



**‘In London he found him a shot of greatness’:**

## **The Construction of the Urban Black British Man in**

### **George the Poet’s *Search Party***

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Grau en Estudis Anglesos**

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Maybe the numbers are good  
But it's all messed up under the hood  
And anyone can look good with the light off  
When you're blind to the fact it's a write-off  
[...]  
And it's all down to the fact my community is full of kids that either had an absent dad,  
or a twist up mother  
It's hard enough being a bigger brother  
But no one wants to live to suffer  
So I see Cat D's all over the ends  
Most of my friends  
'Nuff of these girls have this whole persona  
Miss Coca-Cola  
Shape like a bottle, face like a model  
But your strengths be where your weaknesses from  
Cause your empty when the sweetness is gone  
And you don't see this as wrong  
All of these playas got all of this game  
So how come the team isn't strong?  
[...]  
And in the meantime there's all these guys on the road going gym  
Looking fly but they don't know a thing  
To an extent you wanna suck  
But, really you give them brain cause they're dumb as fuck

I said I got too much love for these hood rats  
Too much love for the mandem  
I will never live life like them  
But that's the my peoples, I understand them  
[...]

(Mpanga, 2015: 'Cat D' -Single)

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## Abstract

Post-industrial America gifted us with the new –nowadays globally appreciated- genre of Hip Hop. The narratives offered by late 80s and 90s Rap artists have shaped the collective global imagination to an inconceivable extent. Often, black males are portrayed as figures that need to state their power constantly through violence in order to prove themselves worthy of surviving trauma. In contrast, George the Poet offers us a more optimistic view about the challenges of the difficult environment and a complete rejection of violence. In this essay we will try to offer a perspective of the mechanisms by which the poetic voice of this young artist tries to establish a new universal role model of the poet-observer –or city flâneur- that contributes to society by the means of poetry to advocate for justice and report the new diasporic working-class struggle. These objectives are achieved by the means of questioning the poetic persona’s own identity. Exploring tensions between the individual and the vastness of London, or the latent racism that is still very much alive nowadays are just expressions of more complex inner conflicts that the poetic persona experiments. The reader will be able to get to know the poetic persona through access to past events that have shaped a new character and attitude towards life. Thus, George the Poet is trying to become a positive role model, the figure of the optimistic young black man that seeks to help all youngsters around him to escape a terrible social fate.

**Key words:** *Social poetry, Rap, Blackness, Disadvantage, Search Party, London, Urban settings*

## Introduction

Post-industrial cities around the world have witnessed the birth of new poetic genres that are concerned with the reality the urban individual experiments on a daily basis. Some authors consider that this is due to a shift in popular consciousness:

What these poets give us are poems whose individual and experiential effects are irrelevant, immaterial, while the poems' and their world's formal structure is what matters above all. The force of the work is to remind us that neither it nor the world it inhabits can be altered by our responses to it or by its effects on us – by, say, our feeling “complete”; they can only be altered by a change to their form. In this respect, we may well have arrived at a crucial dialectical shift in the social and aesthetic history of poetry: a new modernism, post-postmodernism. (Ashton (ed.), 2013: 227-228)

In this sense, the working classes' productions have emerged as new literary models to follow and be admired (Linkon, 2015:114). And the lower classes are indeed going to take the lead in the creation of these new urban based poetic genres as Rap and Spoken Word. As Tricia Rose claims, Rap –Rhyme and Poetry- could have only been created 'under certain social conditions' (Rose, 1994: 99); that is, the particularities of the genre are shaped by the place in which it emerges –the urban setting- and the social class to which the writer-performers belong. In addition, one of the main characteristics of the urban setting is its ethnic multiplicity or diversity (Sandhu, 2004: 10-11). The city is, consequently, an ambiguous space where all sorts of events can take place. That is, the city could potentially be a hostile place for the individual, especially, to the one belonging to a non-hegemonic ethnicity:

I never sleep 'cause sleep is the cousin of death

I lay puzzle as I backtrack to older times

Nothing's equivalent, to the New York state of mind

(Nas, 1994: 'NY State o' Mind')

Otherwise it could represent a space in which it is actually possible to climb the 'social ladder' and become a successful citizen:

The best thing I ever did was learn to read  
I don't have to drink, I don't need to turn to weed  
I'm my own best friend, all my concerns are free  
I did not take the lead, I earned the lead  
I think God made me insane when he gave me a brain  
Cause I ain't scared to believe that I'm prepared to receive what I have dared to  
achieve (Elba, 2014: 'One' ft. George The Poet)

This is the case of George Mpanga –best known as George the Poet-. Mpanga's parents arrived in London as refugees, escaping from the dictatorship of Idi Amin in Uganda. They settled in St. Raphael's Estate in Neasden, an area with high rates of crime and social conflict. In fact, the opening lines of his book *Search Party* are 'I'm from St. Raph's/ Home of guns and staffs' (Mpanga, 2015: 11). George started rapping at the age of 14, inspired by authors such as Dizzie Rascal –also a Londoner- and the rhymes by Nas and Tupac Shakur, which came from America<sup>1</sup>. The Grime scene in London<sup>2</sup> was big when George was a teenager, just as Gangsta Rap was growing in popularity in America and the UK. However, some experts claim that 'UK hip-hop's strong identification with American hip-hop culture limited the potential of this scene to develop autonomously' (Williams (ed.) 2015: 260), that is, American Hip Hop influenced productions in Britain to an unimaginable extent and this posed a problem from Mpanga's perspective. He saw how, in a different reality to that of America, kids

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<sup>1</sup>In Ellis –Petersen, Hannah. 'I'm from a community that doesn't often get to represent themselves' *The Guardian*, 14 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/dec/14/george-the-poet-spoken-word> (Accessed 13 February 2017).

