

**“We Real Cool”: The Performance of Black Masculinity in
American Hip Hop and the Re-Signification of White America’s
Stereotypical View on the Black Male**

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Table of Contents

1. The Social Construction of Black Masculinity in the U.S.	2
2. Black Male Youth and the Concept of White-Supremacist Patriarchy	4
2.1 “We Real Cool”: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Black Male Youth	4
2.2 Black Stereotypes and White-Supremacist Patriarchy	7
3. P. Diddy’s <i>Bad Boy for Life</i>	10
3.1 Performing the Signifying Monkey	10
3.2 Locating Hip Hop	12
3.2.1 The Gangsta	12
3.2.2 Perfectown	14
3.3 Racial Voyeurism and the Fascination with the Black Male Body	17
3.4 Hypermasculinity as a Form of Homosocial Enactment	19
3.4.1 The Black Male Community	19
3.4.2 The Fusion of Black and White	20
4. Black Male Authenticity in Hip Hop	23
4.1 “Keeping it Real”	27
4.2 Black Masculine Performativity	30
4.3 Artistic Sophistication	32
5. “The Black Aesthetic By-Product of the American Dream Machine...”	34
6. Works Cited	36

1. The Social Construction of Black Masculinity in the U.S.

In this paper, I will discuss the ways in which the idea of black masculinity in the U.S. is constructed and how it is being reflected and re-signified by black male hip hop artists. Hip hop is the most salient music genre that comes to mind when talking about black masculinity in the context of American consumerism and art. I will take a close look at P. Diddy's music video *Bad Boy for Life*, which was released in 2001. This video is one of the key works for the analysis of mainstream notions of black American masculinity and the role of white males in the process of constructing masculinity in the US. In the following, I will show how this video engages with white America's stereotypical view on black male hip hop artists and how it parodies these assumptions of black masculinity. Being an aficionado of American hip hop myself, I find it important to make clear that in many cases, rap is wrongly accused of homophobia and misogyny. Sadly enough, there are a lot of artists who support such misanthropic values, but assuming that this problem only exists in hip hop and that it is representative for the entire genre would not acknowledge the complexity and wit of hip hop as a cultural movement and art form. So the questions are: where do these pejorative ideas come from? What does the mainstream image of a black male rapper in the U.S. look like and how do members of the American hip hop community represent themselves?

Ever since it came up, hip hop was based on live performances. Especially b-boying and MCing took place on the streets and in the nightclubs of New Yorker ghettos. Stepping into the cipher and competing against each other in a freestyle battle were the main events in the emerging hip hop scene. Not until the release of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in 1983 have there been any remarkable music videos at all, and "[t]he few videos that did exist for black acts of any genre were primitive" (George 98 f.). Today, we are living in an era of television and advanced technologies, where the arena has shifted from cipher and stage to the screen.

Music videos became a more and more important part of hip hop's success story and "the records were aided by vivid, fun videos that gave the performers larger-than-life personas and featured great dancing or some combination of both. The public's embrace of the kinetic, dance-oriented videos [...] was crucial in driving them to million-selling status" (George 64 f.). Given that hip hop has become a mainstream phenomenon, most people are not insiders but consumers, who connect to the scene primarily via TV or internet. Therefore, we need to concentrate on music videos as a vital element of hip hop culture and a prime channel to disseminate the product ready for consumption.

In the following, I am going to demonstrate that *Bad Boy for Life* is a remarkable piece of work, which is both exemplary for hip hop culture today and extraordinary in its complex and critical interrogation of black masculinity in US mainstream culture. Not only does it reflect long existing notions of black manhood but it also re-signifies white America's prejudiced and racist view on black masculinity. Relating P. Diddy's work with Gwendolyn Brooks's famous poem "We Real Cool", I will establish a reference point in the history of African-American artistic production, before I continue with a close reading of *Bad Boy for Life*.

2. Black Male Youth and the Concept of White-Supremacist Patriarchy

2.1 “We Real Cool”: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Black Male Youth

Gwendolyn Brooks was born 1917 in Topeka, Kansas, but her family soon moved to Chicago, where she spent all her life until her death in 2000 (Saber 7). She was the first African-American author to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1950. Although this has been a huge event at the time, she later said that “blacks should get busy and create some awards of their own” (Brooks, *An Interview* 21:06). “We Real Cool” is her most popular poem and the one I want to have a look at to investigate representations of the black male:

We Real Cool

The Pool Players.

Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We

Left school. We

Lurk late. We

Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.

(Brooks n.p.)

The poem is about a group of African-American boys from Chicago, hanging out in a pool hall. School drop-outs that they are, they usually spend their time on the streets, drinking

and making music. The poem describes the attitude of those boys, who seem to be rather relaxed and self-confident. It starts with the claim “We real cool” - but what does “cool” mean? In an essay on black masculinity, bell hooks, an African-American cultural critic, asks the same question. She recalls: “Once upon a time black male ‘cool’ was defined by the ways in which black men confronted the hardships of life without allowing their spirits to be ravaged [...] It was defined by individual black males daring to self-define rather than be defined by others” (147). hooks explains how this self-assured and autonomous attitude transforms into the “spiritual zombiehood of today’s ‘cool’ black male” (153). This is a metaphorical description of the common disposition that a man, especially if he is black, must not show his emotional state but keep a straight face at all times.

This is also the case in Brooks’s “We Real Cool”. The poem describes the boys’ emotionally indifferent, laid-back and rebellious mental as well as physical posturing (“lurk late”, “strike straight”). Moreover, those boys do not only declare themselves as “cool” but “real cool”. Realness is a fundamental issue within the hip hop world. “Keeping it real” (hooks 150) means being authentic and therefore gaining respect from other rappers, and other men in general. So what the lyrical we in Brooks’s poem is trying to say is that the boys deserve the others’ respect because of their unattached state of mind. However, the boys do not seem to mean what they say. They are hiding their true selves behind fake coolness, which becomes very clear when the text is read out loud.

