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My City, My 'Hood, My Street: Ghetto Spaces in American Hip-Hop Music

Abstract: As a subculture created by black and Latino men and women in the late 1970s in the United States, hip-hop from the very beginning was closely related to urban environment. Undoubtedly, space has various functions in hip-hop music, among which its potential to express the group identity seems to be of the utmost importance. The goal of this paper is to examine selected rap lyrics which are rooted in the urban landscape: "N.Y. State of Mind" by Nas, "H.O.O.D" by Masta Ace, and "Street Struck," in order to elaborate on the significance of space in hip-hop music. Interestingly, spaces such as the city as a whole, a neighborhood, and a particular street or even block which are referred to in the rap lyrics mentioned above express one and the same broader category of urban environment, thus, words connected to urban spaces are often employed interchangeably.

Keywords: hip-hop, space, urbanscape.

Music has always been deeply rooted in everyday life of African American communities, and from the very beginning it has been connected with certain spaces. If one takes into account slave songs chanted in the fields (often considered the first examples of rapping), or Jazz Era during which most blacks no longer worked on the plantations but in big cities, it seems that music and place were not only inseparable but also naturally harmonized. The spatial character of music started to be more and more visible in the 1970s and the 1980s, when young black and Latino men and women, isolated from the dominant white culture, created their own weapon to struggle with the harsh inner-city reality and to talk about their own space and experience. They formed the music subculture called hip-hop.

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Hip-hop is a cultural movement born on the streets of Bronx, New York in the late 1970s and consists of four distinctive elements: MCing (rapping/rhyming), deejaying (turntabling), B-boying (street dance) and graffiti painting. One of the pioneers of hip-hop culture was Jamaican-born Dj Kool Herc who brought the idea of using enormous sound systems at inner-city parties to the USA (Chang 2005, 68). Among other inventors of the movement, such as Africa Bambaataa or Grand Wizard Theodore, a rapper and deejay, Grandmaster Flash is one of most widely-recognized, due to his "old school" track, "The Message" (1982), which is connected with urban reality compared to concrete jungle. The Sugarhill Gang is also worth mentioning because of their hit song, "Rapper's Delight" (1980), that was the first rap single ever to go to the top of US music charts. Apart from rapping, the essential form of hip-hop culture seems to be deejaying which is based on playing vinyl records on two turntables in such a way to provide continuous sound of drums section to which first B-boys were performing their acrobatic and spectacular dance (breaking). Moreover, hip-hop space is surrounded by its own visual art, namely graffiti painting, which from simple tags drawn on the trains (originally perceived as an act of vandalism) has evolved into a well-respected form of street art. However, it seems that none of the elements mentioned above has had a bigger impact on mainstream culture than MCing. It was rap music that contributed to the movement's popularity to a greater extent.[1]

One may claim that hip-hop music is the voice of an ethnic minority (including not only African-Americans but also Latinos), immersed in a specific space, namely urban environment of the biggest cities, reflecting on their reality. The reality of life in a particular city, borough, neighborhood and the streets which are places of the most dynamic social interactions is well-described in hip-hop songs. Thus, the objective of this article is to focus on the analysis of selected rap lyrics, since they seem to be a tangible proof of relations between hip-hop artists and the city they live in, to depict the particular role individual spaces play in hip-hop music. The names of selected city units such as neighborhood, streets, or projects which are recurrent in hip-hop songs sometimes may be used interchangeably as they all refer to American ghetto spaces from the 1990s and early 2000s.

Beginning from the macro perception of the city as a whole to a micro perspective of smaller – but equally important – spaces such as neighborhoods, ghettos and, finally, streets, each of these has had enormous significance for creators of hip hop culture: rappers, graffiti artists, and dancers. The city as a space seems to be an integral part of the hip-hop reality. People representing this culture are still involved in complex relationships with their city, which is a part of their territory, and consequently, identity.

