among artists and producers that sales may be boosted by adding a cover of an already existing song to the album. Whereas using samples has always been an inseparable part of creating rap music, one may ponder why many leading performers should decide to risk losing originality. What is more, plenty of the songs used for covers, are songs written and performed by white artists playing traditional rock or pop music, such as The Police ("Every Breath You Take") or Bee Gees ("Tryin' to Stay Alive"). The number of covers of famous hits seems to be constantly growing. Plenty of singles from hit albums in recent years, were cover versions of earlier hit records. Whereas some of them capitalized on less well-known songs – such as Coolio's "Gangsta Paradise" (originally performed by Stevie Wonder) or the Fugees' "Killing Me Softly" (Roberta Flack) – the more recent ones – Warren G's "What's Love Got To Do With It," Wycleff Jean's "Tryin' To Stay Alive" or Puff Daddy's "I'll Be Missing You" are mirror pictures of the originals and actually stand on the border of plagiarism.

It is important to observe at this point, taking into consideration all the above mentioned facts, that the relatively short evolution of rap music, occurring as it did, within a decade or so, has crystallized the genre as a postmodern category, with all its advantages and, to a larger extent it seems, disadvantages. If part of the definition of the postmodern is the fall of (the) centers and the emergence of the local, suppressed, and peripheral, then rap music incarnates in fact this definition. On the other hand, however, its *recycling* of postmodern waste demonstrates its attempt to become part of this waste, to catch up with the culture which favors the chaotic, fragmented, and equivocal but is also able to sell it well. Looking from a

more theoretical position at the phenomena described above, we may assume that rap music is an example of postmodern aesthetics for various reasons. Interestingly, this truly postmodern recycling and appropriation of various pieces and bits of contemporary culture can, on the one hand, be ideologically justified, if we assume that rap music still represents a struggle between the two cultures, white and black, the oppressor and the oppressed. As Shusterman points out, “a fascinating feature of much underground rap is its acute recognition of the politics of culture; its challenge of the univocal claims of white history and education; and its attempt to provide alternative black historical narratives which can stimulate black pride and foster emancipatory impulses. Such alternative narratives extend from biblical history to the history of hip hop itself, which is thus constituted and valorized as a phenomenon worthy of historical testimony and documentation” (Shusterman: 625).

He is also right to observe that like many postmodern representations, rap/hip hop music decenters former centers, undermines authorities and puts forth the “ex-centric”: “its plundering and mixing of past sources has no respect for period, genre, and style distinctions; it cannibalizes and combines what it wants with no concern to preserve the formal integrity, aesthetic intention, or historical context” (Shusterman: 623-624). On the other hand, however, the adherence of rap to the postmodern platform is a logical consequence of postmodernism’s all-inclusiveness, which puts on a par phenomena which themselves do not seem related to each other. Speaking about postmodernism, Fredric Jameson mentions what Edmund Smyth calls an awe-inspiring list of cultural phenomena: “The poetry of John Ashbery, the reaction against modern architecture, Andy Warhol and Pop Art, the moment of John Cage but also punk and new wave rock with groups like the Clash and the Talking Heads, contemporary vanguard film and video but also Star Wars, the works of William Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon but also the French new novel, and many more” (Smyth 9).

The problem with treating rap music as a *valid* postmodern category has its parallels in writing, where various literary voices, label themselves as “postmodern” but rely heavily, at the same time, on patterns and tropes developed by somebody else. Whereas Coover, Barth, or Pynchon can all be named both precursors and practitioners of postmodernism, more contemporary authors can only and unavoidably tread on the heels of their predecessors. Creating something completely new and original is extremely difficult in a culture so saturated and so up-to-the-minute. It is even a more difficult task for rap music, which, as a rule, recycles the already recycled and deconstructs the already deconstructed. Therefore, the main practices of rap music that Richard Shusterman labels as postmodern are, at the same time, deconstructive for the genre itself. “The thrilling beauty of dismembering old works to

create new ones, dismantling the prepackaged and wearily familiar into something stimulating different,” perceived by Shusterman as rap’s freshness, soon becomes the genre’s only tactic, turning the fresh into the accustomed (Shusterman: 618). Once the novelty wears off, originality and thus the power of this music is at stake. Much as they are captivating, the ploys of rap music are more of form than content.

