

# **“The Higher the Satellite, the Lower the Culture”? African American Studies in East-Central and Southeastern Europe: The Case of Poland**

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The dramatic changes of the past fifteen or so years have transfigured many aspects of life in eastern, central, and southeastern Europe. The sudden transformation of centrally managed economies into ruthlessly capitalistic, free-market constructs has, on the one hand, destroyed people’s feelings of safety and order and made some pine for the bygone times in a gesture of what others deem pathetic nostalgia. On the other hand, 1989 and the beginning of the 1990s brought long-awaited freedom and democracy, the somewhat idealized notions that the citizens of Poland, Hungary, and the former GDR had been nurturing in their heads for decades.

The definition of freedom and democracy was to a large extent based on western standards, promoted by such channels as Radio Free Europe or “underground” literature printed in or smuggled into Poland—for instance, the Paris-based literary journal *Kultura*—but mainly on people’s narratives, stories of those lucky beggars whose visits to West Berlin, London, or New York gave them a glimpse of paradise on earth. For the West indeed appeared to many people behind the Iron Curtain as the Garden of Eden, and so did America, less accessible and imaginable but certainly much greater and more promising than western European countries.<sup>1</sup>

The myth-setting power of the West, and America in particular, created in postcommunist countries an almost insatiable demand for Western and American objects and productions at the beginning of the 1990s, making people consume and embrace uncritically anything “made in the West/U.S.A.” The insatiability of this demand demonstrated itself in Poles’ first voraciously watching and then making

their own American-style movies of dubious quality (*Rambo: First Blood* [1982] and *Psy* [*Pigs*, 1992]), listening to trashy pop music (Belinda Carlisle, Paula Abdul, or Richard Marx), or eating at McDonald's. However, the period also marked the beginning of more ambitious developments, including both a wider cultural exchange between the two countries and the growth of American studies in Poland and other countries of the former communist bloc.

An understanding of the current status of American studies and African American studies, which has emerged as a separate branch of American studies in Poland, is hardly possible without this brief historical sketch showing the magnitude of the changes that have taken place since 1989: whereas at the beginning of the 1990s African American studies hardly existed as an academic field in Poland and was mainly limited to a few classes on particular black authors (Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, or W. E. B. Du Bois), it is now a thriving area, attracting huge numbers of students and offering multimedia insights into the culture of African Americans. The case of African American studies seems more suited for discussion here since the field is more limited and definable than the all-encompassing area of American studies. More importantly, the field is very close to, and sometimes even synonymous with, developments outside academia, picking up very quickly the vibrations from the areas where the most important dialogues between African American culture and its appropriators are being conducted: the street and popular culture. Besides, "black" is in vogue now, not only on campuses but, above all, in everyday cultural life, ranging from music to theater performances and to sports; the evolution of African American studies in Poland and other countries of the region may be seen as a reaction and follow-up to such "street" developments. And as valid as this statement is about Poland, it also represents the development of university curricula in countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania, or even Bulgaria, whose post-1989 ups and downs have surprisingly much in common.<sup>2</sup> Poland will then serve in this paper as a model upon which similar transmutations in other countries from the former communist bloc can be presumed and analyzed, referring the more ardent reader to the particular instances of the development of African American studies in these individual places.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to demonstrate that, despite the fact that the development of African American studies in Poland (and thus in eastern, central, and southeastern Europe) has been boosted by a number of both external and internal factors, including wider cultural exchanges between the U.S. and these parts of Europe, much greater access to recent publications and productions related to the field, and, finally, to people's growing interest in African American culture, the knowledge and understanding of this culture is still on a very superficial and almost simulacral level, limiting perceptions of this culture to several commercially channeled voices and even sustaining the stereotypes that African American culture has been shunning. Not unlike the concept of postmodernism, the term "simulacrum" is probably overused in contemporary criticism, referring to a number

of phenomena whose simulacral character can be questioned. The understanding of the term for the purpose of this essay is a synthesis of Jean Baudrillard's and Plato's views, which is presented by Scott Durham in *Phantom Communities: The Simulacrum and the Limits of Postmodernism*: "The first version [of simulacrum], prevalent in contemporary analyses of mass culture, conceives of the simulacrum as the copy of a copy, which produces an effect of identity without being grounded in an original."<sup>3</sup> And this is all connected with the image-based and homogenizing reach of globalization, but also with the new picture of African Americans rightly labeled by Todd Boyd as "H.N.I.C.," the "New Head Niggas in Charge"<sup>4</sup>; the appeal and power of this new poetics for Polish audiences seem to marginalize those African American voices whose messages are more complex and challenging for the receiver but, nevertheless, much more rewarding.

