



# LAND OF UNLIMITED POSSIBILITIES — LAND OF SYSTEMATIC OPPRESSION. THE AMBIVALENT REPRESENTATIONS OF AMERICA IN JAY-Z AND KAYNE WEST'S *WATCH THE THRONE*

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## INTRODUCTION

Originating in the United States, rap music and the culture of hip hop are closely connected with America.<sup>1</sup> As hip hop's place of origin, the US has a lasting impact on the culture as well as the music and wherever hip hop is consumed and rap is made—in its various global forms and faces (Dawn Goldsmith and Fonseca 2019) and in all its regional manifestations (Hess 2010)—pictures of the USA are transported along with it. This entanglement leads to a variety of representations of America in rap that are as diverse as rap itself (Fitzgerald 2020).

To gain insight into the representations of the US in rap, I will focus on Jay-Z and Kanye West's collaboration-album, and will ask, how is America presented in both artists' *Watch the Throne*? I argue that there are two major representations of the US in this album; on the one hand, the US is depicted as the land of unlimited possibilities where every person can live their American Dream, on the other hand, the US represents the country where radical racial inequalities prevail through systematic racism against Black people. This dual role of the US is evident in the different narratives told on *Watch the Throne*, seen in Jay-Z and Kanye West's boasts of their success and rise from-rags-to-riches as well as and in both rappers' accounts of their experiences with and insights into racial injustice and systematic racism. To support this argument, I examine how both rappers portray their own success stories and connect them to America, thus presenting America as the land of unlimited possibilities for individual

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<sup>1</sup> In my text I use the terms "United States", "US" and "America" synonymously.



people, then analyze the negative representations of the US and show how Jay-Z and Kanye West articulate their experiences with oppression, discrimination, and racism in their songs. Last, I will show that both narratives and representations of the US are not articulated separately, but that they stand side by side and mutually reinforce each other.

In order to situate *Watch the Throne's* dual representations of America within the broader hip hop context, I begin by taking a look at hip hop culture's origins, and in the course of my analysis, I will also utilize additional rap songs to demonstrate my argument. This will show that similar representations of the United States have been present in hip hop since its beginnings and can be found in many places in rap—and that the representations of the US on *Watch the Throne* are representative of hip hop culture's perceptions and conceptions of America.

## THE ROLE OF THE US IN THE BEGINNINGS OF HIP HOP AND RAP

The culture of hip hop and the musical genre rap emerged in the South Bronx of New York City in the late 1970s. At that time the Black people living in the US were subject to extreme racial inequalities and discrimination—which is still the case today (Horowitz, Brown, and Cox 2019; Lee et al. 2020). Black people were worse off financially, less represented politically, and more likely to be policed and harassed than the white population due to systemic racism. This led to material precarity and social marginalization of Black people. As such, Black people in New York were forced into isolated communities which were extremely underfunded and often provide inadequate housing options. This intentional marginalization and ghettoization of Black people exacerbated the material consequences of systemic racism, this motivating a vicious cycle of oppression and discrimination (Hodge 2016; Price III 2006).

Hip hop emerged as a reaction to these material and political realities of Black people living in the New York and throughout the whole US (Kitwana 2002). It started as block parties where DJs, MCs, breakdancers, and graffiti artists came together to celebrate their own Black culture and temporarily get away from the hardships of their everyday lives (Price III 2006). Soon thereafter, as the (white) American population became aware of this culture, rap was 'imported' into white middle-class society, was played in discos and on the radio—and within a short period of time found favor in all of America. This increasing spread of rap led to its commercialization, and the emergence of a market for rap music (Polfuß 2021)—which had a financial, social and emancipative dimension. Because those who could rap had the chance to use their talent to earn money and gain social recognition, rap soon opened up a possibility for financial and social emancipation (Vernon 2018)—and proved to be a way for Black people to gain economic mobility substantial enough to make it out of the underfunded neighborhoods (Deis 2015).



Thus, we can observe that America plays a dual role in the beginnings of hip hop culture and rap. On the one hand, the US is the country of massive inequalities where Black people are discriminated against and largely excluded and isolated from white society. On the other hand, however, the US is portrayed as the land of unlimited possibilities, where individual Black people, despite adverse circumstances, have the possibility to achieve financial success and social recognition through rap music—and possibly even become nationally or even globally recognized stars.