Ending each verse line with the word “We” and completing the syntax only in each following line, the poem consists of a number of enjambments. All enjambments are additionally highlighted by an extended anaphora, which gives a special rhythm to the poem, making it sound like what is now considered rap. According to Don L. Lee, who analyzes black poetry within the frame of the Black Arts Movement and its search of a new Black Aesthetic, black poetry of the 1960s was built of “polyrhythmic, uneven, short explosive

lines”, full of “intensity [and] depth, yet simplicity”, and that “the unique use of vowels and consonants with the developed rap demands that the poetry be real, and read out loud” (Lee, cit. in Neal 226). I will come back to this in more detail later.

These characteristics apply to “We Real Cool” and present day hip hop / rap music as well. Furthermore, meaning is transported by way of Brooks’s intonation and how she pays particular attention to the personal pronouns when she recites her work (Brooks, *An Interview* 21:06). As she once said in another interview, “the ‘we’ is supposed to be almost attached to the word that precedes it” and it is supposed to be spoken very softly, almost like “a little cry: we” (Brooks cit. in Gayles 9). This pronunciation, and the fact that she puts the “we” at the very end of each line, makes an emotional impression on the audience. The reader no longer believes the “cool” attitude of those pool players. They do not seem to be frank about their feelings, probably not even towards themselves. The “we” cannot “stand up straight and tall” (*ibid*), as Brooks explains herself. It does not mark a group of strong individuals but rather tries to hide the insecurity of every one of them. This is quite obvious, given that the emphasis lies on the action that is referred to, while its subject stays in the background. At last, the poem ends with the boys’ prospect of an early death, which is not necessarily meant to be a physical but rather “a mental or a moral or a spiritual death” (hooks 133). A means of interpreting this idea will be explained in the next paragraph.

2.2 Black Stereotypes and White-Supremacist Patriarchy

The picture Brooks paints here is a realistic image of the black male youth growing up in the ghetto of Chicago or any other big city in the U.S. in the 1950s. The state of insecurity and confusion about one's proper identity was the result of the ghetto's high rates of poverty, unemployment and crime, as well as racism and discrimination. Black adolescents had to deal with those problems in everyday life, which is why so many black males separated themselves emotionally from their surroundings, as did the characters of Brooks's poem. Additionally, there has been a fundamental gap between black and white concepts of manhood, which is a problem until the present day. bell hooks examines the origin and impact of this conflict very thoroughly. There are two main problems.

First, it is the still existing pejorative stereotypes about black men being "animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, [...] untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling" (hooks xii). Not only do those stereotypes degrade and harm black men in general, they are specifically limiting their opportunities to express themselves socially, economically, sexually and individually. All in all, "[n]egative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to over-determine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves" (ibid.).

Second, the predominant notion of manhood is a conservative ideal of masculinity based on "the ruling values of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (151). This includes building a family, providing for wife and children, and being in charge of the finances. As a man, one must not show emotions or weakness. Those features are viewed to be female qualities and are unacceptable concerning the "dominator model" (4). In this sense, a man must be strong, emotionally indifferent, sexually potent and economically wealthy in order to gain respect. This set of preconceived qualities creates a highly one-dimensional

notion of masculinity and leaves many black men highly confused and insecure about their own manhood.

As illustrated in Brooks's poem, especially young men are affected. For to be commonly acknowledged as a "real man", black males do not only have to overcome racist prejudices but they also need to adopt this particular set of patriarchal features that was established by the same people who are discriminating against them. Because "the ruling values of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (151) form the only concept of manhood that is publicly propagated, many young black males surrender under the social pressure and subsequently struggle to live up to other people's expectations.

At the same time, there are a lot of black males who choose another way to deal with this process of gendering masculinity. Although they comply with the same basic values of the patriarchal mindset, they distort those ideas by carrying them to an extreme. In this case, exaggeration does not serve as an instrument of reinforcement but as a way of invalidation. White America's original concept concerning the social construction of (black and white) masculinity does no longer determine the way black men are allowed to present themselves publicly. Rather, black males gain power over their former suppressors by applying to the very ideas they are supposed to in such an offensive manner, so they eventually make those patriarchal values their own. The result is what has been called gangsta since the late 1980s. It describes a highly ostentatious self-representation, including one's power over money, women and other (particularly white) men. "Although gangsta rap has been constructed as deviant from middle-class normativity, examining the social texts of desire and consumption shows its relationship to those very norms" (Baldwin 150). In its "exaggerated stories of dominance" (149), it mirrors "the numerous American-dream stories" (158) of mainstream white America. This means that gangsta rap is an extreme and explicit version of white middle-class's conception of manhood. "Blackness as hypermasculine becomes a

romanticized position of strength and opposition that hopes to create ‘safe spaces’ of uncontested male power” (148).

What I am now going to show is how hip hop music, and gangsta rap in particular, is using exactly the same images that have been imposed on the black male for centuries. As being said, many hip hop artists use white America’s stereotypical view on black men and play by its white-supremacist rules. That way, they turn those stereotypes inside out and invalidate them. In order to show how this act of re-signification is working, I am now going to analyze the music video *Bad Boy for Life* by P. Diddy, who is one of the most famous rap artists worldwide and has been the incarnation of the gangsta rapper in the 1990s.

3. P. Diddy's *Bad Boy for Life*

3.1 Performing the Signifying Monkey

In order to understand the construction of a rapper's artistic character and the way he is playing it, it is helpful to take a look at old African oral traditions first. The African-American art of performance and the play with identity and interpretation has a long history. It goes back to the ancient mythology of Esu-Elegbara, which has its origin in the West-African Yoruba tribe. "Esu is the guardian of the *Crossroads*, master of style and of stylus... the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation" (Gates 1988, 6). His closest Western equivalent is Hermes, the etymologic source of the term "hermeneutics" and a "metaphor for the study of the process of interpretation". In contrast, Esu is a "metaphor for the act of interpretation itself" (Gates 1987, 237). For means of self-expression, Esu makes use of the so-called "trickster figures", most importantly the "Signifying Monkey". Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote an eponymous book, in which he explains the origin of this tale.