What distinguishes hip-hop subculture from any other subculture is the fact that it belongs to a broader category of Black-American culture, which is sometimes called urban culture (Gray 2010). While gang, punk or goth subcultures may be viewed as

[1] Light and Tate (2012) even argue that while "graffiti and break dancing, the aspects of the culture that first caught public attention, had the least lasting effect."

in strong opposition to popular culture and their values are distinct from those held by the majority, hip-hop's identity has always been closely connected with black culture which, beginning from the 1990s on, has been considered an inseparable element of mainstream American culture, particularly music. For instance, members of hip-hop culture have been invited to cable television shows such as *Soul Train* or *Yo! MTV Raps*. Similarly, to other urban and youth subcultures, hip-hop's values and norms are sometimes against the dominant ones (painting on the walls is not allowed by the local authorities but at the same time is a form of artistic expression for hip-hop culture members), yet, it seems that hip-hop and urban landscape live together in a symbiosis.

One may claim that urban spaces determine various aspect of hip-hop culture. The names of hip-hop groups, album and song titles are directly inspired by the place a given group originates from. For instance, the first album of West-coast-based hip-hop group Compton Most Wanted was entitled "It's a Compton Thang" or one of the tracks by Nas was called "N.Y. State of Mind." Hip-hop artists frequently pay homage to one's place of origin by writing songs dedicated entirely to a particular space; many artists even decide to name their crew or album in more "geographical way." An example to support the claim that a place functions as a direct inspiration for the song is a great number of so- called "city anthems" such as "Where I'm From" by Jay Z, "California Love" by 2Pac, "Brooklyn" by Fabolous, "St. Louie" by Nelly, to name just a few. Cheryl L. Keyes in her book, "Rap Music and Street Consciousness" (2004), even claims that rap music "fosters ethnic pride among its artists":

> Hip-hop artists often rhyme about their identity and whence they come. Through the adoption of names that indicate ethnic affiliation and the formation crews or posses with similar or supportive ethnic groups and nationalities, artists articulate pride in and representation of their respective communities. (230)

This pride is very often connected to their ethnicity but also the place of living which is particularly visible when rappers refer to the coast they belong to (East vs. West or so-called "Third Coast" or "Dirty South").

Another aspect of the place as a determiner in hip-hop culture is a specific usage of slang expressions and pronunciation characteristic of a given city. Each hip-hop space has its own "urban dictionary" which also constitutes the identity of its members and is widely used in rap songs to emphasize the significance of the locality. Kenneth French in his article entitled *Topomusica in Rap Music: Role of Geography in Hip-hop Music* explains this issue by giving the example of Nelly, the rapper whose music is deeply attached to his place of birth, St. Louis:

The insertion of "r" sounds in words is commonplace in the Midland dialect region (Vaux 2003); instead of saying "I wash my clothes", one would say "I warsh my clothes." Nelly, member of the place-named rap group St. Lunatics, adopted this Country grammar (name of his 2000 debut album) to convey how people live in his locality to the rest of the rap world. (134)

The use of a local dialect gives the impression that space is an integral part of rappers' identity and determines the way in which lyrics are written, and even recorded. In the case of Nelly, by employing elements of the native dialect, the rapper distinguishes himself from other artists, both from St. Louis and cities across the country. Such approach to city dialect can be viewed not only as an artistic statement but also an advertising technique aimed at local audiences. One may say that the use of dialect is connected to class and education issues as rappers usually come from poorer districts, which is well-reflected in their language often riddled with local idiomatic expressions or even grammatical mistakes, but, again, the place one lives in, e.g., a poor district, influences their language.

Urban spaces determine not only the artist name, titles of the songs or the dialect one uses. City landscape also influences the thematic scope of the rap music. For instance, cities are portrayed in hip-hop music in a slightly negative way, namely as an object of accusations. Blamed for lack of opportunities, omnipresent racism and poverty, the city seems to play a role of an enemy in the eyes of many rap artists who due to their living in the inner-city environments are "set up to fail" (Martinez 2007, 121). Numerous examples of rap songs refer, for instance, to the problem of police brutality towards young black men living in the cities or to the issue of unemployment in the neighborhoods. Even when the members of the black community become employed, they are offered insufficient wages. All these problems seem to be a part of the city reality. Low wages make African Americans turn to drug trading and other illegal businesses. This problem is particularly well-described in Mos Def's track entitled "Mathematics":

> When the average minimum wage is $5.15
> You best believe you've got to find a new grind to get C.R.E.A.M
> The white unemployment rate? It's nearly more than triple for black
> Some front-liners got their gun in your back
> Bubbling crack, jewel theft and robbery to combat poverty
> And end up in the global jail economy.

