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*good kid, m.A.A.d. City: Utopian and Dystopian  
Discourses in African American Hip-Hop*

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*As the rhythm's designed to bounce*

*What counts is that the rhyme's*

*Designed to fill your mind*

Public Enemy – Fight the Power

*Fire burning inside my eyes, this the music that saved my life*

*Y'all be calling it hip-hop, I be calling it Hypnotize*

*Yeah, hypnotize, trapped my body but freed my mind*

Kendrick Lamar – “Fuck Your Ethnicity”



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## Preface: Language, Terminology and Corpus

As I am aware that, as a white male, I am a “guest in the house of hip-hop” (Hess 2018) and also in the realm of African American studies, I would like to clarify some questions regarding language and terminology. Firstly, the terms “black” and “African American” are used as synonyms in this thesis in order to stress the different experiences of “black” and “white” people in a society that still understands race as a biological category and classifies people according to this essentialist assumption that fuels racist beliefs. However, race and the terms “black” and “African American” are used as social categories in this thesis. In his book *Race Music*, Guthrie P. Ramsey argues that not only was music produced by African Americans long marketed as race music but that race itself can be used as a category for analyzing black music to stress the different historical experiences that have “reciprocal and powerful relationships with cultural forms such as black music” (33). Consequently, my aim is not to reinforce the notion of race as a biological category but to use it as a tool for analyzing the discriminatory practices that influence utopian discourses in (resistance) music.

Furthermore, rap having been often criticized for its violent and misogynist lyrics, some of those cited will contain harmful language. Of particular sensitivity, even within the African American community, is the use of the n-word. For obvious reasons, the term is not a part of my own vocabulary. However, when the word “nigger” is used in lyrics, it will be spelled out in quotation marks and uncensored so as to preserve the quote’s original force. In citing the lyrics and analyzing their content, I attempt to go beyond merely seeing their use of derogatory language as offensive but detect its often-subversive meaning, which bears utopian impulses. It is not my intention to judge or label a group of people based on their ethnic background.

While this thesis and the analyses it contains aim to be as representative as possible, it nonetheless only portrays a fraction of the vast genre that constitutes hip-hop. The corpus has been chosen by various variables such as commercial success (chart position and/or plays in streaming services), coverage in hip-hop journalism, as well as critical acclaim and influence of the album or song (as indicated by review aggregation website *Metacritic* and coverage in secondary literature). Section 9.3 in the appendix provides an extended discography.



## **SIDE A: Introduction and Theory**

### **1. Introduction**

Since its beginnings in the 1970s, hip-hop has provided a discursive space for African American youth to articulate their hopes, needs and pleasures. In its still young history, the genre has not only been torn between commercialization and subversion but has also been the battlefield between various oppositions: East Coast and West Coast, white America and black America, misogyny and feminism, suburb and ghetto, old school rap and new school rap, authenticity and artistry, to name but a few. This thesis is situated in the liminal space between those oppositions and poses an important question: How do utopian discourses in African American hip-hop both critically mirror the dystopian surroundings from which they emerge and provide hope for a better future? As rap music and its connection to resistance in a post-Civil Rights Era is not the first instance of black American culture intersecting with questions of politics, hip-hop is not detached from the struggles of previous generations. Therefore, this introductory chapter will situate hip-hop and its utopian discourses in the continuum of black American musical forms such as blues, soul, jazz or R&B. The theoretical part, then, discusses various utopian theories with regard to concepts such as time, space, identity and resistance. The ideas by Ernst Bloch, Fredric Jameson, Ruth Levitas, Bill Ashcroft, Alex Zamalin and others serve as a valuable theoretical basis to analyze hip-hop's (oft-hidden) utopian discourses and to place their subversive potential in a broader sociopolitical perspective.

As hip-hop is a genre that is constantly changing, the analyses in this thesis range from the beginnings in the 1970s until contemporary rap releases. After providing an insight into the living realities of New York and Los Angeles in the 1970s and hip-hop's dedication to localizing hope and beauty in the neglected ghetto, the emergence of hip-hop identities will be examined in the first chapter. Articulating the experience of a marginalized community in expressive lyrics over hard-hitting beats, rap artists such as KRS-One or Queen Latifah became the voice for a generation that not only lacked opportunities but also leadership and provided the soundtrack for the daily realities of African American youth. Further drawing on the relationship between

utopian discourses and identity, rap music's ability to constitute and educate revolutionary subjects will be analyzed through the music of Public Enemy. Crossing over from the East Coast to the West Coast, the question of the politics of gangsta rap will then become important. This subgenre has been repeatedly criticized for its misogyny, homophobia, and violence. Without excusing the often-harmful language, it is nonetheless possible to trace a utopian impulse in the lyrics of artists such as Ice Cube by highlighting the importance of street knowledge as the "insurrection of subjugated knowledge," as theorized by Michel Foucault (*Power* 81).

The third chapter is dedicated to the time from the early 1990s until the end of Barack Obama's presidency. These years are also aligned with an increased commercialization and, arguably, a subsequent loss of revolutionary thought. Instead of providing counternarratives, the stereotypical hip-hop personae of the pimp, the gangsta and the ho (Rose 2008) were commodified and the utopian aspirations of previous artists that highlighted the collective struggle of marginalized people were individualized. However, at the end of the 1990s, Lauryn Hill released her seminal album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, which criticized the prevalent materialism and misogyny in hip-hop and refocused attention to the community by highlighting the genre's educative aspects. As the utopian figure of the new millennium approached, apocalyptic discourses that pointed towards the end of the world were widespread. Two of the paths that hip-hop artists embarked upon during this time will be analyzed: on the one hand, there are the dystopian visions of a post-apocalyptic *Hell on Earth*, expressed by artists such as Mobb Deep; on the other hand, Afrofuturist discourses and the negotiation of new (outer) spaces became popular again due to the success of Atlanta-based group Outkast and the groundbreaking impact of Missy Elliott. Having arrived in the late 2000s, the election of Barack Obama as well as the sonic visions of Kanye West had a huge influence on the course of hip-hop. Therefore, the utopian imaginations in this chapter range from individual success to collective uprising, from apocalyptic visions to alien perspectives, as well as from new hopes to the post-secular resurgence of religious imagery.

The fourth and final chapter is dedicated to utopian discourses in contemporary hip-hop. Several scholars (Rose 2008; Asante 2008) have shifted their analyses towards underground rappers, who – it is argued – do not have to follow the rules and tastes of the

“mainstream” market, and who can boost the rebellion of the post-hip-hop generation.<sup>1</sup> By analyzing the music and activism of rappers Killer Mike and Moor Mother, the utopian potential of the underground in contrast to mainstream hip-hop is delineated. However, as an analysis of Kendrick Lamar’s music will show, the binary opposition between underground and mainstream has become blurry. Lamar’s work not only provides interesting insights in the complex (identity) struggles of African Americans and the utopian possibilities in the era of Donald Trump but also exemplifies that subversion is possible within the constraints of the market. The question of gendered identities is also highly relevant and prominent in contemporary rap; analyzing the work of artists such as Nicki Minaj, Frank Ocean and Mykki Blanco will show that queer utopian discourses in hip-hop deconstruct concepts such as body, identity, and digital space. The final part of this chapter revisits two of the most important utopian tropes: the city and time. Travis Scott’s album *Astroworld* will be analyzed as a sonic heterotopia in the ever-changing dystopia of the postmodern city. Rapsody’s seminal album *Eve*, then, transcends past, present and future and rewrites the historical narrative. By making the stories of African American women visible, the artist points towards a utopian future that is grounded in the strength and perseverance of the black community.

As this thesis carries out a diachronic analysis that reaches from the beginnings of hip-hop to today, some general tendencies of rap’s prevalent utopian discourses will be mapped out. Therefore, the concluding chapter will provide a discussion on how these discourses have changed in the history of rap but have never been absent. As Jameson argues, when it comes to the analysis of utopian texts, “the most reliable political test lies not in any judgement on the individual work in question so much as in its capacity to generate new ones, Utopian visions that include those of the past, and modify or correct them” (*Archaeologies* xv). Hip-hop in particular, as an art form based on sampling and remixing, highlights collective effort rather than individual artistry. Guthrie P. Ramsey writes in his book *Race Music* that he relies on “three broad modes of investigation: history, memory, and theory” (3). My thesis follows this

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<sup>1</sup> In his 2002 book *The Hip-Hop Generation*, Bakari Kitwana has defined African Americans born between 1965 and 1984 as the hip-hop generation. As “the entire spectrum of Black youth [...] has come to identify with hip-hop’s cadence,” Kitwana argues that there is no better term to describe this generation. In 2008, M. K. Asante published *It’s Bigger Than Hip-Hop. The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation*. Asante argues that today many young people do not feel represented by this term as they “have begun to see the dangers and limitations of being collectively identified by a genre of music that we [African Americans] don’t even own” (5). He thus introduces “post-hip-hop” as a new term to describe the current period of “transition for a new generation in search of a deeper, more encompassing understanding of themselves in a context outside of the corporate hip-hop monopoly” (7).

framework and adds another important element: a vision of the future. Looking at hip-hop through the lens of utopian theory permits an investigation of its history as an African American expressive culture, highlights the importance of memories from the past that speak to the present through sampling, and integrates an ever-present horizon of hope.

### 1.1. The Role of Music in African American History

From the arrival of the ship that brought the first slaves to the United States in 1619 until today, music has always played a central part in the lives of African Americans.<sup>2</sup> Music was not merely a joyful distraction, it also included hidden political messages and “has served as a laboratory for the interplay of racial solidarity and struggle” (Redmond 10). Starting with “the spirituals and field hollers, which carried messages of rebellion and techniques of survival,” black music not only mirrored its surrounding reality but provided the sonic impulse to overcome it. Especially in the twentieth century, black music has made its way to the foreground of African American cultural production; as a development this highlights a specific characteristic of black participation in the public, namely “political disfranchisement on the one hand and overemployment in the arenas of popular culture on the other” (Iton 4). Consequently, African American political issues are often discussed in the cultural space.

At the beginning of the century, the city became the most important place for cultural production and one of the cultural hubs was New York, where the Harlem Renaissance emerged and defined black aesthetics in the 1920s and 1930s (Floyd, *Transformation* 141). Samuel A. Floyd regards this as a “transformative period integral to the black experience in the United States and celebrated for its provocative artists, writers, musicians, and thinkers.” Within this melting pot of creativity “music was a reservoir of social energies, a fount of and even a mouthpiece for the palpable aspirations of freedom that define the age” (Ramsey, “Afro-modernism” 172). The artists of the time were inspired by a growing awareness of African cultures and “longed to restore African culture to a position of respect, and they used what they

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<sup>2</sup> Within the scope of this thesis, it will not be possible to provide a detailed account of the history of African American music. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century is particularly relevant for the emergence of hip-hop, the century’s defining moments and genres are thus highlighted here. For a more detailed history of black music in the United States see Southern (1997), Floyd (1995, 2017), and Ramsey (2003). For a detailed analysis how hip-hop has been influenced by these cultures, see Rabaka Reiland’s *Hip Hop’s Amnesia* (2012).



knew of African and African-American folk art and literature of times past and current in an attempt to create new cultural forms” (Floyd, *Power* 106). This ongoing combat and collective struggle in primarily urban environments allows one to trace a continuous line in the history of black culture in the past 100 years: the (sonic) reaction to the discrimination and marginalization constitutes and connects African American subjects, “linking them through time, space, and place” (Ramsey, *Music* 116). The narratives of progress that shaped not only the cultural life and the advancements in African American politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were driven by utopian imaginations that pointed towards a liberated future. However, it would be inadequate to characterize African American culture only as a mode of resistance; its history is more diverse than solely responding to the realities of racism, oppression and cultural hegemony (24). In fact, particularly music was a space “for expressing some of the paradoxes, contradictions, tensions, and, of course, the joys and pleasures of African American life” (97). It played an integral part in a larger system of expressive cultures that negotiated diverse experiences during specific sociohistorical situations, providing a pleasurable escape mechanism but also serving as a counternarrative to the existing oppressive hegemony.

As Amiri Baraka argues in his highly influential book *Blues People*, African Americans’ path from enslaved people, who did not count as citizens, to citizenship, was led through their music, and especially the blues (x).<sup>3</sup> Blues music created a space in which marginalized black people could negotiate their identities; it was a music that responded to, according to James Baldwin, “that absolutely universal question: *Who am I? What am I doing here?*” (*Cross, Of the Sorrow Songs*). Ramsey also highlights the blues as the primary musical form when he states that it was ubiquitous and “provided midcentury artists with an artistic framework in which to build personal styles and new musical idioms that spoke powerfully to various constituencies” (*Music* 74). Consequently, the blues is understood as the fundament on which African American (resistance) music builds. In his book *Blutopia*,<sup>4</sup> Graham Lock argues that the two main impulses in African American music are

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<sup>3</sup> The use of the definite article before blues is used to highlight both the musical genre as well as the general trope that traverses through black musical history. As Floyd puts it: “Since the blues appears to be basic to most forms of black music, and since it seems to be the most prominent factor in maintaining continuity between most of them, we might think of it as the Urtrope of the tradition” (*Power* 79).

<sup>4</sup> “Blutopia” is the title of a recording by Duke Ellington first performed in 1944. Lock uses this as the title of his book because he reads the word as a combination of blues and utopia which brings together “an African American visionary future stained with memories” of the blues (3).

a utopian impulse, evident in the creation of imagined places (Promised Lands), and the impulse to remember, to bear witness, which James Baldwin relates to the particular history of slavery and its aftermath in the United States. (2)

Therefore, the blues is best understood as a process, a *modus operandi*; in order to understand its various specificities, it is vital to analyze the specific historical situation under which it emerged. Neither would an analysis of blues be sufficient without addressing its emergence in the South and its ingrained history of slavery nor would it be possible to tackle hip-hop without an understanding of the repression and neglect of the Reagan era that first and foremost produced it (Asante 4). African American individuals may have been rendered speechless and powerless throughout history, but their music never stopped playing. It provided not only a shelter but also carved out possible futures: from songs of the Underground Railroad to activists today chanting “We gon’ be alright” in the protests against police brutality, African American music always has the potential to lead towards a (sonic) freedom.

## 1.2. “We Shall Overcome”: Music and African American Resistance Movements

Music is not a mere reflection of reality or a pleasurable escape from it; music opens up a space in which the negotiation of identities, space, and history becomes possible. It enables people to “imagine things that may otherwise seem unimaginable” (Redmond 1). Especially within the African diaspora music “functions as a method of rebellion, revolution, and future visions that disrupt and challenge the manufactured differences used to dismiss, detain, and destroy communities.” Therefore, music is not only a byproduct of African American resistance movements but central for inspiring and driving them:

The role of black music as a primary conduit circulating energy, inspiration, and information throughout various movements of resistance such as Pan Africanism, Negritude, Black Consciousness, and hip-hop culture politics cannot be overestimated. (Ramsey, “Afro-modernism” 157)

In the postwar period, the cry for sonic freedom rang out parallel to political, social and economic changes of the late 1940s and 1950s that aligned with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM). Martin Luther King Jr. highlighted the importance of music for resistance stating these “songs bind us together, give us courage together, help us march together” (Chapter 4). During the “Second Reconstruction,” as Manning Marable termed the period of collective uprising between 1945 and 1982, black Americans started “using their collective

bodies as a threat to the de facto and de jure racism in American society” (Ramsey, *Music* 101–02). However, these years were not only marked by significant gains in sociopolitical life but also shaped new modes of expressive cultures. Ramsey argues that “as people moved into new circumstances and had access to new resources, they also needed new tools to help navigate their new situations” (“Afro-modernism” 155). Thus, songs like “Mississippi Goddamn” and “We Shall Overcome” and artists such as Nina Simone, Sam Cooke and Paul Robeson became prominent in the course of resistance movements. For African Americans, their music “shattered established conventions; it mocked traditions; in form and grace, it transcended old boundaries to life and thought. It became the appropriate cultural background for their activities to destroy Jim Crow” (Marable, *Race* 52). However, although the gains of the CRM provided new opportunities, they “had not altered significantly the plight of the black masses” (Freeland 265). Therefore, after the famous “I Have a Dream” speech Martin Luther King gave in 1963, “his dream dramatically receded, particularly with the Watts riots of 1965, when his doubts about the willingness of whites to work for a racially just society greatly increased” (Dyson, *God* 99). The utopian dream of a just society based on non-violence clashed with the nightmare of the political reality.

Consequently, in the 1960s, a somewhat more radical dream became prominent. The black cultural nationalism of the Black Power Movement (BPM) not only aimed to reshape the political and social landscape for African Americans but also to transform every arena of life: Black Power was about establishing political independence and self-determination (Freeland 266), which was aligned with new strategies for resistance. Whereas the CRM became known for its non-violent protest, the BPM and the Black Panther Party (BPP) were armed and ready to use violence on the road to justice. The song “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” by Nina Simone is emblematic of this shift as her “radical methods of sounds and revision modeled the strategies of revision that structured the transition from the Civil Rights Movement to the militancy of the Black Power Movement” (Redmond 183). Different dreams of freedom required a different soundtrack: “Black popular music provided a sonic backdrop to the efforts of the new militants who had made a psychic break from the church-based song generally associated with the civil rights movement” (Ogbar 111). Thus, music was important not only for the mobilization of African American citizens but firstly for defining and uniting the movement (Freeland 261). Although previous political and cultural movements had relied on art as political criticism as well, this was the first time that art was turned into an absolute

“political priority and linked to the equally emphatic drive for the development and exercise of black self-determination within a large black political-cultural movement in the United States” (Smethurst 16). The cultural productions of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), the cultural wing of the BPM, was urgent, militant and radical and had a lasting impact on later cultural forms such as hip-hop (3). However, the songs and the music that became central for the resistance movements should not be understood as mere soundtracks to the revolution; these were vital tools that amplified the political demands. For instance, Gil Scott-Heron’s spoken word song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” released in 1970, points out that “you will not be able to stay home”: the revolution is happening here and now and there will not be a possibility to re-watch it. Thus, African Americans “were actively engaging in a quest for alternatives to their political present and were assisted in imagining and enacting that change by the songs on their lips and in their ears: the anthems” (Redmond 8). The BPM has significantly shaped the ideas and practices of its generation and the following one. In particular its cultural and musical ideas that drew much inspiration from African culture continue to inspire contemporary black musical genres such as hip-hop or jazz poetry (Freeland 272).

With the decline of the BPM and the BPP in the late 1970s, the new articulations of political music remained solely in the cultural realm, lacking a political movement to take its message to the streets (Freeland 272). While artists such as Donna Hathaway, Gil Scott-Heron, Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder introduced “a political element into 1970s black popular music that had not been seen before” (Ramsey, *Music* 2), the hip-hop generation came of age at a time that saw some of the most defining events in black political life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the assassinations of key figures like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Fred Hampton, the founding of the BPP and the subsequent COINTELPRO<sup>5</sup> operation to sabotage its goals. During their adolescence, they experienced “a period of initial promise, profound change, and, for far too many, heart-wrenching disappointment” (Hill Collins, *Power* 3). The postindustrial situation that they faced seemed hopeless in comparison to the achievements of the preceding twenty years. However, expressive culture once more provided the space to articulate the experiences of the ongoing marginalization: “the period saw intense artistic expressions

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<sup>5</sup> COINTELPRO is the abbreviation of the Counter Intelligence Program by the FBI that was active from 1956 until 1971. The program targeted political organizations which were considered a threat to the state. Those included for instance “the Black Panthers, anti-war activists, and Communist ‘propaganda’” (Shahani 187). In 1969, the “Panthers had been targeted by 233 separate actions” under COINTELPRO and in just this one year, “27 Black Panthers were killed by the police, and 749 were jailed or arrested” (Marable, *Race* 125).

emanating from within the core of these urban spaces besieged by blight (the legacy of earlier riots), unemployment, crime, and hopelessness” (Ramsey, *Music* 29). Although African Americans remained marginalized and de facto powerless in political discourses, the rise of hip-hop led to their hypervisibility in the realm of popular culture: as sports icons or entertainers (Hill Collins, *Power* 3). As Patricia Hill Collins puts it: “Apparently, singing and dancing about Black pain and wearing the latest styles while doing it could generate cold, hard cash.” On the one hand, the hip-hop generation saw the seeming victories of the CRM; on the other, they experienced the daily reality of downright neglected and racism. Thus, they came of age in an age of contradiction:

This cohort embraces the beliefs of American society concerning individualism, personal expression, and material well-being, yet it also sees how social issues such as incarceration, poor schooling, no jobs, drugs, and the erosion of family structures arise not just from individual failures but from racially disparate, group-based treatment. (5)

Caught in this contradiction, the hip-hop generation had to find its own voice to articulate African Americans’ reality. This state of in-betweenness defines hip-hop’s DNA: between traditional black musical forms and the future, between individual satisfaction and collective uprising, and between affirmation and resistance.

### 1.3. New Leaders: The Rise of the Hip-Hop Generation

The Cross-Bronx Expressway, one of the biggest road building projects in the history of the US, is the visual manifestation of the neglect that the (South) Bronx faced in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Expressway, which “required the demolition of hundreds of residential and commercial buildings” (Rose, *Noise* 31) in addition with other political decisions such as the “Slum Clearance” program<sup>6</sup> forced 170,000 people to relocate in the 1960s and early 1970s. Unemployment rates were soaring, the per capita income dropped, and more than half a million

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Moses, the city planner of New York at that time, was responsible for all these political decisions that led to the economic downfall of the Bronx. The “most powerful urban builder of all time” (Chang, *Stop* 11) designated highly populated working-class neighborhoods as slums, which enabled him to enforce his “Title I Slum Clearance” program (Rose, *Noise* 31). This program “devastated kin networks and neighborhood services” and “accelerated the flight of white tenants into northern sections of the Bronx and into Westchester.” The result: The residents remaining “in the South Bronx were left with few city resources, fragmented leadership, and limited political power” (33).

jobs were lost. These political decisions “supported the interests of the upper class against the interests of the poor and intensified the development of the vast economic and social inequalities that characterize contemporary New York” (32–33). However, not the political agents were blamed but the people who suffered from their actions. Especially after the power outage in the summer of 1977, which caused looting and vandalization, media and politics depicted the Bronx as “lawless zones where crime is sanctioned and chaos bubbles just below the surface” (33). The Bronx (read: the ghetto) was rendered as a dangerous place, outside the ordered norms of society. These developments were constitutive for hip-hop’s aesthetics: “Life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip-hop style, sound, lyrics, and thematics” (21). However, hip-hop does not only tell the ever-changing stories of marginalization that shaped the African American experience in the US; it also “attempts to seize the shifting urban terrain, to make it work on behalf of the dispossessed” (22). It is a genre that emerged from a dystopian reality but reenvisioned its surrounding space with utopian hope.

As Forman (“Hip-Hop” 7) argues, black youth in the postindustrial city were looking for new leaders who would articulate their specific concerns. They were the children of those politicized in the 1950s and 1960s and their parents “spent a lot of time talking about the glories of the civil rights movement, while dismissing the hip-hop generation as apathetic and narcissistic” (Chang, *Stop* 215). Thus, it is not surprising that the music of early hip-hoppers such as Afrika Bambaataa and Kool Herc with its bombastic basslines and glaring melodies “appealed to many youth because it reflected the mood, feel, and ideas of urban youth culture” (Aldridge 235). The lack of leadership put a double pressure on hip-hop artists. Previously, artists could focus on making art that would “support the revolution, not to theorize, strategize, or steer it” (Chang, *Stop* 274). Now, rappers not only were asked to mirror the reality but also to be the leaders of the people. Hip-hop, then, is not only an African American expressive culture, it is “also a discourse of resistance, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against white America’s racism, and its Euro-centric cultural dominance” (Wright 10). Whereas African Americans previously turned to the church and its leaders to communicate their hopes, desires and frustrations, from the 1980s on it were rappers who best articulated the struggles of black citizens in the United States (Dyson, *Reflections* xx). From the early beginnings and sing-song raps that characterized early rap songs to the elaborate and distinctive rhyme patterns that we know today, hip-hop has not only rewritten the history of African American musical expression but in doing so created “new voices, new sounds, new

ways of describing the world and the people in it” (A. Bradley 19). These new ways point towards a future, not only for the genre but also for the political “anthem genre beyond the organized mass mobilizations that once characterized Black social movements” (Redmond 19). Hip-hop “create[s] a space where youth of color can go beyond pain to resistance, where alternative institutions, and alternative politics, can develop” (Ards 314). It is exactly in this space where rap’s utopian discourses unfold.

This thesis aims to trace these utopian impulses from the beginnings of hip-hop to the unwritten futures yet to come. The analysis focuses on rap, “the verbal and musical domain of hip-hop, an expressive oral form through which personal and social perspectives are amplified” (Forman, “Hip-Hop” 2).<sup>7</sup> Rap has the ability to provide perspectives on the social reality from which it emerged and also to communicate new ways of seeing for better, utopian futures. Whereas hip-hop nowadays is a global art form, the focus in this thesis is on black artists, as “hip-hop is an unambiguously African-American cultural phenomenon that emerges within a complex amalgam of hybrid social influences.” Therefore, the question of black utopias, of marginalized horizons of hope, is at the center of the analysis. While a lot has been written about African American music and its connection to revolutionary movements, applying a utopian framework might provide the missing link between music and social upheaval. With its lyrical and sonic narratives, music can articulate utopian impulses and desires that act not only as a criticism of the present but provide a horizon of hope that is necessary for believing in the possibility of resistance in the first place. And rap is the perfect medium for articulating this kind of hope.

