

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

“Another Family Evicted, Another Black man a Victim”

A Literary Analysis of Parenthood in African American Male Rappers' Lyrics between 2012 and 2020

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1. Introduction

With the hip-hop movement finding its roots in the South Bronx in the 1970s before quickly growing and developing across the United States (Alridge and Stewart 190), this form of expression mainly emerged within the black communities, in poorer neighbourhoods of American cities (i.e. Bronx, Brooklyn, South Central Los Angeles). It is crucial to take into account the fact that this movement emerged in a context of poverty and social oppression to understand how rap music quickly grew to become a medium used by artists trying to describe their living conditions, to denounce the injustices suffered by ethnic minorities, and to spread social awareness.

The circumstances under which the hip-hop movement developed give it the specific status of a form of art that has mainly been used by racial minorities¹, and that is often used in order to express a message. As the movement quickly shifted focus towards the specific subgenres of conscious rap and gangsta rap, this message became political. As such, the study of these texts proves to be one way to analyse historical events and sociological aspects related to them from the perspective of ethnic minorities in America, rather than relying on the more traditional narrative conveyed by the media. This method, although it can be seen as somewhat unorthodox, functions as a way of opening up to the voice of those who are not usually given one in official records.

The present research focuses on the representations of parenthood in contemporary rap music. This project aims to discuss parenthood by focusing on distinct family figures and relationships, such as the relationships that occur between a character and their father, mother, or children, as they are represented in the lyrics of Black American rappers. This objective is achieved with the help of theoretical works on rap music, Black culture and the Black American family, such as Robin D. G. Kelley's *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!* (1997), Jennifer C. Lena's "Social Context and Musical Content of Rap Music, 1979-1995." (2006) and Daniel B. Schwartz's *Ghetto: The History of a Word* (2019).

Two specificities of hip-hop music must, however, be pointed out before starting the investigation. Firstly, because of the abundance of hip-hop texts that have been produced in the United States, it is necessary to select a number of relevant criteria in order to reduce the

¹ Although this is no longer the case.

corpus in a significant manner. A first choice that was made before beginning the analysis was to work on a corpus based on albums, rather than single songs. In order to be able to reach a better understanding of an artist's musical universe, it has been decided that the corpus would only contain the works of artists who have released at least two full-length studio albums, and a minimum of four records in total, including EPs². A second choice was to work on a corpus consisting of records that were released between 2012 and 2020. The reason for this decision is that this thesis aims to study contemporary rap music from the "internet era." The choice of the year 2012 has to do with the fact that it is the year that *Billboard* started taking data from online streaming platforms into account for their famous "Hot 100" ranking, "responding to a major shift in how people are consuming music." (McKinley) In order to remain within a context of "internet era" rappers, the studied artists should not have been born after the year 1980. Importance was also given to the type of record labels that the rappers associated with, in order for the corpus to contain independent artists, as well as artists that are signed to commercial labels. Finally, as far as length is concerned, it was decided that the corpus should consist of a total of twenty records, evenly distributed between five artists.

Secondly, hip-hop music is a literary form that functions unlike any other. It consists of lyrics that are "laid" —sung— over a beat —instrumental track. This beat is what gives the songs their rhythm, energy, tone and mood. It is therefore the aspect that carries the most importance when it comes to the commercialisation of songs. As the appeal of rap songs is often said to lie mainly in their beats, the popularity of American hip-hop around the world, including in non-English speaking countries, becomes understandable. However, this also means that, for many consumers of rap music, the textual aspect shows little to no interest. As hip-hop artists (rappers) spend most of their careers focusing on the production of lyrics, here lies a paradox. Since this thesis strongly focuses on the textual and literary aspects of the studied songs, it does the opposite of many rap listeners. However, the significance of instrumentals in rap music cannot be stressed enough. It is therefore recommended that readers of this thesis take a moment to listen to some of the songs that are discussed in this study, in order to enjoy a more complete experience of this art form.

In the context of this study, an emphasis is put on tackling, and attempting to give an answer to the following questions. Firstly, hip-hop is now fifty years old. What is the

² Extended plays

correlation between this ageing medium and the way questions of family are treated? Secondly, is there a difference in the way independent and commercial rappers address the themes related to family in their songs? After a discussion on the background that birthed the hip-hop movement, as well as its more recent development, and the concepts that are relevant to a study on hip-hop and parenthood, the literary analysis section of this work focuses on the different relationships that exist between the rappers —and their narrators and characters—, and the other members of their families, as well as how they are depicted in rap texts. A first chapter of analysis is dedicated to the maternal, which includes the relationships with the mothers, the —potential— surrogate mother figures and the “baby mamas,” a term that refers to the mother of one’s children. In order to better grasp this last type of relationship, the discussion also focuses on the relationship with the partner, in general. After this emphasis on the maternal, a chapter is dedicated to the paternal, including studies of the existing relationships with the figure of the father, the —potential— surrogate father figures and the male role models, in general. Finally, a last chapter of lyrical analysis is dedicated to the way rappers discuss relationships with their children, as well as with the youth as a whole.

2. Literature Review

To begin this thesis, it is crucial to take a moment to reflect on some of the concepts that are central to this topic. First, we will dive into the history of hip-hop culture and rap music, and how they have evolved into the culture and the musical genre that we know today, including the many subgenres that stemmed from the main branch of rap and hip-hop. After establishing the historical significance of hip-hop, we will explore concepts that relate to the Black family in the United States. We will look at the importance and the recurrence of the maternal figure in a children's narrative game known as "the dozens" in order to establish a link between oral expression traditions and family relationships in Black youths. This discussion will highlight how scholars —such as Weitzer and Kubrin— often understood such expression forms, in the context of Black culture, as coping mechanisms. On the contrary, the perspective offered in Robin D. G. Kelley's *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!* (1997) contextualises the dozens as a means to produce an aesthetic and simple straightforward pleasure. This text will be examined before being discussed in relation to rap music.

After this discussion on Black culture, the concept of the ghetto will be explored from its origins to its relevance to contemporary urban Black art forms. We will highlight how this place of legal segregation has been turned, over time, into a space of economic segregation, as middle and upper class Black families, as well as white families, have fled the ghetto in the search for better life opportunities. In the process, the stereotypical elements that can be found in the public perception of the ghetto will be highlighted, leading to a final discussion on the concept of "realness", or authenticity, as it can be found in rap lyrics, denoting either a very archetypal character that takes on the role of the anti-hero (e.g. pimps, hustlers, pushers, etc.) or, quite to the opposite, an individual that acknowledges their part of responsibility towards their loved ones and their community, leading to commendable types of behaviours.

A Short History of Hip-Hop

The hip-hop movement finds its roots in the 1970s, when DJ Kool Herc started using two turntables instead of a single one to play music at parties. Kool Herc had also noticed that the crowd reacted more intensely to the instrumental breaks than to the rest of the songs. He thus decided to only play those breaks in a loop, by using the same record on two turntables and transitioning from one to the other. (Williams 137-138) Soon after, Grand Wizard

Theodore, another DJ from the Bronx, invented scratching (Pray), a technique that can best be described in terms of “manually moving a record back and forth under the record player’s needle.” (Gillett) As Grand Wizard Theodore recounts in Doug Pray’s *Scratch* (2001), he came up with the technique as his mother came to his bedroom’s door complaining about his playing music too loud. As he explains, “while she was in the doorway, you know, screaming at me, I was still holding the record, and rubbing the record back and forth.” (Grand Wizard Theodore in Pray, my transcription) He then practiced the technique for some weeks before introducing it at a party.

Those techniques, which turned out to be the basis for the first instrumentals in rap music, quickly became popular in block parties. This way of interacting with the records allowed the DJs to manipulate the music and play specific parts of songs as they pleased. MCs —Masters of Ceremony— then joined the DJs on the scene as they took on the responsibility of interacting with the crowd verbally. They then began speaking in rhymes and writing their texts, rather than improvising them. Thus was born the emblematic rap combination of the DJ and the MC. Along with the MCs and the DJs, “breakdancers (b-boys and b-girls), and graffiti writers (aerosol artists)” are also known to play a crucial role in hip-hop culture. Together, they are “commonly referred to as its four elements.” (Keyes 1)

One of the earliest recorded examples of those techniques put together to make a song can be found in the 1979 song, “Rapper’s Delight” by The Sugarhill Gang. This track is built around a sample from Chic’s “Good Times” (1979). The Breakbeat from “Good Times”, is used as an instrumental loop by The Sugarhill Gang, as the three MCs rap over it for over fourteen minutes. “Rapper’s Delight” is widely considered to be the first commercially successful rap song and is, according to Jeff Chang, “the best-selling twelve-inch single ever pressed.” (131)

In order to understand why hip-hop and rap music evolved in the way they did, it is important to take into account the social and economic context that surrounded its birth. As explained by Theresa Martinez, further reinforcing the idea that economic segregation played a part in the development of this genre, the hip-hop movement

emerged out of the social dislocations and structural changes that formed the postindustrial urban climate of the South Bronx—one of the poorest communities in New

York and the nation facing “social isolation, economic fragility, truncated communications media, and shrinking social service organizations.” (Rose 1994:33-34; see also Kozol 1995) (272)

This atmosphere eventually served as the rich soil that would allow for the cultivation of an art form that encapsulates the rage, anger and passion of an oppressed population: rap music. Because “Black Arts and hip-hop texts created amid the anger that is easily perceived in major historical events such as the L.A. rebellion and the riots of the late '60s reflect the rage the Black community feels,” (Gladney 292) hip-hop texts can be seen as tools that help us understand the mindset of the people that form those communities.

Grandmaster Flash, one of the earliest hip-hop DJs, is an important character when it comes to rap music. He is often referred to as one of the “earliest hip-hop DJs” (Toop, Baker, George and Rose in Martinez 272), one of the founders of the genre. In 1982, he released the song “The Message” (1982) with his rap group, Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five. This track is widely considered the first rap song to move away from the more traditional “rock-the-house” lyrics and to feature a strong socio-political message. The track even made use of horns and sirens, which serves a function of “intensification of the lyrical topic.” (Williams 154) As such, it set the tone for subgenres of rap that became more “conscious” or “political.” In terms of content, the lyrics mainly depict the struggles and experiences related to life in the projects³ and, generally, as an ethnic minority in America. In the 1995 article titled “The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop,” Marvin J. Gladney explains that “those who pioneered hip-hop were offering artistic expression designed to cope with urban frustrations and conditions” (292). More precisely, political rap often conveys a message that expresses “anti establishment injunctions, libido urgings, and condemnations of coercive standardizations.” (Baker 94 in Martinez 273)

The dissident position of such works and the way they invite the listeners to “fight the powers that be” (Public Enemy) has been an element that fueled many controversies. As Martinez explains it, “dominant group perception of rap as violent and loud emerges, for Rose, out of a fear of black resistance and defiance.” (273) However, she also argues that “the drawing power of rap is precisely its musical and narrative commitment to black youth and cultural resistance.” (Rose 19 in Martinez 273) It is then clear that conscious rap conveys a

³ Here, the word “project” is used in the sense of “a usually public housing development consisting of houses or apartments built and arranged according to a single plan” (Merriam-Webster)

strong political message, one that, in a socio-political environment that oppresses racial minorities, as will be discussed further in this literature review, encourages them, the youth, in particular, to stand up for themselves, for their culture, and to show dissidence when faced with repressive authority.

Throughout the second half of the 1980s, gangsta rap, a specific subgenre of rap music, emerged in the United States. After a few years, the subgenre reached mainstream popularity with artists such as Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, The Notorious B.I.G. and 2pac. The contents of gangsta rap texts are famous for addressing social issues through the representation of certain aspects of oppression. These aspects are claimed to be intrinsically linked to the experience of life as an ethnic minority in poor urban neighbourhoods (e.g. police brutality, poverty, drug abuse).

One of the first gangsta rap songs to ever be released was Public Enemy's "Fight the Power", in 1989. The song was originally made for Spike Lee's film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989), a film that touched on issues of ethnicity and racial tensions. Hank Shocklee, one of the producers of the song, explained the circumstances in which it was written in a 2016 interview for *The Guardian*.

It was a time of huge racial tension, too. Hip-hop culture was just starting and no one understood it. Kids would be out on the streets chilling, shoelaces untied, hats on backwards, and they'd be getting harassed by police. The economy was fucked up and crack was hitting the black community hard. Everyone had a friend or relative on crack, who was stealing from them. (...) The hood was on its own, abandoned at every level: government, county, city. We had to overcome everything. *Fight the Power* was going to be the anthem of the streets. (Beaumont-Thomas)

In this fragment, Hank Shocklee describes the context that surrounded the production of *Fight the Power*. What should be noted is that Hip-hop starts as a "ghetto" youth culture, with young people whose curricular and after-school programmes are being defunded due to white and middle-class flight. (see Anderson and Jargowsky) Overall, this produced a feeling of abandonment for urban Black youth. As Shocklee discusses the environment that those artists and their community experienced daily in the end of the 1980s. He mentions themes that are central to the global gangsta rap movement, namely police harassment, theft, a feeling of abandonment and the ongoing crack cocaine epidemic that hit the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Those claims of police abuse correlate with reports of complaints against Los Angeles Police Department officers around the same time, as is argued in the following extract from *The Los Angeles riots. Lessons for the urban future* (1994):

In the period between January 1986 and December 1990, for instance, there were 8,274 total allegations in complaints by public made against LAPD officers and 24.7% of them were allegations of LAPD officers' excessive force, the largest complaints during that time. (...) Many of those complaints came from the neighbourhoods with the largest concentration of racial and ethnic minorities (Baldassare 74)

Those ethnic minority peoples' feeling of frustration towards law enforcement climaxed in 1992, as a result of the Rodney King trial, a verdict that acquitted the four LAPD officers who were caught on camera while beating Rodney King almost to death. Since this was the first trial to feature a video recording of racially motivated police violence, those communities were expecting to finally see justice. Within the hours that followed the announcement of the "not guilty" verdict, violence started spreading in Los Angeles. "Mayor Tom Bradley declared a local state of emergency and Governor Pete Wilson ordered the National Guard to activate 2,000 reserves." (Baldassare 22) The chaos went on until Friday morning, when the National Guard managed to contain the situation.

This event, which is known as the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, is deeply connected with the history of gangsta rap. First of all, gangsta rap was born out of the frustration caused by similar experiences of normalised police brutality towards racial minorities. In an interview for HBO's documentary-series *The Defiant Ones* (2017), it was explained by former members of the rap group NWA that the LAPD used excessive force on group members Dr. Dre and Eazy E, making them lie face down on the freeway and pointing guns at them. This event inspired Ice Cube to write *Fuck tha Police* (1988) for NWA out of frustration. (Hughes)

Secondly, gangsta rap worked as a rallying cry for such communities. In Mark Ford's documentary *Uprising: Hip Hop and the LA Riots* (2012), KRS One said about NWA that they "awakened Los Angeles to an old identity Los Angeles forgot about. (...) Hip-hop came out and reminded LA that you are gangster but you are revolutionary" and Snoop Dogg stated "NWA gave us a voice. And on the afternoon of 29 April 1992, it became our battle cry." (14:40)

Thirdly, the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising actually inspired gangsta rap and hip-hop in general. One example is Dr. Dre's album, *The Chronic* (1992), an album that focuses heavily on the uprising and its aftermath. According to Ernest Hardy and August Brown, "not only did it capture the essence of pre-riot, during-the-riots and post-riot energy in the neighbourhoods, it actually featured excerpts from filmmaker Matthew McDaniel, who captured [the reactions of] people outside of First AME Church right after the verdicts were announced. Those excerpts are what give 'The Chronic' its resonance." (2012)

The aforementioned developments in hip-hop lead to what is known today as contemporary rap music, sometimes referred to as the "internet era" because of the world wide web's increasing importance in the music business. Indeed, many contemporary rappers found their fame by uploading songs and freestyles onto online platforms such as Soundcloud and Youtube. This era supposedly began between 2005 and 2007, the years those platforms were created. This means that the artists from this period were born around twenty years later than those from the gangsta rap era.

Because of this twenty-year gap, we can presume that the artists that make up this new generation were children at the time of the 1992 riots, which means that they are familiar with the events but perceived it in a different way than the previous generation did. For example, Kendrick Lamar, who grew up in Compton, Los Angeles, was five years old when the 1992 riots took place. In *County Building Blues* (2012), he remembers being with his father and taking part in the looting but the trauma that developed from seeing this violence at such a young age is also apparent.

The swap meet was the bulls' eye like Taurus's
Murder was the melody you should know what the chorus is
"Papa, you really telling me we can just get more of it
If we run out?" He said, "Lil' nigga, today the poor is rich
Don't tell your mom that you seen a Molotov bomb
If she ask just know you have to lie and son don't forget
Bitches ain't shit, hoes ain't neither
Niggas gon' snitch, watch the company you keeping
And one day you'll put money in the ghetto when you got it
Rather than having to hustle off these Rodney King Riots
(That's right, the mothafuckin' Rodney King...
You was with your daddy on Bullis Road)

As the rapper advances and recalls more of his memories, he finally notices that the story took place in the chaotic context of the 1992 Rodney King riots. In the same way, we will see that other rappers go over similar topics while treating them differently and exhibiting distinct feelings and points of view from the previous generations’.

As readers may have noticed, part of hip-hop history has been left on the side. It extends for about a decade from the late 1990s. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, after the deaths of 2pac (1996) and The Notorious B.I.G. (1997), hip-hop music had lost its two most important flagships. Secondly, while rap music was still present in the music industry at this time, its content was less political than at other points in time. Instead, many young rappers turned to party rap, a subgenre that focused more on bass, drums, and sales rather than on its authenticity and the actual impact of its message (e.g. Nelly, Pitbull, Lil Jon). This led to what some scholars like Leonard N. Moore call “the death of hip-hop, as we knew it”, an era in which “artists whose lyrics reflect a consciousness firmly rooted in the history of the African diaspora are seldom given an audience.” (“Can Hip-Hop Be the New Driving Force behind Increased Racial Integration?” 64-65)

On the Concept of Parenthood

After putting the hip-hop movement into perspective, we will now focus on the other concepts that relate to this study. At the centre of this thesis are concepts that are connected to parenthood, and relationships, more specifically, in the context of the Black family and Black communities in the United States. As Robin D. G. Kelley cleverly points out in his 1998 book titled *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!*, those themes are often associated with narrative and play since childhood for the African American youth. Such, as Kelley explains in the following fragment, is the case in children’s oral games that involve coming up with witty insults directed towards someone’s parent, most often their mother.

For all of us, boys and girls, it was a kind of game or performance. Whether we called it “capping,” “snapping,” “ranking,” “busting,” or simply “the dozens,” most of it was ridiculous, surreal humor bearing very little resemblance to reality: “Your mom's so fat she broke the food chain”; “Your mama's skin's so ashy she was a stand-in for Casper the Friendly Ghost.” (...) More than anything, it was an effort to master the absurd metaphor, an art form intended to entertain rather than to damage. (1)

In this fragment, Robin D. G. Kelley describes the over-the-top linguistic game known as “the dozens,” in which children direct witty outrageous insults towards someone’s mother, using the form “your mama”. Those instances, however, are not actually directed towards a person’s family members. The “your mama” form is really more of a code to suggest that the narrative game is starting.

According to Robin D. G. Kelley, most social scientists have suggested theories trying to explain the dozens, as well as other Black cultural forms of expression, in terms of “expressions of pathology, compensatory behavior, or creative ‘coping mechanisms’ to deal with racism and poverty.” (17) Although he acknowledges that those forms of expression may serve a coping function, Kelley expresses an alternative point of view in which he suggests that aesthetics are perhaps the most important reason for this practice. In his 1998 book, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!*, the scholar argues that,

While some aspects of black expressive cultures certainly help inner city residents deal with and even resist ghetto conditions, most of the literature ignores what these cultural forms mean for the practitioners. Few scholars acknowledge that what might also be at stake here are aesthetics, style, and pleasure. Nor do they recognize black urban culture’s hybridity and internal differences. (17)

Instead, Kelley offers his own interpretation of the dozens in which he argues that “the goal of the dozens and related verbal games is deceptively simple: to get a laugh. The pleasure of the dozens is not the viciousness of the insult but the humour, the creative pun, the outrageous metaphor.” (Kelley 34)

Such, it should be noted, can be equally true for rap music. Although this medium can be and has been used as a medium to denounce oppression and injustices, one should not overlook the most crucial effect it produces on its listeners: pleasure. Rappers find pleasure in the lyrical games and challenges that they are presented with when writing lyrics, and fans most often listen to rap simply because they enjoy the clever wordplays, the instrumental track, the way the artists superposes the words onto the background track (i.e. The rapper’s flow) or, and that is most often the case, a combination of those elements as well as other components that haven’t been mentioned. On this matter, Kelley comments that,

By not acknowledging the deep visceral pleasures black youth derive from making and consuming culture, the stylistic and aesthetic conventions that render the form and

performance more attractive than the message, these authors reduce expressive culture to a political text to be read like a less sophisticated version of *The Nation* or *Radical America*. But what counts more than the story is the “storytelling”, an emcee's verbal facility on the mic, the creative and often hilarious use of puns, metaphors, similes, not to mention the ability to kick some serious slang (or what we might call linguistic inventiveness). (37)

According to the scholar, the traditional academic perspective “ignores the influences of urban toasts and published ‘pimp narratives,’ which became popular during the late 1960s and early 1970s.” Those, he argues, are central to the hip-hop movement as, “in many instances the characters are almost identical, and on occasion, rap artists pay tribute to toasting by lyrically ‘sampling’ these early pimp narratives.” Moreover, Kelley insists on the fact that “the assumption that rappers are merely street journalists does not allow for the playfulness and storytelling that is so central to Hip Hop specifically, and black vernacular culture generally.” (38) Moreover, reducing instances of Black creative expression to mere coping mechanisms also robs them of their value as full-blown art forms.