In order to fully appreciate the nature of the changes connected with the status of African American studies in Poland, it is worth taking a closer look at the development of the field in the past two decades and the metamorphoses the treatment of African American culture has undergone in these years.<sup>5</sup> The analysis is interesting insofar as it illustrates the process of Polish culture first shyly acknowledging and eventually appropriating phenomena that before 1989 were sealed off by barriers that seemed hard to overcome: language, status, and race. Thus, one can distinguish three distinct stages of *domesticating* the black, namely that of transmissions, translations, and trans-nations, all of which have finally led to the blurring of the foreign (black) and the native, at least in selected cultural domains. The reader may consider the divisions into these three stages, which I present in "Trans-nating the Black: African-American Culture in the Global Village":

The first stage, before and even after 1989, the symbolic date marking Poland's return to the community of independent countries, may be called "transmitting the black," which, as a matter of fact, meant nothing more than a transfer of (commercially) attractive (and in a sense "ready") black productions to the Polish market. Those productions were already popular in America and this rather mainstream acclaim in the States prompted their appreciation by Polish audiences. Examples here may include the songs of Michael Jackson, Aretha Franklin or Stevie Wonder, but also jazz improvisations of Miles Davis or the writing of James Baldwin. What is quite important is that most of these voices were instantly recognized by the Polish public as "foreign" and "imported," the whole situation being certainly "aggravated" by the fact that it was not only the country of origin but also the color of the skin which made their authors stand out. They existed—in the charts, for instance—side by side with Polish

songs, but very few references to or borrowings from those black voices were ever made by Polish culture.

The next “spell” of the one-way “dialogue” between African-American and Polish culture may be called “*translating the black*,” where “*translating*” actually meant incorporating various black influences into indigenous productions. With their roots in the black ghetto or lyrics, for instance, and set in the local environment, such voices were generating what may be called the “*poetics of hybridity*,” provoking confusion, annoyance or even anger on the part of the unaccustomed audiences. On his first solo single “*Spalam się*” (“*I Am on Fire*”), released in 1991, Kazik, the leader of the cult Polish group Kult, uses a sample from Sade’s song “*Mr. Wrong*” and then goes on to rap about his and his friends’ desire for a chic English teacher. On that occasion Kazik was accused of “*polluting*” Polish culture with “*rap*” elements; what the word “*rap*” actually meant no one could say, but certainly the resonance of the phrase was both extremely low-brow and somewhat ominous.

The final and the most recent stage of this ongoing process of cultural borrowings may be called “*trans-nating the black*,” where the “*trans-*”—meaning “*beyond*,” “*crossing*,” and “*on the other side*”—is accompanied by “*nativization*,” i.e. blending the “*foreign*” with the “*native*,” or, to put it differently, a “*domestication*” of foreign influences. At this level, the foreign—and in this case the black—becomes so much embedded in the local culture that although one can still trace its original roots to a completely different culture, he or she is no longer startled by the presence of the Other in the local setting.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that the new constructs seem at first glance to have enriched and pluralized the cultures of eastern, central, and southeastern Europe, upon taking a closer look at the fields in which black culture is thriving and its local forms, one may wonder whether the insights they offer go beyond the levels of commercially attractive yet artistically mediocre productions. Examining the areas of literature, visual arts, film, music, and sports, used here to demonstrate the growing power of those previously *fighting* the power—to refer to the famous song by Public Enemy that criticizes the unfair distribution of authority in America—should serve as a useful walkthrough and present the reader with the latest developments in these areas. The form is the same, then, but the content different—updated and extending the discussion to places such as Russia, Bulgaria, or Hungary, all of which have come a long way from cultural estrangement to cultural openness. All the examples provided

here should be considered on the level of cultural trans-nations and demonstrate the most recent stages in the process of cultural transmissions.