In hip-hop songs, urban spaces are not only the enemy but also, in a sense, the witness of the world's inequality where discriminated blacks seem to be the main victim. Rap lyrics reflect, in depth, this accusing attitude towards the life in the city. On the other hand, such social problems as disadvantage, racism, and discrimination on the basis of one's education or financial status appear widely not only in the cities but also in the suburbs and countryside, thus, they are not dependent entirely on urbanity. Nevertheless, such areas as the South Bronx, which is the birthplace of the hip-hop culture, are spaces in which various social and economic problems meet.

Finally, hip-hop culture and urban landscapes undeniably cross-influence each other, no matter what one takes into consideration – the city as a whole, each borough, neighborhoods or the smallest, but significant unit, namely the street. The city is play-

ing numerous roles in the hip-hop movement which is influenced by, is a part of, and a product of urban spaces. According to rap artists, since the best depiction of one's identity is their place of belonging, geography plays a crucial role in exploring and understanding hip-hop music. It seems that in the case of young, mostly black men who are not only participants but also inventors of hip-hop culture it is the urbanscape or hip-hopscape (in general as well as more specific sites, including East/West coast, individual cities or ghetto) that influences their choices, preferences, topics of conversation, and worldview.

The analysis of selected rap lyrics

Undoubtedly, there are numerous examples of hip-hop songs connected with urban spaces, either about cities as such or devoted to particular smaller spaces, including neighborhoods or streets which appeared across the United States from the 1970–80s on. In this part, I am going to analyze each distinctive element of urban landscape, focusing on how hip-hop key concepts and concerns are present and depicted in selected tracks. The analysis will be based on three rap songs – "N.Y. State of Mind" by Nas, "H.O.O.D" by Masta Ace, and "Street Struck" by Big L, all connected with the urbanscape of New York City. One of the reasons behind the choice of these particular songs was not only the fact that they are not known to a wider audience but also that, surprisingly, not one was released as a single. Moreover, each track describes space in a different neighborhood of New York City, namely Nas refers to Queens, Masta Ace to Brooklyn and, finally, Big L portrays Manhattan (precisely Harlem). Thus, the lyrics of those three rap tracks seem to provide a wide spectrum of the socio-geographic situation of those neighborhoods of NYC inhabited to a great extent by a black community. The three selected rappers represent the East Coast hip-hop scene which is agreed to be the place of the origin of the subculture (Forman 2011, 61). While hip-hop has become very popular also on the West Coast where a variety of hip-hop subgenres, including "gangsta rap," emerged, historically, it is New York that is regarded as the birthplace of hip-hop (Light and Tate, 2012).

"N.Y. State of Mind" is a song written by Nas for his first album, "Illmatic" (1994) and describes the harsh reality of life in the City, especially in the rapper's borough, Queens. The artist from the very beginning of the career emphasizes the importance of the place he lives in, namely Queens bridge public housing project, which he refers to in numerous tracks including, "Memory Lane (Sittin' in Da Park)" or "One Love" . Nas seems to be one of these rappers who is immediately associated with a certain space. Murray Forman (2011) in his book, "That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader," even asks:

> Can Jay-Z be realistically disconnected from Brooklyn or Nas from Queens? Can Snoop Dogg be comprehended without acknowledging his Long Beach, California, roots and can

> Outkast be isolated from Atlanta? Where these individuals are from is an essential element of who they are and what they project, whether in a broader regional sense of space or in more finely nuanced and closely delineated scale of place. (156)

According to Forman, space influences profoundly rappers' identities and lyrics produced by Nas exemplify this phenomenon very well.

The following rapper whose tracks, such as " H.O.O.D." are deeply connected with urban landscape is Duval Clear, better known as Masta Ace. He is considered by many to be not only an underrated artist but also a prolific rap veteran with 25-years' stage experience. His fourth solo LP entitled "A Long Hot Summer," released in 2004, is a theme album in which urban spaces play a significant role, mostly because the album is built around the concept of the author wandering through the streets of Brooklyn, New York .While portraying urban America in his album, Masta Ace appears to be an experienced and attentive artist who knows his neighborhood very well and notices similarities between his space and other "hoods."

