

Marble Floors and Missed Calls

A Close Reading of Narratives of Success in 2010s U.S. Rap Lyrics

Tuomas Grannas

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In this study I examine narratives of success found in the lyrics of American mainstream rappers in the 2010s using close reading as my method. This study consists of a series of eleven lyric analyses divided into five smaller groups based on the themes present in the lyrics of the songs. The term “success” is defined in this study as the combination of wealth and fame. The concept “mainstream rapper” is defined in this study as referring to a rapper who has at one point in the 2010s (2010-2019) released an album which has charted in the top 100 albums of the Billboard 200 record chart.

In this study songs by the following artists are examined: Drake, JAY-Z, Rick Ross, G-Eazy, Big Sean, ScHoolboy Q, Childish Gambino, Logic and Big K.R.I.T. The lyric analyses are divided into five thematic groups, which deal with portrayals of work in rap lyrics, what it feels like to achieve success and how that success is celebrated, portrayals of reminiscence, the isolating effects of stardom and how financial success can be made to last.

The key findings of the study were that the narratives of success that could be discovered from the lyrics of 2010s mainstream rappers quite diverse. The financial boon that a successful rap career could bestow upon an artist was not flaunted only through typical rap clichés such as by namedropping hypercar marques and expensive champagne brands, but instead also through mentions of the ability to support loved ones financially. In addition, some rappers defined success more broadly than as just a combination of wealth and fame, viewing achieving some form of self-actualization as a significant form of success as well. It also became apparent that digitalization and the proliferation of the internet and of smart phones had turned fame into something almost completely inescapable and had practically evaporated the concept of privacy for some rappers. Then, perhaps partly because the rappers’ expectation of privacy was already diminished either way, rappers in the 2010s would rap about highly introspective and personal topics, almost using their music as a form of therapy. Emotional vulnerability seems to be a noticeable trend in the mainstream hip-hop of the 2010s and it is a significant aspect that separates the rap music of the 2010s from the rap music of earlier decades.

Similar future research should be conducted into the perspectives that mainstream rappers of the 1990s and the 2000s had on success, and the proliferation of introspective lyricism into hip-hop music should be observed further to see whether the trend keeps going into the 2020s.

Key words: rap music, hip-hop music, hip hop music, close reading, lyric analysis, success studies, 2010s rap music, mainstream rap music, wealth, fame, stardom

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1 Introduction

From the 1950s all the way to the early 2010s, rock music and pop music have been the most popular music genres in the US (Diner et al. n.d.). These genres have created the biggest stars, and they have formed the basis for much of youth culture, and popular culture at large.

However, recently there has been a shift in power. After decades of consistent growth as a genre through its inception in the 1970s, rap music finally took over the United States music mainstream from rock and pop music in the 2010s. In 2018, market measurement firm Nielsen declared that rap music had officially surpassed rock as the most popular music genre in the US (Lynch 2018). Musicologist Steven Gamble (2022) presents multiple factors which contributed to this development:

Hip hop's ability to adapt to new consumption mediums, to immerse itself in the contemporary online mediascape, to engage young audiences of new generations, to work within platform constraints, and to creatively innovate helped it soar to the commercial forefront of the popular music industry.

As rap has grown in popularity, it seems that the genre has become more introspective than before (Racine 2018:256). Fame and success are described by rappers in the 2010s from a wider variety of perspectives than before, specifically through the use of introspection, which requires observing in order to understand how narrative trends in rap are developing as the genre evolves over time. This trend should lend itself well to lyric analysis and close reading, as the listener can now get even closer to the artist and their desired message than in previous decades as their lyrics turn inwards. Of course, one should pay careful attention to preserving the delicate balance between taking the perspectives of these rappers completely at face value and remembering that these are still ultimately mediated stories presented to us in the form of a product, a commodity, the popular music song. However, in this thesis I take the position of treating rap lyrics as mostly personally confessional and at least mostly authentic, due to the fact that the autobiographical nature of lyrical perspectives has historically been the prevailing trend in hip-hop. Williams (2007:4) notes: "Hip-hop's claims to authenticity take a variety of forms in a multitude of contexts; consequently, it is virtually impossible to clearly and succinctly define what authenticity means in the context of hip-hop." However, what is clear is that authenticity, even though difficult to define, is a central aspect of hip-hop culture and rap music. One of Williams' (2007:4) definitions for hip-hop authenticity is "...staying true to oneself". Accepting that definition, we can posit that rap lyrics should almost always be thought of as at least partly autobiographical. Of course, styles of hip-hop which indulge in

more fantastical author positions also exist, such as the overtly violent rap subgenre horrorcore, which emphasizes grotesque violence comparable to imagery found in genres like death metal, but those styles of hip-hop are not the concern of this study.

In this study I will examine selected songs released in the 2010s by a variety of popular rappers. My aim in analyzing these songs is to highlight the various narratives and aesthetics of success that rappers weave into their songs. As the 2010s are the first decade during which rap music has held the position of the most popular genre in the US, analyzing the ways that this new position of the genre has affected the music of rappers should offer enlightening perspectives into the stories of this newly reigning, primarily African American group of storytellers. Modern rap artists offer highly detailed perspectives, often going as far as mentioning real people and places, turning the mundane into the mythical. The direct mentions of geographical locations and business establishments in confessional songs which fans of the artist find personally meaningful immortalize those places into the lyrics of globally popular songs, even leading to concrete, financially beneficial effects to the places mentioned in the songs (Stutz 2018). Analyzing this intimacy from the biggest stars of the current most popular genre of music has the potential to increase our understanding on what superstardom in the United States means.

1.1 Research question

The main research question that this master's thesis aims to answer goes as follows: How do 2010s United States mainstream rappers talk about success in their lyrics?

This research question is supported by several others:

How is the time before achieving success portrayed, and what sorts of attitudes or values are connected to that “previous” life?

How is the work required to achieve success portrayed?

What does achieving success feel like, and what sorts of lifestyle changes, if any, does it enable, or, on the other hand, require?

What are the possible downsides of success, and how are they weighed in relation to the upsides?

Are there overarching trends in the views that rappers have on success?

All of the questions I mention here are ones that I have thought about during the course of many years while listening to hip-hop, and they should be helpful in building a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives found in 2010s hip-hop. The questions are of a quality that has resisted fading away, instead coming up time and time again as I have listened to various albums, which I take to mean that the questions deal with topics that are central to the formal characteristics of the genre of hip-hop in the 2010s.

If one listens to the biggest rap hits of the 2010s, or any decade during which rap songs have managed to climb to the top positions of music charts, one hears overwhelmingly positive attitudes regarding success. The flaunting of material wealth has historically been such an integral part of a notable segment of rap music that it has become a bit of a cliché, enough to where the most common signifiers of wealth in the genre could even be clearly categorized, which was done by Davis (2011:44). She noted five well established wealth signifiers: Money, cars, jewelry, liquor, and attire. At this point I should also note that rap songs dealing with the unpleasant parts of fame have also reached some amounts of chart success historically, such as Eminem's 2000 song "Stan", which peaked at number 51 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and detailed an unsavoury parasocial relationship between the rap superstar and a fan. Still, portrayals of the plights of fame and success have typically been saved mostly for album deep cuts, not for lead singles. This study does not focus solely on the purported positive parts of success, but also on the possible downsides. My aim is to provide a holistic picture of how success is portrayed lyrically, and that entails examining both the advantages and disadvantages of fame and wealth.

1.2 Methodology and previous studies on the topic

The method utilized in analyzing the selected songs, whose selection process I'll introduce in the next section, is lyric analysis, focusing specifically on the lyrics of the songs in lieu of aspects like melody, harmony, rhythm, or timbre. More specifically, the method of lyric analysis employed in this study is close reading. While the rising popularity of styles of rap that embrace a more balanced relationship of musical importance between the lyrics and the beat has been a significant trend in 2010s rap music (one need not look further than the success of Atlanta rapper Future, who released five Billboard 200 number one albums in the 2010s which showcase his melodic, autotune-drenched rapping style), rap continues to be a lyric-centered genre - a rap song without lyrics is simply an instrumental. That is why I feel that an analytical perspective focusing specifically on lyrics is still a viable choice for the

purposes of this study, even though melodic rap created by artists such as Future and Atlanta rapper Young Thug has gained prominence in the 2010s. For more on this see Waugh (2020).

A fairly small amount of research has been conducted into this topic, even though success and the work required to achieve it are such central lyrical themes in many rap songs. When searching through research databases using search terms like “success studies”, I encountered almost exclusively studies in fields of research such as business and economics, or, curiously, teaching, in the context of achieving success in the teaching of a subject or concept to a student. I was able to find some perspectives within musicology that were concerned with the process that music stars undergo on their way to becoming idolized icons, such as film and music scholar David Shumway’s 2014 research on rocker Bruce Springsteen but finding similar perspectives specifically relating to rappers proved difficult.

I would be remiss to not point out that “success studies” are not entirely missing in the academic study of the arts, manifesting themselves instead inside composer studies, artist studies, director studies, or actor studies, to name a few variants. Perspectives on success and how stars are made can be found in studies focusing on singular artists, in studies that are highly biographical in nature, often in the form of entire books focused on a particular artist. It appears that the preferred method of dealing with the study of a concept like success in the arts is to perform detailed research focusing on a single artist, and on their entire life from birth to death. I was unable to find many studies concerned with success that utilized a larger dataset of artists for the purposes of studying success itself, not merely success in the context of a singular artist’s career.

The studies that I did find by combining the search terms “music” and “success” were largely too quantitative to be of much use to me. That is to say, they were mostly based on wide trends in large datasets excavated through the use of complex algorithms, seeming exciting mostly to the major label CEO keen to make a profit, not to the academic or to the music fan interested in how artists themselves communicate their experiences of success. These studies do serve a purpose, they are just not the types of studies I myself was looking for.

The analysis of the short-lived and now arguably nonexistent (due to social media replacing it) blogosphere performed by Abel et al. in 2006 did reach surprisingly high precision rates in its predictions of box office revenues of films and the sale of music albums. A 2006 study by Chon, Slaney and Berger employing somewhat similar quantitative methods focusing specifically on music sales data also produced useful new knowledge about the staying power

that songs have on music charts. However, neither of those studies focused on the actual artists themselves, and their experiences of success, and that is what this study aims to do with a qualitative focus. Of course, research methods which combine qualitative and quantitative perspectives exist too, the most interesting of which to me was political scientist Lester Spence's analysis of rap lyrics he deemed "realist" in his 2011 book *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics*. He utilized a web resource called The Original Hip-hop Lyrics Archive (ohhla.com) and selected a random sample of 478 lyrics by 337 different artists taken from singles released between 1989 and 2004. He then analyzed the lyrics line by line and coded them based on the various ideas that he could find. Spence (2011:23) explained his process as follows:

A given idea was coded as being present if a single idea unit (the smallest unit of words able to express the idea) appeared within a song. The various ideas were then combined into larger nodes. The node "drugs," for example, contained references not only to specific drugs but also to drug dealing, to drug consumption, and to both the causes and consequences of drug consumption and dealing, among other things. The node "crime" contained references to crime in general, to specific crimes (homicide, breaking and entering), and to criminals and the criminal system (references to the law and/or juries).

I found Spence's methodology which fluently combined analytical reading with a quantitative approach to be ingenious, and I see potential in the use of that methodology in further studies of rap music.

As far as non-quantitative perspectives on the ideas I am concerned with in my work go, I did eventually find many sound displays of hip-hop scholarship through extensive tinkering with different search terms, even if they weren't quite in line with my specific research question – which, admittedly, is not a negative thing, as it proves that there is space in the field for my research on this topic.

Christopher M. Driscoll, PhD (religious studies) made relevant observations about the concept of "greatness" in hip hop, in his 2019 book *Kendrick Lamar and the Making of Black Meaning*. American studies scholar Nora Máthé, while not focusing on success specifically, used the 2010s in hip hop as her frame of study in her 2019 paper *Representations of Black Masculinity in the 2010s Hip-Hop*, adding legitimacy to my choice of narrowing down my study to focus on a single decade, the 2010s. Moreover, her focus on "the lyrics of commercially successful and critically acclaimed rappers" (Máthé 2010: 1) pulls insights from

a dataset narrowed using similar qualifiers as the ones I plan to use, which provides reassurance that the way I chose to select the material that I will analyze was a viable choice. I also found many research articles focusing on singular rappers, which provide immense aid in the close reading of the lyrics of those rappers.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter on methodology, my research method will be the analysis of lyrics. To go into further detail, I will specifically be utilizing an analysis technique called close reading, which is well suited for deep cultural contextualization, instead of analysis bound to a specific, rigid theoretical backbone, that can at times limit analytical perspectives. As Richardson (2016: 126) put it, close reading demands critical reflection, which is a major reason for me selecting it as my method of choice. I feel that in the process of conducting a study which focuses at least partly on how aspects of the current American economic system are portrayed artistically, the ability to utilize critical reflection is required if any poignant observations about the music are to be made. Close reading is not a theory-driven mode of analysis. It should not entirely abandon theory either, as Richardson (2016: 128-129) pointed out, but it does not have to be bound by its constraints, and that freedom of interpretation is what I myself require in order to interpret and analyze art to the best of my capabilities.

1.3 Material

For the purposes of this study, and as dictated by largely prevailing attitudes towards the concept of success in rap music, my definition of success is quite materialistic, and in line with the capitalist societal systems present in most parts of the world. That is, the term success in this study almost never refers to any abstract concept of self-fulfillment or ability to be at peace with oneself. Instead, it refers, for better or for worse, to a fairly plain Western definition of success, which in essence means having lots of money and fame.

Defining something as abstract as success is a complex task. A 2006 study by Dyke & Murphy found that in their definitions of success, women view relationships and balance as important factors, while men place a higher importance on material success. In the context of business owners, Kirkwood found in her 2016 study that that success consisted of financial success, personal satisfaction, work-life/work-family balance and satisfied stakeholders. This is a perspective I found somewhat applicable to the context of rap music. If we think of the cultivation of a rap career and equate it to running a small business, the perspectives that Kirkwood found become somewhat applicable to the context of my study. Rappers can

achieve financial success and personal satisfaction, and work-life and work-family balance are two topics that I have personally observed as being featured in many rap songs, even later on in this very study. Even the concept of satisfied stakeholders can be applied to rappers and musical artists as a whole – a rapper can sign a contract with a record label, and suddenly their music career has real effects on the attitudes of stakeholders of that particular record label. Success is defined in my own study roughly as the combination of fame and material wealth, which aligns somewhat with the definition given by the men in Dyke & Murphy's study. The selected material in this study will reflect the artists' views on times in their life when they had not achieved success yet, their views on what life is like having then reached that much coveted status of successful, and their experiences of both the positive and negative sides of success.

I do not aim to dismiss the existence of other kinds of definitions of, and perspectives on, success that exist in rap music. However, as an avid rap listener, those alternative perspectives seem to make up a fairly small percentage of the genre's output, at least when it comes to the mainstream. For every one song about being grateful to be surrounded by a loving family and friend group, 10 more songs about the joys of owning a new luxury car or buying bottle service at a club seem to be created. My aim is not to make value judgements regarding this somewhat stereotyped concept of success. That definition of success has already become embedded within the culture of hip-hop and its value system, which is of interest in itself. To one hip hop artist, success may present itself as an almost unfathomably large, distant objective, like the eradication of systemic racism or the ending of the war on drugs. To another artist, success may simply refer to personal material success, i.e., "getting out of the hood", as the common expression found in innumerable rap songs goes. Even the concept of getting out of the hood contains many nuances. It may simply mean going from one tax bracket to another, from a meager subsistence to a comfortable lifestyle. However, it can also mean attaining a level of palpable safety for the artist and their family, with money being merely the means to an end of escaping things like gang violence and close proximity to drug-related activity.

The selection process for the materials that will be analyzed in this study was part systematic, part subjective. The systematic part materialized in the form of these criteria: For a song to be eligible to be used in this study, it had to be released in the time period spanning from 2010 to 2019, and it had to be from a mainstream rapper.

While the concept of the musical mainstream has innumerable context-dependent definitions, for the purposes of this study, I had to create a concrete standard of my own for mainstreamness:

In this study, in order for a rapper to be considered mainstream in the 2010s, they must have released at least 1 album during the 2010s that charted in the top 100 albums of the Billboard 200 record chart. Even then, there is some purposely built-in flexibility in this formula: Even if a rapper only charted an album in the top 100 of the Billboard 200 late in the decade, even songs from the time before they charted an album in the required manner would still be eligible for this study, as long as they were released in the 2010s.

What this means in practice is simply that my formula allows me to study the lyrics of a rapper not only after they made their “big break”, but also before that break - if a rapper’s first time charting an album in the top 100 albums of the Billboard 200 chart happened to take place in 2018 for example, I don’t have to limit my analysis of that rapper’s lyrics to just music released in 2018 and onwards, I can also examine their music from before that, as long as it was not released earlier than 2010.

As far as the subjective aspects of the song selection process are concerned, while my personal enjoyment of the songs I have selected to read closely did play a role in the song selections, a more significant factor for whether or not a song made it into this study was the preliminary listening process through which I narrowed down a group of songs which I felt contained particularly relevant perspectives. I will note that I do not view my lack of impartiality towards the artists’ music as a weakness. In fact, I view it as quite the opposite: As I am well versed in the careers and discographies of the artists whose songs I have chosen to analyze, my ability to perform close readings of their work is vastly improved, as I am able to contextualize their work in relation to their career more clearly.

The 11 songs that I have chosen to analyze in this study are listed below:

Big Sean – “Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)” (2015)

Schoolboy Q – “Break The Bank” (2014)

Childish Gambino – “We Ain’t Them” (2012)

JAY-Z – “Picasso Baby” (2013)

G-Eazy – “For This” (2015)

Drake – “You & The 6” (2015)

Logic – “44 Bars” (2016)

Drake – “9” (2016)

Big K.R.I.T. – “Price of Fame” (2017)

Rick Ross – “Foreclosures” (2015)

JAY-Z – “Legacy” (2017)

1.4 The scope and structure of the study

Applying the methods of controlling the scope of a study learned during the writing process of my Bachelor’s study is a vital part of writing a Master’s thesis, and closer looks toward the history of rap revealed that a simple decade-by-decade division was a deficient and inaccurate way of looking at the history of the genre anyway. Rap, like most other genres of music, or human phenomena in general for that matter, does not fall neatly into clearly understandable and concrete 10-year blocks of time that align with our calendars and the borders of our decades (for a deeper look on that idea I recommend historian Christopher B. Strain’s 2016 book *The Long Sixties: America, 1955-1973*).

Convincing efforts to define rap eras have been undertaken in academia, most notably in the seminal 2010 book *The Anthology of Rap* (Bradley & DuBois). Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois (both professors of English) divided the history of rap that had taken place in the years before their book was released in 2010 into four eras: The Old School (1978-1984), The Golden Age (1985-1992), Rap Goes Mainstream (1993-1999) and New Millennium Rap (2000-2010). They were very thorough in their work, producing a formidable 800-page book, a truly comprehensive look at the history of rap. A future study on the rap music of the 2010s in comparison to the previous eras of rap music presented by Bradle & DuBois should be conducted in order to gain further context into the evolution of rap.

Most of the songs analyzed in this study were released in the time period from 2013 to 2017, with few exceptions. The very early 2010s and the very late 2010s do not get as much

coverage within the confines of this study as the middle years of the 2010s, but I personally feel that grasping the zeitgeist of a particular decade is much easier when looking at the years at the very middle of the decade anyway, as opposed to staring at a decade's bookend years. Additionally, as can be observed in the quantitative work of musicologist Steven Gamble (2021), the rapid rise of hip-hop to the top of the charts did not begin in the first three years of the 2010s, but instead closer to the middle of the decade, roughly in 2014.

Another thing to note is the exclusion of woman rappers in this study. This was a conscious choice made in an effort to, again, keep the scope of this study manageable. This does not imply a value judgement on my part, and I think that it is important that others study women and LGBTQ+ artists so that a truly comprehensive understanding of the rap music of the 2010s can be formed. As a new generation of women rap stars rose to prominence in the 2010s, led primarily by Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion and Doja Cat, there should be no shortage of music to analyze.

The analytical content of this study is divided into two main sections which consist of smaller, detailed analysis chapters which pertain to specific songs and deal with the five categories of song narratives I detailed in section 1.4. The first section, or collection of sub-chapters, is concerned with the positive narratives of success that rappers weave in their songs. The second collection of sub-chapters beginning with chapter 3 will feature portrayals of the potentially negative sides of success and the work required to remain successful.

2 Examining the euphoria of attaining success

In this section I analyse portrayals of work, portrayals of achieving success, and portrayals of reminiscence regarding the process of becoming successful.