The exchanges between contemporary African American culture and cultures of eastern, central, and southeastern Europe are surprisingly shallow in the area that seems most likely to resist the ruthless power of globalization, namely literature. Although it is undergoing a lot of changes in the spheres of marketing, promotion, and the position of the writer, literature is still considered by many an example of high art, urging the reader to invest time and effort in the process of deciphering meaning. Except for two unique narratives, Polish mainstream literature, for instance, has not “produced” in recent years a work that could be attributed to, influenced by, or inspired by black culture. Dorota Masłowska’s novel, *Wojna polsko-ruska: pod flagą biało-czerwoną* (*Snow White and Russian Red*), set in the Polish *blokowisko* (project), instantly reminds the reader of Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Paul Beatty’s *Tuff*, or Nathan McCall’s *Makes Me Wanna Holler*. Masłowska’s enormous talent, however, manifests itself not only in her reaching the recesses of the new Polish reality but in her constructing her characters through the language they speak; the author seems to have absorbed from Emerson the assumption that “I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech,” and she has her characters speak language that smashes both the syntax and the beauty of the Polish tongue but restores the air of authenticity so often lost in contemporary cultural productions. Her language is idiosyncratic and poetic, full of rhymes, rhythm, slang, colloquialisms, stream of consciousness, and irony, self-conscious and self-reflexive, borrowing, paraphrasing, appropriating, and, above all, creating.<sup>7</sup> Masłowska writes about the forgotten victims of the new Polish democracy, the ghettoization of society, and the growing gap between the mainstream and the disenfranchised. “I just prefer when men sing,” says one of her characters and then goes on, “Hip-hop, for example, English songs about how terror happens, that we live in the ghetto, you know.”<sup>8</sup> She explores the Polish project, offering a unique insight into the esoteric world of its dwellers, the clothes they wear, the music they listen to, and the hopelessness they never hope to abandon. The project is a “racialized” social space in the sense that it occupies in Polish society the place that is occupied in the U.S. by the black ghetto (and other poor neighborhoods), and, despite the fact that there are no black inhabitants living there, it is not race but class that becomes the main determinant of its dwellers’ status. The Polish project usually consists of clusters of old apartment houses, inhabited in many cases by workers who lost their jobs after the post-1989 transformation and their children who, despite the fact that they are adults now, cannot afford to move out. The crime rate is usually very high in such places and the crimes include theft, drug dealing, and violence. The label that can be ascribed to the book—“the ghetto novel,” which is understood as a form of postmuckraking realism, offering insights into urban spaces inhabited by the poor and disenfranchised, who are often involved in various criminal activities—implies

that it is not only a Tupac-like account of life in the ghetto but also a fully established literary masterpiece, providing the reader with multiple layers of meaning and interpretation. It is therefore both the form and the content that link this novel to African American culture.<sup>9</sup>

Masłowska's ingesting and then returning the pieces and bits of *blokowisko* culture to the reader makes one realize that in this case the borders between poor black ghetto dwellers and their Polish counterparts are blurring.<sup>10</sup> Her second novel, *Paw królowej* (The Queen's Puke), has the form of a hip-hop novel, in which, in addition to all the elements associated with the ghetto novel, one may find various rap and hip-hop tropes.<sup>11</sup> The queen calls it a song, using creative sampling, travesties, and improvisation, writing about the project (Praga District in Warsaw), and "spitting out" the lyrics to the audience. Again, her verbal acrobatics and the themes she discusses make one seek the roots of the novel in African American influences.<sup>12</sup>

Masłowska's success is often compared to the triumph of Russia's young iconoclast, Irina Denezhkina, whose collection of short stories, *Daj mi!* (Give Me! Songs for Lovers), was promptly labeled by the critics as the voice of the young generation and a hip-hop narrative. However, despite the fact that she dresses many of her characters in urban black clothes, nicknames one of them "Niger" and has him spin stories of rap and sing, "I can't believe my eyes, I can't believe my eyes, men in suits are making fortunes on hip-hop,"<sup>13</sup> her account is more one of muckraking realism or a heartrending picture of contemporary Moscow and Russia, extremely rich and blasé on the one hand, and poor and spiritually empty on the other.

