

“Tears Dropping from the Barbed Wire”: Prison Abolitionism and Hip Hop Sentimentality

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Contrary to the widespread belief that rap music is a non- (or even anti-) sentimental art-form, much of American hip hop culture draws on sentimental elements and aesthetics. In fact, politically charged hip hop productions often rely on popular sentimental tropes to thwart dehumanizing portrayals of marginalized groups – including gangsta rap. Notably, this encompasses works that critically engage with the US penal system: by casting the Black male prisoner as a suffering child, such productions aim to elicit empathy from their audience. Apart from the depiction of the imprisoned individual’s own pain, the grieving mother – whose sorrow mainly stems from being separated from her incarcerated child – serves as a particularly popular motif. Against the broader theoretical backdrop of prison abolitionist theory, hip hop studies, and the study of affect and public feeling, this article examines sentimental elements in works by African American male hip hop artists. Primarily focusing on song lyrics and visual material by rappers 2Pac and YNW Melly, it argues that sentimental aesthetics are used not only to challenge the prison industrial complex, but also to counteract pathologizing notions of Black masculinity within the American cultural imaginary.

Introduction: Thugs Don’t Cry? Gangsta Rap and Sentimentality

A young Black man – almost a teenager still – is sitting in a moving car, sunk deep into the passenger seat, his head tilted toward the window. Cut to black screen. Seated in the driver’s seat, his mother has turned to him, gently stroking her son’s head, her fingers running through his dreadlocked hair. Cut to black screen. Mother and son have gotten out of the car and are now facing each other. With their eyes closed and foreheads touching, the mother holds her child’s face in her hands. Her lips are moving, but the sound is dampened, obscuring her words – is she talking to her son? Is she praying? Despite the indistinctness of what she is saying, it can be heard that her voice is muffled with tears. Cut. The young man is shown entering the prison building all by himself, his facial expression no longer being visible. Cut. The mother is back in the car, alone, tears rolling down her cheek.

Shot entirely in black and white and accompanied by a muted, sinister soundscape, the clip described above serves as the intro to YNW Melly’s *Mama Cry* (2019) music video. Showing a quietly staged, but nonetheless deeply sorrowful depiction of family separation, it underscores the fact that a prison sentence has devastating effects not only on the life of incarcerated individuals, but also their loved ones. The present article sets out to take a closer look at such (self-)representations in works by African American male rap artists, hoping to demonstrate that while a lot of (gangsta) rap songs actively embrace, even glorify, the image of the ‘dangerous criminal’, many prison abolitionist works attempt to counter this dehumanizing portrayal by depicting the prisoner as a suffering child yearning for motherly love. In doing so, they rely heavily on sentimental

aesthetics and strategies, highlighting the fact that, contrary to popular belief, hip hop culture holds an important sentimental dimension.

But what are the forms and functions of hip hop sentimentality – and how does it factor into US-American prison rap? Put differently, in what ways do hip hop productions leverage the “sentimental code” (Paul and Pritz 2025: 9) to advocate for prison abolitionism? And how do they reconcile this instrumentalization of sentimentality with (stereo-)typical performances of gangsta rap masculinities? In the following, these questions will be addressed through textual analyses¹ of selected prison abolitionist rap productions, with a particular focus on works by African American rap artists 2Pac and YNW Melly². Primarily relying on discourse analysis and close readings, this article is theoretically indebted to the fields of prison abolitionist thought, affect theory, gender studies, and critical race theory. After providing a brief history of gangsta rap, the article will offer a theoretical overview of the sentimental, contextualizing it within US (popular) culture and literature. These sections are then followed by an introduction to prison rap – which is commonly considered a derivative of gangsta rap – and prison abolitionism, before turning to the analyses of 2Pac’s *Trapped* and *16 on Death Row*, as well as *Mama Cry* by YNW Melly.



Figure 1. Video screenshot showing mother and son shortly before the son enters prison. YNW Melly, “Mama Cry”, music video, 2019.

- 1 According to Heike Paul and Sarah Pritz, “[t]he sentimental code manifests itself in a multitude of forms and functions across time and cultures” (Paul and Pritz 2025: 9). As such, it adapts seamlessly to different types of media, rendering it well-suited to multimodal art forms – including hip hop culture. Although this article predominantly focuses on the movement’s lyrical and visual dimensions, the sentimental code can indubitably also be evoked by means of hip hop’s multifaceted soundscapes, rendering it an intriguing object of musicological analysis. Indeed, Miles White posits that “rap’s rhythms [...] are its most powerful affective component” (White 2011: 47), while Anne Danielsen highlights the importance of “sonic montage” (Danielsen 2016: 98), arguing that it renders rap music’s expressive impact “fundamentally richer than any exclusively verbal text could manage” (Danielsen 2016: 100). Accordingly, hip hop sentimentality can not only unfold via the instrumental designs of the beats or the rappers’ delivery of the lyrics – e.g. by means of “unified flow in shared rap tracks” (Komaniecki 2017: n. pag.) or the usage of recurring “lyric formulas” (see Stoia et al. 2017: 6) – but also through the incorporation of ‘real life sounds’, such as the slamming of cell doors or prison collect call prompts. Found sounds of this kind may also add to rap music’s “reality effects” (Danielsen 2016: 90), suggesting a certain sense of intimacy between rap artists and their audience that can potentially serve as a fruitful basis for “sentimental political storytelling” (Wanzo 2009: 3). Further examples of sentimentally charged sonic expressions may include practices of sampling and remixing, particularly when it comes to “forging a usable past for historical authenticity” (Williams 2011: 137) by channeling – often romanticized – collective cultural memories of the movement’s beginnings.
- 2 The corpus of this article centers on prison rap songs by commercially successful African American hip hop artists identifying as cisgender males whose works have attained significant mainstream visibility. Moreover, considering that both 2Pac and YNW Melly have each spent time in prison – with Melly’s sentence still ongoing – adds an interesting facet to the role of ‘realness’ in gangsta rap and the fact that the cultural work of the sentimental typically unfolds at the intersection of the public and the private sphere (see Berlant 2008: viii, Paul 2021: 21).