2.1 Reaching for success: Portrayals of work in rap lyrics

This first chapter of section 2 features portrayals of work, more specifically narratives of the struggle to make it as an artist, to achieve any amount of initial success and stability - to enter the mainstream. The three songs in this chapter were all released either before the artist had released their best-selling (measured by first week sales) album, or as part of that best-selling album, meaning that these songs were created before the artists had reached their commercial peak. This increases the narrative tension of the songs, as they all feature the artists speaking their mind on the feelings of knowing you have talent, but not yet knowing just how far that talent and hard work would ultimately bring them. This also creates a loose chronological sequencing to the thesis as a whole: The narratives of the songs in this study highlight both the perspectives of artists who had not yet “made it” in the mainstream, as well the perspectives of artists well into their careers reflecting on the ruthlessness of the business they have chosen to forge their careers in. For now, I will begin with narratives of pre-success life.

A central aspect of this discourse is the concept of authenticity as it is understood specifically within the context of hip-hop culture. Authenticity in rap music can be defined in a multitude of ways, but it does seem to include a certain emphasis on rugged upbringings and the ever-presence of violence. Perry (2004:87) points out that “Calls to keep it real in hip hop, however, have included celebrations of the social effects of urban decay and poverty, for example, assertions of a paranoid vigilance in protecting one’s dignity”. Cook (2007:103) presents a similar description: “...the real is often derided as an obsession with a particular story about violence, drugs, and life in the hood, or with a belief that there is something essentially authentic in the description of brutal lifestyles”. In the following song analyses descriptions of both contestations of traditional hip-hop authenticity as well as reinforcements of old ideals are explored.

2.1.1 Big Sean - Dark Sky (Skyscrapers) (2015)

Detroit rapper Big Sean (Sean Anderson) got his first break at a young age. Still in high school at the time, he was discovered in 2005 by rapper Kanye West. West, who was one of

the brightest rising stars in hip hop at the time, coming off the commercially and critically successful release of his 2004 debut album, *The College Dropout*, was giving an interview at a Detroit radio station. Sean had heard the news of West's visit to the city and made his way to the radio station. Sean had already made himself familiar with the location, having participated in rap battle contests held by the radio station. After waiting at the station to meet West, Sean finally had a chance to show his rapping skills to someone in a position of power and influence who could help him. Sean freestyle rapped for West for ten minutes, and two years later West signed him to his label, GOOD Music. (Kelley, 2017)

The Big Sean song that I've chosen to analyse, "Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)", was released during a commercial highpoint in his career. This song is from the album *Dark Sky Paradise* (2015). Even though Big Sean was signed to Kanye West's label in 2007, his major mainstream break came almost a decade later in 2015, as his song "I Don't Fuck With You" became a hit, and propelled him to mainstream consciousness while reaching number eleven on the Billboard Hot 100 chart (Billboard, 2023). Sean had already released multiple projects before 2015's *Dark Sky Paradise*, but none of them had been as commercially successful as his 2015 album.

"Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)" is the first song on the *Dark Sky Paradise* album. The atmosphere of the song is sinister from the beginning, featuring a bare synthesizer melody playing while the sound of a lightning striking can be heard faintly. Sean begins the song by reciting his worries and demonstrating his workaholic attitude. The lyric "If I ain't going to get it that day is going to waste" displays the kind of burning desire and even despair that drives this artist who, at this point, has yet to reach what would become his commercial break, to work tirelessly day in and day out. This workaholic attitude is a response to the types and amounts of pressure that the capitalistic, short-sighted, and financial quarter driven music industry places on those working within it. However, as media studies scholar Alexandra Boutros (2020: 99) points out "While hip hop can be defined as countercultural in its resistance to dominant understandings of Black identity, it is not anti-capitalist." The majority of rappers are well aware of the gargantuan work efforts their industry of choice demands of them but see it as a necessary sacrifice on their journey to glory.

Imagine stuck in the D and you tryna find a way-way out

And yeah, your music been bumping and you just waiting to break out

And I've been waiting all god damn year, oh yeah

I can tell that it's near but near ain't here

Man, them bills is here right now

Here Sean reflects on a previous period before now, to what I suspect is roughly the year 2007 or 2008, the very beginnings of his career. The “D” here refers most likely to Sean’s hometown of Detroit, from which he is trying to escape, to break out from. The paralinguistic aspects of Sean’s rapping emphasize the frustration and anxiety he feels. His tone of voice is high-pitched, his intonation repeats the same desperate pattern line after line. This vocal style could be described as “exaggerated declamation” in accordance with music theory scholar Robert Komaniecki’s (2020: 29) research on vocal pitch in rap flow. These lines are not rapped in a manner that is laid back or braggadocious, they read like the final pleas of a man who has been pushed to the edge. Sean’s voice here could even be described as nasal, which, as Theo van Leeuwen (1999: 136) points out, is a vocal quality often associated with sounds related to feelings of stress and sorrow.

We can hear the first glimpses of redemption in the lines “And then they say it happened for me overnight, shit, yeah, I guess / I guess it took ten years for me to be an overnight success”. This is Big Sean talking to the people who doubt his work ethic, and after a few more lines this leads us to a major tonal shift in the song. At 1:23 the high-pitched plucks which were building tension are silenced, and we hear only the ringing of ominous church bells as Sean continues rapping. His tone of voice is less nasal, and his flow, which refers to the rhythmic delivery of his lyrics as summarized by music scholar Oliver Kautny (2015:103), speeds up. As the verse continues, we also hear the way that Sean juxtaposes his current and previous life situations with the lyric “I’m from where crime breeds, her titties out like “Sign these”. This contrast between the socioeconomically disadvantaged environment of his childhood with the newly encountered requests of writing signatures on breasts reminds us that Sean is already in a relatively comfortable position in his life, yet that is not enough. He proceeds to double down, and reminisces on his childhood:

I knew I lived this life back when I was young and used to climb trees

I should've known back then I wasn't gon' stop

Cause even then I was infatuated with just sitting at the top

While this is on one hand a humorous double entendre contrasting a treetop with the proverbial top of the music business, or the so called “rap game”, it also shines a light on the type of ambition required to reach the position that Sean now finds himself at.

Finally, at 1:36, the beat of the song kicks in, and Sean professes that he “...don’t owe nobody in the world no favours”. He raps “I started from the basement, made it to the skyscrapers”, substituting the term bottom for the term basement to create a building metaphor for his ascent to success. The lyrical theme of “the bottom” was a major part in another famous 2010s rap hit, Toronto rapper Drake’s 2013 song “Started From the Bottom”, on which he raps about not only uplifting himself but those close to him as well: “Started from the bottom, now my whole team fuckin’ here”. Of course, there is a contrast here in the sense that Drake got his beginnings as the member of a solidly middle-class family, and in fact starred in a very popular Canadian TV show called *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, whereas Big Sean is from Detroit, a city suffering from various well-documented economic problems. However, what I found interesting is that even though Sean raps about Detroit in a negative light (“I’m from where crime breeds”), in fact, as pointed out by Haddad (2019), he himself is communicating only one part of the complex political discourse surrounding the city of Detroit. In his text Haddad referenced a 2013 Fader magazine interview (Cooper, 2013) with fellow Detroit rapper Danny Brown, in which Brown contextualized Big Sean’s position in Detroit hip-hop:

You listen to how I talk about Detroit, and you listen to how a rapper like Big Sean talk about Detroit, and it's like we're talking about two different cities. Which is probably true, because Detroit is that type of city—he went to the best high school in the city, you know, he probably was real spoiled or sheltered, so it's like two different worlds.

Big Sean portrays his struggles as a character-building obstacle which he has managed to overcome, describing this process with the simple yet effective lyric “What you know 'bout living check to check to living check to check to check to check?”. Here a difficult upbringing (at least according to the words of Big Sean, which Danny Brown did not entirely agree with) is turned into a signifier of cultural cachet in the context of hip-hop. Poverty and place communicate authenticity and belonging to the ingroup of “real” hip hop artists (Boutros 2020:101). It is precisely because poverty has been made into a signifier of authenticity in hip-hop that even those artists whose upbringing was perhaps not quite as dramatic as they make it out to be in their songs have an incentive to bring forth an image that signifies realness in their lyrics. Only the artists themselves know accurately what types of socioeconomic circumstances they grew up in, and they have the freedom to portray that upbringing in their songs in the exact way they see best.

As we move into the second, final verse of the song, Big Sean explicitly goes on to describe his workaholicism:

I'm into risk and taking it

I'm into making it then get back to making like I ain't made it yet

This the rehab for a workaholic, I been thinking bout shaking it

I done had a Rolex longer than I had relationships, I'm embarrassed to say that shit

But I've been working on myself and that's the most important work

Even if you don't get paid for it

The line “I'm into making it then get back to making like I ain't made it yet” is especially important here, because it shows that Sean is very much aware of the fact that he has in many ways already “made it”, yet he also feels that he must keep the feeling of not having reached success yet alive inside of himself to motivate him. He has already gotten signed to a major label and has sold hundreds of thousands of copies of his albums, but in an economic system built on the concept of constant, continuous growth that simply isn't enough to him. In a way Sean is right about his situation: At the point in his career that this song was recorded neither of his previous albums had crossed the 100 thousand album first week sales point, and his album sales had in fact declined, with his sophomore record *Hall of Fame* (2013) having sold fewer copies in its first week than his debut studio album *Finally Famous* (2011). His third album, *Dark Sky Paradise* (2015) would go on to sell more copies in its first week than both of his previous albums first week sales combined. This type of self-imposed rhetoric-building of the idea of being an underdog even when you already have a record deal seems to be an effective way for rap artists to motivate themselves into a fervor-like work ethic, which can result in adverse social consequences as Sean points out in the line “I done had a Rolex longer than I had relationships, I'm embarrassed to say that shit”. What is also notable is the fact that nowhere in the song's lyrics is it directly mentioned what type of work Big Sean is talking about. Work in the song “Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)” is a vague, amalgamous concept, which, although unlikely, might theoretically not even refer to any work performed in the quest for material gains, but instead in the quest for spiritual ones, as can be heard in the lyrics “But I've been working on myself and that's the most important work / Even if you don't get paid for it”. Even though the word “studio” is not directly used in the lyrics of the song, the recording studio exists in the song in a symbolic form (see Harkness 2014) whenever Sean mentions his workaholic tendencies. Whenever he mentions neglecting the development of his social life, we can safely infer that that is due him instead being in the recording studio.

While there are mentions of luxury Rolex watches and expensive A Bathing Ape (BAPE) clothing in the song, as well as the very clear desire of “Tryna get paid repeatedly”, Big Sean does not dismiss the importance of personal and spiritual growth. Even when a rapper is working towards a dream with highly material motivations, Big Sean feels that they should not forget the human side of themselves, which is ultimately articulated in the lyrics “Don't call up no favours, I call up my saviour / Like thank you God, look at all we created”.

2.1.2 ScHoolboy Q - Break The Bank (2014)

ScHoolboy Q (Quincy Hanley) is a rapper from California. Growing up in South Central Los Angeles, an area of Los Angeles home to notable hotspots of gang activity, ScHoolboy Q also spent part of his youth in a gang. That era of his life fuels many of his songs and is a prominent subject in his art. In an interview with hip-hop website Complex (Ahmed, 2012) he explained that getting mixed with gang activity was simply a result of the circumstances that he grew up surrounded by: “I was gang-banging at 12. I was a Hoover Crip. My homies were doing it and I wanted to do it. I can't really explain that. I didn't get into it [having beef] with another hood or anything like that. I was just following the leader.”

ScHoolboy Q is a part of the Black Hippy supergroup, a group consisting of artists all signed to the label Top Dawg Entertainment. Other prominent artists signed to the label include rappers Kendrick Lamar, Ab-Soul, and Jay Rock. The reason that Q's name is stylized with a capitalized letter “H” in the middle is because the gang he was in as a young man was called the 52 Hoover Gangster Crips, named after the street ScHoolboy grew up on, Hoover Street.

Q released two independent albums in 2011 and 2012 respectively, before releasing his debut major label album *Oxymoron* in 2014 through Interscope records. *Oxymoron* became his bestselling album and featured many of his biggest hits, one of which is the song “Break The Bank”, the song that I'll be analysing in this study.

One of the reasons I chose a song from an artist like ScHoolboy Q was to feature perspectives from rappers who come from varying circumstances. Like noted in the previous section, Big Sean did not portray his upbringing as wealthy either, but he was not involved in gang activity, which makes his perspective notably different from that of ScHoolboy Q's.

Additionally, Sean got noticed as a rapper at the young age of 15, whereas Q released his first independent album in 2011 at the age of 25 and didn't truly breach mainstream consciousness until the release of his 2014 album *Oxymoron*.

As opposed to the initial desperation heard in the previous song, Big Sean's "Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)", Q starts his verse with a statement making it clear that embarking on the pursuit of a rap career was not a choice made from financial pressure: "Fuck rap, I've been rich, crack by my stick shift / Oxy like concerts, always my bread first". Both lines contain drug references, one referring to crack cocaine (crack) and the other to the widely misused and highly addictive opioid Oxycontin (Oxy), which is the drug behind the national opioid epidemic still ravaging the United States at the time that I am writing this in 2023. Q makes his transition from drug dealing to rapping sound natural as he states that his previous source of income, that being the selling of Oxycontin, is as easy as his current source of income, playing concerts. The aggressiveness of Q's delivery is supported by the darkness of the song's instrumentation, which features a high-pitched piano melody, a simple yet effective bassline and a steadily progressing boom bap drumbeat. Unlike in Big Sean's case, ScHoolboy Q is communicating no feelings of doubtfulness regarding his progress here, no pressure felt to reach a certain level of fame or financial success, the transition from drug dealing to music making is seen simply as a career change from a dangerous line of work to a safer one. This idea is compounded by the last line of the first verse and the first line of the chorus: "Cause one day this rappin' gon' pay / So now we 'bout to break the bank". The stories and experiences, the purported artistic legitimacy acquired during a time period spent engaging in gang activity is seen by ScHoolboy Q as almost an investment of sorts that has been sitting idly, collecting interest, and which he is now finally cashing in. Boutros (2020:101) explains the idea in the historical context of hip hop culture: "Safety... is inauthentic, in part, because hip hop artists are supposed to have come from disenfranchised communities - places of urban disenfranchisement and Black poverty." However, she (2020:104) also makes the point that such discourse is not exactly constructive nor is it completely ideal:

When critics – often removed genealogically and geographically from the places of Black marginalization and disenfranchisement – rush to insist that only Black men from places of risk and volatility are entitled to inhabit authentic (or 'real') positions within hip hop, they (re)produce discourse that suggests that for Blackness to be publicly performed, commodified and consumed as part of authentic hip hop, real Black citizens have to have incurred significant risk of violence or death.

Nevertheless, it remains a relatively common idea that a rough, even dangerous upbringing does grant an artist a certain automatic level of authenticity, respectability and "realness" inside the culture of hip hop. Moreover, that concept is not even entirely exclusive to hip hop:

I'd argue that in society in general, a rags to riches story is often seen as much more interesting than the story of someone born into money.

In the second verse ScHoolboy Q creates a delineation between drug users and drug addicts, between those to whom drugs are simply a way to alter one's consciousness and those who have had their whole life taken over by illicit substances. However, as ScHoolboy Q also mentions using more potent substances such as peyote himself, he displays an example of the way the role of the rapper has shifted, in varying amounts, from drug seller to drug consumer in the 2010s, as examined in sociologist CJ Smiley's 2017 study *Addict Rap?: The Shift from Drug Distributor to Drug Consumer in Hip Hop*. The most notable contrast in this song is between marijuana and crack cocaine:

My time to show out, finally the illest Crip

And I guarantee, I spit harder than concrete

Surprised I got teeth, my lungs inhale keef

Peyote with THC, swinging for the fence

I hope I make it out the park, where the baseheads slide

Q begins his verse by stating that it is finally his time to shine, his time to "show out". This is another way to state that he is cashing in his story, he is breaking the bank by rapping about his experiences. Those experiences are then presented in the next lines via a baseball/drug double entendre: The mention of inhaling peyote, a species of cactus which contains the highly psychoactive substance mescaline, alongside THC, short for tetrahydrocannabinol, which is the psychoactive component of cannabis, is described as "swinging for the fence", suggesting that ScHoolboy Q takes this dose of drugs in an attempt to reach or breach the limits of his physical and mental tolerance. Yet what makes this line stand out is the following mention of the proverbial "park, where the baseheads slide". The park here, in one part, refers to hitting something out of the park, in this case continuing the baseball metaphor of swinging for the fences. However, the park can also be understood as a reference to the "hood", the socioeconomically disadvantaged area from which Q hopes to make his escape. The very last words of this passage finish the baseball/drug metaphor: "...where the baseheads slide" refers both to users of so called free base cocaine, yet it also refers to the baseball play of sliding to a base. These metaphors are an example of the language community-specificity of rap music metaphors in their role as "special expressions of precise meanings" (Crossley 2005:501). The prolific use of metaphors isn't just an aesthetic choice but also a genuinely effective

communication method within the in-group of rap listeners. Drug use continues to be a prominent theme just a few lines later: “I just wanna smoke weed and sip lean by the quart, for real / Good weed, I hit that, crack rock, I sold that”. I mention this line and the previous descriptions of drug use and drug addiction to highlight the way different drugs are thought about in the context of success. Cannabis, referred to here as “weed”, and “lean”, a drug mixture made from cough syrup containing codeine and promethazine, are something to be used for casual recreation by any upstanding citizen, or, in this case, prospecting drug dealer. On the other hand, crack cocaine, talked about here in its crystal form as “crack rock” is exclusively something to be sold to the customer, the addict, the “basehead”. The selling of crack, and more prominently in the case of ScHoolboy Q, Oxycontin pills, is simply a tool used to achieve financial success. Political science scholar Lester Spence notes that this phenomenon of delineation between cannabis and crack cocaine has far-reaching roots in the history of hip-hop (Spence, 2011:45-46), and so is not a phenomenon exclusive to the 2010s.

To close off the second verse, Q raps about his transition from school to drug dealing to music making:

Good grades and skipped school, this life gon' catch up soon

Sure 'nough that shit did, twenty-year-old kid

Got off my behind, write me some sweet lines

Cause one day my story gon' pay

I bring forth again the idea of music as just a substitute for drug dealing in ScHoolboy Q's quest to achieve financial success. With his previous mention of equating the selling of Oxycontin pills to performing at concerts, and now writing “some sweet lines” because “one day my story gon' pay”, does that then place the listeners of ScHoolboy Q's music into the position of the aforementioned “basehead”, into the position of a customer who, instead of purchasing crack cocaine from Q, is now buying his albums and purchasing tickets to his concerts? Q's attitude towards his chosen pursuit is made unmistakably clear in the first lines of his third verse on “Break The Bank”: “Fuck rap, my shit real, came up off them pills / Hustle for my meal, grindin' for my deal”. The process of making music and rapping is seen here as merely a “grind”, as a “hustle” with no other purpose than to bring in money. Spence (2011:40) summarizes the concept of the grind: “When MCs refer to the “grind” or to “grinding,” this is what they are referring to—the mundane twenty-four-hour, everyday, get-it-done mentality that is the primary component of both the homo economicus and the rap

MC.“ It appears that ScHoolboy Q has simply switched one grind (drug dealing) to another (music making). The reason for this change from a dangerous field of work to a safer field of work can be found in the lyrics of the third verse:

Go hard for my Joy, so she don't need no boy
Smile stay on her face, big room with her own space
Up all night, the hard way, don't care if it take all day

“Joy” refers to Q’s daughter, Joyce Hanley, who was five years old when “Break The Bank” was released. ScHoolboy Q is ready to work day and night to provide for his daughter. This final revelation shows us that for some rappers the career of a rap artist is not undertaken out of an exclusively creative need to create art or out of a desire to attain some sort of global celebrity icon status and unimaginable riches, but simply out of a necessity to find a safe way to provide for a family.

2.1.3 Childish Gambino - We Ain’t Them (2012)

Childish Gambino’s entry into the rap world was very different from that of most rappers. Starting his career in the entertainment industry as a writer for the NBC sitcom *30 Rock*, and then starring as an actor in another NBC sitcom, *Community*, Childish Gambino (Donald Glover) released his debut album, *Camp*, in 2011, after having already worked in entertainment for half a decade. Gambino had released several independent mixtapes before his first album, but was still seen by most as a writer, actor, and stand-up comedian first, and a musical artist last. However, the public would begin to recognize his abilities as an entertainment renaissance man by the time he released his second studio album, *Because the Internet*, in 2014. The album spawned multiple hits, most notably the songs “3005” and “TV. Sweatpants” and sold close to a hundred thousand copies in its first week. Today Childish Gambino is among the most successful artists in the rap and R&B genre and has even created his own critically acclaimed TV show, *Atlanta*.

The Childish Gambino song that I’ll be analysing, “We Ain’t Them”, was released in 2012, on Gambino’s sixth mixtape *R O Y A L T Y*. The song and the mixtape were released during a transitional phase in Gambino’s career, just at the tail end of his stint as an actor in the TV show *Community*, and only 2 years before the release of his second studio album *Because the Internet*, which would launch his career into new heights.

The two artists analysed in the previous two sections of this chapter, Big Sean and ScHoolboy Q, had very different starts to their career compared to each other, and especially compared to Childish Gambino. Neither of them was involved in any way with the entertainment industry before beginning their careers as rappers, whereas Childish Gambino had already crafted himself the rock-solid foundations of a potential life-long career in entertainment with his work on two NBC sitcoms, which is why his rap endeavours make for such a fruitful target for analysis. In addition, Gambino had also acquired a Bachelor's degree in creative writing from the prestigious New York University Tisch School of the Arts, separating him from many of his contemporaries in the field of rap.

