

Colored Music in America: a Colored Sense of Belonging? A cultural-linguistic study of hip-hop music lyrics

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Abstract

As all people and nations experience a state of flux, national culture loses its solidity in the context of a global unified culture to which we are called, or rather forced, to belong. Here arise such vital questions as identity and belonging. The case study of this paper concerns the African-American sample as a minority group striving to seize its proper status in a ruthless West. This struggle comes highly significant when treading the edge of popular culture. The research is an inquiry into the extent to which belonging is felt, expressed and staged by the community in question throughout their representative popular culture, to mention hip-hop music. The complex nature of the topic requires, in fact, a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses, first, an anthropological examination of the backgrounds of the African-American ethnical group; second, a linguistic investigation of the African-American musical discourse (hip-hop lyrics); and third, a critical analytic deduction of the activist mission played by such musical genre concerning questions of identity and belonging. Practically speaking, the linguistic part will analyse a selected corpus of hip-hop song lyrics. The methodological process will use a qualitative content analysis technique to extract the linguistic patterns reinforcing the scope of identity and belonging. The concluding part will state some limitations that the research had encountered.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnomusicology, as an area of research, draws its importance from the interdisciplinary line according to which topics and research problems are tackled. Studying the aspects of cultures' coexisting requires a prior investigation of the ethnic and anthropologic backgrounds of those cultures, origins and development. Regarding language as one of the cultures' pillars, it is equally required to explore the linguistic aspects of ethnic groups' discourse using Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, Ideological Discourse Analysis, etc. In addition to history and language, music represents a vital constituent of peoples' culture in the way it expresses and transmits their concerns in the form of artistic messages that aim to spread awareness, call for unity and spur rise and protest. In this respect, Hood (1975) agrees that ethnomusicology is "a field of knowledge, having as its object the investigation of the art of

music as a physical, psychological, aesthetic, and cultural phenomenon (p.2)”. Following this ethno-musicological pattern introduced, the paper will investigate the African-American community's status in the USA through the study of their representative popular culture, notably hip-hop music and the activist mission it has undertaken vis-à-vis the deteriorated racial and social conditions.

As suggested by the title of the paper, the focus will be on the musical manifestation of the African-American culture, tackling hip-hop music as a case study in an attempt to discern the historical, ideological, political and social meanings conveyed by such genre at the level of form and content. Much of recent ethnomusicological work drew on the innovative perspective that “music-making serves to articulate identity amongst minority groups by circumventing the monologic construction of ethnic awareness promulgated by dominant national elite and by emphasizing the sonic and visual attributes of expressive culture as a unique manifestation of alterity (O’Connell, 2004, p.1)”. DeNora (2000) instead asserts that “the sense of “self” is locatable in music... Musical materials provide terms and templates for elaborating self-identity, for identity’s identification (p.68)”. The research will be, as such, an assessment of hip-hop music's role in reaffirming black identity, the enhancement of black individuality and distinctiveness and the urge to change and ameliorate the prevailing state of affairs.

Regarding the weight of African American history, this paper will be interested in discussing the anthropological backgrounds of African American ethnic groups, including their African origins, the history of immigration, slavery, emancipation, social segregation, etc... Background knowledge about the history of African Americans will allow determining the origins and manifestations of the black cultural tradition as a product of their status on the one hand and a means of resistance on the other hand. In the same context, the historical part will focus on the significance of music to the evolution of African American awareness of racial emancipation, social enhancement, identity and cultural safeguard and ethnic empowerment. Among the different genres and constituents of the African American musical tradition, rap music emerged as one of the most influential genres regarding the political and social circumstances accompanying its emergence on the one hand and the innovative style appealing to the taste of both blacks and whites on the other hand. On the activist dimension of hip-hop music, Sullivan (2001) writes: “Rap represents the volatile musical response to a series of transgressions against the African-American community. Rap, also called hip-hop, emerged at a time when the voices of African American leaders_ political, popular, musical, and otherwise_ were distinctly lacking. Violations against the African-American community passed largely uncontested (p.35)”. Ideologically speaking, Lusane (1993) eventually speculates that “rap is a form of political, economic, and ideological empowerment (p.39)”.

Coping with the linguistic meaning of the research, the second major part will be concerned with the distinctive features of the African American language variety (African American English) in an attempt to detect and analyze its ideological significance at the level of form and content. The unique linguistic features and the weighty thematic content constituted an influential militant instrument that enhanced the African American status ethnically, socially and culturally.

For the sake of consistency and coherence, the essay will be developed in the form of distinct and clear-cut sections providing first a historical review of the musical and linguistic

evolution of the black ethnic group, second a methodological display of the research methods and tools, the text of the corpus and the criteria of selection, third an analytical section in which data will be analyzed and interpreted and finally a findings section where results will be discussed and verified according to the hypotheses initially stated.