Whereas Dorota Masłowska's *Snow White and Russian Red* verges on the ugliness of the Polish project and the exquisite beauty of the Polish language, the case of African American visual arts and its local (un)representations seem clearly to belong to the domain of high art. The 2006 show of contemporary African American art in Zachęta, the most prestigious Polish national gallery, which was advertised as the greatest exhibit of this art outside the U.S., offered the Polish visitor and the critic an opportunity to view various representations of this art and seek its Polish transmutations. The main focus of the exhibit was on younger generations of African American artists, a focus that was becoming more and more representative of the changes going on in the field, combining, in a very thought-provoking way, what used to be the art's main emphasis until recently, namely the political (oppression, slavery, racism, the question of equality, etc.) with the aesthetic, and drifting away, more and more often, from strictly political and ideological fields. The artists included Kehinde Wiley (his paintings look like stained glass windows with Gainsborough or Velázquez figures resembling either saints or white aristocracy but all African American and often wearing hip-hop clothes), Sanford Biggers, Michael Paul Britto (with his reconstruction of various black archetypes in his film "Dirrty Harriet Tubman"), Hank Willis Thomas (presenting his "Branded" cycle, with "imprints" of various white brand trademarks on the bodies of African Americans), and Xaviera Simmons (with her excruciating picture of a black female face in "Untitled [Return of the

Repressed]”). But despite the fact that certain general and universal themes are shared by African American and Polish art—to mention here such categories from the Zachęta show as “Desire,” “Africa,” “Not-Free-From-the-Past,” or “Popculture”—Polish artists do not make any direct references to their African American counterparts and no dialogue between the two groups has been initiated. This seems to validate Walter LaFeber’s assumption from his study on Michael Jordan that “the lower the satellite, the higher the culture,”<sup>14</sup> suggesting that globally targeted productions broadcast through the satellite drag standards down by trying to appeal to the widest-possible audiences. Moreover, it seems that exchanges based on deeper understanding, close collaboration, and a more thorough study of the other culture are still quite rare in this case.

The other three areas discussed in this essay relate directly to the field of mass and popular African American culture brought to the Polish audience mainly through various electronic media, including the satellite dish, cable, and the Internet. And although their resonance is disproportionately much wider than that of literature and other visual arts, they often appeal to the target recipient on a very superficial visual or aural level, which is reflected in the Polish representations of such phenomena. The satellite dish mentioned in the title of this essay has, for instance, left an irremovable “black mark” on European sports culture (and university classes too), which is represented by the phenomenon of basketball, second in popularity only to football. Despite the fact that the NBA franchise draws more and more international players and that by taking various coaching positions in the NBA more and more blacks shed the stereotypes of being superb athletes only, it is mainly black performers who still have the game.<sup>15</sup> Sparked back in the 1980s by the classic matchups between two legends of the court, Magic Johnson and Larry Bird, the growing interest in American hoops has been in recent years fueled by the emergence of either transnational and transgravitational stars like Michael Jordan and, more recently, Kobe Bryant and LeBron James, or those “loyal to the best and to the hood,” including Allen Iverson, now playing for the Detroit Pistons. The dexterity, charisma, and fame of such players have made thousands of Polish kids seek glory in streetball showdowns across the country but also have encouraged many players from the countries of the former communist bloc to seek rewards on the courts of the NBA. Cezary Trybański and Maciej Lampe, the first Polish players in the NBA, and their roads from riches to rags in the league are not tales of success, but they are attractive enough to make many other candidates consider signing up for the draft.<sup>16</sup> Players from other countries of the region have included Vlade Divac, Dino Radja, Toni Kukoč, Aleksandar Djordjevic, and Pedrag Stojakovic from the former Yugoslavia; Šarūnas Marčiulionis, Arvydas Sabonis, Darius Songaila, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas from Lithuania; Efthimis Rentzias and Martin Mürsepp from Estonia; Vitaly Potapenko and Stanislav Medvedenko from Ukraine; Jiri Welsch from the Czech Republic; and Andrei Kirilenko from Russia. The NBA’s financial appeal—hardly conceivable to many young players coming to the league straight from high

schools—is probably no more alluring than the myth-setting power of the league, sustained by such players as Iverson or Bryant. Already in 1998 Nelson George saw the future of the game in the likes of Iverson, who he considered as embodying the old spirit of true rivalry and involvement in his game: “he [Iverson] and Stephon Marbury, Kevin Garnett, Shareef Abdul-Rahim, Kobe Bryant, and others—players raised on rap’s bravado—are now the game’s immediate future. What is exciting about them is that despite huge salaries, they have strong warrior vibes.”<sup>17</sup> The importation of scores of talented African American players to the Polish league has led not only to the improvement of the game but also to a growing interest in the culture they are part of and to fewer racist behaviors by audiences. However, despite the fact that the game is much more “colorful,” multinational, and multicultural, Poland has yet to see the emergence of players matching Iverson, Bryant, or James in talent and skill.