Seemingly there was no reason, at least no financially motivated reason, to perform a career change from an actor on a nationally televised TV-show to a rap artist. It is the thought process behind that very decision that Gambino talks about in his 2012 song "We Ain't Them", which I will now analyse.

What must be detailed first is the instrumental of the song. Bouncy, stomping drums and a strong 808-style bassline are complimented by an uplifting piano melody alongside long synth pads sweeping the frequency range in the pace of what I suspect is a low frequency oscillator configuration. The emotional effect of the instrumental is uplifting and motivating, yet it also causes feelings of nostalgia. The instrumental is not aggressive or ominous in any way, it is instead full of life yet also reminiscent of some past time.

The song has no chorus, consisting instead of one continuous 3-minute rap verse performed by Gambino. The song feels like a rant, even a confession. Gambino reminisces on past events while also commenting on the status quo.

Koreatown lunchin', talkin' 'bout how to run things

He said Atlanta wanted somethin'

Waka, Jeezy, and Future got the streets locked down

Copycats making sure T.I.P. keep that crown

In the beginning of the song Gambino lists four prominent rap artists from Atlanta, Waka (Waka Flocka Flame), Jeezy, Future and T.I.P (known also by the name T.I.). He proclaims that this group of artists has the streets "locked down", yet also makes a point of placing T.I. in a higher artistic position, referring to the three rappers mentioned before him as copycats of T.I.'s musical style. The mention of "the streets" is a way of describing the core listener

segment of the mentioned artists, and locked down is a positive word in this context, used to describe the strong grip that the artists have on their fans, i.e., the residents of the proverbial streets. The word streets here is equivalent to the idea of the “hood” or “the block”.

The mention of these artists is significant because their music drastically differs stylistically from Gambino’s own music. All the artists he mentions are creators of a style of music called trap, a genre of rap based on booming 808-basslines and profane lyrics about drug dealing - which are usually undeniably catchy despite the dark subject matter. Even though Gambino is from Atlanta as well, his music and lyrical themes differ greatly from those of rap artists most often associated with Atlanta. He brings this up a few lines later:

I'm fucking 'round with the truth, went to see The Roots

Quest brought me back on stage in a suit

I went hard 'cause niggas say that I'm soft

Even Black Thought thought

I'm aiming a little hard, I gotta be honest

As he recalls an event in 2012 during which he freestyle rapped on stage alongside hip-hop band The Roots (an event of which footage even exists on Youtube today, see “Childish Gambino freestyling with The Roots” in the bibliography), he mentions giving the performance his all because people around him keep calling him “soft”. This is his way of bringing up how he differs from the aesthetic of most rappers, an idea that is a persistent theme in his discography (Ohlendorf, 2016:69). Religion and sociology scholar Michael Eric Dyson (2004:62) points out the following:

The rap concert also creates space for cultural resistance and personal agency, loosing the strictures of the tyrannizing surveillance and demoralizing condemnation of mainstream society and encouraging relatively autonomous, often enabling, forms of self-expression and cultural creativity.

If we categorize the prevailing aesthetic and ideological trends of rap as the “mainstream society” of rap itself, we can deem Gambino’s performance to be his own form of self-expression in the face of potential critique from those who feel that rap should exclusively focus on what Dyson describes as the trials and tribulations of Black urban life (2004:63), instead of the thoughts of an NYU graduate sitcom actor and stand-up comedian. Yet, at the same time, Gambino mentions noticing that even Black Thought (Tariq Luqmaan Trotter, MC of The Roots) thought that Gambino was “aiming a little hard”, i.e. trying too hard to appear

unfazed and invincible, losing some aspect of authenticity as a performer in his attempt to combat the attitudes of his artistic peers and rap consumers.

Makin' jokes here and there done got us some dollars

I'm tryna show the whole world what it is and it ain't a game

He said, "Homie, stay the course, ain't shit changed

Weird night, and everybody was tipsy

Hangin' out with Questlove reminiscing 'bout Whitney

He like, "Man, we can't even make it to 50?!"

As Gambino continues recounting his past experiences, he first mentions that “makin’ jokes” got him some dollars, referencing his past work as a stand-up comedian and as a writer on the NBC situational comedy *30 Rock*. This sets him apart from most other rappers; Whereas ScHoolboy Q also mentioned making money before rapping in his song “Break The Bank”, which I analysed previously, the source of that money in his case was the selling of drugs, not the performing or writing of comedy. What sets Gambino further apart from most rappers in the beginning stages of their careers is his casual mention of “Hangin’ out with Questlove / reminiscing bout Whitney “. Gambino is already rubbing shoulders with famous people, mentioning casually reminiscing about Whitney (Houston) with Questlove (Ahmir Khalib Thompson), drummer of The Roots. Of course, the fact that Gambino knows various celebrities should not come off as a surprise, considering his time spent in the entertainment industry before becoming a rapper, but him casually mentioning that fact makes the atmosphere of his music sound markedly different from the early career narratives of most other rappers. This is important, because in the next lines Gambino mentions what I deem to be the central narrative idea behind “We Ain’t Them”:

That reminds me

I sent a long text message to my mom and pop

I got the same speech when I left 30 Rock

My mom like, "Why you wanna leave a good job?"

My dad like, "Do your thing, boy, don't stop"

“We Ain’t Them” was released in 2012. By that time Childish Gambino had left his writer position on *30 Rock* and was now instead working as an actor, starring in the NBC sitcom *Community*. While he would work on the show until leaving in 2014, it appears that he was

already thinking of leaving the show in 2012. Having sent a long text message to his parents presumably explaining his feelings about the show, his parents have conflicting reactions: His mother, making a plea that Gambino states as having heard once before when switching over from *30 Rock* to *Community*, asks her son why he would want to leave a comfortable, financially secure position. Gambino's father on the other hand encourages his son to "Do your thing, boy, don't stop". These lines highlight the central conflict Gambino is feeling about his career decisions: Should I leave a steady acting job to pursue a rap career, the success of which is certainly not a sure thing? Yet, he explains why he chooses to move forward, to pursue his dreams: "I got the same speech when I left 30 rock" combined with his father encouraging him to "do his thing" shows that moving forward is the right thing to do. Childish Gambino's, or in this case Donald Glover's move from *30 Rock* to *Community* only served to increase his status in the entertainment industry; Why should he expect the transition to a music career to do the opposite? Gambino drives this point home just a few lines later:

Speak from your heart and never compromise what you feel's real

And never let these white people tell you how to feel

Never let anybody tell you how to feel

The message of those lines is self-evident enough to not require much explanation, and if the listener isn't convinced of Gambino's conviction, he uses an example from his family past to further illustrate the strength of character passed on to him through his genes:

My great granddad bought his own freedom

Walk barefoot to Virginia to start his own peanut farm

Gambino does not need to weave narratives of inner-city gun violence and drug peddling to obtain "realness", to obtain artistic authenticity. In fact, as pointed out by historian Davarian L. Baldwin (2004:175), the concept of realness was reserved for the Northeast United States by many rappers themselves, and the Southern United States was not viewed as real or authentic in the context of hip hop for a significant amount of time. Being from Atlanta, Georgia himself, Childish Gambino chooses to use a longer historical narrative to proclaim his own realness; There are other ways than rhymes about killing another Black man that a rapper can use to define what realness and authenticity mean. Thriving as an artist in a society systematically tilted against you by the white ruling majority seems evidence enough of

strength of character. To close off, I respond to a quote by sociologist Greg Dimitriadis (2004:431):

The gangster narrative has become an intrinsic part of the art, engendering an entire musical genre. Its wild financial success has helped to shape the contours of rap's present landscape, the "language" through which rappers articulate their raps. Most artists today acknowledge the genre either implicitly or explicitly, as values such as "hardness" and "realness" now dominate across the board.

This quote is from 2004, and it was true then, and still partly true in the 2010s, but the 2010s are also a notable point of departure from the hegemony of the so-called gangster narrative. If tales of inner-city violence in hip-hop ultimately became a hot commodity in the 1990s, and a financial incentive was born which encouraged rappers to keep telling stories of violence because they sold well, I question if the definition of "realness" in hip hop should still be limited to only include being witness or conductor to violence? Either way, on "We Ain't Them" Childish Gambino provides his own definition of "keeping it real", which means not letting anyone else tell you how to feel. In his own way, Gambino takes part in what Cook (2007:103) categorized as a dialogical engagement with the hip-hop community regarding the notion of authenticity being defined as being true to oneself.

2.2 Living the high life: Achieving and enjoying success

This second chapter of section 2 highlights the ways in which rap artists showcase their wealth as well as their enjoyment of that wealth. It felt logical to present this section right after section 2.1 which dealt with portrayals of work in 2010s rap lyrics. This allows me to create a clear continuum in the beginning of which I analyse portrayals of work, after which I proceed to analyse portrayals of the spoils of said work. The idea here is to examine if the ways in which wealth and success are typically flaunted have changed from what we may hold as cliches of the rap lyric landscape: Mentions of hypercars, haute couture, luxury watches and expensive champagne. Of course, a sample size of two songs will not be able represent every rap lyric trend accurately, but I feel that the songs I have chosen to analyse will still provide useful perspectives in my quest to shed light on the aesthetics and narratives found in 2010s hip hop.

2.2.1 JAY-Z - Picasso Baby (2013)

It is not unreasonable to refer to JAY-Z (Shawn Carter) as a bona fide hip-hop icon, one that normally needs no introduction. Nevertheless, in the interest of academic best practices, I'll briefly write about his history as an artist. JAY-Z, often referred to by the nickname Hova, came from a similar situation as another rapper I wrote about before, ScHoolboy Q - Jay dealt drugs in Brooklyn before making the transition into the music business, and those days of selling crack cocaine (a drug he mentions in countless of his songs) are a central subject in his music. JAY-Z released his debut album, *Reasonable Doubt*, in 1996, and managed to reach the Billboard 200 chart with his very first release. What followed was an incredible multi-decade career still continuing today, filled with dozens of hits, many expanded business ventures, numerous accolades, and immense wealth – Shawn Carter is the first billionaire rapper in history (Hotten, 2019).

My selection of songs to be analysed in this study includes two songs by JAY-Z, “Picasso Baby”, released on his 2013 album *Magna Carta... Holy Grail*, and “Legacy”, released on his 2017 album *4:44*. In this subsection that deals with how artists portray the feeling of enjoying the fruits of their labour, I'll be looking closely at the song Picasso Baby.

Jon Cotner, a Columbia University English professor, expertly detailed the evolution of descriptors of success within JAY-Z's discography in his 2020 Master's thesis *Picasso Baby: Hearing JAY-Z through the Ears of Gramsci or How Language has the Power to Effect Change*. I will be utilizing his observations to conduct my own analysis, which focuses on JAY-Z's portrayals of success in the larger context of rap as well as in comparison to his peers, those being other rappers. Whereas Cotner analysed early-career, mid-career and late-career JAY-Z all in relation to each other, producing a comprehensive chronological look into the way the aesthetics of success in JAY-Z's songs evolved over time as he became wealthier and more famous with each album, I will instead focus my analysis exclusively on late-career JAY-Z, as by the year 2010 he was already fourteen years and 11 albums deep into his career, and this study is specifically focused on rap in the 2010s. In my analysis of “Picasso Baby” I will examine the way JAY-Z positions himself in relation to common descriptions and narratives of success in the genre and culture of rap as a whole, and not just within his own discography.

“Picasso Baby”, as one might deduce by its name, is a song on which JAY-Z talks about high art. As Cotner (2020:72) pointed out, the *Magna Carta... Holy Grail* album contained 22 references to the art world overall, 16 of which I counted as being featured in “Picasso Baby”.

Uh, I just want a Picasso

In my casa, no, my castle

I'm a hassa, no, I'm an asshole

I'm never satisfied, can't knock my hustle

I want a Rothko, no, I want a brothel

No, I want a wife that fuck me like a prostitute

Let's make love on a million

In a dirty hotel with the fan on the ceiling, uh

All for the love of drug dealing, uh

Marble floors, uh, gold ceilings, uh

Oh, what a feeling

Fuck it, I want a billion

Jeff Koons balloons, I just wanna blow up

Condos in my condos, I wanna row of

Christie's with my missy, live at the MoMA

Bacons and turkey bacons, smell the aroma

In the first verse we can hear references to painters Pablo Picasso, Mark Rothko, Jeff Koons, George Condo, and Francis Bacon. Additionally, the opulent Christie's Auction House is mentioned, alongside the Museum of Modern Art, the MoMA. Each reference signifies a connection to the so-called one percent, the wealthy section of the population which make up the hegemony, referring to the Gramscian idea of hegemony meaning cultural power wielded by the wealthy to cement their privileged position in society and exert dominance over those less economically fortunate. Paintings are not mentioned in Picasso Baby as sources of aesthetic personal enjoyment, but as signifiers of wealth, as signifiers of belonging to an elite club wealthy enough to acquire works of high art. I should note that high art was not one of the five common signifiers of wealth in rap music (money, cars, attire, liquor, jewellery) established in a 2011 study by music scholar Kristine Ann Davis, (44), which further places JAY-Z in exclusive company.

The juxtaposition of high art imagery with lines like “I want a wife that fuck me like a prostitute” or the image of making love in a dirty hotel with a fan on the ceiling brings a unique tension to the narrative of the song. JAY-Z wants to enjoy his immense wealth by visiting art auctions with his wife, recording artist Beyoncé (“Christie’s with my missy), yet he is not above bringing up the way his financial empire got started: “All for the love of drug dealing”. I see this is as an example of a phenomenon that Cotner (2020:56) described: “With its dawn, rap music opened up a war of maneuver on the existing dominant hegemony in the US.”

As far as the instrumental of the song goes, this certainly isn't JAY-Z waxing poetic about the merits of late century modernism over classical music. The instrumental for the first two minutes and thirty seconds of the song consist of an immensely groovy drumbeat combined with a complex bassline that plays a very up-front role in the mix. The bassline is complimented by a Hammond organ staccato melody. In the background we can hear high-pitched electronic squeaks. At 2:30 the instrumental changes to a more minimalistic form for the third verse of the song, with the bouncy bassline being removed to give more space for JAY-Z's rapping, the flow of which also changes to become a bit faster paced.

As we move on to the second verse, we are presented with yet more art references:

It ain't hard to tell, I'm the new Jean Michel
Surrounded by Warhols, my whole team ball
Twin Bugattis outside the Art Basel
I just wanna live life colossal
Leonardo Da Vinci flows
Riccardo Tisci Givenchy clothes
See me throning at the Met
Vogueing on these niggas, champagne on my breath, yes
House like the Louvre or the Tate Modern
'Cause I be going ape at the auction
Oh, what a feeling
Aw, fuck it, I want a trillion
Sleeping every night next to Mona Lisa

The modern day version with better features

Yellow Basquiat in my kitchen corner

Go 'head, lean on that shit, Blue, you own it, uh

The artists mentioned include Jean-Michel Basquiat, Andy Warhol and Leonardo Da Vinci. Fashion designer for luxury clothing brand Givenchy, Riccardo Tisci, also gets a mention, as does the art showcase event Art Basel as well as the art museums Louvre and Tate Modern. In addition, we are also treated to a more typical signifier of wealth in rap, the mention of an expensive car brand: “Twin Bugattis outside the Art Basel”. The French car brand is such an undeniable signifier of wealth in the rap genre that it once even spawned a platinum-selling single bearing its name: Florida rapper Ace Hood’s 2013 single Bugatti peaked at number 33 on the Billboard Hot 100 and has sold over one million copies. The opulence of this line denotes JAY-Z’s status as a hip-hop mogul. Communication scholar Christopher Smith (2003:71) explains the phenomenon:

The hip-hop mogul is not intelligible without credible accounts of the lavish manner in which he leads his life, nor is he intelligible unless his largess connotes not only his personal agency but also a structural condition that squelches the potential agency of so many others.

For the most part the second verse is thematically very similar to the first verse, with JAY-Z rapping one braggadocious line after the other to portray how successful and wealthy he is. The most interesting lines here are the two lines that the verse ends with: “Yellow Basquiat in my kitchen corner / Go 'head, lean on that shit, Blue, you own it, uh”. As JAY-Z talks about a yellow Jean-Michel Basquiat piece in his kitchen corner, he mentions his daughter Blue Ivy Carter, telling her that it’s ok to lean on the Basquiat painting as the Carter family owns the painting. What this does is subvert expectations placed on owners of fine art. The line shows that he is aware of how big of a faux pas touching a precious, historically significant piece of art is. He is in essence saying *I’m well aware of the rules of museum etiquette, now I can break them*. The effectiveness of this line is increased, because before it he refers to his house as resembling the Louvre or the Tate Modern. That line is then reinforced by the wordplay in a later line, where JAY-Z says that he sleeps next to Mona Lisa every night, just “The modern day version with better features”, referring to his wife Beyoncé. In essence JAY-Z has turned his living space into his own museum where he gets to make the rules. He has achieved a level of wealth which allows him to participate in the high art market not merely as a spectator, but as an owner. In the song’s chorus JAY-Z embraces his current lifestyle:

Oh, what a feeling

Picasso, baby

Picasso

Picasso, baby

The repeated use of the phrase “Oh, what a feeling” lets the listener in to the headspace of the artist. JAY-Z exudes a certain state of disbelief yet also of immense appreciation for his current lifestyle, he is so amazed that he cannot conjure up anything more complex than simply the repeating of the phrases “Picasso baby” and “Oh, what a feeling”. Years of hard work have led him to a situation where he is collecting fine art and living in luxurious mansions. He is reaping the rewards of his work at a level rarely seen in hip-hop culture. Yet, he is still not quite satisfied, as he mentions in the first verse of the song: “Fuck it, I want a billion”, and in the second verse: “Aw, fuck it, I want a trillion”. As I mentioned earlier, JAY-Z would go on to satisfy at least one of those desires, as he became the first rapper with a net worth of a billion dollars in 2019. I chose to highlight Picasso Baby because it shows how, by the 2010s, rap had been around long enough as a genre to create its first billionaire artist, which then in turn affected the aesthetics of the genre. No longer were cars and clothes the only signifiers of wealth in the genre, as with JAY-Z’s ascent to a new level of wealth, rappers could slowly begin to show interest in collecting fine art. Echoes of this ideal had already existed before, like in Toronto rapper Drake’s 2011 song “Dreams Money Can Buy”: “I got car money, fresh start money / I want Saudi money, I want art money”. “Car money” was something that most successful rappers already had - the goal, which JAY-Z would brag about achieving two years later on “Picasso Baby”, was now “art money”. To quote writer Michael Clune (2015:3) from his article on the relation of money and agency in rap music:

Although my subjectivity depends on your recognition of me, this recognition is not personal, but is standardized by the mediation of money. To become a subject, I identify with the object reflected in your eyes as you look at me. Insofar as my reflection is mediated by money, the object I identify with is placed in a social hierarchy.

JAY-Z’s position as a subject as he raps about high art is related to him informing any potential listener that he has now ascended to a newfound level in the social hierarchy between rapper and listener which has previously remained largely untouched in the rap world. In 2010s rap we get to hear perspectives on success from both rappers who have been in the industry for only months or years, as well as from rappers who have been in the industry for decades - by the release of Picasso Baby JAY-Z was a rap veteran seventeen

years deep into his career. What Drake, five years into his rap career in 2011, desired, JAY-Z, by 2013, already had - art money.

2.2.2 G-Eazy - For This (2015)

G-Eazy (Gerald Gillum) is a rapper from Oakland, California. He released his first studio album, *Must Be Nice*, independently in 2012, after having cultivated a following for himself by releasing mixtapes and touring around the United States as an opening artist for bigger acts such as Lil Wayne and Snoop Dogg. Known for a slightly poppier sound than most of the rappers whose music I'll be analysing, G-Eazy's music often centers on themes of love, ambition, general rap braggadocio, and dealing with vices and addictions. G-Eazy broke into the mainstream with his 2013 hit "I Mean It", and released his second studio album, *These Things Happen*, in 2014, this time through a major label, RCA Records.

The song that I will be analysing from G-Eazy is called "For This", from his 2015 record *When It's Dark Out*.

The song's instrumental communicates a relaxing, laid-back energy, which fits the song's theme of enjoying the fruits of one's labor after working hard for them. Berlin-based singer IAMNOBODI (Dede Ademabua) provides an effortless falsetto hook which glides over the quiet string melodies which sit on top of a leisurely looping drumbeat.

I thought it never would happen

I swear I waited for ages

Had faith in the journey

I said, "let's see where it takes us"

We want gratification

But see it happens in stages

With a team on my back

A couple times might have cracked

But never broke and I can hold them in fact

Man, you know how much weight was on him?