More than a commentary on Black American expressive culture forms, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!* is a work that analyses the social situation that touches the Black population and the way in which other Americans perceive it. D. G. Kelley aims to offer a perspective that differs from that of the so-called “experts” that claim systemic racial injustices are a thing of the past, and that “the failure of the black poor to lift themselves out of poverty has to be found in their behavior or their culture,” as they blame “the people themselves, our criminally minded youth, our deadbeat daddies, and our welfare-dependent mamas.” (8)

This erroneous and overly simplified analysis of a circumstance that is much more complex is pertinent to this thesis because, as we will observe further, a similar stereotyped perception of the facts sometimes serves as the basis for hip-hop narratives (e.g. gangsta rap and pimp narratives). Indeed, on the topic of authenticity in commercial rap music, Kelley argues that “what passed as ‘authentic’ ghetto culture was as much a product of market forces and the commercial appropriation of urban styles,” (Kelley 26) which suggests that such appropriation can take the form of the aforementioned stereotypes, creating a sort of fake —commercialised— authenticity.

History of the Ghetto and Its Paradigms

Rap music and urban American Black culture, in general, are often linked with the specific setting known as “the ghetto”, a place that is often perceived, in the public eye, as a dangerous and mysterious jungle made of concrete, where crime is rampant and survival is an everyday struggle. This stereotypical view of the ghetto served distinct agendas, from politicians aiming to sow fear, to record companies and artists trying to profit off of “street credibility.”

Although the word “ghetto” was first used to talk about segregated Jewish neighbourhoods in Italy, from the year 1516, then, later, with the rise of Nazi Germany, it is nowadays most often used to refer to Black neighbourhoods in the United States. (Schwartz) The two share similarities, mainly the segregation of a certain ethnic group to a specific geographic area. Schwartz insists, however, on the fact that those two shouldn’t be confused. Although they resemble each other in some aspects, the inhabitants of Jewish and Black ghettos have had very contrasting experiences. One key difference between the two is that, as is explained in the following extract from Daniel B. Schwartz’s *Ghetto: History of a Word* (2019), while both situations of segregation started by being enforced by law, the modern-day Black ghetto persists mainly because of social and economic reasons.

In 1910, Baltimore became the first city to pass a municipal zoning ordinance that divided every street into black and white blocks. The ordinance forbade the sale of a home to a black on a block in which the majority of residents were white, and vice versa. Its example was soon copied by other cities throughout the South and Midwest, including Richmond, Atlanta, New Orleans, Oklahoma City, St. Louis, and Louisville. (Schwartz 166-167)

This has to do with the genesis of the Black American ghetto and the fact that “the contemporary state was shaped in profound ways by its colonial past, as were its current patterns of class and ethnic relations.” (Young 72) Indeed, after segregation laws were abolished, ethnic minority neighbourhoods still could not easily benefit from the same social advantages that were available in other parts of the cities. As Kelley argues,

We did get our “piece of the rock,” but at what cost? For many urban residents left behind in the nation's "chocolate cities" while the upwardly mobile fled to “vanilla suburbs,” once the victory parties were over they had a difficult time obtaining city services, affordable housing, or improved schools. In some cases, local politicians

consciously tied their fate to big business and growing downtown entrepreneurs. Some black citizens began to question whether having an African American in city hall even made a difference. (...) Permanent unemployment and underemployment became a way of life. (Kelley 6-7)

According to Elijah Anderson, processes such as red-lining and white flight were already beginning to be noticeable at the end of World War II. The expert argues that, “from the point of view of many whites, black people were to be contained in the ghetto. Blacks (...) found acceptance and security there that to some degree countered the hostile discrimination they faced outside their community,” (10) hence a natural tendency for self-segregation in Black communities.

The public image of the ghetto deteriorated further after violent events such as the Watts riots of 1965 and the 1992 Los Angeles “Rodney King” riots, leading to an accentuation of the public perception of the ghetto “as a powder keg packed with anger just waiting to explode in looting and burning. (...) In more recent times, broadcast and print media consistently reinforce the notion of the black ghetto as a chaotic place where crime and mayhem are common.” (Anderson 10)

As the ghetto became a place to flee in the eyes of the general public, “The black poor became more isolated in urban ghettos, increasingly segregated from middle-income blacks” (Jargowsky 302). Because of the fact that lower-class Black families grew increasingly separated from middle and higher class Black families, as well as from the white communities, and of the aforementioned social disadvantages and their consequences, “the inner-city poor are still commonly regarded as caught in a ‘tangle of pathology’ (Moynihan 1965) that reproduces a cycle or culture of poverty through generations of men who fail as providers, women who bear children ‘out of wedlock’ and youths who grow up without discipline.” (Anderson 14)

Concurrently, the inner-city ghetto became increasingly impoverished and socially isolated, most often because of structural changes in the economy that limited the availability of high-wage, low-skilled industrial jobs (Wilson 1987, 1997; Anderson 1990). These shifts undermined the quality of life in many inner-city communities and accelerated the departure of well-educated, middle-class families for neighborhoods with better schools and services. This exodus deprived the black community of many of its leaders and role models. (...) For many in this community, jobs that pay a living wage are almost nonexistent, and mutual support networks have frayed. Children grow up without two parents, and sometimes none. (Anderson 13-14)

Because of this, “the children of such ghetto residents are said to be caught in a cycle of deprivation from which there is little chance of escape.” (Jargowsky 303) This cycle, as is highlighted in the corpus analysis section of this thesis, constitutes one of the central topics in family-related rap lyrics.

Generally speaking, it is fair to say that the ghetto has often been used as a romanticised place that works as a marketing strategy for rap music. Nonetheless, it is also a reality that racial minorities in America have been disadvantaged in their search for jobs and decent living conditions. The result of class segregation and limited employment opportunities led to a necessity for parallel markets, hence a stronger presence of drugs and overall crime in the deprived areas. Because of the hindering circumstances that exist for the population living in ghettos, some believe that those families are stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty.

The “Real N****”

An expression that is often heard in rap music, is that of the “real nigga” or the “real G”. Such is the case, for instance in Eazy-E’s “Real Muthaphuckkin G’s” (1993) and in Dr. Dre’s “What’s the Difference” (1999), which quotes the following line: “But you was a real nigga, I could sense it in you.” The repeated use of such terms indicates the highly emphasised importance that is given to authenticity—or “realness”—in the rap milieu. As a genre that has mainly been carried by oppressed racial minorities, it makes sense for those communities to be suffering from a fear of their cultures and identities being absorbed or erased by the dominating (White American) culture, hence the central place of the term “real” in hip-hop.

Several scholars have tried to explain the term “real nigga.” The fact that it has been used to denote the authentic bearers of Black culture with a strong emphasis on the word “authentic,” is one of the only constants. They are said to have “Soul” and to adopt a “cool pose”—which have been rationalised by some scholars as coping mechanisms and ways of navigating life in ghetto conditions. In *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!*, Robin D. G. Kelley quotes Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Bilson explaining the cool pose, “a ritualized form of

masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control.” (31) This practice highlights the importance of appearances, especially that of being in control at all times.

According to Kelley, “most social scientists believed they knew what ‘authentic Negro culture’ was before they entered the field. The ‘real Negroes’ were the young jobless men hanging out on the corner passing the bottle, the brothers with the nastiest verbal repertoire, the pimps and hustlers, and the single mothers who raised streetwise kids who began cursing before they could walk.” (20) We can thus begin to see an image forming based on this previous description. This image, however, is not an overwhelmingly positive one as this would mean that the authenticity of this culture comes from quite negative and nihilistic traits of extremely stereotypical —almost archetypal— characters.

It should however be noted that, although “those at the forefront of poverty studies treat culture as if it were a set of behaviors [and] assume that there is one identifiable ghetto culture, and what they observed was it,” (Kelley 22) Kelley does make a case against such gross oversimplification. Instead, the scholar argues in favour of John Langston Gwaltney perspective of a “core Black culture,” which “incorporates a diverse and contradictory range of practices, attitudes, and relationships that are dynamic, historically situated, and ethnically hybrid.” (Kelley 22)

In light of this, it is also crucial to highlight the fact that, even though expressive art forms such as rap music and the other elements of hip-hop culture should not exclusively be interpreted as coping mechanisms, that is not to say that they are solely centred around aesthetics. Hip-hop is a substantial culture in terms of content variety and subgenres. It would thus be a mistake to look upon it as one unified trend. Rap music can feature first-degree representations and analyses of the artist’s environment and an “our art is a reflection of our reality” (Ice Cube) mentality, while it can also present parodies and travesties based on the stereotypical perception that some outsiders have of the same environment, or even absurd metaphors that display bravado to the extreme, as was the case with the dozens. Notwithstanding, rap songs tend to be an amalgam of several distinct traits.

Some irony lies in the aforementioned simplifications that have been made in the judging of Black culture and hip-hop as such traits have often been purposefully displayed by commercially successful rap artists. This even served as the basis for the creation of the entire subgenre known as “gangsta rap” —although those elements can be found, to varying degrees, in other rap subgenres— This specific explanation of the term correlates with Eazy E’s “Real Muthaphuckkin G’s,” as, in hip-hop culture, it is well known that a “G” stands for a gangster. Similar values and archetypes are highlighted by Jennifer C. Lena in the following extract from her 2006 article, “Social Context and Musical Content of Rap Music, 1979-1995”:

Scholars have noted that across sub-genre styles, hardcore rap lyrics feature a “hustler” as a protagonist (Krimm 2000, Rose 1994a). The hustler dominates or victimizes others using force and seduction; hustlers are either “baaadmen” who dominate through force and intimidation or pimps (macks or players). The pimp and the baaadman are anti-heroes —representations of men who can control others physically or lyrically. As anti-heroes, pimps and baaadmen personify accomplishment against the odds; they live in a world of reverse power where the oppressed are powerful (Gates 1988, Kelley 1996, Roberts 1989, Smitherman 1997, Toop 1991). The protagonists of hardcore rap have one foot in the world of extreme bourgeois consumption and success and the other in the ghetto. (486)

However, as will be further developed subsequently in this text, the term “real nigga” has also been used in an entirely different way to denote a responsible person who acknowledges their responsibility towards their community and their loved ones.

An additional element that can be linked to “realness” and authenticity lies in the idea of “keeping it real”, meaning staying true to oneself and one’s origins. In other words, to stay authentic, one must not forget their background or sell out. In Lena’s words,

Cautionary tales like Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde’s “Fast Life” (Profile Records 1981) or Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message” (The Message, Sugarhill Records 1982) were located in particular surroundings and evoked the physical and social deprivation faced by many rappers and their families. These rap lyrics linked “representin’ the ghetto” with “keepin’ it real.” Sincerity and a ghetto identity were deeply associated in early rap lyrics, a facet of “authenticity work.” (Peterson 2005) The early focus of rap lyrics on local people, places and things could reasonably be a function of familiarity alone. These artists used for inspiration the source material in their environments. Rappers were particularly likely to respond to the impact of the increasing commercialization of rap on their local environment. Rappers often forswore the corrupt values of commercial enterprise and instead promoted an ethos akin to Bourdieu’s conception of ‘art for art’s sake.’ (487-489)”

From this fragment, we can understand the importance of “keeping it real,” which can be identified with several different elements of rap music. The one element that Jennifer C. Lena highlights is the lyrical topic of the ghetto, which she calls “representin’ the ghetto.” Although the expert suggests that the very reason for the presence of this topic in early rap texts could be “a function of familiarity,” it has very much been associated with authenticity in contemporary rap music.

Concluding the Literature Review

To conclude, this literature review serves the purpose of exploring the concepts that are essential to this thesis: rap music, family relationships, and the public perception of Black families and culture in the United States. The first part of this review focuses on hip-hop culture and, more specifically on the origins of rap music and its evolution throughout the previous half century, until it became the full-blown musical genre that it is today, including a wide variety of subgenres and topics, some of which are profoundly political and “conscious.”

Regarding the topic of family relationships in Black American families, the first observation that has been put forward is that of the importance of the maternal figure in children’s narrative play, based on “the dozens”. The focus was then directed towards the existing scholarly debates on Black arts as coping mechanisms. Robin D. G. Kelley’s *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!* served to offer some answers, notably because of the expert’s belief that the Black youths take part in such narrative games primarily for the sake of aesthetics and pleasure. It should be emphasised that such a discussion applies to Black arts in general, including rap music, as experts have had a tendency to rationalise Black expressive forms as coping mechanisms, thus overlooking their aesthetic and pleasure-inducing qualities.

The term “ghetto” has also been examined, given its relevance to contemporary urban Black art forms. Its European origins have been discussed as well as how the historical Jewish ghetto relates to the contemporary notion of the Black ghetto. As segregation legislatures disappeared, the economic system took over as a way to maintain racial separation, except that wealthier Black families were now able to leave ghettos, thus leaving the poorer Black families in complete isolation from the middle and higher class Blacks.

As its public image deteriorated because of the general poverty and the violent events that took place there (e.g. 1992 Los Angeles Riots), the ghetto came to be perceived in an increasingly stereotypical and simplified fashion, as “a chaotic place where crime and mayhem are common,” (Anderson 10) and where “the children (...) are said to be caught in a cycle of deprivation from which there is little chance of escape.” (Jargowsky 303) This has had the side effect of creating a notorious, and infamous, playground that rappers could use to tell their sometimes —ironically stereotypical or— archetypal stories.

Finally, the focus was shifted towards the concept of “realness” or authenticity in the hip-hop world. The expression of the “real nigga”, as it appears repeatedly in rap lyrics, was explained in terms of “young jobless men hanging out on the corner passing the bottle, the brothers with the nastiest verbal repertoire, the pimps and hustlers, and the single mothers who raised streetwise kids who began cursing before they could walk.” (Kelley 20) However, as is observed later in this thesis, it should be noted that the term has also been used to refer to characters displaying characteristics that are opposed to the aforementioned ones, instead, valuing one’s capacity to show responsible behaviours.

3. Methodology and Corpus

Family Relationships in Rap Music

The methodology that has been chosen for this thesis is that of a sociologically-focused literary —lyrical— analysis, meaning that the lyrics from distinct albums will be discussed with the aforementioned theoretical —sociological— elements in mind. The topics are divided into chapters based on a classification that was partly inspired by Matthew Oware’s 2012 article, “Decent Daddy, Imperfect Daddy: Black Male Rap Artists’ Views of Fatherhood and the Family.” In his article, Matthew Oware argues that the rap artists from his sample are “decent daddies because they financially support and convey love toward their children and Embrace the notion of family. Yet, they are imperfect daddies because of the (...) stained relationships they have with the mothers of their children.” (341) To illustrate his argument, the scholar uses content analysis to explore the themes of parenthood and family as they are treated in Black Male Rap artists’ creative works. He distinguishes those themes into the following five distinct parts: “Family First”, “Dear Momma”, “Baby Mama”, “Biological Father” and “My Seed”. The first of the aforementioned sections, “Family First”, focuses on how rap artists display a “positive attitude toward marriage and family when discussed.” (334) Indeed, Oware finds that some rappers —he gives the example of T.I.— offer a perspective in which “family takes primacy over friends, who are ephemeral.” (334) The theme of providing for one’s family is shown to have a specific importance in some hip-hop texts, as the scholar argues that “what comes off as bravado and braggadocio may be a sincere effort (...) to financially provide for yet-to-be-born family members.” (335) “Although extremely rare (less than 1%), several rappers expressed affirming and positive feelings toward marriage.” (335) It is important to note, however, that, as is displayed in Nas’s song titled “Getting Married”, artists sometimes exhibit a “stereotypical, possibly patriarchal, view of marriage, wherein there are multiple children (...) plus a wife who cooks (...), yet the underlying desire for a sincere and loving partnership with another person comes through.” (335)

Oware’s “Dear Momma” chapter explores the way “artists conveyed their love, protection, and material support toward their mothers.” (334) As he further observes, “artists talked about their mothers in compassionate and caring ways. (...) Some rappers even dedicated entire songs to their mothers.” (335-336) The scholar highlights three aspects that

are central to the theme: financial support for mothers, the strong need to protect mothers, and the expression of gratitude, appreciation and love for mothers. After providing examples to illustrate his claims, he adds that “these rap artists, who many times depict themselves as hard and prone to violence if provoked, do not have a problem demonstrating their “soft spots” for their mothers.” (337)

The chapter titled “Baby Mama” studies how “the biological mothers of the rappers’ children —baby mamas— were discussed in unflattering terms.” (334) From the “gold digger” stereotype to depictions of domestic violence, Matthew Oware explains the way that the mothers of the artists’ children are usually depicted in negative terms, in their texts. Oware however also notes the fact that there are some instances of rappers, such as The Game, showing appreciation towards their baby mamas, although they are a minority.

Oware’s chapter dedicated to the figure of the “Biological Father” examines the varied ways in which rap artists describe their relationships with their fathers. Oware states that “Fathers of rappers were neither honoured nor overly demonized. Some rappers had upbeat and affirming relationships with their paternal figures while others expressed anger toward them because of their absence.” (338) In other words, “when done, some rappers poignantly rhymed about the relationships with their fathers, yet more expressed anger and sadness toward them.” (334) While he discusses the involvement, or lack thereof, of the rappers’ fathers, the scholar also examines the choices that those biological fathers are remembered for and the types of examples they set for their children, such as employing illegal means to provide for their families.

Finally, “My Seed” investigates how rappers depict their —sometimes hypothetical— relationship with their offspring. According to Matthew Oware, “all artists fully embraced their roles as fathers. Making sure their children were taken care of, financially, was of primary importance to rap artists.” (339) Much like they do with their mothers, the artists openly express their soft spot when it comes to their children. Overall, the scholar finds that,

Although not a predominate theme in most rap songs, Black male artists depict themselves as “decent daddies” and, surprisingly, adhere to Anderson's (1999) decent family typology. These artists contradict popular notions of black male parental irresponsibility, rhyming about providing, protecting, and loving their mothers and

children. Yet, these findings reveal a mixed view of the mothers of their children and their biological fathers. In the end, even though many rap artists characterize themselves as decent, they are imperfect. (328)

In the minority of songs in which rappers discussed themes related to the family, they displayed mainly negative feelings towards their, often absent, biological fathers, as well as towards the mothers of their children. “Baby mamas were depicted as “gold diggers,” “loose,” and untrustworthy.” (341) On the other hand, the rappers’ mothers and children were —nearly— consistently portrayed in a good light. “Specifically, artists adored their mothers and children, dedicating entire songs to both in some cases.” (341)

“Whether artists genuinely mean what they say or not, they are projecting and rapping in a manner that sends the message (however nominal) that they care about their mothers and children, scorn the mother of their children, and are ambivalent about their fathers —not part of a typical hyper-masculine presentation of self (except in the case of anger towards their “baby mamas”). (343)

While summing up the results of his investigation, Matthew Oware also points to an important element. The scholar suggests that, regardless of whether the artists actually mean what they sing, they portray themselves as “non-violent and caring” when discussing their mothers, their children and, sometimes, their fathers. “Specifically, they are displaying a range of human emotions —anger, disdain, sadness, love, happiness— that goes unrecognized by critics and many times, defenders of this genre of music in hip hop research.” (343)

By grouping his work into five different sections, Matthew Oware is basing his organisation on different criteria. The first section, “Family First,” confronts ideas based on the general concept of family, whereas the other four sections address different types of relationships within the family. In this thesis, the aim is to study a corpus of contemporary rap music by focusing on the different family relationships, rather than the general concept of the family. For this reason, there will not be a section equivalent to Matthew Oware’s “Family First”.

In the previously discussed article, Matthew Oware addresses the role of surrogate father figures. He argues that “Black males who are not biological fathers of children stepped in to provide support and guidance where needed” (221), as “research has shown that if not the estranged father, then mothers rely on their own brothers, uncles, or other male figures to

discipline and provide guidance for their children.” (Jordan-Zachery, Reynolds and Richardson in Oware (342), While those surrogate paternal figures and their importance are discussed, they are not granted a section in the article. In view of the role they play, this work will offer a section dedicated to “Role Modelz”. The structure of this work should thus be as follows.

Firstly, “The Maternal” consists of a chapter containing a section on the figure of the mother —“Dear Momma”— as well as a section on the partners, former partners and potential partners —“Baby Mama”. Secondly, “The Paternal,” containing a section dedicated to addressing the figure of “The Father” and another section on “Role Modelz”, including surrogate father figures as well as other, more distant, role models. Finally, the last section, “My Seed,” addresses the rappers —sometimes hypothetical— children and the concept of the “cycle of poverty,” which was previously discussed in the section of this work dedicated to the ghetto.

Regarding his work, Matthew Oware acknowledges a limitation in the “exclusive analysis of artists who sell platinum albums.” (343) and suggests that “Future research should expand analysis to artists who have albums that are not platinum, (...) artists whose intent is not necessarily for widespread commercial success may have messages that align more closely or differ drastically from the findings of this work.” (344) A focus on less famous rap artists would provide a different perspective on this research as according to Jennifer C. Lena, “There is evidence that record labels encouraged rap artists to produce prurient content” (480) and “Record label Executives exercise censorship and manipulate content in Hip Hop away from things they think will get them into political trouble... and toward that which they think will sell mightily without too much protest.” (Rose 223 in Oware 342) For this reason, the decision was made to work on a corpus made of a variety of rap artists, some of which are signed to commercial labels, while others pride themselves in the production of independent music. The corpus features music made by Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Childish Gambino, Joey Bada\$\$ and the Flatbush Zombies.

Corpus: Selected Artists

The corpus for this thesis was selected from the works of four rappers and one rap band, all of whom are Black American males: Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Childish Gambino, Joey Bada\$\$ and the Flatbush Zombies. As will be observed from each of the act's short description, this sample was selected in order to have some geographical diversity, within the USA, and to be able to make a distinction between music that was co-signed by commercial labels, independent —“indie”— labels, or no label at all.

