

Makin' It, by Keeping It Real

Street Talk, Rap Music, and the Forgotten Entrepreneurship From "the 'Hood"

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This article deals with rap music and with two distinct discourses in which rap artists habitually engage. It also deals with the way that one, in these, can find a dialectic between the special and the mundane, between succeeding—makin' it—and remaining loyal to the values of your community or culture—keeping it real. Furthermore, it deals with how the rap star Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter handles this dialectic, positing entrepreneurship as both a politics and an ethic, and how we, by reading his lyrics, are led to some forgotten localities in academic research—the disenfranchised, urban, marginalized, entrepreneurial "'hood."

Keywords: *rap music; hip-hop culture; entrepreneurial discourses; Žižek*

"Selling out" or "staying independent," "crossing over" or "sticking to the rawness"—the difficulties of both making it economically as a rap artist and sticking to one's cultural or subcultural values have been a central and a controversial issue within hip-hop culture since the Sugar Hill Gang got rap music its first commercial success with the hit single "Rapper's Delight" in 1979. Right now, at a time when a major industry has emerged around, within, and from the hip-hop culture, one could argue that this question of conflicting values—which has occupied the public discourse for centuries and been posited in a number of ways and which might even be at the very heart of that peculiar form of moral philosophy that later became known as economics (cf. Langholm, 1984)—finds an extreme in

hip-hop culture. On one hand, we have the phenomenon of “bling-bling”—a discourse that boasts of makin’ it and celebrates success through ostentatious spending habits (e.g., Rehn & Sköld, 2003). On the other, we have the harsh conditions of disenfranchised urban America (from which hip-hop culture has emerged) and a discourse treating the often crude reality and daily struggle of the “hood.”

*Rap critics that say—
 He’s “Money, Cash, Hoes”
 I’m from the hood stupid—
 What type of facts are those?
 If you grew up with holes
 In your Zapatots
 You’d celebrate the minute
 You was havin’ dough
 I’m like—
 Fuck critics—
 You can kiss my whole asshole
 If you don’t like my lyrics
 You can press fast forward
 Got beef with radio
 If I don’t play they show
 They don’t play my hits—
 Well I don’t give a shit—
 SO?
 Rap mags try and use my black ass
 So advertisers can give ‘em more cash for ads—
 Fuckers!
 I don’t know what you take me as
 Or understand the intelligence that Jay-Z has
 I’m from rags to riches, niggaz—
 I ain’t dumb
 I got 99 problems
 But a bitch ain’t one—
 Hit me! (Jay-Z, 2003b)*

This article will deal with rap music. More precisely, it will deal with two distinct discourses rap artists engage in and the way one in these can find a dialectic between the special and the mundane, between distinction and community, between succeeding and sticking to cultural values. Furthermore, it will deal with how the much-celebrated (perhaps the most celebrated) rap star Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter handles this dialectic, attiring

himself in the role of the street hustler, positing entrepreneurship (and the closely related concept of hustling) as both a politics and an ethic. Following on the heels of Jay-Z—who provides an interesting example in that he positions himself toward the extremes of both ends of this dialectic—we are led to some forgotten and neglected localities, places where entrepreneurial spirit seems to be thriving and where an entrepreneurial disposition seems to have become a highly coveted virtue, but that have yet to attract the attention of organizational scholars. The article will thus talk with rap lyrics, but as a way of pointing out what looks like a blind spot in organizational research—exposing the discursive construct of the 'hood (i.e., disenfranchised urban areas) and “the street” as analytically interesting entrepreneurial localities.

*Yo, Yo, J—A—Y—
 I—flow— sick
 Fuck— all—
 Y'all haters blow dick
 I spits the game
 For those that throw bricks
 Money, Cash, Hoes—
 Money, Cash, Chicks,
 What?
 Sex, murder and mayhem—
 Romance for the street
 Only wife of mines
 Is a life of crime
 And since
 Life's a bitch in mini-skirts and big chests—
 How can I not
 flirt with
 death?
 That's—life's a nigga—
 Long as life prevent us
 We gonna send a lot and pray to Christ forgive us
 Fuck it!
 Ice the wrists
 And raise the price on these niggaz—
 Y'all cant floss on my level
 I'll invite you all
 To get wit us
 If ya ball is glitter
 When I go
 All the Harlem playaz wall my picture*

*If you get close enough you can read the scripture—
 It reads: Money, Cash, Hoes
 How real was that nigga,
 What? (Jay-Z, 1998)*

Our argument, and the article as a whole, hinges on the necessity to understand economic behavior, such as entrepreneurship, in its specific contexts and localities. In extension, this stands as a criticism of the tendency in organization studies to assume that the locus of organizational life is the middle-class White enterprise, with the cultural connections that brings into play. By instead engaging with the narrative dialectic that forms the basis of a specific genre in rap lyricism, we attempt to show how entrepreneurship changes in this specific locality and acquires a specific, culturally constructed meaning. We argue that by paying attention to “the hustler” as an entrepreneurial figure in a specific oral tradition, the impossibility of sticking to a general definition of what “entrepreneurship” is, is highlighted and thus also the way in which certain localities have been ignored in the study of entrepreneurship (cf. Rehn & Taalas, 2004). By concentrating specifically on the rapper Jay-Z, a figure from popular culture whose entrepreneurial success is tied to his expression of cultural virtues, we want to present an alternative reading of entrepreneurship and that way illustrate how the study of organizations could be extended beyond the boundaries of the safe and the well known, even into the ’hood and onto streets. The lyrics of Jay-Z should thus be seen as a critical engagement with the more staid narratives of the economic that can be read in magazines such as *Fortune* or scholarly journals in organization studies. (It can here be noted that one of the most important talents for an MC is to have what is known as “flow,” that is, a way of delivery that is both original and unique and that has that hard-to-define quality of being aesthetically pleasing. The depicting of this flow by way of words on a page is almost impossible, and the way in which we have transcribed rhymes should thus be seen as highly tentative. A full understanding of rap lyricism demands an engagement with the music as a whole, but the format of a journal article unfortunately hampers this.)