Whereas Nas and Masta Ace are rappers active artistically to this day, the author of the last song that is going to be analyzed, Big L, was killed in drive-by shooting in 1999. The title of his debut album "Lifestylez ov da Poor & Dangerous" implies that in Harlem, which is the place of origin of this MC, there "ain't cookies and cream," suggesting, for instance, the serious problem of poverty and crime in Big L's area. The rapper, by creating this distinctive somber and pessimistic mood in "Lifestylez," helps the listener understand the reality of life in his space (Harlem) to which he refers in other songs as well.

The analysis of the rap songs mentioned above will focus on describing typical concepts present in the majority of hip-hop tracks whose main theme is the depiction of urban spaces such as New York City. Despite the fact that selected songs vary in titles, which suggests that the main topic of lyrics would be different in each case, they all seem to have a lot in common and such words as ghetto, projects, street may be often used interchangeably as they refer to the general urban landscape. It is even possible to identify the same concepts in every rap song but, depending on the main topic of the track, each theme is developed to a smaller or bigger extent. Topics most frequently appearing in hip-hop music include drug dealing, conflicts with the police, lost opportunities, especially among the youth, poverty and crime in general. The following part of this paper will concentrate entirely on describing those recurring themes and focusing on how these topics are influenced by certain urban spaces of New York City.

"N.Y. State of Mind" – Nas. "I never sleep, cause sleep is the cousin of death"

"N.Y. State of Mind" is considered to be one of the most significant tracks on "Illmatic" (1994), due to its thorough depiction of ghetto life in the 1990s. That time the space of housing projects in the States, in which young Nas was starting his career,

was affected by the so-called "crack epidemic." Young people began to be involved in drug trading and turned to crime and violence on the streets. As not only one of the observers but also a partaker of these phenomena, the rapper expresses his role in the street crime by using stream-of-consciousness-like monolog in "N.Y. State of Mind."

The main theme of this track is the so-called "ghetto life" and it consists of at least three interpenetrating elements such as crime, drug trading and violence against the police and rival gangs. The author invites the listeners to be immersed in the inner-city reality, just like he is, by providing them with vivid imagery of him wearing "street clothes," drinking liquor or seeing people addicted to drugs who are trying to sell anything just to buy some cocaine: "I keep some E&J, sitting bent up in the stairway/ . . . Laughing at baseheads tryna sell some broken amps." Apart from the description of the rapper's reality of life, the first verse of the song is in a sense "disrupted" by the narrative part in which Nas reminisces of the fact that he was trapped by his enemies and needed to defend himself. This section, with all its details such as types of weapon, even more accurately portrays what was happening back then in the City on a daily basis, including gang wars, violence in contacts with the police, shootings on the streets, frequently in the presence of women ("Heard a few chicks scream") or even children. All these were described not from the media's perspective but through the eyes of a 19-year-old black participant who seems to be more subjective – as he is involved in these events – and thus has a more authentic view of the situation. In the second verse, the author even compares ghetto life to hell where he has to not only live in but also survive ("Life is parallel to Hell but I must maintain"). This urge for survival appears to stem from the fact that New York is considered to be a city that "never sleeps" and is filled with "villains and creeps" – this line of the text in particular creates a condensed image of the City being completely different from the perspective of an outsider who usually does not realize what dangers are hidden on the streets corners. Nas, as a young individual immersed in the atmosphere of the City, realizes what the rules of this urban game are and is able to adjust to them, for instance, by taking up a weapon like a Mac-10 or TEC-9 in the fight with the police or by selling cocaine to earn additional money.

The rapper also mentions the difficult living conditions in his area and compares inhabitants of the projects to rats that are packed in a maze-like complex of blocks. This reference to the maze as a place challenging to escape from, seems to be a well-thought-out remark on the situation of people having virtually no opportunity to improve their lives since they dwell in poor housing projects of Queens.