A Short History of Gangsta Rap

Originating in New York City in the early 1970s, hip hop has become a central part of US-American popular culture and beyond. With its roots in the underground scene of the South Bronx, the art form quickly spread across the country and began to achieve greater commercial success in the decades that followed. As a result, its visibility in the mainstream increased as well – particularly with the emergence of gangsta rap in the mid to late 1980s. This is linked to the general surge in interest in street gangs that prevailed at the time. Functioning as the primary source of information about gangs, as Josephine Metcalf points out, mass media outlets relied almost exclusively on sensationalized depictions of life in ‘the ghetto’ (Metcalf 2009: 7), fueling the far-reaching anxieties surrounding urban gangs. Consequently, this type of dramatizing coverage was not only rife with false information, but also fomented “moral panics” (ibid.) among its audience. As is often the case, this type of “public fascination with the subject” (ibid.) resulted in a high (pop-)cultural appeal that ultimately led to the commodification of gangsta culture: “The actual gang experience, with its traditions and customs,” Metcalf writes, “is converted into cultural form and entertainment” (Metcalf 2009: 6). Apart from the hood film genre, gangsta rap is arguably the best-known example for this phenomenon: Offering supposedly raw, yet highly stylized insights into “secretive gangsta subcultures” (Metcalf 2009: 7), such hip hop productions commonly hinge on hyperbolic renderings of a glorified African American male gangster persona (Watts 2004: 598). Rather than assessing it as an artistic form of cultural expression, according to Tricia Rose, mainstream media soon started to vilify hip hop culture based on the idea that “rap music is fundamentally linked to larger social constructions of Black culture as an internal threat to dominant American culture and social order” (Rose 1991: 289). In fact, as Rose goes on to explain, “the dominant media critiques of rap’s aesthetic are conditioned by the omnipresent fears of Black influence” (Rose 1991: 285). Therefore, negative ideas about hip hop being harmful, if not downright dangerous, are closely connected to racist stereotypes about Blackness, especially those related to delinquency, most notably the thug. Strongly tied to – and, at least partly, rooted in – the buck³ stereotype, the thug figure is based on “illusions about Black male bodies as violent, irresponsible, and lewd” (Jackson 2006: 112). Usually portrayed as a “socially sanctioned Black male warrior” (Jackson 2006: 111), Richard T. Craig describes the thug as having a “dialectical nature” (Craig 2016: 38), given that he is imagined as a “criminal while simultaneously a resilient survivor” (ibid.). Thus, in the context of gangsta rap, the “controlling image of the ‘thug’” (Dow 2016: 161) may well be viewed ambivalently: Although it does hold a certain empowering quality, it also entails problematic dimensions, such as the recurrent promotion of misogyny and queerphobia. An outspoken critic of gangsta rap, this glorification of heteropatriarchal thought led Black feminist scholar bell hooks to bemoan what she perceives as “the hip-hop generation’s disdain for the emotional complexity of black male experience” (hooks 2004: 140). Nevertheless, while there are certainly questionable aspects about ‘gangsterized’ constructions of hip hop (hyper-)masculinities, denying them any type of emotional depth is not only far too simplistic, but also strengthens the widespread belief that hip hop culture is “void of sentimental capacity” (Miles 2023: 21).

3 Emerging in the southern United States in the 19th century (Richardson 2007: 3), the buck is constructed as hyper-masculine, oversexed, and prone to violence, the latter especially referring to sexual assaults against white women (Wallace 2015: 25). Thus, following Michele Wallace, he can be described as “the personification of the black threat to white womanhood and, more importantly, to white male authority and dominance” (Wallace 2015: 25). The figure of the buck, she writes, is “the stereotype, the nightmare, that whites could not handle” (ibid.).

What Is Sentimentality?

This assumption might, at least in part, stem from a similarly pervasive misconception regarding colloquial understandings of sentimentality. According to Rebecca Bedell, sentimentality was initially appreciated and thus positively connoted in the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States,⁴ but it lost favor by the early 20th century, when, following their European counterparts, American modernists began to view the sentimental with contempt:

modernist attacks on the sentimental intensified to the point that it became the abject other, both beyond and beneath notice. The word came to serve as a catchall for nearly everything that modernism scorned: the popular, the commercial, the feminine, the domestic, the tenderly emotional. (Bedell 2018: 3)

Still persisting to this day, such associations perpetuate the idea that sentimental expressions are fundamentally inauthentic because they are said to elicit “fake’ emotions” (Solomon 2004: 14). Thus, at first glance, sentimentality appears to clash with several elements that are central to gangsta rap narratives: the popular and commercial versus a certain ‘underdog mentality’, the feminine versus the (hyper-)masculine, the domestic versus ‘the streets’, the tenderly emotional versus a gangsteresque callousness, the fake versus (alleged) authenticity. In the wake of the affective turn in the humanities, however, scholarship on emotions and public feeling has called for a more nuanced conceptualization of the sentimental (see Paul 2021: 18). Situating it at the nexus of the public and private spheres, Lauren Berlant conceives of “the sentimental itself as a form – a dynamic pattern – not just a content with scenic themes, like that of weeping, sacrifice, and sanctified death” (Berlant 2008: 20–21). Building on Berlant’s theory, Heike Paul argues that the sentimental undermines conventional distinctions between the public and private spheres by melding aesthetics and politics (Paul 2021: 21). In this sense, it unites affect and emotion, provoking physical reactions, such as crying, and affirming cultural scripts, such as grief, that have been internalized through socialization (ibid.). A core element of US-American culture, the sentimental is not merely a mode of feeling, but also functions as a communicative code and a culture-specific pattern of dealing with crises (Paul 2021: 8). Following Berlant and Paul, I would like to make the case that their observations also resonate with hip hop culture: sentimentally charged rap lyrics, which are often written in a “candid first-person form” (Metcalf 2009: 7) that equates the speaker with the rapper, strategically blur the boundaries between the public and private spheres, all while addressing crises within and beyond the hip hop community. Against this theoretical backdrop, hip hop sentimentality can be defined as a mode of feeling conveyed by hip hop narratives that embrace the expression of “softer emotions” (Bedell 2018: 6). A communicative code that can be found across all elements of hip hop culture, sentimentalized productions commonly focus on depicting hardship – and, in some cases, how to overcome it. As such, hip hop sentimentality hinges on depictions of grief and suffering, experienced both by individuals as well as within larger (marginalized) groups. While this narrative mode is employed by rappers of all races, genders, and sexual orientations, I suggest that it especially resonates with performances of Black cisgender heterosexual masculinities in hip hop culture, challenging the common association of the sentimental with (white) femininity (see Chapman and Hendler 1999: 1). Therefore, hip hop sentimentality frequently serves as a platform for a particular kind of male self-fashioning that not only reconciles “tender feelings” (Solomon 2004: 4) with ‘gangsterized’