<sup>2</sup>'At the beginning of the new millennium a significant shift occurred in British rap music, with the emergence of Grime from UK Garage.' (Williams (ed.), 2015: 257) In Britain, Rap and Hip Hop culture developed differently. MCs in Britain would rap on Garage rhythms, giving their productions a unique personality that made it different from Rap in the United States.

from his estate and the surrounding areas –especially black boys- started behaving in accordance with the Gangsta social codes:

By the time we were 14, my friends were starting to behave like the rappers they were listening to, carrying drugs for older kids and getting paid for it, and it wasn't through lack of choice. Your mind flicks back to rap and it's all familiar, in a good way. I couldn't ignore that – I knew it was partially down to rap.<sup>3</sup>

As George himself explains, the situation could have been avoidable for those black boys had there been a more positive role model to follow. Gangsta rappers always use a violent discourse in which illegal activities are reported and described constantly (Williams (ed.), 2015: 186). The most dangerous thing about this genre's lyrics is possibly the lack of choice that they present for their public, creating an 'archetype in hip hop [that] is signified by the hypermasculinity and hypersexuality of commercial hip-hop culture'(Williams (ed.) 2015:186). The consequence of this is that the world portrayed in this form of rap is hopeless and discouraging:

Visualizing the realism of life and actuality  
Fuck who's the baddest, a person's status depends on salary  
And my mentality is money orientated  
I'm destined to live the dream for all my peeps who never made it  
(Nas, 1994: 'Life's a Bitch')

Thus, apparently, the only form of survival for black young men always fits within a limited range of parameters. Beyond that, there is little they can do.

For several reasons, Mpanga could foresee that this behaviour model was only going to condemn all his neighbourhood age peers. And, when nobody believed in him, he did his best and managed to get sent to Cambridge<sup>4</sup>. He admits that going to

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<sup>3</sup> Mossman, Kate. 'George the Poet: Rappers have so much power to do good and they squander it.' *The Guardian*. 3 February 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/03/george-the-poet-rappers-power-educate> (Accessed 15 February 2017)

<sup>4</sup> In Packham, Alfie. 'George the Poet: I got into this game to make social progress' *The Guardian*. 13 September 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/sep/13/george-the-poets-message-to-freshers> (Accessed 13 February 2017)

university was a life changing experience for him<sup>5</sup>. George realized during his three year degree in Social and Political Sciences that poetry and rap, when addressed to an appropriate audience, can actually change the world. At King's College he found a space at the Student Union that allowed him to make a statement with his poetry<sup>6</sup>. Later on, he won a social enterprise competition organised by Barclays –‘The Stake’-, with which he earned 16000 pounds, which he destined to the creation of poetry workshops for disadvantaged young people<sup>7</sup>. It is quite clear that Mpanga is extremely concerned with education for the most disadvantaged communities, especially his.

Life is not easy for the average young black man in the United Kingdom: ‘The weight of evidence is that racist discrimination and the disadvantages of ethnic minorities are alive and well and thriving in a whole variety of key British institutions, although *in some contexts* it may be that overt racism may be more muted than before.’ (Rattansi, 2000:121). Despite the country’s positive attitude (Rattansi, 2000: 120) towards people from different ethnicities integrating in the social fabric, lots of inequalities and a latent racism still exist. In the case of black males –either Caribbean or of African descent-, there is still a sense of suspicion and misconceptions about their behaviour and their personalities (Odih, 2000: 95). In part, these beliefs are fostered by Gangsta rap and the social impact this has had after years of representation in the media: ‘but again, the image of the threatening young black male is embedded in a discourse heavily reliant on hip-hop themes and imagery. It goes without saying that a hoodie is not universally understood as a symbol of criminality, or of anything, really. [...]

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<sup>5</sup> In Packham, Alfie. ‘George the Poet: I got into this game to make social progress’ *The Guardian*. 13 September 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/sep/13/george-the-poets-message-to-freshers> (Accessed 13 February 2017)

<sup>6</sup> In George The Poet’s Official Website. <http://www.georgethepoet.com/#about-1-section> (Accessed 11 March 2017)

<sup>7</sup> In George The Poet’s Official Website. <http://www.georgethepoet.com/#about-1-section> (Accessed 11 March 2017)

[Despite this] the hooded sweatshirt has been a staple of hip-hop style for decades' (Williams (ed.) 2015: 320). Consequently, it is very difficult for the western mind to dissociate the negative images that have been created around black communities through Hip Hop culture. Subconsciously, we have become prone to think that a black man is somebody dangerous (Williams (ed.), 2015: 322) due to the widespread narratives that have been distributed by Western thought:

The forms of economic coercion involved in, for example, plantation, slavery, migrant labour and apartheid are all important reminders of the fact that 'race' can become a distinctive feature at the level of economic development. [...] 'Race' has to be socially and politically constructed and elaborate ideological work is done to secure and maintain different forms of 'racialization' which have characterized capitalist development. (Gilroy, 2006: 35)

