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Jockin' Jay-Z: A Praxis-Oriented Autoethnography towards Possiblizing Change in Black Male Performativity

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Jockin' Jay-Z:

A Praxis-Oriented Autoethnography towards Possiblizing Change in Black
Male Performativity

by

Bryant Antonio Payne

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2009

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

Masters of Arts

Department of Communication

in the Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

Jockin' Jay-Z: □ A Praxis-Oriented Autoethnography towards Possiblizing Change in Black Male Performativity

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Bryant Antonio Payne

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of Speech Communication

Approved by:

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TITLE: Jockin' Jay-Z: A Praxis-Oriented Autoethnography towards Possiblizing Change in
Black Male Performativity.

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Ronald J. Pelias

This paper strives to understand how my own conceptions (reflexivity) and embodiment (engagement) of a particular rapper, Jay-Z, contributes towards my subjectivity and art. My research answers, "What does my own experience and embodiment of Jay-Z tell me about my own black masculinity and art in the Hip-Hop generation?" To answer this question, I use what Toyosaki calls "praxis-oriented autoethnography." I show what my relationship with Jay-Z tells me about my black masculinity, culture, and becoming within the Hip-Hop generation.

DEDICATIONS

Elyse Pineau and Derrick Williams – For arousing the self-reflexivity I needed to change my life. This work started with you. I am grateful.

Molly and Kelly Cummins – Your friendship is the reason why this work is completed. I'm forever in your debt.

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Introduction

I was always told that I was a peculiar kid. While everyone else played basketball, I wrote poems. While everyone played video games, I read books. When everyone wore Jordan's, I wore Shaq's. This is not to say that I was better than my peers, but to say that as all humans do, I moved to my own beat. Like a fingerprint, I was a signature unique to the world. In Calumet Park, Illinois if you were to ask for the poetry kid always in the library, nine times out of ten you would be directed to me.

Hip-Hop is too a peculiar kid. While everyone else wore straight-legged, boot cut jeans, it wore baggy denim and 'sagged' them a few inches from the waist. While everyone else painted on paper, it grabbed airbrushes and painted on walls and subway trains. While everyone else played a song straight through at parties, it focused on the break-beat creating the music behind rap today. Hip-Hop is not better than other genres, but it moves to its own beat. So naturally we connected.

And this is where things get fun, for if you were to ask anyone who lives with Hip-Hop, they would tell you that it is no essentialist, stereotypic world where everyone wears baggy jeans, listens to rap, and uses slang like "bling," "swag," and "quit hating" (a view shared by the "haters," the ones envious of its success). They would say, as I am, that within Hip-Hop everyone has their own peculiarity. Some wear their baggy jeans from certain brands and sag them a certain distance from the waist compared to others; some uses a certain "slanguage" based on their hometown; and others have a signature sound based on their region. Within Hip-Hop, everyone is a peculiar kid within this peculiar genre. This is what is known today as style or swag.

This brings me to my standing point. Style must be played out. It must be performed. Hip-Hop does not exist as an entity of itself but is comprised of bodies: popping, locking, breaking, rapping and tagging. In other words, it is *doing*. One can never point beyond a certain performance and say, “There is Hip-Hop!” It always finds its definition in practice. Cornel West elaborates:

...to engage hip-hop is not to be spectator or bystander. One should be hip-hop as one engages hip-hop. One should try to shape and mold hip-hop to make it better, to make it more liberating-full of creative genius, full of political courage, and connected to the best of those who came before, such as Grandmaster Flash, Chuck D., Lauren Hill, and Gil Scott-Heron, as well as the Last Poets, Nina Simone and Curtis Mayfield! (2)

This is important for many have written of Hip-Hop as if it were some empyreal deity that is worshipped, or a machine maintained by the urban youth. While Hip-Hop is something outside of us, it becomes real when we can jump into and participate in it. In this sense Hip-Hop is not an *it*, but people. It is people doing and living. It is the collective picture of people turning their neighborhoods into stages and performing. You can never have Hip-Hop without a body. As Brooklyn rapper Mos Def states:

Listen...people be asking me all the time,
 Yo Mos, what’s getting ready to happen with Hip-Hop?
 (Where do you think Hip-Hop is going?)
 I tell em, you know what’s going to happen with Hip-Hop?
 Whatever is happening with us
 If we smoked out, Hip-Hop is gonna be smoked out

If we doing alright, Hip-Hop is gonna be doing alright
People talk about Hip-Hop like its some giant livin in the hillside
comin down to visit the townspeople
We – Are – Hip-Hop
Me, you, everybody, we are Hip-Hop
So Hip-Hop is goin everywhere we're goin
So the next time you ask yourself where Hip-Hop is goin
Ask yourself...where am I going? How am I doing?

Taking up the call of Mos Def and Dr. Cornel West for critical self-reflexivity and engagement when speaking about Hip-Hop, this research strives to understand how my own conceptions (reflexivity) and embodiment (engagement) of a particular rapper, Jay-Z, contributes towards my subjectivity and art. My research will answer, “What does my own experience and embodiment of Jay-Z tell me about my own black masculinity and art in the Hip-Hop generation?” To answer this question I will use what Satoshi Toyosaki calls “praxis-oriented autoethnography.”