4 According to Katharina Gerund and Heike Paul, sentimentalism has historically functioned as “a moniker for mid-nineteenth-century popular literature” (Gerund and Paul 2018: 17). Closely tied to white middle-class femininity both in terms of authorship and (intended) readership, sentimental literature of the time has engaged “in vexed and intricate ways with the ‘cult of domesticity,’ its gendered and racialized regimes, (civil) religious discourse, and its national ramifications” (Gerund and Paul 2018: 18). Much of sentimental fiction revolved around “matters of familial concern/conflict” (Gerund and Paul 2018: 17), commonly employing “a range of rhetorical strategies to create compassion, to foster sympathetic identification, and to emotionally appeal to its ostensibly mostly female readership” (ibid.).

performances of (hyper-)masculinity, but also seems to thrive from their synthesis. More specifically, in this context, showing vulnerability proves the rapper's 'realness', contradicting the common belief that "sentimentality yields 'fake' emotions" (Solomon 2004: 14) while also affirming the rap artist's perceived authenticity, even when performing a gangsta persona. Put differently, sentimental elements make "hip hop self-representations" (Durham 2014: 7) appear more relatable to the audience. Like other sentimentalized art forms, hip hop narratives of this kind rely on "a mode of address intended to develop empathetic bonds and to represent and elicit the 'softer emotions'" (Bedell 2018: 6), the primary goal being to appeal to the audience's feelings, provoking a distinct affective experience. For instance, when asked about his style in a 2019 interview with *Complex*, YNW Melly states that his music is "about the soul" (Skelton 2019: n. pag.), further specifying that "if that bitch touch anybody soul, you got them. [...] It's gonna be stuck. It hits your soul before it hits your ears." (ibid.).

According to Bedell, it is precisely this "rhetorical power" (Bedell 2018: 9) of sentimental art that renders it a "politically multivalent" (ibid.) tool. Historically, white authors often used sentimental tropes in an attempt to 'guide' their readers morally, one of the most prominent examples being Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁵ This led to the common association of sentimentality with "white middle-class hegemony" (ibid.). However, as Bedell notes, "[i]t was that, but much more, including an agent of radical social reform" (ibid.). Indeed, sentimental codes have historically been used by marginalized groups to express protest and/or resistance against the status quo (Paul 2021: 8–9), perhaps most notably through what Rebecca Wanzo conceptualizes as "sentimental political storytelling" (Wanzo 2009: 3):

Sentimental political storytelling describes the narrativization of sympathy for purposes of political mobilization. It is key if people want to mobilize sympathy and have what I call affective agency – the ability of a subject to have her political and social circumstances move a populace and produce institutional effects. (ibid.)

In other words, as Wanzo suggests, sentimental political storytelling denotes (pop-)cultural works that use sentimentally charged narratives of sorrow to elicit empathy and ultimately spur political action from their audiences. As such, it has helped shape "contemporary discourse about suffering in the United States" (Wanzo 2009:13), rendering certain groups legible and illegible when it comes to depictions of (emotional) pain (ibid.). According to Wanzo, the dichotomy between supposedly 'good' and 'bad' victims is ubiquitous in US sentimental political storytelling, and, as a result, it has been difficult to render the suffering of African Americans legible (Wanzo 2009: 32). However, as Wanzo reminds us,

Illegibility is not invisibility [...] To be politically illegible as a sufferer is to have one's story visible but obscured by historical and cultural debris, thus the intended audience cannot read or interpret it in a way that leads to true comprehension of the cause of suffering. (Wanzo 2009: 32)

This illegibility of African American suffering, I would argue, is precisely what hip hop sentimentality seeks to counteract: by strategically incorporating sentimental elements and aesthetics in their narratives, hip hop productions of this kind set out to create "empathetic bonds" (Bedell 2018: 6) with their audience to facilitate political mobilization. For this purpose, such works often

⁵ In Lauren Berlant's words, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by white American author Harriet Beecher Stowe holds the status of "a master sign or supertext" (Berlant 2008: 28). Indeed, Katharina Gerund and Heike Paul refer to the book as "the prototype of U.S.-American sentimental fiction" (Gerund and Paul 2018: 22): Drawing on a distinct "politico-sentimental aesthetic" (Berlant 2008: 36) meant to channel "compassionate emotion" (Berlant 2008: 28) among its (white) readership, the novel recounts the sufferings and hardships endured by its enslaved African American protagonists in order to promote its "anti-slavery agenda" (Gerund and Paul 2018: 30). As such, it functioned as a central text for the abolitionist movement. Nevertheless, the novel is also deeply problematic, as it perpetuates a number of anti-Black stereotypes, with the eponymous 'Uncle Tom' becoming a racial slur in the 20th century.

draw on traditional tropes that were already highly popular in 19th century sentimental literature, such as the forcefully separated family, the grieving mother, and the innocent child.