Hip hop narratives basically describe the struggles of the life in the American housing projects, focusing on a stereotypical image of the men that live there. Therefore, in this sense, the models of men that are shown are pimps and drug-dealers (Williams (ed.), 2015:186). There is not any kind of variety. Black men are condemned to be seen as dangerous, violent and often linked to drugs, 'gangsta anti-heroes' (Williams (ed.), 2015: 315), in short. The image is nowadays so widespread that it is difficult to escape the exposure to this kind of stereotypes:

"When you're trying to understand how people deal with difficulty, there's no method," he says. "Some people start selling drugs, some people start taking drugs. The world just sees the underclass. A dealer creates economies and he looks after his friends and his family. Outside that bubble, there's nothing but poison, but you cannot come in from the outside and try and change things. You cannot be the guy who tries to tell kids he just 'got tired' of prison and went straight. It doesn't work like that. No one will believe you."<sup>8</sup>

George Mpanga also contributes to the depiction of the conflictive neighbourhood, only the tone in his poems is sad and gloomy. That is not the destiny he is seeking for the members of his community, so as he states in one of his poems '*I'm a man on a*

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<sup>8</sup> Mossman, Kate. 'George the Poet: Rappers have so much power to do good and they squander it.' *The Guardian*. 3 February 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/03/george-the-poet-rappers-power-educate> (Accessed 15 February 2017)

*mission*' (Mpanga, 2015:91) –and quite an ambitious one, indeed-. Mpanga's objective in *Search Party* is to find solutions to the disadvantages that the Black people have to face through poetry.

George acts a social advocate. He transports the reader through the British council estate, describing every little aspect of his life as a member of it. He transports the audience around, showing the daily dramas, but also the small spaces of joy and happiness, giving hope; sharing his experience almost like a *flâneur*: 'Flânerie, the activity of strolling and looking which is carried out by the flâneur, is a recurring motif in the literature, sociology and art of urban, and most especially, of metropolitan existence' (Tester (ed.), 1994: 1). In this way, Mpanga is a walker in the city who gives the best of himself and pushes the reader to follow his voice through his personal stroll around the city. However, Mpanga reverses the role of the traditional Western flâneur, because 'using their imaginations to transcend all the forms of oppression that would keep them from celebrating life, individual black males have created a context where they can be self-defining and transform a world beyond themselves' (Williams, 1997: 821). This entices the reader to find his or her voice and follow Mpanga's example to be aware of the surrounding environment. George the Poet is, in effect, trying to establish himself as a new role model for the boys in the community. He wants to offer new narratives to encourage young boys to achieve everything they want. 'If I can do it, you can too' (Mpanga, 2014: '1,2,1,2' -Single) seems to be his motto. The objective of this paper is to analyse the mechanisms through which Mpanga accomplishes his 'mission' and to confirm the social importance of his work for the community.

## The Urban Setting: ‘My city’ as a Labyrinth

Postmodern writers and critics have often defined the urban space as a Labyrinth. There are reasons to support this point of view. Life in the city is, indeed, difficult. The hyper concentration of population in the capitalist system has an implication of struggle for survival:

Dear Born, you’ll be out soon, stay strong  
Out in New York the same shit is going on  
The crack-heads stalking, loud-mouths is talking  
Hold, check the story yesterday when I was walking  
The nigga you shot last tried to appear like he hurtin’ something  
Word to mother, I heard him fronting  
And he be pumping on your block  
Your man gave him your glock  
And now they run together, what up son, whatever  
Since I’m on the streets I’m gonna put it to a cease (Nas, 1994: ‘One Love’)

In addition, post-industrial times have witnessed the rise of a dispossessed working class that has no other space in the city but underground economy. People without higher education are particularly vulnerable to the whims of the market (Linkon, 2015: 45). People in the communities like the one Mpanga belongs to have few chances to get a qualified stable job, because in Britain: ‘Afro-Caribbean males are four times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than their white peers [...]. Responses amongst black educationalists (Smink 1990; Benioff, 1997) and practitioners (Roberts & Singh 1997) focus almost exclusively on creating ‘culturally authentic’ learning practices geared at constituting positive black male identities’ (Odih, 2002:94). This poses a problem because the tendency is for the number of unemployed

young black men to increase. Thus, great numbers of boys feel that there is no place for them in society: jobs are non-existent and the education system seems to not trust them or even rejects them (Odih, 2002:101). It is not surprising then, that Hip Hop culture, Rap and Block Parties back in the eighties offered a new space for young black people in America to express themselves. As Tricia Rose puts it:

Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America. Rap music is a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music. It began in the mid-70s in the South Bronx in New York City music as a part of hip hop, and African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. (Rose, 1994:2)

In the United Kingdom Grime and Garage parties accomplished the same role for young people. Therefore, Hip Hop culture and Rap music have a basic function: ‘negotiate the experiences of marginalisation, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community.’ (Rose, 1994: 21). But we should take into account that ‘hip hop emerges from the deindustrialisation meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect.’ (Rose, 1994: 21).