Must have came from within'

My lanky ass don't even go to the gym

The first half of the first verse centers on G-Eazy's reminiscences of the feelings that he felt during the period in his career when he wasn't yet stable financially nor fame-wise. During that time of uncertainty, he notes how important it was for confidence to prevail over doubt even in the face of the seemingly insurmountable odds that artists trying to break into the mainstream are faced with: "I thought it never would happen / I swear I waited for ages / Had faith in the journey / I said, "let's see where it takes us". He openly admits that times weren't always easy: "A couple times might have cracked / But never broke and I can hold them in fact". What we are also presented with is a metaphor of sports in the context of hip hop, as the lines "With a team on my back" and "Man, you know how much weight was on him?" are used to build the image of G-Eazy as a so called "franchise player". To quote the website sportslingo.com, a franchise player is "...a player who the team considers is the best player on the team and somebody whom they will build a team around." A concrete example of a franchise player that I'm sure most people, even those without much of an interest in sports will recognize, is the former Chicago Bulls basketball player Michael Jordan.

Atlanta rapper Future used the term franchise in reference to himself explicitly on the song "Serve the Base" from his 2015 album *DS2*: "Come and fuck with me, baby, I'm a franchise". Drake even commented on the phenomenon of rappers comparing themselves to athletes on the song "Thank Me Now" from his 2010 album *Thank Me Later*: "Damn, I swear sports and music are so synonymous / Cause we want to be them, and they want to be us". The references to the concept of the franchise player are intriguing because they comment on the surrounding financial infrastructure around professional sports and, through that metaphor, music. These references are not related to any specific sports plays or actions, instead referencing the infrastructure around pro sports, meaning everything that happens off the court. I will also note that the infrastructure around specifically college sports in the context of hip-hop has also been recently examined, and similarities can be observed regarding the mindsets of rappers and college athletes, as pointed out by Flowers & Cavil (2016:133): "The "winning at all costs" mentality is not just a college athletic phenomenon as the "I'm winning and you lose because you snooze" conceptualization is prevalent in the hip-hop urban community...". While a franchise player of course performs brilliantly on the playing field in their chosen sport, their performance is also related to concerns outside of the field: A franchise player is able to provide financially for their family and circle of friends in their personal life due to the sizable contract they have signed with their team, yet they in turn also act as a source of income for their team, having their face plastered on billboards and

generating sales of their sports jerseys, and, of course, bringing in new fans should they successfully lead their team to a championship. Not only does a franchise player, or “franchise artist” provide for their close circle, they also provide for their record label. The music equivalent term to a franchise player is likely the “phenomenon”, or the “bankable act” (Marshall, 2014:165). The reason why I chose to highlight the concept of the franchise player and its relation to rap can be explained with a quote from popular music scholar Keith Negus (2004:525): “...to understand rap, both in the past and its potential in the future, then cultural explanations alone are not enough. Rap is also a very particular U.S. business.” In a study focused largely on material success in the context of rap, every perspective related to that success must be explored in adequate depth, even if that requires taking a detour to the world of professional sports. G-Eazy equates himself to a franchise player to build a narrative device that allows him to exhibit just how much more enjoyable success feels when you’ve first had to work hard for it, as opposed to becoming successful effortlessly. The weight he felt on his shoulders during his ascension to new financial heights is finally lifted, and it is that feeling of liberation that is the main narrative hook of this song.

As G-Eazy raps about “how much weight was on him”, he brings up the importance of mental strength in the process of working to become a successful rapper: “Must have came from within’ / My lanky ass don’t even go to the gym”. If we then look back at my analysis of Big Sean’s song “Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)” in chapter 2.1.1, to the mentions of Big Sean’s lines: “But I’ve been working on myself and that’s the most important work / Even if you don’t get paid for it”, we can begin to grasp the requirements of reaching success. To put it concisely, even though physical acts, like time spent in the recording studio, do matter, mental fortitude and growth are perhaps even more important to the process of reaching for success. Inner strength, cultivated by self-reflection, “working on myself” as Big Sean put it, seems to be an integral element in these narratives of success described by G-Eazy and Big Sean. As we move on to the second part of the first verse, G-Eazy’s tone becomes more confrontational as he addresses his peers in the rap community.

My album in, just one, but twenty mixtapes to my name

A lot of y’all would lose your appetites

With a distaste for the game

Lot of y’all would call it quits

Because you just chase for the fame

Tell my story to inspire you

Just in case you're the same

Self-made, now I employ ten of my friends

Tryna move moms out the Honda

Tryna send her a Benz

Appreciate it all 'cause it's no telling when this shit ends

Unless this is all a dream and then it depends

The mention of “twenty mixtapes to my name” is G-Eazy’s way of highlighting his past efforts, the work he did to become successful that got him into a position where he is now able to release studio albums instead of mixtapes. I’ve observed that the practice of releasing mixtapes for the purposes of building up a following has declined significantly in the 2010s compared to how common of a practice it was in the 2000s. I suspect this is due to the way music creation and music distribution have both become increasingly democratized in the last decade with the advent of fairly easily accessible and affordable music production software as well as distribution services like Distrokid that allow anyone to easily upload their music onto major streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music. The line between what is considered a mixtape and what is considered an album has become blurred in the 2010s as both are uploaded into, and consumed through, the same services. A mixtape in its previous, physical iteration was something that wasn’t sold on national supermarket shelves, distributed instead “...in urban communities by street vendors or in select local stores.” as Belle (2014:292) points out. Even in digital form the places where mixtapes created before the advent of streaming services can be consumed are separate from the services where albums are consumed. Hip hop mixtapes were and still are uploaded to services like Datpiff.com, which allows rappers to participate in the hip hop tradition of rapping over instrumentals from songs by other rappers, but this practice cannot survive on platforms like Spotify due to the stringent copyright policies of the service. As the policy of sites like Datpiff.com is more lenient in the context of copyright law, their place as the last vestige of mixtape culture seems somewhat secured, even if their new role is to act more as a repository of older classic mixtapes than as a discovery site for new music as the stream of newer mixtapes being created and uploaded to services like it slows down. As is evident from the way G-Eazy raps about his previous mixtapes, they are more useful today as evidence of past hard work rather than as showcases of artistic ability.

To that end, the value of hard work is evident to G-Eazy, as he addresses his peers and even the listener: “A lot of y'all would lose your appetites / With a distaste for the game / Lot of y'all would call it quits / Because you just chase for the fame”. G-Eazy feels that in order for an artist to succeed in the music business they have to possess a real love for the work itself, for the process, instead of using music as a utility to to reach fame and, presumably, wealth. Additionally, in 2010s rap, even wealth has an expanded meaning from the previous clichés of jewellery and expensive clothing: “Self-made, now I employ ten of my friends / Tryna move moms out the Honda / Tryna send her a Benz”. To be able to provide your circle of friends with stable employment and to be able to give a car to your mother instead of driving it yourself has become an acceptable way of displaying wealth alongside more traditional aesthetics of spending which have typically included more self-indulgent purchases.

Finally, I will examine selected lines in the second verse:

Sixteen with dreams so far fetched no one understands us

Playing shows in stadiums

Where everybody way up in the stands is

Standing on their feet, I paint the picture on canvas

That I seen, in my dreams in quick visions and glances

Woke up in NYC today, don't think we're in Kansas

Anymore, but sometimes it's hard to be sure

'Cause if I dreamed that it happened, did it actually or?

Am I just still asleep, and none of it's real

Wake up tomorrow right back in the struggle

Tryna come up and build

I don't know this shit gets deep and ignorance is bliss

It's all I've ever loved, I waited my whole life for this, yeah

First, I'd like to pay attention to the line "Sixteen with dreams so far fetched no one understands us". I highlight this line because it contains an idea similar to the one Big Sean communicated in his song "Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)", which I analysed in section 2.1.1: "I knew I lived this life back when I was young and used to climb trees / I should've known back then I wasn't gon' stop / Cause even then I was infatuated with just sitting at the top". It appears that signs of the ambition required to embark on the journey to creating a successful career in rap are manifested quite early on in an individual's life, in these two cases in early adolescence ("...when I was young and used to climb trees") and during the teenage years ("Sixteen with dreams so far fetched no one understands us"). This ties in to the last line of the verse: "It's all I've ever loved, I waited my whole life for this, yeah". For a rapper to achieve success in their field, they must love the job itself, not merely the potential rewards money and fame can buy. On the song "For This", it seems that for G-Eazy the reality that making rap music is now his profession seems to almost be reward enough for all the hours spent working to reach his current position. The lyrics of the song's chorus state this as well: "I waited all my life for this / They told me, that I won't make it / But I made it". The acquiring of wealth was never the only goal, even if G-Eazy raps the lyrics "Dreams of life changing, checks from label advances / Copping mansions" in the second verse. G-Eazy's goal was to make rapping into a day job, to make a living doing the one thing he loved. The mansions were just a bonus. While my intention in this study was to examine aesthetics and narratives of material success, this deeper analysis has revealed that even in songs that mention Mercedes Benz cars and expensive mansions, the real form of success that is rapped about can in fact be self-fulfillment - to be successful is to make a living doing what you love. I feel that the stark contrast between the almost grotesque opulence of the previous song I analysed in section 2.2.1, JAY-Z's "Picasso Baby", and the relatively straightforward ideal of success as self-fulfillment found in G-Eazy's song "For This" creates an illuminating dichotomy showing the diversity of perspectives found in 2010s rap music. I'll finish this section with a quote by journalist and music critic Alan Light (2004:140):

What has sustained rap for its (ten-year? fifteen? decades-old? the argument continues . . .) history is its ability to rise to the challenge of its limitations. Just at the points at which the form has seemed doomed or at a dead end, something or someone has appeared to give it a new direction.

When JAY-Z got bored of rapping about cars, he started rapping about Mark Rothko paintings - he went into a new direction. When G-Eazy, on his second studio album, felt that he had finally achieved the success he had been clamouring for since he was sixteen years old,

the very process of working to get to his current position is what he felt was important to share. He felt that his words could help those who wanted to make their dream come true, too, or, as he put it in the first verse: “Tell my story to inspire you / Just in case you're the same”.

2.3 Lyrical retrospectives: Looking back at where you started from

In this third and final section of the first chapter of this study I will analyse two portrayals of reminiscence. This chapter does bear some similarities to the first chapter, 2.1, where I analysed rappers’ portrayals of the work required to reach success. Here in chapter 2.3, I am looking at that same period in a rapper’s career, but from a different perspective, that being the perspective of a rapper who has already made it, who has already become successful. While in chapter 2.1 I analysed the way rappers talk about the work they are currently doing to become successful, in chapter 2.3 I look at the ways rappers talk about the work that they have already done to become successful. Through this chapter I hope to gain an understanding about whether rappers view their pre-success lives in a positive light or in a negative light in relation to their lives after becoming successful. The rappers featured in this section are Drake and Logic.

2.3.1 Drake - You & The 6 (2015)

When I wrote the short introductory text for JAY-Z earlier, I mentioned that an artist of his calibre really needs no introductions. I would argue that Toronto rapper Drake (Aubrey Graham) is in that very same pantheon of artists who, at one point in time, have held the mainstream music consciousness firmly in their grasp. In the case of Drake, that point in time consists of a whole decade – the 2010s. Breaking through with his hit single “Best I Ever Had” in 2009, Drake quickly grabbed the attention of the mainstream and never stopped to look back. He was the most streamed artist of the 2010s based on Spotify numbers (Skinner, 2019), and as Spotify has the biggest piece of the streaming service market share pie, Drake was very likely the most streamed artist overall when counting in all other streaming services as well. This isn’t exactly a surprise, as he spent the most overall weeks (118) of the 2010s at number one of the Billboard Hot Rap Songs list. He achieved this feat with 19 number one songs.

Drake’s career path is not the path of a typical rapper, and it bears some similarities to the early years of another artist on this list, Childish Gambino. Like the previously introduced Gambino, Drake also got his start in entertainment, more specifically as an actor on the

popular Canadian teen drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. He released his debut mixtape in 2006, and by 2010, was already nominated for a Grammy for Best Rap Song and Best Rap Solo Performance for “Best I Ever Had”. Finally, in 2011, with the release of his second studio album *Take Care*, he made the Billboard charts into what could be called his permanent residence. The reason for his chart dominance is likely that his softer and poppier sound which has elements of R&B has the potential for high crossover appeal, gaining him listeners outside of rap fans as well. Drake is known for his introspective and at times quite emotional lyrics, with which many listeners (me included) identify with, which is likely a major reason for his success as well.

Drake is the only artist alongside JAY-Z to have multiple songs featured in this study. Some of his most introspective lyrics were in fact the very spark that inspired the whole idea for this study to begin with. For this section, I’ll be analysing his song “You & The 6” from his 2015 album *If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late*. The other Drake song that will be analysed in this study is his song “9” from his 2016 album *Views*.

“You & The 6” consists of two long and lyrically dense verses split by a short refrain which consists of only a single statement: “You and the six raised me right, that shit saved my life”. The concise refrain is used like a seal to close off a verse and allow the transition to another one. The “You” in the refrain refers to Drake’s mother Sandi Graham (b.1960), while the “6” is a nickname for the city of Toronto, due to Toronto consisting of a total of six municipalities. Another reason for the nickname is that the main area code for Toronto, 416, ends in the number six. Before I start the analysis, I will include a contextualizing quote on the topic of hip-hop motherhood and hip-hop fatherhood from Hay & Farrugia (2022:40): “When hip hop culture is added to the sociological dynamics of family life, cultural identities become more complex because markets are invested in shaping and circulating profitable images and ideas.” I include this quote because while I treat rap lyrics in this study as largely autobiographical, it is still important to not forget the surrounding financial circumstances, motivators and influences when dealing with the music of someone as commercially successful as Drake.

I now will begin breaking down the first verse:

Having conversations with mama, man, my life is a mess

Ain't been returning the texts, so she been reading the press

She got Google Alerts, them shits go straight to her phone

She worry 'bout me from home, you know she raised me alone

She said, "I heard you back with you know who"

This first section of this very song was perhaps the single biggest reason for why this entire study exists. When I first heard the lyric “She got Google Alerts, them shits go straight to her phone” some eight years ago in 2015 I was immediately intrigued because that simple lamentation by Drake felt like the perfect encapsulation of what fame and success are like as a rapper in the 2010s. Google Alerts, the simple content detection and notification (CDN) feature available for users of Google’s services isn’t even close to belonging to the most technologically sophisticated creations that the company has produced (it was in fact created all the way back in 2003, 20 years ago as of the moment I am writing this (Kavilanz, 2016), yet it poses multiple complex questions about fame and privacy in the modern information society. The functionality is simple: The user can define search terms, such as “Anthony Bourdain” or “chess” or “Espoo, Finland”, and they will then receive notifications by email when those terms are newly detected on the Internet. As modern smartphones contain email applications, those notifications can now be received on the go as well. Now, if you were, say, the mother of a famous rapper, you could set up a Google Alert for “rapper Drake” or “Aubrey Drake Graham”, which would then allow you to receive a report directly to your phone of every time they are mentioned on the Internet. Of course, some percentage of these alerts would be pure fiction, perhaps linking to some obscure gossip website or online tabloid, but even then, this is already a significant change in regard to how fame is perceived and dealt with in the modern age. Before the Internet became such a pivotal part of so many of our lives, people interested in what was being written and said about celebrities would at the very least have to either go purchase a gossip rag or turn on their TV to catch some airing of TMZ programming or E! News. However, now all they need to do is simply set up a Google Alert, which then not only searches all the mentions of their celebrity of choice, it even delivers them to the consumer in an easily accessible email digest. In essence Google Alerts is like an anti-content filtration system. On most social media services, the user can choose to filter out keywords of their choice, which can be an effective way for a user to make their browsing experience more enjoyable. This is the opposite, funnelling every mention of a specific keyword to the user. In the disinformation age where website advertisements and page clicks are the new currency, this deluge of information can of course end up consisting of more fake news than real ones. Turning on Google Alerts also differs drastically from the regular ways

of following a celebrity on social media which Marshall (2014:11-12) names, because in those cases the content the user/fan is presented with is created by the artist/celebrity themselves, such as in the form of a tweet or an Instagram picture. In the case of Google Alerts the content is overwhelmingly created by someone other than the artist themself.

Drake raps about the effect that being a global celebrity has on his relationship with his mother, where even though Drake has not been responding to his mother's texts, his mother still gets constant updates about his life through Google Alerts. These alerts then cause her to worry about Drake, and to comment on Drake's love life: "She said, "I heard you back with you know who"". Sure, a celebrity's expectation of privacy was already in dire straits in previous decades with the advent of tabloid magazines and live news channels dedicated to spewing entertainment "news", but innovations like Google Alerts exacerbate the phenomenon to new levels previously unknown. Rapper Kanye West talks about similar issues in his 2016 song "30 Hours":

I wake up, assessin' the damages

Checkin' MediaTakeOut

Pictures of me drunk walkin' out with a bitch

But it's blurry enough to get the fake out

MediaTakeOut is a gossip website which Kanye has checked only to find pictures of him walking intoxicated with a female companion. However, at this particular juncture he is fortunate enough that the pictures are too blurry for anyone to definitively claim that it is indeed Kanye in those pictures. Nevertheless, gossip sites possess immense capabilities to spread all sorts of rumours like wildfire, and when they are combined with the ability of Google Alerts to send notifications directly to anyone's phone, the speed at which potential misinformation spreads is frankly astonishing.

The rest of the first verse consists mostly of Drake rapping to his mother about how he wishes she would not comment on his romantic affairs, and of Drake talking about how competitive the music business is. In the second verse he raps about his father's influence on him:

He made mistakes throughout his life that he still doesn't accept

But he just want our forgiveness, and fuck it, look how we're living

I'm content with this story, who are we not to forgive him?

At least I been to a prison, at least I know what it's like

*I used to rap on the phone with one of his friends doing life
 And now I got me a Grammy, that could be part of the reason
 Let's just call this shit even, we got some things to believe in
 Do you remember back to Weston Road, Scarlett Road?
 Hangin' with Aaron Bell and Reny
 Shit could've gone south for me, he looked out for me, ma
 He never let me do drugs
 He let me shoot a gun one summer, but out there everyone does
 He made me listen to his music, old music, soul music
 Shit that can only be created if you go through it*

What begins as a mention of a somewhat rocky relationship between father and son ultimately turns to acceptance: "I'm content with this story, who are we not to forgive him?". This ambivalence is in line with sociologist Matther Oware's findings in his 2012 study *Decent Daddy, Imperfect Daddy: Black Male Rap Artists' Views of Fatherhood and the Family* (p.338). Drake admits that the experience gained from rapping on the phone to one of his father's incarcerated friends at an early age may have even been a foundational experience in his quest to improve his rapping skills: "I used to rap on the phone with one of his friends doing life / And now I got me a Grammy, that could be part of the reason".

We also get to hear about Drake's younger days in Toronto as he mentions Weston Road and Scarlett Road, two roads in the Weston neighbourhood of northwest Toronto. What I find notable is the relationship that can be seen here between Drake and the socioeconomically struggling Weston neighbourhood. While he did grow up there as a young child (Kimont, 2016), he didn't stay in the area long enough to become truly acclimated with the goings-on of the area: "Shit could've gone south for me, he looked out for me, ma" and "He let me shoot a gun one summer, but out there everyone does". Drake was not one of the people who lived in the area for long enough or until he was old enough to develop the types of street smarts that acclimation to the area would have required, nor was he someone to whom guns were a regularly used tool. Drugs were not for selling nor using: "He never let me do drugs" and shooting firearms was aking to an exciting experience at the gun range rather than something done out of a need to defend oneself or attack another person: "He let me shoot a gun one summer, but out there everyone does". Communication Studies scholar Alexandra Boutros distills the essence of the idea in her 2020 article: "Drake's particular and sometimes

contested form of introspective hip hop generates a masculinity that negotiates his distance from the typical locales and signifiers of hip hop authenticity.” Those typical locales and signifiers of hip hop authenticity (socioeconomically disadvantaged areas like Weston, and phenomena like gun violence and drug dealing), while present in “You & The 6”, are not something Drake himself partakes in, apart from spending a period of his childhood in Weston before moving to the affluent area of Forest Hill in Toronto. Drake’s position in the landscape of hip-hop authenticity is something he constantly renegotiates (Pope, 2016:9). The following lines comment on this through the genre of soul music: “He made me listen to his music, old music, soul music / Shit that can only be created if you go through it”. Drake’s father played him soul music when Drake was young, which is why it seems fitting that Drake himself would then become one of the most popular artists in another genre that prides itself on being something that “can only be created if you go through it”: Hip-hop.