2. HISTORICAL REVIEW OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ETHNIC GROUP

2.1. African American History And Musical Culture

The choice of the African American sample as a case study considers the weighty historical luggage, the cultural and linguistic peculiarities, the distinctive ideological inclinations, the unparalleled activist pursuit and other unique characteristics related to that specific group. Regarded as a minority ethnic group in a typical western society capped by the white elite, African Americans, Boyd (2008) notes, were simply objects within a popular culture whose representation tended to be quite stereotypical and problematic. The route to self-esteem and identity determination was long and challenging. As Boyd (2008) states, they attempted to harness the means of production and create their own representations instead of being represented by others. This determination to own representation was a means to resist racial oppression by articulating experiences of resistance and struggle and articulating oppositional identities in highly creative and dynamic ways, beginning with the oral tradition from which all other cultural forms originated. The ethnomusicological study of Black culture, specifically music, would enable exploring the historical, ideological, social and political agents that helped trigger such individualistic representation. Regarding the correlation existing between history and cultural expression, such exploration is made possible only by tracking back black history from the early era of slavery until the contemporary period.

Surviving ethnic, racial and ideological isolation in a hostile western society characterized by white superiority and arrogance was in itself an accomplishment for African Americans. Commenting on the changes occurring in black history and the status it seized in the modern era, Bhabha (1994) writes, “Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the ‘present’, for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix ‘post’: postmodernism, post-colonialism, post-feminism, etc. (p.1)”. The history of African-Americans has been, in fact, a paradox of incredible triumph in the face of tremendous human tragedy. Triumph echoed in the individualistic and flourishing way of life they created out of agony and hardships. A unique style was regarded at first as alien and unconventional but then inspired and influenced all social strata and shaped whole lines of perception and awareness. For better assimilation of this reality, a brief survey of African American history is requisite at this level. According to my own assessment, black history can be subtracted to three main big stages: The trans-Atlantic slave trade or mostly known as the Middle Passage, the era of slavery in America, the emancipation era and modern racism.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade can be nominated as the most significant chapter in black history. The middle passage designates the path taken by slave trading ships from the west coast of Africa (where the slaves were obtained) across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World (where slaves were traded for goods such as sugar and molasses). The slave trade lasted almost four centuries, from the middle of the sixteenth century until the 1860s, marking the most horrific and traumatizing human experience ever. The passage shipped at least twelve million people from different ethnic groups of Africa on a journey of five weeks and sometimes as long as three months. Conditions on board were described as the ultimate in human misery and

suffering. In addition to cruel treatment, slaves were loaded with huge numbers which carried infectious diseases causing high mortality rates on the one hand and weakness and insanity for the survivors on the other hand.

Although coming from different regions and various ethnic origins, slaves were alike subjects to the same traumatic experience and shared a sense of victimhood and humility. They were cruelly stripped out of their identity but could, at the same time, forge by circumstance a common culture, a collective new way of life. Long nights aboard the ships witnessed the development of a particular way of psychological survival that included stories, poems and chants retelling the agony of the journey and the longing for home. This fact came to light, especially with slave settlement in the new world and the beginning of black existence under white mastery. More than this, Gilroy (1993) declares that the middle passage took on a pre-eminent and foundational position in black history. He states that apart from the limiting sense of victimhood, cultural exclusion and inferiority that most historians try to enhance, the experience was ultimately the root of productive syncretism and cultural continuation.

This brings us to tread the next historical phase in black history, corresponding to slave settlement in the new world and the beginning of the institution of slavery. From their very arrival to the new world, black people were confronted with the reality of a different culture characterized by hostility and discrimination. Working as servants and farmers to benefit white society, slaves endured all sorts of humility and suffering. They were deprived of any sense of identity or cultural belonging and were treated as commodities owned by white masters. The lived circumstances gradually led to the emergence of a sort of awareness on the part of black slaves who felt the need to develop their own culture, one that maintained racial identity on the one hand and espoused traits of the new way of life on the other hand. White masters' effort to erase all sorts of blacks' connection to their origins was persistent. Slaves were prevented from using their native language to practice communal customs or develop their cultural forms of expression. Despite these cruel policies, the black community developed a wide consciousness that triggered strong social and cultural movements against white oppression. Raboteau (1978), in a valuable depiction of what he calls "African survivals", describes the cultural transformation that altered blacks' way of life, notably at the level of musical expression. He accounts for the various ways in which African music evolved into African American music and described the African influences on the African American singing styles which emerged in the 18th Century black church. The most significant characteristic that distinguished black music at the time was the religious trait joined to the primitive rhythms of the origins.

Ex-slave Robert Anderson describes: "The coloured people...have a peculiar music of their own, which is largely a process of rhythm, rather than written music. Their music is largely or was...a sort of rhythmical chant. It had to do largely with religion, and the words adapted to their quaint melodies were largely religious (Raboteau, 1978, p.222)." This type of music, referred to as Spirituals, was performed in praise of the Christian God, and names, Biblical figures, and Christian imagery replaced words of the African gods. African style and European hymnody met and became in Spirituals a new Afro-American song to express the joys and sorrows of the religion which the slaves had made their own. With the chronological advance of the social and political movements from both black and whites communities, mutual influence grew stronger and new cultural and musical forms and brands appeared to mark a new-born African American proper culture.