Prison (Abolitionist) Rap Narratives

In her seminal book *The New Jim Crow*, which was first published in 2010, Michelle Alexander points to the disproportionately high rate at which African Americans are imprisoned in the United States, especially when compared to white Americans, arguing that the country’s penal system follows in the footsteps of systemic anti-Black policies and practices, particularly slavery and Jim Crow laws (Alexander 2012: 21). Such institutions, Alexander writes, “appear to die, but then are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time” (ibid.). Thus, as laid out by Monika Fludernik, the contemporary criminal justice system in the US ranks among “practices of colonial and neocolonial oppression that are both literally and metaphorically imprisoning and share aspects of surveillance, confinement, exclusion, and dehumanization with the carceral scenario” (Fludernik 2019: 396). Moreover, according to Angela Y. Davis, not only does the mass incarceration of African Americans disclose “congealed forms of antiblack racism that operate in clandestine ways” (Davis 2003: 25), but it is also driven by financial and political interests, a phenomenon known as the prison industrial complex⁶ (Davis 2003: 84). Significantly fueled by the War on Drugs (which began under Richard Nixon’s presidency in the early 1970s and particularly targeted working-class communities of color in the decades to follow), the growing incarceration rate of African Americans was seemingly justified by the ubiquitous criminalization of Blackness in the media and, therefore, in the cultural imaginary (Kitwana 2002: 79). Moreover, as Bakari Kitwana points out, the mass incarceration of African Americans is also reflected in hip hop culture:

As hip-hop culture became more and more commercialized in the late 1980s and early 1990s, primarily through the success enjoyed by rap music, aspects of prison culture became more apparent in rap music and Black youth culture, from the use of language and styles of dress to extensive commentary on crime and prison life. With so many Blacks entering and exiting prison this influence is inescapable. (Kitwana 2002: 77)

Arguably, this phenomenon most saliently manifests itself in the prison rap subgenre, which emerged in the 1980s (Cecil 2015: 164). Providing insights into life behind bars, as Dawn K. Cecil remarks, prison rap songs serve as “powerful commentary” (Cecil 2015: 165) on the American penal system, oftentimes from an African American point of view. This is particularly noteworthy considering that earlier (pop-)cultural productions dealing with incarceration mostly centered white (men’s) perspectives (Cecil 2015: 43). When looking at the ways in which incarcerated Black male individuals are portrayed in prison rap narratives, two dominant modes of representation appear to stand out in particular. In many instances, the prison sentence is depicted as a type of “rite of passage” and a legitimating activity in the hip-hop hustle” (Pond Cummings 2010: 541). Here, the prison is commonly described as a “tough environment” (Fludernik 2019: 116) that forces the inmates to be (or, at least, act) tough as well – put differently, a place where “men as a rule cannot afford to acknowledge weakness” (ibid.). At the same time, a considerable number of works emphasize that “in many instances, crime is justified by lack of opportunity” (Pond Cummings 2010: 543), pointing to the structural injustice that permeates the racially biased carceral

6 In her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), Angela Y. Davis defines the prison industrial complex as follows: “The exploitation of prison labor by private corporations is one aspect among an array of relationships linking corporations, government, correctional communities, and media. These relationships constitute what we now call a prison industrial complex. The term ‘prison industrial complex’ was introduced by activists and scholars to contest prevailing beliefs that increased levels of crime were the root cause of mounting prison populations. Instead, they argued, prison construction and the attendant drive to fill these new structures with human bodies have been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit” (Davis 2003: 84).

system in the United States (Cecil 2015: 178). In fact, as pointed out by Donald B. Tibbs, numerous rap songs have highlighted precisely the systemic issues that Michelle Alexander has identified in *The New Jim Crow*⁷ long before the book was published, without “this group of *scholars*” (Tibbs 2015: 211, emphasis in original), as he refers to the respective rappers, receiving the recognition they deserve (ibid.). Challenging the institution of the prison as a viable punitive measure within the criminal justice system, such rap narratives can be categorized as prison abolitionist. Prison abolitionism “stems in part from, and continually converses with other abolitionist movements of the past and present” (Reznik 2019: 128), examples including the institution of slavery or immigration detention facilities (ibid.). On its most basic level, according to Rafi Reznik, the prison abolitionist movement rejects “incarceration’s centrality in addressing social conditions that should really be handled by non-criminal means” (Reznik 2019: 130), such as poverty and structural racism, while also seeking to dismantle the prison industrial complex (ibid.):

It is stipulated that by incarcerating the individuals victimized by these circumstances they have little to no control over; authorities and corporations use them as means for the material and political benefit of the powerful. This in turn perpetuates the same political-economic cycle that only yields more victims and perpetrator-victims. In order to end this cycle and address root causes, abolitionists understand decarceration to encompass a divestment of resources away from criminal law enforcement and an investment into the social arm of the state. (ibid.)

In light of the dire consequences of mass incarceration, the belief that the US prison system is “in urgent need of fundamental change” (Shelby 2022: 1) has garnered supporters “across the political spectrum” (Shelby 2022: 2), even though most belong to leftist circles (Shelby 2022: 5). Notwithstanding, as Tommie Shelby reminds us, prison abolitionism is not a homogenous movement; rather, “abolitionist theory and practice is remarkably varied” (Shelby 2022: 5). For example, a much-discussed matter of divergence is whether the prison should be (radically) reformed or abolished altogether. What all prison abolitionists do have in common, however, is a profound “hostility toward prisons” (Shelby 2022: 5), one of the fundamental goals being to end the “often grossly unjust and inhumane” (Shelby 2022: 16) conditions in correctional facilities, as well as to counteract the ubiquitous dehumanization of the prisoner. In this context, the ways in which incarcerated individuals are imagined in the American cultural consciousness play a vital role. According to Monika Fludernik, there are two prevalent modes of (pop-)cultural representation of imprisoned persons, a phenomenon she terms the “ambivalence of incarceration” (Fludernik 2019: 621). Oftentimes, the inmate is viewed “as either a victim or a (deservedly jailed) transgressor” (ibid.). In Caleb Smith’s words, the prisoner is usually considered “a figure of exclusion and decay, inspiring both pity and terror” (Smith 2009: 29), therefore sparking “attitudes that vacillate between punitivity and sympathy” (Fludernik 2019: 621).