## 2. Social Dreaming: Theorizing Utopia

The concept of utopia has been in constant motion, traveling through literature, politics and everyday language. The term, coined by Thomas More in his eponymous book *Utopia*, first published in 1516, is based on the Greek ‘topos’, which means ‘place’, and on the prefix ‘u’,

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<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, hip-hop is characterized as consisting of four foundational elements: breakdancing, graffiti, b-boying and rapping. However, rap music is the most visible and prominent element of contemporary hip-hop culture. Following the tradition of most scholarly articles and music journalism, in this thesis rap and hip-hop are thus used as synonyms.

meaning ‘no’ or ‘not’. However, in the paratext of More’s book, there is the poem “Six Lines on the Island of Utopia” by Anemolius, Poet Laureate and nephew of Portuguese traveler Hythloday, the fictional messenger who told More about the island of Utopia in the first place. In this poem, utopia is spelled as “eutopia” (More 128). With the change of the prefix, the meaning of the word changes to “good place.” Thus, the word utopia both refers to a place that is good but does not exist (Sargent 2). This ambiguity “has left a lasting confusion around the term utopia, and one which constantly recurs like a familiar but nonetheless rather troublesome ghost” (Levitas, *Concept* 3). To complicate clear definitions, new words have emerged that describe various kinds of utopias, such as dystopia (a non-existent bad place) and uchronia (a utopian idea that is not located in space but in time). Utopian studies has also seen myriad new definitions ranging from “critical utopias” (Moylan 2014) to “heterotopias” (Foucault 1984).

With the end of the Cold War and the downfall of the Soviet Union that for some marked “the end of history” (Fukuyama 1992), the realization of utopias seemed not only dangerous but ever more impossible. However, as Bill Ashcroft observes, utopia “remains a conceptual anchor to any theory of a better world, any hope for social change and amenity” (“Utopias” 411). Levitas (*Concept* 1) shares this view, stating that the ideas around utopia cannot be understood as an escape mechanism from reality but rather as a *desire* that is an important and ineradicable part of human culture. Thus, it is not utopian ideas themselves that are diminishing but rather our capacity of recognizing them as such: “The repeated fear that utopia is in decline results from the application of specific narrow views of what constitutes utopia” (208). Conceptualizing utopia in broader terms is aligned with regarding utopian discourses as not only offering positive blueprints for a future to come but also as an examination of the present. Consequently, utopian discourses in hip-hop culture do not necessarily provide maps of the future but rather offer insights into the current marginalization of African Americans. It is exactly from this criticism of the present that the belief in change becomes possible: disenfranchised communities are enabled to recognize the space that surrounds them anew and form collective group identities to resist the status quo. Utopian discourses can thus be a powerful tool “as a political slogan and a politically energizing perspective” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* xi–xii). From negative visions of the present, positive futures can emerge.



## 2.1. Dreams and Desires: Conceptualizing Utopia

While myriad scholars have written on utopia and utopian studies, it is impossible to miss the importance of Ernst Bloch and his monumental book *The Principle of Hope*, as it provides a foundation for almost every theoretical debate that has followed. What is especially groundbreaking in Bloch's work is that he is "open-ended and indeterminist in seeing the principle of hope, operating through a vast number of phenomena, as the utopian impulse" (Bagchi 3). Bloch argues that the utopian impulse is something that is inherently human and can be found in all areas of life, because "[a]s long as man is in a bad way, both private and public existence are pervaded by daydreams; dreams of a better life than that which has so far been given him" (5). While these dreams may merely reflect wishes and a general wanting, which Bloch describes as "abstract utopia," the wish can become a drive and translate to a "concrete utopia," pointing towards a future that is "not yet." Concrete utopias are "embedded in an understanding of current reality and connected to the possibility of actual social improvement" (Sargent 111) and these forward dreams are aligned with "anticipatory consciousness," a term coined by Bloch to describe the possibility of humans to think outside of what they have already experienced:

The anticipatory thus operates in the field of hope; so this hope is not taken *only as emotion*, as the opposite of fear (because fear too can of course anticipate), but *more essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind* (and here the opposite is then not fear, but memory). (Bloch 12; original emphasis)

This hope points towards a future that "is not a mappable space or a regulatable time" (Layoun 186), but that can be described as "Vorschein," illuminating the "possibilities for rearranging social and political relations" (Ashcroft, "Introduction" 5). Consequently, art and literature are especially important as imagining a different world is one of their main functions. With his broad concept of utopia, Bloch also uncovered the utopian possibilities in mass or popular culture instead of relegating them to the realm of high culture. While being aware of the affirmative nature of popular culture, he still traced its products back to the not-yet conscious, the "psychological birthplace of the New" (Bloch 116). Lyman Tower Sargent picks up the importance of dreams for Bloch's utopian vision when he defines utopianism as "social dreaming," referring to the "dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (5). What Sargent calls "social dreaming" translates to "desire" for

Ruth Levitas, the “desire for a better way of being and living” (*Concept* 8). According to Bagchi, utopias can be understood as “socially, materially grounded articulations of desire. Whether and to what extent utopias are realizable within the realms of possibility, including political possibility, depends on the specific context” (4). As the realms of possibility are always dependent on particular contexts, we learn a “lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which those conditions generate” (Levitas, *Concept* 9). Utopia is understood as “an analytic definition that allows that many cultural forms may have a utopian element” (“Music” 217). Consequently, utopias are more than mere unrealizable ideas of better futures or better places; they offer diagnostic instruments for analyzing the present.

For Jameson, utopian ideas, in contrast to “practical thinking which everywhere represents a capitulation to the system itself,” are vital in order to “keep alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is” (*Marxism* 111). However, he sees a fundamental problem with this idea, namely that “our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production” (*Archaeologies* xiii). Thus, Jameson questions the difference between ideology and utopia, which results in the failure of utopias, the “inability to imagine Utopia itself” (289). The failure is not the result of “any individual failure of imagination” but “the result of the systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are in all one way or another prisoners.” Paul Ricoeur offers a solution to this problem by attesting the ability of utopia to refer to nowhere, the “empty place from which we may look at ourselves” (15). It is precisely this nowhere that is “the only location from which we may critique the present because it is the only place that exists outside ideology” (Ashcroft, *Utopianism* 64). Looking at our reality from this perspective makes it look “strange, nothing more being taken for granted” (Ricoeur 16). It is utopian thought that is necessary to transcend the present by displacing the discourse to an imaginary nowhere: a space where transformation and hope become imaginable. This space can be compared to what Jameson calls “radical otherness,” a term that highlights the inevitable necessity of utopian visions as criticism of the present:

Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.  
(*Archaeologies* xii)

The possibility of a radical change in the future is thus kept alive. By understanding (mostly literary) utopias as a *praxis* rather than as *representations* of possible future societies, Jameson

not only highlights their constantly changing nature but also their use value as critical diagnosis of the present. Drawing on the emergence of new forms of literary utopias in the 1970s and 1980s and their inherent criticism of the present, Tom Moylan conceptualizes these new imaginations as “critical utopias” (*Impossible* 10). According to Ashcroft, they “are not so much concerned with the future as much as with sketching the present and our ways out of it. Vision and critique are deeply implicated” (“Utopias” 418). By entangling criticism and vision, it is not the layout of the imagined future that becomes important but rather the “*process* of imagining itself.” This ties utopian thought to resistance movements, because utopia becomes a “vision of possibility that effects the transformation of social life.” Without the utopian belief in the possibility for change, resistance seems impossible.

Utopian visions can either be looking backward or looking forward to imagining possible futures. Looking to the past and drawing on memory is not only an attempt to escape to a previous better life but can also be aligned with what Édouard Glissant calls “prophetic visions of the past” (64). Reenvisioning the past problematizes historical progress and knowledge and rather highlights the “poetic nature of the historical work” (White xi). Conceptualizing the past as narrative that can be revisited through memory makes it possible to escape the hegemonic idea of history as linear progress. As Ashcroft argues: “memory is not simply about recovering a past but about the production of possibility” (*Utopianism* 69). Thus, through rewriting the past, one can conceive a “future outside of any prescription provided by national history” (Ashcroft, “Introduction” 7) – a future that has long been denied to African American citizens in the United States.

## 2.2. Black Utopias: Imagining the Future from Other Spaces and Times

It might seem that the marginalization and institutional racism that African Americans have suffered since the first days of slavery left no room for utopian thought as “much of black American life has been nothing short of dystopian” (Zamalin 6). However, as Zamalin refutes this argument, “Black American reflections on the idea of utopia contain some of the most powerful political ideas in the American tradition.” Considering the dire conditions that enslaved people had to endure on the plantation, the wish for a better future and freedom from oppression fueled both cultural production as well as real change. This utopian “desire for

freedom was expressed in different forms, from songs about escaping slavery to violent uprisings against slaveholders” (Lemke 24). From the dreams of Frederick Douglass to abolish slavery up to contemporary black activists protesting against police brutality and mass incarceration: “The utopian strain of hope” (Zamalin 7) is prevalent in black American culture, ranging from science fiction literature to Afrofuturist discourses in music, from recent superhero movies like *Black Panther* to queer black utopian interventions in the digital space.<sup>8</sup>

As Jameson (*Archaeologies* 2) argues, utopia has changed, “from the accounts of exotic travelers to the experiences of visitors to the future.” And yet, how does one conceive of utopian imaginations when you are neither a traveler but enslaved nor a welcome visitor in the future of contemporary politics? Whereas More could embed his story of the island Utopia in a travel narrative, in 1619, almost exactly 100 years after this work of literature was published, African people did not arrive as exotic travelers but as displaced, enslaved people. The Middle Passage did not lead to a utopian society but to the dystopian reality of the plantation. Nonetheless, this dystopian reality provided the fuel for utopian imaginations of overcoming. For instance, Martin Delany, author of the first black utopian novel, *Blake; or the Huts of America* in 1859, had a constant theme in his works: “oppression created the condition for liberation” (Zamalin 28). Following this idea, it is not surprising that the harsh Jim Crow laws after the abolition of slavery led to a golden age of black utopian literature where authors such as Frances Harper, Pauline E. Hopkins and Edward A. Johnson connected political rule and community with the freedom of black people, deconstructed the idea of masculinity and argued for the necessity of gender liberation (34–35). In the same way that the form of oppression of African Americans has changed, so have black utopian imaginations.

Black people were always either used as scapegoats to negatively talk about the conditions of “ghettos” or hardly present in the political discourse, always framed as the Other. From the days of enslavement up to today’s economic disadvantages, from Jim Crow to the “New Jim Crow,”<sup>9</sup> from the plantation to the ghetto, the “appeal to blacks as problem-people is an assertion of their ultimate location outside the systems of order and rationality” (Gordon

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that black utopian discourses are multifaceted. In this chapter, it is only possible to provide a short introduction to some of their defining features. Nonetheless, chapter 4.3. analyzes Afrofuturist discourses in hip-hop music and chapter 5.3. investigates queer black utopian imaginations. For a detailed theoretical account of black utopias see Zamalin (2019) and Ventura and Chan (2019).

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Alexander, author of the book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), argues that the mass incarceration and the racist laws and practices behind it can be aligned with the Jim Crow laws after the abolition of slavery.

76). Interestingly, the location outside does not correspond to their physical (dis)placement. The ghetto, which in the white imagination is “a backdrop for social ruin and barbarism” (Rose, *Noise* 33), is often located right in the city center, economically deprived and marked by white flight to the suburbs. The latter can be considered “bourgeois utopias” in the words of Robert Fishman; they “express a complex and compelling vision of the modern family freed from the corruption of the city” (Preface). However, suburbs also epitomize the often-racist fears of the white middle-class: “their fear of others, of racial minorities and poor people, once known as the ‘dangerous classes’” (Fogelson 24). They combine, as Chang argues, “urban convenience and rural predictability” (*Alright, Vanilla*). For the few, suburbs are the utopian escape from the seeming dystopian reality of the city.

Considering the discrepancy between hip-hop’s emergence in the city center and its displacement outside of mainstream culture, it is not surprising that rap music is “part of the dominant text and, yet, always on the margins of this text; relying on and commenting on the text’s center and always aware of its proximity to the border” (Rose, *Noise* 19). African American utopian imaginations are written from outside the dominant discourse, from people who had to conceive a place from the very experience of displacement. Consequently, while the concept of space is always linked with utopian theory and practice, it assumes ever greater importance in black utopias, the concerns of which are “always with the black diaspora” (Zamalin 10). Displaced people, whose past has been forcefully erased and who face a long history of oppression and marginalization, have “developed a culture that draws its energy from the very fact of displacement, of homelessness” (Ashcroft, “Utopias” 427). Through their cultural products, marginalized people “are turning their marginality into a creative space for theorizing” (Sandercock 435) and produce practices of resistance that are grounded in the utopian impulse: “Utopia frequently shows desire for emplaced communities whose histories, stories, myths, and narratives have to be recovered, reinvented, and reconfigured. Utopia always has an important element of critique of the present” (Bagchi 7).

The critique of the present and the past also highlights the importance of time for black utopias. As Lynch and Gunkel argue, “[t]he colonial viewpoint renders black people spatially static and outside of history” (23). Thus, not only is mobility restricted in space but also in the process of historical time; African Americans remain immobile, out of synchronization with the “master clock,” as Afrofuturist Rasheedah Philipps (qtd. in Love) puts it. However,

although visions of the past play an important role in black political thought, the search for black utopia is always aligned with specific sociopolitical situations:

By taking up ideal solutions to the specific problems of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow, lynching, mass incarceration, deregulation, and war, black utopia was in conversation with prevailing political realities, crises and cultural trends. (Zamalin 10)

The criticism of the present “offers a different way of being in the present: its utopian energy is directed at resistance to the tyranny of history by the confirmation of a transformation of a place ‘here and now’” (Ashcroft, “Utopias” 420). The criticism of history further highlights the link between utopian imaginations and memory. However, while traditionally memory is regarded as referring to the past and utopia to the future, here the two opposing terms merge because utopia is understood as moving “restlessly between the past, present, and future” (Bagchi 5–6). Cultural critic and hip-hop scholar Greg Tate (qtd. in Dery 211) reaffirms this idea when he states in an interview with Mark Dery that you “can be backward-looking and forward thinking at the same time, [...] one of the things that allowed black culture to survive is its ability to operate in an iconoclastic way in regard to the past.” Or, in Baraka’s more lapidary terms: “The future is always here in the past” (*Jazzmen* 255). In utopian discourses, the past and the future

can fuse, forming a crossroads in the creative consciousness where visions of the future and revisions of the past become part of the same process [...] in which accepted notions of language, history, the real, and the possible are thrown open to question and found wanting. (Lock 2)

Instead of contrasting the notions of space and time, in African American utopias, the two concepts merge as “temporally, Africa, and by extension its diaspora, remains *spatially* outside – an *anachronistic* space – always as a past that Europe races to leave behind by way of settler colonial logics of eminent domain” (lynch and Gunkel 23; my emphasis). People of the diaspora are not only spatially but also chronologically displaced. Having been forcefully taken from their home and been denied a history in the past, the marginalization and discrimination continues in the present. The only way out is in the future: thus, utopia is not a question of possibility but of survival. Thus, black utopians and anti-utopians alike have shared visions: they explore institutional racism and make visible the continuing marginalization of African Americans. As “race and white supremacy have been central to modernity” (Zamalin 11), there is a need to distinguish the black American experience from the white American experience and to also distinguish between their utopian traditions. Black utopian visions were, from the beginning, more concerned with the process of imagining than with the representation of a perfect society:

“Black utopians were much more drawn to something approximating a critical civic sphere defined around shared collective interests and based on reason” (14). Consequently,

Utopia in black became much more critical and infused by a sense of tragedy. It became defined by unfinished conversations, unresolved debates, critical problematics, which resisted easy resolution. In black utopia, a sense of committed struggle in the face of the unknown was coupled with a realistic sense of subversion and collapse. (12)

Thus, the fact that black utopias often do not offer blueprints is less a question of an impossibility of imagining a better future and more related to the importance of a horizon of hope that had to be kept alive. African American utopian discourses emerged from a dystopian reality without history, without identity and without a place. And it is exactly from this hopeless perspective that tales and songs articulated the dreams of a better life and fueled the drive to resist the present.

### **2.3. Disrupting the Present: From Utopian Impulses to Resistance Movements**

Utopia needs to be understood not as a mode of representation but as a praxis that is always changing, always mobile and that can provide the cultural backdrop for resistance movements. Especially in black utopias the notions of “subversion and collapse” were always inherent (Zamalin 12). This is the anticipatory consciousness of black utopias; they have “revised the normative horizon necessary for liberation” and thus “made aesthetics political” (17). Therefore, in marginalized contexts, utopian discourses have a dynamic function: the aim is not to construct a static place, “but to enact the utopian in the engagement with power” (Ashcroft, “Utopias” 420). As Zamalin puts it, “the major reason utopia is a fruitful site for political theory is precisely that it lives on the precipice of human imagination, beyond the border of the possible” (5). As utopian discourses are located outside of space and time, they offer “a vehicle to reach an alternative orientation from which to frame resistance” (Ventura 6). Before enacting change, it first has to be imagined. Resistance is not possible without utopian visions.

Culture has always played a central role for articulating black political concerns, because they are “rarely given space in the US public sphere” (Zamalin 16). Therefore, culture emerged as a “hidden transcript” and – “whether the early slave rituals or later the jazz, blues, literary autobiography, and journalism – forged the contours of black collective identity and strategies of resistance.” As Patricia Ventura argues, imagining a different world is “a deeply political and

resistive act” (7) and this imagining, which happens prior to resistance, is precisely the enactment of “utopian desire.” Jameson further highlights the connection between subversion and utopian discourses when he states that “at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment” (*Archaeologies* xiii). While utopias may point towards an uncertain future, they are “diagnostic interventions” that “aim at the alleviation and elimination of the sources of exploitation and suffering, rather than at the composition of blueprints for bourgeois comfort.” As Bloch puts it in the introduction to *The Principle of Hope*:

Utopian consciousness wants to look far into the distance, but ultimately only in order to penetrate the darkness so near it of the just lived moment, in which everything that is both drives and is hidden from itself. In other words: we need the most powerful telescope, that of polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness. (12)

Utopian thought is therefore always concerned with the present; it offers “maps and plans to be read negatively, as what is to be accomplished after the demolitions and removals” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 12). The demolitions of the present are not only related to the social reality but to the very concept of time itself: African American utopian discourses cannot be understood in linear time; rather “by their very existence and through their radical futurities, [they] meaningfully disrupt linear notions of time” (R. Phillips 239). This disruption not only of the present but of historical time itself defines utopian imaginations as a radical break, which “insists that its radical difference is possible and that a break is necessary” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 231–32). By providing radically different perspectives, utopian discourses and imaginations can emerge in this break, even “without any conception of how a globalized transformation might then proceed” (232). The break itself provides the possibility for alternatives. It is “a meditation of the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right” (232–33). Thus, instead of capitulation to the status quo, the utopian imagination does not have to point towards a designed future; the break from the present constitutes the possibility that keeps hope alive. In order to move towards an (imaginary) future, the present and the past need to be diagnosed and criticized:

This may involve a reinvestigation and uncovering of hidden histories, and a hacking into future histories where they have already been erased, ensuring their appearance, their continued existence even when the movement’s active period has ended on the linear progressive timeline and receded into the so-called, inaccessible past. (R. Phillips 239)

While the utopian desire seems to be a historical constant, the imaginations of this desire are subject to change. It is the power of creative expression to “create visions of the future from



which to rethink the present” (Zamalin 108). This creative vision, the “black fantastic” in Richard Iton’s terms, keeps alive the possibility of utopia. From the BPM and the BAM up to the contemporary expressions of resistance: popular culture and politics were always inextricably intertwined for African Americans. But in order to translate into action these cultural expressions of hope for a better future, the first step was to find their own voice, their own identity.

## 2.4. Creating Identities: Utopias Between the Individual and the Collective Other

Utopias and identities are connected insofar as the latter develop through systems of oppression and the former are ways of constantly (re)producing identities, which are connected to the past, present and the future; these cultural identities “come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall, “Identity” 435). Culture provides a space where marginalized people can see themselves and recognize the power of their own voice. Nowadays, this space is most prominently provided by hip-hop as “an entire generation of African-American youth understands itself as defined primarily by a musical, cultural form” (Rose, *Hip-Hop* 8). Simon Frith (296) underlines this importance of meaning-making through cultural production: it is not that values and ideas are discussed and then represented in the cultural activities, but rather it is through the production of culture that socio-cultural groups recognize themselves as groups. And as cultural production is constantly changing, so are the conceptions of individual and group identities.

The link between black political demands and popular culture is a product of African Americans’ exclusion from the institutions of power; it “has to be understood in the broader context of the uncertainty about the status of black citizenship and specifically the question of whether African Americans are permanent outsiders, the penultimate American other” (Iton 9). After the abolition of slavery, after the end of segregation, after the legislative reforms pushed by the CRM, African Americans were still relegated to the margins of society. City planners and governments

invented no end of both blunt and subtle ways of keeping certain bodies (marked bodies, marked by color, by race, by gender, by sexual preference and by physical ability) out of the sight and out of the way and out of the neighborhoods of certain other bodies. (Sandercock 426)

However, according to Jameson, “the very possibility of Utopian space is itself a result of spatial and social differentiation” (*Archaeologies* 15). Therefore, the utopian imagination is capable of making marginalized bodies visible. Before achieving collective resistance, cultural narratives of marginalized people first need to “write the subject into existence” (Ashcroft, “Utopias” 428). As Zamalin puts it: “Awareness of one’s autonomy and political freedom are analytically distinct. But the first is often a precondition for the second” (27). However, the black body is not only stripped of political freedom but it also suffers pejorative inscriptions. From the times of enslavement, where it provided “an instrument of free labor” to contemporary society where it is rendered as the “image of criminality” (Ramsey, *Music* 102), the black body is always marked and always vulnerable. Resisting these violent representations has been one of the main tropes of black popular culture as it “embodies and emboldens our complex subjectivities and collective visions that include histories and futures of mourning, resistance, resilience, healing, black joy, and horizons of hope” (lynch and Gunkel 27).

There is a tension between individual identities and collective identities, which becomes especially important when analyzing cultural production through the lens of utopian studies. Levitas argues that “any complex system of needs is likely to contain contradictory elements both for and between individuals” (*Concept* 213). It is not possible to conceive a universal utopia, because there are not only different perceptions when it comes to the needs of people but also those desires are socially constructed. Therefore, just as identity formation must necessarily remain in constant motion, the island that is utopia must always remain visible on the horizon but can never be reached. In order to solve this problem between the individual and the collective, Jameson suggests a conception of multiple identities that can change depending on different contexts which are all interrelated: “The collectivity is thus inside of us, fully as much as it is outside us, in the multiple social worlds we also inhabit all at once” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 214). As such, collective utopian imaginations only become possible when their differences are not seen as oppositional but mutually dependent. Music plays not only a special role in the process of creating a space for developing a sense of self but also in creating collectives as it facilitates “a sense of belonging among a community of people” (Freeland 271). As Ramsey (*Music* 77) puts it, “through the process of the work of the imagination, groups of individuals begin to imagine themselves and feel as one group, connecting their past, present, and future.” Thus, these imagined communities “have material, pedagogical, and ultimately political effects, shaping the ways people understand and, as a consequence, act in their worlds” (Wegner xvi).

Moving from individual identities to collective visions, utopian discourses thus provide the prerequisite to political change: when a community is able to recognize the horizon of hope that is ahead, the wishful images (the abstract utopia) can become achievable (the concrete utopia).

## 2.5. Utopia and Music

In the *Republic*, Plato stated that musical innovation was something to be prohibited, as every new form of music can potentially be dangerous to the state, because “when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the State always change with them” (280). As one of the first utopian texts already recognizes, music is more than simple entertainment, it provides lyrical and sonic utopian discourses. Edward Rothstein even argues that “no other form of expression has been so associated with the utopian dream as music” (24).<sup>10</sup> Analyzing music as utopian discourse can highlight “its very liminality, its evocation of something still coming to consciousness, something that is not yet” (Levitas and Moylan 213). Even if musical compositions are not telling straightforward utopian narratives, they nonetheless “conjure the arrival of a new emotional and intellectual space” (Zamalin 106).

Music can offer new perspectives to the real and imaginary spaces people inhabit and point towards “some vision of the future, some sense of its future failures or future promises” (Rothstein 27). The “autonomous world of sound with its own set of laws and relationships” (24) that music creates is thus situated in-between, in the liminal zone between music and politics. This world, this third space, “is a new world of social experience and emotional possibility, but it is also, necessarily, a strange world that we negotiate through listening” (Kun 12). For Josh Kun, this sonic landscape allows the listeners not only to construct their own identity but also offers “new maps for re-imagining the present social world” (Aparicio 293). Especially in the United States, music and pop culture have always played a central role in the

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<sup>10</sup> Bloch always “insisted that music had a particular utopian role in articulating the Not Yet” (Levitas and Moylan 205). However, as Levitas and Moylan argue in their introduction to a special music-centered issue of *Utopian Studies* magazine in 2010, within utopian studies, music has not received much attention (206). While this seems to gradually change, most utopian analyses of music are concerned with classical music. When it comes to utopian discourses in popular and contemporary music, Webb and Lynch (2010), Hanson (2014), and Rando (2017) offer interesting insights. For a general overview on utopian ideas in music see Levitas (2010).

daily reality. Consequently, the lyrical and sonic contents of music can also produce utopian discourses that transcend this reality and point towards new horizons and better futures.

These utopian imaginations do not necessarily need to offer a concrete map of a utopian world; they rather work on the level of emotion and feeling. As Richard Dyer states, popular music culture “presents what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized” (19). When it comes to music that is produced by marginalized people, it was even necessary that the message had to be hidden: “Created under the very nose of the overseers, the utopian desires which fuel the complementary politics of transfiguration must be invoked by other, more deliberately opaque means” (Gilroy 37). Located in a liminal zone between the past and the future, real and imaginary spaces, sounds can transform people and the world they inhabit. This is the “most genuine function of music as a limited and yet pure feeling of that unity of outside and inside which Utopia will establish in all the dimensions of existence” (Jameson, *Marxism* 146), a diffuse future that can both promise a “new, liberating mode of production” or a “dystopian possibility which is that mode of production’s baleful mirror image” (Jameson, “Foreword” xi).