The beginning of the 19th century marked the edge of the black revolution against slavery, which came to a close with slaves' emancipation and the launch of the civil war.

Concerns afterwards turned to the reconstruction of the new society, covering all political, economic, social and cultural areas. With the many rights gained during the era, African American sense of individualism grew stronger and efforts to create a representative way of life enlarged. Keeping pace with the escalating state of affairs, new musical brands appeared, among which the Blues and Jazz were the most remarkable. Despite the increasing pulse of economic and social reconstruction, black status remained deplorable, and sentiments of discontent persisted. New musical forms began to appear and included innovative trendy rhythms and themes that reflected the deteriorated status quo. Among these, we mention R&B, rock and roll and funk music which was interested in the socio-economic concerns of the African-American community.

The social state of affairs at the time marked the persistence of black discrimination, which engendered fervent sentiments of protest and resistance by African Americans. Peaceful protest actions were confronted with government and Police brutality, which produced anger, hatred and resentment of the part of blacks and led to many incidents of aggression and violence. Protest movements transcended the political and social dimensions to encompass the cultural one as well. Black anger was conveyed through musical expression, represented notably in hip-hop music. On the activist dimension of hip-hop music, Sullivan (2001) writes: “Rap represents the volatile musical response to a series of transgressions against the African-American community. Rap, also called hip-hop, emerged at a time when the voices of African American leaders—political, popular, musical, and otherwise—were distinctly lacking. Violations against the African-American community passed largely uncontested (p.35)”. As such, hip-hop manifested not only as a means of struggle but also as a symbol of individualism and identity determination. To this, Lusane (1993) adds that “rap is a form of political, economic, and ideological empowerment (p.39). Characterized by instrumental and discursive inventiveness, rap music was distinguished for its rapid wordplay, complex rhyming and storytelling, unconventional language and structure, metaphors and hidden meanings and sensitivity to aural patterns. Being the voice of an alienated, frustrated, and rebellious black community that has recognized its vulnerability and marginality in post-industrial America, hip-hop music constituted the most weighty and influential type of music in the black culture, at least in the modern era. The ideological and activist aspects and the distinctive linguistic features related to that musical genre made it a good case for study and examination.

2.2. The language of African Americans AAE/AAVE

Following the cultural-linguistic nature of the research, this part will provide an account of the characteristics of African American English (AAE), which constitutes a significant pillar of the cultural tradition of a black ethnic group. In addition to the cultural dimension and relevance to the ethnomusicological tendency of the paper, AAE represents an extremely suggestive component of black music and, notably, the hip-hop genre in the way it contributes to the distinctiveness and singularity of that music. Many terms have been used to describe English spoken by African Americans in the United States, including Ebonics, Black English, African American English (AAE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE is, however, distinguished from African American English (AAE) in the way it relates specifically to a vernacular form, spoken principally by working-class African Americans. In definition, AAE has often been used to refer to the linguistic features of the language of African Americans, most unlike Standard American English (SAE). With the modern immigration policies allowing the entrance and integration of immigrants with Caribbean and African heritage in America, definitions of AAE have expanded to include English speakers from other

countries, as well as individuals who come into contact with African Americans and acquire some of their language patterns.

The beginnings of AAE were first found in the writings of Paul Laurence Dunbar (1893), one of the first American authors of purely African ancestry and the son of ex-slaves. Most of Dunbar's works were written in the "plantation" dialect, the early 20th-century literary version of vernacular, which he thought would be the most acceptable form to both black and white readerships. Research on AAE regarded English variety from different perspectives. In Sociology and Anthropology, linguists such as McDavid (1963) viewed the use of AAV by educated people as a subversive phenomenon parting from the argument that, anthropologically speaking, these varieties never existed at all. Others (Stewart, 1975) viewed educated people criticizing the use of AAE as prompted by the sentiment of hatred and marginalization. Ranging between this dichotomy of perception, research on AAE evolved outstandingly during the 20th century. It focused on the description of the historical origins, lexicon, grammatical and phonological features, use and function within the members of the speech community in concern. The same period witnessed a developing concern for the linguistic, historical and cultural ties reflected in the AAE variety. Some of these concerns tackled the process AAE addressed political, social and ideological issues in the face of white discrimination. These ideas were advocated by names such as Alleyne (1938), Baugh (1980) and Mufwene (1992a). Goffman (1961), however, devoted a special interest to power relations in discourse between whites and blacks on the one hand and between blacks themselves on the other hand.

As significant as history and culture are to the empowerment of the African American ethnic group, language enhanced black individuality and distinctiveness, notably when associated with such an influential musical genre as rap music. A linguistic analysis of AAE excerpts in rap lyrics is requisite to construe such significance. The linguistic investigation of AAE can be explored at the level of syntax, semantics and phonology being the most relevant aspects corresponding to the nature of this research.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Corpus description

The corpus designated for analysis consists of three rap song lyrics identified as follows: the first is entitled "I wonder if heaven got a ghetto" by Rap singer Tupac. The second one is entitled "Uncle Sam! Goddamn!" sung by Brother Ali while the third is entitled "I heard 'em say" by Kayne West. The three text lyrics are taken from the internet website www.genius.com; a site which reliably preserves the spoken text's characteristics noticed through the transcription of the phonological aspects and out-of-lyric interventions by the singer. It also provides a commenting excerpt on the thematic significance of the song as well as information about the writer, the composer and the date of release. The website is also praised for it offers the possibility of joining the audio song version to the lyrics in order to assess the conformity between the spoken and written text on the one hand, and better assimilate the linguistic and paralinguistic patterns on the other hand.