The Art Of Storytelling

Rap music could, in the words of Tricia Rose (1994), be described as a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music [which] began in the mid-1970s in the South Bronx in New York

City as a part of hip-hop, an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. (p. 2)

The influences in this new music form were as plentiful as the South Bronx community at the time was multiethnic. Borrowing or stealing from disco, funk, soul, rhythm and blues, and reggae, but also techno and even heavy metal (the list could certainly be made longer), the music could typically be described as being a collage of snippets—sampled beats, breaks, melodies, groans, moans, phrases—from a variety of musical genres and dates. “Highly rhythmic” and “electronically based” or not, rap music heavily relied on the sampling technique, an activity anyone in possession of a stereo, a turntable, and a record could partake in as the first affordable digital sampler hit the American markets in 1981. This patchwork of music samples was typically put together by the DJ, the disc jockey, the turntablist.

Stemming from geocultural areas “whose oral and kinetic culture has always granted pride of place to rhetorical prowess,” as the French sociologist Loïc Wacquant (1999, p. 144) puts it, a second element central to rap music is the fast and often witty speech typically laid out “on top” of the music, the so-called rap. Referring to several works within the research tradition of verbal art in Black folklore (e.g., Abrahams, 1970; Bauman, 1975; Bell, 1983; Folb, 1980; Kochman, 1973), Wacquant points out that verbal art as performance has been central to the realm of Black commercial culture and that being a “talker” by tradition has been “a quality held in high esteem in the ghetto” (p. 144). In rap music, this quality—this virtue—manifests itself in the oral skills of the master of ceremonies, the MC, the rapper. Performed live in the streets, in clubs, at parties, the role of the MC has often been to keep a party hyped by yelling out call-and-response party chants, such as “All the ugly people be quiet!” and engage in what Rose (1994) terms “a form of rhymed storytelling.” And in line with Wacquant’s remark on the art of talking having been, and being, highly virtuous in this culture, some of the most highly regarded MCs in the history of hip-hop arguably have had the gift of gab, possessing an ability to tell the most astounding stories—often with a twist of wild imagination—from behind the microphone (e.g., Slick Rick “The Ruler” and the album *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick*).

Other times the role of the MC has been to battle other MCs. Such battles—in the form of oral showdowns—have been one of the main ingredients, perhaps even the fuel, in hip-hop culture from the very beginning. MCs have battled each other out on stage, DJs have battled each other out

behind the turntables, dancers have battled each other out “on the floor.” Hip-hop, claims Rose (1994), “remains a never-ending battle for status, prestige, and group adoration, always in formation, always contested, and never fully achieved” (p. 36). Both in discourse and in practice, the battle remains a critical aspect of the culture.

This contested nature of the field, and the notion of community and the 'hood that paradoxically underlies the same, lead us to the two dominant discourses in rap lyricism. Although these could be referred to by many names, we have taken to calling them “makin’ it” and “keeping it real.” These discourses cannot, however, be understood as being completely separate. Instead, they form a dynamic whole, a dialectic of sorts. They, in a way, convey the underlying ethics of the field but also uproot the notion of a master narrative.

What must be noted here, to position our argument, is that we work with an understanding of economic language where this has trickled its way into the domains of entertainment (cf. Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994). In certain areas, “the economic” has even become entertainment in and of itself. This has become particularly clear by the bling-bling phenomenon—a style that deals in showboating, bragging, and conspicuous consumption—that has emerged in and from the hip-hop culture in the past decade (cf. Rehn & Sköld, 2003, 2005). Rappers—belonging to a culture in which the battle is an institutionalized element, most often manifesting itself in rap artists “dissing” (i.e., disrespecting, discrediting, dishonoring) their combatants while accentuating their own greatness (for a more detailed account of the hip-hop culture and its history and traditions, see Foreman, 2002, and Rose, 1994)—do not, however, only brag about the obscene amounts of money they have, how much “ice” (jewelry) they are wearing, how expensive their clothes are, or how ostentatious the lives they are leading are. By and large, hip-hop is also prone to talk their innovative ways of earning a living and getting a business started. Being able to find and exploit new business opportunities, and thereby creating what could possibly become a business empire, are character traits that seemingly outrank both sexual prowess and, for that matter, ostentatious spending habits. Narrations about the various business endeavors rappers are engaged in are told and retold in rap lyrics and in hip-hop magazines. To boot, prominent rappers are featured as tycoons and superentrepreneurs in business and current affairs magazines such as *TIME* (e.g., Tyrangiel, 2003). For the purpose of this article, it is this part of the makin’ it discourse on which we will be concentrating in the following.

Makin' It

Reading the hip-hop magazine *The Source* (e.g., no. 168, September 2003), one could easily get the impression that the way in which a rapper featured in the magazine is going to make it economically is a far more interesting topic than how the music actually sounds. A succession of rap entrepreneurs is lined up in what is proclaimed to be the “dirtiest issue ever” of *The Source*. Two excerpts: Red Café, who has gotten his name from “being able to supply the hood with anything they needed . . . being a one-stop shop” is “about a dollar, making money any way possible” (Mecca, 2003, p. 86). He started doing business on the street and has stuck to his ways. However, he has moved away from selling all sorts of merchandise and offering all sorts of services into the obviously more brag-worthy area of real estate. “I bought a few buildings, resold them and made \$70,000 in profit,” says Red Café (Mecca, 2003, p. 86). And it is evident that this is far more interesting than, for instance, the name of Red Café’s latest record. It is his entrepreneurial spirit that is going to make it for him. “I’m an entrepreneur. I wanna conquer everything possible. That’ll show with Shakedown Records, my company” (Mecca, 2003, p. 86).

Six pages thereafter, *The Source* readers come across an interview with Parrish Smith. The topic of the day? Business, of course—a short lesson on the theme “makin’ it while staying independent.” A large portion of Smith’s musical career has dealt with business and entrepreneurial endeavors. Smith is said to have been the entrepreneurial force that made EPMD (acronym for Erick and Parrish Making Dollars) a successful, and legendary, rap group in the late 1980s and the early 1990s with album releases such as *Strictly Business*, *Unfinished Business*, *Business as Usual*, *Out of Business* and *Back in Business*. Apparently, he was the one taking care of the contacts with Def Jam Records, and in *The Source* he encourages readers and other rappers and musicians to take care of their own business, start a company of their own, and stay independent from larger actors in the industry. Just like he does nowadays. He handles his business and his fate “from start to finish” (Creekmur, 2003, p. 92).