The figure of Allen Iverson provides an interesting link to another area of Polish and European culture where the impact of African American productions has led to the emergence of a completely new genre, rap and hip-hop music, perceived at the beginning of the 1990s in Poland as extremely lowbrow, strange, and not native, having almost all the characteristics of a Lacanian Other. Writing about Iverson as true to hip-hop form, Nelson George observes that “Iverson has formed his own production company, Crew Thick; the first artists signed were two of Iverson’s pals known as Madd Rugid. And Iverson’s appearance, with his hat to the back, on the cover of *Rap Pages*, a national hip hop mag, certified his place in the culture’s constellation.”<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, many critics seem to miss in their analyses of the genre’s development in eastern, central, and southeastern Europe the fact that the poetics of Polish, Russian, Hungarian, or Bulgarian hip-hop is often, not unlike Iverson’s hat to the back, about semiotics rather than actual message. Rap and hip-hop music in these parts of Europe picked up from where involved rap groups in the U.S., including Public Enemy, for instance, almost finished. Hardly aware of the fact that the new productions of gangsta rap that fully emerged at the beginning of the 1990s were released by labels worth several millions of dollars—for example, Death Row Records—the Polish rapper echoed the poetics of gangsta rap, creating half-comic, half-serious appropriations, full of postpunk postulates to fight the system but also misogyny and xenophobia. Focused on verbal acrobatics, bragging about money, cars, and women, “dissing” other performers, and sporting all the “phat accessories,” rap does not always manage to actually represent the socially underprivileged for whom its *accessibility* makes it the only channel to express their preoccupations. What is more, the genre is often descriptive and not prescriptive, taking the status quo for granted, and not attempting to study the root causes of many problems. Wearing a NYC hat (backwards, of course) and a pair of Adidas sneakers, singing about the seals (women) and hay (money), and deeming himself *real*, the Polish rapper has become a parody or a simulacrum of the original he never got to know. In his insightful study of contemporary Polish hip-hop, Bart Reszuta

presents the main themes and concerns of Polish hip-hop, which point to the hybridization and paradoxes that accompany the genre. He writes that the Polish rapper declares himself a Christian for whom God represents the highest value; however, in many of his lyrics he craves money and treats women as objects. He will speak about “unemployment, poverty, turmoil, subordination of the poor by the rich and making hip hop not for money,” while behaving, at the same time, like a rich pimp from Snoop Dogg’s videos.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, this aura of “inauthenticity” surrounding Polish mainstream hip-hop can also be found in Bulgarian productions, where at the beginning of the 1990s, as Claire Levy writes, “through their rather crude lyrics and unruly behavior and lifestyle, they largely imitated MTV-derived stereotyped images.”<sup>20</sup> The subsequent years did not improve the face of Bulgarian hip-hop either, with future productions representing another “apology for vulgar, crude sexism and pornography” (142). Not unlike the Polish rapper, the Bulgarian performers also seem never to have crossed the barrier preventing them from understanding the early roots of the genre.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, in contrast to the field of music, the Polish movie industry has not released many films that could clearly be said to embrace modern African American themes or poetics. The three films that will be discussed in this essay are tributes to contemporary urban or project dwellers culture, an environment that, like Los Angeles County’s Compton or certain neighborhoods of the Bronx in New York, has always existed on the fringes of social and cultural life. Sylwester Latkowski’s *Blokersi* (*Blockers*, 2001) is the first docudrama to show the lives of young, poor project dwellers in Poland, whose prospects for employment and a better future are hindered by the fact that they neither have education nor can afford it, which creates the familiar problems of violence, alcohol abuse, and crime. In the rhythm of hip-hop music performed by Poland’s best old-school rappers, DJ Volt, Paktafonika, and Grammatik, the story is narrated by rapper Peja, once a famous Polish thug and now an exemplary provider for his family. Dominik Matwiejczyk’s *Krew z nosa* (*Nose Bleed*, 2004) echoes the tensions from *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993) and presents the somewhat naïve hopes of the main character, Pablo, that he can escape the bleak apartment houses by becoming a hip-hop performer. Like Tupac Shakur, the main character weaves the stories of the Polish ghetto, provides testimony that can hardly be found in official records, and testifies to the victory of democracy, where the censor no longer suppresses such voices. Finally, *Oda do radości* (*Ode to Joy*, 2005), directed by Maciej Migas, shows the clash between the independent hip-hop culture, with its somewhat naïve conviction that it can change a lot in the young democracy, and Poland’s (vulture) capitalism, which associates hip-hop culture with the scum of society, due to the fact that in most cases hip-hop is practiced by young guys wearing hoodies and living in poor neighborhoods.