Finishing the second verse, Drake comments directly on rap realness:

*I used to get teased for being black
 And now I'm here and I'm not black enough
 'Cause I'm not acting tough
 Or making stories up 'bout where I'm actually from, yeah
 But I just roll with it, momma, rolling stone with it, momma
 Gotta be careful around Rolling Stone
 Or anyone that's tryna throw stones at me, momma
 I'm not condoning it, momma
 They will not tear nothing down, I built this home for you, momma
 Know I don't call enough, momma
 I just been working with so little time for personal, momma, yeah
 Hard labor let me pay the price*

Authenticity in rap music is related here not only to locale and behaviour (“acting tough” and “making stories up ‘bout where I’m actually from”), but directly to race. As Drake’s father is Black and his mother is white, he has faced race-related prejudice from multiple angles during different parts of his life, being criticized for his blackness in his younger years, yet then being criticized for not being “black enough” as he has entered the hip-hop arena. Drake also relates behaviour to race, equating blackness to “acting tough”. This is something that has

come up before in 2010s hip-hop, with a notable example being found in California rapper Earl Sweatshirt's song "Chum" from his 2013 album *Doris*, where he comments on his behaviour in relation to race: "Too black for the white kids, and too white for the blacks / From honor roll to cracking locks up off them bicycle racks". Drake chooses not to let the way others try to define hip-hop realness and his relation to it bother him, while also noting that even the media (Rolling Stone magazine) can play a role in making those definitions: "But I just roll with it, momma, rolling stone with it, momma / Gotta be careful around Rolling Stone / Or anyone that's tryna throw stones at me, momma". Drake finishes the song in which he honours the person and the city that made him the man he is today with one last familiar hip-hop trope, the flaunting of riches, but in a more heart-warming form: "They will not tear nothing down, I built this home for you, momma". Like I noted in my analysis of G-Eazy's line "Self-made, now I employ ten of my friends" from his song "For This" in chapter 2.2.2, in 2010s hip-hop being able to financially provide for your friends and family is just as appropriate of a way of flaunting wealth as buying luxury cars and expensive clothes for yourself is. I'd argue buying your mother a house is about the best thing you can do with rap money.

2.3.2 Logic - 44 Bars (2016)

Maryland rapper Logic (Sir Robert Hall II) began releasing mixtapes in 2010. He grew up under hectic and at times unsafe circumstances, being witness to gang activity and drug dealing from a young age, a subject matter that colours much of the lyrics of his early discography. Known for a lyrical style combining socially conscious topics with introspective stories from his life, he was signed to the independent label Visionary Music Group in 2011. Logic's fourth mixtape, *Young Sinatra: Welcome To Forever*, released in 2013, gained him enough notoriety for Def Jam records to sign him to their roster. His 2014 debut studio album, *Under Pressure*, would launch his career and propel him to mainstream consciousness. However, Logic would land his most commercially successful single in 2017, with the release of his song "1-800-273-8255", named after a United States suicide hotline, and featuring lyrical content focusing on topics of self-harm and depression. As a result of "1-800-273-8255" being Logic's most commercially successful song, and due to its direct tackling of such a difficult topic as suicide, any scholarship regarding Logic's music or him as an artist was almost exclusively focused on only that specific song, such as its mention in the 2019 article *The Music Industry Has a Mental Health Problem* by music industry scholar Manny

Manriquez. I was unfortunately unable to find scholarship which was concerned with Logic's music and artistry on a more general level.

The Logic song that I'll be analysing in this study is called "44 Bars", and it's from his 2016 mixtape *Bobby Tarantino*.

"44 Bars", as the title might suggest, consists of exactly 44 bars of rapping. The song has no chorus, and the intro and the outro of the song both contain a short sample of the 1985 Barrington Levy song "The Vibes Is Right". The song's instrumental is quite minimalistic. The drums consist of a simple, low tempo interplay between a heavy kick drum and a punchy snare drum. Apart from synth pads which are very low in the mix, the most prominent melodic element is a repeating vocal sample from the aforementioned Barrington Levy record, a pitched-up repetition of the lyric "You no hear me yet / Hear me live and direct" enhanced with the use of reverb and delay effects. Occasionally a fast-paced hi-hat pattern also comes in. In all its relative simplicity the instrumental is actually very well suited for the style of confessional rapping that Logic performs on the track, forming a nostalgic-sounding instrumental base on top of which Logic reminisces and reflects on his career. The saying less is more feels appropriate here.

I will proceed with an analysis of the song's lyrics:

*It's kind of funny how life changed and rearranged
 No matter what happens, everything ain't gon' be the same
 The incredible album, what an incredible outcome
 I grip the mic and then talk to the people like I'm Malcolm
 I used to think the fame and money was the motivation
 Until I toured the world and met the people face to face and
 Understood that the power was harnessed in that basement
 It ain't about the money and notoriety
 It's about the people and making a difference in society*

At the beginning of the song Logic looks back at his previous goals regarding his rap career, which are distilled into the pursuit of money and fame. However, from his current vantage point several years into his career, with two studio albums under his belt (he references his 2015 sophomore record *The Incredible True Story* as "The incredible album"), he has come to

the realization that the most valuable reward for creating music is bringing people together and “making a difference in society”. These thoughts are similar to the ones G-Eazy rapped about in “For This”, which I analysed in section 2.2.2. The specific line in “For This” that I am referencing (“Tell my story to inspire you / Just in case you’re the same”) signals that there are motivators other than money and fame which cause rappers to embark on their chosen career path. The desired connection between artist and fan (“Just in case you’re the same” in “For This” and “I toured the world and met the people face to face” in “44 Bars”) is valued just as highly, if not even more highly, than material success, as seen in the lines “Lot of y’all would call it quits / Because you just chase for the fame” (“For This”) and “It ain’t about the money and notoriety / It’s about the people and making a difference in society” (“44 Bars”). The dichotomy between societal impact and human connection on one side and capitalistic motivations on the other has been a part of rap music history for a long time, yet it feels refreshing to hear 2010s rappers desire to exist on the side of societal impact and human connection instead of the side of capitalistic motivations. While Alan Light (2004:143) points out that “Hip-hop is first and foremost a pop form, seeking to make people dance and laugh and think, to make them listen and feel, and to sell records by doing so.”, the scale, on one side of which hip-hop exists as a record selling device and on the other side as way to make people listen and feel has historically shifted in balance from one side to the other. Notably in the 2000s the weight was heavily on the side of (mainstream) hip-hop being a tool for selling records, communicating explicitly materialistic desires and birthing “bling rap”, but in the 2010s the scale became a bit more balanced. Sure, the goal was still to keep selling records, but perspectives on human emotion and societal impact gained more prominence. Of course, as Light (2004:144) goes on to note, “At the same time, rap by definition has a political content; even when not explicitly issues oriented, rap is about giving voice to a Black community otherwise underrepresented, if not silent, in the mass media.”

As the song progresses, Logic talks about how his relationship to his fans has changed as he has gotten more and more famous:

But don't get it twisted, this life I'm living is like a movie

The Godfather, the Goodfella wielding a Uzi

One with the people, if the people is wondering who's he?

Same level, the same rebel that never settled

Pullin' strings like Geppetto who overcame the ghetto

And I know you wrote me and I still ain't answered
'Cause shit is different now, it's forced upon me, different stances
I used to spend all my time conversing with you
But now I write this song to let you know I'm hurting with you

Initially including some stereotypical rap braggadocio (“this life I’m living is like a movie”), Logic quickly moves on, addressing the listener directly: “And I know you wrote me and I still ain’t answered” (Perhaps a reference to Eminem’s classic 2000 song “Stan” about a fan writing to his favourite rapper) and “I used to spend all my time conversing with you / But now I write this song to let you know I’m hurting with you”. It almost feels like rap’s classic tropes of masculine violence (“The Godfather, the Goodfella wielding a Uzi”) have become, to Logic, simply a routine obligation that has to be ticked off the checklist before any matters of real emotion can be talked about, before the artist can bare their true soul. Not only does Logic include depictions of masculine violence, he even distills the classic hip-hop rags to riches story into a single cleverly thought out line (“Pullin’ strings like Geppetto who overcame the ghetto”) before he can finally admit to the listener that he is hurting and he feels that the gap between him and his fans is growing as he has less and less time to talk to them due to the obligations that come with his increased level of fame. A small commentary on what I interpret to be the process of art turning into work is also included with the line “Cause shit is different now, it’s forced upon me, different stances”. As Logic’s fame and wealth grow, he is ironically less free to set his own schedule than before, which then cuts into the time he has to talk with his fans. He elaborates on this further in the next lines:

Shit is too big, but let's be honest man, it's kinda bittersweet
Besides the shows and meet and greets, y'all only see me on the street
And even then, that shit is rare—I just don't go outside
'Cause honestly I don't fuck with this world, I'd rather hide
That misconception, "Cause I rap, I must be filled with pride"
Shit I ain't perfect, if you heard different then someone lied

The few contexts in which he does get to see his fans are heavily monetized - shows (concerts) and meet and greets. Of course, this is ultimately what the relationship between fan and star often is, it is usually eventually mediated by money, but this truth becoming clear to Logic makes him feel bittersweet about his growing status. A celebrity operates in a minefield between the interests of capital (for example their record label, making money off the artist)

and the needs of their fans who in turn make the artist money (Marshall, 2014:56), and negotiating between all three entities (capital, the artist, their fans) can be a complex and stressful process, sometimes even for all three sides at the same time. However, Logic does not back down, instead rising to the occasion of providing both his label with money and his fans with concert experiences:

People in my ear telling me, "Talk that shit"

Actions speak louder than words, I'd rather walk that shit

Since the first album, I'm one of the highest earners on the label

Within six months I put the second one on they table

I played sold out shows in parts of the world I can't pronounce

Release the tickets, watch them disappear when we announce

The explicit mention of his label, a part of the process of music consumption that the listener usually does not need to be keyed in on, is a way of bringing the entity causing Logic pressure into the forefront. For the listener or fan, receiving a new album is simply an exciting event, yet behind that process runs a juggernaut of an industry which is very concerned and highly aware of the economics behind the music (“Since the first album, I’m one of the highest earners on the label”), and Logic does not shy away from rapping about that side of the equation, about the sterile boardrooms where the money is made. Behind every music release looms a Return On Investment-prediction and expectation, and behind every concert the expectation of selling tickets, which Logic seems to be doing effectively: “Release the tickets, watch them disappear when we announce”. For an alternative underground hip-hop perspective on this, see Harrison (2022).

He comments further on the day-to-day of his life on tour:

Leave Friday for the show and come back Monday with a hundred grand

Don't fuck with checks, so when I bounce I prefer cash in hand

You know my first week looking crazy due to high demand

'Cause people don't buy music in this day and age, they buy the brand

The most poignant line here is the declaration that people don’t buy music anymore, “they buy the brand”. This is once again an example of the type of meta-commentary that is a commonly featured part of 2010s rap, yet usually requires an artist to have been successful for a period of at least multiple years in order to surface in their lyrics. Artists themselves feel

free to state in their music that they are aware of the dual-sided nature of their work as both art and commodity, and these economic realities are no longer something that has to remain entirely hidden in order for the songs to communicate to the listeners the stories the artists wish to relay. Communications professor Keith Negus (2004:526) stated the following:

In the struggle against racism and economic and cultural marginalization, and in an attempt to “live the American dream,” rap has also been created as a self-conscious business activity as well as a cultural form and aesthetic practice.

In essence the self-consciousness of rap artists regarding the understanding of rap as both a cultural form and as a business activity does have long roots, but these perspectives have in my view gained more mainstream prominence in the 2010s than during other decades in rap’s history. In “44 Bars” Logic uses explicit mentions of music industry realities (record sale expectations, concert ticket selling speed) to communicate his own bittersweet feelings about his new position as a famous and wealthy rapper as compared to his perspectives during the beginning of his career. However, he raps the following near the end of the song:

There's ups and downs, don't get me wrong but back when I ain't have shit

Felt like I woulda sold my soul to make it with this rap shit

Even though Logic has, in some ways, less freedom and especially free time than in the beginning of his career, he ultimately feels that that trade-off in exchange for fame and wealth and worldwide concert tours was worth it in the end. What is also worth pointing out is that while this song was released in 2015, Logic would actually reach his career commercial height just two years later in 2017, with the release of his third studio album *Everybody*. If his feelings are already bittersweet at this point in his career (2015), further research could be conducted to glean any possible perspectives he has on fame and wealth in his post-2017 music to see if his perspective has changed. However, that is to be reserved for another study.

3 Portrayals of the downsides of fame and success

In this second analytical chapter of this thesis, I will examine portrayals of the potential negative sides of success. This section consists of analyses of four songs, divided into two chapters, one dealing with the isolating effects of fame and the other dealing with the temptations of conspicuous consumption. The narratives in the first chapter of this thesis mostly contained perspectives pertaining to the beginning parts of the artists' careers, which featured largely positive views on fame and wealth. In this second section I highlight songs which contain thoughts from artists who have been in a successful position for a long time, which has potentially expanded their views on their lives as famous entertainers in the public eye in an incredibly competitive, continuously everchanging industry. The nature of fame has changed with the advent of the internet when compared to rap's previous decades, such as the 1990s and the 2000s, and rap as a genre has grown immensely, which means that the stars of 2010s rap experience fame at a markedly different scale than the rappers of the previous decades.

3.1 The price of fame: The isolating effects of stardom

In this section, as the title suggests, I examine portrayals of what is perhaps the most significant negative aspect of fame and global superstardom, which is the potential of social isolation. Achieving success and becoming wealthy and famous can place significant strain on the close interpersonal relationships of rappers. Financial concerns can become the focal point of conversations with family members as everyone wants a piece of the newfound riches, and forming genuine human relationships can become difficult as it is no longer clear whether people approach these rap stars out of a genuine interest in them as people or out of an ulterior, usually financially tinted motive. The rappers featured in this chapter of the study are Drake and Big K.R.I.T.

3.1.1 Drake – 9 (2016)

“9” is the second song of Drake's 2016 album *Views*, his fourth studio album which also boasts the biggest first week sales of his career with 1.04 million album-equivalent units sold. First announced in 2014 with the title *Views from the 6*, the title was eventually shortened to its current form, *Views*. As I mentioned previously in this study, 6 refers to Drake's hometown of Toronto, and in the song “9” he once again raps about his relationship with his hometown.

The most prominent feature of the song's instrumental is the loudly ticking hi-hat which sits atop a relatively minimalistic kick and snare pattern. The song's melodic elements are quite sparse, consisting primarily of an eerie background synth pad alongside bright, high-pitched synth hits. The song's chorus is a sample taken from Jamaican reggae artist Mavado's 2007 song "Dying", placed in the song more as a simple break to separate the two rap verses instead of as a catchy hook intended to encourage repeat listening and radio play.

I will now begin the analysis, starting with the first verse:

*Look, mama hit my phone and said rap's no good
 Better than her telling me the check's no good
 Now they wanna act like I do no good
 Funny 'cause I really did more than I should
 I made a decision last night that I would die for it
 Just to show the city what it takes to be alive for it
 Can't get me on the line so they hang me out to dry for it
 You know 40 wants peace but I'm down to cut ties for it*

Drake's relationship with his mother, a prominent subject of his 2015 song "You & The 6" which I analyzed in chapter 2.3.1 gets a mention in this song as well. The relationship is explored through materialism: "Look, mama hit my phone and said rap's no good /

Better than her telling me the check's no good". This echoes similar sentiments to the ones expressed in "You & The 6": "They will not tear nothing down, I built this home for you, momma" and "Hard labor let me pay the price". Even when his mother expresses dissatisfaction regarding his line of work, Drake feels that the material support that he is able to provide for his mother makes up for the occasional lecture regarding the negative aspects of life as a globally famous individual. The open discussion of his relationship with his mother sets aside the typically hypermasculine ideals usually communicated by male rappers in their songs, which is a phenomenon not exclusive to Drake's music, instead being recognized as a trend in the larger context of hip-hop as well (Oware, 2012:343).

Drake continues his verse, addressing his fans and haters in the city of Toronto: "Now they wanna act like I do no good / Funny 'cause I really did more than I should / I made a decision

last night that I would die for it / Just to show the city what it takes to be alive for it". He positions himself almost in the role of a martyr who is selflessly uplifting his city's position in the global consciousness. His view is not entirely without support: As investigated by Vice News in 2018, he may have been responsible for up to 5 percent of Toronto's at the time 8.8-billion-dollar tourism economy (Hussein, 2018). He frequently namedrops various places and establishments in Toronto in his songs, which then drives traffic to those places, increasing income generation for the city. Drake has also made note of his position as a significant revenue-generating artist inside of the music industry in various songs, one example being found in his 2022 track with Atlanta rapper 21 Savage, "On BS": "I jump on your song and make you sound like you the feature / I jump on your song and make a label think they need ya, for real (Yeah)". A feature from Drake on an upcoming artist's song has the potential to drastically boost the stock of that artist in the eyes of record labels in the same way that Drake namedropping a Toronto restaurant in a song of his drives droves of customers to that restaurant. Drake himself does features actively, enough for him to comment on his omnipresence within the music industry in his 2013 song "5AM in Toronto": "Give these niggas the look, the verse, and even the hook / That's why every song sound like Drake featurin' Drake". However, this in turn causes pressure on Drake: "Can't get me on the line so they hang me out to dry for it / You know 40 wants peace but I'm down to cut ties for it". People now in turn contact Drake, and when they cannot reach him, feelings turn sour. Noah "40" Shebib, Drake's long-time producer and close friend suggests that Drake should adhere to a diplomatic stance when it comes to people begging for publicity, but Drake states that he is "down to cut ties for it". Drake continues describing the effects of fame on his mental state:

*And I can't sleep these days unless I take one
 If they don't have a story these days, they'll make one
 Life is always on, man, I never get a break from it
 Doesn't matter where I go, I can never get away from it
 They give me loyalty and I don't gotta pay for it
 Same way, breads gotta break for it
 Keeping people fed is my only peace of mind now
 And I turn the six upside down, it's a nine now
 I made a decision last night that I would die for it*

The pressure that comes from Drake's level of global fame is causing him to suffer from insomnia, prompting him to "take one" every night. Whether he is referring to actual sleep medication or to drugs that are often misused recreationally, such as Xanax, is left up to the listener's interpretation. He reiterates the requests he receives from people due to his fame and wealth: "If they don't have a story these days, they'll make one", presumably referring to all sorts of creative stories he is presented with by various people, which undoubtedly ultimately end with requests for money. Realizing that in his current position he can never be certain whether someone wants to be associated with him because of his fame and wealth or because a genuine human connection has formed causes him to feel exhaustion: "Life is always on, man, I never get a break from it / Doesn't matter where I go, I can never get away from it". Interestingly, he has already expressed similar feelings many years before in the beginning years of his career, well before he had reached the level of fame that he was experiencing in 2016. A notable example that comes to mind is his 2009 song "Fear", in which he raps the following lyrics: "People think I've changed just 'cause my appeal has grown / And now security follow me everywhere / So I never actually am alone, I just always feel alone". The feeling of fame-induced social isolation has already plagued Drake seven years ago before the release of "9" in 2016, yet he has chosen to continue his artistic journey despite the existence of those feelings.

At the end of the first verse the overarching narrative of Drake's career seems to crystallize perhaps more clearly than ever before in his discography: "Keeping people fed is my only peace of mind now / And I turn the six upside down, it's a nine now / I made a decision last night that I would die for it". For Drake, all the detrimental parts of fame are worth it to provide him and his close circle with a dramatically increased standard of living compared to most people. Of course, I am not insinuating that the life of a multimillionaire rapper is some sort of awful curse from which famous artists like Drake suffer from. In "9", it simply feels as if Drake is telling the listener his own experience with the saying money doesn't buy happiness, where even reaching the position of a millionaire rapper with legions of adoring fans around the world doesn't erase his problems in life, those problems just change shape. Navigating that balance between the good and bad parts of fame and wealth is what creates the narrative tension in many of Drake's songs. On "9", it seems that Drake has reached his ultimate conclusion regarding the direction of his career: "I made a decision last night that I would die for it". He feels there is no turning back from his current point, even if some aspects of his status as a public person exhaust him. He feels that he has contributed so

dramatically to the growth of Toronto's public image that he has turned it (the "6") upside down, to a "9", which to him is a significant point of pride since, as media scholar Murray Forman (2000:67-68) points out, a rapper's city and local ties have played a major role in the formation of hip-hop culture since its very beginning in the 1970s. To get to not only articulate a clear connection to a geographical place, but to go one step further and get to justifiably state to have improved the place where one has gotten their beginnings is enough for Drake to realize that he is willing to commit the rest of his life to hip-hop.

The second verse of the song is a bit shorter than the first verse, and it contains mostly similar observations to the ones in the first verse. Nevertheless, I want to highlight a few lines from the verse:

All these hand outs, man it's getting outta hand

I'ma start telling niggas "Get it how you can"

I got it right now so I'm everybody's friend

If I ever lose I bet we never speak again

I made a decision last night, I'd die for it

Just to show the city what it takes to be alive for it

First place, first place, man we can't be tied for it

I only drove it five times, paid 1.5 for it

Keychain go jang-a-lang, I wanna do major things

MJ in every way, I just don't fade away

Six upside down, it's a nine now

Firstly, I'll note the explicit mention of handouts, which were previously only hinted at in the line "If they don't have a story these days, they'll make one". In the second verse Drake communicates his frustration with people asking him for money in a more straightforward manner, and also points out the artificial nature of these human connections, particularly with the lines "I got it right now so I'm everybody's friend / If I ever lose I bet we never speak again". If Drake's financial or social status were to ever decline, the people who had gotten close to him in hopes of the aforementioned handouts would quickly disappear from around him. The negotiations between financial priorities and personal relationships are a key part of Drake's process of reconciling his position as a famous musical artist and also as himself, as an actual human being. Singh and Tracy (2015:95) outline this process:

Much as he represents his public self as entirely consistent with his private self, Drake understands his public relationships to be characterised by the intimacy of private relationships. Yet, this conceptualisation requires him to minimise the mediation of the music industry. Drake's entangling of his genuine self with his public figure requires a blindness to context that restricts his potential to stand for productive ideas of identity and relationship that might positively shape the hip hop public.