Thematically speaking, the three lyrics tackle the concerns of the black community in corporate America, including poverty, racial discrimination, police violence, the status of

ethnic identity and others. Regarding the linguistic dimension, the three texts are loaded with AAE aspects that could easily be analyzed at the levels of syntax, semantics and phonology. After the description, the following part will enumerate the criteria I adopted for selecting my corpus.

3.2. Criteria of selection

This part deals with the criteria adopted for selecting the lyrics as a type of discourse to study, the songs transcribed into lyrics and the artists performing them. As for selecting the lyrics as a type of discourse, I considered the structure of the lyrics as a type of writing. Song lyrics on the same structural aspects as poems which allow the investigation of structures such as lines, stanzas, meters, sound patterns, rhymes, syllables, etc.. songwriting, on the other hand, is characterized by a large and distinctive linguistic stuff encompassing semantics (word meanings and relations, registers of vocabulary...), grammar, syntax and phonological aspects. Another criterion that led to the choice of rap lyrics as an African American type of writing refers to the remarkable linguistic deviations existing within the transcription of the text (lexical, grammatical, phonological ...), which convey a weighty amount of cultural and ideological significance.

The selection of the artists, however, targeted African-American male rap singers, considering the scope of their fame, popularity and activist undertaking. The songs were selected based on the themes tackled (identity, protest, social concerns...) and following the paper's topic. The linguistic and paralinguistic features of the lyrics are also vital to my choice in the way they contribute to the thematic function of the text.

3.3. Method of analysis

The investigation will employ a content analysis method based on a qualitative corpus examination. The analytical work involves detecting the linguistic features previously mentioned through the corpus and interpreting them at the level of discourse, ethnicity and ideology, focusing on the effect produced on readers/ hearers.

On the whole, this paper will try to detect the presence and persistence of the African-American identity throughout the musical discourse by extracting features and manifestations of the ethnical, ideological and linguistic distinctiveness throughout the text of the lyrics. From there, we will defy the established theories denying the existence of a proper African American culture and prove, instead, the impact of such culture on contemporary western society.

4. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1. Findings

For the sake of clearness and intelligibility, the set of findings is organized in this table into the distinct analytical levels required for the study.

Corpus 1: I wonder if heaven got a ghetto (Tupac)

Syntactic/ gram. level	Phonological level	Semantic level (words meaning+ relation)	
Simple Sentences	<u>Phonetic deviations:</u>	Slang lgge (sh**, damn, a** fu**),	Repetition

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Juxtaposition instead of linkers	*Deletion of final clusters Th = into stop (d/t) or deleted	motherfu**er) +repetition	Absence of Coherence /Cohesion(linkers)
Juxtaposed Short clauses	*Deleting post-vocalic “r”: (nigga)	Racist vocabulary (nigga, hate, black, label, ghetto, whiteness, racist faces, races)	Informal lgge (mama, papa)
Non-conjugated verbs (doing)	*Ing= in / ang		Short forms abbreviations
Copula absence (we under)	*Deletion of initial unstressed sounds (because= cause, until=til)	Vocabulary of violence (burn down, whipped, riot, police, blast, criminal, loot, die, shoot, death row, disgrace, evil, kill each other, snatch, penitentiary, pull a trigger...)	Borrowing (ancient Latin: thee)
‘Is’ instead of ‘are.’	*Final cluster reduction: morn= mo’		Reference to reality/ context (names)= authenticity of the cause
Third-person « s » absence	*/i/= /Λ/		
Auxiliary absence (got)	*Diphthongs into monophthongs	Vocabulary of poverty: (ghetto, couldn’t afford, poor, stomach hurts...)	
Recurrence if imperative	*Recurrence of fricatives (/s/, /ʃ/,/z/) = hissing sounds		
subject deletion			
Recurrence of pronouns I, We, you	<u>Sound features</u> *No stable rhyme		
Incorrect grammar	*Assonance		
Incorrect negative (no excuse)	*Alliteration		
Tense alternation (past/ present)	*Harsh sounds		
	*Plosive sounds		
	*Rhyme: ending in vowels+ long sounds	Vocabulary of optimism/ hope (heaven, better place, erase the wasted, take the evil out, acting right, both black and white, heal each other	

Corpus 2: Uncle Sam! Goddamn! (Brother Ali)