Various elements of black and hip-hop culture can be found in films made even by famous directors from other countries of central and eastern Europe, a fact that is often perceived as an attempt to attract younger audiences. Even the hottest

Hungarian movie in recent years, Nimród Antal's *Kontroll* (*Control*, 2003), features a young shaving-foam sprayer who plays with the controllers of the title in the dark, graffiti-painted tunnels of the Budapest metro. Áron Gauder's *Nyócker!* (*The District*, 2004) presents the struggle between the white mafia in Budapest and a disenfranchised group of Gypsies, portrayed here as the blacks of Europe. If one asks the question, "Whose rap is it?" however, one quickly learns that it is the politics and poetics of the likes of N.W.A., Biggie Smalls, or Snoop Dogg, with clear "us and them" divisions, mics used along with guns, strong words exchanged during beefs, and pockets of wide pants filled with crack. But, again, none of the films mentioned above reaches outside the conventionalized imagery of the modern black ghetto and explores the links between the signified and the signifier, if such connections still exist at all. Probably the most ambitious project of locating hip-hop music and culture in a multicultural metropolis inhabited by ten million people is *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (2005), with Fatih Akin, the director, showing the attempts of real DJs and MCs to develop their cultural (and political) identities in a predominantly Muslim country without focusing only on the baggy trousers, swear words, and gold-and-Hennessy-dripping videos. The lyrics of the rappers here remind one of Public Enemy's productions: the voices of the underprivileged and disenfranchised are amplified, and the iconoclastic tunes flow over the mosques of Istanbul. Another movie that actually makes allusions to African American culture is Emir Kusturica's excellent *Crna macka, beli macor* (*Black Cat, White Cat*, 1998), where the head narco-gangster snorts cocaine from his cross, parodying Priest from Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Superfly* (1972).

The purpose of the perspective adopted for this essay has been to demonstrate that, despite the increasing presence of African Americans in the social and cultural life of the U.S., and despite the growing area of African American studies in countries of east-central and southeastern Europe, in several European countries the nature of the influences that can be attributed to black heritage is often only skin-deep and sustained by global channels, at the foundations of which always lies multinational capital. This analysis should also point to the changing status of many of the areas discussed above, where blackness suddenly becomes a commercially powerful tool and joins its former oppressor—white power and capital—in exploiting its globally sustained appeal. Writing about Michael Jordan and new global capitalism, for instance, Walter LaFeber presents a fascinating story of Air Jordan, noting his legacy from North Carolina and also from the Harlem Renaissance, and then tracing how the union with controversial Peter Knight turned Jordan into a multimillionaire; LaFeber also makes note of the less glorious moments from Jordan's career, when he and Knight "came under further fire for squeezing vast profits from, but otherwise apparently ignoring, African American children who tried to survive in violent inner-city neighborhoods." LaFeber goes on to mention examples of black children in Chicago, Houston, Baltimore, Atlanta, Detroit, and Philadelphia killing each other to get a pair of Air Jordans.<sup>22</sup>