Listening to rap lyrics further conveys the idea that an entrepreneurial spirit and entrepreneurial skills definitely are something worth “frontin’ with” in hip-hop culture. One of the most, if not the most prominent, rap entrepreneur, and moreover one of the most prominent rappers of the past decade, is Jay-Z. Having grown up in the infamous Marcy projects in Brooklyn at the height of the “crack epidemic” in the 1980s, having dealt

in drugs—anything from marijuana, to crack, and heroin—since his lower teens, and having worked his way up in the drug trade, the story (repeated over and over again in his rap lyrics and in interviews) has it that Jay-Z at the outset of his career had great difficulties getting signed by any record label because of his motley background. So along with some friends who assumedly believed in his talent and skill, he set out to make it “the hard way,” starting and running his own record label, Roc-A-Fella Records. And at the very outset of his career, on the first record he released in 1996 (*Reasonable Doubt*, Roc-a-Fella/Def Jam), he and his allies told the world what they were doing—talking business and urging people to do what they had done:

*Now like I was sayin':
We gotta build our own businesses
We gotta get our own record companies goin'—
Like Roc-A-Fella Records
We got to put money back into our own community. (Angela Davies,
from Jay-Z, 1996b)*

After having become a celebrated MC boasting total sales of more than 17 million records, and after having established a multimillion dollar consortium out of Roc-A-Fella Records with several subsidiary companies, Jay-Z ended—or claims to have ended—his career with the release of *The Black Album* in December 2003 (Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam). And on “What More Can I Say,” he likens himself to a street version of one of the (at the time) most celebrated of all business stars:

*Now you know your ass is willie
When they got you in a mag
For like half a billi
And your ass ain't lily
white
That mean that shit you write
Must be illy
Either that or your flow is silly—
It's both
I don't mean to boast—
But damn if I don't brag
Them crackers gonna act like
I ain't on they ads*

The Martha Stewart

That's far from Jewish—

Far from a Harvard student—

Just had the balls to do it

And no I'm not through with it—

In fact I'm just previewin' it— (Jay-Z, 2003c)

Before he, in a later verse in the same song, goes on to take all the credit for the management and entrepreneurial skills involved in this endeavor:

Look what I embody—

The soul of a hustler—

I really ran the street

A CEO's mind—

That marketing plan was me (Jay-Z, 2003c)

From the start around 1995 or 1996, Roc-A-Fella Records had profited heavily from Jay-Z's success as an MC, and around 1999 the business areas that Jay-Z and his two friends and business partners Damon Dash and Kareem "Biggs" Burke (who is not to be confused with the late Christopher Wallace, aka The Notorious B.I.G. or Biggie Smalls, who was also a close acquaintance of Jay-Z's) engaged in, started to broaden. A collaboration with Dimension Films at the end of the 1990s resulted not only in a short movie and a tour documentary but also in the spin-off project Roc-A-Fella Films, which to date has released three full-length movies. Just before the turn of the century, the three also launched the apparel company Rocawear. At the outset focusing on urban, sporty clothing for men, Rocawear has since diversified its offerings, with a range of different brands or sub-brands, also turning toward women and children. By the time Jay-Z found it appropriate to proclaim himself to be a "Martha Stewart that's far from Jewish," the turnover amounted to roughly \$300 million (Gregory, 2003).

A quick glance at what Rocawear is up to in the summer of 2004 reveals the company to be involved in several collaborations. Jay-Z—just like the rapper 50 Cent—already has his name on a sneaker from Reebok, and in the summer of 2004 the company has entered into a collaboration with Pro-Keds, another sneaker company. Victoria Beckham has been involved in a recent marketing campaign, and a new, somewhat more exclusive athletic clothing line—the Team Roc Athletic Apparel Line, which has sprung out of "a youth empowerment program that uses the tenets of basketball to re-shape the lives of young people from Central Harlem and the outer boroughs"—was

launched in the spring of 2004. So when Jay-Z, in “Guns & Roses” from *The Blueprint II: The Gift And The Curse* (Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam), takes on a borrowed identity to show his position in the industry with the words “I’m the young black Ralph Lauren,” the comparison he deploys might not be wholly out of place.

On the release of the *Black Album*—which, again, is supposed to be his last—in December 2003, Jay-Z is portrayed in *TIME* as a superentrepreneur who was “the first rapper to acknowledge that he cares as much about making money as he does about making records, and the first to use acquisitiveness as the major theme of his music” (Tyranigel, 2003) and the one who is leaving the (economically speaking) impoverished music industry. Instead, readers are informed that he is to spend his time and talent managing the “business empire” mentioned above and a few other projects—among them the launch and the subsequent distribution of the “premium two grain, triple distilled Scottish Vodka” Armadale.

To *TIME*, Jay-Z says, “I’ve talked about wanting to have enough to get out since my first album. I was always more interested in the business side of things” (Tyranigel, 2003). It is true that much of Jay-Z’s lyrics deal with celebrating the progress and the success of Roc-A-Fella, with the excesses the profits from this empire permits him to express, and with proclaiming himself as being untouchable at “the top”—both as an MC and as a businessman.

*Geyeah, know what?
I’ll make
You and your wack mans
 Fold like bad hands
Roll like Monopoly
 Ad-vance—you copy me
Like,
white crystals,
 I gross the most, at the end of the fiscal
 year
 Than these niggaz can wish to (Jay-Z, 1996a)*

And as Jay-Z so cocksurely points out, there are plenty of other rappers speaking in similar terms, partaking in and contributing to this discourse of celebrated success and self-aggrandizement. Whether they are all really copying the ways of Jay-Z is of course a more dubious question. It is hard to tell who is “the realest” one out there.