Nas states that being a witness as well as partaker of this harsh New York reality requires having an urban, precisely New York, state of mind. Sohail Daulatzai tries to describe this concept: "Nas suggests that New York might just be that – a state of mind – something that's not geographically bound, that's borderless, amorphous, asymmetrical, ephemeral, dangerous even, if in the "wrong heads" " (Dyson and Daulatzai 2009, 39). The lyrics of Nas's song also suggest that having a New York state of mind means always being alert, due to the fact that "sleep is the cousin of death." This fa-

mous line implies that the one who is asleep, also metaphorically, can easily become a victim. One may claim that the need for this uninterrupted state of consciousness is essential, especially to drug dealers because in order to survive they should have their eyes at the back of their head.

Finally, being focused on the ghetto life with all its dangers seems to be an inherent part of the state of mind of all black New Yorkers as Nas. This state of mind can be influenced also by various factors, especially cultural ones, which contribute to the so-called "Americanness" of an individual. In the text, Nas mentions for instance the film *Scarface* which, among many other movies, defines Nas being an American and his American state of consciousness.

"H.O.O.D" – Masta Ace. "When will it change? Never I know / And I see the same things wherever I go"

The song that is very universal and whose message seems to apply to a great number of American neighborhoods is Masta Ace's "H.O.O.D" from the "A Long Hot Summer" (2004) album. In "H.O.O.D" the author describes what can be observed in the neighborhoods in general but provides an example of his own space in Brooklyn. An interesting fact is that the rapper refrains from emphasizing his exact place of origin and does not directly name it (contrary to Nas's "N.Y. State of Mind" and other artists such as Jay Z, who, in his songs like "Brooklyn We Go Hard" or earlier "Where I'm From," repeatedly pays homage to his borough). In this way, Masta Ace succeeds in creating a more universal meaning of the song to which nearly all inhabitants of black neighborhoods can relate. The author does not focus on a particular place by showing its distinctive features and landmarks but on a general city unit of a neighborhood.

By taking the listeners for a walk, Masta Ace enables them to capture the atmosphere of the place, similarly to "N.Y. State of Mind" by Nas. But while Nas is taking them into the "dungeons of rap culture" which are dangerous and violent, Masta Ace is pointing out that the neighborhood is his home, thus he knows how to describe it in a relatively objective way, and is aware of drawbacks as well as benefits of living in such a place.

Therefore, Masta Ace draws the listeners' attention to the social structure of the neighborhoods which includes mainly sad, unwealthy, undereducated and frequently unemployed men and women. Due to occupying the same space, the inhabitants of black American neighborhoods established certain bonds close to a family bond between each other; they experience love and hate and they think in the same way. This particular state of mind is visible especially in the chorus of the song: "They got broke people, poor people, my people, your people/ (Wherever I go) Listen/ And they won't change, ever change, can't change, don't change/ (And everyone knows)." "They"– meaning neighborhoods – seem to consist of people with common identity which is of the individuals who cannot change their life, behavior or financial status. Sadly, this inability to improve their life situation, in a sense, unites the group.

In the text the author mentions that in his space there will always be a person who considers joining the gang ("There's bound to be one cat thinkin' of loccin'"). Moreover, crime, especially thievery, is happening on a daily basis which does not particularly surprise the rapper. Even rather inexpensive objects, like a bike, can be stolen and this phenomenon constitutes part of the neighborhood's reality.

Due to the difficult economic situation, young people are not only involved in crimes such as thievery or illegal gun possession but also in drug dealing, which is condemned by their mothers ("Young cats be sellin' the rock/ Money busting out they sock mama tellin' them stop"). Young people tend not to consider drug dealing as something morally wrong. It appears to be only a part-time job they can get while living on the streets. Masta Ace emphasizes the fact that when one child turns to crime of any sort, the whole neighborhood cannot refrain from being affected. In the neighborhood, children are not only individuals responsible for crime but also the victims of it. The author refers to a situation in which a young and smart boy got killed for an extremely low prize – only nine dollars: "Get shot on your way to school at the bus stop, damn/ That kid was a fine scholar/ Hear his mama whine and holler he died for nine dollars." Such case very explicitly indicates problems of today's black neighborhoods – when it comes to crime, innocent people become victims as well.