From the hundreds of critical studies affirming the rise of hip-hop culture, one can select those that not only show the development of Hood poetics but are hip-hop narratives themselves. Todd Boyd, in addition to raising several important points about the death of politics in rap music and hip-hop's ongoing searches for the real, is not afraid to attribute the redefinition of the American Dream to basketball and hip-hop. He often sounds like a cool and blasé rapper, impressing the reader with the vernacular vocabulary he employs in his studies of the vernacular culture; chapter titles from his books include "Young, Black, and Don't Give a Fuck: Experiencing the Cinema of Nihilism," "No Time for Fake Niggas: Hip Hop, from Private to Public," or "Epilogue: Some New, Improved Shit."<sup>23</sup> Not unlike one of the greatest "dissers" in cultural criticism, bell hooks, Boyd is not afraid to diss people whose views are at variance with his outlook. Describing his encounter with Spike Lee, Boyd says, "[I] went on to tell him that we could 'settle this like we got some class or we can get into some gangsta shit,' [and he] ended up running off into the rain like a little schoolgirl when he realized that I was the wrong nigga to fuck wit."<sup>24</sup> Boyd mentions many other examples of antagonizing his audiences, which he calls "his job of making people think" (xvii), and which others—for instance, Marlon Ross, in his essay "An Anatomy of the Straight Black Sissy as Theoretical Intervention"—consider a case of homophobia.<sup>25</sup>

Such narratives are certainly illustrative of the growing sense of security and power of many contemporary black voices, but, at the same time, they confine the culture to its most superficial and commercially potent elements, including the Hood, hip-hop, and basketball; seen through this perspective, the culture and its appropriations and trans-nations discussed here with selected examples from eastern, central, and southeastern Europe are but faint echoes of deep and authentic African American poetics, "phantom communities" or "societies of the spectacle," to stress once again their simulacral character. And it seems that the divide between university students studying the phenomena of African American culture from an often highly theorized angle and the rappers and ballers performing in depressed projects is constantly growing, the first considering the area a somewhat exotic and thus potentially attractive field of study and the latter appropriating the culture, often without realizing where the actual roots are. It seems, therefore, that no thorough exchange between the two cultures is possible without artists and students engaging in closer and more frequent interactions, such as arts and literature workshops, visits, and meetings. Otherwise reading Toni Morrison, Gail Jones, or Harryette Mullen and appreciating the works of Paul Britto or Hank Willis Thomas will soon become a purely academic exercise performed by a group of aficionados living in their ebony towers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of America's influences on postwar Europe, see Alexander Stephan, *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2006), particularly Andrzej Antoszek and Kate Delaney, "Poland: Transmissions and Translations," 218–50.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that there were no African Americans in east-central European countries before 1989. In her study *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, Penny von Eschen discusses the role of U.S. "cultural ambassadors," namely jazz musicians, sent by the U.S. government to the countries of the former communist bloc (Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington, for instance). Those exchanges resulted in the development of many local jazz bands and even in some collaborative projects by famous African American and Polish musicians—I mention here Miles Davis's "Tutu" record made together with Michał Urbaniak—however, they did not really offer a lot of insight into broader African American culture. Jazz was quite elitist in Poland at that time, and what the audience really appreciated were the musical skills of its performers rather than the messages they might have been carrying in their improvisations. Willis Conover from the Voice of America played a very significant role in popularizing jazz in many communist countries in the 1950s and 1960s. See Penny M. von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). See also Marsha Siefert, "From Cold War to Wary Peace: American Culture in the USSR and Russia," in Stephan, *Americanization of Europe*, 185–217; and Antoszek and Delaney, "Poland."

<sup>3</sup> Scott Durham, *Phantom Communities: The Simulacrum and the Limits of Postmodernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 7. One could also venture to employ for this discussion other models of simulacra presented by Durham, where, analyzing the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, he describes the *demonic* aspect of simulacrum, considered "the mask of an evil *simulator*, a diabolical actor who, by repeating a familiar image, assumes another's identity as the mask of malign intentions" (9, emphasis original).

<sup>4</sup> Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York: NYU Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> For more information about the evolution of American studies in Poland, see Antoszek and Delaney, "Poland"; or Andrzej Antoszek, "Trans-nating the Black: African-American Culture in the Global Village" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Polish Association for American Studies, Poznań, Poland, October 19–21, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Antoszek, "Trans-nating the Black."

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting discussion of rap's postmodern characteristics, see Richard Shusterman, "The Fine Art of Rap," *New Literary History* 22, no. 3 (1991): 613–32. Masłowska's novel seems to include many important characteristics that Shusterman discusses in his paper: appropriative sampling, cutting, and intertextual references.