Especially when it comes to the African diaspora, “music functions as a method of rebellion, revolution, and future visions that disrupt and challenge the manufactured differences used to dismiss, detain, and destroy communities” (Redmond 1). Therefore, music for marginalized communities can serve as a political act, a new way of mapping the dystopian reality that surrounds them. It is a “useful tool for marginalized blacks to assert their dissatisfaction with their situation and their resistance to the hegemonic nature of the dominant class. In this sense, music is a form of symbolic resistance” (Freeland 284). The liberation that is anticipated is already realized in black American music, as it features an architecture where

singers and musicians can be completely free, free in the only way that would have been possible on a plantation: through art, through music — music no one “composed” (because enslaved people were denied literacy), music born of feeling, of play, of exhaustion, of hope. (Morris)

The songs also have a liberating effect on the people who chant them collectively, which is a “method of participation within the freedom dreams and liberation projects of an emergent diaspora” (Redmond 2). As Redmond puts it, African American songs “are the sound texts that most poignantly record the political issues and contests” (3) and as such they are subject to change. While hip-hop is part of the musical process of African American resistance, it emerged under specific circumstances and has found new ways to articulate the hopes and desires of

young black citizens. Rap music, with its focus on sampling and reappropriating sounds, is heavily reliant on technology, on turntables and mixing equipment. The possibilities of sampling and indefinitely replaying sounds also had an influence on the sonic landscape of rap music, which often mirrored the dystopian present by interweaving gunshots and police sirens with the musical texture of the tracks. However, the technological innovations also led to new utopian discourses. Visions from the past could be reused and put in conversation with the present (for instance the sampling of political speeches and prayers) and the music by artists from different times could speak to each other to create a transhistorical orchestra. Through sampling and its innovative use of technology, hip-hop continues to remix the past and strives towards an ever-changing future.

## SIDE B: Analysis

### 3. Rap as Utopian Space in Dystopian Realities

Hip-hop culture emerged from the marginalization and economic downfall of black urban neighborhoods. Likewise, utopia is also connected to the city; architectural critic Lewis Mumford argues that “the first utopia was the city” (271), and Jameson identifies “the city itself as a fundamental form of the Utopian image” (*Archaeologies* 4). The urban environment that serves as the backdrop for hip-hop’s sonic landscapes can thus not only be conceptualized as a dystopian reality that hinders the emergence of utopias but rather as its prerequisite: “A sense of decline is not in itself an obstacle to utopianism but it does require that any utopia involves the reversal of this decline and thus a radical break from the present system” (Levitas, *Concept* 226). Although rap music nowadays is often analyzed with a focus on the (controversial) lyrics, it were the breakbeats and the music that first propelled the culture.<sup>11</sup> DJs were reclaiming their surroundings with music, the (block) parties offered a “communal sacred space, a chance to escape the chafing oppression of time, to vault the restrictions of the social order, a place to watch the rules become liquid, and peer into possibility” (Chang, *Stop* 168). However, these parties were only temporally limited utopias: the “night always opened into a Reagan morning that was much more than a comedown” (178). Nonetheless, the parties and experiences in the club had a lasting impact on the people and the location, as Chang writes about Afrika Bambaataa:<sup>12</sup> his music and sound system anticipated the rebellion of a whole generation by transforming “his environment in sonic and social structure” (92). As it developed, “rap began to describe and analyze the social, economic, and political factors that led to its emergence and development” (Dyson, “Culture” 61). A loud and fresh new movement emerged, ready to

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<sup>11</sup> In the history of hip-hop, the importance of the DJ and the MC have switched: In the beginning, the DJs were the center of the show. The records that they played and the way how they mixed the breakbeats set the crowd moving. The role of the MC only gradually developed from shouting out members of the crowd to the sophisticated lyricism that we know today. For a detailed account of this development see Chang (2007).

<sup>12</sup> While Afrika Bambaataa remains one of the most important figures in the beginning of hip-hop, the recent accusations of child sexual abuse that he faces and that date back as far as the 1970s cannot be neglected (Willis 2016, Wedge 2016). While the utopian impulses in Bambaataa’s music and the goals of the Zulu Nation need to be acknowledged in hip-hop history, the allegations held against him must not be dismissed, excused or relativized.

conquer the planet Bambaataa had redefined as “Planet Rock.” The single, first released in 1982, was “hip-hop’s universal invitation, a hypnotic vision of one world under a groove, beyond race, poverty, sociology and geography” (Chang, *Stop* 172). This is also highlighted by the lyrics, stating “our world is free / be what you be.” Bambaataa was one of the first who understood the utopian potential of hip-hop as a culture that had a lasting impact on marginalized black youth: “It got them noticed again and it helped to forge a sense of identity and pride within the local community” (Hebdige 223). Thus, it is not surprising that in addition to his groundbreaking musical innovations, Bambaataa was also the initiator of the Zulu Nation, a hip-hop organization that strived towards turning “the gang structure into a positive force in the ghetto” (225). The utopian message of the music translated to activism that channeled the anger of a disadvantaged youth into a positive cultural force and a sense of community.

Hip-hop has always been a performative culture, and it is possible to trace the first utopian impulses to the performances in the nightclubs and street corners in the Bronx, the “poorest, toughest neighborhood in the whole city” (224). As Jill Dolan argues, performances “can articulate a common future, one that’s more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture” (“Performance” 455). Although the early performances and parties did not explicitly articulate utopian desires or a criticism of the present, their temporarily available utopian space became political because “the satisfaction of that moment can leak out of the performance space to inform the dissatisfaction of everyday life” (Sargent 48–49). From the spirit of hope the music and the dance performances ignited, a new culture and new perspectives emerged, which directed the abstract desires towards a concrete utopia: to the belief that change was possible.

Two of the first rap songs that lyrically described the dissatisfaction of African Americans with their living conditions were “The Breaks” by Kurtis Blow and “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. These songs “pioneered the social awakening of rap into a form combining social protest, musical creation, and cultural expression” (Dyson, “Culture” 62). Moreover, they illustrate the importance of stories from one’s own neighborhood and its inhabitants in hip-hop culture. The prominence of these local narratives was not only a way to represent reality, it also drew from

the desire to have pride in one’s community, even if – especially if – that community was denigrated by outsiders. Rappers created a self-fulfilling prophecy: By taking pride in where they were from, they gave where they’re from a reason to be proud. (A. Bradley 107–08)

These depictions wrote the ghetto into existence as a place of hope. As Ashcroft argues, the “*idea* of utopia can be an image of possibility in place” (“Introduction” 8). Rap, in offering a counternarrative to the dominant portrayal of the media, has the ability to sonically transform the Bronx and its inhabitants: from displacement to home, from neglect to possibility, from criminalization to community.

According to Ramsey, there are two discourses that emerged from the dystopian reality. Some artists reflected “the horrendous conditions of inner cities,” while others “attempted to refashion the image of the postindustrial city in more complimentary terms, portraying it as home – as a Safe Space” (*Music* 29). However, most rap songs cannot be classified as either being dystopian or utopian – in fact, they synthesize both discourses, as exemplified by “The Message.” When Melle Mel starts the first verse with “broken glass, everywhere,” he does not merely mirror the grim reality of the living conditions but also creates a possibility of transformation. He provides a voice for the people rendered Other as a direct result of “urban renewal.” In articulating their reality, Melle Mel does not change what people see but how they see it (A. Bradley 98). Rap not only delineates the reasons for the existing violence and drug problems but also provides its surroundings with humanity. Songs like “The Message” compress the disgust with the politics of the Reagan era and the dissatisfaction with the discrimination and neglect and mark the beginning of politically conscious rap that would shock white America and provide hope for African Americans.

### 3.1. Sonic Homes: Constructing Hip-Hop Identities through Music

In 1979, the first rap song that gained popularity also outside of hip-hop’s birthplace in the Bronx was released: “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang.<sup>13</sup> According to Adam Bradley, the song marks the beginning of a “distinctly black voice” (14) that spread first in the US and then globally. Historically, voice has been a marker of identity from the times of enslavement. It “represented the most sonically conspicuous possession of a body otherwise possessed. The vocal utterance provided slaves with an expressive tool, an audible social force that served to

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that the song has a controversial history: the founder of Sugar Hill Records, Sylvia Robinson, randomly assembled a group of men who were not really part of the hip-hop community and stole most of their lines on the song from other MCs (a capital crime in rap).



construct group networks and structures of meaning” (Radano 14). As tobias van Veen states, “slavery by its very nature strives to displace even the very memory of ‘being human’. Such is the de jure principle of instituting slavery; that the slave is not a human subject” (67). The dehumanization of enslaved bodies led not only to their invisibility but also to their inaudibility: the bodies were “sold as commodities, their names and identities stripped, their cultures, histories and languages (all but) banished.” By voicing it into existence, enslaved people found a strategy to reclaim their body. Barbara Bush argues that “music and dance were central to slave resistance and the reconstruction of community within the constraints of chattel slavery” (20). Through sound and performance, inaudible, dehumanized bodies could sonically construct new identities and create a sense of community. From the times of enslavement until now, music has always played a central role in the process of identity construction for African Americans. The transformation of identity is intertwined with the transformation of musical styles: “group identities are passed along and transformed in both formal and informal ways, through history and memory, through institutions, and especially through cultural forms like music, literature, and mass media” (Ramsey, *Music* 37). According to Cloonan and Johnson, sound is “an ancient marker of physical and psychic territorial identity” (29). Sound transforms not only the space in which it is produced but also the people who inhabit it. Consequently, the discursive space that was opened by hip-hop also invited the emergence of a new voice, one aligned with the negotiation of new identities. Rap music provided not only a new way of seeing but also new ways of hearing the post-industrial downfall of the cities.

KRS-One exemplifies the power of sound as an identity marker in his song “Sound of da Police.” Forman argues that the “streets are idealized as an authentic cultural locus, a zone of real human activity where aspects of love and communal affiliation collide with other more heinous factors including boredom, threat, violence, and murder” (“Hip-Hop” 3). By contrasting daily life in his neighborhood with the sound of police horns that provides a constant sonic threat to African Americans, KRS-One sonically mirrors this argument. As he defines the ghetto not in terms of the visual presence of the police but rather through the sound that is associated with it, he recognizes the acoustic presence as “a powerful tool for political negotiation, a way of taking control in defiance of physical space” (Cloonan and Johnson 29). The onomatopoetic chant “Woop-woop!,” which is at the beginning of the first eight lines of the song, mirrors the soundscape of the ghetto, audibly marked by the presence of the police. Moreover, by using parallelism – only changing the last word in the phrase “that’s the sound of

da police” to “beast” – the lyrical I’s opinion on law enforcement is already indicated. Whereas white citizens mostly connotate the police with security and order, they posit a real threat to African Americans, as the ongoing instances of police brutality against black people continue to show. The first verse elaborates on this contrast between the experience of marginalized people in the neighborhood and the police who patrol the area: the police officers frisk a group of African Americans in the search for drugs, but the lyrical I calls out this racist policy by rapping “you claim I’m sellin’ crack, but you be doin’ that,” putting the blame on the police and the government for introducing the drug to poor neighborhoods in the first place.<sup>14</sup> The question “Are you really for peace and equality?” further challenges the motives of the police. Moreover, with the hyperbolic exclamation “we run New York,” a collective group identity within the marginalized group is created, one that highlights the collective power of the community. The second verse, then, relies on clever wordplay to establish a historical connection from the experience of enslavement to the institutionalized racism African Americans face today:

Take the word overseer, like a sample  
Repeat it very quickly in a crew, for example  
Overseer, overseer, overseer, overseer  
Officer, officer, officer, officer  
Yeah, officer from overseer

By quickly repeating the word “overseer,” a term that refers to those who were responsible for watching over enslaved people, KRS-One establishes a phonetic connection to the word “officer,” highlighting the fact that the racism and marginalization from the times of enslavement are still in effect. Although there is no etymological connection between overseer and officer, the history of modern police forces is entwined with the institution of slavery: “Slave patrols and Night Watches, which later became modern police departments, were both

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<sup>14</sup> It was only after the War on Drugs was declared by then-president Ronald Reagan that crack cocaine began to spread in black neighborhoods (Alexander, Introduction). This timing as well as the role of the media that demonized black citizens by spreading “images that seemed to confirm the worst negative racial stereotypes about impoverished inner-city residents,” fueled “conspiracy theories and general speculation in poor black communities that the War on Drugs was part of a genocidal plan by the government to destroy black people in the United States.” As Carol Anderson recounts, the Reagan administration was in fact involved in drug trafficking from Nicaragua. While the government protected those who brought the drugs to the US, “there was an equal determination to lock up and imprison the communities bearing the brunt of the White House’s narco-funding scheme” (Four). Consequently, it is not surprising that the topic was discussed widely in hip-hop culture. Dimitri Bogazianos even argues that the predominance of crack-related themes in hip-hop led to a “consciousness of exploitation” that drew parallels between the music industry and selling drugs: rappers began “juxtaposing their own exploits in street crime with the machinations of industry executives in the suites” (4).

designed to control the behaviors of minorities” (Kappeler). KRS-One’s harsh criticism is rhythmically propelled by the aggressive beat and delivery of the lyrics – as the beginning of verse three states: “Check out the message in a rough stylee [sic].”<sup>15</sup> This “‘in your face’ approach to making or writing about music is used deliberately to alienate those not sharing the same musical tastes, as a means of demarcation” (Cloonan and Johnson 34). While the sound of the police is prevalent in the neighborhood, this song provides the counternarrative – it mirrors the sonic landscape of the ghetto and not only reverses its negative associations but also hands back the responsibility to the oppressors. Instead of individual advances, the power of the community and the collective strength in challenging the institutionalized racism of the government is highlighted throughout the song.

While songs like “Sound of da Police” shed light on African American struggles and are paradigmatic for the utopian discourses and the sound of early conscious rap, they also illustrate the predominance of black male identities in hip-hop. In the lyrics, African American women are often either denigrated or their stories are left out. However, early female artists such as Sister Souljah and Queen Latifah not only challenged the objectification and sexualization of women but also gave voice to the untold stories and struggles from a female perspective. As the utopian discourses that were prevalent in male-centered hip-hop culture did not provide a hopeful future for them, they had to carve out their own spaces to create identities and a horizon of hope that was intersectional and diverse.

Especially important for the development of a female hip-hop identity was Queen Latifah, who released her debut album *All Hail the Queen* in 1989. The hit single of the album, “Ladies First,” both puts women from sexual object to the lead role (“It’s ladies first”) and sends a critical message to her fellow male rappers (“Some think that we can’t flow / stereotypes, they got to go”). Monie Love, the songs feature guest, even performatively disproves those who believe that women “can’t flow.” In the first verse, her rap is “slick and smooth” and dependent on her fast and flowing delivery of the words. By both lyrically stressing the importance of the notion “ladies first” and proving female rappers’ ability to produce beats and rhymes, Queen Latifah and Monie Love send a utopian message to young women: in hip-hop, there is a place for them and their stories. They are also able to “step out into the night,” as Latifah puts it,

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<sup>15</sup> Pronouncing style as /staili/ is not only applied to fit the rhyme of the next line but is also Jamaican patois, which is characteristic for KRS-One’s articulation.

grab a microphone and make themselves heard. When the song was released, claiming this space and stressing the importance of women in rap was a radical break with the masculine status quo. Thus, the song “is a powerful rewriting of the contributions of black women in the history of black struggles” (Rose, *Noise* 164) and points to a hopeful future that includes the histories and listens to the stories of African American women.

Although female rappers like Latifah, Roxanne Shanté, MC Lyte, or Monie Love provide pro-women narratives that “affirm a black, female, working-class cultural aesthetic that is rarely depicted in American popular culture” (Rose, “Butt” 303), they are not anti-black-male and they avoid the label feminism, as they see it “as a signifier for a movement that related specifically to white women.” Therefore, “women rappers articulate a politics of solidarity with their men that is closely aligned with womanism” (Phillips, Reddick-Morgan and Stephens 269).<sup>16</sup> Queen Latifah stands out as one of the first Afrocentrist artists who did not neglect the intersections of race and gender. “Ladies First,” as one of her most well-known songs,

is a statement for black female unity, independence and power, as well as an anti-colonial statement concerning Africa’s southern region. The rap recognizes the importance of black female political activists, offering hope for the development of a pro-female, pro-black, diasporatic political consciousness. (Rose, “Butt” 300)

While the topics mentioned by Rose are all evoked in the lyrics, the music video reinforces the song’s political message: before the song starts, a slideshow presents portraits of female African American activists such as Madame C. J. Walker, Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Winnie Mandela. Throughout the video, pictures of South Africa are shown as well as footage of the rappers Queen Latifah and Monie Love rapping. Juxtaposing these images not only highlights the Afrocentricity of the song but also puts hip-hop in line with previous freedom struggles. Moreover, as the stories of women activists often remain invisible in (African American) history, making them visible is in itself a utopian act. Putting the images of black female activists at the beginning of the video “implies that women can and should be first in revolution” (Roberts 251). Consequently, the song is embedded in the history of resistance and highlights

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<sup>16</sup> The idea of “womanism” was initially introduced by writer and poet Alice Walker in 1979 and has since served as an alternative concept to feminism for women of color. According to Layli Phillips, womanism “elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race or class, to a level of equal concern and action” (xx–xxi). While having several intersections with (black) feminism, womanism encompasses a broad variety of concerns from spirituality to ethics. As L. Phillips puts it metaphorically: womanism “is the sound and feel of Black feminism, the politics of Black feminism, and the soul of Black feminism” (xxxv).

the voices from the past to amplify its own message. Moreover, chanting “ladies first” while images of South Africa are portrayed in the video “shows how the same rationales are used to justify the oppression of blacks and women, and identifies the similarity between sexism and racism and the importance of resisting both oppressions.” As the use of the Malcolm X sample, in which he states that “there are going to be some changes made here,” underlines, the song “affirms and revises African-American traditions at the same time that it stakes out new territory” (Rose, “Butt” 301). “Ladies First” illustrates an awareness of the violence that is inscribed in the histories of race and gender but also spreads a message of hope. While it remains unspoken how this “new territory” might look like, the song fosters the belief in change. As Jameson puts it, “utopia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them” (*Archaeologies* 416). Thus, the use of the Malcolm X sample is perfectly reinforcing the utopian desire of the song: “There are going to be some changes made here.” “Ladies First” does not map out visions of a better society or provides blueprints for (female) identities. Queen Latifah and Monie Love articulate their desire for a “better way of living” (Levitas, *Concept* 8) and spread a simple, powerful message: that change is both possible and inevitable.

### **3.2. Public Enemies: The Beginnings of a New Black Revolution**

In the late 1980s, the association of hip-hop with joyful block parties was slowly fading away, and the time had come for serious business: “The center of the rap world swung decidedly in a Black nationalist direction. Hip-hop culture realigned itself and reimagined its roots, representing itself now as a rap thing, a serious thing, a Black thing” (Chang, *Stop* 229). The promises of the CRM were a distant memory and in the vacuum of black leadership, a rap group from Long Island emerged as the new voice for their generation: Public Enemy. It was the first group that followed a strictly pro-black political agenda, foregrounded African American history and spread revolutionary political messages in their songs. As the rapper DMC states in the documentary “Prophets of Rage,” in school he was taught about American figures such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, but “when Public Enemy started talking about historical figures, occasions and instances, it was an education for a young brother” (JayArgonaut). Education is seen as the key for overcoming discrimination, as Public Enemy

put it on the song “Rightstarter” (Message to a Black Man): “Our solution, mind revolution.” However, the educative aspects of Public Enemy are based outside the institutional realm; the knowledge is spread in the language of the community, in the vernacular slang of the streets. This kind of education is

valued over formal education because of the history of African Americans’ exclusion from formal education as a result of centuries of enslavement, colonization, legal segregation, and other forms of oppression and discrimination across the African diaspora. (Phillips, Reddick-Morgan and Stephens 259)

Chuck D, Public Enemy’s main rapper can thus be described as an organic intellectual as defined by Antonio Gramsci – or perhaps even more fittingly: a hood intellectual. Analyzing Gramsci’s concept in the context of rap, Nathan D. Abrams identifies four important features of organic intellectuals:

These are that they are members of an aggrieved community; that they reflect the needs of that community; that they attempt to construct a counter-hegemony through the dissemination of subversive ideas; and that they strive to construct a historical bloc – a coalition of oppositional groups united around these subversive or counter-hegemonic images.

All of these aspects are also prevalent in the lyricism of Chuck D. Considering hip-hop as a “counterculture of modernity” (Gilroy 36), his lyrics are aligned with expressing urban, black identities “that emerged outside of the institutional infrastructures where the arts are traditionally nurtured” (Forman, “Hip-Hop” 3). By telling the silenced history of African American oppression and resistance, Chuck D carves out hip-hop’s counter-hegemonic potential in order to construct a collective black revolutionary identity that is united in subverting the status quo. In this respect, the organic intellectual is more important than the traditional intellectuals; she or he “cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class” (Hall, “Studies” 267). As black students still face discrimination in the education system (O’Neal Cokley), it becomes the task of hip-hop to fill that void. Moreover, the emergence of organic intellectuals in the context of hip-hop not only spread knowledge to the listeners but also helped define a new responsibility for hip-hop artists: as role models and leaders in a post-CRM ear. Considering the utopian discourses in rap lyrics, they

not only contributed to the reeducation of their audiences in the ways they imagined the places they inhabited, they helped their authors define, in a new

and continuously evolving way, the vocation of the modern intellectual, a project also already begun in More's founding text. (Wegner 4)

Given the technical modes of sampling and remixing that are constitutive for the genre, the task of the hood intellectual can be interpreted in the framework of the call and response pattern. From the musical archive, from the history of African American struggles, educative aspects and respected role models are discovered (sampling); they are then rearranged and put into new perspective (remixing). In this process, the temporal boundaries between present and past break down, as the past speaks to the present while moving towards an imaginative future. As Potter puts it, through the technological use of sampling rap music makes "a future out of fragments from the archive of the past" (*Spectacular* 18). Sampling and remixing are thus central for the utopian discourses in hip-hop culture. The educative aspects are not only prevalent in the lyrics but also in the sonic canvases of Public Enemy's production team, the Bomb Squad. The Bomb Squad "sampled from news broadcasts, Civil Rights-era speeches, and field recordings to construct an ominous sound collage that collapsed the traumas of the past into the acoustic environment of the present" (van Veen 69). As Charise Cheney (10) argues,

[b]y appropriating and signifying upon beats, melodies, and any number of other recorded sounds, DJs and producers can assume the role of historians, using those sonic files as primary sources to create a historical narrative and to introduce audiences to political figures of the past and present; or, they can assume the role of cultural critic, using music as a method to construct and deconstruct historical narratives.

The notion of the "historical narrative" is crucial in this context. Public Enemy do not only recount the history of oppression from a black perspective but also highlight the narrative aspects of history. As Hayden White argues, the historical work is "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (2). As such, the binary opposition between fact and fiction is overturned: history no longer represents an invariable course of events but a narrative that can be revisited and changed. This (de)construction of historical narratives is a profoundly utopian moment. By remembering earlier revolutionaries and activists and channeling their ideas to educate the new generation, the past becomes relevant for the present and the future: "The utopianism of the past [...] is not only an attempt to disrupt the dominance of European history, but also an attempt to reconceive a place in the present, a place transformed by the infusion of the past," Ashcroft argues (*Utopianism* 82). The aim of Public Enemy then was "to 'refashion the revolution' to the sounds of hip-hop" (Neal, "Message" 307) and they did not stop with the music: Their logo of the silhouette of a black man in cross hairs visually marked

the return of black radicalism and mirrored COINTELPRO, which a generation before had targeted black uprisings and attempted to keep the revolution down.