Syntactic/ gram. level	Phonological level	Semantic level
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Copula absence Conjugated verb absence Recurrence of «you » pronoun Recurrence of imperative Absence of 3rd person « s.» Recurrence of questions/ exclamation Demonstratives(that/ those Use of passive Fronting of direct objects	Deletion of final sounds Sound cluster (joining) « outta.» Rhyme: ending in vowels+ long sounds Recurrence of plosive sounds Harsh sounds: «g/k/ f/ s/ t/.»	Slang lgge goddamn Cultural/ historical references (uncle Sam, slave, land, home, grand imperial guard, bloodshed, genocide, the cold continent, latch key child, the Roman empire, imported and tortured...) Real present names/ places Vocabulary of race (slave, imported, tortured, chained) Vocabulary of violence: wild, tortured Short forms Metaphor (united snakes) Irony
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Corpus 3: I Heard’ em Say (kayne west)

Syntactic/ gram. level	Phonological level	Semantic level
Complex sentences Copula absence Conjugated verb absence Incorrect grammar: are= is Active form Subject fronting Tense alternation+ joining	Initial sound deletion Soft sounds	Autonomy Repetition Irony Religious vocabulary (pray, minister, Allahu akbar, believing, Jesus, the devil) Real names Political vocabulary (government, administer, cop cars, job, minimum wage,)

4.2. Interpretation

The interpretive section will try to infer the historical, cultural, social and ideological messages and meanings conveyed through the linguistic aspects characterizing the corpus of Rap lyrics. From there, we can deduce the activist and militant undertaking achieved by black musical expression to affirm ethnic identity, pride and power.

a. Syntactic/ grammatical level

The type of sentences in the text is very revealing as far as the thematic function is concerned. The corpus witnesses an alternation between simple and complex sentences following the escalating temper of the event telling or the nature of the topic tackled. The complex sentences come in the form of recited events about the daily life of black people involving their fight against poverty, vice, government segregation and unequal opportunities (corpus 1 and 3). They also undertake the role of retelling black history, such as the slave trade and slavery eras (corpus2), to affirm black identity and culture on the one hand and condemn the evil deeds of western societies on the other hand. The complex sentences, as such, come following the complex nature of the themes dealt with, those of suffering, protest and struggle and have the function of reflecting the edgy state of mind lived by the speaker (the artist on behalf of his community) defying the unjust status quo and striving to improve his situation. They also indicate the complex relationship between the black community and white society and government, based on alienation, detachment and fighting. Eventually, the structural and thematic complexity is apt to produce an impressive effect on the reader or hearer's perception of the issue, generating a sense of identification with the cause and sympathy towards the subject.

Besides complex sentences in the corpus, simple sentences appeared in a juxtaposed manner, at a hasty pace reflecting, which reflected the simplistic, unsophisticated style of the black character and his concentration on the main issues through simple and short parts of speech. The rushed succession of simple structures may also reveal the black character's hasty and impulsive attitude reflecting his unstable and erratic state of mind.

Another recurrent grammatical feature in the corpus is tense alternation or fusion. The text did not abide by one discursive tense but wavered between past, present and future. This alternation may be considered a grammatical deviation or viewed as a discursive technique to convey a particular intended significance. Taking into account the themes tackled by the lyrics, tense alternation can function to describe blacks' status in the function of time: their historical past, origins, their unchanging present and their aspiration for change in the future. This may be indicative of the wavering state of mind of the black character, keeping faithfulness to his African origins, sticking to his struggle to improve his present condition and raising hope for a better future status.

The corpus included the recurrent use of minor grammatical forms such as the imperative, the passive form, demonstratives, and concentration on particular personal pronouns, which appeared important to the meaning of the text. The speaker meant the use of the imperative to invite his community members to rise for struggle and improve their status vis-à-vis white segregation and aggression. It functioned as an address to the reader/ hearer to increase the amount of his involvement and affect his consciousness. The repeated use of personal pronouns "I", "we", and "you", often in an interchangeable manner, indicates an insistence from the part of the speaker on the weight and power of the black community as it expresses black persistence to preserve the sense of solidarity and union inside the group. Passive forms worked as a parallel to the passivity of the black subject vis-à-vis the racist institution he lives in and, at some point in the text, reminded him of the history of slavery where blacks lived in a state of complete passivity. Fronting, as a syntactic operation, aimed to put into prominence specific syntactic categories such as the subject or the direct object to

highlight its status or deeds (whether black or white member). Interrogative and exclamative forms appeared persistently as a reflection of the black subject's uncertain and unstable state of mind, his psychological unrest and his endeavour to escape reality.