After industrialisation, the city has become a hostile place for ethnic minorities but also for the working classes in general. Life has become a struggle for the most disadvantaged in society: ‘Post-industrial conditions [...] have had a direct and sustained impact on urban job opportunity structures, have exacerbated long-standing racial and gender based forms of discrimination, and have contributed to increasing multinational corporate control of market conditions and national economic health.’ (Rose,1994:25). The city has become a Labyrinth for the working class black man:

The only way he can overcome the hopelessness that  
claimed everyone around him is by embracing the  
likelihood of death and incarceration. Only then can

he be the architect of his own destiny. So he hurtles  
mindlessly towards his mid-twenties, energised by the  
prospect of autonomy in a world of constrictions. (Mpanga, 2015: 17)

And sometimes the roughness of it does not let us remember that there is actually a way  
out: ‘Maybe if he wasn’t so preoccupied with survival, he’d be in search of a purpose’  
(Mpanga, 2015: 17).

What is the city, then? The city is a beehive, buzzing with the constant strife of the  
people that live in it. Moreover, ‘the city can offer nothing redemptive – no affiliation,  
no solidarity and no comradeship’ (Osborne (ed.), 2016:105). Since industrialisation,  
the urban setting has become a Labyrinth where the individual struggles both to find a  
place in society and ultimately for survival, the latter not only being a life preserving  
feeling, but an attempt to consolidate one’s identity:

All cities are temporary places. People, ideas, fashions, buildings, all come and go in the  
blink of an eye. Lose touch with a friend and it can be hard to make contact again: they  
will have moved on, perhaps a number of times. Romantic movies about cities often  
make play with the idea of serendipity [...]. They tend to be popular; unsurprisingly so,  
for they feed our desire to believe that urban life needn’t be as emotionally amputating  
as, in our unhappier moments, we worry it is. (Sandhu, 2004:20)

In fact, identity problems are common in the urban space, since identities ‘are driven by  
contradictions, ambivalences, situational and contextual variations, and unpredictable  
individual and group alliances (Rattansi 1994). They remain provisional and unfinished.  
Closures operate in temporal and spatial contexts, involve varying degrees of emotional  
attachment; there is a continual switching, making and remaking of identifications’  
(Rattansi, 2000:122). The individual belongs usually to the class that has raised him, but  
there are also educational and personal elements –like ethnicity, gender, and  
personality- that are to be taken on account when the construction of the self takes place

(Rattansi, 2000: 122). Despite this, there is a need to ‘mapping and narrating other identificatory processes’ (Rattansi, 2000:123).

Therefore, in this context, the individual struggles to find the identity that is hidden in the Labyrinth: ‘My city has a lot of faces. / Some can be found in forgotten places.’ (Mpanga, 2015: 27). The subject seems to be compressed amongst the tensions that are produced by an unfair system, unable to develop their personality as a whole. Usually, for these individuals, it is difficult to find spaces of self-development that would help them overcome the limitation that the system imposes in them: ‘They feel a remorseless compression, psychological incarceration. What can they do? Some go mad. Others quell their anguish’ (Sandhu, 2004:108). Consequently, they become subjects living in isolation, which is quite ironic if we consider that the context in which this happens is a hive of human activity. And it is usually alienation which pushes the subject into a creative activity (Rose, 1994: 27).

Within this context of consolidation of urban centres the 19<sup>th</sup> century, literature gave birth to one of the most interesting figures of literature the flâneur or city walker (Tester (ed.), 1994: 1). In this figure we see the convergence of the alienated subject acting as an observer and describing the city to the audience, however Mpanga is not isolated from his context:

Under social tensions you can see London languishes;  
Thirty per cent minorities, three hundred languages.  
Differences –race and class – it’s all enormous,  
But the common ground we found surpasses all the borders.[...]  
I grew up around lots of crime, the violent kind. [...]  
It’s not just Cockney rhyming slang,  
We’ve got block-beef, violent gangs [...]  
Children navigating through postcode wars

In estates with the least funding – [...]  
TFL knows the world is your Oyster,  
As long as you can afford it,  
Even though you might need to remortgage  
Just to get from Aldwych to Shoreditch. (Mpanga, 2015: 28)

George the Poet is indeed a flâneur. His poetic style is defined by his vision of the city and everything that happens in it. But the way he conveys this message is different from that some Rap artists in America:

I grew upon the crime side, the New York time side,  
Staying alive was not jive [...]  
No question I would speed for cracks and weed  
The combination made my eyes bleed [...]  
My life got no better, same damn 'lo sweater  
Times is ruff and tuff like leather (Wu Tang Clan, 1993: 'C.R.E.A.M.')

Mpanga's message is dominated by a feeling of connection with the rest of the community:

Gimme a handshake, you helped shape the landscape,  
Even if you think you didn't play a major part,  
Even if you had a change of heart,  
You touched my life because you played your part.  
You changed my life when you played your part. (Mpanga, 2015: 65)

George talks about embracing what he is through what the community has offered to him, because 'life is sweet when your passion is fruitful' (Mpanga, 2015: 65). In addition, Mpanga reverses the lonely figure of the city walker. As a wanderer, George the Poet is rooted to the place he grew up in, and he does not only observe but he intends to change the injustices around him. On the other hand, the American narratives are dominated by hostility and how the community is often split up:

To learn to overcome the heartaches and pain

We got stickup kids, corrupt cops, and crack rocks  
And stray shots, all on the block stays hot  
Leave it up to me while I be living proof  
To kick the truth to the young black youth  
But shorty's running wild smokin' sess and drinkin' beer  
And ain't trying to hear what I'm kickin' in his ear  
Neglected, but now, but yo, it gots to be accepted  
That what? That life is hectic (Wu Tang Clan, 1993: C.R.E.A.M.)