In the text Masta Ace, apart from juvenile delinquency, extensively describes the situation of women in the city space. They are presented in all ages – as girls prostituting themselves in order to earn some fast money, young mothers learning how to take care of their children and wishing to win the lottery to improve their financial situation, and older pensioners. This third group realizes that the reality of life is harsh, thus they have to stay alert and "keep they purse in the front" not to be robbed of their money. Those ladies are aware of the fact that young individuals mentioned above, apart from drug dealing, tend to rob the city dwellers in order to obtain extra money. It seems that women have to adjust to the environment and rules of the neighborhood, either by selling their bodies (young women) or being always alert (pensioners and young mothers).

Despite the common problem of injustice and difficult situation in his neighborhood, the author could not help but admit that he feels good in the space he knows very well, probably due to the fact that he was born there and became accustomed to the conditions and principles of living around "rough blocks." The interesting fact is that even though the "hood" is the rapper's home, he notices that in every city, the inhabitants share experience, which makes them feel unified. What's more, the author mentions the Puerto Rican ("P.R") and Dominican ("D.R.") minorities which are also immersed in the city environment. The fragment below illustrates those two issues:

> H . O . O . D
> Should I turn my back on the hood? No, not me
> Whether P.R., D.R., or the West Indies
> Or fifty other spots that are just like these
> Chicago know what I mean, Philly as well

Shit I hear nowadays sounds silly as hell
Whether in Miami or in Houston, Texas
Where some so broke they're not used to breakfast
Oakland know what I mean, L.A. too
D.C. feel me, I can tell they do
When will it change? Never, I know
And I see the same things wherever I go.

With the regard to the fragment, the author would not be able to draw a conclusion that every neighborhood is more or less the same if he was not an experienced artist who traveled a lot during his career (he indicates this at the beginning of the song). Moreover, Masta Ace emphasizes the fact that if one is a stranger who never lived in the neighborhood, it is difficult for him or her to accept the existence and reality of it. The author is certain that nothing will change about the situation of neighborhoods but judging by the mood of the song, he entirely accepts his place of living.

"Street Struck" – Big L "They had dreams but gave 'em up cause they street struck"

In the song "Street Struck," the author describes him living in the crime-tainted ghetto and the effects that ghetto life has on youth. Despite his young age, the rapper appears to be a mentor giving advice to his listeners who live on the streets. Big L admits that he used to spend most of his time selling drugs, similarly to his peers, but he decided to make such choices that allowed him to change his daily routine and avoid being "street struck." This term applies to all young individuals who instead of developing their talents, turn to crime and drug dealing. The message of the song seems to be a direct reaction to this socio-geographic problem present on the streets of New York in the 1990s.

At the beginning of "Street Struck" Big L, in brief, describes the reality of life in his place, Harlem. He emphasizes the fact that in his place of origin "there ain't no cookies and cream," which suggests the issue of widespread poverty and the lack of luxuries, or at least a decent life. Also, the line "cause where I'm from - you can choke from the gunsmoke" suggests that the space he lives in is literally and metaphorically filled with gunsmoke. In addition, the problem of peer pressure is visible on a daily basis and similarly to Masta Ace's song ("Only take one bad apple to poison the good") young people tend to have relations only with those "rotten" juveniles.

Undoubtedly, the life in New York is difficult and dangerous because of certain actions performed by the young men involved in drug dealing, which is a common phenomenon on the streets and another typical theme in hip-hop songs. Harlem – being the place of author's origin – is a well-known place for drug dealing, called "danger zone" (which is also the title of Big L's posthumous album). Drug trading is inseparably connected with debts which lead to violence and shooting directed towards

debtors. The fact that Big L was killed for debts of his brother, who was at that time in prison, stresses even more the authenticity of the lyrics. The author himself used to be absorbed in the drug trade which he reminisces about at the beginning of the second verse: "Before the rap contract, I was sellin' crack/ Stay strapped with a Mac, I was into all of that/ I started rappin' and got nice as hell/ If it wasn't for this I might be doin' life in jail." He admits that he used to behave like most of his friends and realizes possible consequences of such actions. The listeners are not informed what made Big L change his way of thinking but probably the passion for music was one of the most important factors.