As far as African American English (AAE) is concerned, the grammatical deviation is agreed to be one major characteristic of that variety. Deviation in the text occurs in different instances, such as 3rd person “s” omission from the verb, which parallels the sense of omission and exclusion felt by black individuals, or 3rd person “s” added to directives which aim at reclaiming the previously omitted entity, of the black subject and reaffirming his presence and efficiency during the pulses of fervour detected in the text. Other deviations consisted of the Conjugated verb absence and tense incorrectness, which reflects the indifference of the subject about the notion of time. For him, time seems static as long as he remains oppressed and marginalized. Such indifference comes from the long and unfinished life of suffering, which makes Time a hopeless and meaningless notion. One major grammatical deviation recurrent in the corpus refers to copula or auxiliary absence, an aspect which reflects the accelerating mood of the text and, accordingly the hasting frame of mind lived by the subject to escape his situation and improve his status as a black member.

b. Phonological level

Phonological variation represents a significant characteristic of the African American English variety. The investigation, as such, can tackle the levels of normative pronunciation first and phonetic organization second. As far as the normative pronunciation is concerned, the text witnessed the recurrence of many deviated phonological features such as final sounds omission (/t/, /d/, /r/, /g/, /n/) or sound change (/ð/= /d/, /θ/= /t/, /e/= /i/, /ai/= /a/, /ə/= /e/). This set of deviations may reflect the ignorance of the black speaker as aliens to the genuine white race about the correct enunciation of the language, which tends to aggravate their difference, inferiority and powerlessness. The omission or modification of sounds, whether intentionally or not, may also reflect the hastened and accelerated mood lived by black members in the pursuit of recovery and change. In recent perspectives, these deviations accentuate black distinctiveness, uniqueness, arrogance, and pride. Such differences persisted through the ages to retell the history of black suffering, struggle and eventual triumph. The text of the corpus also included the repeated use of long vowels and diphthongs (/o:/, /ai/); Sounds are often used to express pain, anger and rage. The long and composed sounds actually add to the thematic function of the lyrics as well as the tension and unease characterizing the text's mood. The plosive sounds: /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, and /g/ excessively used in the text, aided by their phonetic quality, reflect the plosive and unbearable situation lived by black members, enduring their suffering and fighting against the status quo. Regarding the phonetic organisation, it is vital to comment on the rhythmic features to mention the rhyme. It is actually noted that the verses of the lyrics do not stick to one single regular rhyme (repetition of the same sounds). Sounds are rather occurring in an unstable, disorganized manner which constitutes an innovative and subversive feature in discourse but also a signal of individuality and distinctiveness as far as black discourse is concerned. Functionally speaking, the irregular rhyming patterns may reflect the speaker's unstable psychological mood and accordingly serve the text's thematic function. Talking about the quality of sounds most recurrent in the text, we notice the regular repetition of harsh sounds, forming a sort of cacophony and dissonance. This unpleasant composition has for effect, adding to the harsh mood and complex theme of the text besides being an appeal for the reader to interact. Other sound aspects, such as alliteration (repetition of initial consonants)

and assonance (repetition of vowels), aimed to highlight specific lexis and registers serving the thematic function as well as the general mood of the text.

c. Semantic level :

The semantic investigation can be explored at two levels: lexical semantics, which relates to word meanings, and compositional semantics, which relates to the manner words are combined, including the different semantic operations that form these combinations. Making into prominence the themes tackled in the lyrics, a wide range of registers was employed. The register of race and color constituted a central element in black narratives. Vital to black people's life and history, the set of vocabulary related to race and ethnicity describes within the segregated status lived by black community and the sense of marginalization and rejection they endure. It also makes into evidence the relationship that relates them to white community and in some instances functions as to convey the sense of pride and self esteem they preserve in spite of all. A persistent recurrence of the register of poverty and social corrosion has for function to highlight the legacies of racism on the one hand and to produce a sympathizing effect on the reader on the other hand. A wide range of vocabulary related to violence is also detected within the text of the lyrics notably associated with the government or police relation with black members. White attitude is also countered by black violence in a reflection of the sentiments of discontent and anger growing among them. At some points in the text, we can however detect an intermittent vocabulary of hope and optimism to which the speaker resorts to escape the tense mood of gloominess and despair and to call instead for change and improvement. In addition to those mentioned, the religious register is frequently detected in the text regarding the significance of religion to the creed of the African American community as a spiritual escape and a source of empowerment.

Besides lexical registers, the lyrics contain contextual references, mainly historical and cultural ones including real names, places, eras and events. These references enhance the truthfulness and authenticity of the cause on the one hand and increase the reader or hearer's identification and sympathy on the other hand. Insisting on historical and cultural references translates the black community determination to preserve the value of black history and enhance their ethnic individuality and reinforce their sense of pride and esteem.

As far as compositional semantics is concerned, many semantic operations marked their presence in the text, notably foregrounding and backgrounding. The first feature aims to make some particular themes prominent, such as black suffering and discontent. The second feature aims at drawing the general context in which the theme is introduced and, in most instances, providing background information about the historical course of a black ethnic groups. Cohesion, however, can be remarkably traced in the text mainly through repetition. Echoing the same lexis, registers, and topics repeatedly create a coherent unit enabling the reader to keep involved in the subject matter and, more importantly, get affected by the cause displayed. Other semantic aspects appeared throughout the lyrics mentioning antinomy, irony, metaphors... To fetch the significance of the first example, joining antonyms may reflect the speaker's unbalanced mood and state of mind vis-à-vis the injustice he endures, waving between the need to rise and rebel and the call for reconciliation and peace. The irony, however, occurred intending to mock and ridicule the power and oppressing deeds of the government towards black subjects in an accusing and condemning manner. The use of metaphors was also

meant to draw the coercing actions of the state in an amplified, exaggerated way to win the reader's consideration and sympathy.