According to the myth, a monkey, a lion and an elephant are living in a friendly relationship with each other. One day, the monkey tells the lion that the elephant was talking badly about him. After they get into a fight about it, the lion realizes his mistake of having taken the monkey literally. The message of this tale is that signifying is a literary trope of indirect speech. It is the combination of repetition, revision and reversal. This is what Diddy is doing in *Bad Boy for Life*, where he repeats white America's stereotypical view on black masculinity and reflects the preconceived ideas of the black male gangsta rapper. Thereby, he does not only mirror the social and cultural conventions but he presents them in an indirectly altered manner, which means, he re-signifies them. In reference to the tale, Diddy personifies the monkey, whereas the lion symbolizes prejudiced white America or any other of hip hop

culture's opponents. "The monkey rarely acts in these narrative poems; he simply speaks. As the Signifier, he determines the actions of the Signified, the hapless Lion and the puzzled Elephant" (241). It is what Diddy and his colleagues are doing as well: they do nothing but talk, and yet they change our social and cultural perceptions by indirectly calling attention to them.

In *Bad Boy for Life*, Diddy does not address any stereotypes on black male hip hop artists straightaway, but after analyzing the video through a filter of signification, its parodical character becomes obvious. In order to express his criticism, Diddy does not use any common references or direct accusations but he only reflects the common notions of black masculinity. "In this sense, [he] does not signify something; rather, [he] signifies in some way" (239). Besides this way of indirect speech, another hint at this act of signifying is his name. Sean Combs changed his artist's name many times by now. He turns himself into an object of parody when Stiller does not know how to address him because he did not know how Diddy was calling himself these days (02:58).

The invention of a proper character leads back to "the tradition of African American renaming as an empowering gesture that overcomes the disability inherent in accepting 'slave names'" (Saddik 117). So when Diddy asks "What changed but the name?" (01:04), he demonstrates his on-stage character's variability and diversity, and that it is him to choose who he wants to be. Implicitly, he also declares that his professional life does not interfere with his personal identity. In conclusion, what we see in *Bad Boy for Life* must not be taken literally. As I explained, it is a form of signifying, which means it is based on repetition and reversal. Diddy reflects existing stereotypical resentments against black masculinity, and by slightly altering them he twists them around and re-signifies them.

3.2 Locating Hip Hop

3.2.1 The Gangsta

Hip hop has its origins in the ghetto of big American cities, consisting of mostly black neighborhoods. There is no other style of music that pays as much attention to where an artist comes from as hip hop does. Particularly in gangsta rap, artists “acquired a locational and economic specificity” (Baldwin 147). This became clear during the conflict between rapper Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G., which was not only a feud between two artists. Fuelled by the media and increasing record sales, the dispute transcended the personal level and became internationally known as the *East Coast West Coast* conflict, which ended with the death of both protagonists (Lynskey n.p.). This shows how fundamental the aspects of space and location are, in order to gain respect in the hip hop world and connect with other artists and the audience. As Murray Forman summarizes, members of the hip hop society drew a clear “distinction between East Coast rap and the emerging LA ‘gangsta’ style, [...] with a more specific sense of place and, subsequently, greater significance to local youths” (78).

At the same time, it supports the stereotypical understanding of hip hop artists as highly aggressive, violent and criminal people. In *Bad Boy for Life*, Diddy and his gang represent their neighborhood in several ways, too. When Black Rob starts to rap, he introduces himself without mentioning his name but explaining he was coming “straight from the Harlem streets” (02:16). He also refers to a famous Harlem wrestling team, the “Harlem Heat”, which is written on the shirts the women on the backseat of the car are wearing. Additionally, Mark Curry directly addresses B.I.G. and says “ain’t shit changed since the Notorious” while you can hear and see Diddy in the background, whispering “we miss you, B.I.G.” and raising his forefinger to the sky (03:42). Although all this seems very usual for the

hip hop community, what is exceptional is the fact that there are not only East Coast rappers like Xzibit arriving at the scene but also, for instance, Snoop Dogg (02:27) and Ice Cube (02:36) got a short appearance in this video and join the others at their party. This is remarkable because they originally come from the West Coast. In conclusion, Diddy distances himself from this media-regulated conflict and thus rejects the image of gangsta rappers being narrow-minded, aggressive and violent people.

3.2.2 Perfectown

No matter what record label they belong to, all those rappers have one thing in common: the hood. The “hood experience” is the only version of “Black experience” (Hart 15) that is commercialized and publicly appreciated in terms of authenticity, as Walter E. Hart demonstrates in his paper on the culture industry’s representation of hip hop music. The “hood experience” has been a common image to U.S. society ever since “the beginning of a wider U.S. interest in production and consumption of popular visual images of African American culture”, which gave way “to the genre of Blaxploitation film[s]” (Ongiri 8). In such movies, African-American culture and life in the ghetto of big American cities was represented in one way only, namely as a “profoundly visual, aggressively vernacular, and grounded in urban lower-class cultural and political expression” (7).

Transferred into the context of music industry, this picture of black life in the ghetto is maintained within the image of gangsta rap. Consequently, “the gangster, ghetto, violent, sexist, and materialistic form of hip hop music [is acknowledged] as the most authentic version of rap music and rap music came to be the mediated representation of authentic Blackness” (Hart 14). In contrast to this familiar hood reference, *Bad Boy for Life* is situated in a fictional American suburb called “Perfectown” (00:01). It is a place where exclusively white conservative people of the middle-class live. So when P. Diddy and his hip hop associates arrive in their black Mercedes and a huge black night liner pulls into the drive way, a storm is coming in and all neighbors come out on the street to watch the new arrivals. The reserved looks on the residents’ faces reveal anxiety and suspicion towards their new neighbors. After a short time however, they become curious about this “black” lifestyle, watching and even engaging in the garden party of Diddy and his company (01:38, 01:47). In the end, the whole neighborhood is having a big party where everybody is celebrating with each other.