A brutal component in the American narratives places traumatic experiences in the Projects at the centre of all themes and spaces that are explored. George also describes trauma in similar terms: 'Shots sound like fireworks when I wake up at night/ My mum's screaming out the window, trying to break up a fight' (Mpanga, 2015: 12). Despite this, there is always a sense of hope that removes the desperate feeling of having been raised in the council estate.

If we consider this, in terms of the importance of the urban spaces in both narratives –American and British-, we could easily reach the conclusion that such accounts are dependent of the context in which they are created (Osborne (ed.), 2016:40). It would be impossible for those narratives to exist outside of the setting of the city. But some authors take a further step and claim that the urban space becomes another character within the narration: 'the setting [...] occupies a privileged space in the literary imagination. Valorised as a multicultural 'world city', it seems to be an ecosystem by itself' (Osborne (ed.), 2016:103). In the songs and poems explored, space is as important as the people who inhabit it in all these texts: 'despite [...] the vivid realism of urban decay, [...] [they] do indeed 'drag a rough poetry out' of the bleakness and the cruelty' (Osborne (ed.), 2016:106). The city –New York as well as London- is something dear and beloved to the authors that talk about it. As we have seen in the

previous passages, the individuals that have been raised in a city have a deep sense of belonging to it and their identification with the surrounding space can create extremely rich effects in their personality. Mpanga brings this to the extreme, devoting more than one poem in his collection to talk about the particularities that shape London as a city.

However, we cannot forget, as George the Poet reminds us, that the city is big and the urban subject can come from many different walks of life. The singularities of the urban space arise even from the most hostile looking places in the city: ‘The concrete jungle of council housing thus becomes a synecdoche of the brutalized lives within’ (Osborne (ed.), 2016:97). The image that is usually portrayed of Housing Projects and Council estates is quite negative. Somehow, Mpanga manages to reverse this image by finding the daily bright moments that characterize the neighbourhood as a space in which there is also happiness and joy: ‘Watch ghetto girls play hopscotch in little boots; / [...] So we chill on the blocks and build zoots’ (Mpanga, 2015: 12). But positivity is only generated by the simple things – ‘Focus on the now, because you’re here. / You are exactly where you’re supposed to be’ (Mpanga, 2015: 108)-, which make the reader want to go back home and allow the creation of peaceful spaces within the storm. The experience in the hood can be traumatic sometimes. Police brutality, gang violence and economic depression prove themselves as quite effective social traps that chain disadvantaged people to the hood (hooks, 2004: x). Despite this, every cloud has a silver lining and, in effect, there are ways out of the hood. But that is not what Mpanga is searching for.

## **Black Men in the Hood: Drug-dealers, gun carriers**

So far, the main features of the council estates and the housing projects have been described and its environments have been compared. This section of the essay has the objective to find out how masculinity in these contexts is constructed, that is, what makes a man a man in the hood is going to be discussed. In order to answer to that we are going to refer to several texts that have been written by authors who have spent their childhood and adolescence in the hood.

On the first place, the general experience of living in both council estates and housing projects seems to be quite traumatic:

Right now that system is symbolically lynching masses of black men, choking off their very life, by making it all but impossible for them to learn basic reading and writing skills in childhood; by the promotion of addiction as the free enterprise system that works to provide unprecedented wealth to a few and short-term solace from collective pain for the many; by widespread unemployment; and the continued psychological lure of life-threatening patriarchal masculine behaviours. (hooks, 2004: xi)

This feeling is especially valid for young black men due to the assumptions that are overtly extended about their behaviour: ‘Seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented. They have made few interventions on the stereotype’. (hooks, 2004: x). In fact, ‘figures suggest that black Caribbean [...] boys occupy the lowest levels of educational achievement and experience the highest rates of exclusion from school (Watkins, 1998; West and Lyon, 1995)’ (Archer, 2011:80) in the United Kingdom. Black men have traditionally been regarded as aggressive people, and extremely sexual subjects:

Read any article or book on black masculinity and it will convey the message that black men are violent. The authors may or may not agree that black male violence is justified, or a response to being victimized by racism but they do

agree that black men as a group are out of control, wild, uncivilized, natural-born predators. (hooks, 2004: 44)

Consequently, the traditional values of masculinity that apply to white males are brought to an extreme in the case of black men, because ‘masculine identities are constructed through various positionings of self and others, particularly with regard to interconnected social divisions of gender, race and class’ (Archer, 2011:83). A black boy in his early teens can encounter gang violence quite often, almost daily if he lives in a bad neighbourhood. He is more likely to be stopped by the police and registered: They grabbed me from behind and threw me against the wall./ [...] Until they turned me around and I saw the uniform./ Aren’t you the law? I wish I knew before. / One of them said something about resisting arrest [...]/ This kid’s fifteen.’ (Mpanga, 2015: 14). Accounts of the terrible situation that black boys live can be found easily in the most popular artistic works that they produce. These young people’s feelings are ignored and even silenced, making their ‘Blackness [...] [a sign of] invisibility, as a condition signifying the total absence of social recognition, a complete negation of the social world, [...] understood [...] as a condition of total deprivation.’ (Osborne (ed.), 2016: 208).