<sup>8</sup> Dorota Masłowska, *Snow White and Russian Red*, trans. Benjamin Paloff (New York: Black Cat, 2005), 148. Originally published as *Wojna polsko-ruska: pod flagą biało-czerwoną* (Warsaw: Lampa i Iskra Boża, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> In order to appreciate whether Masłowska's narrative is an example of high or low art, one may consider Heike Raphael's interesting article, "Gazing at the Ghetto: The Emergence of Hip Hop 'Street' Fiction" (paper presented at the "Bridges Across the Nations: African American Culture in the 21st Century" conference, Pulawy, Poland, February 2–5, 2006), which discusses in more detail various U.S. "ghetto narratives." See also Heike Raphael-Hernandez, ed., *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> One has to remember that Masłowska had her novel released when she was only eighteen; she is, in a sense, a product of the culture she writes about in her novel.

<sup>11</sup> Dorota Masłowska, *Paw królowej* (Warsaw: Lampa i Iskra Boża, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Obviously, as one of the reviewers of this essay observed, the narrative may not necessarily be considered an example of high art by everybody. This was the case in Poland, too, where reviews of Masłowska's work ranged from raving paeans written by established Polish writers to condemning commentaries, mainly by right-wing journalists.

<sup>13</sup> Irina Denezhkina, *Daj mi!* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2004), 28, translation mine. English translation published as *Give Me: Songs for Lovers*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 109.

<sup>15</sup> See David Leonhardt and Ford Fessenden, "Black Coaches in N.B.A. Have Shorter Tenures," *New York Times*, March 22, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/22/sports/basketball/22coaches.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Lampe, selected by the New York Knicks in the 2003 NBA draft, was traded to the Phoenix Suns, from which, despite his improving game statistics, he was "sentenced" to play for the New Orleans Hornets, where, instead of playing more minutes, he spent a lot of time on the bench. Eventually he was transferred back to Europe. Currently, the only Polish player in the NBA is Marcin Gortat, who plays for the Orlando Magic.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Viking, 1998), 153.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* More recently, it was LeBron James's appearance on the April 2008 cover of *Vogue* with Gisele Bündchen in a picture taken by Annie Leibowitz that no doubt provoked more controversy, the phrase "racially charged image" being a lighter form of criticism. See Jemele Hill, "LeBron Should Be More Careful with His Image," *ESPN Page 2*, March 21, 2008, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=hill/080320&sportCat=nba>.

<sup>19</sup> Bart Reszuta, “Hip-hop as CNN—Chronicles of City Life (Ten Commandments of Polish Hip-hop)” (paper presented at the “Americanization, Globalization and Contemporary Popular Culture” conference, Istanbul, Turkey, May 20–22, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Claire Levy, “Rap in Bulgaria: Between Fashion and Reality,” in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-hop Outside the USA*, ed. Tony Mitchell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 142.

<sup>21</sup> See Mitchell, *Global Noise*, for an interesting presentation of Australian, Turkish, and even Maori varieties of the genre, whose common denominator is that most of these voices were at one point influenced by the already commercialized model of American rap and hip-hop.

<sup>22</sup> LaFeber, *Michael Jordan*, 90–91. For more examples of the changing politics of basketball, see George, *Hip Hop America*; Darcy Frey, *The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); Larry Platt, *Only the Strong Survive: The Odyssey of Allen Iverson* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002); Michael Mandelbaum, *The Meaning of Sports: Why Americans Watch Baseball, Football, and Basketball and What They See When They Do* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); Ryan Jones, *King James: Believe the Hype; The LeBron James Story* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2005); and David Lee Morgan, *LeBron James: The Rise of a Star* (Cleveland, OH: Gray, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> See Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You? Popular Culture from the ‘Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Boyd, *New H.N.I.C.*; and Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous*. For other interesting analyses of contemporary black youth, urban, hip-hop, and/or ghetto culture, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Leon E. Wynter, *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002); Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2002); Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001); bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green, eds., *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure* (New York: NYU Press, 1998); Murray Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); and Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Boyd, *New H.N.I.C.*, xv–xvi.

<sup>25</sup> Marlon Ross, “An Anatomy of the Straight Black Sissy as Theoretical Intervention,” in “Blackness and Sexualities,” ed. Michelle M. Wright and Antje Schuhmann, special issue of *FORECASST* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007), 41–57.

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