What is happening here is again a form of re-signifying black stereotypes. This time, it is about the cliché that a rapper's life essentially exists of partying, drinking and living the good life. Or to put it another way: hip hop artists are consistently depicted as hypermasculine, lazy and addictive personalities. Hip hop actually represents all aspects of life, yet its common reputation is another one. In *Black Noise* Tricia Rose states: "From listening to too much commercialized highly visible hip hop, one could get the impression that life in the ghetto is an ongoing party of violence and self-destruction with 'style'" (141). It is exactly this media-constructed image of black hip hop artists from the ghetto that Diddy reflects here.

This image is a product of America's culture industry, a term that goes back to Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Culture industry describes the people and businesses in charge of a country's cultural production. In the context of black U.S. hip hop, there are two major parties in charge of rap music's hypermasculine gangsta reputation and the stereotypical representation of black hip hop artists. On the one hand, there are black entrepreneurs supporting the notion of "'racial authenticity', where the position of absolute difference [to the white male] is self-induced" (Baldwin 140). This idea culminates in the gangsta persona and responds to the concept of white patriarchy we have already examined. "However, the new gangsta / playa aesthetic is not a full embrace of marketplace ideology and commodified cultural productions" (142). The radical gangsta attitude is often a means to address "direct confrontations with black stereotypes" and "make visible the social construction of what appear as natural black characteristics" (150).

On the other hand, there are white-owned multinational businesses working with stereotypical views on the black artists, whom they promote. "The effect of the culture industry's cycle of assumptions is that it acts upon historically negative racial perceptions and

reinforces those perceptions by only allowing a one-dimensional version of hip hop music to define the genre as a whole and projects the negative characteristics of one-dimensional hip hop onto the Black community and individual Blacks” (Hart 12). Furthermore, the “multi-dimensional messages of hip hop from the 1980s began to narrow throughout the 1990s based on the assumption that Whites were the primary audience and as Whites accepted the negative images and messages as authentic representations of Black culture” (13). Hence, the culture industry’s promotion and distribution of hip hop music constantly repeats certain racist, stereotypical images of black men, which reinforce prejudices and make the mostly white audience believe what they see is the essential truth about black culture.

P. Diddy’s *Bad Boy for Life* breaks this vicious cycle simply by choosing an unusual setting for his video that is different from the common spatial circumstances of the black hood experience. We are instantly surprised to see such a calm, decent American suburb in a hip hop video. This moment of astonishment is the result of Diddy’s visual rhetoric. The suburb is a place commonly associated with white middle-class citizens, but Diddy and his fellow rappers occupy this space and turn it into theirs. “For so long, space had been the chief signifier of racial difference, and freedom and movement had become white prerogatives. Yet these artists are now turning static space into sites of creative play and parody” (Baldwin 158). I will come back to the argument of parody in the next paragraph, as for now this confusion seems to vanish as soon as Diddy and his peers arrive on the scene. Yet it differs from other mainstream hip hop videos by embracing those anxious, white neighbors instead of mocking them for their lack of coolness. By parodying the mainstream perceptions of race and space within hip hop culture, Diddy’s video produces two important effects. Firstly, it clearly represents an anti-racist and integrating attitude without giving up established elements of hip hop culture and style. Secondly, it displays the white-supremacist phenomenon of “racial voyeurism” (Rose 55), which I will now discuss more closely.

3.3 Racial Voyeurism and the Fascination With the Black Male Body

Racial voyeurism is a phenomenon of racial distinction and display. The core of this sociological act is the visual consumption of the black body by a white audience. For this paper, I am focusing on the consumption of the black *male* body. Racial voyeurism has got a long history. As Elizabeth Alexander neatly sums up, “[b]lack bodies [...] for public consumption have been an American spectacle for centuries. This history moves from public rapes, beatings, and lynchings to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing” (92) and most spectators have been mostly white men.

The same thing happens in *Bad Boy for Life*. In the basketball scene (03:50), there are three tall, athletic white men playing against P. Diddy and basketball legend Shaquille O’Neal. Although it is three against two, the white team does not stand a chance of winning against the black competitors. Since basketball is commonly seen as a typically black sport, this is quite usual. However, if you take a closer look at it you notice that Diddy and O’Neal are not only showing off their skills but even during the game, they look straight into the camera and in the end they perform a little dance of victory. This illustrates the importance of physical competition between black and white men and the consumption of the black male body in action. The winners’ ostentatious behavior is already a noticeably comical performance of sports as male contest. Still, the aspect of parody becomes more evident in the golf scene (02:39).

Golf is the exemplary sport of the white upper class. Presenting himself as a rap artist, who wears bourgeois clothes and plays golf, Diddy plays with stereotypical notions of race and class. Additionally, he stresses this effect by his overly arrogant acting, the plastic lawn from where he tees off, the black golf ball which has “Bad Boy” written on it, and the fact that he is standing on top of a roof and even has his own golf caddie at his side. He tries to

make a professional impression but when he finally hits the ball, he ball hits a neighbor's window and Diddy quickly goes back into the house. If Diddy wanted to state his superior physical status, he could have chosen another ending for this scene. Instead, by shooting the golf ball through the window, he exposes how ridiculous it is to distinguish black and white sports as well as male competitiveness.

What needs to be highlighted here is the spatial and contextual aspect of this parody. "Parody is one of the techniques of self-referentiality by which art reveals its awareness of the context-dependent nature of meaning, of the importance to signification of the circumstances surrounding any utterance" (Hutcheon 85). In this case, the effect of parody is achieved by choosing an unusual setting, and by mixing up the motifs of white suburbia with the performance of black male hip hop. "Parody, then, in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony" (32). Here, the background would be the prejudiced ideas of what black hip hop had to look like and the new incorporating work would be Diddy, self-confidently overthrowing the borders of representing hip hop and consciously reflecting his reputation as a gangsta rapper.