The rapper notices that instead of pursuing education or developing their career as singers or sportsmen, young and talented individuals living in his area turn to drug dealing ("They could've been boxers, ballplayers or rap singers/ Instead they bank robbers and crack slingers"). Big L realizes that even though his peers had certain dreams connected with their future career, they were verified by the hard reality of hip-hop streets. Still, he cannot understand why the youth seem not to care about opportunities they have lost. Unfortunately, young people are so immersed in ghetto life, in other words, they act according to the rules of the "street life," where the only thing they are interested in are financial profits stemming from being a "gangsta." The rapper ironically points out that an individual can possess a house or cars but if one is in jail or even dead this makes no sense. Those two issues are well-exemplified in the text:

> And some of my peeps are still in the game sellin 'caine
> If that's what you gotta do to maintain, go 'head and do your thang
> But with the cash profit make an investment
> And try not to go to the grave like the rest went
> Cause you can be rich with crazy loot, own a house and nine cars
> What good is that, if you're dead, or behind bars?

The passage proves that the change Big L had undergone made him think differently than most of his peers. The author warns his audience of being "street struck" and encourages them not to abandon their dreams.

In the last verse, Big L admits that it is demanding to avoid being "street struck" again but he has his own way to manage with the situation, which is sitting in his house, writing rap lyrics and "leaving streets alone." The author realizes that not being involved in "shady businesses" of drug dealers does not protect from being a victim of killing as death may reach one just on the corner. This justifies the idea of being street struck – even innocent ones can get killed or robbed. The same problem was discussed by Masta Ace in "H.O.O.D" when he reminisced the "young scholar." The conclusion is that the only way to survive in the concrete jungle seems to be connected to "staying off corners." In the text Big L explicitly describes the relation between space and people living in it. The notion of the street as a dangerous place seems to be attached to the identity of individuals who have an impact on what is happening in

the ghetto, yet, very few of the city inhabitants feel the need to improve the situation on the streets. The street seems to be not only the environment in which young people sell drugs and use weapons but also the part of reality which prompts people to behave in a certain way. As the place and people cross-influence each other it can be said that they are inseparable.

To conclude, after a detailed analysis of selected rap lyrics it can be said that even though the abovementioned song titles were different (referring to the city as a whole, a neighborhood, or the street), all three dealt with the same main theme, namely hip-hop reality. Issues such as conflicts with police, drug dealing and its negative consequences seemed not to be reserved only to one particular space but also to urbanscapes, or even hip-hopscapes in a more general sense. There is no denying that an urban environment of the biggest cities is inseparably connected with the culture of young black Americans (due to the fact that it was them who have influenced the surrounding areas in the way they are now, for instance, thanks to graffiti art) and vice versa. It was the reality of life in the city that has contributed to the appearance of all hip-hop concepts present in rap lyrics. It seems that without urban landscapes there would be no hip-hop culture in the way we understand it today. This proves that urbanscapes, playing numerous roles in hip-hop culture (which is not without reason called a street culture), seem to be the most recurrent space present in the movement. Interestingly, while Nas in "N.Y. State of Mind" refers to the whole city of New York, by Masta Ace in "H. O. O. D" to his neighborhood in Queens, and Big L to a street in "Street Struck", they all focus on the same general concept of an urban space. If the selected spatial elements from the three tracks were altered and titles such as "Street State of Mind" or "Hood Struck" emerged, the general message of the track and its overtone would not be changed as they all address similar topics within the same space. One may say that blocks, streets, projects, neighborhoods, districts, boroughs, and even whole cities are the spaces that are recurrent in hip-hop music and their presence in the lyrics signifies the larger concept of an urban landscape, thus, are often used interchangeably.

As for rap lyrics, titles of the songs and the conclusion that it seems to be impossible to write songs irrespective of the reality of life in the city (because of the fact that one of the crucial hip-hop premises is to "keep it real" which means to be authentic and refer only to one's own experience), in my opinion, what is being described is not the most important element of hip-hop song but how a particular rapper does it. Even though a theme of the song may be the same and the names of urban spaces may be used interchangeably, as the analysis proves, it is the rapper's perception of reality, his or her sensibility and open-mindedness that are the most crucial for overall value of hip-hop music.

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