Without a political movement that took the protest to the streets, the hip-hop generation solely fought in the arena of popular culture. Music was their “weapon of resistance” (Chang, *Stop* 249), a cultural call to arms. Especially Public Enemy’s albums *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* with its lead single “Fight the Power” and *Fear of a Black Planet* provided rap music with “ideological vitality” (Dyson, *God* 166). On these albums, the group criticizes the hegemonic power of the state and attempts to create a new, black planet, a “terra incognita, looming threateningly close to the Earth, emblazoned with the Public Enemy logo” (Obst). The success of Public Enemy, KRS-One and Queen Latifah (as well as countless other acts) in the late 1980s and early 1990s highlights the fact that hip-hop has always been able to pinpoint and criticize social issues that have negatively influenced African American citizens. However, socially conscious artists often did not align with the commercial interests of record labels as the latter were often afraid of signing acts with an explicit political messages, fearing both alienating their large white audience base as well as “the ire of conservative cultural watchdogs or politicians” (Forman, “Hip-Hop” 5). Moreover, when Public Enemy released their album *Muse Sick-n-Hour Mess Age* (read: music in our message) in 1994, the sound of hip-hop had changed. As Dyson states, “biting black nationalist commentary and an Afrocentric worldview giving way to sexual hedonism and the glamorization of violence” (*God* 167). The center of attention had shifted from the East Coast to the West Coast, specifically to Los Angeles.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.3. Street Knowledge: The Utopian Politics of Gangsta Rap in Los Angeles

The artists that first fashioned the sounds of West Coast hip-hop rejected the “burden of representation” and instead offered “a generational critique of their parents’ obsession with cultural respectability” (Canton 246). Gangsta rap not only highlighted a generational gap but

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<sup>17</sup> Whereas the epicenter of gangsta rap was certainly the West Coast, it is important to note that hip-hop studies often simplifies the rich and complex stories that rap produced in other urban centers outside of the East Coast and the West Coast. For instance, the origins of the language and the style of battle rap that shaped its development in Los Angeles can be traced to Philadelphia based rapper Schoolly D, whose track “P.S.K. What Does It Mean?” released in 1985 was the blueprint for the work of Ice-T, who was later often referred to as the founder of gangsta rap. However, especially after the legendary beef between the East Coast and the West Coast that reached a sad height with the death of Tupac and Biggie Smalls, the focus of hip-hop history was often caught in the binary opposition between the coasts.



also the growing tension between classes in African American society. It articulated the perspective of the black working class that was fed up with the leadership of middle-class black citizens: "Gangsta rap musicians and producers refused to present an image that was acceptable to white America and they reminded middle-class African Americans about the realities of the inner city" (251). This class divide is aligned with the desperate situation that the marginalized black working class faced, as Ruth Levitas puts it:

Where it is no longer assumed that social organisation is inherently controllable by human agents, or where it is no longer believed that the agents who are in control can themselves be made accountable to the rest of us, much of the motive for the construction of utopias as goals is lost. They cease to be images of a hoped-for future and become again expressions of desire. (*Concept* 226)

As a better future seemed ever-more far away, the desires of West Coast hip-hop were primarily related to surviving in the streets and finding pleasure in the dire conditions. As the opening of N.W.A.'s seminal album *Straight Outta Compton* indicates: "You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge." The controversy that the articulation of this street knowledge sparked was largely caused by the language of gangsta rap. But the drive and the anger that can be heard in the lyrics stems from an unmet desire – the desire to be visible and heard. As Adam Bradley puts it: "Harsh words are sometimes required to describe harsh realities" (75). This criticism of the obscene language of African Americans did not emerge with rap but also has an earlier history. James Baldwin had already noted in an article in the *New York Times* in 1979, a "language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity" ("English") and the language that black people have created "permits the nation its only glimpse of reality." Although violence and sexism have always been part of American popular culture, now they were uttered by "what many white Americans considered to be the most violent and threatening segment of America – 'young angry inner city black men'" (Canton 245). Moreover, in contrast to the "East Coast utopians like Rakim and Chuck" (Chang, *Stop* 219), the message of gangsta rappers was more ruthless: "Fuck delayed gratification, they said, take it all now."

Street knowledge took the place of historical knowledge, which is aligned with another type of hood intellectual that can be best explained using Michel Foucault's concept of the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (*Power* 81), which he "essentially defined as ways of thinking and doing that have been eclipsed, devalued, or rendered invisible within the dominant institutions of power/knowledge" (Reiland xxi). Although subjugated knowledges are always present, they are disqualified and suppressed by dominant ones (Foucault, *Power* 82). However,

when subjugated knowledges reach the surface, they are powerful and through their insurrection “criticism performs its work.” The street knowledge of gangsta rap provides a perfect example for the insurrection of subjugated knowledges: “Rap, as a resentment listening music, collectively comprises the power of emancipated knowledges, the determination to change established society, and the anticipation of liberation” (Spencer 448). Thus, rather than demonizing gangsta rap as being the reason for the downfall of African American neighborhoods, it is more fruitful to analyze its musical and lyrical content “to find out what conditions cause their anger and hostility” (Dyson, *God* xiii). This connection between street knowledge and criticism is exemplified on the song “The Nigga Ya Love To Hate” by Ice Cube, who states that he is “kickin’ shit called street knowledge” and in the next line asks the question “Why more niggas in the pen than in college?” Ice Cube critically reports from the margins of Los Angeles, from the ghetto that is often only seen as a place of destruction and devastation. By questioning the reasons for the predominance of black citizens in prison and their absence in education, he uncovers some of the structural forces that shape the life of African Americans.

On his second album, *Death Certificate*, utopian discourses are even more prominent as they move towards two different directions: the album features, as the lyrics of the introductory song “The Funeral” state, the “death side, a mirror image of where we are today” as well as the “life side, a vision of where we need to go.” When Ice Cube released the album in 1991, it marked the move from a mere gangsta aesthetic to a more refined “politics of gangsta-centrism” (Chang, *Stop* 342), a politics that is less rooted in the history of African Americans’ oppression and focuses on the current situation. The criticism that *Death Certificate* provides points towards “commodity culture and the neoconservatism of the Reagan/Bush era” (Boyd 333). Rather than justifying gang violence, sexism and other destructive behaviors, this is the reality that he attempts to eradicate on the “death side” of the album. The “life side,” on the other hand, “concerns revitalization and getting at the roots of these societal problems, dealing with them efficiently, and moving on to more concrete solutions” (334). Therefore, the both sides of the album encapsulate both criticism and the hope for a better future. The utopian discourses on *Death Certificate* provide the diagnostic lens to analyze the shortcomings of the status quo and also believe in the possibility for change.

As the 1992 riots in Los Angeles would show, gangsta rap offered the “anticipatory consciousness” that is aligned with utopian discourses. Songs like “Cop Killer” by Ice-T and his group Body Count or “Fuck tha Police” by N.W.A. already addressed the prevalent police

brutality against African Americans with their lyrics that stated “Cop Killer, fuck police brutality” or criticized that the police has “the authority to kill a minority,” respectively. Especially the acquittal of the policemen responsible for the Rodney King beating and the subsequent riots “had demonstrated the social utility of gangsta rap, which can provide critical commentary on America’s racial and class contradictions, while it can also glorify some of the worst attributes of this society’s lust, violence, sexism, homophobia, and greed” (Canton 245). Rap lyrics, especially in gangsta rap, cannot be classified as exclusively either socially conscious or derogatory and violent. In fact, they can be both simultaneously.

These narratives of gangsta rap in the 1990s mirror the trend towards a “critical dystopia” in science fiction writing at the same time, which “turned to dystopian strategies as a way to come to terms with the changing, and enclosing, social reality” (Moylan, *Scraps* 186). Analyzing gangsta rap through the lens of critical dystopia one has to recognize the genre as

a form of resistance and a definite expression of oppositional culture, bringing to light long perceived problems in our nation’s inner cities, and effectively heralding the 1992 Los Angeles riots that shocked a nation and a globe. (Martinez 268)

Gangsta rap’s dystopian outlook provides harsh criticism of the ongoing marginalization and economic deprivation of African Americans and thus articulates the desire for change. The characterization of literary feminist critical dystopias by Jenny Wolmark also perfectly describes the dystopian discourses of the songs as they “critically voice the fears and anxieties of a range of new and fragmented social and sexual constituencies and identities in post-industrial societies” (91). The fears and anxieties become especially apparent in the acquittal of the policemen who brutally beat up Rodney King, which resulted in the Los Angeles Riots that started on April 29, 1992, the day of the verdict. What is interesting are the parallels between this incident and the 1965 Watts Riots, not only in terms of their vigor but notably when it comes to the impact on popular culture. As Odie Hawkins, an author and member of the Watt’s Writers Workshop remembers, post outrage “[e]verybody was a poet, a philosopher, an artist or simply something exotic” (chapter 12). Members of the Writers Workshop even recorded the spoken word albums *The Black Voices: On the Streets in Watts* and *Rapping Black in a White World*, which with their force and anger anticipated the expression of artists such as Eazy-E (Chang, *Stop* 311). What had changed between 1965 and 1992 was not the lack of expressive culture or the anger that ignited the riots – it was the sound.

Although gangsta rap was controversial and caused of many an impassioned debate even within the black community, it became the most visible and commercially successful subgenre of the time. This corresponds to the erasure of the local social context from which it emerged – with the commodification came the loss of complexity. As Bynoe (qtd. in Forman, “Hip-Hop” 5) argues, through rap music, the industry has “frame[d] the ‘authentic’ Black American not as a complex, educated or even creative individual, but as a ‘real nigga’ who has ducked bullets, worked a triple beam, and done at least one bid in prison.” In the 90s, the revolution came with a price tag, and it was not the consumers who had to pay the lion’s share.

#### 4. Commodification, Apocalypse and the Obama Era: New World Dystopia

With the release of Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic* in 1992, the “golden age” of hip-hop gave way to the cultural hegemony of gangsta rap and a subsequent loss of diversity in rap’s subgenres.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the rise of gangsta rap corresponds to hip-hop’s rapid commercialization. Therefore, the possibility for utopian discourses within the context of the (mainstream) market will be investigated. Lauryn Hill’s seminal album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* will then be regarded as a counterpoint to gangsta rap as the album introduced a new sense of community and reinforced the belief in music’s power as a medium for change. However, the 1990s and the approaching new millennium also led to an apocalyptic outlook in hip-hop as album titles such as *Tical 2000: Judgement Day* by Method Man or Busta Rhyme’s *The Coming* indicate. Therefore, Mobb Deep’s album *Hell on Earth* will be analyzed as oscillating between heaven (utopia) and hell (dystopia) drawing on Frantz Fanon’s concept of a Manichean earth divided into paradise for the colonizer and hell for the colonized (6). Escaping from the apocalypse also led to the quest for hope in outer spaces as the decade also saw the resurrection of Afrofuturist discourses in hip-hop culture. While Atlanta-based group Outkast can be seen as the initiators of this renewed interest in Afrofuturism, Missy Elliott’s focus on technologies transferred these

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<sup>18</sup> The seven years between 1986 and 1993 are often considered to be the “golden age” of hip-hop. In this short period seminal albums such as *Paid in Full* by Eric B. and Rakim, *By All Means Necessary* by Boogie Down Productions and *Long Live the Kane* by Big Daddy Kane were released. Hip-hop of the golden age is considered to be sonically innovative, socially conscious and lyrically creative. With the commercialization of gangsta rap in the 1990s, which homogenized the sound of hip-hop, this brief period of experimentation and innovation arguably came to an end.

discourses in the new millennium. Arriving in 2008, the election of Barack Obama introduced new utopian discourses into hip-hop culture. Especially the utopian hope of the presidential race was reflected in myriad rap songs. Obama's second term, in contrast, was marked by growing disenchantment. By analyzing Kanye West's albums *Yeezus* and *The Life of Pablo*, not only West's topical shift from politics to preacher can be illustrated but also the difficulties of black American life in the early 2010s.

#### 4.1. Individual Utopias and Collective Visions: Between Commodification and Subversion

Although the problems black communities faced were widespread before hip-hop emerged, rap music provided a perfect scapegoat to "avoid addressing the causes of the real problems of black America: racism, sexism, and poverty" (Canton 244). Through the rapid commercialization of rap, the criticism of the genre became widespread and gangsta rap in particular became the focal point of censorship debates, which had an ironic side effect: the more it was criticized, the more popular it became (249). The criticism of gangsta rap was twofold: on the one hand, politicians complained about the profanity and the violence in the lyrics, which through the commercialization and popularity of rap found their way into the bedrooms of white youth; on the other hand, hip-hop traditionalists and members of the black community argued that the commercialization stripped gangsta rap of its political content and attenuated its social criticism as well as its revolutionary power.

The utopian discourses of music in capitalism are especially noteworthy. While Bloch is aware of the problems of subversion in commercialization, he argues that "no art has so much surplus over the respective time and ideology in which it exists" (1063) as music. He designates music a special role for the utopian impulse: its "expressive power" enables it to break out of the boundaries of commodification, "moving towards its own utopian career." Because of its sonic surplus, music has the "capacity to transcend the utterable" (Levitas, "Music" 221) and escape the subordination to market interests. While the music itself can be commodified, the feelings and emotions that its sounds might evoke cannot be contained. Particularly in black musical forms the commercialization of subversion has long played a central role. Corporate America always wanted to profit from the cultural products of African Americans, even during the black cultural revolution in the 1960s. Therefore, the question arises as to whether subversion is

possible when a culture becomes heavily commodified. According to Greg Tate, rap “was never anti-capitalist, pro-black or intentionally avant-garde” (Tate qtd. in D. Baldwin 161). Originally, hip-hop was about boasting, about having a good time and showing off your skills. Moreover, rap’s focus on consumer culture is not surprising, considering the fact that the world of black youth “is almost completely devoid of the privileges and luxuries most middle-class Americans take for granted on a daily basis” (Reiland 4). Thus, the stories of individual success, of making it out of the ghetto are a reaction to a reality seemingly far bleaker than its lyrical representation. Moreover, rap is not only a musical form that is based in African American culture, but it also “mirror[s] contemporary American history, culture, politics, and society far too closely” (6). Consequently, the market and the revolution are not binary oppositions in hip-hop but are dependent on each other. Potter even argues that this is a common thread in African American popular culture, finding “strategies for forming and sustaining a culture *against* the dominant, using materials at hand” (*Spectacular* 108). Black cultures “have continually transfigured and transformed objects of *consumption* into sites of *production*.” There is a liminal space between the market and subversion in which hip-hop is situated. This

space between the points where radical political discourse can critique dominant culture and dominant culture becomes financially viable through the selling of this contrary discourse is the only available space for a reasoned understanding of contemporary political culture. (Boyd 327)

African American music can both be a product of market interests and simultaneously successfully deliver its social message (Freeland 279). However, the incorporation of the black cultural realm into the market economy is also aligned with an imbalance of power as the record companies were mainly owned by white people who were interested in selling a particular image of black people (Hess, Introduction). The decline of urban centers, institutional racism and the marginalization from which hip-hop emerged in the first place “has been co-opted by corporate America and represented as glossy, yet gritty, complex of music idioms, sports imagery, fashion statements, racial themes, danger, and pleasure” (Ramsey, *Music* 167–68). The reality that should be portrayed (and possibly changed) was marketed and defined by white America. As The Notorious B.I.G. famously puts it in his song “Things Done Changed,” the marketing of reality and the subsequent overrepresentation of rap artists in popular culture had the effect that the horizon of hope that led out of the ghetto only offered three possible paths one could take, namely basketball, crack, or rap: “If I wasn’t in the rap game / I’d probably have a key knee-deep in the crack game / because the streets is a short stop / either you’re slinging crack rock or

you got a wicked jump shot.” Consequently, commercialization and the success stories of singular artists individualized the revolutionary spirit. As the situation for the majority of African Americans deteriorated, the dream of a collective uprising was shattered to a degree.

The commercialization of rap music did not influence the utopian dream of making it out of the ghetto, but it relegated this dream to the private and individual sphere. Jameson argues that there are two types of wish-fulfillment: “a repellent purely personal or individual ‘egoistic’ type, and a disguised version which has somehow been universalized and made interesting, indeed often gripping and insistent, for other people” (*Archaeologies* 46). Thus, there is “an opposition between the particular and the universal which is also intimately related to that between the writer and his public, or in other words, between the individual and the collective” (47). While the utopian projections of a wealthy, luxurious life outside the projects speak to young men in the ghetto, they are not capable of building a community that attempts to put the words to the streets to form collective action. Songs about individual success instead of visions of collective struggle were a byproduct of the commercialization of hip-hop in the 1990s. This corresponds to “the myth of the self-made man and the idea of expressive individualism” (Paul 16), which is connected to “utopian visions of a classless society, or at least to a society that allows considerable social mobility” (368). Whereas the prototypical figure of the self-made man was white, “African American writers and intellectuals took up the image as well as its cultural scripts of success and appropriated them for their own ends” (391). In hip-hop, this success story began on the streets, as the lyrics on Dr. Dre’s song “Lil’ Ghetto Boy” exemplify: “I’m back up on my feet with my mind on the money / that I’ll be making soon as I touch the streets.” The commercialization of hip-hop and the dominance of hustler<sup>19</sup> narratives thus remixed the American dream: making it big was aligned with respect and status on the streets. According to Levitas, one of the most important functions of utopia can be its capacity to inspire hope in people and not only desire (*Utopia* 108); a hope that can then translate to “the pursuit of a world transformed.” However, in gangsta rap only individual worlds are transformed. While its lyrics embody several materialistic utopian desires of individuals (e.g. money, cars, clothes), they arguably lack the ability to inspire collective hope and subvert the status quo.

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<sup>19</sup> “Hustler” is a prominent term in hip-hop and refers to a person, who is preoccupied with making money. Previously, the term was predominantly used to making money through selling drugs. However, now it is a general term for generating cash.

The predominance of black masculine identities in gangsta rap even further relegated female identity constructions to the margins: women were presented as objects, solely defined by the male gaze of the gangsta. However, in 1998, Lauryn Hill released *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, an album that had a huge influence in the hip-hop world and that provided a new musical space for the negotiation of black (female) identities and also redirected attention to collective utopian visions. The album's title is a nod to the books *The Mis-Education of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson as well as Sonny Carson's autobiographical novel *The Education of Sonny Carson*. Whereas Carson reflects on the formative aspects of being raised in the streets and the prison, Woodson argues "that African Americans remain enslaved mentally when they attempt to imitate the education of whites instead of developing curricula that reflect their own culture, history, and economic reality" (Alridge 239). Taking inspiration from these books, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* not only sees the beauty in the often harsh realities of street life (e.g. on the track "Every Ghetto, Every City") but also provides a counter-narrative to the imitation of education of whites by highlighting hip-hop's responsibility for educating its listeners (e.g. on "Superstar"). Given the fact that the intro begins with Lauryn Hill's absence in the classroom, the educative aspect is already emphasized in the frame story of the album. Moreover, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* criticizes the prevailing individualizing and materialistic aspects in gangsta rap and puts the focus back on the community. On the track "Final Hour," for instance, Hill states that she is "about to change the focus from the richest to the brokest / I wrote this opus to reverse the hypnosis." However, the reversal of power structures does not mean "merely swapping places in today's exploitative economies, corrupt legal systems, or rigged political processes. The first becoming last would also mean undoing those structures altogether" (Ford 607). This undoing of power structures is not only interesting in the hierarchy between (broke) black people and (rich) white people but can also be read as a comment on gender hierarchies. The simple reversal of power does not lead to a more equal society, rather it is a deconstruction of power in general that is necessary. As Angelika Bammer notes in relation to feminist utopian writing in the 1970s, this deconstruction is aligned with understanding utopia "as an approach toward, a movement beyond set limits into the realm of the not-yet-set" (7). Similarly, the utopian discourses on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* can be understood as counternarratives that move "beyond set limits" of the status quo of class and gender. Hill does not provide blueprints but encourages her listeners to venture beyond: to a future that is not rigid but malleable, diverse and hopeful.



Throughout the album, Hill also criticizes the then monotonous and monothematic materialistic direction of hip-hop. For instance, on the songs “Lost Ones” and “Superstar” rappers who turned from prophet to profit are called out, as illustrated by the lines “Now, how come your talk turn cold? / Gained the whole world for the price of your soul” on “Lost Ones” and the question “Should they be someone with prosperity and no concept of reality?” about how an artist should be on “Superstar.” However, the album does not solely criticize individual behavior but rather the devastating effects of capitalist consumer culture, as the lines “Get yours in this capitalistic system / So many caught or got bought you can't list them” as well as “Let’s free the people from deception” on the tellingly titled track “Forgive them Father” preach. Thus, Hill is aware of the corporate power structures that hugely influence the direction of the music and the marketing of the artists. As a member of the hip-hop community herself, she does not denigrate music’s role in the struggle for liberation, but neither does she downplay the misguided direction and focus that many of her contemporaries had taken for their own, individual upward mobility. Considering the significant commercial success of the album, it brought new perspectives to a vast number of American youth. Therefore, the commercialization and prominence of hip-hop culture in the mainstream also brought some positive effects. As hip-hop songs reached a growing number of people, they “could be used to create a conversation about social justice among young people, much as black religious culture influenced the civil rights discourse of the sixties” (Ards 314).

The album is also rife with religious imagery. From the biblical theme of “Lost Ones” to the apocalyptic discourse on “Final Hour,” Lauryn Hill provides new interpretations and readings to religious tropes and delivers utopian discourses as a rapper-cum-prophet, which are especially straightforward in the last lines of “Everything is Everything”:

Sometimes it seems  
 We'll touch that dream  
 But things come slow or not at all  
 And the ones on top, won't make it stop  
 So convinced that they might fall  
 Let's love ourselves and we can't fail  
 To make a better situation (better situation)  
 Tomorrow, our seeds will grow  
 All we need is dedication

Highlighting once again the importance of community (“We’ll touch that dream” and “Let’s love ourselves”) as well as the need to believe in hope and to stay dedicated, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* paints a completely different picture in contrast to both the apocalyptic discourses

and the individual, often misogynist gangsta utopias in hip-hop culture. She believes that loving the community is vital to spread utopian messages (“to make a better situation”), which will then influence the future generation as the “seeds will grow.” Although dedication is certainly needed, the belief in positive change is always audible on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. In the song “Lost Ones,” Hill perfectly phrases her utopian message of hope: “Wisdom is better than silver and gold / I was hopeless, now I’m on hope road.”

#### 4.2. War on the Streets: Dystopian Discourses and Apocalyptic Visions

The 1990s were also a decade in which dreams of a better future not only seemed far away in hip-hop but also in utopian theories in general. Russell Jacoby, for instance, argues in his book *The End of Utopia* that the “utopian spirit – a sense that the future could transcend the present – has vanished” (xi). The hip-hop generation was now facing

a world in which the War on Youth was being driven to new heights of hysteria and repression, and government-deregulated, globalized media monopolies were colonizing and branding hip-hop’s countercultural spirit. (Chang, *Stop* 439)

The apocalyptic visions that were prevalent during that period are especially interesting in the context of utopian studies. While most religions include some vision of a better life, it is especially Christianity which produced narratives of past and future utopias. Sargent even argues that “Christianity was the fount of Western utopianism and utopianism is a central concern” (86), perhaps most prominently in the context of apocalypses, “which foresaw an imminent cataclysm in which God would destroy the wicked and raise the righteous for a life in a messianic kingdom” (92).<sup>20</sup> Whereas the imagination of the post-apocalyptic world in Christianity is a utopian projection of a paradise for true believers,<sup>21</sup> the apocalypse in hip-hop is often already in process; a reflection of the dystopian reality that surrounds African Americans. As van Veen argues: when examined “through a post-eschatological timeline: total

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<sup>20</sup> From the influence of the Nation of Islam and Louis Farrakhan on groups such as Public Enemy to the importance of the Nation of Gods and Earths (better known as The Five Percenters) for artists such as RZA from the Wu-Tang Clan, hip-hop and religion always had a reciprocal relationship. Unfortunately, within the scope of this paper, it will not be possible to delve into the fruitful intersections between hip-hop, religion, and utopia. For a preliminary overview on the importance of religion in rap music see Dyson (1996), Pinn (2003), and Utley (2012).

<sup>21</sup> The Book of Revelations states: “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him [...] There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever” (22.3–5).

cultural destruction and dehumanization under slavery had already happened” (65). This thought is illustrated on the track “Countdown to Armageddon” by Public Enemy: “Armageddon has been in effect. Go get a late pass!”

Thus, the imaginations of doomsday in the 1990s took on two different shapes: on the one hand, there were the apocalyptic visions of white America, caught between the end of the Cold War and the utopian promises of the new millennium; on the other hand, for African Americans, the dystopian reality of the apocalypse was already underway. These diverging apocalyptic visions can be distinguished as either major or minor apocalypticism, as defined by James Edward Ford III. Ford argues that major apocalypticism is based on a Eurocentric notion, namely that if the West (embodied in the United States) cannot regain control, the world will end. The main aim of this discourse is “to say that destruction is on its way, but it is not yet here, and can be staved off *through increased devotion to the empire*” (Ford 598). This major apocalyptic discourse is aligned with then-president Bush’s notion of a “new world order” that he formulated in the context of the Gulf War. He maintained the idea that from the “troubled times” a new world can emerge: “A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.” Essentially, Bush imagined a utopian world in which the United States would emerge as savior and strong leader. Minor apocalypticism, on the other hand, is aligned with the idea that the end of the world is not near but that this process is already ongoing. These discourses “can concentrate their creative and critical resources on populations who feel the weight of apocalypse on a daily basis, insofar as the empire triumphs *most directly at their expense*” (Ford 598–99). This apocalyptic vision was especially articulated in East Coast rap music, oscillating between destructive visions and hope. As Ford puts it, “the everyday squabbles these artists describe in turn is not the source of this lawlessness, but instead is an attempt to survive it” (608). Musically reflecting their surroundings, producers “creat[ed] sparse, rough and rugged soundscapes that clearly differed from Dre’s multi-layered melodies” (Diallo 335). The funky West Coast aesthetic was not suitable to provide the sonic backdrop for the grim tales of the dystopian city.

The album *Hell on Earth* by rap group Mobb Deep is paradigmatic for these apocalyptic utopian discourses from the position of the marginalized. Frantz Fanon (*Earth* 16) has defined the world as being Manichean, a paradise for the colonizer, but at the same time this

hostile, oppressive and aggressive world, bulldozing the colonized masses, represents not only the hell they would like to escape as quickly as possible but a paradise within arm's reach guarded by ferocious watchdogs.

Mobb Deep present the city as war zone. They are “runnin’ through townships” on the song “Animal Instinct,” and reinforce this notion on the song “Hell on Earth (Front Lines)” by stating “the project is front line and the enemy is one time.” *Hell on Earth* can be considered a critical dystopia: the album “portrays the darkness of the living moment, the difficulty of finding a way out of a totalizing system” (Levitas, *Utopia* 110). The effects of institutionalized racism and the de facto segregation of privileged white people and marginalized African Americans are visually amplified and presented as a violent conflict.<sup>22</sup> However, this war is fought out not only in the streets but also discursively. Rap is the weapon to survive in this dystopian reality: on “Bloodsport,” Mobb Deep state that “this ain’t rap, it’s bloodsport” and that they are surrounded by “dangerous thug minds and brainstorm wars.” Nonetheless, Mobb Deep elevate themselves above the other players in the rap game, as it is them who bring “apocalypse to this game called rap” on the song “G.O.D. Part III.” Considering the fact that between the 1990s and the early 2000s rap music was consolidated and that “the influence and control of music corporations altered the content of rap music” (Houston 22), the apocalyptic visions of Mobb Deep can also be read as a criticism of the direction of mainstream rap that headed towards an apocalypse aligned with meaninglessness and irreverence.