Furthermore, sports are a male zone. This becomes utterly clear when you look at the German term for a sports team, a "*Mannschaft*", wherein the players are implicitly assumed to be male. Overall, men keep to themselves when it comes to sports because its main purpose is to gain respect from other males. In *The Gender of Desire* by Michael S. Kimmel argues that "[m]anhood is demonstrated for other men's approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance [...] Masculinity is a *homosocial* enactment" (33). Beyond the realm of athletic competition, homosocial enactment is also a relevant topic for the hip hop community and America as a whole. This is what Byron Hurt shows in his documentary *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, where he analyzes the construction of manhood in hip hop culture.

3.4 Hypermasculinity as a Form of Homosocial Enactment

3.4.1 The Black Male Community

As being said, sports are not the only way used to perform masculinity in the public sphere. In rap lyrics and music videos, too, the most important part is to give evidence of one's masculinity. Byron Hurt's documentary points out the fact that sexist, misogynistic and homophobic portrayals of others self-evidently harm women and homosexually oriented people, but that their primary aim is to underline the performer's strength and masculinity in the eyes of a likewise male audience. Although it is a big problem, I cannot talk about the state of misogyny and homophobia right now. What I want to focus on is this: Hurt explains how the construction of masculinity works within hip hop culture and lists the essential features of manhood, which are necessary to get respect from other rap artists. The core values, as we already know from our readings of bell hooks, are physical, sexual and economical power, being in control and dominate other men and people in general: "If you're not any of those things, people call you soft or weak or a pussy or a chump or a faggot. And nobody wants to be any of those things, so everybody stays inside the box" (Hurt 02:30).

This stereotypical picture of male gender identity puts especially strong pressure on the black youth. Growing up under such restrictive social preconditions, they are taught how to be a man and how they are supposed to feel about themselves. Contrary to this, black male adults and especially hip hop artists get criticized for their misogynistic and homophobic behavior, although it is a result of the patriarchal and gender-stereotypical values that have been imposed on them since childhood. Therefore it must be made very clear that those overtly hypermasculine attitudes cannot rightfully be regarded as authentic representations of the artists' true opinions on gender identity.

As mentioned before, the culture industry is the main factor that triggers and supports such gender-stereotypical representations of black men of the hip hop community. Diddy addresses this issue in his video when he is showing a little boy how to dance and move in front of the camera (01:25). The boy is a miniature version of Diddy. He is wearing the same clothes, the same jewelry and is dancing exactly how he is shown to. This scene is a substantial wrap-up of America's black male gender education we just talked about and through its direct and transparent presentation, it makes the audience realize the process of constructing gender identity.

Another aspect is the setting of hip hop performances as the stage for advertising black masculinity. In his paper on *Hip Hop Consumption and Masculinity*, Damien Arthur says that "masculinity can only be enacted in the presence of other men [...] In modern society men share their masculinity in places where passions that are mainly shared by men are enacted (for example, where a team sport [...] is being played, or where subcultures like motor racing or Hip Hop meet)" (107). In relation to this statement, *Bad Boy for Life* seems like the paradigm of hypermasculine enactment. A basketball match, a motocross stunt and the huge hip hop performance at the end of the video exemplify those stereotypical characteristics of manhood. And what must be stressed furthermore is the fact that the cast is almost entirely consisting of men.

There are only a few sequences in which women appear at all, like sitting in a Jacuzzi (01:40) or on the backseat of a car (01:54). "Although women are not completely absent from these modern bastions of masculinity, they are relatively marginalized and are constantly positioned at the periphery" (Arthur 107). By only representing females in the background, resembling pieces of decoration rather than actual people, the male protagonists step even more in the center of attention. But again, Diddy's work is not simply one of those videos that worship manhood and reduce women to objects of masculine self-glorification. In fact, by

directly presenting and implicitly criticizing all kinds of stereotypical views on black masculinity and black hip hop artists, Diddy personifies the modern ideal of masculinity. This new prototype of a modern black man is what Holt and Thompson called “the man-of-action hero” (428).

“The man-of-action hero resolves the inherent weaknesses in two other prominent models, the bread winner and the rebel” (Arthur 107). According to this, Diddy leaves behind the conservative role model of the breadwinner that was imposed on black men by white-supremacist patriarchy, and at the same time transcends the rebellious figure of hip hop’s gangsta rapper. The video neither shows sexist gestures nor promotes aggression, violence, or crime. It simply focuses on the hip hop community as a group of self-confident men respecting each other. This sense of community is a key factor of defining the new form of masculinity Diddy promotes here. Even on the cover of *The Saga Continues*, the album on which *Bad Boy for Life* was released, it says “P. Diddy and the Bad Boy Family”. Hence, the feeling of being a strong collective is performed publicly and it is the sign of a proud and respectful homosocial community of men.

3.4.2 The Fusion of Black and White

An important event in the elaboration of such kind of African-American male community spirit has surely been the Civil Rights Movement. After the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, revolutionary voices from the black public arose with increasing urgency. As cultural equivalent to the political Black Power Movement and the Black Panther Party, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) came into being. It has been an association of black artists from Harlem that soon gained attention in a wider area. Representing a more and more radical point of view, cooperating artists addressed their works to an exclusively black audience. They supported the notion of a “Black community”, which objected “the Civil Rights Movement’s utopian vision of community based on racial inclusion, integration, and cultural harmony” (Ongiri 97). As a result, many opponents of this radical approach accused the BAM of anti-nationalism and fanatical ethnocentrism. Furthermore, the stereotypical figure of the “Black macho” came up, a “highly stylized, hypermasculine, military Black [man]” (Ongiri 21). As we have already seen, this pejorative idea of black masculinity exists until the present day.