Kendrick Lamar is a rapper from Compton, California. He is known as a “Pulitzer Prize-winning poet laureate of hip-hop.” (Robinson) Indeed, his fourth studio album, *DAMN.* (2018), was the first non-jazz or classical album to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Music. This thesis discusses *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (2012), *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) and the acclaimed *DAMN.* (2017), as well as *Black Panther: The Album* (2018), a soundtrack to the eponymous film, which contains 14 songs written and produced by Kendrick Lamar. All four of those albums were released under contracts with Top Dawg Entertainment, an independent label, and Aftermath Entertainment, a subsidiary of Interscope Records, which is owned by Universal Music Group. Kendrick Lamar is thus mainly considered a commercial artist for the purposes of this thesis.

J. Cole, another commercial rap artist, was born on a military base in Germany and raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina. He has reached commercial success after becoming the first artist to sign a contract with Jay-Z's label, Roc Nation, in 2009. According to the label's website, “all four of Cole's full-length albums have debuted at #1 on *Billboard* Charts, and have gone platinum.” (“J. Cole”, Roc Nation) This thesis will touch on J. Cole's *Born Sinner* (2013), *2014 Forest Hills Drive* (2014), *4 Your Eyez Only* (2016), and *KOD* (2018), all of which are signed to Roc Nation, Columbia Records, and Dreamville Records, a label that was co-founded by Cole and that is distributed by Interscope Records (Universal). In July 2020, the website *The Player's Tribune* revealed that J. Cole is married and the father of two children, the first of which was born shortly after the release of *4 Your Eyez Only* (J. Cole).

Childish Gambino is the stage name of Donald Glover, who was previously known as an actor and a comedian. Before releasing his first album, Glover signed a contract with Glassnote Records, an independent label founded by Daniel Glass. This means that three of

Childish Gambino's albums featured in this thesis are signed to Glassnote Records: *Because the Internet* (2013), *Kauai* (2014) and *"Awaken, My Love!"* (2016), while Gambino's last album, *3.15.20* (2020) was released via RCA records, which is owned by Sony Music Entertainment. Although Childish Gambino can technically be considered a rap artist, strong influences from other genres such as R&B, soul and funk can be heard in his music. *"Awaken, My Love!"* (2016), for instance, is closer to the genre of soul, while *3.15.20* (2020) could be labelled as experimental or alternative hip-hop. The stylistic diversity reveals an artist who could qualify as a modern-day "renaissance man", given the varied artistic fields in which he has proven himself. It should thus be highlighted that Childish Gambino's first three albums were released through an independent label, while his last album was released by a commercial label. Glover is the father of three children who were born in 2016, 2018 and 2020, which, we will observe through the lyrical analysis of his work, has had an impact on his music.

Joey Bada\$\$ is a young artist from Brooklyn. He is of Caribbean descent as his mother is of Saint Lucian origin (Ortiz) and his father, from Jamaica, as is mentioned in his song, "Big Dusty" (2015). In this thesis, I will discuss two of his full-length albums and two EPs. The *Summer Knights* EP (2013), which was signed to Cinematic Music Group—an independent label distributed by The Orchard (a subsidiary of Sony Music)—, Relentless Records—a British independent record label owned by Sony Music—, and RED—a division that was owned by Sony Music and merged under The Orchard in 2017. *B4.Da.\$\$* (2015) was signed by those same three labels, as well as Pro Era, an independent label that is owned by Cinematic Music Group and was founded by the eponymous hip-hop group, of which Bada\$\$ is a member. *All-Amerikkkan Bada\$\$* (2017) was released under Pro Era and Cinematic. The *Light Pack* was released in 2020 under Pro Era and Columbia, which is also owned by Sony. Joey Bada\$\$ should thus be considered mainly independent, although his music is distributed by bigger commercial labels.

With similar —Caribbean— roots, The Flatbush Zombies are a band made of three male rappers: Meechy Darko, Zombie Juice and Erick Arc Elliott, the latter also working as the group's producer. The three members were all born in Brooklyn and met at a young age, bonding over their passion for anime and wrestling. This group presents a specific interest for this research because they are completely independent—as they put it, "1000% Independent Believe That" (Glorious Dead Recordings). Unlike Childish Gambino and Joey Bada\$\$, who

are signed to indie labels, which are owned or distributed by larger corporations, the Flatbush Zombies founded Glorious Dead Recordings, a label that is fully managed by the group. They released *3001: A Laced Odyssey* (2016), *Vacation in Hell* (2018), and the *Now, More Than Ever* EP (2020) under Glorious Dead Recordings. The first of their work that will be discussed in this thesis, the *Clockwork Indigo* EP (2014), is a collaborative work that was recorded by the Flatbush Zombies and, Brooklyn-native duo, The Underachievers, under the name of Clockwork Indigo. It was self-released under Electric KoolAde Records, another self-founded independent label.

Overall, we see that, out of the selected artists, two rappers, J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar, released their albums on major, “commercial” labels. Joey Bada\$\$ and Childish Gambino, on the other hand, mainly worked with independent labels such as Cinematic and Glassnote, although it is important to highlight the fact that Childish Gambino’s latest album, *3.15.20*, was signed to RCA Records, which is owned by Sony Entertainment. It should also be noted that Joey Bada\$\$’s work was mainly signed to independent labels that are distributed to or affiliated with Sony Entertainment. The Flatbush Zombies are the only artists that can be considered completely independent, as *Clockwork Indigo* (2014) was self-released under ElectricKoolAde Records and the other three records were released under The Glorious Dead Recordings, both labels that were created by the Flatbush Zombies. Their independence is a part of their identity as their website states that they are “1000% Independent Believe That” (thegloriousdead.com). This lineup should make it possible to find out whether a difference is apparent between the way independent and commercial rappers address the question of parenthood and family relations.

Apostrophe

The apostrophe, an address to a person or personified object that is not present, is a textual component that occurs in some of the texts that are analysed further in this thesis. It presents a specific interest to this research in situations in which the rappers address their loved ones through their music. It should be noted that an apostrophe can also occur in situations in which the addressees are not living people, or not able to take notice of them at the time that they are being written or spoken. Such is the case in the event of deceased parents and notably within the genre of the “letter to the child.” More specifically, J. Cole’s 4

Your Eyez Only presents an innovative way of treating the apostrophe. The album, which was released in 2014, contains a recurring theme: the death of the rapper's friend, James McMillan Jr.⁴ The final track, eponymous to the album, contains an apostrophe to James's daughter. In this case, it is J. Cole that is addressing her, on behalf of his late friend James. This address is discussed in further details in the chapter of this thesis dedicated to the relationships between the rappers and their children.

Now that the methodology and structure of this work have been articulated, the following chapters of this thesis focus on the textual analysis of the selected albums. After a short section describing the initial observations that arose after the study of the corpus, the final three chapters are dedicated to the study of the different types of relationships that are discussed by the rappers. Firstly, a section on "The Maternal", which is followed by the chapter on "The Paternal", and, finally, the section dedicated to the artists' children, entitled "My Seed."

⁴ According to the Genius website, "James McMillan Jr" is a made-up name that J. Cole used on this album to talk about his deceased friend while maintaining the privacy of James's family. (Kennedy)

4. Initial observations

The textual analysis was carried out by examining the lyrical contents from the twenty selected musical works —four solo artists and one group, four albums/EPs per artist/group— and isolating a total of 760 occurrences of text relating to the aforementioned themes. As is shown in the ensuing chart (fig. 1), the 760 selected occurrences were divided as follows. 367 occurrences (48.29%) were classified in the “Baby Mama” category. 120 instances (15.79%) related to the topic of children and were classified under “My Seed.” There were 111 occurrences (14.61%) of lyrics mentioning the figure of the Mother. 54 occurrences (7.11%) were relating to the topic of “Role Modelz.” 45 (5.92%) mentions of the figure of the Father were made, 30 (3.95%) for topics related to the cycle of poverty, 19 (2.5%) mentions of Grandparents and, finally, 14 occurrences (1.84%) of text explicitly mentioning the importance of “realness.” For this last topic, it should be noted that this low percentage does not, in fact, reflect the low importance of the topic. Those occurrences only cover cases in which realness is explicitly discussed and do not include the artists’ choice of vocabulary and slang, occasional accents, choices of topics, etc., indicating the high importance given by rappers to their seeming “real.” Overall, although some rappers —J. Cole and Childish Gambino— dedicate songs to specific members of their families, the parental relationships are usually only discussed in a few lines of the rap songs and constitute minor themes.

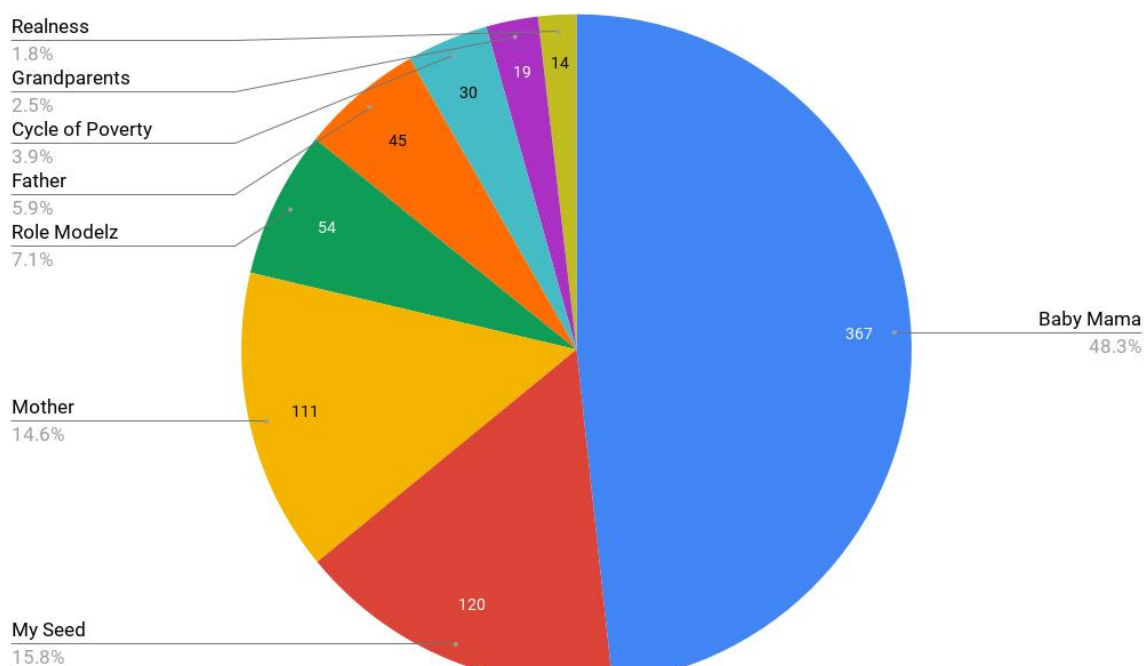


Fig. 1: Repartition of occurrences in the different categories

5. The Maternal: Mother Figures and Baby Mamas

This chapter focuses on the feminine and maternal figures that can be found in the texts from the corpus. It is divided in two parts, which correspond to the main different types of relationships with female characters that the rappers mention in their lyrics: the relationship that they pursue with partners, previous partners and potential partners —“Baby Mamas, Lyrical Games and Trust Issues in the Relationship”—, and the relationships that exists between them and their mothers —“Dear Momma”— and potential alternative mother figures, such as their grandmothers.

More specifically, the first section of this chapter, “Baby Mamas”, discusses a series of recurrent phenomena that can be observed in the rap texts that discuss such relationships with partners. Firstly, this section studies the phenomenon of the objectification of females, which appears to be nearly ubiquitous in the selected sample. It is revealed that most of the instances of objectification happen in a sort of hip-hop lyrical game in which the rappers display braggadocio and a macho state of mind through the use of excessive, sometimes absurd lyrical forms. Secondly, Love themes are focused on, taking notice of the absence of a balance throughout the sample as only two out of the five selected acts have shown interest in treating such topics. Thirdly, this section addresses the depiction of unfaithfulness by rappers, which shows a double standard when it comes to men and women committing the unlawful acts. Indeed, whereas the women degraded for their unfaithfulness, the male rappers tend to react to their own betrayals by bragging, as it is displayed as a sort of sexual prowess. Fourthly, a section dedicated to previous partners discusses the difference that can be observed in how rappers treat their “exes” and their “baby mamas”. Whereas exes appear to be remembered in an ambiguous way, some rappers expressing regrets while others show the opposite, baby mamas are always depicted in a negative light, as manipulative women. Overall, this section highlights the difficulty for men and women to establish strong and healthy relationships, as both parties seem to be only interested in what they can gain from each other —mainly sex for men and money for women—, which can also be a way for one to distanciate themselves from their emotions, out of the fear of being used.

In the second half of this chapter, the emphasis shifts towards the mother and alternative mother figures. The textual analysis reveals that the rapper’s biological mothers are mainly depicted as strong women that fought the hard socio-economic circumstances that

they experienced, often working several jobs in order to support their households. Two exceptions are present in the selected corpus, however, as Childish Gambino does not mention any economic struggle and J. Cole's mother is not represented as an incredibly strong woman, because of her suffering from addiction. That being said, the rapper does not love her any less for it. Although he fled the house as a young adult, he now expresses regrets for doing so. This analysis of the maternal figure also focuses on birth and how it is mainly used by rappers to refer to themselves. In the case in which they are addressing this topic seriously, they tend to use a "coming up from the bottom" narrative, while, when they treat the topic figuratively, they mainly use excessive or outrageous metaphors. The mothers themselves can sometimes be heard on the albums, as is the case in Joey Bada\$\$'s and Kendrick Lamar's work. In the case of the former, the woman is discussing deep themes while her son is listening religiously, which depicts her as a wise, mystical woman with a deeper understanding of the world we live in. Kendrick Lamar's mother, however, appears as a much more humble woman, as she discusses everyday themes instead of sharing her wisdom. When it comes to alternative mother figures, grandmothers are close to the only visible characters. Those grandmothers are shown as being deeply caring and religious, and can also be a way for rappers to address previous generations and older topics, such as the heritage of slavery in America.

Baby Mamas, Lyrical Games and Trust Issues in the Relationship

As was noted in the initial observations of this analysis, almost half (48.29%) of the occurrences found in the corpus were classified under the "Baby Mama" category, regrouping all instances of text relating to partnerships, including previous partners and potential future partners. This high figure is mainly caused by two elements: the objectification of women, which accounts for slightly over half of the whole "Baby Mama" category, and the love-themed songs.

Firstly, by "objectification," it is meant that female characters are mentioned in lyrics that objectify or use them—in a negative way—for lyrical purposes. They often do so in an extravagant way that is reminiscent of the dozens, in order to show bravado or braggadocio, meaning that the rappers are boldly attempting to impress their peers by displaying excessive and boastful behaviour. For instance, in the Flatbush Zombies' song, "iamlegend" (2020), Meechy Darko sings the following lines:

I done had chicks cross every border
Just to ride and slide they tight vagina on this anaconda.

In those two lines, the rapper brags about both his success with women and the size of his sexual organ, making it a particularly direct, macho and childish attempt at displaying masculine superiority. The women that are mentioned in such lyrics are not attributed any humanising characteristics. They are only praised for their physical assets, not for their intelligence or personalities, and are mainly referred to in terms of “bitches” or “hoes.” It should, however, be highlighted that such objectifying practices seem to display more of a lyrical game, like the dozens, than an actual statement about the artists’ feelings towards members of the opposite sex. Indeed, more often than not, they do not play a great role in the actual message of a song. Instead, they serve as a way to display an extravagant form of penmanship. According to Robin D. G. Kelley, such “exaggerated and invented boasts (...) should sometimes be regarded as part of a larger set of signifying practices. Growing out of a much older set of cultural practices, these masculinist narratives are essentially verbal duels over who is the ‘baddest.’” (38) This is made very clear in songs such as Kendrick Lamar’s “Backseat Freestyle” (2012), which contains the following lines.

I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel Tower
So I can fuck the world for seventy-two hours
Goddamn I got bitches, damn I got bitches
Damn I got bitches: wifey, girlfriend and mistress

In the first two of those lines, it is the obvious absurdity and excessiveness of Kendrick Lamar’s comment that aim to produce laughter and pleasure in the listeners. It is obviously biologically impossible for his sexual organ to reach the size of 324 metres. The sheer absurdity of this proposition is reminiscent of the type of wit that was used by children in the dozens.

Second came the love songs and love-related themes. By love themes, what is meant is a song, or a section of a song, that is completely dedicated to an artist’s or character’s partner or idealised partner. While most of the rappers showed little to no interest in love themes, Childish Gambino and J. Cole proved to be exceptions. In the case of Childish Gambino, this can be explained by the recurrence of the theme in *Because the Internet* (2013), which is centred around a character that experiences loneliness, and in *Kauai* (2014), an EP that mainly

focuses on summer vibes and summer flings. J. Cole, however, gives us some insight into his actual life as he writes songs that are dedicated to his partner. The following fragment, for instance, was taken from his 2016 song, “foldin clothes”, a song in which Cole reflects on “the simple things that say ‘I love you’” and thanks his partner for providing support for him on a daily basis.

I wanna fold clothes for you
I wanna make you feel good
Baby, I wanna do the right things they
Feel so much better than the wrong things
I said I wanna fold clothes for you
I wanna make you feel good
Baby, I wanna do the right things they
Feel so much better than the wrong things

After removing the contents of the aforementioned categories, we are left with three noteworthy types of lyrics. They are the lyrics that mention the addressee’s partner, unfaithfulness, and previous partners. The first of those categories takes a form in the second person and links with the aforementioned objectification of women in that it uses them as a means. In this case, they are used to formulate an insult that is aimed towards the addressee, often in the shape of the rapper describing pursuing relationships with the lady. For instance, in “95 Till Infinity” (2013), Joey Bada\$\$ states the following line.

I’m in the walls while you bugging her up
I’ll do your girl like this beat, straight fucking it up

Although the second line clarifies Joey’s message, the first one might not be clear at first glance. “I’m in the walls while you bugging her up” may be understood as Joey saying that he is having sexual relations with this —“your”— girl while her partner —“you”— is annoying —“bugging”— her. We can understand that the girl is ignoring her partner’s phone calls and text messages. The walls can be interpreted as a metaphor for the female sexual organ, as can be found in rap lyrics from other songs and artists. Indeed, a similar metaphor can be found in Kendrick Lamar’s “These Walls” (2015).

Landlord said these walls vacant more than a minute
These walls are vulnerable, exclamation
Interior pink, color coordinated
I interrogated every nook and cranny

I mean, it's still amazing, before they couldn't stand me
These walls want to cry tears
These walls happier when I'm here
These walls never could hold up
Every time I come around, demolition might crush

In Kendrick Lamar's "These Walls" (2015), the walls-vagina metaphor is pushed even further than in Joey Bada\$\$'s song. Kendrick makes use of the "landlord" figure, which corresponds to the person who owns these walls: the woman. As the woman says that these walls have been "vacant" for quite some time, she is telling the narrator that she has not had any sexual relations in a long time. The narrator says he "interrogated every nook and cranny", suggesting that he had sex with the woman. He adds that the woman is probably developing feelings for him, as she is happier when he is there. In this case, however, the artist plays with a double metaphor as the walls can also represent the prison walls that are imprisoning the girl's boyfriend while Lamar is spending time with her.

The second one of those categories, unfaithfulness, contains 18 occurrences from the corpus, mainly in Childish Gambino's texts. It is a recurring topic in his 2016 album, *"Awaken, My Love!"*. The second verse of the album's first song, "Me and Your Mama", goes as follows.

This is the end of us
Sleeping with the moon and the stars
I know where you've been
You can see us far then near

"This is the end of us" can be interpreted as Childish Gambino's character taking the decision of breaking up with their partner. This idea is further reinforced when he says "I know where you've been," which can be understood as meaning that the partner was caught cheating. In "II. Zealots of Stockholm [Free Information]," from his 2013 album, *Because the Internet*, Gambino gives another depiction of a cheating woman, although in this case, he is the one taking part in the unlawful act with the cheating woman, as can be observed in the following lyrics:

"I'ma walk out; wanna walk too?"
What about dude?
"Fuck him, I just really wanna feel something"

As the rapper's character reminds the woman of her partner —“What about dude?”—, she responds that he should forget about her partner and leave with her. Women are, in more direct terms, also described as unfaithful in the following fragment from the Flatbush Zombies' *Good Grief* (2016).

Heard you was fucking with other niggas
I ain't bluffing, locked up, now luxed up
Handcuffed, now hand cuff
Unfaithful bitch love the taste of dick
Only faithful to my bros
My rights and my wrongs

In this verse, *Zombie Juice* plays on the similar-sounding “locked up” and “luxed up,” and on the polysemy of the word “cuff” to express his socio-economical ascension from being targeted by law enforcement agents to enjoying wealth and luxury. The depiction of the woman's unfaithfulness correlates with the findings made by Matthew Oware in his 2012 article, “Decent Daddy, Imperfect Daddy: Black Male Rap Artists' Views of Fatherhood and the Family.” The scholar states that, according to the artists from his sample, females were to be considered untrustworthy and deserving little respect (338), as can be observed from the rappers' use of derogatory terms, such as “bitches,” when it comes to referring to women.

On the other hand, however, the roles are sometimes reversed as well. Such is the case, for instance, in J. Cole's “Apparently” (2014). In several of his songs, Cole mentions the mistakes that he has made in the past. This fragment is one of the most straightforward ones, as the artist actually says that he has been unfaithful.

I've been unfaithful
I don't know why you call on me

Finally, there were fifteen situations in which the rappers mentioned their previous partners, including nine that actually use the words “Baby Mama.” The artists seemed to be giving ambiguous images of their exes. While some of them were discussed negatively, such as in Childish Gambino's “12.38” (2020), which quotes: “Lay back on my back (Uh), vibrate. My ex on some BS”, rappers sometimes have fond memories of their exes as can be observed in the following passage from J. Cole's “Hello” (2020).