While *Hell on Earth* paints a dystopian, seemingly hopeless picture, there are several instances on the album that point towards a utopian future that can only be achieved by elevating the minds through rap music. Stylizing themselves as apostles of the apocalypse on the song “Apostle’s Warning,” Mobb Deep rap:

Dreams of growing old with my son to live great  
Little man I’m plannin’ to enhance your mindstate  
The rebirth, a nigga who lived an ill life  
The one before me was of an even more trife

While being aware of the historical discrimination and marginalization of African Americans, Mobb Deep dream of a better future, also knowing that while they still live in an era of institutionalized racism, their lives have already significantly bettered compared to their

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<sup>22</sup> Chang argues that while legal segregation has been abolished, it still defines life in the United States: “Whether through white flight, the optics of diversity, or metaphorical and actual wall building, the privileged spare themselves the sight of disparity, and foreclose the possibility of empathy and transformation” (*Alright*, Introduction).

ancestors. Therefore, *Hell on Earth* challenges the sound of mainstream hip-hop culture by painting an apocalyptic reality in the middle of a (discursive) war; they do not want to provide an easy-going listening experience but sonically reflect the disruption of the contemporary reality and draw attention to the urgency in their message. The utopian vision of Mobb Deep is not a wishful image of a new Eden after the apocalypse. On the contrary, *Hell on Earth* is a reminder that for African Americans the world already is post-apocalyptic and excluding. However, just as the colonized subject “discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis,” *Hell on Earth* can be analyzed as a musical and lyrical “agenda for liberation” (Fanon 21). Mobb Deep abandon utopian maps of better futures, rather they take the apocalyptic route to amplify the dystopian situation of the present. As Rando puts it, “the value of utopia lies not in a completed vision of the future but rather in its capacity to help us to imagine a massive disruption” (33). *Hell on Earth* as a critical dystopia does “point to the exit, but it does not suggest what we might find, or make, when we leave” (Levitas, *Utopia* 111). However, there is no need to know what is going to come as it certainly cannot be worse than the apocalypse. Thus, precisely because Mobb Deep’s music paints a grim picture of this Manichean world, it enables marginalized people to see their surroundings anew and foster the belief in the possibility for change.

#### 4.3. ATLiens and Cyborgs: Afrofuturist Utopias in Rap Music

As Mobb Deep located *Hell on Earth*, Atlanta-based group Outkast relocated the quest for utopia to outer spaces in their album trilogy *ATLiens* (1996), *Aquemini* (1998) and *Stankonia* (2000). These albums are connected to the concept of Afrofuturism, which Ytasha Womack defines as the “intersection of imagination, technology, future, and liberation” (9). Afrofuturism has been particularly prominent in music, notably with avant-garde jazz musician Sun Ra. Ra stylized himself more as a space traveler than a musician; his philosophy was not “that black people needed to immigrate or assimilate, but that they needed to undertake space travel in search of new planets” (Zamalin 96). However, this futuristic, outer-space outlook draws its inspiration from an imagined past, as the “African roots of African American culture and music were a crucial link to the development of black consciousness, and jazz especially paid homage to the African link” (Freeland 278). Afrofuturism “points to the necessity of counter-histories,

of searching for legible traces of black history, so as to be able to imagine possible futures” (Steinskog 4). Thus, it provides a critical perspective on how to approach black culture, and it aims “to find models of expression that transform spaces of alienation into novel forms of creative potential. In the process, it reclaims theorizing about the future” (Nelson 35). Aesthetic visions, then, can be understood as political program.

With its use of digital technology and new recording techniques, hip-hop has always been drawn to the future. The genre could be described as ‘sonic fiction’ as defined by Kodwo Eshun. Hip-hop is music that “comes from the Outer Side [...] [i]t alienates itself from the human; it arrives from the future” (*Sun* -006–005). Analyzing the sounds and production, Eshun (-003) puts the alienation, the gaps and breaks at the center of his theory of sonic fiction. In the futuristic gaps, the discursive space that provides a cultural lens for analyzing the present can unfold, situated between technology and the human, between the inner and outer self, and between past and future. The relegation of the black struggle to outer spaces cannot be understood as an escape mechanism but as a distancing from the present to reflect on and criticize contemporary issues, the goal being the creation of “an alternative reality wide enough and deep enough to contain an infinitude of prophetic body politics” (Tate 200). This also connects Afrofuturism and utopia: from the place elsewhere a critical look at the present becomes possible. As Ricoeur puts it: “The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual” (17). By relocating the discourse to other places and times, Afrofuturism attains the capacity to precisely pinpoint the problems of the here and now.

Afrofuturism is deeply entwined with a diaspora aesthetic; in Afrofuturist works, “spaceships might be a metaphor for slave ships, subverting the journey to make it one of escape, not damnation” (Hancox qtd. in Alisch and Maier 140). In essence,

[a]n Afrofuturist angle critiques the alleged *past-ness* of culture as something stable, fixed, like a property. In this sense, *futurity* becomes a cultural capacity with very concrete implications for the creation of *alternative identities*, for *claiming spaces*, and gaining *authority* in the present for black and brown people. A capacity to aspire performatively emerges through Afrofuturist *sound practices*. (146; my emphasis)

As this quote indicates, Afrofuturism operates on various layers: by taking on a futuristic lens to criticize the past, where black bodies did not hold subject positions, alternative identities can emerge that claim not only space but also voice their opinion with authority. Therefore, Afrofuturism does not only point towards a liberating future, but also rewrites the past. In this wrinkle in time, another layer unfolds: between fact and fiction. As Ruth Mayer notes, “to

capture events that were never documented in writing by the ones who experienced them might very well require another structure than the realist ones of representation” (556). Thus, Afrofuturism requires an analysis that takes into consideration several factors such as “time, speculation, intersectionality, and identity” (Atcho). Venturing outer space is aligned with new perspectives and new horizons of hope that might not have been visible before.

The title of their 1994 album *ATLiens* as well as song titles such as “E.T. (Extraterrestrial)” already indicate Outkast’s journey to outer space. In the album, the rap duo explores a wide range of topics, ranging “from pimps and hustlers to spaceships and higher consciousness” (Johnson 461). Outkast conceives of “notions of the future in an attempt to reevaluate harmful socially constructed practices like white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and highly exploitive forms of capitalism” (473). As the album title and also the name of the band signify, Outkast are not only the outsiders in hip-hop’s focus on the two coasts, but they also explore the streets of Atlanta as aliens, always reporting their experiences from the perspective of the other. What is especially interesting are the two concepts of black identity that are prevalent in the music of rappers Big Boi and André 3000: whereas the former takes on a traditional hip-hop identity (i.e. the image of the hustler), André 3000’s performance is more speculative and abstract. These two identities in juxtaposition, then, create new perspectives on blackness:

Big Boi’s attention to traditional black hip-hop identity functions as the countermemories of past and present black hip-hop identity, which enables Andre (and at times, the duo as a whole), to re-cast potential counterfutures of black “intra-racial” identities through futuristic images and lyrics – an Afrofuturist project in its deepest intersectional, counter-memorial sense. (Atcho)

*ATLiens*, as the first album of what could be described as their Afrofuturist trilogy, outlines Outkast’s topics and establishes them as the alien other. This is articulated on the album’s second track, “Two Dope Boyz (In a Cadillac),” opening with the line “Greetings, earthlings.” The song sets up various oppositions that are characteristic for Outkast’s utopian visions on *ATLiens*: the real Atlanta (“a nigga that’s from the A-Town”) and its dystopian street-life stories (“in this atmosphere this ain’t no practice here”) vs. the cities alienated counterimage (“the A-T-Liens”) and Outkast not following the rules of street life (“in the middle we stay calm”). The song’s hook further highlights the rappers’ perspective as the Other: “Asking where we come

from? South Post slums.”<sup>23</sup> Considering the album’s outer space narrative, the “South Post slums,” are conceived as a place outside, an alien space that provides the backdrop for the stories of Big Boi and André 3000. From this discursive elsewhere, the criticism of the present can unfold. As André puts it on his verse on the title track of the album, “they alienate us cause we different, keep your hands to the sky / like sounds of blackness when I practice what I preach ain’t no lie.” Considering the alienation and othering of African Americans, this line cannot only be understood as an individual statement; it is also a general assessment of the wider attitude towards the ghetto and its inhabitants. Whereas white America sees only destruction and devastation, André 3000 sees hope, encourages the people to “keep your hands to the sky” and provide a positive vibe, which is further reinforced through the song’s sound that evokes memories of hip-hop’s golden age beats. Against the challenges that America, which Outkast portray as a modern-day Babylon, poses, the hook of “Babylon” provides a glimpse of hope:

I fear the battle’s just begun  
 Oh, though we’re here, someday we will be gone  
 So I’m hoping, wishing, praying  
 To keep my faith in you, in you, in you

America/Babylon represents “expressive luxury, sensuality, vice, and corruption” (Zanfagna 153) and it is easy to get caught in its trap and aspire a life of greed and lust while losing the sense of community. However, while Outkast are also surrounded by this reality, they refuse to adopt a purely negative outlook. While they “fear” that the battle has just begun, they refuse to give up “hoping, wishing, praying.” Thus, utopian hope is presented as the necessary, stronger antinomy to the fear and desperation of not believing in change at all. Directly addressing the listener (“keep my faith in you”), Outkast emphasize the importance of every single person in keeping the utopian spirit alive. Thus, while utopia is not mapped out, the possibility for change is upheld in the music and its message.

The idea of music as a weapon for change is further elaborated in the track “Wheelz of Steel,” which highlights the power of the beat.<sup>24</sup> As the hook of the song states, “touched by the wheelz of steel / now show me how you feel,” experiencing a beat or a song can alter the

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<sup>23</sup> The line is delivered by André 3000 and the “South Post Slums” are a reference to East Point, Georgia, a suburb located southwest of Atlanta. The poverty and crime rates as well as unemployment in East Point are higher than Georgia’s average. As of 2019, the city has been designated the state’s most dangerous city (Sturgeon).

<sup>24</sup> The song is also a reference to Grandmaster Flash, who revolutionized mixing and scratching and whose single “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel” heavily influenced the turntable use in hip-hop music.



feelings and “touch” people in a metaphorical sense. As Eshun puts it, the turntables “become a subjectivity engine, generating a stereophonics, a hifi consciousness of the head” (*Sun* 014). The scratching of the vinyl defamiliarizes the expected sound, it constitutes a break that opens up a discursive sonic space in which new perspectives and identities can emerge. The lyrics further add to the power of the music and the beat: “Vocally arming you was my responsibility,” states Big Boi on the track “E.T. (Extraterrestrial).” Music can offer visions that might provide marginalized communities with “normative traction in an era characterized by the dismissal of any possibilities beyond the already existing” (Iton 17). Hip-hop from outer space can take a look beyond the borders of the possible and shape new collective visions. Moreover, “E.T.” stresses the Afrofuturist discourses on the album, asking the listener the question “out of this world / are you alien?” in the hook. The alienation that African Americans feel is also one of the reasons for the inability of collective resistance. As André 3000 powerfully puts it in his verse on the same song:

Just can't be scared to spread your wings, head to better things  
Maybe the mockingbird and nightingale they want to sing  
Keeping this thing alive, to the table's what we bring  
We like hailstorms and blizzards in the middle of the spring  
Extraterrestrial, out of this world

With these bars, the rapper highlights the ability of rap to uplift its listeners instead of spreading stories that confirm prejudices against black citizens. His urge to “keep[] this thing alive” stresses the importance of utopian discourses that defy expectations “like hailstorms and blizzards in the middle of spring” and lead to new paths “out of this world.” Out of this world, in this context, can both be read as the real world as well as the hip-hop world. Against the predominance of negative images of the gangsta, Outkast want to “head to better things.” Moreover, they stress the importance of utopian visions: although the wish for a better future can lead to disappointment, one “can't be scared to spread your wings.” Evoking the image of flying and adopting a bird's eye view further stresses the Afrofuturist ideas on the song: from the place above, “out of this world,” a new perspective on the present can be gained from which new horizons of hope can emerge. This is also emphasized in the song “Millenium,” in which Outkast go even farther into space:

Planets and stars  
Earth, Jupiter, Mars  
Clothes, hoes, cars  
It's who you are

These four lines not only contrast a narrow look on materialistic Atlanta with the planetary vision of Outkast, but they also move from abstract to concrete: from planets and stars to the human identity. Consequently, Outkast describe how humans are only a small part of a larger universe but still define themselves through materialism. Big Boi addresses the unsuccessful attempts of African Americans to overcome this situation, stating: “Now or never, let’s stick together and overcome / but they don’t feel like marching, ‘cause they shoes is overrun.” On “E.T.,” André 3000 nonetheless stresses the importance of perseverance: “Floating in this game of life despite how out of place you may feel / in this race oh you just can’t quit.” While Evoking the image of a runner who cannot seem to finish the race, the lyrics act as a motivation: even when the goal seems far away and one feels powerless, only “floating in this game of life,” there is no other option than keeping on moving. The horizon that is utopia can never be reached but always aiming to go there is the only viable option.

Rebooting Afrofuturist aesthetics on *ATLiens*, Outkast not only departed from the narrative of the gangsta, but they also explored new sonic spaces, often referencing 70s Funk and Soul Music. With their music, Outkast “provide another black experience” as André 3000 puts it on the eponymous track of the subsequent album *Aquemini*. Just as Sun Ra “explored cosmic origins and sonically both abided and broke the rules of modern jazz simultaneously” (Womack 60), Outkast define the sound of Southern hip-hop, which follows some of the conventions of rap but also points toward new sonic possibilities. Whereas on *ATLiens* the music of Outkast was only influenced by funk’s sound and the aesthetics of P-Funk album covers, on *Aquemini*, the group even secured a feature with fellow Afrofuturist George Clinton. Clinton, who envisions funk as a liberating space, “created astral-liberation party music” with his bands Parliament and Funkadelic (Womack 63). However, his feature on the Outkast track “Synthesizer” has a somewhat more pessimistic outlook on technological progress, as it poses the question “are we digging into new ground / or digging our own graves?” “Da Art of Storytelling (Part 2),” a song in which “the sky is electric blue” and “Mama Earth is dying and crying because of you,” further illustrates the potential of technological dystopia. While “approaching the final exit” Outkast are providing the soundtrack, “writing the raps and doing the beats to make this last recording.” However, as the closing track on *Aquemini* illustrates, the dystopian visions never outweigh the utopian possibilities. On “Liberation,” Outkast bring together a number of artists to deliver a nine-minute long spoken word sermon that strives towards “liberation and, baby, I want it.” Most notably, neo-soul artist Erykah Badu, who

would later release her Afrofuturist two-part album series *New Amerykah*, urges marginalized people to “shake that load off and sing your song / liberate the minds, then you go on home.” With *ATLiens*, *Aquemini* and *Stankonia*, Outkast not only enter new paths in the sound and style of hip-hop but also introduced new utopian discourses in their lyrics. Situating themselves outer space, the duo found effective ways for critically diagnosing the challenges of the here and now and raise hope in their listeners.

Whereas Outkast were responsible for the resurrection of Afrofuturist discourses in rap in the 1990s, Missy Elliott translated the utopian promises of the approaching new millennium into sound. From her debut album *Supa Dupa Fly* (1997) to *Da Real World* (1999) and *Miss E ... So Addictive* (2001), Missy Elliott not only personally matured as an artist but also imagined possible futures. Although the 1990s saw the rise of myriad female rappers such as Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, Eve or Left Eye of TLC, it was Missy Elliott’s music which “altered the spectrum and the range of hip-hop” (Ghansah) and most prominently pointed toward a multidimensional utopian future. Moving constantly between references to the women who came before her (as in the line “I sit on hills like Lauryn” in the song “The Rain”) and an outlook to the future (“Missy Elliott, bring you to the future” on the intro track to *Da Real World*), Missy Elliott provides the perfect soundtrack for the turn from the old to the new century. Embracing new technologies and evoking tropes from outer space, she “rewrite[s] the musical gender lines in much the same way that the male techno musicians rewrote the race lines” (Shaviro 172). Moving towards a sonic future, Missy Elliott

creates a music of cyborg hybridity, in which her own rapping modulates fluently and seamlessly back and forth between [...] past and future: between the interiority of a woman’s voice crying out in loss, and the exteriority of an exuberant transhuman reengineering of the female body.

As Missy Elliott’s music videos show, Afrofuturism is also a predominantly visual culture. This can be especially illustrated with the example of her breakout single “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly),” as both the song and the video “raise questions about identity and otherness, and about power and control. They ask us to think about how we are being transformed, as a result of our encounters with the new digital and virtual technologies” (Shaviro 169). In the video, not only the movements are robotic and point towards a cyborg future, but through the use of costumes – the most memorable being an inflatable black body bag that diffuses the body markers of the rapper – the gradual merging of humans with technology is visualized, resulting in a posthuman, cyborg body. As Eshun states, African Americans are often rendered as aliens, “[i]nhumans,

posthumans owing nothing to the human species” (*Sun* 113). Consequently, Missy Elliott’s visualization of the black body as posthuman reflects this dehumanization in a technological, space traveling context. The use of a fisheye lens, which produces a distortion of bodily features, further underlines the visualization of the black body as alien cyborg. Conceptualizing cyborgs as “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (3), Donna Haraway already points to the “oppositional, utopian” (7) potential of cyborgs. By distorting her own bodily features, Missy Elliott illustrates the alienation and othering of the black body and deconstructs the concept of prototypical body norms altogether.

However, Elliott does not merely reflect the alien status of African American bodies; she also transcends them by constructing larger than life personas (a common feature in hip-hop identity construction). For instance, in the music video to her song “She’s a Bitch” from the album *Da Real World*, she situates herself in an alternate reality as a supervillain, powerfully centering her experiences as a black woman. Reinforcing the positive self-affirmation as “bitch” in the lyrics, the video presents the artist as a black superheroine. This representation challenges both the prevalence of male superheroes and presents blackness as powerful force. As Stuart Hall argues about the importance of blackness in black popular culture, black bodies are the “canvases of representation” (“Black” 109). Consequently, presenting herself as a black superheroine is in itself a utopian imagination that associates power and presence with black female bodies. Moreover, as Adilifu Nama argues, black superheroes and superheroines are “cultural ciphers for accepted wisdom regarding racial justice and the shifting politics of black racial formation in America” (4). Stylizing herself as a self-confident and powerful superheroine is thus also a bold statement regarding her status as an African American woman in the U.S.

While Missy Elliott’s music videos clearly present different perspectives on black bodily images, notably the dance and choreographies performed therein have utopian potential. As Randy Martin argues, “dance also makes its own politics, crafts its own pathways and agency in the world, moves us toward what we imagine to be possible and desirable” (29). Connecting performance and protest as “movement for change” and “changeable movement,” respectively, Martin explores the utopian discourses of dance choreographies as they “constitute precisely this fragile dialectic between political becoming and being, a desire for difference and a capacity for realization” (32). The importance of dance in Missy Elliott’s work is best exemplified in the music video to the single “Lose Control.” The video begins with a group of black dancers in formation, dressed in blue outfits and having their hands interlocked, making robotic

movements, translating Missy Elliot's lyrics "hypnotic, robotic / this here will rock your bodies" into bodily action. From the opening call-and-response-like mantra "music makes you lose control" followed by an aggressively shouted "here we go now," the bass-heavy song with its hypnotic melody and snare sound is perfectly matched by the ecstatic dance moves in the video. As the scenery shifts between futuristic deep black rooms, a dystopian desert and old-looking bars that are connected by the ongoing dancing, the dancing itself can be regarded as a practice of "world-making" that "unfolds its potentiality precisely in the offering of alternatives, of utopias, developed with the help of the body and through the organization of movement" (Klein and Noeth 9). This performative practice is described by Jill Dolan as "utopian performative," which is aligned with

small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (*Utopia* 5)

Performance and protest are connected, as the former not only constitutes collective bodies but also invites the audience to imagine different routes that resist the present conditions and point towards a horizon of hope. With her cyborg identity that provides counterimages to stereotypical representations of black women in (hip-hop) culture and the "changeable movement" of the dance choreographies in her music videos, Missy Elliott situates her music in an Afrofuturist framework and provides the perfect soundtrack for the momentous millennial transition.

#### **4.4. Black Presidents and Postmodern Slaves: The Utopian Discourses of the Obama Era**

Events like the 9/11 attacks as well as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 arguably exemplify what was foreshadowed in hip-hop's apocalyptic discourses of the 1990s.<sup>25</sup> Especially Katrina and its aftermath had devastating effects for the African American community. The lack of support that was felt by many was put into words by rapper Kanye West who argued live on television that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" (qtd. in Forman, "Hip-Hop" 7). It was only

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<sup>25</sup> The effects of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina for hip-hop culture have already been widely analyzed. For more information on the influence of 9/11 on popular music see Fisher and Flota (2011). For an analysis of Katrina's influence on hip-hop music see Kish (2009).

with the presidential campaign of Barack Obama that a new hope inspired the hip-hop community. Initial enthusiasm, however, faded rather quickly. While the songs of several artists highlight the utopian beginnings of Obama's presidency and display a newfound sense of community, the disillusionment that many felt in the course of his second term is exemplified by the work of Kanye West.

Obama represented a new approach to politics and leadership. His vast knowledge of popular culture, his young age and his focus on the community appealed to many Americans transcending race and class differences (Forman, "Hip-Hop" 9). As Forman argues, the Obama years certainly "signal a decisive break from the Civil Rights era, providing a crucial moment in the transformation of the nation's discourse around race, culture, and identity" (1). The presidential campaign was centered around two terms that are central to utopian discourses: change and hope.<sup>26</sup> The newfound hope was also audible in the hip-hop community as myriad artists supported the presidential campaign and wrote songs that celebrated Obama. For instance, rappers Jeezy and Nas collaborated on the track "My President," which was recorded during Obama's campaign and released shortly after the election. The song is a celebration of the hope that Obama provided as Jeezy straightforwardly acknowledges:

Obama for mankind  
We ready for damn change so y'all let the man shine  
Stuntin' on Martin Luther, feelin' just like a king  
Guess this is what he meant when he said that he had a dream

By using Martin Luther's last name King in its literal sense, Jeezy positively connotes leaders of the resistance with royalty and sees Obama as suitable successor of the CRM. Moreover, cleverly drawing a line from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech to Obama, the lyrics also emphasize the belief in Obama's ability to enact change. With Obama, Jeezy hopes, the utopian dream of the CRM can finally translate into action. In a remix of the song, rapper Jay-Z delivers the first verse, which offers further insight into the historical significance of the first black president:

Rosa Parks sat so Martin Luther could walk  
Martin Luther walked so Barack Obama could run

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<sup>26</sup> The now famous "HOPE" poster is not only reminiscent of Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* but is also a product of the hip-hop generation. The design by Shepard Fairey draws heavily on the style of graffiti and the poster was first printed as a street poster independently, before it was approved by the Obama campaign. For more information on the poster and its connection to hip-hop see Forman (2010).

Barack Obama ran so all the children could fly  
So I'ma spread my wings, you can meet me in the sky

Jay-Z embeds the win of the presidency in the African American freedom struggle, regarding it as yet another step to equality. Using verbs from the isotopy of movement arranged in the fashion of a climax – from static (“sat”) to gradual acceleration of movement (“walk” and “run”) to the point of flying – Jay-Z both emphasizes African American’s accomplishments of the past and their utopian potential in the future. From Rosa Park’s subversive action of claiming her right to sit on a bus to Obama running for president: African Americans have never stopped claiming their rights in spaces that were previously unattainable for them. Now that the most powerful political position in the United States is held by a black person, black citizens can dream of everything, even of superhuman capabilities such as flying. Moreover, while the resistance of the past is often aligned with individuals, Jay-Z believes that Obama’s presidency will inspire “all the children” of the future generation to continue the revolution. From taking the bus to flying in the sky: Jay-Z’s changing of the tense of the verbs of movement (e.g. walk/walked) illustrates that the “future is dependent upon the past” (Steinskog 4), not only in resistance but also in rap’s narrative. Rapper Common illustrates this sentiment of uplift in his song “The People” when he states that “my raps ignite the people like Obama.” Therefore, he connects the power of hip-hop to the rhetorical power of Obama who inspired a community to take action and overcome its marginalization. This ability to enact change is further emphasized on the song “Changes”:

What is change?  
Change is Martin Luther King Jr.,  
Ghandi, Shakespeare, Assata Shakur  
Barack Obama  
And you can’t forget Common  
Change is gonna happen  
Change is hope

These lines do not only put Obama in context with historical (resistance) figures but also establish a connection between hip-hop and politics and, more importantly, stress the importance of hope as a catalyst for change. Therefore, the line “change is hope” is paradigmatic for the utopian discourses that are required to boost change in a community.