Guided by this theoretical framework, I propose that sympathy is a key factor here, given that one of the central objectives of prison abolitionist rap music is to contest the prevalent dehumanization of incarcerated African American men in the US cultural imaginary. Indeed, while such hip hop narratives clearly remain coded as masculine, they aim to disprove the “dominant, media-produced discourse on the Black male as hyper-masculine, subhuman, and cold as ice” (Kirkland 2013: 131), especially when it comes to convicted felons. In other words, many prison abolitionist hip hop productions seek to defy the notion of the Black male prisoner in the American cultural imaginary as an un- or even anti-sentimental figure, rendering “the pains of impris-

⁷ Tibbs further criticizes Alexander’s work not only for disregarding the significance of hip hop in this context, but also for openly disparaging the art form, particularly gangsta rap: “Although Alexander devotes approximately three pages to integrating Hip Hop rap music into her analysis, she gives the genre as a whole short shrift when it comes to recognizing their contribution. She limits her critique to either lambasting Hip Hop rap music, particularly ‘gangsta rap,’ as a minstrel performance of the worst stereotypes associated with black people or only mentions one artist when it is easiest to proffer their identity in a good light” (Tibbs 2015: 211).

onment” (Cecil 2015: 43) legible via “sentimental political storytelling” (Wanzo 2009: 3). Furthermore, I would like to suggest that this tendency is closely linked to a general trend that can be found in US hip hop culture: the sentimental turn. Although sentimental elements were already part of early hip hop, rap narratives gradually began to embrace well-established tropes of the American sentimental tradition in the early 1990s, prominent examples including rappers such as 2Pac, The Notorious B.I.G., and Common. Dovetailing with what Ole Jacob Madsen has aptly described as the “therapeutic turn” (Madsen 2014: 2) and the growing popularity of the “self-help industry” (Madsen 2014: 81) in Western cultural contexts, the sentimental turn in hip hop denotes a shift toward more and more explicit expressions of sentimentality. While this overt embrace of sentimental aesthetics significantly surged with the emergence of emo rap in the 2010s, the enduring effects of the sentimental turn can evidently be observed – not to say *felt* – in more recent album releases, such as Offset’s *Kiari* (2025) and YoungBoy Never Broke Again’s *Slime Cry* (2026).

Someone’s Son: Sentimentalizing the Black Male Prisoner

Often credited with being among the first hip hop artists to herald the political (or conscious) rap genre in the 1980s, Public Enemy is probably best known for their unabashed socio-critical commentary in a US context. With their lyrics promoting ideas grounded in the principles of the Black Power Movement, the group contributed to the “creation of a revolutionary black consciousness” (Kun 1994: 28) within the hip hop community. As such, their songs often broached issues surrounding structural racism, including the mass incarceration of African Americans in *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos* (1988). Here, the US carceral system is not only described as a continuation – if not a present-day form – of slavery,⁸ but also called an “anti-[Black man] machine” (IV. 7), evidently referencing prison abolitionist thought. Over the course of the song, the lyrics recount a violent riot among the inmates that eventually culminates in a successful prison break: “53 brothers on the run, and we are gone” (IV. 18).⁹ Strikingly, the prison criticism expressed in *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos* hinges on the performance of a tough type of hip hop masculinity. For example, the speaker not only describes himself and his fellow fugitive prisoners as “bruised, battered, and scarred but hard” (IV. 2), but also refers to the cell block where they were held as “a tier where no tears should ever fall” (II. 13). The sentimental, one could say, is rejected here. Likewise, N.W.A.’s famous protest song *Fuck tha Police*¹⁰ (1988) as well as *10 B 3*¹¹ (1991) by O.G. Style also draw on violent, un-sentimental imagery to depict revolts against the discriminatory US criminal justice system. Although the hardships of incarceration are repeatedly outlined in these works, their affective power lies in the portrayal of their respective speakers as a revolutionary carceral subject (see Fludernik 2019: 330), whose rebellion against the prison system is mainly driven by rage – or, as Public Enemy put it: “A cell is hell, I’m a rebel, so I rebel” (*Black Steel*, III. 23).

8 “They got me rotting in the time that I’m serving / Telling you what happened the same time they’re throwing / Four of us packed in a cell like slaves, oh well / The same motherfucker got us living in his hell / You have to realize, what is a form of slavery / Organized under a swarm of devils” (II. 1–6)

9 The music video to *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos* also shows a brutal prison riot. However, unlike in the lyrics, at the end of the song the protagonist (portrayed by Chuck D) does not manage to escape, but is executed by a complacent high-ranking prison official.

10 “A young [Black man] got it bad ‘cause I’m brown / And not the other color, so police think / They have the authority to kill a minority / Fuck that shit, ‘cause I ain’t the one / For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun / To be beating on and thrown in jail / We can go toe-to-toe in the middle of a cell / [...] / Beat a police out of shape / And when I’m finished, bring the yellow tape / To tape off the scene of the slaughter” (I. 2–17)

11 “The plan was to escape from this hell hole / They couldn’t stop us, cause 10 B 3 was too cold / Shots were fired and a lot of people died / [...] / Shot a guard in his back as we ransacked / Headed for the first floor / The hard part, but we was ready for a real war” (I. 23–36).

In fact, as bell hooks points out, in US society, for African American men “it is more acceptable to express rage than to give voice to emotional needs” (hooks 2001: 91). Thus, while the inmates’ plight is illustrated on several occasions, this kind of representation hardly allows for any vulnerability. Quite to the contrary, the revolutionary carceral subject clearly reflects the idea of the Black male prisoner as a hard-boiled “resilient survivor” (Craig 2016: 38), perhaps even rendering him “dangerously superhuman” (Rose 1994: 153) in the process. This approach entails a certain ambivalence: while this type of glorifying (self-)representation can be considered empowering, it also perpetuates harmful stereotypes about African American men being cold, ruthless, and therefore dangerous. This, I would argue, is where hip hop sentimentality comes in: Woven into ‘traditionally’ masculine gangsta rap narratives, it challenges the demonization of Black men, offering more nuanced accounts on Black masculinities in hip hop culture (and perhaps even beyond). Borrowing Monika Fludernik’s terms, the sentimental turn in hip hop is marked by a – at first rather tentative – shift from the revolutionary to the sentimental carceral subject (see Fludernik 2019: 330).