*For those that think Hov' fingers bling bling'n—
Either haven't heard the album or they don't know English
They only know what the single is
And singled that out
To be the meaning of what he's about
And bein I'm about my business—
Not minglin much
Runnin my mouth—
That shit kept lingerin'
But no dummy—
That's the shit I'm sprinklin'
The album width to keep the registers ringin'
In real life, I'm much more distinguished—
I'm like a bloke from London, England
Jeah, you jinglin baby
See I go right back
And I bring 'em in baby
Business mind of a Ross Perot (Jay-Z, 2002)*

Real Niggaz

For although the issue of makin' it is aired in various way—in rap lyrics and in interviews—every so often it is immediately accompanied by statements about how “ghetto,” how “hood,” or how “street” one is. Hear any rappers talk about industry success, business acumen, and entrepreneurial skillsets, and they'll most probably follow it up by telling you that they learned their ways on the street, just hustlin' or engaging in an outright criminal lifestyle, in short, by leading their lives in hard-core urban reality. Jay-Z illustrates the tendency in the immediate continuation of “The Bounce”:

*But never lost my soul
Crossed the line—
I bought pop across the row
Then I walk through the 'hood
Where they up to no good—
Slangin' them O's
Like a real O. G. should
Oh, he's good—
No he would
Never sell out—
He's so young (Jay-Z, 2002)*

In “Money, Cash, Hoes,” he demonstrates that it was not a one-off affair:

Flavors
robust—
Platinum and gold touch
Y'all rap now,
Fast money got slowed up
Niggaz try to stop Jay-Z to no luck
Roc-A-Fella foreva
C— E— O
what what . . .
Us the villains—
Fuck your feelings
While y'all playa-hate
We in the upper millions (Jay-Z, 1998)

And if you recall the quote from “99 Problems” earlier (Jay-Z: “Got beef with radio if I don’t play they show / they don’t play my hits— well I don’t give a shit, SO? / Rap mags try and use my black ass / So advertisers can give ‘em more cash for ads, fuckers!”), Jay-Z is keeping it real by taking a stand against commercial interests by not conforming to the demands of radio stations wishing to profit from his music and by disrespecting rap magazines collaborating with advertisers with the purpose of profiting from his, as he puts it, “black ass.”

Being accused of “crossing over”—that is, broadening the addressed customer segment to include White middle class (which of course, somewhat paradoxically, has become the most profitable customer segment)—seems like every rapper’s worst nightmare. Smith, quoted in *The Source*, claims his strategy of staying independent is a matter of avoiding this risk: “Once you crossover, that’s it. You can’t come back. I stick to the rawness” (Creekmur, 2003, p. 92). This is of course a way for Smith to keep it real. Also, Red Café throws in some of “the real” in the story, seemingly convinced that his entrepreneurial mentality will help get him where he wants to be: “I talk that shoot-‘em up, bang bang shit because I’ve been through it,” he tells *The Source* (Mecca, 2003, p. 86).

References to “the real” are certainly occurring even more frequently on their own, so to speak—that is, not following directly on statements of makin’ it. All carrying Jay-Z’s signature, song titles such as “So Ghetto,” “Dope man,” “Big Pimpin’,” “Streets is Talkin’,” “1-900-Hustler,” “Renegade,” “Justify My Thug,” and, perhaps the least subtle of all, “Real Niggaz,” testifies thereof.

As perhaps the dominating topic of hip-hop lyrics, the concept of “the real” has also gained substantial attention from music research and research in social, cultural, Afro-American, and Afro-Caribbean studies (e.g., Foreman, 2002; Kelley, 1994/1996; Rose, 1994). Among others, Murray Foreman (2002) treats the concept and its ambiguities in *The Hood Comes First*. Although he seems to be fairly content to settle in with Robin Kelley’s (1994/1996) observation that “to be a ‘real Nigga’ is to have been a product of the ghetto” (p. 210), there is, as we shall see, more to the concept.

*I went from no dough
to show dough
to money to blow
From umm, hoe I don’t know, to
get deez
Never, “Excuse me miss,”
bitch please,
never try to provoke
Same disrespectful cat I was when I was broke
Ain’t nuttin changed baby
but the different faces I stop
or maybe some of the places I shop
Now that I run through tracks
like cleets with a Air
for some of the hottest beats,
still catch me eatin at Pete’s
Fuck the foul cat who
screamed out and threatened my life
It’s all good, here I come kid,
dead to the hood
till I’m in the dirt, foul cats like termites
come out of the woodworks,
if they think you stack paper
Dead niggaz react later
while the cancer spread
Teach a team how to scheme before they
answer lead
You know me, I used to shoot hoops in the park,
ain’t nothin changed
except now I push Coupe’s in the dark (Jay-Z, featuring Sauce
Money, 1998)*

A Tale of Two Discourses

The discourses of rap lyricism are, obviously, manifold. Regardless, there are, as we have seen, two dominant themes that emerge as quite distinct, and for the purposes of this article, we will treat these as dominant discourses. Both deal, in their own way, with the issue of reality and ethics, but in very different modes.

Nigga Stu-B-Doo in the G.S.—
Three ooh ooh
Playin' number two Tekken
Zero to sixty in
six point seven seconds {tires screech}
Hangin out the window Actin' up
Chickenheads like
"You doin' fo' months!"
Flexin the Rolex—
Oyster perpetual—
Thirty-five diamonds across the face
Still eatin' out foam cups
And paper plates
We don't call it playa hatin'
In the nine-eight—
It's P. I.
That's pass interference—automatic first down
Want Juice like Tupac—
Then Obey the Thirst, clown
Be in the P.J's—in NY
Rockin' DK
Mix EJ
with OJ, OK?
We say—
"L. A. niggaz got crazy game—
Like John Elway got a superbowl ring"
The homies down for whatever—
We stack the chedda
Swiss bank accounts
And mo' mozzarella
—fella! (Ras Kass, 1998)

We have in an earlier article (Rehn & Sköld, 2003) discussed a specific mode of the first discourse: bling-bling as a specific symbolization of the discourse of success, makin' it. In this mode, excess and expenditure is used to

signal how far one has come, how much money one has, how massively successful one is. Specifically, this is interesting because it highlights the way in which economic language can be deployed in a mode that at least contains the possibility for subversion. Furthermore, this discourse of excess is interesting insofar as it shows us how the economic language can be utilized as entertainment, thus subtly problematizing the assumed dichotomy between economy/organization and entertainment/popular culture. But the rap discourse of makin' it contains more than mere excessive symbols.