In the first place, the process of creation is replaced here by appropriation, which is represented by sampling, mixing of styles, and employing covers. Using the method of sampling, rap “artists” openly refute the assumption that art is unique. This is very much convergent with the postmodern assumption that art is an inexhaustible simulacrum and that it is virtually impossible to create a piece of art which will be free from any borrowings. The problem has been the focus of many postmodern discourses, with the famous essay by John Barth – “Literature of Exhaustion” – opening the dispute. The mixing of various styles represents postmodern eclecticism, where the former boundaries between the high and low culture, the representing and the represented, all blur. The range of styles and genres rappers borrow from is enormous – from *The Phantom in the Opera* to *Superfly* to the Simpsons. Using covers may represent rewriting or re-enacting certain *stories* in the way that literature uses fairy tales, myths and archetypes. But whereas in the case of literature the ultimate purpose behind Coover’s or Barth’s contemporary tales is to show the ambiguity of the world, in the case of rap productions the purpose seems much more mundane: money, money, money.

The devices commonly associated with rap music, such as cutting, mixing, or scratching, have also contributed to the evolution of the genre as a postmodern category. By using these devices, black performers challenge or subvert such qualities of a work of art as integrity, fixed structure, or traditional patterns. It seems that the principle of deconstruction employed here combines the pleasure of creating from scratch with the pleasure of destroying of old forms.

Finally, rap music is full of paradoxes and contradictions that can hardly be resolved even on a very basic level. Whereas successful performers declare without exception their loyalty to the ghetto they come from, these declarations are instantly denied by their becoming icons of the culture they contest. They appear in videos in chic cars and clothes surrounded by scores of (white) women and sipping their Hennessy. Rap’s attitude to the media, seen by Shusterman as “complex,” is another paradox the music seems incapable of shunning. It is, as Shusterman writes, [its] “fascinated and overwhelming absorption of contemporary technology, particularly of the mass media” leading to the creation of Masters of turntables,

amplifiers, and mixers (Shusterman: 620). However, as is the case of the NBA, said to be a game played by the black for the white man, the best deejays are likely to be signed by Big Name record labels, part of the system they scratch and rhyme against.

Quite surprisingly, many of the Polish rap groups, which at one point had chosen the form of (American) rap music as the way of developing their own artistic and independent egos, seem oblivious to the deep transformations American hip hop has undergone and to the fading uniqueness of the genre. It awakens memories of the situation behind the Iron Curtain before 1989 when any (cultural) utterances were guaranteed to become fertile ground, as long as, to paraphrase Henry Ford's statement, they were American. Contemporary hip hop fans and groups in countries of East Central Europe are perhaps not yet familiar with the subtle practices of the market economy, which makes them believe that the rap CDs they buy in "alternative" sections of Sony megastores are nonpareil.

Rap's complete departure from its Compton roots, allows us to look at the genre of contemporary rap music as the embodiment of Jean Baudrillard's notion of *simulacrum*, a copy without original, standing for postmodern reality where any sense of identity seems to be missing. In his writings such as "The Precession of Simulacrum" as well as *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard claims that postmodern culture consists of signs that have broken away from referring to "reality."<sup>iii</sup> A sign that would once have referred to the depth of meaning and could be traded for meaning has now become an empty connotation, and "the whole system becomes weightless, no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (Baudrillard 7). The successive phases of the image are illustrative of the ultimate flux of undifferentiated images and signs:

- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the absence of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure information (Baudrillard 8).

The former boundary between the image, or simulation, and reality breaks down and, as a result, a world of hyper-reality is created, and the distinctions between the real and unreal are blurred. Since simulations and simulacra have no referents, the social also begins to collapse. As Byron Hawk rightly observes, "this process of social entropy leads to the collapse of all boundaries between meaning, the media, and the social – no distinction between classes, political parties, cultural forms, the media, and the real. Simulation and simulacra become the real so there are no stable structures on which to ground theory or politics"(Hawk:

Simulation). On the theoretical level, contemporary rap music seems to fit very well into that description.

On a more everyday or *street* level, another factor that has sapped the power and message of rap music has been the deaths of the artists who had been commonly perceived as leading forces of the genre proper. Actually many of them died in circumstances which demonstrated that their lives can hardly be separated from the aura surrounding the genre. The Notorious B.I.G fell victim to a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles, Eazy-E was diagnosed as having full-blown AIDS and was the first rapper ever to admit having this condition, and, finally, 2Pac Amaru Shakur, was shot in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas after watching the Mike Tyson fight on 7<sup>th</sup> September, 1996. The loss of the last one turned out to be an event the world of rap could hardly come to terms with.