Nonetheless, several rappers “remain skeptical of Obama’s capacity to enact real change, citing the restrictions of elected office and the tendency among so many Democratic leaders to cleave toward mainstream liberal interests” (Forman, “Hip-Hop” 14). For instance, in their

2008 song “Politrikkks,”<sup>27</sup> radical political rap group dead prez state “even if Obama wins / Uncle Sam ain’t my friend,” criticizing the government and the racist political system of the United States that even a black president cannot change. Uncle Sam, one of the most-popular “imaginative embodiment[s] of American national identity” (Rieser 171), here acts as the personification of the American government and its institutions that have continued to marginalize black citizens. However, the outlook of dead prez is not purely pessimistic, as can be seen in the lines “I believe in hope / I just want us to want more / politics is a game / how they keep us contained.” Referencing the “hope” slogan of the Obama era, the rappers directly address the community (“us”) in order to encourage everyone not to be blinded by the promises of politics because “there gotta be more that we could hope for.” Utopian futures, dead prez argue, cannot be achieved on the ballot but only by collective uprising. On Killer Mike’s song “Reagan” (2012), the rapper reinforces this criticism of the government:

Ronald Reagan was an actor, not at all a factor  
just an employee of the country’s real masters  
just like the Bushes, Clinton, and Obama  
just another talking head telling lies on teleprompters

Obama, in the song, is portrayed as indistinguishable from the (white) presidents who came before him. He is not the most powerful political person in the country but yet another “employee of the country’s real masters,” arguably referring to big corporations and the hidden power factors and of capitalism. Moreover, even artists who had been optimistic during the first presidential race articulated their disillusionment after the first term in their lyrics. Jeezy, for instance, released the song “Streetz,” in which he states: “Seen a black president, I ain’t see no change tho.” The utopian hope that the presidential race brought, was quickly evaporating after the first term in office.

This downturn to nihilism and the search for a new hope in the second term of the Obama presidency is best analyzed by referring to Kanye West, who released his highly political album *Yeezus* in 2013, followed by the gospel-infused *The Life of Pablo* in 2016. According to Dawn Boeck (211), Kanye West

has constructed multiple models of visions of modernity that challenge the past,  
engage the present, and envision a future. In each of these visions of modernity,

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<sup>27</sup> Spelling song and album titles with three k’s refers to the abbreviation KKK for the Ku Klux Klan and is often applied by artists to reinforce the political content of their work and stress the institutionalized racism that African Americans have to face. Notable instances include Ice Cube’s album *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted* as well as *ALL-AMERIKKKAN BADASS* by Joey Bada\$\$.



West grapples with a critical awareness of his historical ancestry as a black male, a fatalistic understanding of his own lived reality as a commodity, and a genuine confidence in his capacity to be an agent for social change.

West's ability to shape-shift his "sonic identity" (R. Bradley 100) enables him to envision "a future that transcends the traditional and limiting perceptions of class, race, education, and consumption." His music offers alternatives that embrace differences and allow flaws and unresolved paths. Considering his early work as a producer, where he regularly sampled soul music, he connects not only generations through sound but also revives "the lived realities of the people for which the music served so much purpose" (Neal, "Kanye" 9).

In 2013, Kanye West released his most politically expressive album to date, *Yeezus*, which for the listener is both musically and lyrically challenging. The songs create a raw, uncomfortable imagery that deconstructs race relations in the United States, best exemplified by the songs "Black Skinhead" and "New Slaves." The former, which was also the album's first single, features an industrial-sounding, rough beat and distorted vocals that set the theme for the whole album.

For my theme song (black)  
My leather black jeans on (black)  
My by-any-means on  
Pardon, I'm getting my scream on (black)

These first lines are especially interesting, because they reveal four of the most important aspects of the album: 1) leadership: in the braggadocio-heavy style of hip-hop, Kanye declares this is his theme song, fitting of his persona who is more a leader than ever bore; by later stating "you niggas ain't breathin, you gaspin' / these niggas ain't ready for action," he is further calling out other rappers as followers who cannot keep pace; 2) consumer culture: West is not only known for his music but also as a fashion icon, and yet the album has him constantly reflecting on his position in a capitalist consumer society that makes us "all to slaves in this new, hyper-connected global economy" (Anderson and Jennings 42); 3) revolutionary politics: quoting and adapting Malcolm X's famous "by any means necessary" line, West places his music in a political context (one already indicated by the song's title); 4) sonic distortion: as the distorted vocals and the bass-heavy beat indicate, *Yeezus* is a departure from West's previous production style towards a more hard-hitting, raw sound. The lyrics mirror West's dystopian soundscapes with the topics ranging from failed relationships ("Blood on the Leaves" and "Guilt Trip"), depression and addiction ("Hold My Liquor") to materialism ("Send It Up") and its criticism on "New Slaves." In this song, West offers a straightforward criticism of capitalist consumer culture that he

frames as a new form of enslavement, stating “I know that we the new slaves / I see the blood on the leaves.” Directly quoting the song “Strange Fruit,” most famously performed by Billie Holiday and Nina Simone (whose version West samples on the song “Blood on the Leaves”), allows West to put himself in the historical context of protest songs, drawing a line from physical enslavement to capitalism’s tight grip on black bodies. This historical context is further explored in the first verse:

My mama was raised in the era when  
Clean water was only served to the fairer skin  
Doin’ clothes, you would’ve thought I had help  
But they wasn’t satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself  
You see it’s broke nigga racism  
That’s that “Don’t touch anything in the store”  
And it’s rich nigga racism  
That’s that “Come in, please buy more”

West not only highlights the fact that the conditions of African Americans have not significantly changed since the times of enslavement, but also alludes to the fact that there is both “broke nigga racism” and “rich nigga racism,” “drawing attention to how hustling might allow us to buy ourselves out of jail, but we can never buy ourselves our freedom” (Curry 133). The song is pessimistic in tone, criticizing institutionalized racism and the prison-industrial complex that according to West is also responsible for a new form of enslavement:

Meanwhile the DEA<sup>28</sup>  
Teamed up with the CCA<sup>29</sup>  
They tryna lock niggas up  
They tryna make new slaves  
See, that’s that privately-owned prison  
Get your piece today

Lyrically mirroring the arguments put forward by Alexander, who states that “mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions

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<sup>28</sup> DEA is the abbreviation for the Drug Enforcement Administration. One of the main reasons for mass incarceration is the ongoing War on Drugs. According to Alexander, the “drug war is largely responsible for the prison boom and the creation of the new undercaste, and there is no path to liberation for communities of color that includes this ongoing war” (Tinkering).

<sup>29</sup> Before being rebranded as CoreCivic, CCA was the abbreviation for the Corrections Corporation of America, one of the biggest private corrections companies in the United States. As Alexander argues: “Prisons are big business and have become deeply entrenched in America’s economic and political system” (Tinkering). Considering the fact that the majority of the prison population is made up by African American men and that “[a]s a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow” (Introduction), it is not surprising that West touches on these topics on the song titled “New Slaves.”

that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race” (Introduction), Kanye West connects his criticism with an economic analysis, pointing out the fact that – and further intertwining historical enslavement and the contemporary situation – some people profit from the marginalization of others. Thus, *Yeezus* is in stark contrast to rap’s prevalent utopian visions during Obama’s presidential race. While these saw Obama as the continuation of positive developments from the past (such as the achievements of the CRM), West draws attention to the rather dystopian reality that African Americans have faced since the times of enslavement. Songs like “New Slaves” emphasize the fact that nothing much has changed. The hope of the Obama era has turned into disappointment. However, it is from the critical assessment of the (recent) past and present that the desire for change develops in West’s music. He sets his hunger for a different world – which Bloch defines as the “main drive” (11) for the utopian impulse – to music.

“Black Skinhead,” is the hypnotic and angry manifesto that lyrically and sonically asserts West’s new direction and entwines his political outspokenness with religious connotations. As Watts argues, Kanye focuses “on blackness, and that blackness is divine” (159); a sentiment also highlighted by the song “I Am a God” as well as the album’s title.<sup>30</sup> Entwining personal hubris with religious imagery, political overtones and sonic distortion, West’s visions on *Yeezus* are multifaceted and complex; the album can be considered a modern secularized reimagination of the Passion of Christ. However, the divinity is not triumphant: the sonic architecture of tracks such as “I Am a God” comes crashing down, destroying rather than underlining the lyrical content. This ambivalence between deification and blasphemy becomes even more prominent on *The Life of Pablo*. Before releasing the album, West claimed that it was a gospel record, which was emphasized by the album’s first single “Ultralight Beam,” an uplifting, even humble song. Its first verse directly takes on the form of a prayer, stating “deliver us serenity / deliver us peace / deliver us loving / we know we need it.” Praying for serenity, peace and love can be considered a performative utopian act: instead of criticizing the present or mapping out possible utopias, the hope for a collective future is placed in the hands of God. As Gary Zabel puts it: “The religious concept of redemption is the most vivid embodiment of that utopian condition of fulfilled hope that our culture has yet evolved” (84). Consequently, *Yeezus* and *Life of Pablo* can be seen as two sides of the same coin, as West’s “music sonically amplifies this existential

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<sup>30</sup> *Yeezus* is a combination of West’s nickname Ye and Jesus.

tension, highlighting the implications of divinity and humanity, rising and falling, together” (Watts 157). Oscillating between god and human, salvation and depression, freedom and oppression, *Yeezus* and *Life of Pablo* negotiate the desperate feeling of African Americans whose hopes in the presidency of Barack Obama have not been fulfilled. However, *Life of Pablo* ends with the track “Saint Pablo”; a track in which “the listener hears hope for Kanye” (171). As the last line of the chorus, which is situated in a church, states: “Yeah, I feel like home.” This brings together music and architecture: “music, in a sense, the most abstract of utopian expressions, architecture literally the most concrete” (Levitas, “Music” 220). The church is the most concrete representation of the abstract divinity that West aims to sonically reproduce. Thus, “looking at the church in the night sky,” enables him to wonder “whether God’s gonna say hi,” being humbled by the architectural realization of his own religious visions. Moreover, the song also

brings to an end one project and era, in hopes of a more self-actualized future project. Kanye’s god status may very well be outdated; however, finding his center again, his meaning, his center or ground of being, is where the song positions him. (Watts 172)

Beyond the context of West’s individual progress, regarding *Yeezus* and *Life of Pablo* as indicators of utopian discourses within African American communities shows the ambivalence between hope and desperation that marked the eight years of the Obama presidency. However, as the second term came to an end and Donald Trump entered the presidential race, the look to the past years became more positively connotated.<sup>31</sup> As rapper YG puts it in the anti-Trump anthem “FDT”: “He can’t make decisions for this country, he gon’ crash us / No, we can’t be a slave for him / He got me appreciatin’ Obama way more.” These quickly changing utopian discourses between 2008 and 2016 also highlight the fact that utopias “forms and functions as well as its explicit content are historically variable” (Levitas, *Utopia* 4). Utopian discourses change with their socio-political situations. Thus, hope can quickly turn into disappointment and vice-versa. Therefore, it is not surprising that the election of Donald Trump got African Americans “appreciatin’ Obama way more.” Although the eight years in power had not brought the change many had wished for, in retrospective, the presidency did not seem as bad as before.

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<sup>31</sup> While Kanye West has always been a controversial artist, his shifting political views need to be mentioned here. Since 2016, West has remarked that “slavery was a choice” (qtd. in Lockhart), argued that the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment should be abolished and continues to support Donald Trump, even regularly meeting him in the Oval Office. While some trace these spontaneous outbursts to his mental illness (bipolar disorder), West’s statements have been highly criticized, especially within the black community. As writer Ta-Nehisi Coates put it in an essay for *The Atlantic*, West’s utterances are “not stray thoughts. They are the propaganda that justifies voter suppression, and feeds police brutality, and minimizes the murder of Heather Heyer. And Kanye West is now a mouthpiece for it.”

## 5. Utopian Discourses in Contemporary Hip-Hop Culture

When it comes to contemporary rap, the tenor in academic literature is mostly negative: it is argued that mainstream hip-hop is apolitical, devoid of meaning, only affirming capitalism's inequalities (see Rose 2008; Asante 2008). As M. K. Asante gravely puts it, "the culture, as we can see today, has not only lost its edge, but its sense of rebellion and Black improvement – the very principle on which it was founded" (115). While many of the criticisms that he develops in his book are certainly valuable, statements such as these are utopian wishes for an imagined past, creating a hip-hop history that only tells a single, glorifying side of the genre's foundations. Looking for utopian discourses and revolutionary spirit often leads academic analyses to the so-called underground – to rappers who are based in the community and reflect political issues in their songs. However, for a proper cultural critique, it is not possible to neglect the most commercially successful rappers. Moreover, the rise of streaming technologies and digital culture has led to fuzzy boundaries between the mainstream and underground as modern phenomena like the rise of Soundcloud rap indicates.<sup>32</sup>

This final chapter thus attempts to provide a glimpse into some of the present utopian discourses in hip-hop culture. First, the political importance of underground rap will be analyzed before arguing that the work of Compton-based rapper Kendrick Lamar skillfully balances both political lyrics and popularity, thereby defying strict classifications of underground and mainstream. Moreover, hip-hop has become incredibly multifaceted in recent years. Therefore, the work of artists such as Nicki Minaj, Frank Ocean and Mykki Blanco will be examined in the context of queer utopian discourses. With their music and videos, these artists break down previously static concepts such as gender, body, and identity. In doing so, they carve out new spaces and sounds in hip-hop culture and play a huge part in making the genre more inclusive and diverse. Finally, I return to two of the most important concepts in this

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<sup>32</sup> The term "Soundcloud rap" takes its name from the music website soundcloud.com, which is the favored streaming service for rappers that are affiliated with the genre. Soundcloud offers free uploading of music and is one of the go-to sites for discovering new music. After some tracks went viral and record companies signed artists, in 2017 music critic Jon Caramanica argued that Soundcloud rap "has become the most vital and disruptive new movement in hip-hop thanks to rebellious music, volcanic energy and occasional acts of malevolence." The emergence of Soundcloud rap outside corporate marketing structures points out two interesting facts: First: as producing and uploading music has become very easy and cheap in the digital age, traditional gatekeepers like record companies and labels have somewhat lost their significance. Second: innovation is still largely driven by artists and their listeners and not by the market.

thesis: the city and time. Analyzing Travis Scott's 2018 album *Astroworld* with regard to the notions of home, heterotopias and the privatized postmodern city will show that with the changes in its spatial surroundings also the sound of hip-hop has changed. Rapsody's seminal album *Eve* will then connect the past with the present and the future. By following the threads of African American history that are present in the songs of the album, it becomes possible to illustrate how the utopian discourses of the present are infused with stories from the past.

### 5.1. Underground Utopia: The Rebellion of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation

Critics want to mention that they miss when hip-hop was rappin'  
Motherfucker, if you did, then Killer Mike'd be platinum  
Y'all priorities fucked up, put energy in wrong shit

These lyrics taken from Kendrick Lamar's track "Hood Politics" already pinpoint the problem of subversive rap music in the contemporary era: it is not that rap has lost its revolutionary spirit, but critics and media outlets are not interested in it. Providing a shout-out to Killer Mike, one of the most respected rappers in the hip-hop community but not equally represented in mainstream culture, perfectly illustrates the discrepancy between the production and circulation of rap music. Just because the music is not marketed does not mean that it does not exist. Moreover, as underground rappers do not need to fit the current taste of mainstream culture, they can touch on broader and often more subversive topics. Potter ("Future" 66) even argues that

the most vital and substantial dimension of the politics of hip-hop has always been *underground*, in its collective verbal, vernacular political sensibility. What has been counted as 'political' rapping in the past was only one *part* of the double historical movement of black culture, which has, from its earliest days, alternated between an outward-looking progressive stridency and a no less powerful interior, reflective force.

Marcyliena Morgan, director of the Harvard Hip-hop Archive, reflects this notion, comparing hip-hop's underground to the Underground Railroad, and defining it as "the place where truth can be spoken, where skills can be learned" (208).

One of the underground's most outspoken rappers is aforementioned Atlanta-based artist Killer Mike. After releasing several albums and mixtapes in the following years, it was his 2012 album *R.A.P. Music* that put him on the map as an important voice from the underground

whose music is dedicated to the African American community and resisting the status quo, as the acronym R.A.P., which stands for “Rebellious African People,” already indicates. In an interview, Killer Mike further elaborates on the two things that are important for him and his music:

You’re not free if you don’t own your own community. You have no freedom; you just occupy a space. That is not the same thing as freedom. And when I say ‘we,’ I first mean the African-American community simply because I am African-American, and this community is a more depressed community, with double the national unemployment rate. (qtd. in Reece)

As the quote indicates, the most important topics are community and freedom, which directly connects *R.A.P. Music* to utopian discourses. As Killer Mike already states on the opening track of the album, “we the readers of the books and the leaders of the crooks.” He presents himself as an educated hustler, a knowledgeable leader, who is running the streets and is able to uplift his community. Moreover, he explicitly states that “I don’t make dance music, this is R.A.P.,” distancing himself from the sound of the mainstream and positioning himself as an underground rapper, who makes “Rebellious African People’s” music. This notion is further highlighted on the album’s eponymous song, which has an important hook:

This is jazz, this is funk, this is soul, this is gospel,  
this is sanctified sex, this is player Pentecostal,  
this is church: front, pew, amen, pulpit,  
it’s what my people need and the opposite of bullshit.

The first line references the importance of sampling in rap music: it is a postmodern reimagining of earlier African American musical forms and thus also related to the black church, which has also been an important space for black politics (Iton 9). The prophetic visions of gospel music are secularized and remixed with beats and samples, which enables the conceptualization of Mike’s music as “player Pentecostal.” Moreover, hip-hop is defined as a discursive space that serves the same purpose as the church: to create a sense of community and to educate them. Rap is not just dance music; in fact, rap is “the opposite of bullshit.” On the song “Ghetto Gospel,” Mike distinguishes underground rap from the mainstream as he states that “I used to sell raps for enlightenment / but I got lapped by them guys selling lies for the white man.” In his view, commercial rap is control by white-owned record labels that market a black experience that is based on lies and deception. Underground (read: real) rap, on the other hand, can speak power to the people and pinpoint the problems of institutionalization and racism. In the spoken intro of “R.A.P. Music,” Mike further reinforces this comparison of hip-

hop with a community-centered religious space when he states: “I’ve never really had a religious experience in a religious place. Closest I’ve ever come to seeing or feeling God is listening to rap music. Rap music is my religion. Amen.” This framing of hip-hop as spiritual practice is also expressed on the song “Ghetto Gospel.” According to the rapper, the purpose of this song is to provide people “with the spiritual optimism through music to become leaders of their community, to do something different, to own something, to revitalize, to wake up those bones” (qtd. in Reece). This is achieved by contrasting the somewhat negative verses with the potential of salvation that reverberates throughout the hook. The utopian discourses on the track (and throughout the album) criticize the present situation, highlight the importance of community and strive towards liberation.

On the song “Reagan,” Mike asks the black community the question “the ballot or the bullet, some freedom or some bullshit / will we ever do it big, or just keep settlin’ for li’l shit?” His vision of freedom is not grounded in voting or the government, but in the ability of the community to care for themselves. *R.A.P. Music* thus also serves the purpose of educating his community and points towards a better future that can be achieved; the album is hopeful and optimistic as indicated by hooks such as “we the ones, we the winners, we the champions / champagne at the end of our campaign” on the song “Butane (Champion’s Anthem).” Positioning himself as based in the community’s “we” and titling the track “Champion’s Anthem” highlights Killer Mike’s belief in the power of music for resisting and rewriting the narrative. Moreover, the imaginary communities that utopian discourses produce are “not only a way of imagining subjectivity, but also a way of imagining space” (Wegner xvii). Thus, although “life is rough” and “so dystopian,” the song recognizes the beauty of the people living in these environments. By contrasting the negative descriptions of the verses with the positive collective identity that is evoked in the hook, Mike sonically transforms the dystopia and reimagines it anew.

Another way of transforming one’s environment is exemplified by Moor Mother. The artist, Afrofuturist and rapper also spreads utopian discourses in her music and is a part of Black Quantum Futurism (BQF), a collective which operates at the intersection of activism, art and DIY culture. Whereas her music is situated in an Afrodiasporic context (as exemplified by the line “tell a story, hope it transit trans-Atlantic” on the song “Parallel Nightmares”), the activism of BQF operates on a local level, in the community, and attempts “to create safe space for dialogue, visioning, and testing of ideas around community sustainability, resilience, and



resistance” (Duplan). Consequently, art translates into action and the utopian impulses are not only articulated but also implemented. The main focus of her work is re-setting the “Master’s Clock,” as one of the songs on the album *Analog Fluids of Sonic Black Holes* is titled. According to Rasheedah Phillips (who is also a part of BQF), this adherence to the (Western linear) master clock “establishes and disassembles black memories of the past, and prevents access to potential futures by fashioning both collective and individual moments into static events on an invisible, irreversible timeline” (Love). Using Afrofuturism as a way to challenge this timeline provides new perspectives on the possible pasts, presents, and futures of marginalized people. Moor Mother destabilizes the notion of time and in her work “focuses on recovery, collection, and preservation of communal memories, histories, and stories” (Duplan). As she puts it on “Parallel Nightmares” on her debut album *Fetish Bones*: “Reverse the clock, bring back our light years.”

Defying genre boundaries, Moor Mother’s music is oscillating between noise, blues, spoken word and political rap. As Samuel R. Delany describes his own science fiction writing, it “does not try to predict the future. Rather it offers us a significant distortion of the present” (Delany 171). Similarly, Moor Mother’s music can be described as a “sonic black hole,” which distorts its surrounding present and cannot be escaped. Following the description of Eshun in his revisitation of Afrofuturism, the songs of Moor Mother are “creating contexts that encourage a process of disalienation” (“Considerations” 298). They are “assembling conceptual approaches and counter memorial mediated practices in order to access triple consciousness, quadruple consciousness, previously inaccessible alienations.” One example of multiple consciousness and historical disalienation can be found in the song “Creation Myth,” where a “black body staggers through history, hauling itself from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the recent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, being knifed, dismembered and towed behind a pickup truck along the way” (Beaumont-Thomas). Interweaving the histories of various African American subjectivities and stating that “you can see my dead body at the protest” on the song “Deadbeat Protest,” Moor Mother creates an uncanny sense of communal history that is transcending past, present and future, highlighting the necessity of protest and the fetishization of black life as survival strategy: “trying to save my black life / by fetishizing my dead life.”

Moor Mother sonically and lyrically reflects the marginalization of black America. As stated in an interview, the artist believes that there is “hope in a dystopian reality” where “the hopes and dreams of our ancestors, act as important metaphysical tools that serve as agents to help one discover hidden information in the present time” (qtd. in Foster). By not only

imagining these utopian horizons but also putting them into practice in workshops that are “called DIY Time Travel, helping people to imagine their futures” (Beaumont-Thomas), Moor Mother connects the revolutionary potential of music with translating it to the community and the streets. These workshops can be defined as what Ramsey called “community theaters,” in which the “intergenerational exchange of musical habits and appreciation” can serve as “sites of cultural memory” which then form “a cultural poetics upon which theoretical and analytical principles can be based” (*Music* 4). Within the community, past, present, and future can collapse into what Eshun calls “yesternow” (*Sun* 010), offering possibilities to not only remain but to transcend the marginalization. Criticizing and rewriting the structural history of oppression and at the same time offering spaces for radical self-love and community building is an impressive example of how Moor Mother crafts utopian narratives in her music whilst also creating real life utopian safe spaces.

## 5.2. *good kid, m.A.A.d. City*: Utopian Discourses and Black Struggle in Trump-Time

Kendrick Lamar’s music represents the emerging voice of a new generation in rapidly changing times for black Americans. From his major label debut *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* (GKMC)<sup>33</sup> to the most recent Pulitzer-winning work *DAMN.*, Kendrick Lamar shapes the new political discourses of the post-hip-hop generation in the shift from the promises of the Obama presidency to the dystopian reality of Trump-Time.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Lamar represents another interesting development in hip-hop culture: the liquidation between underground and

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<sup>33</sup> The acronym of the album translates to either “me angel, angel dust” or “my angry adolescence divided,” which already encompasses the utopian aspirations of a black kid growing up in a dystopian environment surrounded by drugs, anger and violence. The notion of the angel is especially interesting not only because Lamar uses it to refer to his purity that is threatened by his surroundings (as exemplified by the drug PCP, also known as angel dust) but also because it links Lamar to Sun Ra. According to Zamalin (100), the artist’s “aim to resignify meaning explained why Ra consistently called enslaved people in the United States ‘angels’ for brutally laboring in the fields. This was not to romanticize or sanctify their suffering, but to reclaim the existence of black dignity beyond the experience of commodification under racial capitalism.” Considering the fact that in Lamar’s work the question of black dignity and suffering is also always at the center, it would be interesting to draw further parallels between these two artists.

<sup>34</sup> Anna Everett (253) uses the hyphenated term “Trump-Time” in her reflection on Afrofuturism in the post-Obama era to articulate her anxiety about “a total foreclosure on a viable black futurity.” However, in contrast to using terms like “era” or “age” of Trump, her use of “time” denotes the 45<sup>th</sup> presidency “as a temporary and pessimistic existential moment haunted by that seemingly more optimistic memory of black futurity promised by the hopeful, if not giddy, Obama era” (Everett 256). As this thesis aims to highlight the utopian aspirations of better futures in hip-hop, this notion is applied to emphasize the limited time period of the presidency that for marginalized people in the US might often feel like a never-ending nightmare.

mainstream rap. Lamar is well-respected in the hip-hop community, has significant commercial success, and critics praise his lyricism as well as his musical production. By analyzing the utopian discourses on his seminal albums *To Pimp a Butterfly* (*TPAB*), released in 2015 and *DAMN.*, released in 2017, not only can Lamar's individual transformation be highlighted but also the collective African American struggles in rapidly changing political times. According to Fast and Jennex (10),

the overwhelming musical silence in the Trump administration is a metaphor for the hopelessness and despair many around the world feel in the wake of his rise to power and the ruthlessness and ignorance of his (lack of) leadership.

*TPAB* picks up this topic of the importance of leadership and portrays the shifting responsibility in Kendrick Lamar's role as an important voice of his generation (a generation that Lamar himself dates on the track "Ronald Reagan Era" on his 2011 debut album *Section.80* as "1987, the children of Ronald Reagan"). He is looking for his personal and political voice and touches broader social challenges of the African American community (J. McLeod 131).