*Believe me—
 We run this rap shit fo shizzie
 Make makin' millions look easy
 Everywhere ya turn you see me
 You hear me
 Believe me
 For ya see my pistol in
 3-D—
 No time to call a peace
 treaty
 Dial 9-1-1 cause you
 need de
 Police to help you
 Believe me (D12, featuring 50 Cent, 2002)*

Makin' it stands, in rap lyricism, for standing apart, succeeding against the odds—a version of the American Dream. It signifies being different from the next guy, having made it despite the problems one has faced on the streets. 50 Cent will celebrate his wealth by stating that he made it even after having been shot nine times, whereas Fat Joe pays homage to his earlier poverty by laughing “[I] get a hundred grand from my most garbage rap.” Because rap developed in impoverished urban areas, it is fairly self-explanatory why tales of success would start to flourish in the discourse. Still, it is interesting to note how this discourse, which is usually played out in more implicit ways (rock star lifestyles and demands) became an explicit narrative strategy. Although rock music kept to narratives of “my baby done left me,” rap developed its own discursive strategies, positioning the artist as a political agent. Success, in the specific sociocultural context in which rap should be understood, is not merely a question of profiting from hard work; it is a signifying event. When a statement regarding wealth, success, or survival is voiced in rap lyrics, this is not merely a case of depicting the achievements of a singular individual but a claim regarding possibility and the creation of actuality (e.g., George, 1998; Rose, 1994).

Such claims and such a discourse do, however, necessitate a counterdiscourse, a dialectical opposite. In the case of rap lyrics, this can be seen in the discourse of keeping it real. As the braggadocio and rhodomontade of makin' it positions the agent as someone special, and thus, to some extent, removed from the community, the need for reaffirming the connection to this is necessary to upkeep the dynamic. The discourse of keeping it real is, however, even more complex than the discourse of success. There is, to begin with, a vernacular all its own to the "real". To be keeping it real can be described by terms connected to the street ("I'm so street I have pavements"), the 'hood, or various degrees of reality ("the realest cat out there"). Often, these vernaculars are combined, as when a rapper brags about being "grimy," implying that he is still on the street, still dirty, still part of the poverty and realism of the neighborhood. The most important fact of keeping it real, however, is that it signifies that one isn't as removed from the community as one's claims of makin' it might make it seem. The discourse of keeping it real thus relates to contextualizing, whereas makin' it relates to distancing oneself from the mundane, which in practice means that the two discourses exist in a dialectical relationship.

Ask around—

I ain't the one you wanna stun on, pa

Pull through—

I'll throw a fuckin cocktail at ya' car

From the last shootout—

I got a dimple on my face

It's nothin'—

I can go after Mase's fan-base

Shell hit my jaw—

I ain't wait for doc to get it out

Hit my wisdom tooth—

[huck-too]

Spit it out

I don't smile a lot—

Cause ain't nuthin' pretty

Got a purple heart for war,

And I ain't never left the City (50 Cent, 2003)

Being real does not, however, simply mean that you are less of an individual. Rather than being used as a way to position oneself as everyman or everywoman, it functions as a way to signify being true to one's own

nature, of one's being unchanged by having made it. Although the discourse of makin' it relates, in its own way, to how one's life has changed (Notorious B.I.G.: "I made the change from a common thief / To up close and personal with Robin Leach"), the role of the opposite discourse is to note that one hasn't changed on a fundamental level, that one is still "street," still "gangsta" (Notorious B.I.G.: "I'm blowin' up like you thought I would / Call the crib, same number, same hood"). The ethics of bourgeois capitalism (albeit a very special version thereof) here meets a specific virtue ethics, all within the dialectic between two discourses. The dialectic between distancing and contextualizing/historicizing creates a complex descriptive whole, one where individual accomplishment is positioned into a moral context (of sorts).

At the same time, the dialectic of these discourses shows how rap lyricists have used different modes of talking about the reality they perceive as a specific aesthetic strategy, but further as a distinct organizing strategy. The storytelling of rap obviously deals with description but also with positioning and organizing the events of the everyday in a commoditizing manner. Storytelling becomes a business, but at the same time the business is intimately tied to the culture it grows out of, allowing for a political sensibility. Rapping becomes both a way to establish a culture (keeping it real) and a way to escape the socioeconomic quagmire—and thus political (makin' it—but what is it?). Naturally, this is not without conceptual problems. Is this truly a way to escape oppression or merely the repetition of the capitalist mode that oppresses? Should a clearly misogynistic and violent culture be allowed the epithet "real"? These questions are, however, beyond the scope of this article. What isn't is the observation that the discursive strategies can be seen as powerful organizing devices and further as part of a very efficient value-creating process. Storytelling here isn't merely an additional managerial technique but a way to make millions. And it's certainly not coming out of preppy business schools or nerdy science parks.

*Visualizin' the reali-sm
Of life and actuality
Fuck Who's the baddest—
A person's status
depends on salary
And my mentality is
Money orien-tated
I'm destined to live the dream
For all my peeps who never made it*

*Cause yeah— We were beginners
 In the hood as five percenters
 But somethin' must of got in us
 Cause all of us turned to sinners*
*Now some
 Restin' in peace
 And some are sittin' in San Quentin*
*Others such as myself
 Are tryin' to carry on tradition
 Keepin' the wealth of essence—
 Street ghetto essence inside us
 Cause it provides us
 With the proper insight to guide us (Nas, featuring AZ
 the Visualizer, 1994)*

Succinctly put, the argument thus far stands as follows: Rap lyrics are a question of rappers' constructing their identity (although the issue of identity isn't explicitly explored here) and their surroundings through storytelling, but this storytelling isn't as simple as merely the depiction of outside events. Rather than upholding the barrier between organization/economy on one hand and entertainment/culture on the other, the performing of the rap persona often conflates these two spheres. The economic is retold in the narrations, whereas the narrations are sold as commodities. When we look closer at these commodities, we can in them find two distinct discourses that paradoxically relate both to the creation of the productive persona (the rapper, to be an economic agent, must create a convincing persona in order to sell it—which in turn is exactly what he or she cannot be seen as doing) and to the depiction of "reality." The two discourses play with different ways of positioning oneself to the subject one is discussing (mostly, in the case of rap lyrics, urban life and existence). One of these modes is distancing—portraying oneself the subject as something special and separate. Done by signifying prowess, often economic, this discourse highlights the rapping subject while simultaneously positioning the mode as a political move. The emphasis that is put on a specific mode of existence (e.g., stressing the way in which storytelling can be a source of wealth) creates a highlighted subject, a focal point. In this way, distancing works as an expressive maneuver—as the creation of a subject of interest. The second major discourse, keeping it real, is on the other hand a mode of contextualization or recontextualization. Although makin' it creates the politicized Other, keeping it real positions the narrator into a community or a shared context. The highlighted subject is thus, in a way, made normal—even if this would be a very special kind of normal.