While he is not a hip-hop artist, industrial rocker Marilyn Manson, another artist who also at one point reached staggering heights of global fame, expressed the same idea as Drake regarding the effect of money and fame on how artists are perceived in his 1998 song "The Dope Show": "They love you when you're on all the covers / When you're not, then they love another". The fickle nature of fame and its effects on interpersonal relationships are not a topic exclusive to rap music, having been explored in many other genres previously, but as rap became the most consumed genre in the U.S. in the 2010s, examining the genre's own relationship towards fame still feels like an important task.

Drake closes the second verse with some more traditional rap music tropes, those being the flaunting of material wealth as well as comparisons between the sports world and rap music. He summarizes the position of automobiles in hip-hop with the line "I only drove it five times, paid 1.5 for it", the 1.5 referring to a purchase price of 1.5 million dollars. What matters is the price of the car, not the brand, which evidently does not even need to be uttered at all. In a way this feels almost comedic - no consideration for aesthetics or personal enjoyment is even considered, the only thing that is important is the price of the car. It does not matter whether the car is a Bugatti or a Rolls-Royce, what matters is that it cost 1.5 million dollars. Moreover, the line is even doubly effective at communicating the size of Drake's wallet, as he states that he only drove the 1.5-million-dollar car five times before presumably getting rid of it. Not only does he have the 1.5 million dollars to initially spend on the car, the impairment of the car after he has driven it is no concern to him either - it simply does not matter to him that he will likely lose tens of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands, in resale value after getting rid of the car. This takes the aspirational aspect of so called "bling rap" (Boutros, 2020:100) to one of its extreme conclusions, where the ability to treat hypercars as merely disposable goods comparable to plastic utensils or face masks is something that the listener should also want to attain.

Drake ends his verse by comparing himself to "MJ", be that Michael Jackson or Michael Jordan. The mention of never fading away would point more to basketball icon Michael

Jordan who was known for his ability to successfully make highly difficult fade-away basketball shots. Jordan is largely considered to be the greatest basketball player of all time, and Michael Jackson rightfully bears the title of “King of Pop”, so by comparing himself to these superstars Drake positions himself as the greatest rapper of all time. While that title is still up for contention in my personal opinion, it does seem undeniable that Drake is at the very least the most successful rapper to ever come from Toronto, and his claim of having turned the 6 upside down to a 9 seems more than reasonable to me.

3.1.2 Big K.R.I.T. – Price of Fame (2017)

Big K.R.I.T. (Justin Lewis Scott) is a Mississippi rapper who started his career in 2005. The letters K.R.I.T. in his artist name stand for King Remembered in Time. K.R.I.T.’s musical style is rooted heavily in southern hip-hop, often featuring strong basslines which complement his fluid rapping style. In his lyrics he dabbles in both introspective and socially conscious topics as well as more light-hearted, hedonistic aesthetics. He produces most of his own music and has also produced songs for other artists such as Rick Ross, Bun B, A\$AP Ferg and Joell Ortiz. Alongside studio albums his discography also includes numerous mixtapes which he used to build a fan base before reaching a position where he could record his first studio album, 2012’s *Live from the Underground*.

In 2017 K.R.I.T. released “Price of Fame”, the 19th song on his double album *4eva is a Mighty Long Time*. The song’s instrumental is calm, built around a steadily progressing, fairly slow-paced breakbeat. Occasional melodic flourishes play in the form of high-pitched synth whistles as well as synth pads and singular piano chords. The instrumental communicates mixed feelings; it is not a straightforwardly sad background, instead evoking bittersweetness, an atmosphere of quiet acceptance. It is on this beat that Big K.R.I.T. details his experience with coming to terms with the fact that fame isn’t all it’s cracked up to be - what the true price of fame actually is.

I will now proceed with an analysis of the song’s lyrics, beginning with the chorus which K.R.I.T. raps before the first verse:

Paparazzi after my shows askin' me questions

God fed up with my soul so ain't no blessin's

Happiness can't be bought or sold, I learned my lesson

Now I see what fame will really get you;

Bottle by the nightstand, that ease the stresses

Dealin' with depression, pills on the dresser

Fiendin' for affection so I'm buying out the section

Now I see what fame will really get you

In the chorus K.R.I.T. lists multiple downsides that come with fame. Lack of privacy is mentioned first, with a reference to paparazzi. A spiritual emptiness is also communicated via a religious metaphor: “God fed up with my soul so ain't no blessin's”. As K.R.I.T. has reached earthly blessings, material blessings, he has begun to realize that those blessings may have come at the cost of his own relationship with God - at the cost of spiritual blessings. The old saying money can't buy happiness, which I mentioned previously in my analysis of Drake's song “9” in chapter 3.1.1, is brought up here as well, in connection to mental and perhaps even spiritual wellbeing: “Happiness can't be bought or sold, I learned my lesson”. This is a poignant example of what theologian and rap scholar Anthony B. Pinn (2007:293) described as “...an important tension, a type of wrestling between existential realities and religious sensibilities” in hip-hop. A music career undertaken in one part out of a desire to express oneself and in another part out of a desire to acquire riches places the artist, in this case Big K.R.I.T., in an intersection between his own spiritual wellbeing and the state of his bank account. The stress caused by K.R.I.T. finding himself in the middle of this conflict manifests itself in the form of an actively fracturing mental health: “Bottle by the nightstand, that ease the stresses / Dealin' with depression, pills on the dresser”. A similar idea was rapped by Drake in “9”: “And I can't sleep these days unless I take one”, alluding to some sort of sleeping pill or other form of medication. The fact that mental health issues are mentioned in the music of multiple artists in this study seems to line up with the findings of Kresovic et al., who noted in their 2021 study that references to mental health struggles have increased in hip-hop in the time period from 1998 to 2018. K.R.I.T. ends the chorus by lamenting the state of his romantic affairs: “Fiendin' for affection so I'm buying out the section / Now I see what fame will really get you”. “Buying out the section” refers to buying a V.I.P. section at a night club, which often includes bottle service, alcohol doled out by what are often scantily clad women which K.R.I.T. sees as a way to receive even a tiny amount of affection which he, in his state of fame-induced social isolation desperately craves. “Now I see what fame will really get you” is him realizing that fame and money will buy you physical intimacy, sure, but not real human connection.

In the first verse K.R.I.T. expands on his realization that mental health matters more than the numbers in one's bank account:

Lifestyles of the rich and famous

That lifestyle left a lot of rich folk brainless

To the temple, yeah we were broke but that life was simple

Besides, food is food, water is water, air is air, the rest is mental

I did without until I did within

I said on beat what I wrote in pen

I gave my all without givin' in

But it's a thin line between heavenly divine and a livin' a life of sin

I interpret the line “Lifestyles of the rich and famous / That lifestyle left a lot of rich folk brainless” as a comment on conspicuous consumption. Especially in the context of rap music, which often features “rags to riches” stories, artists who suddenly become successful and wealthy develop an entirely new way of thinking about money, which, ironically, often materializes in the habit of not thinking about money. Individuals who just years earlier would have to carefully calculate the total of their grocery bill are now spending money frivolously without a thought in the world, firmly thinking that fame lasts forever and the same applies to money. The previously analysed Drake song “9” contained an example of this with Drake rapping about buying a car for 1.5 million dollars before getting rid of it after driving for only five times. Drake himself has even commented on the concept of conspicuous consumption in his 2011 song “The Ride”: “And steal your mother's debit card so you maintain an image / And ride around in overpriced rental cars that ain't tinted”. Even when the budget is not necessarily there, the internal need to “keep up with the Joneses” causes a person to spend money irresponsibly. The need to flaunt wealth in rap has been described as a way of displaying “financial power” (Baker-Kimmons & McFarland, 2011:5), and in a genre based on hypermasculine concepts of authenticity which are communicated through the use of various types of power, rapping about conspicuous consumption is simply another tool in the toolbox for rappers to bolster up the “realness” of their image.

In the lines “To the temple, yeah we were broke but that life was simple / Besides, food is food, water is water, air is air, the rest is mental” K.R.I.T. distills the dilemma of fame and wealth using the basic building blocks of life, evoking a rather Maslowian description of the

fundamentals of life, those being food, water, and air. With the statement “the rest is mental” K.R.I.T. reiterates the meaning of mental health; Money can buy you oceans of water, fancier food, even cleaner air, but it cannot buy a healthy mind, and can often in fact have a detrimental effect on an artist’s mental state. Money solves certain problems but can create more complex ones in their place. K.R.I.T. yearns for a time before fame and wealth when “life was simple”, even though he worked incredibly hard making music to reach his current position: “I said on beat what I wrote in pen / I gave my all without givin' in”. He ultimately evokes religious imagery to drive his point home: “But it's a thin line between heavenly divine and a livin' a life of sin”.

In the second verse Big K.R.I.T. raps about the pressure that being famous and wealthy places on his personal relationships:

*I bought a bottle just to soothe my soul
 Still crying over granny, that was some years ago
 I'm a man now, I came up to hold my fam down
 Can't tell them about my depression 'cause most them fans now
 Got to protect myself at all times
 I know some partners that been sued by their bloodline
 Lord forbid I let my blood down
 The first time I say no, guess we ain't blood now
 Scared, me as a businessman is like all they see
 Justin Scott trapped as Big K.R.I.T. screamin', "It's really me"
 When it was only us it was only love, how could this be?
 When fallin' out for some is not gettin' the V.I.P
 And a simple conversation means we talkin' work
 To play a song that's almost perfect but it need my verse
 You got an artist, but I'm family, but you need a purse
 You hit the city but don't call me first, that's what fame gets you*

At the start of the second verse K.R.I.T. mentions the bottle from the first verse again. He uses alcohol to escape his problems, to soothe his soul. Losing his grandmother didn’t stop him from reaching fame (“I'm a man now, I came up to hold my fam down”), but it did leave

a mark which he is now trying to erase with alcohol. K.R.I.T. defines being a man as being the breadwinner, being able to provide financially for your family. However, he also mentions emotional stoicism as a central tenet of manhood, and even of stardom: “Can't tell them about my depression 'cause most them fans now”. A star does not cry, he goes simply goes into the studio, makes the music, then goes up on stage and performs that music. He mentions that even his own family has begun seeing him more as a star rather than as a person, his family are now fans of his, not his family members. As he feels his role as a family member diminishing and his role as a wealthy music star increasing, he confides to the listener with his fears of financial issues tearing his family apart: “I know some partners that been sued by their bloodline / Lord forbid I let my blood down / The first time I say no, guess we ain't blood now / Scared, me as a businessman is like all they see”. Things are still going okay, but K.R.I.T. is afraid of the first time he refuses a request for financial support, describing a potential broken familial relationship as a bloodline breaking.

K.R.I.T. uses his real name to describe the conflict between him as a person and as a performer: “Justin Scott trapped as Big K.R.I.T. screamin', "It's really me" / When it was only us it was only love, how could this be? / When fallin' out for some is not gettin' the V.I.P”. He re-references the V.I.P. section he mentioned in the first verse, only this time he isn't buying it for himself but for someone else - or refusing to buy it for someone else. He uses that icon of conspicuous consumption to show over how meaningless of an issue a relationship can break, displaying the corruptive power of money clearly. The people around him can no longer see him as Justin Scott, only as the star, the performer, Big K.R.I.T., a role inside of which he feels trapped. The veneer of fame and wealth has corroded his existence as a real person in the eyes of those closest to him, atleast so he fears. He has also previously expressed similar fears regarding the larger workings of the entertainment industry, not just his specific role as a star and a musician: Ramsby II and Carter (2015:41) highlighted K.R.I.T.'s suspicions regarding record labels, and his unease at the possible concept of losing ownership of his music, being then trapped as an artist who is forced to perform music he does not even hold the rights to.

Big K.R.I.T. finishes the second verse by talking about how his line of work is invading every aspect of his life:

And a simple conversation means we talkin' work

To play a song that's almost perfect but it need my verse

You got an artist, but I'm family, but you need a purse

You hit the city but don't call me first, that's what fame gets you

K.R.I.T. feels that he is unable to distance himself from his status as wealthy and famous even though he himself wishes so. He is socially isolated, no conversation is just a conversation, every conversation “means we talkin' work”. In my personal opinion the most emotionally effective line is the second to last line of the second verse: “You got an artist, but I'm family, but you need a purse”. Justin Scott has ceased to exist as a person, he is now Big K.R.I.T., merely a walking wallet. K.R.I.T. finishes off the song by talking to those who want to request him for money: “You hit the city but don't call me first, that's what fame gets you”. He tells them to feel free to go party in the city, but to not call him before that asking for money. Whereas before the call to K.R.I.T. would have simply been an invitation to come join people for a night on the town, now he knows that the caller doesn't care about K.R.I.T. as a person or whether he will even come, the caller simply sees him as a walking wallet to which the caller would very much like to reach into. In turn, K.R.I.T. would rather take no calls at all rather than risk having to turn down someone's request for money. That's what fame gets you. Writer and academic Michael W. Clune wrote about the blinding effect of money in rap music in his 2013 article *Rap, Hip Hop, Spoken Word*. In the article (Clune, 2013:2) he laid out how rappers use references to material consumption as a way of making themselves invisible to the listener, the potential onlooker, as a way of communicating their heightened social status and separating themselves from the “common man”:

Money-as-light shining from my wrist, neck, or car, bling-bling makes me invisible to you. The light reflecting off my money doesn't compel your recognition of my status, wealth, or fame. It doesn't force you to notice me. It blinds you, making such recognition impossible.

In effect Big K.R.I.T. has achieved that very same end result, only he has come to find out that being invisible is in fact incredibly depressing. K.R.I.T. as a person is invisible; the only part of him visible to everyone around him is his bank account. In the most extreme case, the price of fame is the loss of the artist's personhood into the shadow of their stardom.

3.2 Maintaining success: Financial responsibility

In the final part of this chapter, I examine two songs by older rappers who have both made a long career in hip-hop, JAY-Z and Rick Ross. The focus of this section is the concept of financial responsibility and making success, or at least financial stability, last for a long time.

Whereas in chapter 2.2 I analysed portrayals of conspicuous consumption and portrayals of enjoying the fruits of one's labour, here I will analyse the perspectives of two rappers who are known for their business acumen and have only increased in net worth over the course of their careers, even if, especially in the case of Rick Ross, their bestselling albums are already behind them. As rap is a relatively young genre, during its previous decades it simply hasn't been possible to hear the perspectives of rappers with multiple decades of rap music stardom under their belt, since the genre as a whole had not existed for a very long time at that point. However, in the 2010s, rap has existed as a clearly unique genre for multiple decades, even if one delineates between "modern" rap, which I would argue got its start in the beginning of the 1990s, and the earlier decades of rap, those being the 1970s and the 1980s. While by the 1980s rap had already arrived as a genre that likely wasn't going to disappear anywhere, the complex, multi-layered rhyming patterns and topics that we now recognize the genre by would arrive in the 1990s, a decade which many rap listeners refer to as the Golden Age of rap music. While the 1980s saw the debut of many all-time great rappers, I argue that it wasn't until the 1990s that we began to witness the exodus of rappers who would go on to have consistently successful careers spanning multiple decades, such as JAY-Z, Nas and Eminem.

3.2.1 Rick Ross – Foreclosures (2015)

Miami rapper Rick Ross (William Roberts II) launched his career in an explosive manner with his 2006 hit single "Hustlin'". Known for his deep, distinctive voice, and for his immense work ethic, Ross has consistently released commercially successful albums at a rapid pace for close to two decades. He can be heard rapping on many of the most important rap albums of the 2010s (Grannas, 2020), which highlights how connected he is in the rap world. While his songs usually deal with idealized images of luxurious jet set lifestyles funded through criminal enterprises, Ross occasionally gives the listener a glimpse into the seedy underbelly of the music business through songs like 2017's "Idol's Become Rivals", or the 2015 song "Foreclosures" off of his *Black Market* album, which is the song I'll be analysing in this study. Ross' lyrical forays into how the music business works are especially interesting considering that the music business is his real line of work - even though he raps about a life of crime, the field that he actually makes his money from is perfectly legal, yet still fraught with exploitation. This type of self-awareness is not necessarily a common sight in rap music, which is why his lyrics are worth paying extra attention to. To have an artist who has put so much effort into creating a certain persona, that of a mafia boss drug kingpin

(Jankov [2016: 15] even went as far as referring to Rick Ross as “a movie villain character”), come out and rap honestly about the music business makes for an engaging listen. The topics that Rick Ross raps about can usually be boiled down to a high-flying power fantasy set in the world of international drug dealing. He aligns with Kelley’s (1996: 189) vision of gangsta rap: “Many of the violent lyrics are not intended to be literal. Rather, they are boasting raps in which the imagery of gang bangin’ is used metaphorically to challenge competitors on the microphone...”. When Ross then occasionally switches perspectives and raps about the music industry instead, it is akin to an action movie director suddenly turning around and directing a drama about his own business - the film industry.

The instrumental on “Foreclosures” exudes a calm seriousness, lacking some of the usual grandiosity found in many of the beats Rick Ross has a habit of rapping on. The drums are very prominent in the mix, and the gargantuan kick drum combined with a rigid 808 bass anchor the instrumentation. A yelping vocal sample to which reverb has been applied sits far back in the mix, sounding distant and giving the song an air of desperation. The 808 bass line alongside synth lines and quiet, glimmering background sounds make up the melodic core of the instrumental. Admittedly, the “Foreclosures” instrumental is one of my personal all-time favourites.

The song features a short intro, which is just a clip of Rick Ross speaking the following words:

There's so many things that I don't understand. Sometimes, being in the position I am, with no malicious intent, my nigga, you can take it how you want it. I see it from both sides, I feel a nigga pain.

The intro foreshadows the topics which Ross intends on rapping about in the song. Ross’ comments are somewhat paradoxical - he both doesn’t understand, yet also sees things from both sides, empathizing with the pain of the person he is addressing. My interpretation is that what Ross doesn’t understand is the following: How can a person who has amassed wealth manage to blow it all away and end up destitute once again? Wealth acquisition is a central theme in the Rick Ross discography, and he considers it to be something that he personally excels at, which is perhaps why he has a hard time understanding how someone else could mismanage their wealth so dramatically. However, I take his line “I see it from both sides” to mean that he also understands that the mentality of someone who gets rich but is originally from an impoverished background can lead them down a path of financially unsound

decisions. After all, if someone comes from an upbringing where there were few opportunities to teach about the responsible management of large sums of money, and then they suddenly get rich, the ability to manage large sums of money does not just appear out of thin air. While I personally feel that no-one knows how to make a dollar stretch better than someone who has no other option but to be frugal if they want to put food on the table, there is some evidence to back up the theory that dramatic wealth increases do not always last. One need not look further than professional athletes: A 2009 Sports Illustrated investigation estimated that “By the time they have been retired for two years, 78% of former NFL players have gone bankrupt or are under financial stress because of joblessness or divorce.” and “Within five years of retirement, an estimated 60% of former NBA players are broke.” (Torre, 2009).

I’ve mentioned the lyric trend of rappers comparing and equating themselves to professional athletes in their field previously in this study, and it is possible that similarities exist between the money management skills of rappers and athletes. However, I should point out that the career of a rapper or a musical artist overall has the potential to go on for much, much longer than that of an athlete, as the job of an artist does not depend as much upon physical fitness when compared to the job of an athlete. The group of players who have laced up their shoes after turning 40 in the National Basketball Association is exceedingly small, and the same goes for the National Football Association. In stark contrast, some artists may even tour and continue recording music until they are octogenarians - Leonard Cohen released his 2016 album *You Want It Darker* when he was 82. As Rick Ross put it, this issue is indeed not one-sided. Now, let’s move on to the first verse of the song:

Learn to walk a tightrope

Ever seen a rich nigga go broke?

They putting liens on a nigga's things

Publicize your demise, and by all means

Your family fortune is forever what you stood on

Sold dreams, fantasies that put the hood on

You reap what you sow, and they speaking repossessions

To the culture itself, these are powerful lessons

Right from the beginning Ross compares responsible money management to walking a tightrope - both require finesse, and more importantly, balance and a calm demeanour. As

Ross continues describing the events that occur when one fails to make payments on things they have purchased (“They putting liens on a nigga's things / Publicize your demise, and by all means”), it almost sounds like he is addressing a potential future version of himself: “Sold dreams, fantasies that put the hood on”. This is exactly what Rick Ross himself does in his music, enough so that he even mentions it in another song from the *Black Market* album, in a song called “Silk Road”: “I entertain niggas under poverty lines / So I paint these pretty pictures as part of my rhymes”. Ross vividly understands his position as essentially a dream salesman, selling songs filled with escapist power fantasies about life as an unimaginably wealthy, almost omnipotent drug kingpin to people he himself describes as living under poverty lines. He understands that he himself should be the one taking care of his financial status, and if he fails to do so, it is nobody’s fault but his own: “You reap what you sow, and they speaking repossessions / To the culture itself, these are powerful lessons”. I take the mention of “the culture” to refer to hip-hop culture and perhaps even Black culture on a larger scale. As news outlets and tabloids “publicize your demise”, others in the community, in the culture, should learn from those moments instead of repeating them themselves.