And I thought about you today
And I thought about the things you used to say
And I thought about the things we did
And I thought about your newest kid
And damn that makes two now
Oh what do I do now?
'Cause if we ever got together
I'd have to be them niggas step-pops forever
And well that ain't my thing 'cause I
I ain't even got my own
And I ain't really got no home
No place to put these things I own

In this song, J. Cole decides to call a previous lover in order to get back in touch and reconnect. Unfortunately for Cole, however, he realises that the woman has started a new life without him and is now responsible for two children, which would make reuniting difficult as her situation wouldn't function properly with the rapper's current lifestyle. Still, it is with nostalgia that the artist describes his fond memories with this person. The use of anaphora, with the repetition of the words "and I thought about" serves to create a regular rhythm, while increasing the emotional tension in the text and suggests the image of the narrator being obsessed by those thoughts, repeating them in his head.

When rappers mentioned an actual baby mama, however, the global tendency was to discuss her in negative terms. In "A Spike Lee Joint" (2016), Zombie Juice from the Flatbush Zombies sings: "Got a phone call from my baby mama tripping." In "4 Your Eyez Only" (2016), J. Cole repeats his friend's words as he raps the following lines.

her mama be stressing me
Like I ain't the one who put them Jays on her feet
Like I ain't out in the field like that

Here, J Cole's friend discusses how, in spite of his efforts to provide for his daughter, he is trying to make money in any way he can —out in the field— but his baby mama still proceeds to put pressure on him. Another noteworthy element is greed. Baby mamas have often been associated with the restless search for ways to get money from their men, through legal child support as well as other means. In the following fragment from Joey Bada\$\$'s "My Jeep", Meechy Darko describes himself being careful to wear a condom before sexual intercourse in order to avoid his partner wrongfully accusing him of getting her pregnant.

Rubber cover me up, you know some women are crazy
Lil nigga ain't mine—that Trojan got yo' baby
She said, "Meech—don't even try to play me."
I switched gears; Jeep went "Ehr!" like Jamie

In the first line, the rapper uses the word “rubber,” which is slang for a condom and justifies his using it with the notion that “some women are crazy.” The second line sets a different scene in which one of those “crazy” women is trying to claim that she had a child from him. He responds that the little kid is not his, because his baby is in “that Trojan” —condom—, meaning that the rapper’s semen could not have entered the woman’s body. The second half of the fragment shows the woman questioning Meechy Darko, and him fleeing the situation.

Overall, what transpired from the analysis of this theme in the selected corpus is a difficulty for individuals in the Black community to pursue healthy relationships for several reasons. Firstly, men are depicted as not being concerned with the pursuit of serious relationships and only showing interest when it comes to sexual intercourse, thus not valuing women for their intellectual qualities. Instead, women are only discussed in terms of their physical attributes and how “easy” they are. As such, women are often robbed of any agency in rap songs, instead only being used as means for the rapper, or character, to reach a goal —sexual or other.

On the other hand, female characters are often perceived as being greedy and choosing their partners based on their wealth and status. A recurrent way this is exhibited is by rappers explaining that their celebrity made them more attractive to potential partners, as can be observed from the following fragment from Joey Bada\$\$’s “DEVASTED” (2017), where the rapper clearly voices his impression that women want to go to bed with him, even though that was not the case before he achieved his current status of wealth and fame.

I don't need the money just to say that I'm rich
Couple little honeys wanna get in my bed
But they used to run from me when I had nothin'
Now they want to fuck 'cause they see me stuntin'
Nigga came up off the hustlin'

As both parties seem to show concern for the other person using them to achieve a goal —economic, sexual or other—, they seem to try and protect themselves through

emotional distancing, thus creating a negative spiral of trust. In the following fragment from “LAnd of the snakes” (2013), J. Cole recounts adopting this behaviour, “to hit and never commit,” without giving much thought to the effect that it will have on his partner. In this case, the girl resents him for it, as she had probably built up some expectations which haven’t been met by Cole.

On some Bobby Brown shit, my prerogative, nigga
Is to hit and never commit
Not realizing when I hit she never forgets
So every time I ignore the telephone call
Saying I'll hit her back knowing I'm never gon' call, she was hurting
Now she's staring dead in my face, she was smirking
Like, "Yeah, I remember and nah you ain't worth shit, nigga
You ain't worth shit, nigga"

In this fragment, Cole describes a situation in which a girl is expecting him to get back in touch. The narrator feeds her expectation by saying he plans on calling her back, although he knows this will not be the case. Later, she expresses her feeling of betrayal by saying he “ain’t worth shit.”

On the topic of faithfulness, it can be observed that the male rappers showed a proneness to resent women for being untrustworthy, while they did not show signs of being willing to commit to a single person themselves, thus leading to a double standard when it comes to trust in the relationship. It should be highlighted, however, that, although this appears to be the general tendency, there are some exceptions. J. Cole, for instance, although he sometimes adheres to the general tendency, also displays certain maturity in the way he handles his relationship, acknowledging his mistakes and his struggle with faithfulness in an address to his current partner.

Finally, it should also be noted that a majority of the contents in this theme should not be taken literally, as the rappers often mention women and relationships in their texts in a practice of braggadocio. Much like in the dozens, the artists try to make their listeners smile and laugh by using wit, decadent lyrics and extravagant imagery. It appears that the use of relationships with women can function as a code for the lyrical game, much like “yo’ mama” was for the dozens. By doing this, the rappers choose to play into the stereotype of the irresponsible ghetto youth.

Dear Momma: Rappers and their Beloved Struggling Mothers

The relationships to maternal figures prove to be of great importance to the rappers from the sample, as they are the third most mentioned types of relationships in the corpus. Similarly to Matthew Oware's findings in 2012, the results of our analysis show that the rappers from the studied sample express their love to their mothers repeatedly, regardless of their socio-economic background. Most of the artists recount stories of their mothers struggling to get by while raising their offspring. Such is the case in the ensuing fragment from Joey Bada\$\$'s "TEMPTATION" (2017).

I really came up from the bottom
Strugglin', my momma on her last dollar

In those lines, Joey Bada\$\$ depicts the socio-economic struggles that he and his mother used to live with. The rapper explains that he grew up seeing his mother left without any money. The first line expresses that this is no longer the case as he "came up" from this situation.

Several other songs suggest the rappers' poor background. In the following fragment from the Flatbush Zombies' "U&I" (2018), Meechy Darko tells us about his mother, Debra. He explains how the woman had to work three jobs in order to make ends meet and run her household, one of which was handling drama as the rapper recounts already being a turbulent—"rowdy"—child by the age of three.

Debra's only son, he was conceived in King's County
That was '89, by '92 he was already rowdy
Misunderstood since he crawled out the womb, the only child
And his momma workin' three jobs, one was dealin' with drama

As we have observed in the previous examples, these rappers show a tendency to refer to their mother's former social situations. They often highlight the fact that they, as sons of poor families, managed to go up—economically—and left this state of poverty. This is directly connected with song lyrics that display a narrator who is trying to help his mother financially, by paying her rent or other types of bills. Very often, however, the rappers go beyond this and express a wish to spoil their mothers, once they reach fame and start

accumulating money. This phenomenon is shown in the following fragments from Kendrick Lamar's "Institutionalised" (2015) and Joey Bada\$\$'s "FOR MY PEOPLE" (2017).

If I was the president
I'd pay my mama's rent
(Kendrick Lamar)

Wanna get my mom a crib, with a lawn
Somethin' that my future kids, can run up on
(Joey Bada\$\$)

In the first fragment, from Kendrick Lamar's "Institutionalised" (2015), the narrator dreams big as he is thinking in terms of being president. However, the first thing that he would do in such a situation is as simple as paying his mother's rent, hinting towards the ideas that, firstly, helping his mother financially is one of the most important things for him to do, and, secondly, that his being "institutionalized" in the ghetto makes him unable to think outside of those circumstances. The lines from Joey Bada\$\$'s "FOR MY PEOPLE" (2017) show the song's narrator expressing a similar desire in that he wishes to make sure his mother has a roof over her head. Only, instead of paying for her rent, the narrator would buy his mother a house, complete with a lawn for his future kids to "run up on."

As could be observed from the previous fragments, rappers have a tendency to depict their mothers as strong women who, even though they are having a hard time keeping their heads above water, keep their hopes up and never give up. However, two exceptions to this tendency can be found in the works of J. Cole, whose mother emerges as a weaker figure, as can be observed in the song "Once an Addict" (2018), and Childish Gambino, who does not describe his parents having to go through financial struggles.

Firstly, J. Cole's "Once an Addict" (2018) discusses the rapper's mother and her fight with depression and addiction.

Mama ain't recover yet
Callin' me at 12 at night
She drunk as fuck and I'm upset
'Cause why she always using me for crutch?
Growin' up I used to always see her up
Late as shit, cigarette smoke and greatest hits from Marvin Gaye
She kill a whole bottle of some cheap chardonnay
I gotta leave this house 'cause part of me dies when I see her like this

(...)
Depression's such a villainous state
I used to stay out later on purpose
Subconsciously I was nervous that if I came home early then what would surface was
her inner demons
And then I'd have to end up seein' my hero on ground zero

In this first part of the verse, Cole recalls how he used to come home to a drunk mother, which led him to start avoiding her. J. Cole explains that his mother descended into a deep depression after a heartbreak, which led her to lose a fight to addiction. Although this made for an extremely difficult relationship, Cole states that he still sees his mother as his hero, and that the reason why he avoided her for so long was because he did not want to “have to end up seein' my hero on ground zero,” meaning that he did not want to see her at her lowest, psychologically.

I wish that I could say the right words to cheer her up
I wish her son's love was enough
I tell her, "Mama, go to sleep"
She tell me "Boy, hush. You better pray to God you never get your heart crushed"
I shake my head in frustration
Head to my room and I can still hear the tunes with my door shut
Fuck it though, a couple more months I'll be gone
Off to college and dorms
(...)
She lit, talkin' drunk shit, I'm pissed
But I'm still all ears like Basset Hounds
Thinkin' to myself, "Maybe my mama need help
Don't she got work in the morning?
Why she do this to herself?
(...)
Lookin' back, I wish I woulda did more instead of runnin'

This second fragment begins with the use of anaphora, as Cole begins three consecutive lines with the pronoun “I,” appearing to be blaming himself for not being able to help her. Finally, the third I leads to an address as he advises his mother to go to bed. She addresses him back, dismissing his advice, which leads the narrator to flee the scene, as he is thinking of fleeing the house for good. The narrator appears to be tormented and extremely worried about his mother as he asks “don’t she got work in the morning?” and “Why she do this to herself?” In the last line, the narrator expresses remorse. Although he had left the house to shield himself from his mother’s depression, as well as to pursue greater goals in university, he expresses his regrets for not having done more for his mother. Overall, this quote from “Once an Addict”

(2018) shows J. Cole sharing his feelings towards a mother that stopped taking care of herself and broke under the weight of her problems.

The love that J. Cole has for his mother can be observed more clearly in the following extract from the 2014 track titled “Apparently”, in which the rapper explains that, even though his mother had a hard time dealing with financial problems and eviction, she still loved him. He presents an apology for being absent from her life in those hard times of struggle and ends simply by saying “I love you mama.”

Think back to Forest Hills, no perfect home
But the only thing like home I've ever known
Until they snatched it from my mama
And foreclosed her on the loan
I'm so sorry that I left you there to deal with that alone
I was up in New York City chasing panties, getting dome
Had no clue what you was going through
How could you be so strong?
And how could I be so selfish? I know I can be so selfish
I could tell by how I treat you with my girl, damn she so selfless
But she put up with my ways because she loves me like you do
And though it don't always show I love her just like I love you
And I need to treat you better
Wish you could live forever
So we could spend more time together
I love you mama

Similarly to “Once an Addict” (2018), “Apparently” (2014) shows J. Cole expresses regrets for having left his mother “there to deal with that alone.” The song then turns to a love letter to his mother as the artist first expresses his respect for being “so strong” before acknowledging that he needs to treat her better. He finishes his verse with a pure expression of love in the last three lines of the fragment.

Another exception to the main tendency of mothers being represented as triumphant struggling figures can be found in Childish Gambino’s work, as the artist does not mention memories of his mother struggling financially. Unlike the other rappers, Donald Glover was raised a Jehovah’s Witness, which means that his access to popular culture and the outside world was limited when he was younger. Although hip-hop and the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ world are not traditionally seen as compatible, Glover suggested, in a 2018 interview conducted by Stephen Colbert, that he is still in touch with his parents and that they showed

support in his career, despite not fully understanding what he does, since they are not familiar with showbusiness and popular culture. He stated that “they’re the best parents ever.” (*The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*)

Childish Gambino’s songs are a second exception because his mother is not depicted as having to face the same socio-economic challenges. Indeed, economic struggle in his own family does not constitute one of the main themes in Gambino’s music. When it comes to the figure of the mother, this following fragment from the 2016 song titled “Stand Tall” displays the image of an encouraging household, which may give us some insight into the support that his parents actually provided their son. In those lines, the speech that is given by the mother is that of a powerful message of hope, pride and courage.

But my mama said
Keep all your dreams, keep standing tall
Oh I, nah, nah, nah
If you are strong, you cannot fall
If you are strong, oh no
There is a voice inside us all
So smile, ohh, when you can, ohh, when you can

This fragment displays several word repetitions. Firstly, the word “keep,” which applies to Glover’s dreams but also urges him to “keep standing tall.” Secondly, after the backup singers sing “if you are strong, you cannot fall,” Gambino softly repeats the first half of the line. Although the message is supportive, it suggests that life will not be easy. It appears that Gambino’s mother urges him to “keep all your dreams, keep standing tall” in the face of adversity. Finally, she urges him to smile but knows that it will not always be possible, which is why she adds “when you can.” It is a very nuanced message regarding the future, and an encouragement to remain strong despite the possible challenges of life.

Birth and Associated Metaphors

Strongly related to the figure of the mother is the topic of birth, which was mentioned by each of the selected artists, adding up to a total of eight occurrences. It should be noted that, while some of those are literal mentions of an artist’s birth, a majority —six out of eight— of the times that birth was mentioned was in the context of metaphors. For instance, the following extract reveals the former of those situations, as J. Cole expresses his being

grateful for being born, which might have not happened if his mother had had the money to afford an abortion.

Thank God mama couldn't afford the abortion
The loneliest orphan
I flip my misfortune and grow me a fortune

In this extract from his 2018 song, “ATM”, J. Cole shows his gratefulness for his mother not having had the money for an abortion, which led to his birth. The rapper ends this fragment with a play on the words “misfortune” and “fortune,” using the latter in its second meaning related to wealth, rather than luck.

The use of birth metaphors, on the other hand, accounts for the lion’s share of this subcategory of occurrences. Although, in literature, birth metaphors usually serve as a way to refer to acts of creation, they were mainly used by rappers as an indirect way of talking about themselves through absurdly exaggerated metaphors, such as it can be observed in the Flatbush Zombies’ “Vacation” (2018), in which Meechy Darko sings: “I’m the shit like my momma gave birth out her asshole.” In this line, the rapper plays with the tension that exists between the first, literal meaning of the word “shit” and the slang expression “the shit,” which means the best, while also showing a sense of self-mockery. Another example of such exaggeration in metaphors can be found in Joey Bada\$\$’s 2015 song, “On & On”, in which the rapper states: “this the death of a psychopomp but a birth of God’s son.” From this line, it is clear that the rapper is speaking in a figurative manner, as he mentions being the son of God. Kendrick Lamar draws a similar parallel by comparing his birth to the christian immaculate conception in the following lines:

I was born like this, since one like this, immaculate conception
I transform like this, perform like this, was Yeshua new weapon

Childish Gambino also uses the topic of birth in a figurative way, in the 2020 song titled “Algorythm”, as he sings the ensuing lines that also refer to quasi-spiritual themes: “came out Mother Earth smelling like roses.”

In the case of Meechy Darko from the Flatbush Zombies, the rapper uses birth metaphors in a different way, as he appears to associate his birth and childhood with themes

that usually identify with the horror genre. The following fragments are taken from the tracks titled “R.I.P.C.D.” and “Trade off”, both of which were released on the Flatbush Zombies’ *3001: A Laced Odyssey* (2016).

Deranged since birth I was conceived in an insane asylum
 (“R.I.P.C.D.”)

Rosemary's baby the hand I rock my cradle to the grave
 I had six exorcisms this year alone and I feel the same
 I'm high and sleep deprived, having nightmares while I'm still awake
 (“Trade Off”)

The second fragment refers to the 2000 film written by Roman Polanski, *Rosemary's Baby*, in which a woman named Rosemary falls pregnant with the child of Satan, the antichrist. As Darko had previously released a solo song titled “The Baby of Rosemary’s Baby” (2013), the fragment from “Trade Off” can be interpreted as Darko claiming to be the son of the antichrist, since his parent —Rosemary’s baby— is the hand that rocks his cradle. The repeated association that Darko makes between birth, childhood and horror themes, such as death and the devil, results in a strong tension between the opposite concepts of good and evil, as young children have often been identified with innocence.

Conversations: Voice Recordings and Apostrophes

Finally, the figure of the mother also appears in more direct forms of communication, which fall under two categories: recordings of the mothers’ voices and instances of rappers using apostrophes in their texts. Mothers’ voices can be heard in Joey Bada\$\$’s *B4.Da.\$\$* (2015) and in Kendrick Lamar’s *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (2012). In *B4.Da.\$\$*, Joey Bada\$\$’s mother can be heard giving her son advice on life, thus appearing as a wise and enlightened woman who has most of life figured out and wishes to share her knowledge with her son. She can be heard giving Joey a sermon about perception. “Everything is perception. Your perception of yourself or who you are is not what other people think that you are. So like for instance, you might say ‘I'm cool; I don't wear jewelry, I don't this, I don't that’ You don't have to.”

Kendrick Lamar’s *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* is different in that it doesn’t offer a particularly mystical image of his mother. Instead, as Kendrick recounts events such as being

beaten for being in the wrong neighbourhood, spending the night out with some friends and seeing one of them dying from a bullet, the songs are punctuated with vocal exchanges between the different characters that appear in the album, some of which are voicemail messages left by his mother who, unlike in *B4.Da.\$\$*, is mainly concerned about mundane issues such as her son bringing the car back. Instead of painting a transcendent picture of his mother, Kendrick Lamar chooses a realistic perspective that presents her as the authentic woman that she is, including credible real-life problems and choice of words, as can be observed in the following fragment from “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter” (2012).

Please leave your message for three-two-three
Record your message after the tone
Kendrick, where you at?
Damn, I'm sittin' here waitin' on my van
You told me you was gon' be back in fifteen minutes
Man, I gotta go up to the county buildin', man, these kids ready to eat
I'm ready to eat, shit
I gotta get them food stamps, come on now
You on your way or what?
I hope you ain't out there messin' with them damn hoodrats out there, shit
'Specially that lil' crazy-ass girl Sherane
And plus you got school tomorrow
You keep fuckin' around in them streets, you ain't gon' pass to the next grade
Eleventh grade

Instances of apostrophe are also apparent in the studied texts as is the case in J. Cole’s *Love Yourz* (2014). In the following fragment from this track, Cole directly addresses his mother by asking her about the pain that she experienced from her heartbreak and about the way she copes with it, namely by drinking.

So tell me, Momma please, why you be drinkin' all the time?
Does all the pain he brought you still linger in your mind?
'Cause pain still lingers on mine

Cole begins by asking his mother why she is always drinking, and if it is because she is still in pain because of “him.” In the third line, he adds that he too can still feel the pain caused by his abusive stepfather. As Cole touches subjects of father —and, then, father figure— absenteeism and addiction, he begins to give some insight into the cyclical nature of misery and poverty that will be discussed further in this work.

Surrogate Mother Figures

As readers may have noticed from the aforementioned structure of this thesis, the section of this work titled “Role Modelz” is located in the chapter dedicated to paternal figures. The reason for this is simply that there is a more significant number of cases of male role models in the studied corpus than female, which could be explained by two phenomena. Firstly, absentee fathers seem to be a much more common occurrence than absentee mothers, leading to a greater need for substitute father figures, and male role models in general. Secondly, as the corpus that was studied in this thesis is exclusively made up of works by male rappers, it makes sense that the artists would look to identify with male individuals more than female, which also correlates with the perception of hip-hop as a movement that is strongly associated with themes of masculinity (see Oware and Kelley).

This does not mean, however, that there are no female role models in the African American community and its representation in rap music. One of the main differences that can be found between male and female role models, as is observed in the textual sample that was selected for this work, is that all of the instances of female role models were regarding family members, which is not always the case for their male counterparts, as is studied later in this work. More specifically, most of the instances of substitute mother figures that were studied in the sample are about aunts and grandmothers, a first example of which can be found in Childish Gambino’s “II. Shadows” (2013), as the artist sings “my aunt say ‘keep the sex game picante,’” recounting his aunt giving him advice on relationships and sex. The Flatbush Zombies’ songs “The Glory (2018) and A Spike Lee Joint” (2016) show Zombie Juice telling his audience about spending his childhood living with his grandmother.

Rihanna and my grandmomma took me in from the start
Aunt Marie beatin' cancer, givin' everything she had

Those lines from “The Glory” (2018) mention three surrogate mother figures playing a role in Zombie Juice’s life: his grandmother, his aunt, and a woman named Rihanna. Juice expresses his gratitude for the fact that Rihanna and his grandmother took him in. He then paints a picture of his aunt Marie as a strong woman who fought cancer with all of her energy and managed to live through the disease. The 2016 song, “A Spike Lee Joint” quotes “Used to smoke mad weed before my grandma went to church.” The line exposes Juice’s grandmother

as being a religious person. The rapper uses the formulation “used to,” which means that it was a regular habit for his grandmother to go to church on Sundays, and for him to consume cannabis before she left.

As role models, African American grandmas are frequently depicted as being quite religious characters. This can also be observed in Kendrick Lamar’s 2017, “ELEMENT.”.