*All role models on TV
 Most of us ain't got a TV,
 you feel me?
 Shit, Michael Jordan don't come through
 I bet the nigga get the money
 when it time to sell his shoe
 I'm telling you,
 I ain't puttin' him down
 Cuz I love him to death,
 but I ain't ever seen him in my town
 But you could see Snoop Dogg everyday
 I'm boss to the blocks like the projects in the PJ's
 (Snoop Dogg, 1999)*

And a Plethora of Hustlers

Jay-Z does not make “gangsta rap.” He is a hustler that raps and spits game and plays on people’s intelligence as well as ignorance. Just cause some one reps the hood, dosen’t mean he or she makes gangsta rap. He does so many things that people miss, and if you really don’t listen or have some of the same expiriences, he’s gonna blow right past you. In a sense, the teacher who told the student taht doesn’t live in the hood was telling the thruth, but he/she failed to realize that the “hood” is a mentaliy, which he still represents, thus motivating him to strive to acheive more and keep huslting, at the same time revealing the blueprint and the game to those who choose the life he chose. (C-Will82, 2004)

Torn between these dialectical discourses, which of course have a history in Black urban America that far exceeds rap music and hip-hop culture, Jay-Z attires himself in the role of the street hustler—a ubiquitous character in Afro-American literary expression (e.g., Goines, 1972/1999, 1972/2004; Haley & Malcolm X, 1964/1992; Slim, 1969/1987). Although there is only one reference to the conceptual persona of the hustler in the lyrics presented in the above (Jay-Z: “Look what I embody—The soul of a hustler—I really ran the street” in “What More Can I Say”), by and large Jay-Z’s lyrics are swarming with such references. Time and time again, he depicts himself as engaging in activities ranging from the rather innocuous and inoffensive, to the downright criminal, from “poppin’ tags” (as in “Poppin’ Tags”) and copping a “coupé with the roof gone and switch plates” (as in “U Don’t Know”), to “pushing weight” or “slanging dope” and threatening to cut off the hands and thumbs of his retailers or customers

should they mess with his merchandise or come up short (as in “Holla”). Rather than downplaying his background in the drug trade, he emphasizes it, and time and time again his “shout-outs” go to all the hustlers who never made it like he did. The same is true for 50 Cent, Nas assures us that he is stayin’ on his hustle (in “A Message To The Feds, Sincerely, We The People”), and Red Café believes he is facing a bright musical future because of his hustling skills. Utilizing the conceptual persona—and moreover the political, ethical, and economic agent of the hustler—has been a popular move in rap music during the past decade. And considering the outline of “the social art of the hustler” given by Wacquant (1999) in “Inside ‘The Zone,’” this seems—to the extent it actually is a strategy—like a reasonable move. “To hustle,” claims Wacquant,

denotes a field of activities that have in common the fact that they require mastery of a particular type of symbolic capital, namely, the ability to manipulate others, to inveigle and deceive them, if need be by joining violence to chicanery and charm, in the pursuit of immediate pecuniary gain. (p. 142)

Moreover, Wacquant describes the hustler as “a *generic figure who occupies a central position* in the symbolic space of the black American ghetto” (pp. 150-151) and as

an elusive and slippery character, difficult to grasp and pin down in a stable reality, precisely because his trade consists in many instances in unobtrusively inserting himself into social situations or spinning about him a web of deceitful relations, just so that he may derive some more or less extorted profit from them. (p. 143)

Acting in “the grey world of the illicit and the illegal, that which leaves no paper trail, no official trace, that which is reprovved and repressed by society” (p. 143), the hustler emerges as a political, ethical, and economic agent who is very well suited to handle conflicting positions and virtues of the kind we have spoken in the above. He or she is a value-creating entity who can move freely between the legal and the illegitimate and who at the same time is accepted in the sociocultural context in which he or she acts. For, as Bettylou Valentine (1978) demonstrated in *Hustling and Other Hard Work*, hustling has by tradition made out a necessary, complementary occupation that people in disenfranchised urban America have engaged in to cope with the everyday struggle. Further stressing this legitimizing aspect, Wacquant goes on to point out that the hustler acts in a world

known and tacitly tolerated by all because it is both banal and necessary: you have to live and take care of your own. And thus, owing to the chronically insufficient level of income received from work or from social assistance, nearly all the residents of the ghetto must, at one point or another, rely on some kind of hustle to get by. (p. 143)

Enter Žižek

These oppositional discourses and the paradox that emanates from them are not new to scholars who have paid interest to rap music and hip-hop culture. They have, however, remained a paradox. Contemplating the oppositional discourses, Foreman (2002) points out the following:

Interestingly, the general transition into the 1980s, when rap finally attained a relatively stable position in the music business, also introduced a major contradiction in values within the hip-hop culture that has never been fully or adequately resolved. (pp. 104-105)

It goes without saying that the representations of rap lyricism aren't real in the classical "mirror of nature" sense of the word. Even when we are talking about keeping it real, we do not necessarily mean that this is an issue of exactitude and realism, and tales of makin' it are frequently filled with an almost ridiculous amount of hyperbole. The descriptions of the world we are presented with in rap thus aren't pure descriptions but rather culturally colored takes on what meaningful communication means.

Following the social-cultural critique of Slavoj Žižek, we would, however, contend that the contradictory discourses of rap lyricism can be viewed as ideological moves stemming from a wish to stabilize the lacking subject. The reality of keeping it real is in such a perspective not a question of accurate depiction but rather a move through which the very unreality of urban life can be illustrated. As Žižek (2003) argues, the Real—something separate from the fantasy of reality as pure representation—can very well be a space of contention. Keeping it real is thus not a move closer to some immutable truth, but an acknowledgment of a specific surreality, that of the social antagonism manifested in the ghetto, the 'hood. Similarly, makin' it is clearly not a question of true transgression or the overthrow of a socio-economic system where race matters. Rather, it can be seen as the creation of a virtual reality, within the space of the lyric and the "rap lifestyle," where the normal rules are overthrown. The rapper can never truly enact

reality, as the very notion of a reality that can only be attained through specific symbolic manifestations is problematic—if one has to enunciate reality, it becomes symbolic and prosthetic—but neither can he or she truly escape the reality of race and socioeconomic background. The bling-bling or incorporation of a rapper, which should signify a distancing from ghetto life, thus stands as the most obvious form of the Real, whereas claims of being street or 'hood become proof of a distance from the place where these claims can truly be enunciated. The rapper thus creates a virtual reality that is defined by a lack, a void that cannot be filled, and the dialectic can never achieve closure.