Two tropes are especially relevant for analyzing the utopian discourses on *TPAB*: the pursuit of the American Dream as well as the notion of (collective) black identity. The first track of the album, "Wesley's Theory," is already a bold statement for the humanization of black lives, sampling the line "every nigger is a star" from an old Boris Gardener song. Thus, according to James McLeod, *TPAB* "begins and ends with a powerful declaration against the threat of non-being, both at societal and individual level," its core belief is that "blackness is power" (127). Relying heavily on black Christian traditions and religious imaginary, Lamar "expresses his personal suffering as representative of his community's and imparts a transcendent hope to a people struggling to exist in a city in ruins" (Linder 108). The deconstruction of individual and social identities is aligned with W. E. B. du Bois's concept of "double consciousness," which describes a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (xiii). However, du Bois wishes "to transform the loss of identity into a new knowledge" (Zamalin 100), thereby conceptualizing a sense of identity that constantly reproduces itself anew. The double consciousness in Kendrick Lamar is personified in the song "King Kunta," with the track's character being both king and slave at the same time.<sup>35</sup> Lamar is aware of his

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<sup>35</sup> Kunta Kinte is a character in the novel *Roots* by Alex Haley. In the story, after several failed attempts to flee, his right foot is cut off, which is also a prominent part of Kendrick Lamar's song: "Now I run the game, got the whole

status and success in the hip-hop community (“I run the game”) but he also knows that he is still a black man in the United States. Consequently, the “threat of individual death is always imminent, as is the metaphoric death of black culture at the hands of white America” (J. McLeod 124). However, Lamar also offers counternarratives to systemic racism and the anxiety and threat of death it produces. In the track “The Blacker the Berry,” the “reclamation of racist tropes and historically significant moments within the black community, especially around slavery, displays the courage of standing up to anxiety and the threat of death” (130). The song also provides an interesting commentary on the concept of the American Dream. As Lamar raps,

I mean, it's evident that I'm irrelevant to society  
That's what you're telling me, penitentiary would only hire me  
Curse me till I'm dead, church me with your fake prophesizing  
that I'ma be just another slave in my head  
Institutionalized manipulation and lies  
Reciprocation of freedom only live in your eyes

Because he is a black man, Lamar is told that he is “irrelevant to society” and that the only employment for him awaits in prison. As J. McLeod argues, the American Dream “serves as an incentive for white folks but to strive to achieve. Black folks can instead find themselves used for cheap labour within the prison industrial complex” (130). Lamar contrasts this impossible ideal of the American Dream for African Americans with the music industry’s efforts to pimp black artists, arguing that African Americans can achieve the American Dream, but only when accepting the terms of white corporate America. Considering Lamar’s upbringing in Los Angeles, this preoccupation with the American dream is not surprising as the “specters of black poverty, hypersegregation, and racial terror have always haunted visions of L.A. as a Promised Land of the American Dream” (Zanfagna 7). Lamar’s challenging of the American Dream is a recurring theme throughout the album in the figure of Uncle Sam. Reminiscent of dead prez’s lyrics in their song “Politrikkks,” on *TPAB* Uncle Sam also acts as the personification of the US government that is held responsible for the oppression of African Americans. For instance, on the album’s opener “Wesley’s Theory,” Uncle Sam asks Kendrick “What you want you? / A house or a car? / Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar? / Anythin', see, my name is Uncle Sam, I'm your dog,” promising individual wealth in a consumerist society. However, as the line

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world talkin' / King Kunta, everybody wanna cut the legs off him.” By reimagining Kunta Kinte as a king, Lamar asserts not only humanity to enslaved people but royalty. This positive identity of past African Americans

“forty acres and a mule” indicates, Lamar is aware of the history of false promises.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the end of the same verse takes on a more pessimistic tone: “And when you hit the White House, do you / But remember, you ain’t pass economics in school / And everything you buy, taxes will deny / I’ll Wesley Snipe your ass before thirty-five.” Commenting both on the economic problems of the African American community due to worse education opportunities as well as the higher mortality rate of black citizens due to homicide and police brutality, Lamar counterpoints the temptation of the American Dream with its inherent downfall for African Americans. Thus, “American culture offers him everything he could ever want before reminding him that, in the end, Uncle Sam still owns him and will rein him in as necessary” (J. McLeod 131). While the utopia of individual freedom and economic prosperity is presented as reachable through individual exceptionalism, at the end institutionalized racism will always keep it at arm’s length from African Americans.

As revealing as Lamar’s poetic force are the shifting sonic landscapes of his major label album trilogy. Lamar and his producers carefully choose the style and musical language of each track and album to craft a coherent and engaging sonic narrative that refutes the binary opposition between mainstream and conscious rap. For instance, on *GKMC*, the beats and melodies are often uplifting and danceable, in contrast to the often mellow and monotonous production that is associated with conscious rap. Lamar is not either popular or aware – in fact, he is both, as he boldly states on “Bitch Don’t Kill My Vibe,” the album’s breakout single: “I’m tryin’ to keep it alive and not compromise the feeling we love / You’re trying to keep it deprived and only co-sign what the radio does.” Lamar is searching for freedom both in the music (as articulated by the freestyle boasting on songs like “Backseat Freestyle”) and the outside world (as indicated by the voicemail messages that appear throughout the album and which ground the story in reality). The experimental approach of *TPAB* is reminiscent of Sun Ra’s “jazz-like improvisational notion of freedom, as a mixing and matching of competing ideals and visions [...] that he thought could be a model for politics” (Zamalin 105). The album features beat poems in the style of Gil Scott-Heron (“For Free?”), political anthems (“Alright”), jazz improvisations (“u”), and also funk songs (“Wesley’s Theory”). Moreover, Lamar not only

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<sup>36</sup> The phrase “40 acres and a mule” refers to a promise for land redistribution after the abolishment of slavery. However, what would have been a visionary idea quickly evaporated: the Order was overturned in 1865 and the land was returned to the planters – “the very people who had declared war on the United States of America” (Gates Jr.)

provides sonic hints to African American artists (such as George Clinton, Tupac, Snoop Dogg or Dr. Dre) but also references black literature such as the novel *Roots* by Alex Haley, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (on “King Kunta”), Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (on “Alright”), or Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* (in the track of the same name). “Mortal Man,” then, connects all the dots that constitute the rich body of Lamar’s work: in the track, he conducts a time-travel conversation with Tupac Shakur, using phrases that one of his role models uttered in an interview prior to his early death. The recorded voices of artists in posthumous records “already project a sense of an uncanny ephemeral haunting” (K. McLeod 114). The dead are not supposed to speak, so to say. However, considering the fact that on *TPAB*, “physical death within the African-American community is intertwined with cultural death” (J. McLeod 125), “Mortal Man” can also be read as a counternarrative: Tupac is alive as long as his music is alive and his cultural impact is still present. In the conversation, Lamar channels the wisdom and the anger of previous generations to link it to contemporary struggles in order to map out utopian possibilities. Consequently, “Mortal Man” is not only marked by the conversation between Tupac and Kendrick but also by “the ghost of Mandela” and shout-outs to highly influential people such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Jackie Robinson or Jesse Jackson. However, Lamar does not only rely on the guidance of previous leaders but also updates their message, urging the people around him to “make room for mistakes and depression.” Without falling in the trap of glorifying the grand narratives of resistance in the past, the “revived utopian thought enjoins us to search for meaning in the immanence of collective life and to fashion a common space devoid of an overarching unity, a malleable and plastic space, where shared existence is interpreted each time anew” (Marder and Vieira xi). Utopian imaginations, Lamar is aware, are dependent on socio-historical factors and varying subjectivities that are always subject to change. He thus acknowledges his own insecurities as a leader and points to the importance of utopian visions that are diverse and malleable.

The individual struggle of Kendrick Lamar as a leader for a new generation parallels the systemic struggle against marginalization. However, there is hope: at the end of the song the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly, from Kendrick as a rapper who is lured by temptation to a conscious political artist is completed. Although being exposed to a dystopian reality, the caterpillar (read: marginalized citizens) can learn from this experience and criticize it, resulting in “breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant.” There is beauty in the ghetto, one only

has to acknowledge it. Thus, the utopian discourses in *TPAB* are aligned with courage that can also be “found in the minority cultures of the United States, as they have historically continued to declare their presence against the threat of non-being posed by the dominant narrative of the American story” (J. McLeod 126). However, the dominant narrative is not the only power that defines the lives of African Americans: there is a “greater power within the self and the culture” (132). Voicing this greater power at the same time as acknowledging the individual and collective flaws represents “the shift from an essentialist notion of politics and of communal being to the priority of collective existence in its perpetual becoming and constituting character” (Marder and Vieira xii). Thus, the notion of utopia as the process of becoming instead of a finished product is powerfully articulated in *TPAB*, an album which time-travels from conversations in the past to the importance of being in the future.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that started as a hashtag in the wake of the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2014 as well as the rallies against the then-presidential candidate Donald Trump illustrate how the utopian hope that can be found in albums such as *TPAB* can travel from sonic spaces to the streets and ignite collective action. Chanting the lyrics from Lamar’s popular single “Alright,” the protesters marched with the hope of a better future. In the song, Lamar accepts the suffering that he as an individual as well as his community had to endure, but the suffering is framed positively and connected to the hope and belief in a forgiving God (Linder 110). Stating in the intro, “Nazareth, I’m fucked up / Homie, you fucked up / But if God got us, then we gon’ be alright” further underlines this religious belief in hope, “the communal narrative of hope emerges precisely from an admission of collective sin, followed by a declaration of God’s valuing, and saving, of each individual.” Highlighting the individual struggles as well as the collective ones can be seen as a transition from previous forms of African American resistance. Angela Davis argues that the BLM movement has also brought a change in leadership, namely that “not only are women assuming positions of leadership, young activists today are also exploring different leadership paradigms – for example [...] collective forms of leadership” (67). Thus, while understanding that “the objectives that the previous generation struggle to achieve – freedom, justice, and equality – remain the same” (Asante 128), the post-hip-hop generation develops new forms of resistance, in culture as well as on the streets. Resistance now is diverse and collective and increasingly digital. Thus, creating identities and negotiating the ongoing marginalization happens in myriad spaces that complement each other: in the music, on the internet, and on the streets.

If *TPAB* is a deconstruction of the American Dream in the Obama era, *DAMN.*, released shortly after the inauguration of Donald Trump, paints a completely different picture: on the album cover, Lamar is pictured in a white t-shirt, looking defeated and miserable. The butterfly has metamorphosed into a prophet, who draws heavily from biblical scripture to map out the possibility of utopia in Trump-Time. Rodney Carmichael compares Lamar's album trilogy to the writings of prophet Jeremiah in the bible with *GKMC* representing "Jeremiah," *TPAB* the "Book of Kings" and *DAMN.* being the "Lamentations, bleak in tone and temperament, long on suffering and short on hope." Carmichael further argues that the sonic landscape of *DAMN.* stands both in the tradition of African American resistance music but also transcends it:

From the birth of the Old Negro Spiritual, black America has crafted hymns to get over the confounding hardships of this world. Lamar complements that tradition, but he also complicates it. *DAMN.* embodies a year in which hip-hop – and America at large – finds itself wrestling in public with its inner demons. He could've made another Black Lives Matter anthem like "Alright" to quell our fears. Instead he held true to his prophetic vision and laid his vulnerabilities on the line.

*DAMN.* tells no clear-cut story, the narrative is constituted by its instability and fragmentation. This fragmentation can be considered central to contemporary reboots of resistance movements as it "resists romanticizing resistance in the face of mutilation or annihilation, and provides a space for nontraditional or antiheroic figures to emerge as central" (Graham 126). *DAMN.* was the first hip-hop album to win the Pulitzer Prize for music as the committee argued that it is "a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life" (The Pulitzer Prizes). Once again changing the sonic landscape after the experimental approach of *TPAB*, the album perfectly captured both the zeitgeist with its focus on trap beats as well as being a straightforward hip-hop album that honored the legacy of the old school.

Kendrick Lamar is an artist who does not provide straightforward answers: While criticizing respectability politics as well as police brutality and institutionalized racism, he also sings about radical self-love that is needed in the black community to overcome the vicious cycle of incarceration, death and gang violence. The utopian discourses on his albums allow for individual flaws, for questioning leadership, for depression. Although Lamar is a politically outspoken artist, he is nonetheless commercially successful – thus, he is bridging the gap between the underground and the mainstream. Moreover, his music is a sonic reflection on the shifting complexities of African American life in a decade that has seen a rise in police brutality,



an increase of right-wing rhetoric and the shift from a black president to a president who panders to white supremacists. Despite all these difficulties, Lamar's music always points towards a horizon of hope and reaffirms the beauty in the ghetto and in blackness. As *TPAB* and *DAMN*. have shown, he fulfilled the voicemail message that his mother left him on the last track of *GKMC*, urging him to

tell your story to these black and brown kids in Compton. Let 'em know you was just like them, but you still rose from that dark place of violence, becoming a positive person. But when you do make it, give back with your words of encouragement, and that's the best way to give back – to your city. (Paula Duckworth on “Real”)

As this voicemail indicates, the question of class is also highly relevant in hip-hop narratives: Although Lamar “was just like them,” he changed and now inhabits a different position, being now both the Other in white America as well as in the neighborhood where he grew up. As bell hooks argues, “class differences disrupt notions of racial unity,” leading to the fact that “[t]here is no longer a common notion of shared black identity” (2). Lamar connects these ideas on his song “FEAR.” when he states:

At 27 years old, my biggest fear was bein' judged  
How they look at me reflect on myself, my family, my city  
What they say 'bout me reveal  
If my reputation would miss me  
What they see from me  
Would trickle down generations in time  
What they hear from me  
Would make 'em highlight my simplest lines

The fear of “bein’ judged” cannot only be read in the context of his perception in white America but also when he comes back to his hometown, Compton. However, as José Muñoz puts it in his book *Cruising Utopia*: “Hope along with its other, fear, are affective structures that can be describe as anticipatory” (Introduction). As has been stated above, Kendrick Lamar negotiates the complexities of contemporary African American life; the utopian discourses of his work are multiple and relational, connecting hope and fear as well as underground criticism and mainstream success. The future is always at the horizon, shapeshifting from utopia to dystopia and back again, “a place where entrance and, above all, final content are marked by an enduring indeterminacy” (Bloch qtd. in Muñoz).

### 5.3. Dislocated Utopias: Queer Bodies, Queer Masculinities, and Digital Identities

In her book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman approaches the archive from an intimate perspective to tell the stories of young black women who were rebelling against the social order at the turn of the twentieth century. This task is necessarily “a narrative written from nowhere, from the nowhere of the ghetto and the nowhere of utopia” (Hartman xiii). Fusing archival documents and personal stories, Hartman paints a diverse picture of black life and black rebellion to narrate “the utopian longings and the promise of a future world that resided in waywardness and the refusal to be governed” (xv). As the works of Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliott and Moor Mother in this thesis have shown, women in hip-hop also refuse to be governed, both by white feminism as well as by the patriarchal structure upon which hip-hop was founded.<sup>37</sup> Following this tradition, contemporary rappers continue to provide counternarratives to gendered utopian discourses.

Nicki Minaj, one of the most successful and visible rappers in recent years, is not only challenging the white male gaze but also queers stereotypic images of black female bodies. She “shows off her body with pride, disrupting the Western idea that thin and blonde means beautiful” (Vigderman). With her music and videos, Minaj crafts a new narrative; one that puts the individuality and sexuality of black women at the center. For instance, in her song “Anaconda,” Minaj sampled “Baby Got Back” by Sir Mix-A-Lot, a male-gaze-heavy song that features lines such as “look at her butt / it is so big, she looks like / one of those rap guys' girlfriends.” Minaj challenges this notion, moving from the object to the subject position and redefines the song to highlight the beauty of black women’s bodies that do not follow the beauty conventions of mainstream culture. According to Hill Collins, “women of African descent have been associated with an animalistic, ‘wild’ sexuality” (*Politics* 27). However, as Hansen and S. Hawkins argue, African American “female performers often re-appropriate explicit images of black female sexuality” (166). In doing so, they can negotiate questions of (bodily) identity and “achieve control over their own sexuality.” Nicki Minaj in particular is known for performing

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<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, the influential history of women in rap has not been analyzed sufficiently. Tracy D. Sharpley-Whiting’s *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women* (2007) and, most recently, Kathy Iandoli’s book *God Save the Queens: The Essential History of Women in Hip-Hop* (2019) so far provide the essential reading. For a memoir of how African American women handle the contradictions between being both feminist and negotiating the misogyny of rap, see Joan Morgan’s *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (1999).

multiple identities and thus “inhabits, reproduces, and revises fraught subjectivities historically thrust upon black women” (Cosimini 48). Considering utopian discourses as responses to and criticisms of the current situation which can vary “from critique to alternative, from distorting mirror to playful fantasy” (Ní Dhúill 55), it becomes possible to conceptualize the performance of Nicki Minaj as a bodily utopia that “confounds such simplistic notions of black femininity and pushes against the cultural forces that constrain black sexual desire” (Cosimini 48). As Caitríona Ní Dhúill argues,

[t]he ways in which details of masculinity and femininity, sexual politics, and reproductive practices are worked out in literary utopias reveal the understanding of gender current in the cultural context of their production. (54)

Consequently, the utopian discourses in rap also reflect the contemporary understanding of gender. In the playful reproduction of the meanings that are inscribed on black women’s bodies, Minaj is able to “restructure what our culture states to be reality” (Turner 31), thus pointing towards a new, utopian reality. Moreover, Minaj’s songs, which are both political and playful, are reminiscent of hip-hop’s roots as they are “forging pleasure where pleasure was not allowed: [...] The art form breaks rules in order to challenge a violently oppressive system and have fun” (Cosimini 50). Connecting play, politics and images of sexual desire and fulfillment can be read as “expressions of queerness” who “reify both heterosexual and homosexual desirability while creating space for black female sexual subjectivities in a presumably hostile environment” (Smith 361). Minaj destabilizes previously static hip-hop concepts such as authenticity by adopting multiple identities and thus uses “queerness as a strategy to create different, (perhaps more) inhabitable worlds” (Snorton 297). The (queer) body becomes the utopian project, putting the importance of identity first before creating worlds that they might inhabit.

Hip-hop is still a space rich with hypersexual masculine identities that embrace the subjugation of women and the LGBTQ+ community (hooks 2004; Rose 1994; Hill Collins 2006). However, rap also has the potential to articulate a more progressive understanding of gender politics (Dhaenens and De Ridder 287). When adopting a queer perspective, rap artists can not only destabilize the notion of body but also question hegemonic masculinity. Recently, rappers such as Frank Ocean and Mykki Blanco have started to carve out new spaces for deconstructing black male (hip-hop) identities. Looking at hip-hop from a different perspective

– in the break between the commercialization and the criticism of the genre – provides new ways of seeing the construction of masculine identities and (digital) queer utopian spaces.<sup>38</sup>

Queer, in this context, can be seen as “the qualitative position of opposition to presentations of stability – an identity that problematizes the manageable limits of identity” (Gang qtd. in Bailey 187); as a theoretical position that actively destabilizes the concept of gender. Frank Ocean’s album *Channel Orange* can be analyzed as the artistic expression of this identity struggle, both when it comes to blackness and masculinity. As Iton argues, “blackness is a dislocation of modernity” (Snorton 293). Seeing blackness and black identities as dislocations, as the Other, allows artists to produce counternarratives to the norm. As Dhaenens and De Ridder argue, Frank Ocean writes against “picture-perfect, heteronormative and neoliberal fantasies,” and instead “[r]acial segregation, class distinctions, and community building return as themes in his music” (289). He challenges the concept of (male) authenticity and portrays a vast range of diverse characters. Thereby, Ocean reinforces the notion of gender as performance and deconstructs the idea of static, “real” masculinity (290). However, he does not criticize the prevalent masculinities but rather the discourses that produced them in the first place, the “burden of being governed by hegemonic discourses and hegemonic masculinity” (292). Ocean is cruising through identities, times and spaces, never offering blueprints but zapping through topics like through TV channels, as the album title *Channel Orange* already indicates. However, as the line “my TV ain’t HD, that’s too real” on the song “Sweet Life” shows, the album is also an escape mechanism from reality, wallowing in a dream-like state. Ocean is looking back to an idealized utopian past that is reminiscent of VCR movies, nostalgic and diffuse, not as detailed and crisp as the digital era.

Mykki Blanco’s work, then, is paradigmatic for the shifting and diverse utopian discourses emerging in digital space. Virtual environments not only increasingly influence the lives of contemporary youth but also uncouple music from its physical product (Rando 5). This has democratized music production and amplified the unheard voices who previously had been kept

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<sup>38</sup> Frank Ocean has often not been considered a rapper but a RnB artist. For instance, Chuck D argued that his coming out as a gay man has not shaken the hip-hop community because “there’s plenty of black male gay singers” (qtd. in Levine). However, this statement does not only reinforce the binary opposition between rappers and singers but also refuses to acknowledge the fact that both hip-hop and RnB have changed and the boundaries between the genres have become blurry as artists such as Drake and The Weeknd also indicate. Therefore, analyzing Frank Ocean as a queer hip-hop artist in this thesis is an attempt to reinscribe him in the history of hip-hop and also assert that – due to Ocean’s commercial success – queer hip-hop cannot only be classified as “indie music” and, contrary to the belief of Xinling Li, is reshuffling the “rules of the hip-hop game” (2).

silent by gatekeepers such as record companies. This is the utopian potential of new (music) technologies: “they make music accessible in ways that were hitherto unimaginable” (6) and this new “potential energy in the cultural sphere could be converted into kinetic energy in the social sphere” (5). Moreover, as Jurgenson argues, in virtual environments “[i]nformation penetrates the body in increasingly more intimate ways.” The private becomes even more political and Blanco’s performances of multiple identities perfectly illustrates this ever-increasing liquidity of gender in the digital space of the Post-Internet, which is “defined by the lack of difference between being online and offline” (Waugh 235) and is a key factor in the “identity politics of the post-millennial generation” (233). According to Michael Waugh, “the most crucial theme of queer theory is that of fluidity and mutability” (240) and Mykki Blanco in particular is “queer gender fluidity in action” (244). Not only through his<sup>39</sup> music but also his online performance, the artist highlights the importance of the digital space for performing gender.

As he is constantly producing and reproducing different identities, Blanco embraces the notion of Otherness and subverts its connotation of marginalization to an empowering statement. By “reconfiguring the stories from the past,” artists such as Blanco “anticipate a queer future with minoritarian solidarity, staking out a space that gets us to rethink sexual orientation” (S. Hawkins 198). Moreover, Blanco’s queer narratives are not only told in the music or the videos, they are multimodal and transmedial (247).<sup>40</sup> The process of identity construction in the queer digital space is marked by “cybernetic soundscapes” (244) and Blanco’s lyrics as well as the (visual) performance of the artist in both the online and offline world. Consequently, the utopian discourses in the work of Mykki Blanco also move beyond the real world. They sonically, visually and performatively map the digital space, constantly being in flux and crossing boundaries, “providing political scripts that reject what is assumed in the form of resistance” (S. Hawkins 209). This transgressive potential of Blanco’s art is perfectly captured in the song “She Gutta,” released in 2014. While the song’s lyrics and gritty soundscape already establish the song’s themes – gay sexuality and transgenderism in a street gang context –, the music video highlights the dystopian environment. Moreover, as Blanco is switching between male and

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<sup>39</sup> Mykki Blanco is the transgender alter ego of artist Michael Quattlebaum. Quattlebaum himself has stated that “he describes Blanco through the use of male pronouns” (Waugh 243). With respect to this preference, this thesis also employs male pronouns to refer to Blanco.

<sup>40</sup> This multimodality is reminiscent of artist Lil Nas X, whose “Old Town Road” was one of the most successful songs of 2019. Whereas the artist’s music can hardly be conceptualized as topically queer, his online persona, which particularly unfolds on social media platform Twitter, hugely influences his performance as a gay black man in hip-hop culture.

female performances in the video, the prevalent binary opposition between genders is challenged and deconstructed. Connecting the violence of the ghetto with bodily violence caused by sexual orientation or gender, “[a]rtists such as Blanco turn to a progressive sexual politics in the guise of transgendered representations in order to advance an awareness of the reality of violence and sexual discrimination in the US today” (209) Considering this dystopian tale of “She Gutta,” the future might seem bleak from a queer perspective. However, “there is a dialectical tension between hope and disappointment that spells out queer utopia” (142); it is the interruption of the present that particularly characterizes the queerness of these utopias (Muñoz, chapter 9). The work of Nicki Minaj, Frank Ocean and Mykki Blanco constitutes the “radical break” that not only insists that “radical difference is possible” but also that this “break is necessary” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 231–32). Thus, queering hip hop as well as notions of bodies, masculinities or identities is not aligned with providing clear-cut alternatives but rather embracing the subversive potential of failure and disruption.

#### 5.4. Postmodern Cities and Past Utopias: Futures in Contemporary Rap

Since its beginnings, the city has always been hip-hop’s most important spatial trope. Whereas the first hip-hoppers came of age in postindustrial cities, contemporary young artists face postmodern cities. As MacLeod and Ward argue, in postmodern cities the “very ‘practice of citizenship’ is now interwoven more deeply into the habits and practices of privatized consumer behaviour” (156). Growing up in postmodern Houston in the 1990s, it is not surprising that Travis Scott’s 2018 album *Astroworld* is dedicated to specific consumerist place in the city: the theme park AstroWorld that was closed in 2005. Theme parks can be analyzed as consumerist heterotopias in the heart of the city, which “act as microcosms reflecting larger cultural patterns or social orders” (Ashcroft, *Utopianism* 134). In the postmodern city, the theme park is the utopian dream of the citizen-cum-consumer. Spaces like these have led “to a diversification in, and intensification of, the consumption experience” (MacLeod and Ward 156). As the city is marked by commercialization, conceiving of alternatives becomes more difficult: this is the “invincible universality of capitalism” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* xii) that hinders the emergence of alternative utopian discourses. Although the AstroWorld theme park provided a pleasurable escape from the dystopian reality of Scott’s upbringing in the city, it did not challenge the

systemic forces that shaped his surroundings. On the contrary: visiting a theme park can be compared to a temporary utopia that for a brief moment in time diffuses capitalism's economic inequalities.