Bitch, all my grandmas dead
So ain't nobody prayin' for me, I'm on your head, ayy

In the this fragment from the Kendrick Lamar’s “ELEMENT.”, the rapper argues that nobody is praying for him because both of his grandmothers have already passed away, thus hinting at the fact that the grandmothers are expected to be the most passionately religious members of the family in the Black community. With both of his grandmothers having passed away, his spiritual layer of protection is gone as well.

Finally, in the following extract from J. Cole’s “Runaway” (2013), the rapper mentions his grandmother in the greater context of his family heritage, focusing especially on his ancestors at the time of American plantation slavery.

Slaving in the baking sun for hours just
To see the master creep into the shack where your lady at
Nine months later got a baby, that's
Not quite what you expected, but you
Refuse to neglect it, 'cause you
Know your wifey loves you, thus you refuse to accept it
That's the type of shit that turned my granny light-skinned
Rich white men rule the nation still
Only difference is we all slaves now, the chains concealed
In our thoughts, if I follow my heart to save myself

In those lines, J. Cole paints the horrific picture of a scene in which a female slave falls pregnant and gives birth after being raped by her master. He then argues that such grim events are the reason why his grandmother was light-skinned, suggesting that his great grandmother’s mother was herself a slave who was raped on a plantation. He then proceeds to say that “rich white men rule the nation still” and implies the metaphor of rich white men “fucking” over poor people in general, since modern-day capitalism created a world in which

a few powerful —often white— individuals own the main industries and media, thus making the middle and lower class population slaves at work but also in their minds.

To conclude, female characters in rap music appear to fall into two main categories. On the one hand, the baby mamas and related characters, meaning the previous, current and potential partners of the rappers. On the other hand, the mother and substitute mother figures. While some partners and ex partners were sometimes discussed with fondness, the baby mamas were mainly depicted in negative terms, correlating with Matthew Oware's findings in "Decent Daddy, Imperfect Daddy: Black Male Rap Artists' Views of Fatherhood and the Family" (2012). Those characters were often objectified and dehumanised by being either treated as means to an end, or as untrustworthy and greedy individuals. On the specific topic of faithfulness, the texts imply a double standard as the women are shamed for being untrustworthy and unfaithful, while the men take pride in seducing several women. This paradox points to an apparent misogyny where men are praised among their peers for displaying a type of behaviour that would cause women to be shamed.

Such a situation suggests a difficulty when it comes to the male-female relationships that are pursued by the rappers. Indeed, as it appears that neither men nor women can be trusted in a relationship and that they despise each other, pursuing a balanced relationship seems to be an impossible goal to achieve for our rappers. In any case, the repetition of similar themes and situations throughout the varied sample that is used in this work, as well as the one that was used by Matthew Oware, in 2012, hints at the fact that, to a certain extent, such discourse can essentially be interpreted as excessive displays of braggadocio on the artists' part. "Of course, the line between rap music's gritty realism, storytelling, and straight-up signifyin(g) is not always clear to listeners, nor is it supposed to be" (Kelley 38-39)

When it came to the second category, rappers showed a deep appreciation of their mothers in their texts. The "mamas" are often revered and presented as strong women who always overcome adversity and the struggles of life. As a result, rap artists show a strong desire to repay them by showering them with expensive presents such as houses, jewellery and expensive cars. Those women are traditionally idealised by the rappers who don't seem to have a single negative thing to say about them. Exceptions could however be found in the realistic depictions that were given by Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole. The figure of the mother

is also mentioned in the expression “(I put that) on my mama,” which is a way for an individual to promise something. This hints at the idea that a mother is the most meaningful thing —or person— to a man, thus showing the importance that they are given by Black male rap artists. It should be noted that their importance is probably also what makes them the target of many jokes such as in the dozens.

In some cases, the songs under discussion feature the relationships that exist between the rappers’ narrators and substitute mother figures. They are most often female family members such as aunts and grandmothers. Such was the case with Zombie Juice, a member of the Flatbush Zombies who reported being brought up by his grandmother. The grandmothers are given similar traits to those that qualify the mothers in that they are usually represented as strong loving women who have been through a fair share of struggles in life. However, more emphasis is put on their spirituality as the narrator in Kendrick Lamar’s “ELEMENT.” (2017) goes as far as implying that his grandmothers were the only two people who prayed for him. Because they are from older generations, the grandmothers are associated more closely with further ancestors and to the heritage of slavery. In the studied rap corpus, it appears that substitute mother figures are not as present as substitute father figures and male role models in general. This can be explained by the male rappers’ tendency to identify with individuals of the same gender and by a bigger proportion of absenteeism in fathers than in mothers, which could lead the individuals to feel tormented because of their lack of a father figure.

6. The Paternal: Moving Past the Stereotypes

This chapter examines the relationships that exist between rappers and the paternal figures that played a role in their lives. Those relationships are divided into two categories: the relationship between a rapper and his biological father, and the relationship between a rapper and alternative role models —stylised as “Role Modelz” in reference to J. Cole’s 2014 song titled “No Role Modelz”. The first half of this chapter is dedicated to the rappers’ depictions of the relationship that they have with their biological fathers. In this context, the rappers appear to have a clear-cut perspective on their fathers, which depends on the type of relationships that they had. There are three apparent models in the studied corpus. Firstly, if the father was present in the rapper’s life, the relationship is described in positive terms, which represents a majority of the artists in our sample. Secondly, in cases where the father was absent by choice, the rappers expressed very negative feelings towards their fathers. Thirdly, in cases in which the fathers were absent unwillingly —such as if they passed away early in their child’s life—, the artists have a tendency to express a deep sadness and feelings of hollowness. Some artists exhibit varying feelings due to an evolution in the relationships they have with their fathers. A recurrent phenomenon that is observed in this topic is the repetition and cyclical nature of family structures. For instance, on several occasions, J. Cole demonstrates similarities between his fatherless childhood and that of other characters, as well as real-life people.

In the second half of this chapter, the focus is redirected towards the “Role Modelz”, which includes the surrogate father figures and the personalities that inspired our artists. The surrogate father figures are actual people, usually members of the family, that help bring up the children and teach them some values of life. In the selected corpus, the rappers mainly refer to uncles and grandfathers. On the other hand, the rappers are also inspired by famous personalities and characters. In their choice of inspirations rappers show a tendency to pick individuals that they can identify with on several levels, such as Will Smith’s character, Will, from “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air”, who is a young black man who was abandoned by his father at a young age. Rappers mainly refer to Black personalities, with a majority of rappers. When it comes to the way they mention those inspirations, the rappers show creativity in a lyrical practice that consists of including the names of those people, or the titles of their works, into rap lyrics, while struggling to keep a coherent grammar. Overall, mentioning paternal figures appears to remind rappers of their childhood as they may discuss memories

that they had with their fathers, or older celebrities and characters that they looked up to as kids or adolescents.

Biological Fathers: Between Absenteeism and Fond Memories

Unlike for female characters, the sample analysis suggests that rappers have a more unequivocal way of treating the figure of the biological father. Artists show a tendency to have a clear-cut opinion on their biological father and rarely deviate from it. For the most part, rappers seem to find themselves in one of three categories when it comes to their father. The first category contains the rappers who cultivate a good relationship with their fathers, as is the case for Childish Gambino, Kendrick Lamar, and Flatbush Zombies' members Meechy Darko and Erick Arc Elliott. The second category corresponds to the rappers whose fathers were absent —seemingly— by choice, including J. Cole. The third category is made of the rappers whose fathers were not in their life, for unwanted reasons —such as if they passed away before their child's birth. Zombie Juice seems to belong to this last category but it cannot be said with absolute certainty as he only mentions his father once in the whole corpus. Joey Bada\$\$, whose parents split up when he was five (Morris), is the only artist who displays ambiguous feelings towards the father figure.

The first element that can be observed from the repartition of our sample of artists into those categories is that the second and third category only account for one individual each, while the first category accounts for five of them, which means that an overwhelming majority of the rappers from the sample have had an actual relationship with their fathers when they were children. This result is surprising when compared to Matthew Oware mentioning that the rappers from his sample were “split in their view of their fathers —at times positive, at times negative” (341) and to the usual stereotype of the absentee Black father.

As was mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter, Zombie Juice only mentions his father a single time in the four selected works of his band, the Flatbush Zombies. This occurs in the song “when i'm gone” from the band's latest release, *now, more than ever* (2020). The artist, who was raised by his grandparents (Stevenson), sings “I just lost my mama, I don't got no father” in a sad agonising voice, openly putting his emotions on display.

J. Cole has had tumultuous relationships with his father figures. His father left his mother when he was young and things took a turn for the worse when his mother remarried with another man who turned out to be abusive. In his 2013 album, *Born Sinner*, J. Cole explains that his father was absent for most of his childhood and that the two only reconnected when Cole was already an adult, as can be observed in the following fragments from “Forbidden Fruit” and “Born Sinner”.

'Came a man by myself, only father was time
I know that she relate baby daddy ain't shit
So she raised that nigga kids but she swallowing mine
(“Forbidden Fruit”)

Pops came late, I'm already stuck in my ways
Ducking calls from my mother for days
Sometimes she hate the way she raised me but she love what she raised
(“Born Sinner”)

In the first extract, J. Cole finds himself in the process of seducing a girl that he met earlier. The rapper points at the cyclical nature of family structures in the Black community as he tells her about his absentee father and notices that she can relate because she was herself abandoned by her “baby daddy” and left to raise the man’s children by herself. J. Cole finishes with a punchline as he says “So she raised that nigga kids but she swallowing mine.” Here, the word “kids” is given the second meaning as Cole means that the girl is raising the other man’s children but also swallowing the rapper’s sperm. The fragment from “Born Sinner” confirms that the rapper hasn’t had much of a relationship with his father since the man came late into his life. This fragment also points at the idea of a cycle as the second line’s meaning is made ambiguous by the fact that it could be attached either to the first or the third line, meaning that the listeners do not have a way of knowing whether it is J. Cole or his father that is “ducking” —ignoring— Cole’s mother’s phone calls for days. It seems however that J. Cole and his father have recently reconnected and that the rapper holds no grudges as the last track on Cole’s *2014 Forest Hill Drive* (2014) quotes: “My pops I love you. James Cole, I love you.”

When it comes to the artists that enjoyed good relationships with their fathers, the texts tend to depict them similarly to the mothers, as wise men that are present to give good advice to their children. Such is the case in the following extract from the Flatbush Zombies’

“Your Favorite Rap Song” (2016) where Erick Arc Elliott states that “Papa told me fame would only flood my brain,” recalling his father advising him to be careful not to lose his head when he becomes famous. Similarly, in “IV. Sweatpants” (2013), Childish Gambino sings: “My father owned half the MoMA and did it with no diploma.” In reality, Childish Gambino’s father was far from rich as he used to work as a postal worker. The line can instead be interpreted in terms of the man’s intellectual richness. According to contributors on the song’s Genius page, “Despite [not having a diploma], he was able to self-educate, and knew half of the paintings at the Museum of Modern Art. (...) His father “owned” half of MOMA by knowing and understanding half of MOMA’s artistic content.” As was already discussed in the section of this thesis dedicated to the figure of the mother, Childish Gambino discussed the supporting environment that he was raised in several times throughout his work. In “Stand Tall” (2016), Gambino sings the following lines.

I feel like a child, so young and new in '92
I listened to what my father said
[Chorus]
Keep all your dreams, keep standing tall If you are strong, you cannot fall
There is a voice inside us all
So smile when you can, when you can

This text is almost perfectly identical to what the artist reported his mother saying to him, thus showing how both of his parents were very present in his childhood. The following extract from “19.10” (2020) displays the artist’s father as a mystical all-knowing man. Glover remembers being six years old when his father gave him this enigmatic, yet hopeful, piece of advice.

I remember, uh, back when I was six years old, uh Daddy said, "The world's so cold"
"There is something that you should know"
Uh
"You're so gorgeous," thank you, daddy
"Nothing's really worth your time"
"But someday soon you just might find"
"The truth about the world's design," oh

As Childish Gambino’s father passed away, the rapper also mentions him with great sadness in several songs from his latest album, *3.15.20* (2020)

Grief is a standing ocean, I never swam unless you did
So I don't know why I'm here without you
I miss you

Here, the rapper admits to being struck by grief and feeling completely lost without his father. Those lines from “39.28” are repeated backwards in “35.31”, thus creating a mystical atmosphere. “39.28” ends with the following extract in which Gambino says that he is calling to a spirit, presumably his father. As he addresses the spirit, Childish Gambino suggests that it is the only way of keeping him alive, before admitting to not being able to love himself without his father around, thus pointing to the strong bond that linked the two.

I call to a spirit, you may never hear it
How else could I keep you alive? Alive
'Cause it's hard for me to love myself without you here
'Cause the days are slow, but the years are fast
I wonder when I'll feel your smile

Kendrick Lamar also had the chance of having a father who was present in his life, although it cannot be said that he always led an exemplary life. “Kenny Duckworth, was reportedly running a South Side street gang called the Gangster Disciples”, before Kendrick’s parents moved from Chicago to Los Angeles, three years before the birth of their son. (Eells) In Kendrick Lamar’s song, “DUCKWORTH.” (2017), the artist tells the true story of how his father, Kenny, met Anthony Tiffith, also known as “Top Dawg”. Anthony is the founder of Top Dawg Entertainment, which is the label that Kendrick has been signed to since he was sixteen years old. Kendrick introduces the story by saying that “Life is one funny ma’fucker, a true comedian, you gotta love him, you gotta trust him.”

See, once upon a time inside the Nickerson Garden projects
The object was to process and digest poverty's dialect
Adaptation inevitable: gun violence, crack spot
Federal policies raid buildings and drug professionals
Anthony was the oldest of seven
Well-respected, calm and collected
Laughin' and jokin' made life easier; hard times, mama on crack
A four-year-old tellin' his nanny he needed her
His family history: pimpin' and bangin'
He was meant to be dangerous, clocked him a grip and start slangin'
(...)
Crooked cops told Anthony he should kick it
He brushed 'em off and walked back to the Kentucky Fried Chicken
See, at this chicken spot, there was a light-skinned nigga that talked a lot

With a curly top and a gap in his teeth, he worked the window
 His name was Ducky, he came from the streets, The Robert Taylor Homes
 Southside Projects, Chiraq, the Terror Dome
 Drove to California with a woman on him and five-hundred dollars
 They had a son, hopin' that he'd see college
 (...)

Ducky was well-aware
 They robbed the manager and shot a customer last year
 He figured he'd get on these niggas' good sides
 Free chicken every time Anthony posted in line, two extra biscuits
 Anthony liked him and then let him slide, they didn't kill him
 In fact, it look like they're the last to survive, pay attention
 That one decision changed both of they lives, one curse at a time
 Reverse the manifest and good karma, and I'll tell you why
 You take two strangers and put 'em in random predicaments
 Give 'em a soul, so they can make their own choices and live with it
 Twenty years later, them same strangers, you make 'em meet again
 Inside recording studios where they reapin' their benefits
 Then you start remindin' them about that chicken incident
 Whoever thought the greatest rapper would be from coincidence?
 Because if Anthony killed Ducky, Top Dawg could be servin' life
 While I grew up without a father and die in a gunfight

Kendrick Lamar chooses to tell this improbable story in the form of a children's tale as he begins with "once upon a time." Of course, this is no ordinary children's tale. Although the rapper borrows some codes from the genre, the content stays very much related to the streets and the ghetto as the story begins "inside the Nickerson Garden projects." In "DUCKWORTH.", Kendrick Lamar tells the intertwining tales of the two aforementioned characters. The story first focuses on Anthony Tiffith, providing some context on his childhood. He grew up around a mother that was addicted to crack cocaine and Kendrick tells us that "his family history [was] pimpin' and bangin'," meaning that his family was involved in gang activities⁵. The rapper reaches the conclusion that Anthony was "meant to be dangerous," hinting at the idea that, for ghetto families, the odds tend to be on the side of repetition and cycles. In the second part of this fragment, the rapper introduces the second character: his father, Kenny Duckworth. Kendrick mentions his father's criminal past straight away as he says: "His name was Ducky, he came from the streets. The Robert Taylor Homes. Southside Projects, Chiraq, the Terror Dome." Finally, the events unfold in the third part of the fragment. The singer explains that, since his father was aware of Anthony's reputation as a violent criminal, he made sure to stay on Anthony's good side by giving him free extra food any time he visited the KFC restaurant where Kenny was employed. Kendrick suggests that

⁵ "Bangin'" is short for "gang-banging," which is a slang term that refers to gang violence. (Merriam-Webster)

this may have led Anthony to spare Kenny's life later on, which meant that Kenny was there to look after his son. The two men met again twenty years later, since Anthony became Top Dawg, the founder of the label that signed Kendrick Lamar. The rapper then asks, "Whoever thought the greatest rapper would be from coincidence? Because if Anthony killed Ducky, Top Dawg could be servin' life while I grew up without a father and die in a gunfight." This means that Kendrick believes that, if not for Kenny's kindness, Anthony might have killed him and ended up serving a life sentence in prison. This would have left Kendrick without a father to set an example for him, which would have led him to get involved in gang activity himself, and probably die from a bullet. This implies that those actions allowed Kendrick's father to beat the odds and break the cycle. Because Kenny and Anthony were friendly towards each other, Anthony could save himself from a life of crime and Kendrick could stay away from it completely, which led him to become the Pulitzer-winning rapper that he is today.

Similarly to his approach to the theme of birth, Meechy Darko, from the Flatbush Zombies, mentions the figure of the father in a rather sinister way, bringing up elements that are usually linked to the horror genre. In the Flatbush Zombies' "Your Favorite Rap Song" (2016), Darko sings the following: "I am the spawn of the sin of my pops." In this line, Meechy Darko associates the words "spawn" and "sin," which immediately brings the devil to mind as it hints to the expression "the spawn of Satan." As was established in the section of this work dedicated to the mother, Darko has referred to himself as "The Baby of Rosemary's Baby," meaning that he is the son of the antichrist. It is thus clear that the two correlate.

However, the line could also be interpreted more literally, as Darko accusing his father of being a sinner. The most obvious explanation would be that Meechy's father committed the sin of lust, which led to the rapper's birth. Indeed, in the song "This Is It" (2016), the rapper sings "Kudos to my papa, he ain't wear the rubber," meaning that he is thanking his father for not wearing a condom during sex. Another explanation could be found in Meechy Darko's father being accused of the sin of pride, as, in "when i'm gone" (2020), the rapper claims that he "love[s] hard like [his] mother, [and has] too much pride like [his] father."

As was mentioned in the beginning of this section, Joey Bada\$\$ is the only artist from the studied sample that displays ambiguous feelings towards his father. On the one hand, the rapper seems to express disappointment in his father in several of his songs. In "O.C.B."

(2015), he states: “Woke up one morning; Papa was gone,” referring to his father leaving the household when Joey was still a child. In the track “My Yout (Remix)” (2013), Joey sings the line “Poppy leave them dimes at my welcome mat.” The most obvious way this line can be understood is as the image of his father leaving money —dimes— in front of the door, but never coming in, which could be a metaphor for the father paying child support money although he never sees his child.

On the other hand, several songs show Joey Bada\$\$ being quite positive about his relationship with his father. In the following extract from “Curry Chicken” (2015), Joey mentions his father naming him when he was born, and imagines taking him on a sunny vacation —to “the palms”— before adding “I gotcha back, [you] ain’t gotta worry.”

And to my papa, my word is my bond
When you held me in your arms
Did you know along that a star was born?
Then you named me Jo-Vaughn, now that name ring alarms
Nearly 20 years later, we on a plane to The Palms
I gotcha back, ain't gotta worry (worry worry worry)

In a similar way, Joey Bada\$\$ seems to hint that his wealth helped him have a relaxed relationship with his father in the ensuing quote from “Shine” (2020), as the artists makes a creative use of the word “blocks”, saying he went from building with them —referring to the plastic construction toys— to building the block —which indicates that he does business in real estate. This is confirmed in the last of the three lines, in which Joey paints a picture of him discussing real estate investments with his father.

It'd probably make you niggas nervous (Come on), seven-figure purchase (Uh-huh)
Went from buildin' with blocks to buildin' the block
Now I'm talkin' with my pops about some buildings to cop, nigga

Perhaps the most ambiguous line comes from Joey’s 2013 track, titled “Hilary \$wank”, in which he says “Honey, Pop was a bumbacloth and had a queen bee Mommy.” This line raises questions because of the use of the word “bumbacloth,” which is a Jamaican Creole word that derives from the English words “bum”, a person’s backside, and “cloth.” (Jamaican Patwah) While the word originally referred to toilet paper or menstrual pads, it has evolved into a cursing word and an insult. It thus appears that Joey Bada\$\$ is insulting his father.

However, on the song's Genius page, the artist commented on this line saying: "I don't hate my dad [I] love that man... bumbaclot is just my way of saying he's jamaican..."

Some of the artists also address the father figure indirectly, by discussing other people's fathers, one instance of which can be found in J. Cole's "4 Your Eyez Only" (2016). In this song, which we will return to in a subsequent section of this work, J. Cole gives some insight into the life of one of his friends, James McMillan Jr. As can be observed from the next fragment, James and J. Cole appear to have had resembling childhoods.

Innocence disappeared by the age of eight years
My Pops shot up, drug-related, mama addicted
So Granny raised me in projects where thugs was hanging

Indeed, this fragment displays a strikingly similar childhood story to that of J. Cole, as both men had to grow up without a father around to look after them, J. Cole's father having left when the rapper was five years old, and James's father having passed away when James was eight. The text says that James's father was "shot up, drug-related," which creates ambiguity as to the exact cause of his death. Indeed, it is not clear whether James's father was killed because of his "drug-related" criminal life or if he died of an overdose by "shooting up" drugs into his veins. After the death of their respective fathers, James went to live with his grandmother, while J. Cole was raised by his mother, who happened to suffer from addiction, just like James's mother. As it displays a similar background to the one that the artist himself experienced, this story once again allows J. Cole to address the ever present cyclical aspect of life in the ghetto.