As Ross gets further into the first verse, he gets down to the nitty-gritty details of the recording industry:

A real nigga, you gonna know that by the contract
Bottom line blood, show me where them one's at
That paper it get funny when publishing is involved
Mechanicals never mattered because that was your dog
Now you hands-on, but things don't ever seem right
You make a call to give your lawyer the green-light
He look into it then hit you up with the bad news
It's so familiar, he did the same with the last dudes
Mafioso, baby girl, cash rules
Every dollar accounted for, double M the crew

He first uses his financial status to bolster up his image of authenticity and realness in the context of hip-hop: “A real nigga, you gonna know that by the contract”. This is his way of bringing his financial power to the forefront, but it does differ from the usual way that financial power is communicated in hip-hop, which is through rhymes about conspicuous

consumption, i.e., buying hypercars and expensive liquor (Baker-Kimmons & McFarland, 2011:5). Ross merely insinuates that his recording contract is so large that it alone confers realness upon him, he does not need to explicitly mention what he plans to spend his money on, which is in line with the theme of the song, that being the dangers of conspicuous consumption and the reckless handling of money.

Ross then dives into the dirty details of his line of work, using concrete and accurate recording industry terms to bring the listener inside of the world of professional musical artists: “That paper it get funny when publishing is involved / Mechanicals never mattered because that was your dog”. The mentions of publishing and mechanicals, referring to mechanical licensing, are topics often deemed too boring to be of interest to the listener of a rap song, yet here they are used to communicate Rick Ross’ professionalism and understanding of the inside workings and mechanisms of his industry. Using those contractual terms he paints the picture of a contract signing where the actual minute details of the contract to be signed are not in the favour of the artist, yet the artist ignores that because he feels that the person he is signing the contract for is his “dog”, his friend - they would never do anything bad to him, such as make him sign an unfavourable contract... Wouldn’t they?

Cases in which the artist signing the contract and the person making the artist sign the contract are actually friends are in fact quite common in hip-hop, since many established rappers go on to manage their own record label imprints, sometimes independently, sometimes under major labels, and sign artists who they have a personal connection with and are familiar with beforehand. Negus (2004:532) wrote about this phenomenon in his article *The Business of Rap: Between the Street and the Executive Suite*:

One of the characteristics of rap that initially confused the major companies was the way that rap proposed a series of working relationships across different musical entities: cliques, collectives, affiliations and group and label identities that connected together different “bands” and individual performers. This is signified in the continual appearance of performers on each other’s recordings and the way that this establishes very specific networks of affiliation and alliances, e.g., the performers who have grouped around such entities as The Dogg Pound, Dr Dre’s Aftermath and Puff Daddy and The Family.

Another example of that phenomenon is Cash Money Records, founded by brothers Ronald “Slim” Williams and Bryan “Birdman” Williams in 1991. I mention this specific label because it is one which Ross himself has rapped about in his 2017 diss track towards New Orleans rapper and label executive Birdman, titled “Idols Become Rivals”. In the song Ross

explicitly names and calls out Birdman for the way Birdman treats artists on his Cash Money Records label, even stating that Birdman has stolen the publishing rights of artists he signs to Cash Money Records to fund the purchase of a house: “You stole them boys' pub' and bought a foreclosure”. It is not unreasonable to think that Ross may be implicitly talking about Birdman on “Foreclosures” as well, considering that Idols Become Rivals came out only two years after “Foreclosures”, making it likely that Ross already had suspicions and perhaps even knowledge of Birdman’s alleged actions by 2015. In comparison to Cash Money Records, Ross assures that the financial affairs of his own label, Maybach Music Group (“double M”), are in pristine order: “Every dollar accounted for, double M the crew”.

After the first verse we are treated to the song’s chorus:

Death Row, fast life

Foreclosed on my past life

The white man call us stupid niggas

We spend it all, nothing for our children

Had it all, now it’s repossessed

Can’t feed the clique cutting bad checks

Time to learn boy, that cash rules

Success is a precious jewel

The chorus starts with a double-entendre, on one hand referring to death row, the section of prisons which houses inmates sentenced to death and awaiting execution, and on the other hand likely referring to Death Row Records, the California record label known for its controversial chief executive officer Suge Knight as well as artists like 2pac and Dr. Dre. Death Row Records was infamous for the dubious ways in which it conducted business and handled financial affairs, so Ross referencing it in “Foreclosures” is logical. He then goes on to comment on what he sees as a problem in his own community regarding money management: “We spend it all, nothing for our children / Had it all, now it’s repossessed”. It seems that Ross has been witness to this cycle before, enough times that he feels obligated to suggest a solution to the problem: “Time to learn boy, that cash rules / Success is a precious jewel”. Ross states that success and the wealth that comes with that success is like a precious jewel, something that, when treated with care, can last for a very long time, but which requires careful handling.

I will skip the second verse, as it consists mostly of fairly typical rap braggadocio which does not require much analysis and move straight to the third verse. Ross begins the verse with some simple words of advice to those finding themselves in possession of newly acquired riches: “Can’t be writing checks with your eyes closed / While you living out of homes in different time zones”. The advice is self-explanatory, yet Ross feels that it still needs to be said out loud, because as he pointed out in the song’s chorus, he still sees people spending every bit of money they get instantly and not saving anything for the future. He continues by addressing young artists who may be on the verge of signing a record deal:

I never met an artist who fully recouped

These the deals the deal dealers wanna deal to you

Young niggas, time to act your wage

Buying belts you seen on other niggas waists

Rick Ross advises artists to be cautious about signing label deals, because he has never met an artist who has managed to recoup the money back to the label. However, he also goes on to mention that that may be by design: “These the deals the deal dealers wanna deal to you”. Signing an artist to a grandiose record deal with a large upfront sum of money (which the artist may not realize has to actually be paid back to the label down to the last cent) can be a way for record labels to essentially trap artists into working situations that overwhelmingly economically favour the record label, not the artist. Because that can be the case, he advises young individuals who may want to spend their money frivolously due to peer pressure to instead “act their wage”, and not feel pressured to engage in conspicuous consumption, i.e., “Buying belts you seen on other niggas waists”. Of course, this advice can be seen as contradictory or hypocritical coming from an artist whose brand, as Jankov (2016:16) described, “is based on mentioning luxury brand names, to a larger degree than most of the rappers.” However, the mention of those luxury brands can be seen as merely another element of Ross’ larger than life image and as an aesthetic-building tool in the fantastical stories he tells in his songs. Ross’ whole point here may even be that he can justify mentioning luxury brands in his songs because he is already an established artist with a long career as well income streams other than music, which means he can actually afford the luxury items he raps about in his songs. This is in opposition to young artists who have just signed their first deal and who have no idea how long they will last in the industry, not to mention that that label contract advance money is not even theirs in the first place, as every cent has to be paid back to the record label.

On *Foreclosures*, Rick Ross shares his own observations regarding money management in the music industry as well as in Black culture on a larger scale. As “Foreclosures” was released on his eighth studio album *Black Market*, it is reasonable to assume that Ross is talking from a steady base of experience. By lifting the veil and letting the listener in on how the music industry operates and treats artists, particularly young Black artists, Ross shares a cautionary perspective on fame and success in rap music. His suggestion of switching from peer pressure induced conspicuous consumption to a more responsible attitude towards wealth in hip-hop is a refreshing perspective to hear and is an example of the notable variety that can be observed in the ideas communicated in 2010s hip-hop.

3.2.2 JAY-Z – Legacy (2017)

It felt fitting to reserve the final spot in my study for a song titled “Legacy”. In this song from JAY-Z’s 13th and as of now latest solo album *4:44*, released in 2017, the billionaire rapper reflects on what he hopes to leave behind when he one day enters eternal rest. Legacy is the closing track of *4:44*, and at this point in time (2023) it seems like it may even end up being the closing track of JAY-Z’s career as a solo music artist. While he has rapped on a small number of songs by other artists and released a collaborative album with his wife Beyoncé in 2018 titled *Everything Is Love*, for the most part JAY-Z has remained relatively quiet musically after releasing *4:44*. He released *4:44* to great critical acclaim after the more mixed critical response to his previous two solo efforts, 2009’s *The Blueprint 3* and 2013’s *Magna Carta... Holy Grail*, and leaving the track “Legacy” as the final song of the project would serve as a frankly perfect bookend to his career. I completely understand if as a 53-year-old father of three who has recorded music and toured for practically his whole adult life, JAY-Z finally wants to live life without feeling any pressure to spend long nights in the studio and on airplanes traveling to distant places to perform, likely away from his family. At least as far as money goes, no-one can tell him what to do anymore, and hasn’t been able to do so for a long time at this point. With a portfolio of multiple successful businesses including ventures in high-end alcohol sales, his own record label Roc-A-Fella Records, a stake in the streaming service Tidal and various other investments, and with one of his most critically acclaimed albums bookending his vast discography, stepping away from the pressures of working full-time as a recording artist seems like a crystal-clear choice.

For the last time in this thesis, I shall now proceed with my analysis.

Legacy features a short intro clip, a voice recording of JAY-Z's at the time five-year old daughter Blue Ivy Carter asking "Daddy, what's a will?". From there the wonderfully upbeat instrumental kicks in and JAY-Z begins rapping. The instrumental is one of my personal all-time favourites. It moves with a relaxed rhythm, evoking the feeling of a sunny afternoon walk. The drums are not very bass-heavy in the context of hip-hop, and the melodic elements do most of the heavy lifting in building up the atmosphere of the song. The traditional brass instrumentation gives the song a nostalgic, warm feeling. The song feels like a victory lap for JAY-Z.

The first verse begins with JAY-Z listing the people he plans on leaving his monetary legacy, his inheritance, to:

*Take those monies and spread 'cross families
 My sisters, Hattie and Lou, the nephews, cousins and TT
 Eric, the rest to B for whatever she wants to do
 She might start an institute, she might put poor kids through school
 My stake in Roc Nation should go to you
 Leave a piece for your siblings to give to their children too
 TIDAL, the champagne, D'USSÉ, I'd like to see
 A nice peace-fund ideas from people who look like we*

He mentions various family members, also including his wife Beyoncé, to which she refers simply as "B". JAY-Z then speculates on what his daughter Blue might do with the wealth that is in her possession once JAY-Z is gone, hoping that she will use the money to do good in the world, such as "put poor kids through school". This desire to do good is a beautiful thing - the profits of a rap career based on stories of drug dealing, the start of which was likely at least partially funded initially by profits from drug deals, which eventually turned into a billion-dollar empire, is then ultimately used for philanthropic purposes, at least so JAY-Z hopes. However, JAY-Z does not mention how he got his career started, instead highlighting his completely legal ventures: "TIDAL, the champagne, D'USSÉ, I'd like to see / A nice peace-fund ideas from people who look like we." This makes sense, as he is addressing his daughter who he feels does not need to hear about his own younger days at such an early age.

*That's major, just like the Negro League
 There was a time America wouldn't let us ball*

Those times are now back, just now called Afro-tech

Generational wealth, that's the key

My parents ain't have shit, so that shift started with me

My mom took her money, she bought me bonds

That was the sweetest thing of all time, uh

As JAY-Z continues the first verse, he makes a comparison between the exclusion of Black people from major sports leagues, specifically referencing the Negro (baseball) League, and comparing it to the underrepresentation of Black people in today's technology industry. He feels that the exclusion of Black people from the same opportunities and industries that white people have access to has not gone away, the situation has just shifted industries. Admittedly, as I am writing this, I am unable to come up with a single prominent Black technology entrepreneur or founder off the top of my head, whereas I could name tens of white tech executives and founders, which speaks to the sad state of affairs when it comes to diversity in the technology industry.

I find the mention of generational wealth to be central to unlocking the narrative of the song and even the arc of JAY-Z's entire career. He raps that "Generational wealth, that's the key / My parents ain't have shit, so that shift started with me", bringing up his impoverished upbringing, a common starting situation for many rappers. The explicit mention of generational wealth puts JAY-Z's whole career into perspective; In one lifetime, a lifetime far from being finished at the time of writing I should point out, he has succeeded in creating enough wealth to last for multiple generations if handled responsibly. Like Belle (2014:293) points out, "In many ways, Jay-Z represents the quintessential "from rags to riches" American dream narrative in hip-hop." In a society such as the United States, where social mobility, especially for Black people, is not easily achieved (Shiro et al., 2022) and inherited wealth concentrates among the richest part of the population (Buchholz, 2022), creating generational wealth out of essentially thin air through hard work and savvy investing is nothing short of a miracle, especially for someone who is not a lawyer, doctor, or banker, but instead a rapper. JAY-Z has leveraged his personal brand and image as an artist to build a sizable fortune and has even commented on this himself in a remix of Kanye West's 2005 song "Diamonds From Sierra Leone": "I'm not a businessman, I'm a business, man". For a deep look at another song from the 4:44 album, "The Story of O.J.", which deals with some of the same ideas as "Legacy" and can help in building a more comprehensive understanding of the ways the

rhetoric of JAY-Z's late-career music tackles societal issues, I recommend the 2020 article *JAY-Z and O.J.: Sport and the Performance of Race in Hip-Hop Music* by Northcutt, Henderson, and Chicowski.

In the second verse JAY-Z raps about spirituality and his own family history:

*You see, my father, son of a preacher man
Whose daughter couldn't escape the reach of the preacher's hand
That charge of energy set all the Carters back
It took all these years to get to zero in fact
I hated religion 'cause here was this Christian
He was preachin' on Sundays, versus how he was livin' Monday
Someday I forgive him
'Cause strangely our division led to multiple religions
I studied Muslim, Buddhist, and Christians
And I was runnin' from him, He was givin' me wisdom
See how the universe works?
It takes my hurt and help me find more of myself
It's a gift and a curse
That's called the Red Queen's Race*

Anthony B. Pinn (2007:291) makes the following observation: “One of the major and documented functions of musical production such as rap has been the articulation of responses to the “ultimate” questions of life. In this sense it has engaged religious traditions and religious issues in both explicit and implicit ways.” As such, JAY-Z immortalizing his own reconciliation with his grandfather’s inconsistency of action (“He was preachin' on Sundays, versus how he was livin' Monday”) between his position as a preacher and his treatment of JAY-Z’s aunt (the details of which are left to interpretation) on *Legacy* is part and parcel of typical rap imagery. What JAY-Z’s grandfather did was obviously something very serious, as JAY-Z remarks that “That charge of energy set all the Carters back / It took all these years to get to zero in fact.” In this way JAY-Z reflects on the position from which he rose to stardom: His family was not only impoverished in a financial sense, but also reeling psychologically

from events inside of the family. In his 2016 song “spiritual” JAY-Z talked more directly about what his grandfather had done: “Pray your father's father wasn't touching his little daughter / Creating trans-generational trauma, that shit'll haunt ya”.

This level of personal openness is something that I feel has become a more prominent part of the genre in the 2010s compared to previous decades, and that effect has rippled to the rap music of the 2020s, with the most notable examples coming from Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar’s 2022 album *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers*, on which he reflected on the generational trauma he himself had experienced. While talking about such a profound, everlasting concept as a person’s legacy, JAY-Z does not relate the idea of intergenerationality exclusively to wealth or to leaving a positive legacy but to tragic events as well. A person’s legacy can be negative instead of positive, causing, in the most extreme cases, transgenerational trauma. What I find interesting is the avenue through which JAY-Z found coping methods, that avenue being the exploration of religious diversity. As he felt that his relationship to Christianity as an exclusive religion was now tainted due to his grandfather’s actions, he explored its alternatives: “I studied Muslim, Buddhist, and Christians”. This exploration affected the way he saw the world: “See how the universe works? / It takes my hurt and help me find more of myself / It's a gift and a curse / That's called the Red Queen's Race”. While rap is often thought of as a genre of music most focused on Christianity and Islam in lieu of other religions, those other religions, such as the Buddhism mentioned here, should not be left without attention, as pointed out by Pinn (2007:294). In the case of “Legacy”, there may be a connection between JAY-Z’s capacity to forgive his grandfather (“Someday I forgive him”) and his explorations of Buddhism, a religion to which forgiveness as a mean of ending suffering is a central value.

I take JAY-Z’s mention of the Red Queen’s Race as well as him rapping “You run this hard just to stay in place / Keep up the pace, baby” in the song’s bridge as him verbalizing what life in the economic circumstance of the United States can be for someone who does not come from generational wealth. When housing prices rise but minimum wage stays the same (Alas, 2021), many workers are indeed running as hard as they can just to stay in place - The Red Queen’s Race is a scene from Lewis Carroll’s 1871 novel *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, in which the main character, Alice, is made to run by the Red Queen, and she is unable to move due to the landscape moving with her. A tedious concept made more insidious due to how incredibly well it fits as a description of the economic situation of an alarming portion of the U.S. population. For JAY-Z to be able to say that his

family will, with responsible money management, be saved from having to partake in the Red Queen's Race for generations, is perhaps the greatest show of financial power ever heard in the history of hip-hop. However, I take it that JAY-Z hopes this privilege is someday extended to all Black people as he samples "Someday We'll All Be Free", a song from soul singer Donny Hathaway in the outro of "Legacy": "Day, someday, someday we'll all / Someday we'll all be free". I hope so too.

4 Conclusions

My main research question was “How do 2010s United States mainstream rappers talk about success in their lyrics?”. To that end, the first discovery I made was related to the balance between material and immaterial forms of success mentioned in the songs. Even in the case of rappers whose music in the study had a very strongly materialistic perspective, more abstract perspectives also came up often. My analysis of ScHoolboy Q’s song “Break The Bank” serves as one example. In the song ScHoolboy Q raps very directly about how the decision to pursue a rap career is no different than his previous line of work, that being drug dealing, yet it ultimately became clear that his decision to switch careers was in fact motivated by his love for his young daughter.

Even though I stated in my introductory chapters that I would focus on material depictions of success in this study, it quickly became apparent that those depictions were not always, or even in the majority of times, detachable from more immaterial, even spiritual ideas of success. This interpretation was reinforced by the discoveries I made in my analysis of G-Eazy’s song “For This”. Ultimately, in that case what the artist had worked so diligently for was not wealth, but in fact the freedom to be in a position in his life where he was able to make a living by pursuing his true passion: Rapping.

Another one of the research questions I presented in the beginning of my study was “How is the work required to achieve success portrayed?” The work required to achieve success was portrayed much as I expected it to be, that being as a grueling, workaholic, day-to-day process performed out of an unyielding desire to be the master of one’s destiny. This can present a problem for artists battling with fitting the definitions of hip-hop authenticity that I presented in the beginning of this study. McLeod (1999:136) speaks about this in the context of the 1990s, during which hip-hop made its first true mainstream breakthroughs:

By selling millions of albums to White teens and appearing on MTV, hip-hop artists (and their fans) have had to struggle to maintain a “pure” identity. They preserved this identity by invoking the concept of authenticity in attempting to draw clearly demarcated boundaries around their culture.

In G-Eazy’s case, the idealization of the work itself is a meaningful perspective. He does not confer hip-hop realness upon himself through attempts at fitting in with the traditional rap music ideal of realness consisting of a violent upbringing with gang connections, but instead

redefines realness as succeeding in a goal one sets for themselves, in a somewhat similar way as was discussed in relation to Childish Gambino's song "We Ain't Them".

Big Sean's song "Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)", where working to become successful in the music industry was portrayed very explicitly as what it is for many musicians, a genuine battle for survival in a capitalistic society, offered a differing perspective to that of G-Eazy's. Big Sean viewed the process of working to become famous as quite grueling and as the means to an end, compared to G-Eazy, to whom the work itself was more meaningful.

The next research question that I brought up was "How is the time before achieving success portrayed, and what sorts of attitudes or values are connected to that "previous" life?" I observed that the time before achieving success was largely portrayed in a reasonably positive light, which I found a bit surprising. Big Sean's portrayed his life before success in a dramatic and mostly negative manner. On the other hand, in ScHoolboy Q's case work was treated as a fairly mundane thing, it was just something that one needed to do to feed their family.

Childish Gambino had an entirely different view on work, and he approached his time before success in the rap industry as an immensely creatively fulfilling artistic departure. I should note that this perception is likely affected by the position Gambino was in before his rap career took off in the mainstream. Even before reaching success as a rapper he was already a successful actor on a network TV show and was at least financially comfortable. Rap for him was an undertaking done out of a gnawing, internal creative need, not out of financial necessity. In the case of Drake on the song "You & The 6", the pressures of fame were putting stress on his relationships, particularly with his mother. While he did celebrate being able to do things like buy his mother a house, life after having achieved success was not uniformly great, and he was able to find positive things about his life before fame as well. The same was the case for Logic in his song "44 Bars" as well, where he did feel happiness about his current position, but also lamented the fact that his connection to his fans was diminishing. In the songs in section 3.1, Drake's "9" and Big K.R.I.T.'s "Price of Fame", which dealt with the negative aspects of fame, the time before success was again portrayed in a positive light, as even a place that rappers perhaps wished they could return to at times to escape the pressures and the social isolation of fame.