But what really is at the core of the BAM and black rap music is a dialectic dispute between integration and separatism (Zips, Kämpfer 311). Hip hop music is an important instrument to reflect social, economical and personal circumstances. In their book on Black Nationalism and hip hop, Zips and Kämpfer even claim that hip hop is a kind of philosophy and view of the world. They say that through hip hop, many African-Americans could create some sort of black consciousness. According to them, this is not only the case with what is commonly called “conscious rap”, but gangsta rap also reflects the social, cultural and psychological conditions of black men and women in the U.S. (317). I agree that stereotypical views on black American hip hop artists and their work are simply the product of insufficient understanding and knowledge about African-American culture and life in the United States. I

will discuss hip hop's representation of black life in America more thoroughly when we talk about the correlation of authenticity and hip hop. As for now, I want to focus on the fusion of black and white masculinity as suggested in *Bad Boy for Life*.

Gabriele Klein explains that in order to become a respected member of the hip hop community, one has to stick to the display of a specific set of codes, but at the same time one needs to establish an individual style of self-representation. This way, the affirmation and transformation of existing forms of self-expression are closely related. Common images of hip hop artists are preserved through unconventional ways of re-signification: Rhetorical techniques like parody and hyperbole are usually used by rappers to modify the fixed rules of self-enactment (200) and "an important mode of modern self-reflexivity" (Hutcheon 34). One example for such kind of re-signifying stereotypical standards and images of representation is the scene in which one of the white middle-class neighbors is mowing his lawn (02:08). The man trims his lawn with a small, manually handled lawn mower. In the next shot, you can see Diddy sitting on a huge electronic mowing machine, cruising around on his property rather than gardening. So what we have here is the adaption of a stereotypically regular male competition concerning the irrational question: who owns the bigger car? This contest grounds on the cliché that every man is searching for ways to prove his strength, power and competitiveness. Besides, rap artists are said to be superficial and macho. Diddy now uses these prejudices (the conventional norm) and places them in an unusual and therefore ironic context (unconventional form). This way, he puts the stereotypical character of this certain image of masculinity on display and changes it, "without really destroying it; only the function is altered" (Hutcheon 35 f.).

But there are other more direct and explicit ways in which Diddy illustrates the connection or approach of black and white in this video. Most obvious: the people. First, there is an all white-conservative suburban neighborhood. They seem rather unhappy when Diddy

and his crew arrive in the street. Whereas in the beginning, there are two separated groups of people, one of them white and one of them black, they engage with one another in the course of the video. Finally, the whole neighborhood is celebrating a huge party and there is no distinction between black and white anymore. There are black as well as white people on stage and in the center of attention, which makes clear that now it is a perfectly mixed party crowd. But still, the only women in this pool of people are in the audience, so the entertaining part remains male business. Or put another way: the homosocial community stays intact.

The second feature combining black and white is the clothing. Also a main part of hip hop culture, almost all of the characters in *Bad Boy for Life* are wearing clothes in black and white. Most striking is the scene with P. Diddy and Ben Stiller (02:58), who are both celebrities and people of public interest. Here, Diddy is wearing a white shirt and Stiller put on a black one, which suggests a notion of connectedness and equality on a visual level. The half moon is still another detail reflecting the fusion of black and white. You can only see the moon for a short moment during the motocross scene (05:00). The night sky is completely black and the waxing half moon is shining bright. From the camera angle it is only visible when Diddy reaches the climax of his motorcycle stunt in mid-air. This symbolizes Diddy's attitude towards society's and the culture industry's views on black masculinity. As being said, this specific lunar phase obviously mirrors the fusion of black and white. Capturing the climax of Diddy's flight reflects his success in business, since he made it to the top. And the stunt he is performing in this very second shows that his tactics are rather risky but he nevertheless acts according to his beliefs. Diddy breaks out of the pre-framed notion of black hip hop and leaves behind the differentiation of black and white masculinity.

Additionally, a garage band appears several times in the video (01:05, 01:17, and 02:54). It consists of two white and two black men, one of them being Diddy himself. The light-skinned band members are in fact members of actual rock bands. The guitarist is David

Navarro, ex-member of The Red Hot Chili Peppers, and the man on the drums is Travis Barker, most commonly known as the drummer of Blink-182. By including the performance of real life artists in this video, *Bad Boy for Life* does not only reflect an idea of mixing “black” and “white art” but it actually does so by having artists from different genres collaborate with each other. Besides, the garage in which they are playing looks more like a record studio than a place where you would usually park your car. Floor and walls are all white with lots of light bulbs on it. This setting indicates the up-coming success of such kind of cooperation, encouraging people to take the best of each branch of art in order to create something new and impressive.

Finally, the party is over. We can see Diddy coming out of his house the next morning to get the newspaper. Across the street is a group of neighbors, all light-skinned, excitedly waving and whistling at him (05:30). Again, those people are not actors but the band Crazy Town. The music they make is called rap metal, which is a combination of rap and alternative metal music. When Diddy spots them, he waves back and says to himself: “Damn, there goes the neighborhood...” (05:34). This scene is highly ironic because the former social structure is completely turned upside down. “Perfectown” changed to “Crazy Town” and Diddy slips into the role of an average citizen and a decent neighbor, wearing a white bathing gown on a quiet sunny morning, wondering about the others’ eccentric and obscene behavior. At first sight, this seems funny to us. But when we think about why we are amused by that, we must confess that it is because of our own stereotypical views as consumers of black hip hop music. It does not fit to the stereotypical image of a gangsta rapper when Diddy makes an appearance in a casual outfit and with a decent attitude. Although it is the very same judgmental attitude his white neighbors occupied in the beginning, nobody found surprising the way they behaved. Hence Diddy takes people’s pre-existing attitudes on black masculinity and black hip hop, and by re-enacting them brings to mind their stereotypical and unjustified character.

And it is not only the white bourgeoisie that is to blame here, it is the entire audience and consumer unit of hip hop music that is addressed by Diddy's criticism.