Since being a man in the hood can be dangerous, in order to survive, the young black man has to prove his worthiness to overcome trauma. Thus, a particular identity has to define all of these young men; they have to be hard and tough people:

Males experience(d) social pressure to be hard. Hardness is akin to the behaviours that urban sociologists have discovered for decades in poor communities of color where male develop ‘codes of the street’ [...]. Hardness provided marginalized men protection against severe social and economic oppression, from racial insubordination to the fines of deindustrialisation and the loss of jobs in central cities [...].The contemporary meanings of ‘hardness’ stemmed from lives of inner-city poverty where an underground ‘economy thrives’, where turf wars of gang members endanger the lives of its residents, where individuals must generate creative and often illicit plans to survive (Spade et al. (eds.), 2008: 191-192)

However, as Mpanga indicates in one of his poems, most of that behaviour is only performance:

In fact, who cares?

Clearly, within we're just conforming.

We're not really living, we're just performing.

Two notions we invent: 'Pride' and 'hope', but

In reality, all of us consent by default, cos there's

Strength in numbers and immunity is fine. (Mpanga, 2015: 32)

These young men are usually very different when they are alone, or with people who are really close to them emotionally. We find out that these boys are able to express their feelings, although if they did that in the public sphere, they would be despised for that or even laughed at, especially within the spheres of: 'Hip-hop's gender politics [which] extend outside of their performative qualities into the realms of lived experience and expectation, and are often short-sighted about the complexities of Blackness and humanity that hip-hop could (and should) represent. Hip-hop gender politics are often considered oppositional and frequently in a power struggle that intersects with race and class' (Williams (ed.) 2015:182). Moreover, the status that they could have previously achieved in their estates or housing projects could be potentially lost. In this sense we can apply Butler's concept of performativity: 'a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions –and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness' (Butler, 1990: 140). During their teenage years, these boys need to learn what it takes to be a man in the hood:

So I comes back home, nobody's out but Shorty Doo-Wop  
 Rollin' two Phillie's together: in the Bridge we call'em oo-wops  
 He said: 'Nas, niggas caught me bustin' of the roof  
 So I wear a bulletproof and pack a black tre-deuce."  
 He inhaled so deep, shut his eyes like he was sleep  
 Started coughin', one eye peeked to watch me speak  
 [...] this little bastard  
 Keeps me blasted and starts talkin' mad shit  
 I had to school him, told him don't let niggas fool him [...]  
 Tough luck when niggas are struck, families fucked up [...]  
 Shorty's laugh was cold-blooded as he spoke so foul  
 Only twelve, tryin' to tell me that he liked my style (Nas, 1994: 'One Love')

This young boy in the story should be a schoolboy but he is already carrying a gun and acting like a gangster, in short: like a man in the hood.

George identifies the moment when this starts: during schooling:

Sometimes I sit back with a Buddha sack  
 Mind's in another world, thinkin'  
 "How can we exist through the facts?"  
 Written in school text books, bibles et cetera  
 Fuck a school lecture , the lies get me vexed-er ( Nas, 1994: 'One Love')

Thus, 'the consequences of [...] addressing inequality at school are highly significant' (Odih, 2004:92). Black boys from disadvantaged communities can experience many differences in the education they receive. The way teachers treat them, the assumption that the school's authorities might make about these boys can be fatal for them to get enough confidence to carry on with their education: 'Contrary to the dominant media image of exclusion as a result of 'out of control violence', Gillborn found that the behaviour of black students was subject to different interpretations from that of their white counterparts. White teachers were found to feel 'more threatened' by black students and were more likely to interpret their behaviour as warranting disciplinary action' (Odih, 2002: 97). Most usually drop school and give up pursuing an education, thinking that there might be no space for them somewhere where nobody believes in them. Others leave the educational space in order to live a 'man's life' back in the neighbourhood. In the hood they can find their 'identity and respect, financial attraction,

and physical dominance offered to young black men by gangs, drug and gun culture through focusing upon British-born teenagers and their place within a hybrid urban context' (Williams (ed.), 2015:119). Where they grew up, these kids can achieve to be 'respected' and have power over others, although 'getting 'respect' can be a bloody business. The quest for cultural capital often leaves a trail of hapless victims in its wake' (Sandhu, 2004:102). They can achieve to change their situation and make money. Of course, these ambitions are problematic because that sense of 'respect' can only be achieved through violence and dubious business. The problem lies in the fact that some part of rap music and hip hop culture make it feel so real to them. Indeed, that is an illusion, a dream to be sought after but it can never be accomplished. Consequently, the 'exploration of the effects on young people of a nihilistic black British subculture of violence reflects a significant contemporary concern' (Williams (ed.), 2015: 119). This situation, which is parallel in council estates and housing projects, is produced by the inequalities the system generates in urban areas. Not even the context that has seen the individual grow is now offering opportunities to move on.