On the whole, the analytical part implemented a linguistic study of the lyrics of rap songs focusing on the syntactic, semantic and phonological features and deviations characteristic of the African American English variety. The aim was to discern the significance of such features concerning African American history, culture and present status in white America.

5. CONCLUSION

Ethnomusicology as a field of study is mostly praised for its interdisciplinary scope for research enabling to investigate of subject matters with recurrence to multiple disciplines. Choosing the case of African American rap music took into consideration the ethnographic, historical and cultural luggage associated with it on the one hand and the linguistic load related to the African American language variety on the other hand. The paper, on the whole, aimed to discern the cultural, social and ideological meaning and messages conveyed by rap lyrics through the study of the linguistic features and deviations characterizing AAE. To enhance the efficiency of the study, the analytical section is preceded by a historical review of the African American ethnic group and its musical tradition. The methodology part, however, put forward the description of the corpus to be analyzed, the selection criteria and the research tools applied for analysis.

The course of researcher knew, in fact, some limitations and difficulties that can be confined to four main points. The first one refers to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, which offers the possibility and temptation to study it from multiple perspectives. This actually appears to be unfeasible regarding some time, space and academic restrictions. The second point concerns the analytical part, where various linguistic aspects were disregarded in the course of analysis while concentrating on other specific ones that serve the thematic scope of the subject matter. The third problem is the methodological section, specifically with the lyrics' transcription. The transcriptional process risks losing the original aspects of the spoken version, which may alter the authenticity and accuracy of the data under analysis and affect the quality of the results.

Despite the difficulties and limitations encountered by the research, the paper tried to defy the traditional views about ethnic groups' status and cultural behaviour, suggesting that the distressing historical experience can be the focal source of power and prosperity.

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Appendix: lyrics

Lyric 1

I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto
Tupac Shakur

I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto

I was raised, the little young nigga doin' bad shit
Talk much shit, 'cause I never had shit
I could remember being whupped in class
And if I didn't pass, mama whupped my ass
Was it my fault, papa didn't plan it out
Broke out left me to be the man of the house
I couldn't take it, had to make a profit
Down the block, got a glock and I clock grips
Makin' G's was my mission
Movin' enough of this shit to get my mama out the kitchen
And why must I sock a fella,
Just to live large like Rockefeller

First you didn't give a fuck but you're learnin' now
If you don't respect the town then we'll burn you down
God damn it's a motherfuckin' riot
Black people only hate police so don't try it
If you're not from the town then don't pass through
'Cause some O.G. fools might blast you
It ain't right but it's long overdue
We can't have peace till the niggas get a piece too
I want G's so you label me a criminal
And if I die, I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto

I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto

Here on Earth, tell me what's a black life worth
A bottle of juice is no excuse, the truth hurts
And even when you take the shit
Move counties, get a lawyer, you can shake the shit
Ask Rodney, LaTasha, and many more
It's been goin' on for years, there's plenty more
When they ask me, when will the violence cease?
When your troops stop shootin' niggas down in the street
Niggas had enough time to make a difference
Bear witness, own our own business
Word to God, 'cause it's hard tryin' to make ends meet
First we couldn't afford shit now everything's free so we loot,
Please don't shoot when you see
I'm takin' from them 'cause for years they would take it from me
Now the tables have turned around
You didn't listen, until the niggas burned it down
And now Bush can't stop the hit
I predicted the shit, in 2Pacalypse
And for once I was down with niggas, felt good
In the hood bein' around the niggas, yeah
And for the first time everybody let go
And the streets was death row
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto

I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto

I see no changes, all I see is racist faces
Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races
We under, I wonder what it take to make this
One better place, let's erase the wait state
Take the evil out the people, they'll be acting right
'Cause both black and white are smokin' crack tonight
And only time we deal is when we kill each other
It takes skill to be real, time to heal each other
And though it seems Heaven-sent
We ain't ready to have a black President, huh

It ain't a secret don't conceal the fact
The penitentiary's packed and it's filled with blacks
I wake up in the morning and I ask myself
Is life worth living, should I blast myself
I'm tired of being poor and even worse I'm black
My stomach hurts so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch
Cops give a damn about a negro
Pull a trigger, kill a nigga*, he's a hero
Mo' nigga, mo' nigga, mo' niggas
I'd rather be dead than a po' nigga
Let the Lord judge the criminals
If I die, I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto

I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
And I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto

I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
Just think, if niggas decide to retaliate
Soldier in the house, I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto
I wonder if Heaven got a ghetto

Lyric 2

Uncle Sam Goddamn
Brother Ali

Ah, the name of this song is Uncle Sam Goddamn
It's a show tune, but the show ain't been written for it yet
We're gonna see if-
Tony Jerome and the band can maybe work this shit out for me
And straighten me out right quick
I like it so far man
Yeah
Come on, lets go

Welcome to the United Snakes
Land of the thief, home of the slave
Grand imperial guard where the dollar is sacred and-
Let's do this shit for real, come on now