Despite all those elements signifying the approach of black and white, Diddy does not give up his own style and identity. On the contrary, he personifies a strong black man with high self-esteem and the ability to reach with his art the most different kinds of people. William J. Harris wrote: "No post-Black Arts artist thinks of himself or herself as simply a human being who happens to be black; blackness is central to his or her experience and art" (xxvi). So what Diddy represents here is self-consciousness mixed with a feeling of equality. *Bad Boy for Life* spreads the message that it does not matter if you are black or white, as long as you are original in what you are doing. This leads us to the question of authenticity, which is a major topic in hip hop culture and will be discussed in the next paragraph.

4. Black Male Authenticity in Hip Hop

4.1 Keeping it Real

Being authentic or ‘keeping it real’ is one of the most important characteristics within hip hop culture. To ‘keep it real’ is related with the expression of coolness we talked about in the beginning of this paper. To be real implies to be cool as well and vice versa. But what we have already learned from Gwendolyn Brooks is that being cool is a tough business. Coolness often is nothing but a fake attitude mostly insecure and underprivileged males try to adopt. “Keepin’ it real is a floating signifier in that its meaning changes depending on the context in which it is invoked”, as McLeod describes in his essay on authenticity within hip hop (139).

For black men within the hip hop community and especially in gangsta rap, this means supporting and personifying the stereotypical views of white America. “In contemporary culture, that which is urban, black, and poor continues to be marked as the most authentic manifestation of African American culture” (Ongiri 23), it says elsewhere. We have already discussed the pejorative ideas on black masculinity and the prejudices against hip hop music. We have seen that “[w]hat the music industry has done through rap music is to frame the ‘authentic’ Black American not as a complex, educated, or even creative individual, but as a ‘real nigga’ [...] This means that corporate entertainment entities have no vested interest in seeing that rap artists advance themselves creatively or intellectually” (Bynoe 149).

Now I want to focus on the different aspects of authenticity. I will explain what really is at the core of this phenomenon and the reason why a lot of hip hop artists are misjudged because of the way they express and present themselves. There needs to be a frame of reference in order to evaluate the level of authenticity of a certain work. McLeod analyzed the specific elements of authenticity within hip hop music and came up with a list of

classification. He defined six categories on which to measure an artist’s authenticity and put them together in a chart:

Semantic Dimensions	Real	Fake
Social-psychological	staying true to yourself	following mass trends
Racial	Black	White
Political-economic	the underground	commercial
Gender-sexual	hard	soft
Social locational	the street	the suburbs
cultural	the old school	the mainstream

(139)

According to this table, *Bad Boy for Life* would be considered fake, because all parameters of artificiality apply. The video addresses a mainstream audience, it is situated in a white suburb and the occurring artists do not use a noticeably “hard” or vulgar language. Nevertheless, I claim that this music video is one of the most authentic of all, because “authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated but is a socially agreed-upon construct” (135). That is exactly what Diddy demonstrates in this video. He explicitly adopts aspects that are commonly considered fake, like choosing as a setting an American suburb, inhabited by white middle-class citizens, openly demonstrating his commercial success and addressing a mainstream audience. At the same time, he works with regular hip hop themes like big cars, group appearance and a gangsta attitude. This way, Diddy’s self-enactment crosses racial, political-economical and cultural conventions of the American society by embracing its black and white stereotypes. He catches the viewer’s attention and brings preconceived notions of race into focus.

As being said, our picture of the standard black male hip hop artist with his tough attitude and street experience is constantly repeated by the mainstream music industry and accepted by a mainly white audience. Despite its global popularity, many people do not appreciate this kind of art a serious business. The problem is that those people do not understand the true impact of authenticity and the performance of black male identity through hip hop. In her essay *Rap's Unruly Body*, Annette J. Saddik gives a profound explanation of how to “read” hip hop and what authenticity really means in this context.

4.2 Black Masculine Performativity

According to Saddik “gangsta rap focuses precisely on the negotiation of contradictory constructions of black male identity within American culture” (113). This is what we have been talking about on the previous pages. The reason why so many people do not see this mediating character of hip hop music is because they have little insight into what it means to be a black man in American society. In his biography, rapper Ice-T explains:

The main misinterpretation and misunderstanding of rap is in the dialogue – in the ghetto talk and machismo, even in the basic body language. This is what I call shit talkin’ [...] Too many people take shit talkin’ seriously because they have no frame of reference [...] The misinterpretation of rap comes from people who have no insight into the ghetto mentality and attitude (94).

The audience takes what they are offered without questioning it or realizing rap’s complexity. This is why many hip hop artists are accused of sexism, homophobia and racism when all they do is reflecting society’s attitude towards them. The term “nigga”, for example, is one of the key words that cause public uproar because instead of recognizing it as a metadiscursive statement on the social category of race, it is miscomprehended as a form of racist threat (Zips, Kämpfer 332).

Another subject of hip hop that is being criticized is its ostentatious performance of one’s economical power and superiority. Although the poor American male who makes his way from the lower-class to the top of the business world is the prototype of the famous American Dream, hip hop artists keep being accused of improper behavior when they present their achievements upfront. Saddik detects this irrational habit as a set of “elitist cultural display codes”, which she explains like this: “The American Dream dictates that one can and should obtain power and wealth, [...] but the signifiers of power and wealth [...] must not be ostentatious, must not be ‘flaunted’” (114).

Hip hop reveals this hypocritical standard by breaking its rules in an extremely exaggerated manner, and it combines a two-fold contradiction. First, capitalist success is a key value of American society that must not be talked about because flaunting is regularly considered inappropriate and therefore must not be practiced. Second, the tale from rags to riches is implicitly meant to be an exclusively white American ideology. In opposition to that, Diddy and a lot of other black male hip hop artists take this urban myth and make it theirs. They explicitly demonstrate their wealth and the status that they have gained although they did not confirm the social norms and “cultural display codes”. Same goes for every other aspect of white America’s “patriarchal, capitalist American Dream” (ibid.), like sexual virility, superiority, etc. The result is what we earlier called “hypermasculinity”.