The figure of the rapper is key in this conception of life, since it usually is a point of reference for many black teenagers in these environments. Usually, 'their material frequently explores this experience in works that address cultural difference and social exclusion' (Osborne (ed.), 2016:41). The accounts of their lives provide solace to those young boys that feel there is no hope left for them: 'Male rappers often speak from the perspective of a young man who wants social status in a locally meaningful way. They rap about how to avoid gang pressures and still earn local respect, how to deal with the loss of several friends to gun fights or drug overdoses, and they tell grandiose and sometimes violent tales that are powered by male sexual power over women' (Rose, 1994:2). The world around them is hostile, and Hip Hop culture

and Rap songs provide with something that is known already, and therefore, safe. And, whereas there are many Hip Hop artists that do not support violence and despise rappers that promote aggressive behaviour, their attitude can be contradictory sometimes: ‘Some rappers defend the work of gangsta rappers and at the same time consider it a negative influence on black youth’ (Rose, 1994: 2). And still, for the disadvantaged male youth in the council estates or the housing projects, it might be incredibly powerful to listen to an older man that has been through the same kind of experiences and survived. And, often, not only that, these men have made money and live a comfortably luxurious life. It is not strange that poor boys regard them as an example. However, it is dangerous for these boys to consider that they can achieve anything within the ‘gangsta’ style of life. And here is where Mpanga’s role in changing that starts.

One of the most important aspects of George the Poet as an activist is his motivation to work with young people so that the future can look brighter to them: ‘Untapped potential could be unlocked ability/ Hidden wisdom, unsung possibility’ (Mpanga: 2015: 99). He claims that the most important part of this job has to start at school: ‘I want higher educational achievement for marginalised groups’ (Mpanga, 2015: 111), so the focus at schools should be especially to help people that come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Black boys should be able to find positive role models in people that do not fit in the parameters of stereotypes about black men – ‘Just consider this/ My life could have been yours, with a twist’ (Mpanga, 2015: 33). There are many different ways of living a life as a black man that do not imply violence, although police brutality and racism are still a part of daily life:

Nonviolent black males daily face a world that sees them as violent. Black men who are not sexual harassers or rapists confront a public that relates to them as though this is who they are underneath the skin. In actuality many black males explain their decision to become the “beast” as a surrender to realities they

cannot change. And if you are going to be seen as a beast you may as well act like one. Young black males, particularly underclass males, often derive a sense of satisfaction from being able to create fear in others, particularly in white folks. (hooks, 2004: 45)

This impression is due to the fact that ‘the white perceptions of black culture and communities represented in the press have indeed been of deprived and bleak urban housing estates, black families without fathers, high unemployment, gang-ridden streets, knife and gun crime, low educational attainment and aspirations, and the potential for violent protest. [Some accounts] [...] portray such a landscape and thereby appear to reinforcing white stereotypes in presenting a hopeless determinism’ (Osborne (ed.), 2016: 118). In order to make the younger generations see this, George sees in poetry and music powerful tools in order to convey a message that has been ignored for long:

What if schools made use of musicians  
As a means of getting their students to listen?  
Analysis and discussion of actual lyrics  
Helps learning occur in more natural spirits.  
I’ve done the same thing myself with poetry.  
It doesn’t just sow a seed, it helps grow a tree. (Mpanga, 2015: 85)

Even the less significant person for the system actually has a function in society and in other people’s life, which is quite an inspiring thought. There should not be any restrictions for people that come from the humblest background, all members in society should be helped to perform the same and, at least, have choices over their life. By conveying this message, George the Poet creates a powerful discourse for young people. Everyone can get an education if the context in which they live helps them find their way through the difficult path. However, it is not impossible and every person involved in the education of these young black boys should be aware of that and willing to make a change.

# **The Power of Word: Changing the World through Rap and Spoken Word**

In African communities, storytelling and the use of the voice in singing in order to convey feelings and emotions are widely popular strategies that have the purpose of bringing the people together. In each diaspora community, the use of word and musical language has evolved in a particular form. In the last forty years, these forms have been placed at the centre of pop culture in the forms of Rap and Spoken Word, which have been adopted in the Western world as part of popular and admired artistic genres.

However, these two genres can be traced back to more fundamental forms of oral cultural productions that have been part of African culture: ‘some analysts see hip hop as a quintessentially postmodern practice, and others view it as a present-day successor to pre-modern oral traditions’ (Rose, 1994: 21). In Rap and Spoken word this can be seen in the importance of the word in these genres, and the way stories are told: ‘Rap lyrics invoke and revise stylistic and thematic elements that are deeply wedded to a number of black cultural storytelling forms’ (Rose, 1994:3). In addition, the genre of Rap or Spoken Word ‘relies on a variety of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American musical, oral, and dance forms and practices in the face of a larger society that rarely recognizes the Afrodiasporic significance of such practices’ (Rose, 1994: 23), and they have also been widely used, to the extent that ‘poetry [and Rap] has even been assigned various civic tasks, from humanizing the London Underground to (literally) reporting the evening news’ (Eldridge, 1997:32).