"Ville Mentality", another song that is featured on J. Cole's album, *4 Your Eyez Only* (2016), contains an interlude and an outro, which consist of audio tracks that were recorded when Cole visited a school in Fayetteville. In an interview with the media, Complex, Elite, the producer of this song explained that "Cole went to Fayetteville one day and just sat down with some kids and spoke to them and recorded it. And he got them to open up and say these really powerful things." (Ortiz) The fragments that appear on the song feature the voice of a young girl who talks about her late father.

My dad, he died —he got shot 'cause his friend set him up. And I didn't go to his funeral— and sometimes when I'm in my room, I get mad at my momma when she mean to me. And she—
And she say, "clean up" —I say— (...) I get mad and I slam my door and go in my room— And then, I get mad and I say, "I wish my dad was here"

The girl explains that, much like was probably the case with James McMillan Jr., her father was killed because of his involvement in criminal activity. She expresses how much she misses him when her mother is mean to her and she becomes upset. This story is another perspective that is added by J. Cole on the issue of absentee fathers in poorer Black American communities. This allows the rapper to work on three levels, as he shares his own personal stories, relates tales of his friend's life, and lets other young individuals share their stories. Of course, the choice of featuring a little girl's voice is also an element that participates in triggering emotions in the listeners. On this topic, the song's producer commented: "What she said, it hit me pretty hard, and I think other people are going to connect with what she was saying because it was just...talk about a window into what's wrong with America. It's right there. And it's a little girl. If you can't feel that, you're not human."

Role Modelz

As was discussed in the previous section of this work dedicated to substitute mother figures, the analysis of the corpus revealed a great majority of male individuals when it came to the role models discussed by rappers. This can be explained by two reasons: first, the sample suggested a higher number of absenteeism in fathers than in mothers, which can lead to a strong concern and the feeling of a void in artists that experienced such circumstances. Second, the corpus being made up of works by male rappers exclusively, it seems logical that the artists would try to identify predominantly with male characters, which also correlates with the perception of hip-hop as a movement that is strongly associated with themes of masculinity (see Oware and Kelley). Indeed, in his research, Matthew Oware observed the following.

African-American uncles played the role of surrogate fathers in the lives of their nephews when biological fathers were unavailable. Specifically, uncles provided social capital such as advice on negotiating urban environments, interacting with girls, and promoting educational attainment and employment. (331)

For the sake of this research, the role models that were mentioned in the corpus have been separated into two subcategories: the individuals that actually took on the role of surrogate father figures, and the individuals —often celebrities— that had an impact on the rapper, even though they did not interact directly.

Surrogate Father Figure

Role models are an important topic in Cole’s work. In “03' Adolescence” (2014), the rapper highlighted that he “ain't grow up with my father,” and he has mentioned role models in several of his songs. The ninth song on his 2014 album, 2014 Forest Hills Drive, is titled “No Role Modelz”. The second verse begins with the following lines. As J. Cole tries to remember his role models, he notes that he cannot think of a single one, highlighting the empty gap that was left in his life after his father left.

No role models and I'm here right now
No role models to speak of
Searchin' through my memory, my memory, I couldn't find one

As was argued by Matthew Oware, family members, such as uncles, tend to take on a bigger role in a child’s life when their father dies. (331) This seems to be confirmed by Zombie Juice, who grew up with his grandparents, in the Flatbush Zombies’ song, “The Glory” (2018), as he mentions three of his uncles throughout the track.

Shout out my Uncle Mannie, hey, hi, I hope you winnin'
(...)
Uncle Karl you in a better place
(...)
Rest in peace Uncle Rob, we miss you, bless your heart

Interestingly, J. Cole also mentions his uncle on the song BRACKETS (2018), although, in this case, the rapper is actually portraying a caricature of the taxation system that he is subjected to.

Hell yeah boy, I'm a goddamn millionaire now
Hell yeah, nigga, they can't tell me shit now, bro, hell no, fuck that
Bitch, got my first motherfuckin' million dollar check nigga
I'm goddamn lit boy, you crazy as hell

Hold up, it's my phone real quick, it's my Unc'
Uncle Sam and shit

"What's up Unc'? Yup. Hey, I told you that check was coming in, I gotchu when it came in. Goddamn, I'm a man of my word. Goddamn, I told you I'ma have it, and goddamn, I'ma have it for you. Hell, shit, damn right. Now, how much was it though? Uh huh. Huh? Half? Half nigga? You crazy, boy, you crazy. Bitch, you crazy as fuck. Bitch, bitch, you better suck half my dick!

As he mentions that he is talking to uncle sam, the listener understands that J. Cole is not speaking about his actual uncle. Instead, the rapper seems to be complaining about the level of taxation on high revenue. While he acts out the conversation, Cole's voice is modified into a higher pitch, thus making him sound like a kid. As he seems to have not realised how much money he would lose to taxes, before being faced with it, this could be his way of expressing his child-like innocence, as well as his immaturity, since he finishes by saying "bitch, you better suck half my dick!"

As was expected, Grandfathers also proved to step in as surrogate father figures, or even just as alternate father figures that complement the existing one. In "The Glory" (2018), Zombie Juice recalls the following recurring scene in which his grandfather would reprimand him by telling him he was "just like [his] mama," which the rapper clarifies as being "tough love," an unpleasant way of making him realise the gravity of his actions, to better help him in the long run.

I wish my momma was alive, if I could see her face
My grandfather used to say when I fucked up
That I was just like my momma, tough love

Kendrick Lamar's work mentions his grandfather twice. First, in the song "Swimming Pools (Drank)" (2012), which is about the dangers of alcoholism and the dangers of peer pressure. The lyrics quote:

Now I done grew up 'round some people livin' their life in bottles
Granddaddy had the golden flask
Backstroke every day in Chicago
Some people like the way it feels
Some people wanna kill their sorrows
Some people wanna fit in with the popular, that was my problem

In this fragment, Kendrick discusses the strong presence of alcohol in his family circle. He informs the listeners that his grandfather used to drink alcohol from a golden flask, which illustrates the importance of alcohol in the man's life. The rapper plays with the semantic field of the swimming pool and associates it with the consumption of alcohol. "Backstroke every day in Chicago" hints that his grandfather swam —drank— every day, back in Chicago. In "How Much A Dollar Cost" (2015), Kendrick Lamar narrates a story in which he encounters a homeless man. The rapper informs the listeners of the smell of alcohol that emanates from the man but, to refer to alcohol, Kendrick uses the term "Grandpa's old medicine," which shows an association between alcohol and the memories he has of his grandfather.

I smell Grandpa's old medicine, reekin' from your skin
Moonshine and gin, nigga you're babblin', your words ain't flatterin'

In the Flatbush Zombies' "The Odyssey" (2016), Meechy Darko refers to both of his grandparents by singing "They hog tied my grandmama and whipped my grandpa with pistols." Here, however, the use of those characters serves a purely narrative purpose and is not based on real events. However, this points to how important family members are to our young rappers, as violence towards their grandparents or other loved ones is generally viewed as one of the worst things that could happen to them.

Celebrities and TV Daddies

Although several family members can sometimes step in as needed in order to help bring up fatherless children, it is not always possible or sufficient. Interestingly, rappers often report the influence of other celebrities, and even fictional characters on both their personal and artistic development. This seems coherent with the very nature of rap music, since the genre first came to life with the use of samples from other recorded songs. Intertextuality is thus deeply connected to rap music.

A first instance of a "celebrity" role model can be found in the following fragment from J. Cole's 2014 "No Role Modelz".

First things first: rest in peace Uncle Phil
For real
You the only father that I ever knew
I get my bitch pregnant, I'ma be a better you

The “Uncle Phil” that the song is referring to is the character from the 1990s television show, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, played by James Avery. J. Cole begins by paying his respect to the actor, who passed away almost exactly one year before Cole’s album was released, before adding that he was the only father that he ever knew. Given the rapper’s personal family history, resemblance can be observed with the main character in the TV show, Will —played by Will Smith—, who was abandoned by his father. Unlike Cole, however, Will benefited from having a strong father figure around to teach him how to navigate life and become a better person, thus explaining why Cole relied on the character of Uncle Phil so much, not only because he was a good father figure, but also because J. Cole could relate to Will’s personal situation.

J. Cole is not the only rapper from our sample to have mentioned *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* in his work. As can be observed in the following fragment from “Worldstar” (2013), Childish Gambino also seems to identify with the TV show’s main actor.

Worldstar before rap, you already know that
So Fresh Prince, they about to bring the show back

The fragment begins with Gambino saying he was a world star before rap, as he was already famous for his acting and stand-up comedy before he began his career in the music industry. The reason for his identification with the Fresh Prince might be found here as Will Smith is another one of the few celebrities who successfully managed to have a career both in acting and in music —as the emcee in the rap duo, DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince—, much like Childish Gambino himself. Although this only constitutes a short referral, Childish Gambino also allows his influences to flow freely into his work, as could be seen throughout his 2016 album *“Awaken, My Love!”* The work shows Gambino participating in the practice of a different genre, compared to what he made in his previous works such as *Because the Internet* (2013). Indeed, while the 2013 album can clearly be labelled in the hip-hop/rap section, *“Awaken, My Love!”* shows the rapper leaving his comfort zone to produce a funk and soul album. The first single, “Me and Your Mama” is heavily inspired by George Clinton and his Funk band, Psychedelic. On the matter, Ludwig Göransson, who produced the song with

Childish Gambino, commented that “it's with the addition of a reverberating snare drum, a sound that's unmistakable to anyone who has ever tried to trace the roots of funk and psychedelic soul back to Funkadelic and, in particular, the 1971 epic ‘Maggot Brain.’” (Göransson in Rys) The second single of the album, “Redbone”, strongly resembles another Funk classic, Bootsy Collin’s “I’d Rather Be With You”

Of course, mentions of other artists that influenced a rapper’s work do not stop there, and, given the highly playful lyrical nature of rap music, it has become a sort of game for rap artists to try and insert hidden references to their fellow rappers into the text while, when possible, keeping a coherent grammar. Occurrences of such practice can be found as early as the early 1990s, as can be observed in the following fragment from LL Cool J’s “Pink Cookies In a Plastic Bag Getting Crushed by Buildings” (1993), in which the rapper casually filled his lyrics with the names of rappers and rap groups: Heavy D, Big Daddy Kane, A Tribe Called Quest, Flava Unit, Ice-T, Brand Nubian and Boogie Down Production.

Well can we do ya so **Heavy, I'm D?**
She said, "You tried to play me like **Big Daddy**"
I said, "I know your **Tribe I Called and re-Quested**
For you to be manifested"
She said, "You know the Same Gang and my **Flava Unit** too?"
I said, "You only knew the certain things I wanna do, do you?"
Rub ya down with warm **Ice-T**
Make ya feel **Brand Nubian** instantly
Boogie Down and check this **Production**
(my emphasis)

In a similar spirit, J. Cole makes a reference to the famous rap duo, Black Star, which is composed of the rappers Mos Def and Talib Kweli. J. Cole cleverly refers to himself as a “black star,” before mentioning the names of the two rappers, as can be seen from the following extract from “She Knows” (2013)

Now I'm sure you done heard about me
A black star, Mos Def, Kweli

Cole even dedicated a whole song to the rapper Nas, one of his idols. In “Let Nas Down” (2013), Cole uses christianity as a metaphor for hip-hop and associates rap celebrities from previous generations to religious figures. Cole argues that ‘Pac —2Pac— was the hip-hop equivalent of Jesus, before saying that Nas wrote the Bible, as this rapper was famous for his clever writing of lyrics.

‘Pac was like Jesus, Nas wrote the Bible

The Flatbush Zombies’ 2018 album, *Vacation in Hell*, features the track “Headstone”, which is constructed in a way that is reminiscent of the techniques used in LL Cool J’s aforementioned “Pink Cookies In a Plastic Bag Getting Crushed by Buildings” (1993), only the Brooklyn trio managed to write a song that is even more dense in references, as can be observed in the following verse by Zombie Juice.

1. I hit it **Doggystyle**, she throw it back, yeah, I'm **Born to Mack**
2. **It's Dark and Hell is Hot** so leave me where I'm at
3. I'm livin' how I wanna, no **Reasonable Doubt**
4. It's clear to see, **All Eyez on Me**, **400 Degreez**
5. **Who am I? Ruthless**, **Eazy does it**
6. **The Chronic** smoke in public, **Hate It Or Love It**
7. The underdogs, with **Liquid Swords**
8. **It Was Written** in my **diary**, this **Art of War**
9. I'm feelin' **Infamous**, **Immortal** with my **Technique**
10. A **Revolutionary** shinin' with diamond teeth
11. Young **Don Cartagena**, excuse my demeanor, this the **Glamour Life**
12. **You Still Not a Player**, you ain't half as nice
13. I'm **Born Again**, **Life After Death**, I made the sacrifice
14. I'm **Supa Dupa Fly**, **Juicy** keep them **Hypnotized**
15. I said **my name is Juice**, **AmeriKKKa's Most**
16. **Ain't No Half-Steppin'**, see you at **Tha Crossroads**
(my emphasis and numbering)

By taking a closer look at this fragment, we can observe a very high number of —bolded— references to earlier rap albums in Juice’s verse. The first four lines alone mention six albums: Snoop Dogg’s *Doggystyle* (1993), Too \$hort’s *Born to Mack* (1987), DMX’s *it's dark and hell is hot* (1998), Jay-Z’s *Reasonable Doubt* (1996), 2Pac’s *All Eyez on Me* (1996), and Juvenile’s *400 Degreez* (1998). Perhaps the most clever word plays are taking place in lines 13 to 15, as the rapper plays with titles of the Notorious B.I.G.’s works, namely two of his albums —*Born Again* (1999) and *Life After Death* (1997)—, and his most commercially famous singles —“Juicy” (1994) and “Hypnotize” (1997). The rapper from the Flatbush Zombies uses the

single titles to urge himself —taking advantage of the resemblance between “Juice” and “Juicy”— to keep the crowd entertained —Hypnotized. Interestingly, both the members of the Flatbush Zombies and the Notorious B.I.G. are from Brooklyn, and have Caribbean roots that they proudly show in their music through the use of accents and specific vocabulary. For instance, in his 1997 song, “You’re Nobody (Til Somebody Kills You)”, Biggie Smalls takes up a Jamaican accent and sings:

Here's a tissue, stop your bloodclaat cryin'
The kids, the dog, everybody dyin', no lyn'

Similarly, in MRAZ (2013), Meechy Darko, from the Flatbush Zombies, begins his verse with “What the bloodclot?”, using the same expression⁶ that was used by the Notorious B.I.G in the previous quote. The four references that were made by Zombie Juice are evidence to the strong impact that the Notorious B.I.G. had on the trio, an impact that may even have inspired Juice in picking his rap name.

In an interview conducted by Genius, the Flatbush Zombies were asked to give some explanation regarding the lyrics Meechy Darko commented the following.

“We’re really, like, paying homage to all those people in the past, ‘cause we wouldn’t have had these rhyme schemes, wouldn’t have had these ideas if it wasn’t for any of those people. (...) People don’t care about the past (...) I think that’s why this song is cool because we’re paying homage and not in a cheesy way. We’re just really doing lyrical exercises, which is what hip-hop is about.” (Brown, my transcription)

What is striking in Meechy Darko’s statement is the profound respect that those rappers show for the artists that preceded them and created the basis for the genre. The rapper expresses his opinion that “people don’t care about the past” and does not hesitate to display the importance that the previous generations of rappers had on him. Meechy also touches on the lyrically playful nature of rap music, as he qualifies the demonstrated practice as “lyrical exercises, which is what hip-hop is all about.”

⁶ “Bloodclot” and “bloodclaat” are spelling variations of the same Jamaican Creole word. It was originally used to refer to a menstrual pad, “claad” being the Creole equivalent to the standard English “cloth” (Jamaican Patwah)

Of course, the references do not stop at the confines of rap music and hip-hop culture. As J. Cole demonstrates in his 2016 song, “Immortal”, the intertextuality present in rap lyrics also touches on other musical genres, such as blues.

They tellin' niggas, "sell dope, rap or go to NBA"
In that order, it's that sort of thinkin'
That been keepin' niggas chained at the bottom and hanged
The strangest fruit that you ever seen, ripe with pain, listen...

As can be observed from this quote, Cole uses the title of Billie Holliday’s 1939 song, “Strange Fruit” and adapts its original meaning to his own contemporary context. Indeed, while the original song meant to protest against the lynching of Black Americans in the South—and compared the hanging bodies to “strange fruits”—, J. Cole’s use of the expression qualifies the way that contemporary Black Americans are being kept down by the socially imposed idea that the only way for them to earn good money and be successful is by selling drugs, becoming a rapper, or becoming a professional basketball player. It should also be added that, although this probably was not J. Cole’s original purpose, the title of the song, “Immortal”, fits the practice of sampling and referring to other artists in rap lyrics, as, in this process, rap artists make sure that the sources of their inspiration survives longer in the collective memory, by introducing their fans to it.

Some rappers even mention their influences and sources of inspiration outside of music altogether. Such is the case in the following fragment from Childish Gambino’s 12.38 (2020)

N. K. Jemisin with you, uh
Got the All About Love, on some bell hooks

In this fragment, Childish Gambino mentions the African American Fantasy writer, N. K. Jemisin, as well as the professor and author, bell hooks. In his 2020 “The Light”, Joey Bada\$\$ chooses to describing himself by referring to Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali, proclaiming that he is a mix of both, “in a rapper’s body.”

I'm like Mahatma Gandhi meets Muhammad Ali
Trapped in a rapper's body

Finally, Kendrick Lamar's 2012 "Backseat Freestyle" begins with the following lines.

Uh, Martin had a dream
Martin had a dream
Kendrick have a dream

By identifying with Martin Luther King and bringing up his "I have a dream" speech from the first line of the song, Kendrick Lamar is setting high expectations from the start. However, as *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012) is a tale of Kendrick's adolescence, the lyrics end up being mainly concerned with childish goals —"bitches," "money and power"—, and his dream turns out to be rather immature, as is demonstrated by the chorus:

All my life I want money and power
Respect my mind or die from lead shower
I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel Tower
So I can fuck the world for seventy-two hours

Conclusion: Ghetto Daddies and Rap Role Modelz

In summary, the paternal figures take an important place in rap music, albeit not as much as the maternal figures. The literary analysis highlights the presence of two main types of paternal figures: the biological fathers, and the role models, stylised as "Role Modelz" in reference to J. Cole's 2014 song. The relationships with the figure of the biological father are described differently based on the artist that is studied. Mainly, they fall into three categories. The first category is made up of the artists whose fathers are absent from their sons' life, presumably by choice. As could be expected, the songs that mention such characters are filled with negative feelings towards those absentee father figures. Secondly, the fathers that were absent from their children's lives for involuntary reasons —for instance, if they passed away— are usually discussed with great sadness as they cannot be blamed for their absence, even though it may cause pain for their children. The third category comprises the rappers whose biological fathers were present during their childhood. Those artists describe having positive relationships with their fathers and have a tendency to connect their biological figures with happy personal childhood stories.

With regard to those categories, it should be noted that, although the stereotypes about the Black community in America would have us believe otherwise, a majority of the artists

from our sample find themselves in the third category, as they exhibit good relationships with their fathers. However, in the analysis of J. Cole's music, we find that the rapper repeatedly draws attention to the cyclical nature of family structures in the Black community, which he illustrates by comparing his personal circumstances with those of other people.

'Came a man by myself, only father was time
I know that she relate baby daddy ain't shit
So she raised that nigga kids but she swallowing mine
(Forbidden Fruit)

A first example is found in this first extract from *Forbidden Fruit* (2016), where Cole tells the story of the interactions he has with a young lady and mentions that she can relate to his situation, as her partner left her to take care of their children. An even more powerful way this cyclicity is exposed is by using actual audio recordings from young children who shared their experience of similar predicaments.

It should also be noted that, as his personal situation changed with the passing of his father, Childish Gambino's lyrics display an evolution from depictions of a good relationship to the sadness caused by the voice of his father's absence, as can be observed from the following extracts from "Stand Tall" (2016) and "39.28" (2020).

I feel like a child, so young and new in '92
I listened to what my father said
[Chorus]
Keep all your dreams, keep standing tall If you are strong, you cannot fall
There is a voice inside us all
So smile when you can, when you can
(“Stand Tall”)

Grief is a standing ocean, I never swam unless you did
So I don't know why I'm here without you
I miss you
(“39.28”)

The second half of this chapter is dedicated to “Role Modelz”. On the one hand, this position could be filled by male role models that could step into the picture and act as surrogate father figures for the fatherless children. Those individuals are usually related to the children. Uncles and grandfathers are the most common occurrences in the analysed corpus. On the other hand, text analysis reveals that rappers often rely on complementary role models

that they find in the media. In their songs, the artists list the celebrities that influenced them in several different ways such as by producing music that is directly inspired by specific tracks from older artists (e.g. Childish Gambino's "Redbone" and "Me and Your Mama"), mentioning those celebrities by name, and mentioning the titles of their works. In some cases, the second and third approaches lead to an intense lyrical game that consists of placing as many references as possible in one's lyrics, while keeping a coherent grammar, as can be observed in the Flatbush Zombies' "Headstone" (2018).

Overall, the rappers' choices in the role models that they discuss seem to indicate a tendency for them to search for individuals displaying characteristics that they can identify with. For instance, one popular reference is that of Will Smith's portrayal of Will in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, which can be explained by the character's backstory, being abandoned by his dad at a young age and having to go live and form a connection with his uncle —Uncle Phil— and aunt. The character of Uncle Phil is even mentioned directly in the first line of J. Cole's "No Role Modelz" (2014). Rappers also refer to many rappers from older generations, as well as other types of artists and celebrities such as Billie Holiday, Muhammad Ali and Martin Luther King. An overwhelming majority of those role models and inspirations are African American males.