2Pac’s *Trapped* and *16 on Death Row*

When it comes to this increasing ‘sentimentalization’ of gangsta rap, 2Pac can be considered a key figure. One of the most famous and renowned rappers in hip hop history, to this day, his work continues to attract considerable attention in the United States and internationally, sparking both praise and criticism. The latter was particularly prevalent in 1990s mainstream media, often resulting in the public vilification of the rap artist, which was fueled – and seemingly justified – not only by his gangsta rap lyrics, but also by his involvement in the East Coast versus West Coast hip hop rivalry, during which he was fatally shot in 1996. For example, a New York Times article reporting his death refers to him as “rap performer who personified violence” (Pareles 1996: 1) in the headline, while another one – published two days later in the same newspaper – is titled “Shots Silence Angry Voice Sharpened by the Streets” (Marriott 1996: A1). Arguing against this both disparaging and one-dimensional perception of 2Pac, Derek Iwamoto points out that – despite the rap artist’s reliance on “images of power, toughness, ruthlessness, elite, ruggedly classy, wealthy, and womanizing” (Iwamoto 2003: 46) – he is also viewed as a “sensitive and progressive person” (Iwamoto 2003: 44) within the hip hop community. This sensitivity, I suggest, translates into the sentimentality of the rapper’s oeuvre. 2Pac is widely considered an important representative of political rap, with a number of his works also tackling the carceral system of the US – gradually interspersed with sentimental elements. In fact, it could be said that 2Pac’s works not only illustrate the sentimental turn in hip hop culture as a whole, but that there has been a similar, smaller-scale shift within his own discography.

Trapped

One of 2Pac’s earlier productions that critically engages with the US penal system is *Trapped*. Released in 1991, the song points to the prison industrial complex (“Worked me like a slave while they laid back” [II. 15]) while questioning the effectiveness of the prison as a means of ‘correction’ and rehabilitation: “Too many brothers daily headed for the big pen’ / [Black men] comin’ out worse-off than when they went in” (I. 9–10). In *Trapped*, the speaker not only refers to actual penal facilities, but also to the isolation and lack prospects – the figurative imprisonment, that is – that many African Americans experience in the ‘ghetto’. At the end of the last verse, he declares that he would prefer death over a prison sentence; it is, however, left unclear whether he is alluding to an impending firefight with the police or even contemplating suicide to avoid being detained,¹² with the latter arguably constituting the ultimate act of rebellion against the system – albeit at the highest possible price. Yet, what stands out in this account of the adversities and structural discrimination the speaker faces as an African American man in the prison system

(and US society as a whole) is the lack of sentimentalization. Instead, on its lyrical level, the narrative’s affective focus is on channeling rage caused by racist oppression, which ultimately culminates in a violent, even deadly, act of revenge against a police officer: “Bang bang, count another casualty / But it’s a cop who’s shot for his brutality” (II. 7–8).



Figure 2. Cover art showing an African American child holding onto iron bars. 2Pac, “Trapped”, frontal cover art, 1991.

The *Trapped* cover art, on the other hand, evokes the trope of the “the sentimental/innocent child” (Vallgård et al. 2015: 12): Showing a Black child holding onto bars in an urban environment, it alludes to the figurative type of imprisonment described in the song, namely the notion of being *trapped* in adverse circumstances from a very young age. Adding a sentimental dimension to the song’s gangsta rap lyrics through the depiction of a helpless child, the *Trapped* cover art not only points to the lack of prospects that marginalized youths have to face, but also to the fact that mass incarceration also affects a lot of African American minors, both inside and outside correctional facilities. Similarly, in the *Trapped* music video, there are occasional hints of sentimentality through the depiction of children (and women) in visitor booths. Separated from their loved ones by glass panes, the presence of the imprisoned men’s families reminds the audience that the inmates are someone’s sorely missed sons, fathers, or romantic partners, the prison having torn them away from existing family structures. In doing so, the music video subtly (yet emphatically) touches on an immensely popular trope in sentimental cultural and literary productions from the United States, namely the involuntary – and often brutal – separation of families. Generally speaking, according to Fludernik, idealized portrayals of the nuclear family constitute “the archetype of sentimental fiction” (Fludernik 2019: 257) – a phenomenon that extends well beyond literature into the American cultural imaginary. Historically, however, as Paul points out, families of color in particular have been disadvantaged and destabilized by US state institutions (Paul 2022: 139), for example during slavery, in the context of Native American boarding schools, or at the Mexico-United States border. In response, by centering “the violent disruption of the closest social relations” (ibid.), cultural and literary narratives (including prison abolition-

12 “Now I’m a fugitive to be hunted like a murderer / Ran through an alley, still lookin’ for my getaway / Copper say, “Freeze, or you’ll be dead today” / Trapped in a corner, dark and I couldn’t see the light / Thoughts in my mind was the nine and a better life / What do I do? Live my life in a prison cell? / I’d rather die than be trapped in a living Hell” (III. 14–20).

ist rap) often rely on sentimentalized representations of forced family separations to highlight socio-political injustices. As such, following Paul, they aim to “affectively interpellate their audience and aim at eliciting the preferred feelings (in analogy to Stuart Hall’s ‘preferred readings’) of sympathy and fellow empathy” (Paul 2022: 140).

16 on Death Row

In line with the increasing sentimentalization of 2Pac’s hip hop productions, the issue of family separation due to incarceration is addressed more poignantly in the lyrics to *16 on Death Row* (1997¹³). As indicated by its title, the song follows the story of a Black teenager who is arrested, imprisoned, and ultimately sentenced to death. Awaiting the end of his short life, he turns to his mother to tell her about the horrific conditions in prison – and how he ended up in the correctional facility. Each verse begins with “Dear Mama”, imbuing the lyrics with what could be called a sentimental overtone. Notwithstanding, they are also interspersed with typically ‘gangsteresque’ elements, especially when the speaker details the brutal murder that lands him in prison.¹⁴ At the same time, he also engages in self-reflection, sharing that he fell into delinquency due to past traumatic experiences.¹⁵ This revelation certainly aims to cast the song’s protagonist in a more sentimental light: After all, as is detailed in the second verse, his criminal behavior arose from the unspeakable suffering of a young child. In prison, the speaker encounters similar types of hardship in the form of ubiquitous violence, sexual abuse, isolation, and systemic racism. These inhumane conditions not only have him “turn old and cold” (II. 18), but also drive his fellow underage inmate (who was repeatedly raped in prison) to commit suicide. Amid these horrors of incarceration, the speaker also adopts a confrontational stance, stating that he has “beef with a sick society” (III. 5) and advising his “homies out buryin’ motherfuckers” (III. 15) to

*Steer clear of these Aryan motherfuckers
‘Cause once they got you locked up
They got you trapped, you’re better off gettin’ shot up
I’m convinced, self-defense is the way
Please stay strapped, pack a gat every day
(III. 16–20)*