In naming the album *Astroworld*, Scott musically resurrected the theme park that for him was “a way of life – fantasies, imagination” (qtd. in Weiner). As Foucault puts it, heterotopias are “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites – all the other real sites that can be found within the culture – are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (“Spaces” 3). Consequently, *Astroworld* can be analyzed as a sonic heterotopia that invites the listener to a rollercoaster ride to the ruins of a childhood in Houston. This is most poignantly illustrated in the lyrics of the album's opening track “STARGAZING”:

If I take you to my past you will be traumatized  
Got a thousand kids outside that's tryna come alive  
'99, took AstroWorld, it had to relocate  
Told the dawgs I'd bring it back, it was a seal of faith

By sonically bringing back the feeling of the amusement park, *Astroworld* evokes the utopian concept of a home, “a home produced by the creative imagination, one that exists beyond the boundaries of the political reality” (Ashcroft *Utopianism* 40). As Ashcroft argues, all utopian ideas of hope share “a vision of *heimat*,” which is “conceived in a disruption of conventional boundaries, a dynamic operation of memory” (68). *Astroworld*, then, is an archaeology of Scott's childhood memory, a musical counternarrative to the destroying forces of the capitalist postmodern city. However, the theme park AstroWorld is not a prominent topic in the lyrics of the eponymous album but rather related to the general feeling of escape, adrenaline and temporary utopia. Drugs, alcohol, and sex, then, are prominent themes on *Astroworld*, providing another temporary escape from the struggles in the postmodern city. As the real AstroWorld is closed, he relies on weed, lean, and psychedelic drugs as remedies, sending his mind on a mental rollercoaster ride through Houston. Thus, *Astroworld* is a time-travel album that metaphorically mourns the loss of a positive feeling of home disguised as a theme park. Referring to Zygmunt Bauman, such (postmodern) utopias do not enact real change as they are “made to the measure of the consumer's bliss – intended, like all consumer joys, for utterly individual, lonely enjoyment even when it is relished in company” (28).

However, hypersexuality and consumerism on *Astroworld* can be seen as paradigmatic for an often-neglected aspect in rap music. As Bailey argues, “[t]he materialism and conspicuous consumption of hip-hop culture is never recognized as a symptom of depression” (192).

Consequently, the topics and themes on *Astroworld* cannot only be understood as the glorification of sexuality and consumption but a coping mechanism for negotiating “the stresses of living in disadvantaged settings” (Harper and Jackson 114). Putting the apparent nihilism at the center of the analysis allows new ways of seeing the artistic interpretation of the reality that produced it in the first place:

In a cultural context that denies men, particularly black men, the space to express emotions such as hurt, sorrow, etc., this pain mutates into a dismissive cool and aggressive stance most often directed at the people closest to home—those who are much easier to access than those whose actions create the context that breeds hood nihilism. (Bailey 196)

Rappers such as Travis Scott not only grew up in an environment that was marked by marginalization and trauma but also in a capitalist consumer culture. According to Ashcroft, “capitalism itself, the system that most utopias are now designed to contest, is generated by desire as needs expand to fulfill the requirements of growth” (“Utopias” 412). Consequently, the desire of overcoming the marginalization of the neighborhood is embedded in the capitalist system, which is also aligned with the messages that hip-hop can spread being “filtered through a corporate structure that does not prioritize these concerns” (Houston 23). Travis Scott’s *Astroworld* is a limited sonic utopia that highlights individual pleasure before collectively resisting the very system that tore down the real AstroWorld in the first place.

Whereas *Astroworld* mourns the loss of an idealized place in the past, Rapsody’s album *Eve* deconstructs the notion of past, present and future altogether. The album centers around the often-neglected stories of African American women and thus provides a counternarrative to history. In the songs, “ghosts of slavery and the African diaspora” (K. McLeod 119) are always present. According to Ashcroft, a “vision of African futures begins in a reformulation of African pasts” (*Utopianism* 90). Being haunted by the past, Rapsody’s work disrupts notions of the present and in the process carves out possible futures. For instance, on *Eve*’s opening track “Nina,” Rapsody samples Nina Simone’s version of “Strange Fruit,” and in her lyrics recounts the story of women during enslavement and resistance: “As we lay these edges down, brown women, we so perfect / Went from field nigga to still nigga, being cropped out the picture / But we all know who got the juice, my sisters.” Rapsody reaffirms the statement that black is beautiful, draws the attention to the fact that history often was aligned with women “cropped out of the picture” but that women were central in the liberation struggle. This combination of retelling history through the lyrics but also through the audible presence of Nina Simone, a



central cultural figure in African American resistance, leads to Rapsody “evoking the sonic ghosts of past performance” (K. McLeod 120). The distinction between past and present becomes disrupted, channeling the historical energy of resistance to create the possibility of a better future. As feature guest Reyna Biddy puts it in the outro of “Nina”: “I’ve been here many times before and I’ve never been defeated, and still I will never be defeated.” The utopian discourses on *Eve* are not situated in the future but are best understood as a “chronopolitical revisioning of past utopian futurisms and alternate-utopian timelines that reveal a plurality of elsewhere/elsewhens” (van Veen 81). Therefore, the future is rooted in memory and “while the colonial subject may be excluded from history,” it has access to a circular, non-linear memory that “operates to disrupt history, while at the same time becoming the foundation of a vision of the future” (Ashcroft, *Utopianism* 93).

The song “Hatshepsut” best exemplifies the transcendence of linear time on the album *Eve*. Being named after the first female pharaoh, “Hatshepsut” is centered around the concepts of community, sisterhood and queens throughout history. As Queen Latifah is a feature guest and delivers a powerful second verse, the song sees the collaboration of one of hip-hop’s first successful female rappers with one of the most important contemporary female voices in rap, which makes “Hatshepsut” one of the standout songs of the album. In her verse, Rapsody even acknowledges the importance of Queen Latifah when she raps “Latifah still a Queen, I’m just tryna follow her path.” By interpolating the hook of “U.N.I.T.Y.,” one of Latifah’s most memorable songs, Rapsody further highlights her influence in hip-hop history. Moreover, Rapsody’s verse is a call to all African American women to overcome their differences and build a community as they “been through a lot, we got a lot still to repair” and that “queens will always have your back.” In the second verse, Latifah builds on this notion of collective history, rapping that “even living single we connected by the tribe” and women are “connected by alliance, sisterhood.” As both rappers provided shout-outs to the women that came before them (e.g. Roberta Flack and Coretta King), Latifah is also drawing attention to the ones to come, stating “all hail the Queens and the next ones to arrive” as “another black reign came to water and nourish the crop.” Therefore, “Hatshepsut” transcends linear notions of time; the song provides an “‘archaeology of the future’ by ‘remembering’ it in the density of the cultural past” (Ashcroft, *Utopianism* 95).

People in power “attempt to erase the traces of others; but the other stories still live on, to emerge in other places, at other times,” states Doreen Massey (160). As the analysis of Travis Scott’s *Astroworld* and Rapsody’s *Eve* has shown, the stories of the Other can either emerge in unsuspected places (in the ruins of a theme park) or in other times, outside dominant temporalities. This not only shows hip-hop’s ongoing potential to provide utopian discourses that critically reflect on the present conditions but the power of the creative process itself. As Ashcroft argues: “Simply by imagining the world differently the creative work shows the possibility of a different world” (*Utopianism* 49).

## 6. “It’s Bigger than Hip-Hop”: Conclusion

Black protest music should sting and burn, be hard to digest for some, leave an aftertaste for others, make us feel more rather than less – whether it’s hate or love – make us recognise our conflicted passions, and the contradictions of our strange, post-civil rights and post-black power movement lives. Lives that shouldn’t have to be defended as mattering. Black pop radicalism should shake our culture to its core. (Brooks)

While the 2010s have seen the rise of progressive movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, African Americans still face institutional racism, mass incarceration, police brutality and educational disadvantages. As Lynch and Gunkel argue, “the integrity and substance of black people as a whole and human is contested and dismantled globally with the continuum of African and American descended people’s social and physical death” (26). Therefore, the need for “a black visioning of a future that is political and cultural” has not diminished. On the contrary: articulating utopian desires, imagining new horizons has never been more important. From the temporary utopian spaces of the block parties that marked the beginnings of the genre to the queer performances in contemporary rap: the analysis of the songs and artists in this thesis illustrates that hip-hop has the potential to provide a space for constructing black identities and collectively resisting the status quo.

While all of the works analyzed feature traces of utopian impulses, some are more visible, and others continue in the tradition of hidden transcripts in black popular culture. Either way, it is vital to uncover them in order to realize hip-hop music’s political potential. Zamalin argues that the current “dystopian postdemocratic political moment requires imaginative thoughts”

(144). Channeling the energy of more than 400 years of African American cultural resistance, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is hip-hop that provides a vibrant cultural space for imagining better futures, negotiating black identities and resisting the dominant culture. Although the predominance of mainstream rap might suggest otherwise, the topics discussed in rap music are now more diverse than ever: masculine identities are questioned, mental health issues in black communities are addressed and strategies for collectively overcoming the inequalities caused by disadvantages in education and racist capitalist power structures are evoked. All these aspects considered, hip-hop is now “the most robust moment of resistant (and also heterogenous, say, in contrast to the predominance of soul or funk), black popular music that we’ve ever had” (Brooks). It is “capable of tweaking the sensibilities of mainstream America, challenging the cultural status quo and provoking intense social debate” (Forman, “Hip-Hop” 6). Following Marable’s argument that a “Third Reconstruction at some future point is historically probable” (*Race* xii), it could be argued that its coming is already sonically foreshadowed.

Certainly not every single rap song is utopian and provides political commentary; if the corpus in this thesis had been compiled solely by the most popular songs on streaming services, the political awareness of rap would certainly not be as convincing. However, as this thesis also aims to show, hip-hop is only an umbrella term for an incredibly diverse musical genre that can be commercial, subversive, hopeful, violent, angry, misogynist and progressive. And often all of it at the same time. Especially when it is “difficult to argue for hope or critical utopianism at a moment when cultural analysis is dominated by an antiutopianism often functioning as a poor substitute for actual critical intervention” (Muñoz, Introduction), recognizing the utopian potential in culture is vital in order to not lose track of the horizon of hope and foster the belief in change. Consequently, aiming to avoid the pitfall of political pessimism, this thesis instead stresses the utopianism of hip-hop culture.

On the song “Fuck Your Ethnicity” on his debut album *Section.80*, Kendrick Lamar emphasizes the power of rap music: “y’all be calling it hip-hop, I be calling it hypnotize / yeah, hypnotize, trapped my body but freed my mind.” Hip-hop is more than a musical genre. It is based in the continuum of African American popular culture and draws its revolutionary power from its own past; from the field hollers to the streets in Ferguson: the cry for freedom has merely changed its rhythm and beat. “Revolution is driven not by the vision of perfection but by the anticipation of the realm of freedom,” Ashcroft states (*Utopianism* 67). Analyzing myriad artists from the humble beginnings to hip-hop’s force in the cultural sphere today, this thesis

has shown that this anticipatory consciousness is inherent in rap. When one listens closely, the possibility of change will sonically and lyrically unfold. As dead prez famously put it 20 years ago: “It’s bigger than hip-hop.” And it still is.

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- The Notorious B.I.G. “Things Done Changed.” *Ready to Die*. Bad Boy, 1994.
- Travis Scott. “ASTROTHUNDER.” *Astroworld*. Cactus Jack, 2018.
- . “HOUSTONFORNICATION.” *Astroworld*. Cactus Jack, 2018.
- . “STARGAZING.” *Astroworld*. Cactus Jack, 2018.
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# HIDDEN TRACKS

## 9. Appendix

### 9.1. English Abstract

Hip-hop, a culture that emerged from the marginalization of black citizens in the postindustrial city in the 1970s, is now the most prominent genre in contemporary US pop music. Although rap has become very commercialized, it has never lost its revolutionary potential and still provides the discursive space to express the desire for change. This thesis illustrates, how the daily reality of African Americans is mirrored both musically and lyrically in rap and traces hip-hop's utopian and dystopian discourses. As rap is not the first African American musical form that is aligned with resistance and subversion, an overview of the importance of popular culture for black resistance movements is provided. The theoretical part is concerned with utopian studies and its connection to concepts such as time, space, hope, and subversion. Beginning with Ernst Bloch's monumental work *The Principle of Hope*, utopian theories by Fredric Jameson, Ruth Levitas, Bill Ashcroft, Alex Zamalin and others are connected and their potential for a musical and lyrical analysis of African American hip-hop is carved out. In the analysis, then, three different time periods are investigated in order to highlight the changing nature of utopian discourses in hip-hop from the 1970s until today. Firstly, the utopian beginnings of hip-hop in a dystopian reality and the emergence of hip-hop identities are delineated before contrasting Public Enemy's vision of a new black cultural revolution with West Coast gangsta rap, which is analyzed through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges." Secondly, the question of subversion and commercialization is addressed as well as apocalyptic visions, Afrofuturist discourses, and the hope/disillusionment of the Obama presidency. Finally, several utopian discourses in contemporary hip-hop are analyzed, ranging from queer utopian interventions in the digital space to Kendrick Lamar's deconstruction of the American Dream. As the diachronic analysis illustrates, socio-political changes not only influence the sound of hip-hop but also its utopian discourses. This foregrounds the critical potential of utopian thinking: imagining the future particularly changes our perception of the present.

## 9.2. Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Rap Musik ist das dominierende Genre im amerikanischen Musikgeschäft und beeinflusst beinahe jede Facette der globalen Popkultur. Was als kulturelle Ausdrucksform der marginalisierten schwarzen Bevölkerung in den Ghettos von New York in den 1970er Jahren begann, hat sich beständig weiterentwickelt und verschiedene Spielarten und Subgenres hervorgebracht. Von Conscious Rap über Trap und Boom Bap bis zum öffentlich breit diskutierten Gangsta Rap: Hip-Hop ist eine unfassbar diverse Kultur, die sich von ihren Wurzeln in New York global ausgebreitet hat. Trotz der Kommerzialisierung des Genres, hat Rap sein revolutionäres Potential nie verloren und bietet bis heute einen der diskursiven Räume, in dem die sich verändernde Marginalisierung und Diskriminierung von Schwarzen ausgedrückt und damit der Wunsch nach Veränderung laut wird.

Diese Diplomarbeit illustriert, wie sich die Lebensrealität von Afroamerikaner\*innen in der Musik und den Texten von Rapper\*innen widerspiegelt und dabei utopische und dystopische Diskurse verhandelt werden. Nach einem kurzen Abriss über die parallel verlaufende Geschichte von afroamerikanischer Musik und Bürgerrechtsbewegungen beschäftigt sich der erste Teil der Arbeit mit Utopien und damit verbundenen Konzepten wie Zeit, Raum, Hoffnung und Subversion. Ausgehend von Ernst Blochs *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* werden theoretische Überlegungen von Bill Ashcroft, Fredric Jameson, Ruth Levitas und Alex Zamalin miteinander verknüpft und auf ihr produktives Potential für die musikalische und textliche Analyse von afroamerikanischem Hip-Hop befragt. Im analytischen Teil der Diplomarbeit stehen anschließend drei verschiedene zeitliche Epochen im Mittelpunkt, um die Veränderung von utopischen Diskursen im Rap seit den 1970er Jahren bis heute aufzuzeigen. Von der Vision einer neuen kulturellen Revolution der Gruppe Public Enemy über Afrofuturistische Diskurse im Rap von Outkast und Missy Elliott bis zur Frage nach utopischen Diskursen im digitalen Raum und der Dekonstruktion von hypermaskulinen Identitäten werden Songs und Alben von diversen Künstler\*innen neu gehört und analysiert. Durch die diachrone Perspektive wird illustriert, dass sich mit den wechselnden sozialen Verhältnissen nicht nur der Sound von Rap, sondern auch dessen utopische Diskurse verändern. Damit wird vor allem das kritische Potenzial von Utopien hervorgehoben: Denn im Nachdenken über die Zukunft verändert sich vor allem unser Blick auf die Gegenwart.

### 9.3. Extended Discography

#### Rap as Utopian Space in Dystopian Realities

Afrika Bambaataa & the Soulsonic Force, *Planet Rock: The Album* (Tommy Boy, 1986).  
Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, *The Message* (Sugar Hill, 1982).  
Kurtis Blow, *Kurtis Blow* (Mercury, 1980).

#### Sonic Homes: Constructing Hip-Hop Identities through Music

Big Daddy Kane – *Long Live the Kane* (Cold Chillin', 1988).  
Eric B. and Rakim, *Paid in Full* (Island, 1986).  
Eric B. and Rakim, *Follow the Leader* (Uni, 1988).  
KRS-One, *Return of the Boom Bap* (Jive, 1993).  
MC Lyte, *Lyte as a Rock* (First Priority Music, 1988).  
Salt-N-Pepa, *Hot, Cool & Vicious* (Next Plateau, 1986).  
Salt-N-Pepa, *A Salt with a Deadly Pepa* (Next Plateau, 1988).  
Jungle Brothers, *Straight out of the Jungle* (Warlock, 1988).  
Queen Latifah, *All Hail the Queen* (Tommy Boy, 1989).  
Run-D.M.C., *Run-D.M.C.* (Profile, 1984).  
Run-D.M.C., *Raising Hell* (Profile, 1986).

#### Public Enemies: The Beginnings of a New Black Revolution

A Tribe Called Quest, *The Low End Theory* (Jive, 1990).  
Boogie Down Productions, *By All Means Necessary* (Jive, 1988).  
Boogie Down Productions, *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop* (Jive, 1988).  
Paris, *The Devil Made Me Do It* (Tommy Boy, 1990).  
Poor Righteous Teachers, *Holy Intellect* (Profile, 1990).  
Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1988).  
Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam, 1990).  
Sister Souljah, *360 Degrees of Power* (Epic, 1992).  
X-Clan, *To the East, Blackwards* (Island, 1990).  
Wu-Tang Clan, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (Loud, 1993).

#### Street Knowledge: The Utopian Politics of Gangsta Rap in Los Angeles

Eazy-E – *Eazy-Duz-It* (Ruthless, 1988).  
Ice Cube – *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* (Priority, 1990).  
Ice Cube – *Death Certificate* (Priority, 1991).  
Ice-T – *Rhyme Pays* (Sire, 1987).  
Ice-T – *O.G. Original Gangster* (Sire, 1991).  
N.W.A. – *Straight Outta Compton* (Ruthless, 1988).  
N.W.A. – *Niggaz4Life* (Ruthless, 1991).  
Schoolly D, *Schoolly D* (Schoolly D, 1985).

## Commodification, Apocalypse and the Obama Era: New World Dystopia

### Individual Utopias and Miseducation: Between Commodification and Subversion

A Tribe Called Quest – *Midnight Marauders* (Jive, 1993).  
A Tribe Called Quest – *Beats, Rhymes and Life* (Jive, 1996).  
Arrested Development – *Zingalamaduni* (EMI, 1994).  
Common – *Resurrection* (Relativity, 1994).  
De La Soul – *Stakes is High* (Tommy Boy, 1996).  
Dr. Dre – *The Chronic* (Death Row, 1992).  
Jeru the Damaja – *The Sun Rises in the East* (Payday, 1994).  
Lauryn Hill – *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Ruffhouse, 1998).  
Nas – *Illmatic* (Columbia, 1994).  
Tupac – *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z...* (Interscope, 1993).  
Tupac – *Me Against the World* (Interscope, 1995).  
Snoop Dogg – *Doggystyle* (Death Row, 1993).  
Snoop Dogg – *Tha Dogfather* (Death Row, 1996).

### War on the Streets: Dystopian Discourses and Apocalyptic Visions

Busta Rhymes – *The Coming* (Elektra, 1996).  
Busta Rhymes – *When Disaster Strikes...* (Elektra, 1997).  
Busta Rhymes – *E.L.E. (Extinction Level Event)* (Elektra, 1998).  
Killah Priest – *Heavy Mental* (Geffen, 1998).  
Method Man – *Tical 2000: Judgement Day* (Def Jam, 1998).  
Mobb Deep – *Juvenile Hell* (Island, 1993).  
Mobb Deep – *The Infamous* (RCA, 1995).  
Mobb Deep – *Hell on Earth* (RCA, 1996).  
Raekwon – *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx...* (RCA, 1995).  
Wu-Tang Clan – *Wu-Tang Forever* (RCA, 1997).

### ATLiens and Cyborgs: Afrofuturist Utopias in Rap Music

Big K.R.I.T. – *Cadillactica* (Def Jam, 2014).  
clipping. – *Splendor & Misery* (Sub Pop, 2016).  
Erykah Badu – *New Amerykah Part One (4<sup>th</sup> World War)* (Universal, 2008).  
Erykah Badu – *New Amerykah Part Two (Return of the Ankh)* (Universal, 2010).  
Janelle Monáe – *The ArchAndroid* (Wondaland, 2010).  
Missy Elliott – *Supa Dupa Fly* (Elektra, 1997).  
Missy Elliott – *Da Real World* (Elektra, 1999).  
Missy Elliott – *Miss E ... So Addictive* (Elektra, 2001).  
Outkast – *ATLiens* (LaFace, 1996).  
Outkast – *Aquemini* (LaFace, 1998).  
Outkast – *Stankonia* (LaFace, 2000).

## Black Presidents and Postmodern Slaves: The Utopian Discourses of the Obama Era

Jay-Z – *The Blueprint 3* (Roc Nation, 2009).  
Jay-Z – *Magna Carta Holy Grail* (Roc Nation, 2013).  
Kanye West – *808s & Heartbreak* (Def Jam, 2008).  
Kanye West – *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (Def Jam, 2010).  
Kanye West – *Yeezus* (Def Jam, 2013).  
Kanye West – *The Life of Pablo* (GOOD, 2016).  
Nas – *Nas* (Def Jam, 2008).

## Utopian Discourses in Contemporary Hip-Hop Culture

### Underground Utopia: The Rebellion of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation

dead prez – *Let's Get Free* (Loud, 2000).  
Immortal Technique – *Revolutionary Vol. 1* (Viper, 2001).  
Immortal Technique – *Revolutionary Vol. 2* (Viper, 2003).  
Immortal Technique – *The 3<sup>rd</sup> World* (Viper, 2008).  
Kendrick Lamar – *Section.80* (TDE, 2011).  
Kendrick Lamar – *good kid, m.A.A.d. City* (TDE, 2013).  
Killer Mike – *R.A.P. Music* (Williams Street, 2012).  
Moor Mother – *Fetish Bones* (Don Giovanni, 2016).  
Moor Mother – *Analog Fluids of Sonic Black Holes* (Don Giovanni, 2019).  
Run the Jewels – *Run the Jewels* (Fool's Gold, 2013).  
Run the Jewels – *Run the Jewels 2* (Mass Appeal, 2014).  
Run the Jewels – *Run the Jewels 3* (Run the Jewels, 2016).

### good kid, m.A.A.d. City: Utopian Discourses and Black Struggle in Trump-Time

Childish Gambino – “This is America” (mcDJ, 2018).  
Jay-Z – *4:44* (Roc Nation, 2017).  
Kendrick Lamar – *To Pimp a Butterfly* (TDE, 2015).  
Kendrick Lamar – *DAMN.* (TDE, 2017).  
Meek Mill – *Wins & Losses* (Atlantic, 2017).  
Meek Mill – *Championships* (Atlantic, 2018).

### Dislocated Utopias: Queer Bodies, Queer Masculinities, and Digital Identities

Azealia Banks – *Broke with Expensive Taste* (Prospect Park Caroline, 2014).  
Cardi B – *Invasion of Privacy* (Atlantic, 2018).  
Frank Ocean – *Channel Orange* (Def Jam, 2012).  
Frank Ocean – *Blonde* (Boys Don't Cry, 2016).  
Kamaiyah – *A Good Night in the Ghetto* (self-released, 2016).  
Le1f – *Riot Boi* (XL, 2015).  
Megan Thee Stallion – *Fever* (300 Entertainment, 2019).  
Mykki Blanco – *Mykki* (Dogfood, 2016).  
Nicki Minaj – *The Pinkprint* (Cash Money, 2014).

Nicki Minaj – *Queen* (Cash Money, 2018).  
Noname – *Room 25* (self-released, 2018).  
Tierra Whack – *Whack World* (Interscope, 2018).  
Zebra Katz – *Champagne* (self-released, 2012).  
Zebra Katz – *Drklng* (self-released, 2013).

### Postmodern Cities and Ghost Stories: Utopian Discourses in Contemporary Rap

A\$AP ROCKY – *At. Long. Last. ASAP.* (RCA, 2015).  
Chance the Rapper – *Coloring Book* (self-released, 2016).  
Chance the Rapper – *The Big Day* (self-released, 2019).  
Earl Sweatshirt – *Some Rap Songs* (Columbia, 2018).  
J. Cole – *KOD* (Dreamville, 2018).  
Joey Bada\$\$ – *ALL-AMERIKKAN BADASS* (XXXX, 2017).  
KIDS SEE GHOSTS – *KIDS SEE GHOSTS* (GOOD, 2018).  
Mick Jenkins – *Pieces of a Man* (Cinematic, 2018).  
Pusha T – *Daytona* (GOOD, 2018).  
Rapsody – *Laila's Wisdom* (Roc Nation, 2017).  
Rapsody – *Eve* (Roc Nation, 2019).  
Travis Scott – *Astroworld* (Cactus Jack, 2018).  
Vince Staples – *Big Fish Theory* (Def Jam, 2017).  
XXXTentacion – *?* (Capitol, 2018).