In general, it appears that the greater topic of paternal figures has a tendency to serve as a way leading into stories of the past as rappers often recollect the memories that they have with their biological fathers, the family stories that they were told, or consuming the content that was produced by their favourite celebrities. For instance, a section of Kendrick Lamar's "DUCKWORTH." (2017) tells the tale of how his father decided to flee the gangs of Chicago to start a new life in California with Kendrick's mother. In "County Building Blues" (2012), Kendrick recalls a day spent with his father in 1992 through the eyes of his five year-old self. The young Kendrick reminisces over spending the day riding around the city of Los Angeles with his father. The memories are shared in an innocent happy way and it is only at the very end that the rapper announces the actual context that the events are taking place in: the 1992 Rodney King riots.

7. The Child: My Seed

This chapter is dedicated to the depictions of fatherhood in the selected rap sample, as well as the rappers' relationship with the younger generations. With scholars such as Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) arguing that rappers fear "fatherhood in general" (341), this chapter aims to analyse this phenomenon and verify the veracity of such claims, based on lyrical analysis. This analysis points to the fact that rappers treat this topic by addressing both their own—sometimes hypothetical—children and the next generations, in general. On the one hand, when it comes to their own children and family members, rappers express very positive feelings and fully embrace their duty as providers and role models. The rappers highlight a strong wish to be present for their children, nieces and nephews, and, on occasion, describe them as motivations to succeed. On the other hand, when it comes to their relationship with the youth as a whole, rappers express a wish to leave their mark and have a positive impact on the next generations and discuss their concerns relating to the existing systemic racial inequalities.

One literary technique that proves central to this topic is that of the apostrophe, an address to a person or personified object that is not present, or able to receive it, at the time when the message is being written or spoken. In rap lyrics, the apostrophe is used to focus on positive messages directed towards the youth. Childish Gambino, for instance, addresses a message of support to his son through an apostrophe, and emphasises the importance of pursuing supportive cycles. In J. Cole's *4 Your Eyez Only* (2016), the rapper conveys a message from a late friend, James, to James's daughter. Again, this message mainly focuses on the repetitive nature cycles of poverty and incarceration.

One concept that is addressed through this message is that of realness. The manner in which it is treated displays a shift in perspectives, from James's early understanding that realness comes from violent and ruthless behaviours, as was the case in gangsta rap, to rappers from the sample highlighting love and a sense of responsibilities as being central to realness. This can mainly be observed in the works of J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar.

Finally, the sample analysis directs the conversation towards the goal of "breaking the cycle," referring to the aforementioned cycles of poverty, incarceration, father absenteeism and more. After discussion on the different cycles and what links them together, the lyrical

analysis reveals that the rappers from the sample have a tendency to preach values related to self-love and the importance of education as a way to fight those cycles.

My Seed: Hip-Hop Daddies and Their Children

In the selected corpus, mentions of the rappers addressing the next generation came in second, after the baby mamas, thus ranking slightly above the mothers. In his 2012 article titled “Decent Daddy, Imperfect Daddy: Black Male Rap Artists' Views of Fatherhood and the Family”, Matthew Oware observed that “Black Male rap artists openly express their love and affection for their children, fully accepting the fatherly role as caregiver.” (341) The scholar argues that his findings “differ from Weitzer and Kubrin (2009), who state that rappers fear ‘fatherhood in general’ because, ‘...nurturant and caregiving behaviour is simply not manly’ (p. 18).” (341) The study of our lyrical sample shows results that are similar to Oware’s, as the rappers who have children display full acceptance of their responsibilities as fathers and take pride in providing and being present for their children. However, this does not necessarily mean that rappers do not fear fatherhood, only, more specifically, what our sample suggests is that they are scared of not being sufficiently good fathers, as can be observed in the following fragments from the Flatbush Zombies’ “quicksand” (2020) and J. Cole’s “Hello” (2014).

I'm feelin' the connection with my family driftin'
How will it be when I become a father of my own?
 (“quicksand”)

Oh what do I do now?
Cause if we ever got together
I'd have to be them niggas step-pops forever
And well that ain't my thing cause I
I ain't even got my own
And I ain't really got no home
No place to put these things I own
 (“Hello”)

The first fragment shows Meechy Darko’s fear of not being present for his future children, as he can already feel the connection with his family “driftin’” —slowly disappearing— while, in the second fragment, J. Cole expresses being uncomfortable with the idea of raising a child, as he is afraid that his lifestyle would not allow him to be a good (step-)father. In any case, what can be observed is that the rappers are not scared of parenthood as such. Instead, they

sometimes display a fear of being inadequate father figures. It is therefore difficult to understand Weitzer and Kubrin's claim that rappers fear "fatherhood in general." (18) Moreover, this assertion appears to have no basis in the scholars' lyrical analysis, as none of the fragments quoted in their 2009 article, "Misogyny in Rap Music" seem to support such an allegation. To support their claim, Weitzer and Kubrin quote Snoop Dogg's 1996 "Freestyle Conversation" and Too \$hort's 1995 "Coming Up \$hort", both of which touch on the fear of being tricked by a woman into making her pregnant, which would result in having to pay child support money. The idea that "it is not only the material cost of fathering a child that is feared in these songs, but also fatherhood in general," (Weitzer and Kubrin 18) however, is not supported by the quoted lyrics.

As was discussed in the section of this thesis dedicated to baby mamas, the fear of being tricked by women is still very much present in contemporary rap lyrics, although it is generally expressed in terms of women being interested in pursuing relationships with rappers because of their money. The only occurrence of a rapper mentioning this issue by referring to fatherhood can be observed in the Flatbush Zombies "Hell-O" (2018), where Meechy Darko sings. "It's Meechy Dark, still not the father bitch." As the line ends with the word "bitch," it can be understood as being directed towards a —probably hypothetical non-existent— woman, thus displaying the rapper's smugness for not having fallen into her trap.

When it comes to the analysis of our corpus, rappers address the topic of children in two types of ways: by mentioning their own offspring —although sometimes hypothetical— and by discussing the next generation in a more general manner. As was aforementioned, rappers displayed positive feelings regarding fatherhood, as can be observed in the following fragment.

Wanna get my mom a crib, with a lawn
Somethin' that my future kids, can run up on
So I always do my best to carry on

This quote from Joey Bada\$\$'s "FOR MY PEOPLE" (2017) highlights the artist's wish to be able to provide financially for his family, even though he did not have children of his own before 2018 (Saponara). Although he discusses buying a house —"crib"— for his mother, the artist has his future children in mind as he insists that the house should have a lawn for them

to play on. Joey Bada\$\$ ends by saying “so I always do my best to carry on,” which implies that this objective is one of the goals that keep him motivated to work hard.

In the context of providing their children with a better life, rappers also paint themselves as protective figures that are capable of violence, as can be observed in the following fragment from Kendrick Lamar’s “XXX.” (2017).

Yesterday, I got a call, like, from my dog, like 101
Said they killed his only son because of insufficient funds
(...)
He said: "K-Dot, can you pray for me? It been a fucked up day for me
(...)
To the spiritual, my spirit do know better, but I told him
"I can't sugarcoat the answer for you, this is how I feel:
If somebody kill my son, that mean somebody gettin' killed."

In this verse, Kendrick is having a conversation with a friend whose son was killed. The friend asks Kendrick —“K-Dot”— to give him advice and to pray for him. Kendrick, who, in the verse, is painted as a wise religious man, disregards his spiritual character and tells his friend that if he was in his shoes, he would simply search for revenge by killing his son’s murderer, quite the opposite of the type of advice that his friend is looking for. It can be speculated that the message behind those lines is that, to Kendrick Lamar, one’s child is so precious that their protection ranks above any moral, reasonable, or even spiritual, concern. In doing so, the rapper also sends a message that, should anyone try to harm his offspring, they should be aware that there will be imminent retaliation.

Moving further away from the perception of rappers as being unwilling to look after their children, Childish Gambino shows a great fear of losing contact with his son in “Baby Boy” (2016). The first verse of the song begins with the following lines.

Little hands, little feet
Tiny heart, tiny beat
Oh, thinkin' 'bout the time we spent falling in love together
I don't wanna leave you, I don't wanna deceive you
But oh, when mama cries from daddy's lies
Oh my, please don't take him away, mama
Don't take him away, oh

As we learn from the other songs in the album, the narrator appears to be in a somewhat destructive relationship where both parties have committed mistakes, leaving the couple with seemingly no way of fixing their relationship. In this fragment, the narrator owns up to the lies that he has told and the sadness that those lies brought to his partner. However, despite the realisation that the relationship has failed, the narrator pleads with his partner not to take his child away. The emotion is so strong that the sentence that begins in the fifth line does not even reach completion. Instead, the singer goes back to his original plea. This story gives an interesting twist to the recurring popular narrative of the irresponsible willingly absent father.

Even the Flatbush Zombies, who, so far in this work, have been shown to display the most hypermasculine, aggressive, and, sometimes rude discourse, show a sensitive side when it comes to fatherhood. Out of the three members of the band, only Zombie Juice is a father and his child is mentioned twice in the band's 2018 album, *Vacation in Hell*.

I wish I could see my kid way more than I could
My baby momma holdin' grudges but the court will do good
("The Glory")

True, indeed, Juice, if you ever off or bleed
I'm takin' care of your seeds, even if that means millions in fees for custody
She wildin' out on court, I'm like, "Give that bitch what she needs."
("U&I")

The first fragment, which is from the song titled "The Glory" (2018), shows Zombie Juice expressing sadness at the fact that he cannot see his child as much as he would like to. He adds that his baby mama is "holdin' grudges", which suggests that she is trying to gain full custody, keeping him from spending time with his child. In the second fragment from "U&I" (2018), Meechy Darko promises to be present in the lives of Juice's children if he is not able to, regardless of the reason. Meechy even adds that he would pay millions of dollars in fees if it is necessary to gain the child's custody.

Although some artists do not have children of their own, this does not stop them from showing interest in the next generation, as can be observed in the following fragment from Kendrick Lamar's "YAH." (2017)

My latest muse is my niece, she worth livin'
See me on the TV and scream: "That's Uncle Kendrick!"
Yeah, that's the business (Uno)

In this extract, the rapper mentions the relationship he has with his niece. He describes being inspired by his niece and calls her his “muse,” which shows the importance of this relationship to Kendrick.

The rappers from the sample also discuss the youth and the next generations without specifically targeting members of their own families. This can be observed in the Flatbush Zombies’ “XYNO” (2014), which quotes: “Overseas touring all the youth they support us.” This means that young people support them all around the world, which implies that what they preach will have a global impact on the future generations. However, having an impact on the youth is not always easy. According to Meechy Darko in “The Odyssey” (2016), parents sometimes get in the way.

This fan told me her parents said I sound like the devil
To me I sound like a poor black kid from the ghetto

In this fragment, the rapper describes a situation in which a fan’s parents do not seem to approve of their daughter’s musical taste as, according to them, Meechy sounds like the devil himself. The reason for this could be found in either one of two elements of Meechy Darko’s music. Firstly, as he performs, the rapper takes on a low-pitched, grunt-like, gritty voice, which is unusual in rap and popular music, and is reminiscent of some heavy metal singers. Secondly, the parents might be referring directly to the contents of what is sung by the rapper, as he repeatedly uses harsh vocabulary and discusses controversial topics —such as drugs and violence. In the second line, the rapper argues that the elements that make the fan’s parents uncomfortable might not so much be linked to his likeness to the devil, but that they are the consequence of him being “a poor black kid from the ghetto.”

In his approach to his younger fans, Joey Bada\$\$ has often displayed the image of someone who believes that many societal issues can be fixed, in the long run, by educating children and having a positive influence on them. The Brooklyn rapper used the expression “save the children” several times in his work, even using it as the title of the first song on *B4.Da.\$\$* (2015).

Tell me how we gon' make a livin'
Hustle on the block, who gon' save the children?

In this fragment from “TEMPTATION” (2017), Joey Bada\$\$ expresses concern for the Black youth and the Black community in general, as the systemic inequalities that exist give fewer work and education opportunities for urban Black communities and push young people to “hustle —make money in any way possible, usually by illegal means— on the block”. The rapper asks “who gon’ save the children?”

In order to save the children, Joey Bada\$\$ tries to reach out to the youth in his songs. In LAND OF THE FREE (2017), Joey states that he is “reaching out to my children, just hoping that they will listen.” He also sings the following lines.

And everything I do or say today that's worthwhile
Will for sure inspire actions in your first child

This fragment reveals Joey Bada\$\$’s intention, which is not only to educate the youth and make them listen, but also to inspire them to take action in order to better themselves and their environment. Similarly, in the following fragment from J. Cole’s 2013 song titled “New York Times”, the artist discusses reparations for American slavery and comments that he does not want money, as he would rather see young African Americans be given a chance to receive proper education.

In fact, reparations for niggas in desperation
Fuck money, get my kid a real education

In the case of Kendrick Lamar, the song “Real” (2012) contains an audio recording of his mother saying the following words:

If I don't hear from you by tomorrow, I hope you come back and learn from your mistakes. Come back a man, 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... And I love you Kendrick, if I don't hear you knocking on the door you know where I usually leave the key. Alright? Talk to you later, bye.

To put it back into the greater context of the album, the previous songs tell the story of Kendrick hanging out in the city, which ends with one of his friends dying from a bullet. Kendrick then experiences some sort of rebirth, as he turns to religion after an encounter with an elderly lady from the neighbourhood. His mother, who, until that point, was concerned with very mundane topics —throughout the album, she repeatedly reminds Kendrick that she is waiting for him to bring the car back—, suddenly disregards her usual concerns and opens her heart to Kendrick. She expresses her hopes that Kendrick will grow from this traumatic experience and evolve to be a positive influence on the next generations.

Apostrophe and the Letter to the Child

As was already discussed in the literature review of this work, an apostrophe consists in an address to a person or personified object that is not present, or able to receive it, at the time when the message is being written or spoken. In the previous part of this chapter, we observed that, in Childish Gambino's 2016 song, "Baby Boy", the rapper addresses a great fear of losing his child's custody. As it turns out, it is not the only song that is connected to the artist's son as it appears that, as a whole, the album *"Awaken, My Love!"* (2016) was produced with his child in mind, complete with scary stories and recollections of meeting the child's mother.

I'm on your side, woo, oh There is more out there
And somebody cares 'bout you I do
Keep all your dreams, keep standing tall If you are strong, you cannot fall (x5)
("Stand Tall")

In "Stand Tall", Childish Gambino, who had previously described his parents as being supportive of him, goes on to show the same gentleness in an apostrophe that is directed towards his son. The repetition of the same lines —"Keep all your dreams, keep standing tall If you are strong, you cannot fall"— throughout the different stages of the song suggests the idea of a positive cycle, rather than the habitual negative cycles of poverty that can usually be found in urban music.

Perhaps the most compelling instance of apostrophe in the studied corpus can be found in J. Cole's *4 Your Eyez Only* (2016). The album contains a number of songs that

discuss J. Cole's late friend, James McMillan Jr.⁷, including "Change" and "4 Your Eyez Only", which contains the following fragment:

One day your daddy called me, told me he had a funny feeling
What he'd been dealing with lately, he wasn't telling
I tried to pick his brains, still he wasn't revealing
But I could feel the sense of panic in his voice
(...)
With that said, the only thing I'm proud to say, I was a father
Write my story down, and if I pass
Go play it for my daughter when she ready"
And so I'm leaving you this record, for your eyes only
Don't you ever scratch or disrespect it
This perspective is a real one, another lost 'Ville son

In this fragment, J. Cole is giving some context into the origins of the story and the reason why it has to be transmitted via this medium. He addresses James's daughter directly as he uses the form "your daddy." The rapper explains that James called him one day, with fear in his voice, seemingly scared that he would die soon, and asked Cole to write his story down and share it with James's daughter if he passes before he can. Cole then addresses the young girl and says: "so I'm leaving you this record, for your eyes only (...) This perspective is a real one, another lost 'Ville son" — "'Ville" refers to Fayetteville, North Carolina, the city where J. Cole, and, presumably, James, grew up.

In "Change", J. Cole talks about the cycle of violence and crime that touches struggling black communities. The last verse of the song brings this topic closer to his personal experience of the murder of his friend James, as can be observed in the following fragment.

Pistols be poppin' and niggas drop in a heartbeat
Scattered like roaches, a body laid on the concrete
A body laid on the concrete
Look, somebody laid on the concrete
No time for that, ain't no lookin' back, cause I'm running too
I made it home, I woke up and turned on the morning news
Overcame with a feeling I can't explain
Cause that was my nigga James that was slain, he was 22
(Last night at around...) He was 22

⁷ According to the Genius website, "James McMillan Jr" is a made-up name that J. Cole used on this album to talk about his deceased friend while maintaining the privacy of James's family. (Kennedy)

J. Cole uses a powerful lyrical strategy as his choice of words becomes increasingly specific and humanises the victim more and more, as the verse progresses. In the first line, the rapper begins by talking about systemic issues in general, using the form of the “habitual —or invariant— be” followed by an infinitive, which indicates a repeated tendency for something to occur, indicating that gun violence is a common incidence in Black American urban communities. In the second and third lines, J. Cole becomes more precise as he points to a specific “body laid on the concrete”. In the fourth line, Cole replaces “a body” with the humanising word “somebody.” The rapper says he has “no time” to look at the victim because he must get himself out of harm’s way by running home. The next day, the so far anonymous victim is finally attributed an identity, as J. Cole turns on the news to realise that the victim was his friend James.

Since James passed away, J. Cole must now keep his promise by passing on James’s story to his daughter. In “4 Your Eyez Only”, the character of James introduces his story by describing the difficulties of providing for his daughter, highlighting the impression of being pushed back into criminality, as it appears to be the only way to make decent money as an ex-convict. As he tries to resist the urge, James knows that he might fall back into his own ways.

That's why I write this sonnet
If the pressure get too much for me to take and I break
Play this tape for my daughter and let her know my life is on it (For your eyes)
Let her know my life is on it
(For your eyes) For your eyes only

In this fragment from “4 Your Eyez Only” (2016), James explains that his doubting his capacity to stay away from crime, as the pressure of providing may become too intense, is the reason why he wants to make sure that his daughter hears his story.

J. Cole then sings James’s life story, a reminder of the cycle of poverty that hurts the Black urban community in the United States.

At a glance, I'm a failure
Addicted to pushing paraphernalia
But Daddy had dreams once, my eyes had a gleam once
Innocence disappeared by the age of eight years
My Pops shot up, drug-related, mama addicted

So Granny raised me in projects where thugs was hanging
(...)
Picked up the family business by the age of 13
Six years later was handed sentence
'Round the same time is when you came in this world
Me and your mama thinking:
"What the fuck we naming this girl?"
I told her "Nina," the prettiest name that I could think of
For the prettiest thing my eyes had ever seen, I was 19
Took me two felonies to see the trap
This crooked-ass system set for me
And now I fear it's too late for me to ever be
The one that set examples that was never set for me

This fragment begins with James calling himself “a failure” and “addicted to pushing paraphernalia,” which, given the context, indicates that he was a drug dealer. He argues, however, that this was not always his plan, but that he was pushed into this activity after he lost both his innocence and his father at the age of eight, as a result of a drug-related incident. James was raised by his grandmother in the “projects” —government subsidised housing— and picked up drug dealing —“the family business”— when he was thirteen years old, which led him to be incarcerated when he was only nineteen, around the time his daughter was born. James adds that he fell into “the trap” that was set for him by “this crooked-ass system,” and is now scared that he will not be present for his daughter, thus repeating the cycle that he himself fell victim to. He shares some of his wishes in the following paragraph.

I pray you find a nigga with goals and point of views
Much broader than the corner, if not it's gon' corner you
Into a box, where your son don't even know his pops
And the cyclical nature of doing time continues

James shares his concern that Nina, his daughter, might end up in a relationship with a man similar to the man he was and hopes that she finds a man with greater aspirations in life, thus avoiding repeating the cycle of poverty and incarceration —“the cyclical nature of doing time”— that seems ubiquitous in African American urban communities.

Realness: What makes a “Real N****?”

In his letter to his infant daughter, James addresses the concept of realness and how his perception of it has changed over the years. Interestingly, in the song “Immortal” (2016), the chorus, sung by J. Cole, quotes: “Real niggas don't die.” By saying “Real niggas don't die”—which could also be a reference to N.W.A's “Real Niggaz Don't Die” (1991)—, J. Cole, who may be speaking from James's perspective, “suggests that there is something about the nature of hustling and violence that immortalizes the perpetrator.” (Genius) This correlates with James's aforementioned speech on realness, from the song “4 Your Eyez Only” (2016), which quotes the following.

See, baby girl, I realized
My definition of a real nigga was skewed
My views misshaped by new mixtapes
That confirmed the shit I learned in the streets was true
That real niggas don't speak when they beef with you
They just pull up on your street, let the heat achoo
And if a real nigga hungry, he gon' eat your food
I was a fool, spent all my time ducking school, ducking cops
Ducking rules, hugging blocks that don't love you

In this fragment, James explains that his perception of realness was skewed, biased by what he had heard in gangsta rap music and observed in the streets. James explains that what he believed was that realness comes from ruthless and sociopathic traits, meaning that “real niggas” solve their arguments with other people by conducting drive-by shootings, and not through dialogue, and that “real niggas” do not need to ask for permission to take what they want from other people. James continues by saying he was a fool who tried to achieve this goal and chose crime over school. After those lines, James changes the topic and never goes back to share his knowledge of what actually makes a person real.