What we can see in the way in which rap lyrics try to operate with the dual discourses of exclusivity and contextualization could be read as a linguistic articulation of the impossibility to achieve stability in a position of permanent displacement. Because the socioeconomic context of rap is that of an disenfranchised minority, the dual discourses can be seen as a way to create a Real that represents a fundamental antagonism—something that can be articulated but never fully overcome the split and decentered subject.

The rapper, simultaneously boasting about his or her jewelry and claiming to be “street,” can be seen as a contingent figure, paradoxically claiming that success in the system that oppresses is a way to be “real.” The lacking subject created by such a move becomes a space on which a number of ethics and politics can be projected—a politics of interpretation where the real emerges only through the impossibility of reality as stable. Shawn Carter, with his multitude of aliases, his continuous mantra of business and success, and his repeated calls to the iconized 'hood of Marcy, emerges as a highly ambiguous figure—torn by the contradictory nature of the Real (cf. Žižek, 2002). Perpetually unfulfilled, the rapper thus repeats discourses that emphasize incompleteness and recreates the descriptive analysis as a negative dialectic.

This incompleteness also puts the focus on the question we started with: to succeed or to be true to one's social and cultural values. Ethics, in a system of paradoxical discourses, becomes not a question of solving the riddle but one of living with the fact that dialectics never solve anything—Žižek's counterclaim to the prevailing Hegelianism in much of social theory. The question posed is not one to be solved, and neither does rap lyricism present us with an answer. What we, in the competing discourses, can find is not a way to an answer but a permanent instability, a foundational absence, a lack. Rap lyrics do thus not answer anything, nor do they map out an ethical project—not even the highly ideological and moralized project of entrepreneurship. Instead, they show us how ideology emerges as fantasy

and desire (Žižek, 1989) and how reality becomes contested. The lyrics may describe tales of virtue, but this is a virtue defined by its impossibility, and the dialectic never works to eradicate this. Instead, we can, through the lack the rapper and the hustler embody, see ourselves and the contested nature of organized life.

Escaping (to) the 'Hood

Rap lyricism, hence, does not provide us with one unified answer to the issue aired at the beginning of this article. But the discourses we have attempted to emphasize and illustrate in the above reveal ways of dealing with the struggle of succeeding economically while maintaining one's 'hood ethos that carry with them some implications for organizational and entrepreneurial research—implications that we will attempt to elucidate in the following.

Jay-Z battled his way up from Marcy, perfectly playing the game of bourgeois capitalism. He talked of makin' cheddar, recorded it, sold it, and thus made or remade the cheddar. Repeat, over and over again. At the same time, this distinction made it seem that he was distancing himself from the street, the "real." So he retold his time on the street, reminded folks that he was, still, from Marcy. He made it, but he kept it real. Word. He made himself a player and a hustler by playing one on mix tapes and MTV and kept it real by telling stories about when he was down with the street. He played the field, hustled it, making himself and remaking himself with every track, every move, also playing the game of ghetto authenticity (almost) perfectly. Some, such as Nas, would certainly claim that he was a phony, a created individual. But he would retaliate, claiming to be the "realest"—over and over again.

One could argue that rap lyricists, engaging in these two discourses the way they do, contribute to creating and recreating a paradoxical and extreme image of the "reality" of Black urban America—a virtual reality, so to speak, that is exotic and exciting and that serves as first-rate ground for capitalistic enterprises. As we have seen, it is a virtual reality that is making out much of the content of rap music but that also serves as a key milieu for films such as *Paid in Full* (Roc-A-Fella Productions/Dimension Films) and for best-selling computer games such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (*GTA: San Andreas*). It is a virtual reality that can be attractively packaged and sold as a commodity. And as the 'hood not only becomes the milieu, but rap lyricists themselves also serve as characters in a video game—as in *Def Jam Vendetta*

(Electronic Arts)—the “reality” has, in fact, become a video game unto itself, where it is hard to distinguish between fictional characters and the real people: the ’hood as a commoditized virtual reality, inhabited by fairy-tale-like heroes, whose personas and whose virtues might well have become commodities in and of themselves; and the entrepreneurial or hustling rap artists (among those) packaging and capitalizing on these commodities.

Continuously being created or recreated and enforced in this commodification process, the social art of hustling—of selling “ice in the winter,” “fire in hell,” and “water to a well” (as Jay-Z puts it in “U Don’t Know”)—emerges as a personal virtue outshining many others, perhaps even most. It is what gets you by in *GTA: San Andreas*, and it is what makes your character climb in rank in *Def Jam Vendetta*. It is what takes Ace, the main character in *Paid in Full*, from an anonymous existence to becoming one of the major “playas” in Harlem, and it is—or at least it is presented as—the best possible foundation for an up-and-coming rap artist. In the virtual reality being created, we are not, however, witnessing small-time hustling that is kept on a level of getting food on the table. Instead, we are seeing a kind of hustling that is blown out of proportion and that exceeds the street and the ’hood and the daily struggle for survival; it is a form of hustling to which the upsides are plentiful—hustle good enough, and you’ll end up in the penthouse—and that finds its way to other realms and that is probably best termed entrepreneurship, be it legitimate or not.

Although magnified and appearing in a favorable light, Jay-Z’s and other rappers’ hustling or entrepreneurial ways arguably rub off on an actual ’hood mentality. Even though the rappers might be perceived as fairy-tale heroes and heroines (cf. Lil’ Kim, Missy Elliot, and Jackie-O), they are de facto running real businesses with a great deal of success. Jay-Z is only one among a number of actual rap artists who has founded his own record label and his own clothing line and who is moving into other domains. Russel Simmonds, Queen Latifah, Ice Cube, Sean John Combs (aka P. Diddy), Missy Elliott, 50 Cent, and Jennifer Lopez all have their own business ventures—record labels and personal clothing lines being some of the most popular. And reading interviews with up-and-coming artists in *The Source*, one could, as we have seen, easily get the impression that the desire to acquire an entrepreneurial disposition (if such a thing at all exists) and to achieve something along these lines seems to be flourishing in the ’hood. If it wasn’t always-already, the creation of a virtual reality, characterized by a radical hustling, seems to have contributed to chiseling out hustling/entrepreneurship as a virtuous activity and a much-coveted skill in urban Black America.