This dual role of America is also reflected in rap’s lyrics. When rappers talk about their experiences, about how they grew up and what it means for them to be a Black person in the US, they convey pictures of America. These representations can be both positive (land of unlimited possibilities for individual people) and negative (land of systematic oppression of Black people). Thus, rappers articulate, transmit, and disseminate various representations of the US through the stories they tell in their raps.

#### THE US AS A LAND OF UNLIMITED POSSIBILITIES FOR INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE

In rap, the US is often presented as a land of unlimited possibilities where, unlike in other countries (EN 2015), anything is possible for anyone if, according to the narrative of the American Dream (Cullen 2004), they just work hard enough. This idea that anyone can make it through hard work is, as Fors (2018) points out, particularly important for Black people who come from low-income communities and face adverse circumstances. Because many rappers come from this demographic, the American Dream and representations of the US based on this dream are frequently found in US-rap—namely, wherever rappers tell their personal from-rags-to-riches-stories and verbally associate their financial and social rise with the possibilities they have in the US.

An early example of such an association can be found in the first rap song ever recorded, *Rapper’s Delight* by the *Sugarhill Gang* in 1979 (González 2018). The three rappers Wonder Mike, Big Bank Hank and Master Gee, rap about how they rock the dance floor, impress the ladies and own expensive status symbols, and how they have achieved all this by themselves, solely through the use of their voice. In this context, the first-named of the three mentions “America”:

*And guess what, America, we love you  
A 'cause ya rock and a roll with a so much soul  
You could rock 'til you're hundred and one years old (Sugarhill Gang 1979)*

Within these verses, Wonder Mike associates the Sugarhill Gang’s success with the US as he presents America as the place which allowed them to “rock and a roll with a so much soul”—ergo, the place that created the conditions and possibilities for the rappers to succeed.



Similar representation of the US as a country where everyone has the possibility to succeed through their own work and to live their American Dream can be found throughout hip hop history. This is shown not least by the many songs that mention the American Dream in their title (Jeezy, The Game, Diddy, Nelly, will.i.am and Killer Mike are amongst the most prominent rappers to have songs called *American Dream*, Jay-Z and B.o.B have songs called *American Dreamin'*) or mention it in their lyrics. As this selection of artists suggests, this representation is especially prevalent in the genre of Gangsta Rap—a rap genre in which rappers cultivate the image of being a ‘Gangsta’ by flaunting criminal lifestyles and placing a lot of emphasis on the fact that they ‘made it’ as a self-made man through their hustle (Harkness 2014).

The representation of the US as the land of unlimited possibilities through the telling of one's own self-made success story reached a new peak in 2011 with the collaboration album *Watch the Throne* by Jay-Z and Kanye West. In it, the two artists extensively illustrate their own success through their braggadocious lyrics, their expensive videos, the album's majestic-looking cover (Rolling Stone 2011), and its exclusive producers, samples, and feature guests (Breihan 2011) as well as through the overwhelming design of Jay's and Ye's joint tour (Es Devlin 2012). In terms of content, both artists mainly rap about their “life of fame and fortune” (The Most Unruly 2019), brag with their financial and symbolic wealth, and portray themselves, as Jay-Z does in the song *Murder to Excellence*, as “the new Black elite” (Jay-Z and Kanye West 2011). Jay-Z and Kanye West make this kind of “luxury rap” (Burton 2013, 343) to show that they have made it from-rags-to-riches and are now living the “legal American Dream” (The Most Unruly 2019)—which, as Croucher (2014) elaborates, they give new meaning to by distorting it to “exorbitant lengths.”