Although James himself does not tell us where actual realness comes from, J. Cole addresses Nina and comments on the topic by saying the following:

Now it's 30 years later, making sure this story's told
Girl, your daddy was a real nigga, not 'cause he was cold
Not because he was the first
To get some pussy 12 years old
Not because he used to come through
In the Caddy on some vogues

Not because he went from bagging up
Them grams to serving O's
Nah, your daddy was a real nigga, not 'cause he was hard
Not because he lived a life of crime and sat behind some bars
Not because he screamed, "Fuck the law"
Although that was true
Your daddy was a real nigga 'cause he loved you
For your eyes only

As can be observed in this fragment, Cole tells Nina that her daddy “was a real nigga,” and begins listing reasons that would fit James’s old perception of realness, arguing that those are not elements that would make a man real. In short, J. Cole argues that James’s realness has nothing to do with his ruthlessness, his life of crime or his general disregard for rules and social conventions. Instead, it is because James finally realised that those elements have no value, and because he sorted out his priorities. James was “a real nigga” because he loved his daughter.

In a similar twist of fate, Kendrick Lamar’s *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (2012) displays an evolution in the rapper’s perspective on realness. Whereas the third track of the album, “Backseat Freestyle”, shows an immature sixteen year old Kendrick who takes pride in his ruthlessness, the song “Real” educates the listeners to a newfound perspective on realness.

Goddamn I got bitches, damn I got bitches
Damn I got bitches: wifey, girlfriend and mistress
All my life I want money and power
Respect my mind or, nigga, it's go time

As was highlighted in the previous paragraph, this fragment from Kendrick Lamar’s “Backseat Freestyle” displays the young man bragging about pursuing multiple relationships with distinct women and threatening to start fights with anyone who does not “respect his mind. On the other hand, the following fragment from “Real” sends a message that is completely opposed to this one.

Kenny, I ain't trippin' off them dominoes anymore. Just calling, sorry to hear what happened to your homeboy, but don't learn the hard way like I did, homie. Any nigga can kill a man, that don't make you a real nigga. Real is responsibility. Real is taking care of your motherfucking family. Real is God, nigga

After Kendrick's traumatic experience of losing a friend, Kenny Duckworth, the rapper's father, reaches out to Kendrick in order to express his condolences and teach him about realness. In Kenny's words, "Any nigga can kill a man, that don't make you a real nigga." Much like J. Cole, Kenny teaches the listeners that realness comes from values of responsibility and family.

Breaking the Cycle

Throughout this thesis, one of the most recurring concepts that was observed so far is that of the cycle. This cycle takes different forms such as the cycle of poverty (Anderson 14), the cycle of deprivation (Jargowsky 303), the cycle of father absenteeism and the cycle of incarceration. All of those cycles are interconnected and are a consequence of the "systemic racism" (Cohen 204) and racial injustices that exist in the United States, as the lack of education and work opportunities that are available to the people from Black urban communities has led individuals to "hustle," meaning to find alternative ways of earning money, in order to be able to provide for their loved ones. In some cases, the hustle was legal, but for most, hustling meant getting involved in criminal, often drug-related, activities. In such cases, poverty would indirectly lead to incarceration, which is but one of the links that exists between the different cycles. In the words of Joey Bada\$\$, "Trickery in the system, put my niggas in prison." (LAND OF THE FREE 2017) For a lucky few, however, hustling legally was a possibility. As is explained in Dimitri A. Bogazianos's *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music and the War on Drugs* (2012), "hip hop is making a way from no way, and in the case of mainstream hip hop, it has been a legal hustle for many youth from ghettos who would not have had many other opportunities." (Wright in Bogazianos 62)

J. Cole's works repeatedly refer to those legal hustles that are used by Black Americans to attain wealth and leave those vicious cycles. As was previously discussed, the rapper's 2016 song, "Immortal", quotes: "They tellin' niggas, 'sell dope, rap or go to NBA.'" In his 2014 song, "G.O.M.D.", the rapper asks:

Why every rich black nigga gotta be famous?
Why every broke black nigga gotta be brainless?
Uh, that's a stereotype

Similarly, in his 2012 track, “Black Boy Fly” Kendrick Lamar expresses a similar perspective to J. Cole’s, arguing that “the only way out the ghetto”, is through fame, as he sings:

The only way out the ghetto, you know the stereotype
Shooting hoops or live on the stereo like Top 40

Of course, J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar are not complaining about being rich and famous. The issue that they are highlighting in those songs is that becoming a famous entertainer or athlete seems to be the only available way for Black people to reach wealth in America. Interestingly, J. Cole himself is a living example of this stereotype, as he started out as a basketball player before becoming a rapper (J. Cole). Of course, as Cole notes in “Friends” (2018), “they only got 12 slots on the Pistons,” referring to the detroit-based NBA team. What the rapper suggests is that the dream of escaping poverty by becoming a professional athlete is only within reach of a minority of individuals. For those who do not have such a possibility, the problem stays unchanged and the cycles remain a reality.

As many individuals are having to opt for an illegal hustle, the public association of Black youth with criminality remains a strong issue, especially when it comes to encounters with agents of the law. As is widely explored in Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, African American’s experience encounters with the police as dangerous situations. In the book, the author addressed his son saying that “the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body.” (9) This has recently been demonstrated by the deaths of Eric Garner (17 July 2014), Michael Brown (9 August 2014), Tamir Rice (22 November 2014), Walter Scott (4 April 2015), Alton Sterling (5 July 2016), Philando Castile (6 July 2016), Stephon Clark (18 March 2018), Breonna Taylor (13 March 2020), George Floyd (25 May 2020), Daunte Wright (11 April 2021) (BBC News) and countless others.

This idea is also explored in rap music, as can be observed in the following lines from Joey Bada\$\$’s “BABYLON” (2017)

Detached from the roots since we set sail, my brothers
That's word to motherland, sold us on stolen land
Visions from brother man, he seen us all holdin' hands
Fifty years later, still see my brothers choked to death
R.I.P. to Eric Garner, only right I show respect

Nowaday they hangin' us by a different tree
Branches of the government, I can name all three
Judicial, legislative and executive
Lock your pops away, your moms, then next the kids
It's all consecutive, I'm just tryna break the cycle
I wonder if I'll do it all before they take my life, yo

This fragment is very dense in references to the oppression experienced by African people since they were first brought to America. Joey Bada\$\$ begins by referencing slavery and the fact that people were stolen from their native land —mainly in West Africa— and brought to stolen land —America— to be sold as slaves. The rapper then mentions Eric Garner, who “died after he was wrestled to the ground by a New York police officer on suspicion of illegally selling cigarettes.” (BBC News) Joey Bada\$\$ says he still sees his brothers being “choked to death.” The rapper goes on to use the “branches of the government” as a metaphor for branches of the trees where Blacks were hung in lynchings. In the end of the fragment, the artist alludes to “the cycle” and his intention to break it. Similarly, Kendrick Lamar’s “Feel” (2017) quotes: “I feel like I can't breathe.” Although the song does not directly discuss the topic of oppression, the allusion to Eric Garner and the Black Lives Matter movement is present, as, “while in a choke hold, Mr Garner uttered the words "I can't breathe" 11 times.” (BBC News)

In order to fight the cycle, rappers decide to address those issues in their music. They also preach positive values and ideas such as education and self-love. The outro to the Flatbush Zombies’ “Best American” (2018) support such a message of education, as can be observed in the following lines.

We are all the problem
When we don't homeschool, our children, after school
We are all the problem when we lay down
And expect somebody else to do the work for us
We are all the problem when we don't stand up to oppression
We are all the problem if we go back into slavery
That makes us all the problem.

This fragment highlights the band’s belief that educating children, also outside of school, is crucial and that it is necessary for the citizens to stand up to oppression. For this same reason, rappers try to get involved in their families and communities. As was previously discussed,

Kendrick Lamar values the relationship that he has with his niece. Now a father, Childish Gambino shares the following conversation with his son in the song titled “47.48” (2020):

- (Gambino) What do you love?
- I love... who do I love?
- Yeah, who do you love? Me?
- Yeah
- Anybody else?
- Mom and Oiallo. And Genesis. And I love... and I love Roland And I love myself
- That's... those are good answers. Those are really good answers
- Do you love yourself?
- I do love myself
- Does mommy love herself?
- Absolutely

In this extract, we can observe the emphasis that is put on self-love. As his son answers the question by saying he loves himself, Childish Gambino pauses for a second before replying: “That's... those are good answers. Those are really good answers,” which suggests his surprise, as self-love is something that he appears to have struggled with. Such is suggested in the ensuing song of the album, “53.49” (2020), when Glover sings: “Never said it even though I prolly should (Woah). I said I love me, I said I love me, ah, yeah.”

Regarding the rappers’ involvement and positive impacts on the community, some examples can be found in the following cases. Firstly, J. Cole’s created the Dreamville Foundation, a non-profit organisation that focuses on providing support to the youth from his hometown of Fayetteville North Carolina. The foundation gained media attention after “providing aid for those affected by Hurricane Florence in his hometown of Fayetteville, North Carolina.” (Lukarcanin). Secondly, Kendrick Lamar “has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Compton Unified School District’s music, sports, and after-school programs ‘to help keep Compton students off the streets and in the classroom.’” In 2014, raised funds during an international tour for charity, the proceeds of which “were donated to Habitat for Humanity and the city of Compton.” (Selby). Thirdly, Joey Bada\$\$ started a campaign which ended up producing \$25,000 for “The Fund for Public Schools.” he also donated “\$10,000 to Communities United for Police Reform in New York City” and “\$10,000 in production equipment and instruments to his alma mater, Edward R. Murrow High School through a successful partnership with the J Dilla Foundation and Akomplice Clothing.” (Jefferson). Finally, with the release of their *now, more than ever EP* (2020), The flatbush

zombies have sold three thousand pieces of merchandising, thus generating over \$100,000, “with all proceeds going to Black Lives Matter charities.” (Richards)

Conclusion: Rappers and the Next Generation

Finally, it may be concluded that rappers display characteristics that make them positive role models for the youth. Contrary to Weitzer and Kubrin’s claim that rappers fear “fatherhood in general (341), the lyrical analysis that was conducted in the context of this thesis revealed that rappers embrace their role as parents, providers and role models, even hinting that their children, or other young members of their families, give them motivation to work harder to succeed. When discussing their own children and family members, rappers exhibit positive feelings and a wish to be present for them and protect them.

Rappers also discussed the younger generations in general, which led them to share their concerns related to the repeated cycles of poverty and incarceration, as well as systemic racial inequalities in general. When it comes to their effect on the youth, rappers express a wish to have a positive impact that will help young African Americans learn important values and make the right choices, to change the world for the better.

In the context of this study, a focus was put on apostrophe, a literary device that takes the form of an address to a person or that is not present, or able to receive it, at the time when the message is being written or spoken. Several instances of apostrophe could be found throughout the corpus, most famously in J. Cole’s *4 Your Eyez Only* (2016), as the rapper relates the story of a late friend, James, to James’s daughter. The study of this text showed a particular concern for the repetitive nature cycles of poverty and incarceration.

The lyrical analysis also revealed the importance of the concept of realness, and a difference in the way it is perceived in gangsta rap and our contemporary sample, as James, who mentions being influenced by the former genre, associates realness with ideals of violence and ruthlessness. On the other hand, Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole’s works suggest that realness comes from love and a sense of responsibility.

Finally, as James's tale ends with his death, indirectly caused by his being stuck in a system that is seemingly impossible to escape and is conditioned by repetitive cycles of poverty, the corpus analysis brings us to discuss this flawed system and the solutions that rappers offer in order to change it.

8. Conclusion

As a medium that is now over fifty years old, rap music has had a lot of time to expand and mature, diversifying its topics and perspectives in the process. It is fair to say that hip-hop has gone a long way since the early days of Grand Wizard Theodor and Grandmaster Flash. Today, it has evolved into a global movement that shows no sign of stopping. Given the extent of this genre, it seems clear that it cannot be reduced to the works of a few artists, and this thesis has no claim to do so. This being said, in exploring the representation of family relationships in the works of Childish Gambino, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Joey Bada\$\$ and the Flatbush Zombies, this thesis has highlighted some trends that can be observed in rap texts. The present work has examined three different types of figures and family relationships: the relationships with the maternal figures, the paternal figures, and the children. Hip-hop is strongly connected to the concepts of ghetto and cycles of poverty, as well as stereotypes of broken Black families, which creates an atmosphere in which family relationships can be very tense. This tension can be observed through lyrical games and distinct literary devices such as anaphora and apostrophe, which gives listeners an impression of immediacy to the situations discussed by the rappers.

On the topic of the maternal, the present lyrical analysis shows that, in the studied corpus, the female characters are split into two categories: the rappers' partners and baby mamas, and the mothers and surrogate mother figures. While some partners and ex partners are discussed with fondness, the baby mamas are mainly depicted in negative terms, similarly to Matthew Oware's findings in his 2012 article, "Decent Daddy, Imperfect Daddy: Black Male Rap Artists' Views of Fatherhood and the Family". Those characters are often objectified and dehumanised, by being treated as means to an end, and depicted as untrustworthy and greedy individuals. On the specific topic of faithfulness, the texts imply a double standard, as the women are shamed for being untrustworthy and unfaithful, while the men take pride in seducing several women. This paradox points to an apparent misogyny where men are praised among their peers for displaying a type of behaviour that would cause women to be shamed. In general, it can be said that the relationships to potential partners and baby mamas are often used in the context of lyrical games reminiscent of the children's game known as "the dozens" in that the rappers use it as the basis for extravagant metaphors in a codified display of bravado, braggadocio and masculinity. By taking part in this practice, the rappers choose to play into the stereotype of the "baadmen," (Lena 486) anti-heroes that

value ruthlessness, sociopathic behaviours and hypermasculinity. The second category focused on the relationships with the mothers and substitute mother figures, which were almost exclusively discussed in overwhelmingly positive terms. Those characters are depicted as strong women who always overcome adversity and the struggles of life. As a result, rap artists show a strong desire to repay them by showering them with expensive presents. The surrogate mother figures that were mentioned were mainly grandmothers, who are discussed similarly to the mothers, although with more emphasis on their religious faith. The great contrast in the ways the mother figures and partners are discussed suggests an emotional bias in the form of the glorification of mother figures and a general distrust of baby mamas.

The literary analysis highlighted the presence of three main types of paternal figures: the biological fathers, the surrogate father figures, and the role models. The relationships with the figure of the biological father were described differently based on the personal situation of each artist. The fathers that were present during the artist's childhood were discussed with enthusiasm, while the rappers expressed negative feelings towards those who were absent. Surrogate father figures were mainly found within the family, such as in the uncles and grandfathers. Regarding the role models, rappers showed a tendency to mention individuals with similar predicaments to their own in order to be able to better identify with them. A majority of them are African American males. Those role models are often acknowledged in a hip-hop lyrical game that consists in mentioning their names, or the title of their works, in rap lyrics, while maintaining a coherent grammar, as can be observed in the Flatbush Zombies' "Headstone" (2018). In general, rappers have shown a tendency to associate the figures of the father and the mother with themes and memories of the past. As the artists discuss those characters, they often mention stories of their childhood or stories that they were told about their parents, as children. Such is the case in Kendrick Lamar's songs, "County Building Blues" (2012) and "DUCKWORTH." (2017).

In the context of the artists' relationships with their children, the lyrical analysis that was conducted revealed, contrary to Weitzer and Kubrin's claim that rappers fear "fatherhood in general (341), that rappers embrace their role as parents, providers and role models. The rappers exhibit positive feelings and a wish to be present for their children and protect them. As rappers discussed the younger generations in general, they expressed wishes to have a positive impact that will help young African Americans learn important values and make the right choices, to change the world for the better. They also shared their concerns related to the

repeated cycles of poverty and incarceration, as well as systemic racial inequalities in general. The lyrical analysis revealed several instances of the use of apostrophe, an address to a person that is not present. This literary device gives the rappers the possibility to create an atmosphere of direct intimacy. Most notoriously, it takes the form of a letter to the child in J. Cole's *4 Your Eyez Only* (2016), as the rapper relates the story of a late friend, James, to his daughter. The concept of realness also proved crucial to this album, which highlighted an evolution in the way the concept is perceived in gangsta rap and in our contemporary sample. Indeed, whereas James, who mentions being influenced by the former genre, associates realness with ideals of violence and ruthlessness, Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole's works suggest that realness comes from love and one's sense of responsibility. By suggesting this new notion of realness, the rappers step away from the aforementioned stereotype of the "baaadmen." (Lena 486) Although the rappers sing those texts in the first person, it can be difficult to perceive the difference between author and narrator. "Of course, the line between rap music's gritty realism, storytelling, and straight-up signifyin(g) is not always clear to listeners, nor is it supposed to be." (Kelley 38-39)

As Hip-hop is now over fifty years old, questions may be asked as to the correlation that developed between the ageing medium and the way topics such as family relationships are treated in the genre. Firstly, the development of online platforms such as YouTube and SoundCloud implies that modern-day rappers are able to reach notoriety by themselves, without the need for an agent or a label to promote their music. This phenomenon appears to have resulted in a widening of the topics discussed in rap music. According to Clara McNulty-Finn, rap lyrics in the 1990s "had a relatively narrow focus. (...) Even the most financially successful rappers wrote about violence, crime, and living in poverty." In comparison, today's artists benefit from platforms that allow them to reach their fans directly. "Not having to uphold the expectations of a record label allows artists to craft their own message while still finding success." (McNulty-Finn) The result of such newfound freedom appears to be that of a creative climate in a musical genre that encourages more complex metaphors and free connection of ideas, resulting in a greater number of associations of distant topics and ideas in songs. Proof of this claim can be found in the various issues that were brought up by the artists in relation to questions relating to the family. For instance, repeated connections were made between, on the one hand, issues relating to cycles of poverty and systemic racial injustices, and, on the other hand, discussions on the relationships with the children, and the youth in general.

Secondly, although the medium has aged, it is difficult to comment on the genre, as a whole, as this would reduce it to generalisations. What can be observed, though, is the evolution of individual rappers throughout their careers. The lyrical analysis that was conducted in this thesis suggests that, while there seems to be a pattern in the way artists evolve as they age, not all rappers appear to follow the same route. For the most part, rappers tend to step away from immature expressions of misogyny as they age and grow into wiser personae. They also show a tendency to become less self-centred and begin to focus more on the next generations, in an attempt to share their knowledge. Examples of this can be observed in J. Cole's *KOD* (2018), which discusses human suffering and ways to deal with it. In the song "FRIENDS", which discusses the topics of addiction and drugs, J. Cole advocates caution and abstinence. The last verse of the song ends with the following lines.

I understand this message is not the coolest to say
But if you down to try it I know of a better way
Meditate

As Cole shares his advice, he acknowledges that it might not be the "coolest." Indeed it is not necessarily what someone might expect from a rapper. However, in *KOD*, J. Cole, who is now an established rapper, is not afraid to show that he is done trying to seem cool and that he would rather preach positive thoughts in order to have a valuable impact on his fans. Childish Gambino goes through a similar process of growth, although he displays more clear-cut phases in his albums. While his 2013 album, *Because the Internet*, is very self-centred, featuring themes of introspection, a recurrence of crude language and general apathy towards the other characters. His new works, *"Awaken, My Love!"* (2016) and *3.15.20* (2020) show more concern for the artist's loved ones and the next generations. However, as they advance into their careers, Kendrick Lamar and the Flatbush Zombies do not show such a clear evolution in the way that they treat those topics in their songs, as they continue to take part in misogynist displays of masculinity in their more recent works.

Those observations hint towards the idea that it is not how long an artist has been making music that has an impact on the contents of their music but, rather, their personal choices and the life events that they experience. Furthermore, artists appear to adopt more traditional rap topics and perspectives earlier in their career, which allows them to prove themselves through the use of clever word plays and penmanship, taking part in lyrical games

that are widely recognisable by hip-hop fans, similar to the children's practice of the aforementioned dozens. While some rappers move on to feature more diverse types of content in their music, some of them chose to remain closer to their original personae.

This brings us to the question of labels and their influence on the content that is produced by the artists. The study of the "Baby Mama" revealed that the Flatbush Zombies, the only group that is completely independent, have the most lyrics that are dehumanising women. Surprisingly, the artists that come second and third are the ones that are signed to commercial labels: Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole. The Flatbush Zombies' lyrics were also the ones that contained the least love-related songs, which puts them in opposition to Childish Gambino —making up for fifty out of the eighty occurrences—, followed by J. Cole.

Overall, the findings suggest a correlation between the artists' labels and the objectification of women in rap lyrics. The significant presence of such occurrences in albums signed to commercial labels could indicate that the artists were encouraged by their labels to use controversial language that "sells." Although it is present to a significant extent in J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar's works, it seems close to ubiquitous in the Flatbush Zombies' "1000% independent" (The Glorious Dead) music, which could be explained by the absence of external guidance, the strong influence of rap music from the older generations, and the importance given by the group to authenticity —earlier rappers, such as gangsta rap artists, had a tendency to take on a "ghetto" persona that behaved in a hypermasculine way, which ended up being associated with authenticity in rap music. However, the link between the labels and the lyrical contents of an album cannot be argued with certainty. What transpires from the literary analysis is that each artist appears to make their own choices when it comes to the topics discussed and how to treat them. Furthermore, there is limited to no correlation to be observed between the labels and the other topics. It should be noted that, because the corpus for this thesis is only made up of works by five artists, the tendencies that were observed may be coincidental.

As was just discussed, the corpus that was selected for this thesis only contains songs made by five artists, which means that there is no way to verify whether the observed tendencies are linked to the labels' influence or are completely fortuitous. In order to answer this question, future research should expand analysis to a larger number of artists, distributed amongst rappers signed to commercial labels, indie labels, and fully independent artists.

Another limitation comes from the fact that this thesis is solely focused on the works of male rappers. As there are two sides to every story, future research should study the works of female rappers, such as Janelle Monáe —signed to Sean Combs’ commercial label, Bad Boy Records—, Saweetie —signed to Warner Records Inc.— and Rapsody —signed to It's a Wonderful World Music Group, an independent label—, and compare them with the works of male rappers, in order to gain a more global understanding of the representation of parenthood in rap music.

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