Smoke and mirrors, stripes and stars
Stolen for the cross in the name of God
Bloodshed, genocide, rape and fraud
Writ' into the pages of the law, good Lord
The Cold Continent latch key child

Ran away one day and started acting foul
King of where the wild things are daddy's proud
Because the Roman Empire done passed it down

Imported and tortured a work force
And never healed the wounds or shook the curse off
Now the grown up Goliath nation
Holding open auditions for the part of David, can you feel it?
Nothing can save you, you question the reign
You get rushed in and chained up
Fist raised but I must be insane
'Cause I can't figure a single goddamn way to change it

Welcome to the United Snakes
Land of the thief, home of the slave
The grand imperial guard where the dollar is sacred, and power is God
Welcome to the United Snakes
Land of the thief, home of the slave
The grand imperial guard where the dollar is sacred, and power is God

All must bow to the fat and lazy
The fuck you, obey me, and why do they hate me? (Who me?)
Only two generations away
From the world's most despicable slavery trade
Pioneered so many ways to degrade a human being
That it can't be changed to this day
Legacy so ingrained in the way that we think
We no longer need chains to be slaves

Lord it's a shameful display
The overseers even got raped along the way
'Cause the children can't escape from the pain
And they're born with the poisonous hatred in their veins
Try and separate a man from his soul
You only strengthen him, and lose your own
But shoot that fucker if he walk near the throne
Remind him that this is my home, now I'm gone

Welcome to the United Snakes
Land of the thief, home of the slave
The grand imperial guard where the dollar is sacred, and power is God
Welcome to the United Snakes
Land of the thief, home of the slave
The grand imperial guard where the dollar is sacred, and power is God

Hold up, give me one right here
Hold on
You don't give money to the bums
On a corner with a sign bleeding from their gums
Talking about you don't support a crackhead?
What you think happens to the money from your taxes?

Shit, the Government's an addict
With a billion dollar a week kill brown people habit
And even if you ain't on the front line
When massah yell crunch time, you right back at it
Plain look at how you hustling backwards

At the end of the year, add up what they subtracted
Three outta 12 months, your salary pays for that madness
Man, that's sadness
What's left? Get a big ass plasma
To see where they made Dan Rather point the damn camera
Only approved questions get answered
Now stand your ass up for that national anthem

Welcome to the United Snakes
Land of the thief, home of the slave
The grand imperial guard where the dollar is sacred, and power is God
Welcome to the United Snakes
Land of the thief, home of the slave
The grand imperial guard where the dollar is sacred, and power is God

Custom made (You're so low)
To consume the noose (You're so low)
Keep saying we're free (You're so low)
But we're all just loose (You're so low)
Keep saying we're free (You're so low)
But we're all just loose (You're so low)
Keep saying we're free (You're so low)
But we're all just loose (You're so low)
Custom made (You're so low)
To consume the noose (You're so low)
Keep saying we're free (You're so low)
But we're all just loose (You're so low)

Lyric 3

Heard 'Em Say
Kanye west

West, Mr. West
Uh, yeah, uh, yeah
Uh, yeah, uh, yeah

And I heard 'em say
Nothing's ever promised tomorrow today
From the Chi, like Tim, it's a harder way
So this is in the name of love like Robert say
Before you ask me to go get a job today
Can I at least get a raise on the minimum wage?
And I know the government administer AIDS
So I guess we just pray like the minister say

Allahu Akbar and throw in some hot cars
The things we seen on the screen is not ours
But these niggas from the hood so these dreams not far
Where I'm from the dope boys is the rock stars
But they can't cop cars without seeing cop cars
I guess they want us all behind bars, I know it

Uh, and I heard 'em say (ooh)
Nothing's ever promised tomorrow today
And I heard 'em say
Nothing's ever promised tomorrow today (nothing's ever promised tomorrow today)
But we'll find a way
And nothing last forever, but be honest, babe
It hurts, but it may be the only way

They say people in your life are seasons
And anything that happen is for a reason
And niggas gun clapping and keep to squeezing
And Gran keep praying and keep believing
In Jesus, and one day that you see him
'Til then walk in his footsteps and try to be him
The devil is alive, I feel him breathin'

Claiming money is the key, so keep on dreamin'
And put them lottery tickets just to tease us
My Aunt Pam can't put them cigarettes down
So now my little cousin smokin' 'em cigarettes now
His job try to claim that he too niggerish now
Is it 'cause his skin blacker than licorice now?
I can't figure it out, I'm sick of it now, uh

Uh, and I heard 'em say (ooh)
Nothing's ever promised tomorrow today
And I heard 'em say
Nothing's ever promised tomorrow today (nothing's ever promised tomorrow today)
But we'll find a way
And nothing last forever, but be honest, babe
It hurts, but it may be the only way

With every worthless word we get more far away
And nothing's ever promised tomorrow today
And nothing lasts forever, but be honest, babe
It hurts, but it may be the only way
Ooh, ooh, ooh-ooh
Ooh, oh, oh-oh
Oh, woo-woo
Oh, ooh, ooh