Both artists use lyrical and visual allusions—for example, Kanye West's verse “We like the promised land of the OG's” on *Murder to Excellence* or the gigantic US-flag in the background of the music video for *Otis* (see Figure 1)—to associate their success with the US, which provided them with the opportunity for it. They do this particularly prominently in the song *Made in America*. In his verse, for example, Kanye West delivers a classic ascent story, reporting how he had already told his mother about his (American) Dream as a child, gradually realized it, and is now living it. In the chorus sung by Frank Ocean the connection to the US is made even more clearly. After first mentioning various figures of the Civil Rights Movement—“Sweet king Martin [Luther King Jr.], sweet queen Coretta [Scott King], Sweet brother Malcolm [X], sweet queen Betty [Shabazz]”—as well as the figures of the Holy Family—“Sweet Mother Mary, sweet father Joseph, Sweet Jesus”—the chorus singer concludes by proclaiming: “We made it in America” (Jay-Z and Kanye West 2011). By putting so much emphasis on “America” as the place where the artists (finally) made it, the chorus clearly associates the song's and album's success stories to the US—and presents the latter as the context that makes the artists' dream succeed in the first place. At the same time, by

mentioning Civil Rights figures and virtually addressing them, it suggests that it has been a long road before Black artists were able to realize their American Dream in America.



Figure 1 Scene from the music video *Otis* by Jay-Z and Kanye West with a stylized US-flag in the background (Source: <https://giphy.com/gifs/kanyewest-kanye-west-jay-z-otis-iFnPmqzeyfjHZiHcqV>)

## THE US AS A LAND OF SYSTEMATIC OPPRESSION OF BLACK PEOPLE

In his verse on the same song, *Made in America*, Jay-Z points out, that we are not yet at the end of this long road and the problems, which are indicated with the names Martin, Coretta, Malcom, and Betty, are not yet over. When he tells us about the struggles of his family and other Black families in the US, Jay-Z draws a different and substantially darker picture of the US.

The depictions of the inequality that is foundational to the US become particularly clear on the above-mentioned song *Murder to Excellence*—the “thematic centerpiece” (Genius 2011) of the album. It vividly depicts various experiences of Black people in the US, and shows that many of them often experience exclusion and violence in their lives and are confronted with precarious living conditions (Breihan 2011). For this purpose, in verse 4, Jay-Z refers to another person of the Civil Rights Movement.

*I arrived on the day Fred Hampton died  
Real n\*\*\*\*s just multiply  
And they say by 21, I was supposed to die (Jay-Z and Kanye West 2011)*

By drawing a parallel between the murder of Fred Hampton and his own birth, Jay-Z interprets his own biography from this event. Jay-Z here, as his reference to multiple



“real n\*\*\*\*s” suggests, is a representative for any Black person in the US, stating that not only his own life, but that of every Black person—or, every Black male (Houston 2014)—in the US is fundamentally endangered and threatened by a premature death (Jones-Eversley et al. 2020).

Kanye West ties in these depictions in his verse 2 when he reports on the everyday life of young Black people in his hometown of Chicago, the “murder capital,” and tells how people you just met were murdered shortly afterwards.

*And I'm from the murder capital where they murder for capital  
Heard about at least three killings this afternoon  
Looking at the news like, "Damn, I was just with him after school" (Jay-Z and Kanye West 2011)*

In verse 3, Kanye West further intensifies his depictions, calling what is happening to Black people a “genocide” (in *Who Gon Stop Me*, Kanye will speak of a “holocaust” against his people). There is a “war” going on at America’s own doorstep, and the Black population is suffering primarily and disproportionately hard (Houston 2014, 67–89). Kanye West concludes his portrayals of violence with a comparison of the death toll of American soldiers in Iraq and the number of murder victims in Chicago, which illustrates the drastic nature of what is happening.

*Is it genocide?  
'cause I can still hear his mama cries [...]  
It's a war going on outside we ain't safe from  
I feel the pain in my city wherever I go  
314 soldiers died in Iraq, 509 died in Chicago (Jay-Z and Kanye West 2011)*

These depictions of *Watch the Throne* reveal the exact opposite of the land of dreams: Jay-Z and Kanye West present America as a land of nightmares; a land where Black people must constantly fear for their own safety and the well-being of their loved ones (Burton 2013), a land where a land where drastic inequalities and systematic racism prevail, and a land where Black people are marginalized, crowded into ghettos, and left to their own fate (Stupar 2015).