In doing so, he portrays himself as a revolutionary carceral subject (see Fludernik 2019: 330): By stating that he would rather die than serve life in prison, he presents himself as fearless in the face of the impending death penalty. However, in the last verse, as his execution draws ever closer, he mourns the future that is taken away from him:

*Dear Mama, they sentenced me to death
Today’s my final day, I’m countin’ every breath
I’m bitter ‘cause I’m dyin’, so much I haven’t seen
I know you never dreamed your baby would be dead at 16
(III. 1–4)*

His sorrow extends beyond his own plight, as he is grieving not only for himself, but also for his mother losing her child at such a young age – her “baby” (III. 4) who “never got to be a man” (III. 13), as he puts it. Ultimately, *16 on Death Row* leaves it open whether the speaker’s words will ever reach his mother, since it remains unclear whether he is composing a letter to her or rather

13 Like all tracks on 2Pac’s posthumously released album *R U Still Down? (Remember Me)*, the song was likely written between 1993 and 1994.

14 “Whip out the 9, now I’m a dime off yo’ ass / [...] / Snatched him like a bitch and threw him in the trunk / The punk thought I was bluffin’, but swear I’m nothin’ nice / Before I take your life, first wrestle with these mites / I listened to his screams until he went insane / I guess the little mites had finally found his brain” (I. 12–18)

15 “Dear Mama, these cops don’t understand me / I turned to a life of crime ‘cause I came from a broken family / My uncle used to touch me, I never told you that / [...] / I kept it deep inside, I done let it fuel my anger” (II. 1–5)

engaging in an inner monologue. Nonetheless, the humanization of the speaker occurs primarily through his role as a child and his mother’s grief.

Looking at *Trapped* and *16 on Death Row*, it soon becomes apparent that they rely on similar topics and motifs when discussing mass incarceration to promote prison abolitionist thought. In both songs, the twofold criticism of the system in the form of literal and figurative imprisonment plays a central role. On the one hand, the vicious cycle of systemic racism and marginalization is repeatedly addressed, the concomitant lack of prospects (and the resulting hopelessness) potentially leading to delinquency and prison sentences. On the other hand, however, the institution of the prison – and, therefore, the prison industrial complex – is openly criticized as well. Both songs portray correctional facilities as profoundly violent, merciless, and inhumane spaces, to the degree that death is presented as the preferable option. As such, they not only heavily question the idea of rehabilitation in prison, but also point to the dehumanization of incarcerated African American men. When comparing the two songs, however, it is noticeable that prison abolitionist ideas are conveyed in a more overtly sentimental manner in *16 on Death Row* than in *Trapped*. Nevertheless, neither work relinquishes typical gangsta rap motifs and aesthetics. Rather, there is an interplay of sentimental and gangsteresque elements that seem to complement each other. Thus, in both cases, the respective speakers’ ‘street credibility’ is preserved, if not reinforced, by the songs’ “sentimental political storytelling” (Wanzo 2009: 3).

YNW Melly’s *Mama Cry*

The growing sentimentalization within US hip hop culture over the decades to follow is perhaps most evident in the appearance of emo rap: in the strikingly male-dominated subgenre, emphatically voiced expressions of deep pain take center stage, often in tales of heartbreak, mental illness, and/or substance abuse. Yet, as is often the case when it comes to hip hop, genre boundaries tend to be fluid with respect to sound, content, and aesthetics. Accordingly, some emo rap artists – including Juice WRLD, XXXTentacion, Lil Loaded, and YNW Melly – can be described as both emo and gangsta rappers, as their discographies comprise (often interrelated) narratives of gangsterism and profound suffering. The prison is a recurring theme in the works of YNW Melly, as exemplified by the aforementioned *Mama Cry*. The song’s lyrics and music video both prominently feature the separation of families, relying heavily on the image of the grieving mother.

Although the *Mama Cry* music video features several (both Black and non-Black) male prisoners and their mothers, its main focus remains on Melly and his mother: Following the introductory clip, the video is veined by flashback scenes displaying loving moments between the two, from infant to adolescent, in their family home, thus creating an idyllic scenario in the domestic sphere. At the same time, short glimpses reveal the son’s gradual descent into criminality in this very environment, such as a scene showing him pulling out a weapon from under the sofa. This domestic (and strongly sentimentalized) imagery is not only contrasted with depictions of a tough prison environment (e.g. depictions of armed guards, barbed wire, and dreary cells), but also with parts in which the mother, with tears in her eyes, looks at pictures of her son all by herself. Finally, towards the end, a baby, a young boy, and a teenager – all intended to represent the incarcerated protagonist as a child – are shown in a barren prison cell with the door slowly closing. Yet again, the humanization of the Black male inmate hinges on his role as his mother’s child. Hence, the video not only presents prisoners as emotional, vulnerable beings, but clearly casts them as children yearning for parental love. The closing scene of the video, which shows Melly’s mother looking directly into the camera with tears running down her cheeks, can therefore be understood as a silent appeal directed towards the audience. In other words, the imprisoned son’s pain only appears to become legible after first traversing his mother’s body.¹⁶