Shakur, a rapper *par excellence*, not only embodied the image of an exemplary “thugsta,” but also revitalized rap music with his return to his Compton roots on releasing his famous album *2Pacalypse Now* (1991). The album, which spawned the successful singles “Trapped” and “Brenda's Got A Baby,” contained numerous references to violence in the ghetto, police officers, and “niggaz” being killed and gained notoriety when the killer of a Texas policeman stated he had been inspired by the record. The then Vice-President Dan Quayle denounced the record saying that it had no place in American society. In 1993 Shakur followed this incident with a best selling album called *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z...*, which produced the singles “I Get Around,” “Keep Ya Head Up,” and “Papa’z Song.” He was then nominated for an American Music Award as best new rap/hip hop artist. The next two albums that followed – *Me Against The World* and *All Eyez On Me* – only reinforced 2Pac’s image as a leading and constantly developing representative of rap music, whereas his private life clearly became the apotheosis of the thug lifestyle: he was sentenced several times for offenses, including assault, shooting, sodomy, and sexual abuse. Shakur’s *all eyez on me* album – described by many as the best double CD in the history of rap music – revealed 2Pac’s enormous gift for weaving stories about the loss of “homies” he loved (“Life Goes On”), forgiving his enemies (“I Ain’t Mad At Cha”), and Black-on-Black hatred (“Life Goes On”). Probably the most famous song from the album – “California Love” – projects 2Pac’s more relaxed attitude as a relatively contemplative rapper who is ready to make peace with some of his demons. In California “which knows how to party, where you never find a dance floor empty” 2Pac is no longer an outlaw but a cooled off “nigga” sipping Hennessey with his entourage on the way from Diego to the Bay.

The inability of the rap world to reconcile itself to his death finds its reflection in numerous theories stating that changing his name from 2Pac to Makaveli, means that he is alive and well somewhere, along with Elvis Presley and Jim Morrison. The following two points of “evidence” – out of forty or so – reveal the desperate attempts to keep 2Pac amongst the living: “1. The white Cadillac containing the gunmen passes an entourage of Tupac’s boys, many of which were bodyguards, no one gives chase, and there are no witnesses, how come? 2. The cover of his newest album (Makaveli) has him looking like Jesus Christ, could he be planning a resurrection?”<sup>iv</sup>

2Pac’s death – perceived by many as the ultimate decline of the genre – roughly coincided with the appearance of the new kids on the block, the group called the Fugees. The very name of the group – the Fugees – means in colloquial English displaced persons, émigrés, escapees, or exiles. As a matter of fact members of the band are Creoles coming from Haiti, often resented and looked-down on by US blacks.<sup>v</sup> This “black on black” racism is another problem contemporary rap music seems unable to address properly. The out-of-the-blue release of the Fugees’ album *The Score*, featuring the hit singles “Killing Me Softly” and “Ready Or Not” shook the somewhat decaying rap scene. Even though the group had by then already released their first album – “Translator’s Crew” – it was only perceived as a professional hip-hop record with elements from Jamaica and not necessarily belonging to “mainstream” rap/hip hop. Even the titles of several songs from *The Score* – “Zealots,” “The Beast,” “Cowboys,” “Manifest” – indicated that the record crossed the boundaries marked by the themes rap/hip hop music generally touched upon. Surpassing the boundaries of the black, local, and peripheral, *The Score* became a ground-breaking release restoring to rap/hip hop music most of the myths commonly perceived as lying at the foundations of America. Except for the hit single “Killing Me Softly” (the cover of Roberta Flack’s song), which clearly stands out from the general atmosphere of the production, the other tracks set historical events, stereotypes, and visions within the framework of the contemporary reality, illustrating them with well-chosen examples from the everyday life of the black society. “Fu-Gee-La,” an excellent case in point, summarizes the relationship between white and black people in America since the very first slave was brought ashore:

We used to be number 10 Now we’re permanent one (*Rags to riches*), In the battle lost my finger, Mic became my arm Pistol nozzle hits your nasal, blood becomes lukewarm (*Peaceful vs. violent resistance*) Tell the woman be easy Naah (*The Bible*) squeeze the Charmin Test Wyclef, see death flesh get scorned. Beat you so bad make you feel like you ain’t wanna be born And tell your friends stay the hell out of my lawn. Chicken George became Dead George stealin’ chickens from my farm (*Gangs*). Damn, Another dead pigeon If your mafiosos then I’m bringin’ on Haitian Sicilians (*Black Racism*) (Fugees, “Fu-Gee-La”)

The song includes references to black idols (Steve Wonder), drugs (crack babies), the Bible and the Puritan tradition (Armageddon), Israelites and the chosen nation (Mount Zion), the frontier myth (saloons), blaxploitation movies (*Superfly*), (Muslim influences) Ramadan and many others.

The question arises whether the Fugees' effort and impact were but a fleeting phase in the unstoppable metamorphosis and commercialization of the genre of rap music, or whether they perhaps marked a more widespread return to verbal acrobatics or jousting involving rhymes within the African-American community. Judging from the numerous commercial undertakings individual members of the group have got themselves involved in recent years, it is indeed hard to believe the genre can be rescued from eradication. While the name of Wycleff Jean, when added to the acknowledgment list of any profit-making project, has become a skeleton key opening the pockets of customers, the promise given by the group on releasing their *Score* album seems long forgotten. Besides, Wycleff's star is beginning to be obscured by another new kid on the block, the white superstar Eminem, whose recent tour with veterans of gansta rap, namely Snoop Doggy Dog, Ice Cube, Exhibit, and Dr Dre, left many a teenager screaming with ecstasy but also acknowledged his status as a "homie." He has already sung in a duet with Elton John, and it is just a matter of time before they will team up with Wycleff to release another "groundbreaking" hit. If this should be the case, it seems that the genre will be coming back to its roots, namely "Electropop," "a kind of techno-Rap with a twist of Disco in it," and contemporary culture will by then have completed yet another process of turning the new and original into commercialized simulacrum. Eminem's appearance on the market can well be compared to Elvis Presley's capitalizing on the legacy of black music, the "sweetening" of the early rawness of Little Richard and Chuck Berry as well as Motown's presenting black culture for a white public – to make money.

## LIST OF WORKS CITED

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Frost, Elisabeth A. *An interview with Harryette Mullen*. *Contemporary Literature*, 41 (2000): 397-421.
- Fugees. "Fu-Gee-La." *The Score*, Sony Music Entertainment Inc./Columbia, 1996.
- George, Nelson. *Hip Hop America*. Harmondsworth: Viking Penguin, 1998.
- Hawk, Byron. "Simulation." 07 April 2000. <<http://www.uta.edu/english/hawk>>.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise. Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
- Shakur, 2Pac. "Hertz of Men." *all eyez on me*, Death Row Records/Interscope, 1996.
- Shakur, 2Pac. "Life Goes on." *all eyez on me*, Death Row Records/Interscope, 1996.
- Shusterman, Richard. "The Fine Art of Rap." *New Literary Theory*, 22 (1991): 618-629.
- Smyth, Edmund J, ed. *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*. London: Batsford, 1991.

---

<sup>i</sup> Liroy was one of the earliest Polish hip-hop artists.

<sup>ii</sup> Vulgar lyrics, in which women are oftentimes reduced to rappers' "scores" and videos in which rappers appear surrounded by white (and black) model-like girls, have created a label for this "style" of hip hop music, called the pimping. For an interesting discussion on the position of African American women in contemporary black culture, see Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, one of the most revealing if not petrifying accounts dedicated to the black ghetto.

<sup>iii</sup> Some would probably argue that rap music is simulacrum *per se*, due to its utilization of such techniques as sampling, mixing etc., described in this article, yet if we remember the very beginning of the genre, as a form of (local) African American protest, then its evolution into a full-blown postmodern hybrid is obvious.

<sup>iv</sup> [Http://alive.and.well.somewhere.fans](http://alive.and.well.somewhere.fans) This is actually one of the many (anonymous and exemplary) pages on the Internet, which nicely summarizes various theories explaining why actually 2Pac is still alive.

<sup>v</sup> In March 1998 Wycleff Jean of Fugees as well as other members of the group ran a campaign in New York high schools against so called black racism, which included treating Haitian émigrés as "worse blacks."