Such representations of the US as a country that does not care about Black people and actively “precarizes” them can be found again and again in rap (Rose 1994); when, for example, *Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five* in their early rap song *The Message* (1982), without calling it active oppression, report on and criticize the precarious living conditions of Black people (Turino 2008, 93–121), when American Gangsta rappers portray the criminal path as the only chance they had as Blacks to get out of precarity (Harkness 2014), or Childish Gambino in *This is America* (Supratman and Wahyudin 2019), as well as many other rappers in their protest songs—that emerged as response



to the murder of George Floyd in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter protests (Kaufman 2020)—explicitly denounce and indict racial abuses and systemic racism against Black people in the US (Lehrman 2021).

## INTERACTIONS BETWEEN BOTH REPRESENTATIONS

*Watch the Throne* presents the US as land of unlimited possibilities, where every person can make it from-rags-to-riches and live their American Dream—as well as a land where huge inequalities between population groups prevail and the country where Black people are systematically oppressed. Both representations do not stand unrelated to each other, but they are—as, for example, Burton (2013) notes in his review of the album—connected and interact with each other. By tying together Jay-Z and Kanye West’s American-Dreamlike success with ongoing racial inequalities, *Watch the Throne* brings together two seemingly incompatible representations of the US—which mutually reinforce one another.

The rags-to-riches story and the success of both artists seem all the more impressive against the background of systematic racism and the oppression of Black people. As a person who, as Jay-Z portrays in his biography, had no other chance than to sell crack in his youth because of his skin color and racial background (Beaumont 2012), him suddenly living a famous and fortunate life, is substantially more impressive than a white person who is afforded much greater privilege in America. This is how racial inequalities and systemic racism increase their individual success story. And if it is even possible for individual Black people in the US to become rich and famous despite all opposition and oppression, this in turn reinforces the image of a dreamlike America—where basically everything is possible for anyone.

Conversely, the fact that some Black people “make it,” (Klein and Friedrich 2003) amass enormous wealth and influence, associate with powerful people, and are among the self-proclaimed “new Black elite” (Jay-Z and Kanye West 2011) raises the question of why society treats some Black persons as celebrities while at the same time systematically oppressing the majority of Black people. Thus, rap holds up a distorting mirror and shows society just how paradoxically and arbitrarily it treats certain groups of people (Tretter 2021a, 2021b).

As Jay-Z and Kanye West tell in their interviews with *The Breakfast Club*, they are aware of the reciprocal dynamic between these two narratives and representations. In *Watch the Throne*, they deliberately present both of them side by side, in order to send, as Jay-Z puts it, “dual messages at the same time” (Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM 2016a). In doing so, they intend to show, first, how paradoxical and arbitrary the disparate treatment of Black people is in the US. This aims, second, to support criticism of current racial inequalities and systematic oppressions in America, and is meant, third, as Kanye West points out, to underscore demands for greater opportunities for



emancipation and expression for Black people (Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM 2016b).

## CONCLUSION

There are two prominent representations of the US in *Watch the Throne*. On the one hand, the US is the land of unlimited possibilities. This is evident where Jay-Z and Kanye West rappers portray their rags-to-riches rise, their famous and fortunate lives, and present America as the country that allowed them to achieve their dream. On the other hand, the US is the country where Black people are systematically oppressed and racialized. This is evident where both rappers recount experiences with and offer insights into racial injustice and systematic racism.

A look back at the origins of hip hop and side glances at other rap songs have shown that this dual role of America as oppressor and enabler was already present in the early days of hip hop and has repeatedly been present in rap ever since. This suggests that *Watch the Throne*, with its dual representation of the US, representatively echoes a common motif in hip hop.

Where both representations occur together, they can reinforce each other—and paint an ambivalent picture of the US. The unlimited possibilities become even more unlimited the more unequal society is, and the more particular populations are systematically oppressed. Conversely, the social inequality and oppression of Black people becomes more paradoxical and arbitrary the more popular and influential individual Black people become. It is above all the latter, reinforced criticism that may prove relevant—in *Watch the Throne* as well as in other rap songs—and which might hopefully have repercussive effects on American society (Odenthal 2019) and contribute to making the US more of a land of unlimited possibilities rather than a land of systematic oppression.

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