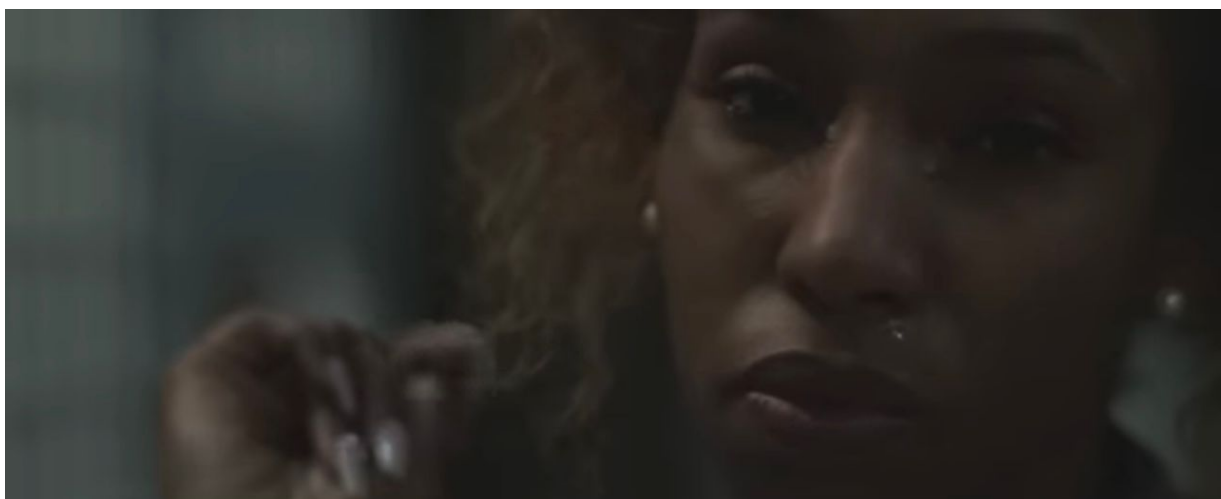


Figure 3. Video screenshot showing a close-up shot of the protagonist's crying mother looking directly into the camera. YNW Melly, "Mama Cry", music video, 2019.

Similarly to *16 on Death Row*, in the *Mama Cry* chorus (which is repeated three times throughout the song), the speaker directly addresses his mother:

*Mama, please don't you cry, I'm sorry
I just caught some time, I'll be home soon
It won't be long, I promise
I will be okay, just wipe those
Tears off of your face, I'm sorry
I won't right my wrongs, I'm guilty
Lord, have mercy, please forgive me
Mama, please don't you cry, I'm sorry
(1-8)*

Just as in the music video, the chorus centers the grieving mother's pain caused by the separation from her child, namely the speaker of the song. He, in turn, tries to comfort her with these lines; yet, his own despair is made clear through his admission of guilt and the subsequent plea for God's mercy. Likewise, in the song's two verses as well as in its outro, the speaker's focus shifts to his own plight as he describes the hardships and dire living conditions he has to face in prison.¹⁷ In doing so, he draws on highly sentimental imagery aimed to illustrate his pain, including his "soul [that] bleeds through these four walls" (I. 7), his "heart that's filled with pain" (II. 1), and his "tears dropping from the barbed wire" (outro 3). Moreover, like in many prison abolitionist works, the supposedly rehabilitating effect of prison sentences is called into question, even negated: "Cold shower, cold bath, cold food, cold slab / Only makes a cold heart" (II. 3-4). Similar to *16 on Death Row*, it is insinuated that *prison* causes inmates to become emotionally numb (if not stunted altogether) and that the speaker is worried that this might happen to him as well.

Clearly, in *Mama Cry*, prison abolitionist ideas are primarily channeled via sentimentalized representations of suffering; strikingly, neither the lyrics nor the music video evoke the revolutionary carceral subject (see Fludernik 2019: 330). Notwithstanding, the speaker's 'street credibil-

¹⁶ In this sense, *Mama Cry* contributes to a trend in both academic and public discourse that primarily connects Black motherhood to crisis. Indeed, according to Jennifer C. Nash, with African American lives under constant threat, Black mothers became "icons of trauma, grief, heroism, and death" (Nash 2021: 3). Often, this notion of African American motherhood is used for political mobilization, for example in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement (see Nash 2021: 4ff.; Paul 2021: 118ff.).

¹⁷ See, for example, the first verse of the song: "One hundred and forty-five days, I'm counting / Tryna hold on but the time goes slowly / Two hundred and twenty-five ice cold showers / Hurricane hit my cell, ain't get no power / Tryna walk a narrow straight path is a battle / Kinda hard to walk when you're chained in shackles" (I. 1-8).

ity’ – and therefore his gangsterism – is not undermined by this overt display of vulnerability. In fact, stereotypically ‘gangsta masculine’ aesthetics are indeed present in *Mama Cry*, albeit quite subtly – especially when compared to 2Pac’s prison abolitionist works discussed above. Examples include, for instance, the music video’s protagonist wearing grills and a gold chain or being surrounded by brawny inmates doing weight training while he is shown performing in the correctional facility’s yard. Arguably, over the past decades (and particularly since the advent of emo rap), sentimentality has become so ingrained in hip hop culture that sentimental elements no longer need to be attenuated by assertive, if not vigorous, expressions of hegemonic markers of Black male (hyper-)masculinity in gangsta rap productions. Rather, these – at first glance seemingly incongruent – aesthetic modes are interwoven so seamlessly that they appear to become an integral part of one another. Hip hop’s gangsta masculinities, one could say, can therefore not only be sentimental, but also provide fertile ground for “sentimental political storytelling” (Wanzo 2009: 3) in support of prison abolitionism.

Conclusion

According to Heike Paul, the sentimental is often evoked in response to crisis (see Paul 2021: 8; 15–16). Consequently, the increased emergence of sentimental elements in hip hop productions that critically deal with incarceration can be understood as a reaction to the mass incarceration of African Americans. In such works, the prison constitutes a space in which the suffering that comes with a ‘gangsta lifestyle’ – which is frequently glorified in rap music – is articulated and negotiated. Altogether, as Kellie Hay and Rebekah Farrugia point out, hip hop constitutes “a site of cultural production that articulates the relationships between public and private, institutional, and inner life” (Hay and Farrugia 2023: 47). Therefore, by operating within the “intimate public sphere” (Berlant 2008: viii), prison abolitionist hip hop productions not only seek to criticize the problematic penal system of the United States, but also aim to counteract the pathologizing notions of Black masculinity and the Black family that exist within the American cultural imaginary by means of sentimental strategies. In recent years, as self-depictions of male (gangsta) rappers have become increasingly sentimental, the motif of the suffering incarcerated father – whose prison sentence prevents him from being a caring and present parent – appears to be growing more established in works that engage in “sentimental political storytelling” (Wanzo 2009: 3), examples including *Jail Call* by Casanova (2019), *Father of 4* by Offset (2019), and *If Daddy Goes to Jail* (2023) by Troy Ave. Nevertheless, although such ‘father narratives’ equally hinge on the portrayals of family separation and the innocent child, the grieving mother seems to remain the ‘default trope’ in rap narratives that recount the hardships of imprisonment.

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