Hip hop artists and rappers do not make up entirely new standards. They take the old ones from white conservative middle-class America and manifest them in such a radical way that they destroy those values by actually following the cultural rules. “In hip hop’s postmodern complexity of performance (of race, of gender, of sexuality, and finally, of capitalist America) lies the chaotic force that threatens to overthrow conservative power relations while simultaneously working within the system of commodity capitalism” (112). In other words, this is not an approval of white America’s mindset but it is a sociocritical approach to those values and a very self-ironic performance, since the common history of black American masculinity and the individual experience of many black men in the United States is crucially different from present day black masculine performativity. The art of many rappers, including Diddy, is nevertheless to be considered “authentic”. The reason why and how to define authenticity in the terms of hip hop culture will be the subject of the next paragraph.

4.3 Artistic Sophistication

In her essay, Saddik refers to an interview of rapper Ice Cube on *The Charlie Rose Show*. There he talked about the performance of black masculinity in hip hop music and Saddik reformulates the essence of his message like that: “[T]he performance should not be confused with the performer” (111). Rap is an art of performance and, like how an actor conceals his own personality behind the character he is playing, a rapper does not reveal his true identity through the character he represents on stage. From this follows that the question of authenticity of hip hop artists does not hint at a claim of truth of what they are talking about in their lyrics but it is rather a question of “artistic sophistication” (*ibid*). So, to be authentic and respected means to create an original style and develop an individual hip hop character to perform on stage, in music videos and the media.

In *Bad Boy for Life*, the separation of on-stage artist and real life person is reflected in several ways. On the one hand, Diddy draws a straight line between his official performance and the private space. The video starts with Diddy and his crew moving into a big white house, but we never get to see the inside of his home. The whole story plays out front, the curtains are closed and in the walls there are loudspeakers instead of windows (00:50). This makes clear that he, Sean Combs, is self-consciously slipping into the role of P. Diddy. He parodies this “double life” in the end of the video. There he is only wearing a bathing gown, barefooted, but still wearing a big chain around his neck (05:22). He lets us only see the character he chose to perform publicly, but we cannot draw any conclusions about his true identity. Nevertheless, people are very keen on tracking down his real personality, although it is not about the truth of his performance but the originality of his work. Accordingly, Diddy must be absolutely confident in his role and certain about how to protect it. The “awareness of ‘being seen’” (*ibid*), as Saddik quotes Ice Cube, is the main part of a rapper’s self-enactment.

Diddy proves his assurance in the scene with Ben Stiller (02:58). Trying to talk about hip hop, Stiller has problems to articulate himself. Simply calling it “this whole thing” and wishing to be invited to “one of those crazy house party things”, he obviously does not have a clue about hip hop’s performativity. This way, he is representative for white America as a whole. Assuming that Diddy’s private life resembles the show he is performing in public, Stiller expresses the unawareness of hip hop’s complexity and its several layers of meaning. People take the artist’s performance literally and subsequently misunderstand that “the exaggeration and self-consciousness of black male rappers clearly is something other than the performance of one’s ‘true’ self” (123). This misinterpretation is what the tale of the Signifying Monkey is referring to as well.

5. “The Black Aesthetic By-Product of the American Dream Machine...”

... is hip hop, according to Greg Tate (cit. in Bynoe 147). As we have learned hip hop is a mainly black dominated art form within an otherwise white dominated social context. But although most American rappers are dark-skinned, many of the biggest music corporations are in the hands of white business men, directing and forming the mainstream view on black masculinity in hip hop. As we have seen in 3.2.2, the social construction of racial prejudices is not only due to white-owned businesses but there are also black entrepreneurs involved in the making. Nevertheless, this process of stereotyping is working because of a supposedly mostly white audience and the omnipresent ignorance towards racist categorizations.

Stereotyping describes the one-dimensional representation of different “groups of people by a single, fixed set of characteristics” (Berger 115). On a visual level, “when there is a pattern of recurrent, stereotypical presentations, the depictions acquire a layer of ‘meaning’ they otherwise would not have except for that context. Consumers of the media are presented an overall vision of social life that is regularly reinforced and repeated [...] The individual programs or films are not intended to *say* to people that members of these groups are less able and of lessened worth, but by surrounding audiences with an electronically created environment in which this is the social reality, the overall effect is much the same” (Berger 118). Accordingly, Diddy uses the mainstream motifs of black male hip hop artists, repeats them one more time and thereby changes their message in the same indirect way those stereotypes have been introduced in the first place.

As a form of self-parody, Diddy re-signifies white America’s stereotypical view on black masculinity in hip hop by exaggerating pejorative ideas that gangsta rappers are accused of, like sexism, racism and violence. At the first moment when shown to a middle-class white audience, *Bad Boy for Life* usually causes unspecified amusement. That is because what we

see at first sight is on the one hand “so typical” for a black male hip hop artist and on the other hand ridiculously irrational. At second sight however, we realize that what Diddy is doing here is nothing else than intentionally picturing what we are expecting of him: the black macho, intruding peaceful American suburbia and causing trouble. But that is not what is happening. By presenting himself in a deliberately comical way, he goes beyond mirroring white America’s prejudiced view on black masculinity to actually twist it around.

We have seen that in order for this rhetoric of parody to work out and to re-signifying social and racial stereotypes, the aspect of context is very important. We noticed that through “trans-contextualization” (Hutcheon 32), Diddy parodies existing stereotypes on black male hip hop and especially gangsta rap. All in all, it is clear that *Bad Boy for Life* is far beyond simply being a piece of comedy but with its several layers of meaning and its power of re-signification, it is a remarkable piece of work and it deserves to be acknowledged as a progressive performance of black masculinity in American hip hop.

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