We treat this rap shit
Just like handlin' weight
What they want we give it to em—
What they abandon we take
Hit a rapper with consignment—
Let him know it's at stake
Put his ass in the studio—
Let him cook up a cake
When it's hot get on the money spot
in every state
Like the wiz in Camelot
The mom-and-pop's
at the gate
But first we scope shit
Advertise in every area
Let the fiends know—
Hey,
we got some dope shit
Gon' need a middle man
So we look to radio
Let em test the product
Give em a promo show
Just a breeze,
not enough to catch a real vibe
Then we drop a maxi-single and
charge em two for five
Ain't tryin' to, kill em at first
just buildin' clientele
So when the album drops
The first weeks it's on sale
But when demand grows
It's time to expand, yo
You don't want no garbage papi
It's ten grand per blow,
fo' sho'
Somehow the rap game
reminds me of the crack game
See that rap shit is really just like sellin smoke (Jay-Z, 1997)

Although we—and Jay-Z and others, for that matter—take to analyzing the business engaged in by the rappers as a staged game, it is of course a deadly serious one. Conflicts within hip-hop culture—so called beefs—are

far from always played out as strategic moves. And even if they are, the outcomes might still be ugly. And as every game, this one has its rules, its internal logic that participants have to if not follow, at least relate to. It is important to keep in mind that we are not only dealing with a fantasy world in which everything is possible and legitimate. Rap music is consumed and carries a lot of meaning to people living in the “reality” of inner-city African American neighborhoods (see Pinn, 1999). People do take rap seriously. Strategy matters. Keeping it real wouldn’t be such a central discourse if it didn’t carry a lot of meaning to a lot of people. Rap artists do struggle with issues regarding legitimacy. Although successful rap artists might well have an impact on mentality and value systems in the ‘hood, it’s not only up to them to set the rules and pick and choose what character to play. Being accused of having sold out or crossed over might still squash a career, also that of someone who has made himself or herself out to be a large-scale hustler. Assumedly, there is quite a lot of “truth” to Jay-Z’s, Nas’s, or “Fiddy’s” keeping it real narratives. Arguably, they would not be able to make it as big without putting them on repeat. So when Jay-Z tells *TIME* about his journey, “I didn’t skip any floors. I started at the lower lobby. Went all the way up to the penthouse” (Tyranigel, 2003), he offers a key to how his particular legitimacy problem is handled: by having walked the longest winding road possible. He is makin’ it by keeping it real—a point further pursued in “Moment of Clarity”:

*Thank God for grantin’ me
 This moment of clarity
 This moment of honesty
 The world’ll feel my truths
 Through my Hard Knock Life time—
 My Gift and The Curse
 I gave you volume after volume of my work—
 So you can feel my truths
 I built the Dynasty by being one of the realest niggas out—
 Way beyond a Reasonable Doubt
 (Ya’ll can’t fill my shoes)
 From my Blueprint beginning to that Black Album ending
 This is closure—
 Hear what I’m about—nigga, feel my truth (Jay-Z, 2003a)*

This points us in an interesting direction. The lyrics present an Other’s urban environment as a locus of entrepreneurial activity and entrepreneurial spirit (both geographically and conceptually). The point out the ‘hood as a dislocated entrepreneurial “heart of the city” (itself commodified; cf. Jay-Z’s

“Heart of the City”), where the spirit of enterprise is abundant and a strong business acumen is highly fashionable, desirable, and legitimate. A locality of an Other (culture), not always abiding by the norms and value systems of bourgeois capitalism, instead praises other ways of going about your business and other ways (or at least areas) of learning your business.

The lyrics point away from universities, incubator environments, and technology parks as the arenas where new enterprises are started and where value is created. Geographically, it further leads us away from high-tech suburban areas where millions are ploughed down into new infrastructure and toward the inner city. Well there, at the heart of the city, conceptually it turns us away from conference rooms and R & D labs, away from the mythical business lunch. Instead, it points out a hardcore urban environment, traditionally falling in between what is thought of as the places where entrepreneurial activity takes place, as significant space of value creation.

In doing so, rap lyricism further conceptually dislocates the notion of the entrepreneur and entrepreneurial activities. As we have already noted, street entrepreneurship has been prone to connect to the concept of the hustler. Acting from and acting out of a different cultural setting, an ethical system of an Other, possessing its own moral values, the hustler with his (the hustler is by tradition a male figure) ability to move freely from one side of the law to another (so vividly illustrated by Jay-Z in “Rap Game/Crack Game”) might set our understanding of the entrepreneur and entrepreneurial activities in motion, for instance, helping us see how formal entrepreneurship might not necessarily be something essentially different from informal, perhaps even illegal ditto.

Our aim has not been to present the ’hood as the entrepreneurial environment above all other entrepreneurial environments. The point has merely been to point it out as an highly interesting one, possibly even an industrial locus, that has sadly been forgotten by organization research—or, dare we say, ignored because of a moralizing research field. In following Jay-Z’s turn back to the ’hood, we are in fact trying to combat myopia in studies of organizing and entrepreneurship and study the multifaceted nature of economy. We’re trying, as researchers, to keep it real.

Epilogue

Just as we have brought this argument to an end, Jay-Z not only has gone on to become the CEO of Def Jam Records, but he has also released an album (*Collision Course*), together with Linkin’ Park, a White, platinum-selling, rock band—some would say truly selling out. He is makin’ it even bigger and,

arguably, dumbing down to even lower domains, to an even broader customer base of white middle-class youth—makin' it but arguably watering down his own credibility and his own achievements. But one might also ponder if he, now that he has reached this far, is turning our proposed logic upside down, shifting the poles—or at least the proposed dependency. Having dumbed down and having attempted (and to some extent managed) to convince the world that he has kept it real, one might argue that he, now, is in fact keeping it real by makin' it. For a real hustler makes it regardless of what he comes across. Even in the world of legitimate business, a real hustler maintains.

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