A central research question I posed was "What does achieving success feel like, and what sorts of lifestyle changes, if any, does it enable, or, on the other hand, require?". To that question I found multiple answers, and this question was one to which the answers varied

highly. It does seem that overall, achieving success was seen by the rappers in my study as a highly positive achievement, but it was possible to observe definite some downsides to success as well. The financial stability that success and wealth brings was commented on positively by all of the rappers. Big Sean found achieving success to be a freeing development in his life, but also mentioned how important self-discovery and working on one's mental and spiritual health was. JAY-Z went all out in his celebration of achieving success, spending frivolous amounts of money on high art in his song "Picasso Baby" and in the process participating in the discourse between rap music and high art as written about by de Paor-Evans (2018:13). However, those purchases were recontextualized in his song Legacy as being just another part of the significant financial inheritance he wanted to eventually leave for his family, so they were not exclusively bought for bragging rights. In the case of fellow rapper Drake, he felt that the financial security he was able to give to his close circle was worth the sacrifice of things like personal privacy and ease of forming authentic human relationships. I think Big K.R.I.T., in his aptly titled song "Price of Fame", was perhaps the only artist in my study who expressed a wholly negative stance on achieving fame, which was perhaps to be expected from a song called "Price of Fame".

My question "What are the possible downsides of success, and how are they weighed in relation to the upsides?" was one of the more straightforward questions in the study. To put it succinctly, the most notable downsides of success, as pointed out in their songs by Drake, Logic and Big K.R.I.T., were the loss of real human connection, the corrosive effect money can have on familial relationships, the loss of privacy, and the hectic nature of life as a globally famous musical artist. As far as how those downsides are weighed in relation to the upsides of fame, Big K.R.I.T. was the only artist in this study who communicated that the negative sides of fame were truly making him reconsider his life choices. All the other rappers in the study felt that their life post-success was significantly better than their life pre-success.

The last research question that I posed, one that should help greatly in summarizing my findings in this study, was "Are there overarching trends in the views that rappers have on success?". To answer that I must conclude that it seems undeniable that to the overwhelming majority of rappers success is a positive thing. Where we can find a variety of opinions is in the various ways different rappers actually define what success is in the first place. A common definition of success was related to material wealth. Making lots of money is thought of as a central part of being successful, enough so that, in particular in Drake's view, financial stability is the main trade-off made in exchange for the loss or diminishing of things

like privacy and real human connection. To some rappers, the definition of success was more multifaceted than merely material. As mentioned previously, Logic and Big Sean placed high value on the mental and spiritual aspects of success, and specifically in Logic's case, on making a positive difference in society. For Childish Gambino success meant getting to participate in rap as a creative outlet, getting to do something where he himself held the reins of the entire creative vision. In ScHoolboy Q's case success enabled him to provide a safe upbringing for his daughter, although that can be thought of as another way of saying that the financial aspect of success is of high importance to him. Rick Ross and JAY-Z placed importance on the preservation of money - once you make it, you have to be careful not to waste it, so that you can make it last and perhaps pass it on to your children one day. This perspective came up indirectly in Drake's case as well, where if he were to somehow lose his wealth, he would no longer be able to support his mother and other members of his close circle financially, meaning that, to a certain extent, he has to keep working for the rest of his life if he wants to keep up the current standard of living that he and those close to him enjoy.

My central findings were that for 2010s rappers, the loss of privacy and the potential degradation of close relationships, while an unfortunate side-effect of reaching success, was a worthy sacrifice for the riches, both material and mental, that success brings with it. Additionally, what is a unique trend for rap in the 2010s in particular is the openness with which rappers feel comfortable sharing their more introspective ideas regarding the intersection of success and human connection, and I think that that openness can even be a sign of rappers using their artform, their medium, as a form of public therapy. Being able to communicate directly to listeners, to fans, about their worries and problems regarding success, fame, and wealth, seems to be one of the central overarching trends and narratives of 2010s mainstream hip-hop. I think that further studies should be conducted on the renaissance that women rappers experienced in the 2010s as well as on the perspectives found in their lyrics regarding phenomena like fame and success. In addition, with the advent of digital humanities (Haverinen & Suominen 2015), computational methods combined with sentiment analysis could also be utilized to produce a wider understanding and look into the lyrical landscape of 2010s hip-hop. As hip-hop music grew into the most consumed music genre in the United States in the latter part of the 2010s, it will be interesting to see how far into the 2020s the genre retains that position as well as how rap music evolves stylistically. A similar study like this one could very well be conducted at the conclusion of the 2020s.

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Appendix: Finnish summary of the study

Suomenkielinen lyhennelmä tutkielmasta *Marble Floors and Missed Calls: A Close Reading of Narratives of Success in 2010s U.S. Rap Lyrics*

Johdanto

Rock ja pop ovat olleet Yhdysvaltain suosituimmat musiikkigenret 1950-luvulta 2010-luvun alkuun saakka. Kyseiset genret ovat synnyttäneet suurimmat tähdet, ja muodostaneet perustan merkittävälle osalle nuorisokulttuuria, ja populaarikulttuuria laajemminkin. Viimeisen kymmenen vuoden sisällä voimatasapainossa on kuitenkin tapahtunut muutos.

Vuosikymmenten tasaisen kasvun jälkeen räpistä tuli viimein 2010-luvun jälkipuoliskolla Yhdysvaltain kuunnelluin genre, kun se ohitti kuulijamäärissä edellistä valta-asemaa pitäneet rockin ja popin.

Mitä suurempaan suosioon räp on kasvanut, sitä laajemmin se on pystynyt tukemaan erilaisia perspektiivejä. Yksi 2010-luvulla merkittävimmin kasvaneista näkökulmista on introspektiivinen räp, jota pitääkin tutkia kasvattaaksemme ymmärrystämme räpin narratiivisten trendien kehittymisestä ajan kuluessa. Tämän trendin tutkimiseen sopii erinomaisesti lyriikka-analyysi ja lähiluku, sillä kuulija pääsee nykyään entistä lähemmäksi artistia räppärien omaksuessa entistä introspektiivisempiä näkökulmia musiikissaan verrattuna menneiden vuosikymmenten räppiin.

Vaikka täytyykin pitää mielessä, että musiikki on aina lopulta vahvasti medioitu kommunikaation muoto, painotan omassa tutkielmassani räpin tulkitsemista perspektiivistä, joka huomioi räpille tyypillisen omaelämäkerrallisen ja autenttisuushakuisen kerrontatavan ja totuuskäsityksen. On toki olemassa myös selkeästi fiktiivisiin ja liioiteltuihin kertojahahmoihin perustuvia räpin alagenrejä, kuten kauhuteemoihin keskittyvä horrorcore, mutta kyseisen kaltaiset räpigenret eivät ole tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tarkastelun aiheena.

Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tarkastelen valittuja 2010-luvulla julkaistuja yhdysvaltalaisen valtavirtaräppärien kappaleita. Päämääränäni näiden kappaleiden analysoimisessa on tuoda esiin erinäisiä menestyksen narratiiveja ja estetiikkoja, joita räppärit kappaleisiinsa sisällyttävät. Koska 2010-luku on ensimmäinen vuosikymmenen jolloin räp on pitänyt hallussaan Yhdysvaltain suosituimman genren asemaa, uskon uudessa johtoasemassa olevan genren suosituimpien artistien lyriikoiden analysoimisen tuovan esille valaisevia näkökulmia

valitsemieni popkulttuuria tuoreeltaan hallitsevien, suurelta osin afroamerikkalaisten tarinankertojien näkemyksistä.

Tutkimuskysymys

Tutkielmani keskeisin tutkimuskysymys on seuraavanlainen: Miten 2010-luvun yhdysvaltalaiset valtavirtaräppärit käsittelevät menestystä lyriikoissaan?

Päätutkimuskysymystäni tukevat myös seuraavat oheiskysymykset:

Miten räppärit kuvaavat elämäänsä ennen menestyksen saavuttamista, ja minkälaisia asenteita tai arvoja heidän ”edelliseen” elämäänsä liittyy?

Miten räppärit kuvaavat menestyksen saavuttamisen vaatimaa työtä?

Miltä menestyksen saavuttaminen räppärien mukaan tuntuu, ja minkälaisia elämäntapamuutoksia se joko mahdollistaa tai jopa vaatii?

Mitkä ovat menestyksen mahdollisia negatiivisia seurauksia, ja miten niitä arvioidaan suhteessa menestyksen positiivisiin puoliin?

Onko räppärien näkemyksissä menestyksestä erotettavissa toistuvia, laajoja trendejä?

Metodologia ja aiheesta jo olemassa oleva tutkimus

Tutkimusmetodinani käytän lyriikka-analyysia, ja tarkemmin sanottuna lyriikoiden lähilukua. En siis keskity tutkielmassani kappaleiden musiikillisten ominaisuuksien, kuten melodian, harmonian, rytmin tai sointiväriin tarkasteluun. Vaikka melodisesta räppäämistä ja laulua yhdistävästä räpistä on tullutkin huomattavan suosittua juuri 2010-luvulla, räp on silti edelleen ytimessään vahvasti lyriikoiden pohjalle rakentuva genre, jonka takia lyriikoiden lähiluku on tutkimukseeni parhaiten sopiva tutkimusmetodi.

Löysin melko vähän valitsemastani aiheesta tehtyä tutkimusta, vaikka menestys ja sen saavuttamisen vaatima työ ovatkin melko keskeisiä, yleisesti käytettyjä teemoja ja narratiiveja räppärimusiikissa. Menestykseen keskittyvää tutkimusta löytyi laajasti esimerkiksi liiketalouden ja taloustieteen aloilta, muttei juurikaan taiteidentutkimuksen piiristä. Suurelta osin löytämäni musiikkiin ja menestykseen keskittyvä tutkimus oli tehty esimerkiksi tietojenkäsittelytieteen alueella, ja se olikin luonteeltaan hyvin kvalitatiivista.

Tutkimusmateriaali

Tutkin pro gradu -tutkielmassani menestyksen kuvauksia 2010-luvun yhdysvaltalaisessa valtavirtaräpissä. Menestyksen määrittelen tutkielmassani yhdistelmäksi kuuluisuutta ja varallisuutta. Valtavirtaräppäriin määrittelmän täyttääkseen valitsin tutkielmaani kriteeriksi sen, että räpartistin oli täytynyt julkaista 2010-luvulla vähintään yksi albumi, joka ylsi listasijoituksellaan yhdysvaltalaisella Billboard 200-albumilistalla ensimmäisen sadan albumin joukkoon.

Tutkielman tutkimusmateriaali koostuu yhdestätoista kappaleesta, jotka valitsin kattavan esikuunteluprosessin perusteella ja osittain myös omien mieltymysteni pohjalta.

Esikuunteluprosessin perusteella valikoin tutkielmaani kappaleita, joiden lyriikoissa tunnistin potentiaalisesti hedelmällisiä analyysin kohteita.

Lista tutkielmassani analysoimistani kappaleista:

Big Sean – “Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)” (2015)

Schoolboy Q – “Break The Bank” (2014)

Childish Gambino – “We Ain’t Them” (2012)

JAY-Z – “Picasso Baby” (2013)

G-Eazy – “For This” (2015)

Drake – “You & The 6” (2015)

Logic – “44 Bars” (2016)

Drake – “9” (2016)

Big K.R.I.T. – “Price of Fame” (2017)

Rick Ross – “Foreclosures” (2015)

JAY-Z – “Legacy” (2017)

Kappalekohtaiset tutkimustulokset ja löydösten laajemmat trendit

Detroitista kotoisin olevan räppäri Big Seanin “Dark Sky (Skyscrapers)” -kappaleessa tuli selkeästi esille kuvaus kokemuksesta menestyksen saavuttamisen vaatimasta työnarkomaanimaisesta työtahdistista. Artisti kuvasi menestyksenhalun ja sen aiheuttaman työaikataulun haittaavan sosiaalisen elämän kehitystä ja pahimmillaan aiheuttavan perspektiivin menettämisen elämän tärkeimpien asioiden suhteen. Big Sean korostikin kappaleessaan henkisen hyvinvoinnin merkitystä, jota ei pidä unohtaa menestymisen eteen tehdyn työn lomassa.

Los Angelesista kotoisin olevan ScHoolboy Q:n kappaleesta “Break The Bank” pystyi erottamaan selkeästi artistin utilitaristisen suhtautumisen räpmusiikin tekoon lähinnä yhtenä uravalintana muiden joukossa. Q oli tehnyt uranvaihdoksen reseptilääkkeiden laittomasta katumyynnistä räp-artistin uralle päästäkseen työskentelemään turvallisemmalla alalla voidakseen tarjota nuorelle tyttärelleen paremman elämän. Huumediilausaikana koetut kokemukset ja tarinat artisti rinnasti kuin pankissa pitkään istuneeseen korkoa keränneeseen valuuttaan, jonka tuotot hän nyt kotiutti käyttääkseen niitä lyyrisenä materiaalina räp-urallaan.

Atlantalaisen Childish Gambinon kohdalla räp-uralle lähteminen oli tapa toteuttaa itseään taiteellisesti aiemmista töistä eroavalla tavalla. Gambino oli kuuluisa ja menestynyt näyttelijä, käsikirjoittaja ja stand up -koomikko jo ennen musiikkiuraansa, ja mainitsikin “We Ain’t Them” -kappaleessaan äitinsä esille tuoman huolen Gambinon uranvaihdoksen rahallisista riskeistä, ja toisaalta isänsä kannustavan, luottavaisen asenteen poikansa elämänpäätösten suhteen. Tulkitsin Gambinon myös kyseenalaistavan räpin autenttisuuteen liittyvää diskurssia, ja määrittelevän aitoudeksi oman sydämensä seuraamisen.

Jo pitkän uran tehneen Brooklynista kotoisin olevan räppäri JAY-Z:n kappaleessa “Picasso Baby” artisti jatkoi räpin perinnettä materialistisen varakkuuden esittelystä ja sillä kerskailusta. Hän kuitenkin toi ilmiöön melko uudenlaisen näkökulman kehuun käyttävänsä rahojaan niin sanotun “korkeataiteen”, eli tässä tapauksessa kalliiden maalausten ostamiseen. Kappaleesta pystyi näkemään räpin pitkän historian vaikutuksen, sillä genre oli 2010-luvulle päästäessä ollut jo olemassa useita vuosikymmeniä, mikä mahdollisti genressä menestyneille artisteille hyvin mittavien omaisuuksien kartuttamisen vuosien saatossa.

Kalifornian Oaklandista kotoisin oleva G-Eazy iloitsi kappaleessaan “For This” pitkän työnsä mahdollistamasta saavuttamastaan asemasta. Hän ei niinkään rehennellyt kalliilla autoilla tai

jalokivillä, vaan ilmaisi tyytyväisyytensä siitä, että oli päässyt asemaan, jossa pystyi elättämään itsensä ja työllistämään ystäviään tekemällä sitä mitä rakastaa, eli räppäämällä. G-Eazy ilmaisi myös itse työn rakastamisen tärkeyden - musiikkiuralle ei kannata lähteä pelkän rahan perässä, sillä taloudellinen ulkoinen motivaatio ei kestäisi pitkään.

Torontolainen Drake, yksi 2010-luvun menestyneimmistä artisteista, puhui “You & The 6” -kappaleessaan nuoruudestaan ja suhteestaan vanhempiinsa sekä Toronton kaupunkiin. Hän piti nuoruutensa kokemuksia tärkeänä osana kasvamistaan artistina ja ihmisenä. Kappaleessa tulivat ilmi myös 2010-luvun modernin sosiaalisen median aikakauden negatiiviset vaikutukset artistien yksityisyyteen ja sitä myötä heidän läheissuhteisiinsa. Juuri tällaiset perspektiivit ovat uniikkeja 2010-luvun räpille ja sen jälkeiselle ajalle, sillä esimerkiksi 2000-luvulla sosiaalinen media ei ollut vielä saavuttanut nykyisenkaltaista, lähes universaalia markkinapenetraatiota ja käyttöastetta.

Marylandista kotoisin oleva räppäri Logic ilmaisi kappaleessaan “44 Bars” tyytymättömyytensä kiihtyvän räp-uransa velvollisuuksien aiheuttamaan faneistaan etäännyntymiseen ja ulkomusiikillisten asioiden viemään aikaan. Hän toi myös esille uransa edetessä kokemansa perspektiivin muutoksen, jonka myötä hän ilmaisi ymmärtäneensä, että musiikkiurasta saatu raha ei ollutkaan kaikkein tärkein asia, vaan sen sijaan kyky puhua ihmisille ja vaikuttaa heidän elämiinsä oli kaikista merkityksellisintä. Logic toi myös esille musiikkialan taloudellisia realiteetteja, jotka voivat vaikuttaa artisteihin ja heidän taiteeseensa.

Tutkielman toisessa Drake-kappaleessa, nimeltään “9”, artisti toi esille vakaumuksensa jatkaa musiikin tekemistä huolimatta globaalien supertähteyden mukanaan tuomista negatiivisista lieveilmiöistä, kuten yksityisyyden menettämisestä ja aitojen ihmissuhteiden solmimisen vaikeudesta. Drake ilmaisi myös kotikaupunkiaan Torontoa kohtaan kokeman ylpeytensä, ja kehui muuttaneensa kaupungin imagoa ja brändiä globaalillakin mittakaavalla. Tässä kappaleessa oli kuultavissa merkityksellistä pohdintaa kuuluisuuden ja menestyksen positiivisten ja negatiivisten puolten välisestä tasapainottelusta.

Mississippin osavaltioista kotoisin oleva Big K.R.I.T. toi esille tutkimuksen negatiivisimman suhtautumisen kuuluisuuteen kappaleessaan “Price of Fame”. Hänen mukaansa kuuluisuus oli aiheuttanut mielenterveysongelmia kuten ahdistusta ja masennusta, hankaloittanut ystäväsuhteita, ja muuttanut hänen läheistensä tavan suhtautua häneen ihmisenä eikä vain tähtirollissa olevana artistina. Kappaleessa selkeästi kuultava syvä introspektion taso ja vaikeidenkin asioiden jakaminen kuulijan kanssa on ominaista 2010-luvun räpille.

Miamilainen Rick Ross räppäsi “Foreclosures”-kappaleessaan vastuullisen rahankäytön puolesta ja kehotti varsinkin nuoria artisteja varovaisuuteen ja huolellisuuteen levytyssovimuksia tehtäessä. Kappaleen narratiivi rahan älykkäästä käytöstä ja säästäväisyydestä poikkeaa räpille historiallisesti ominaisesta tavasta ihannoita kerskakulutusta, ja on omiaan toimimaan todisteena valtavirtaräpissä 2010-luvulla kuultavissa olevien näkökantojen moninaisuudesta.

Tutkielman toisessa JAY-Z:n kappaleessa, nimeltään “Legacy”, artisti ilmaisi tyytyväisyytensä saavuttamastaan menestyksestä, ja pohti samalla sitä, mitä jättää läheisilleen jälkeensä. Kappaleessa artistin suhtautuminen rahankäyttöön ei ollut yksiselitteisesti kulutuskeskeistä, vaan pikemminkin jopa humanitääristä ja filosofista pohdintaa sisältävää. Kappaleesta oli löydettävissä hyvinkin henkilökohtaista reflektiota myös hengellisistä asioista, kuten uskonnon roolista elämässä ja sen kyvystä auttaa vaikeiden tapahtumien käsittelemisessä.

Tutkielman keskeisiä löydöksiä oli useita. Laulutekstien analyysistä kävi ilmi, että yksityisyyden menettäminen ja läheisten ihmissuhteiden mahdollinen heikkeneminen olivat enemmistölle räppäreistä hyväksyttäviä uhrauksia menestyksen mukanaan tuomien materiaalistien ja henkisten rikkauksien saamiseksi. Juuri 2010-luvun räpille ominaiseksi kiinnostavaksi trendiksi paljastui myös huomattava avoimuus, jolla artistit jakoivat introspektiivisiä ajatuksiaan menestyksen ja ihmissuhteiden risteämäkohdista. Introspektiivisuutta ja itsereflektiota sisältävien lyriikoiden merkittävä määrä vaikuttaa osoittavan, että 2010-luvulla suuria kuuntelijamassoja tavoittavat räppärit uskaltavat kuuluisuudestaan huolimatta käyttää musiikkiaan jopa jonkinlaisena julkisena terapiamuotona, jossa he purkavat tuntojaan faneilleen. Osittain tähän saattaakin vaikuttaa juuri yksityisyyden väheneminen sosiaalisen median lähtemättömän läsnäolon myötä, joka ajaa kenties artistit kontrolloimaan oman elämänsä julkista narratiivia musiikkinsa kautta.

Oman tutkimukseni kaltaisia jatkotutkimuksia kannattaisi kohdistaa 1990-luvun ja 2000-luvun räpmusiikkiin, ja myös 2010-luvun naisräppärien musiikkiin. Samankaltaisen tutkimuksen toteuttaminen myös 2020-luvun lopussa voisi hyvinkin tuottaa arvokasta tietoa.