This format has a healing property certainly, because it allows the writer-performer express himself or herself in a way in which large audiences can be addressed: ‘Healing, [...] is one of the dominant themes in contemporary Black literature on London. The past was a bruising place. Many of those who reached the capital from

foreign shores ended up ravaged. [...]Such hardships, over and over again.[...] They'd been reduced 'to a stoop' by a combination of hard labour, pitiful incomes, and racial hostility.' (Sandhu, 2004:98). The social impact all these productions have is of unimaginable value in order to create political consciousness; since, usually, the message they convey is inherently political. The accounts that we might encounter in those works –either songs or poems- tell about the difficulties and struggles that individuals live. But the narratives presented are not only dealing with the problems of one subject. Often, the whole community is involved in what seems to be a call of attention for those who listen and can empathize with what is being told: 'I just might be a person of actual importance, /From a place where no one seems to matter' (Mpanga, 2015: 43). The healing process starts precisely here: 'Soul healing for wounded black males necessitates a return to the inner self. It requires that black males not only "come home" but that they dare to make of home a place where their souls can thrive' (hooks, 2004: 144). When a community or an audience listen to you and try to understand your feelings, something beautiful is happening. Everything that is painful, or hurts about the past can be overcome because there are other individuals that are listening. They are paying attention and also experiencing some of the feeling that the writer-performer conveys:

We owe it to ourselves to work together

For the simple fact we'll share this world forever.

None of us is leaving. If you need something to believe in' (Mpanga, 2015: 87)

And this can only be achieved when the message is transmitted through someone's voice, often voices that did not find spaces to be heard before, because 'the tension between social justice and status quo, pleasure and profit, are part of the paradoxical nature of hip-hop music and culture around the world. The majority of hip-hop theater

artists reconcile their desire to be successful with creating thought-provoking work committed to social change' (Williams (ed.), 2015: 86). The process of healing is also carried out through the writing experience and the performance of the text, because sharing one's experience can help oneself look at things in a different angle.

All of these narratives have in common that they are shared and can be shared. Some critics claim that: 'Much hip hop culture is mainstream because it is just a black minstrel show—an imitation of dominator desire, not a rearticulation, not a radical alternative. No wonder, then, that patriarchal hip-hop culture has done little to save the lives of black males and done more to teach them'( Williams (ed.), 2015: 142-143). Therefore, as well as pessimism can be shared, optimism can be conveyed and transmitted to an audience. Consequently, there are always possibilities of improvement of the difficult conditions: 'I believe we're stronger than we think. / I believe we can last much longer than we think' (Mpanga, 2015: 91). In George the Poet's book there are many instances of these change proposals that could be effective in order to change the community's fate. Most of them revolve around the role of education in improving the life conditions of black young males. The future is never so grim, within the community there are people that struggle to be different, and manage to get an education: 'Using their imaginations to transcend all the forms of oppression that would keep them from celebrating life, individual black males have created a context where they can be self-defining and transform a world beyond themselves' (Williams (ed.), 2015: 138).

In his book and songs, George claims to be different from people in their community –'I would never live life like them/ but that's my peoples, I understand them' (Mpanga, 2015: 'Cat D' –Single) -, but he also explains to the audience that they can achieve anything if they put their mind to it. However, his message is risky; some

people would not believe him or could be condescending with him: ‘Some even think that I’m a well-meaning Cambridge graduate trying to compensate for my guilt about some privileged upbringing by t telling other people’s stories. Thanks to these poems, I’m clear that none of these perceptions matters. The truth doesn’t care who finds it, who sees it or who shares it –it just shines, regardless’( Mpanga, 2015: 6-7). In order not to be misinterpreted, Mpanga assumes an active role within the community and empathizes to a great extent with the people that have been raised with him: ‘We still need to inspire a generation’ (Mpanga, 2015: 49). Thus, there are many options that could improve the situation of people in the community: improvements in education, new facilities and especially, as George sees it, there should be a focus on how artistic expression can help teenagers, especially black boys, to be more motivated to pursue an education.

## **Conclusion**

Writing this essay was quite challenging because there was no previous criticism on Mpanga’s book. However, this has been a task I have enjoyed, since I already knew about his work as a social activist. The particularity and the personality George the Poet has as an author resides in the fact that he has escaped the stereotypical characteristics of the young black man of poor background. The urban setting has also functioned as a space for learning that has taught him that finding practical solutions for the people might be a way to address the issues that many communities in a city like London face. So, in a way, we can say that he has run away from the Labyrinth and that he sees it from another perspective. This does not mean that he ignores what is happening inside. In fact, his main aim is to modify the effects that its walls might have on the people. Therefore, London has shaped George the Poet as a writer, but he could shape new

psychological landscapes in the urban setting in order to improve the life quality of his community.

In order to achieve this, he challenges the main conceptions about black men, presenting himself as somebody who can be reached by the community and breaking most stereotypes associated with black masculinity. In his book, he also focuses on the importance of education and schooling for black boys that could have a horrible fate otherwise. In addition, he claims that creating spaces for young people that come from disadvantaged communities to express themselves, might be extremely beneficial to help communities like the ones he belong to in the process of overcoming trauma.

Consequently, the use of Spoken Word Poetry and Rap as tools to convey these messages make of Mpanga a unique Rap male artist that does not follow gangsta social codes. Through the use of oral forms, he is following a tradition of African writer-performers, making his message more effective for the community. In addition, the process of healing started in the writing of the poems can be completed more gracefully when conveyed to large audiences through the sound of his voice.

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## THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

A child is not a portion of an adult.

It's not a partial being.

A child is an absolute person,

An entire life. [...]

Many children are given less than they deserve;

Such is the world they entered at birth.

But all it takes is one friend... one friend

Who's willing to go to the ends of the earth. (54

For children in the hardest circumstances,

A friend who gives in to no resistance.[...]

You could be a friend, too.

Go to the ends of the Earth, for children. (Mpanga, 2015: 55)