I seek to know what my relationship with Jay-Z tells me about my black masculinity, culture, and becoming within the Hip-Hop generation. As Denzin articulates, my stories derive from a larger context that may give voice for those “taken-for-granted understandings” that is often left out in general discourse. Greg Dimitriadis writes, “performance is a key site where social, cultural, and material constructions are put into motion, are articulated and rearticulated in new and (often) powerful ways” (296). Likewise, I aim to rearticulate the present discourse of my black masculinity within the Hip-Hop generation. As Cornel West writes, Jay-Z “...serves as a force, particularly for minorities, of creating a new identity-but

also a new rhetoric to augment the identity, a new lingo, new symbols of identity that have become part of a metamorphosis of black and brown youth” (4). First, I will explain the significance of hip-hop itself as it intersects with performance and race. Next I will explore the narrative of hip-hop/black masculinity as destructive. I will then articulate how I myself was introduced to hip-hop, rap specifically, and my own beginning journey of becoming a rapper through the intersections of performance, ascription, and the need for *cool*. Lastly, I will go in depth on my relationship with Jay-Z and how praxis-oriented autoethnography possibilizes spaces for change in my own black male performativity by exploring Jay-Z’s.

Hip-Hop, Performance and Race

Nowhere else but on the body does Hip-Hop and everything we love about it play itself out. Wrap a naked body with certain clothing, a certain walk, a certain talk, a certain *swag* and you have a rapper. Rappers are the embodiment of their own style, experiences, neighborhoods and stories. Without their bodies constantly in action, there would be no Hip-Hop.

As an ethnographer, I investigate rappers as a cultural space. Defined for me by Bryant Keith Alexander, “A cultural space is a particular site marked by the cultural practices of the people who live there” (106). If it is true that performance is cultural, then rappers who offer embodied performances represent their cultural experiences. You can often find this in the common phrase of “repping,” a euphemism for representing, such as “I rep da Chi” (meaning I represent Chicago) or “Rep your hood” (meaning represent your neighborhood). Rappers stand in or represent their homes, stories, and cultures.

And that is why they've become the cornerstone of Hip-Hop. Because of their representative influence, they have become iconic. And who can argue with that? Now you see white upper-class men (with no experience or relation to the young urban poor) sagging their jeans, using slang, and playing rap music loudly from their speakers. Michael Eric Dyson further elaborates, "White kids are also adopting the dress, diction, and demeanor of urban black youth. From baggy pants to oversize shirts, the "gear" of hip-hop culture as been mass-produced and worn by youth of every ethnic and racial group" (422). The point is that once we admire something, we began to mimic it.

Performance is a way of personalizing the styles we respect, of making them our own. As Ronald J. Pelias writes, "Performance is an act of becoming, a strategy for discovering oneself by trying on scripts to test their fit, a means of clothing oneself in various languages until one believes what one says" (109). When Pelias begins to rehearse T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he aims to "have a sense of the other (Prufrock) living within my body" (97). In order to achieve this experience, Pelias writes, "I must make his words mine. I must control them, own them, and know that they will be there" (103). Pelias narrates his experience once he finally connects with the poem:

I see things I never saw before. Without the script in hand, my body becomes free. It moves in ways it never has before. I find myself playing once again, testing possibilities, choosing among them. My body is speaking, guiding me to new discoveries. My body is becoming his. I am learning how it feels when it speaks, how it moves in space, how it looks at others (104).

As Pelias narrates, his constant engagement with the poem not only gave him a new way of understanding its content, but also gave him a new way of understanding Prufrock

himself. The encounter at the end made him a different individual. Like all relationships, you leave a bit different from when you started it. This illustrates Pelias' alternative definition of performance, "a method of understanding, bodily, located in the experience of doing – as the carpenter knows the weight of the hammer, as the sculptor feels the smoothness of the stone, as the child learns the tricks of the tree" (110).

Pelias' model of "Becoming Other" is a useful tool as I explore my own subjectivity. I add Gregory Lakoff and Mark Johnson's thoughts on metaphors from their work, *Metaphors We Live By*. Lakoff and Johnson help me understand Pelias' experience in new and critical ways, for though I believe Pelias experienced Prufrock as he never has before, I also believe that there was nothing of Prufrock *himself* that he experienced. Instead, what Pelias had was an experience with a *conception* of Prufrock based on his own cultural experiences. Norman K. Denzin also explains, "No self or personal-experience story is ever an individual production. It derives from larger group, cultural, ideological, and historical contexts" (73).

Dwight Conquergood called the performance paradigm "intervention and radical research" (145). Placing what Clifford Geertz labeled as "sentimental education" (27) against objective knowledge, performance produces a kind of knowing that is missed by the disciplines of objective research. While objective research aims to capture a snapshot or frame of a phenomenon to analyze and explain, performance aims to speak with and understand, at least attempting to account for knowledge that exist in-between the borders of our own framing. Conquergood further elaborates:

Subjugated knowledges have been erased because they are illegible; they exist, by and large, as active bodies of meaning, outside of books, eluding the forces of

inscription that would make them legible, and thereby legitimate. What gets squeezed out by this epistemic violence is the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, co-experienced, covert—and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out (146).

Likewise, my attempt to account for those subjugated knowledges, meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context (Conquergood, 146), seeks to “talk back” to the discourse that not only harms me, but various black men who were raised with Hip-Hop. As Black feminist scholar bell hooks writes, “talking back meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant to have an opinion” (5). Thus, I know this is a “courageous act – an act of risking and daring” (5). But it must be done. To leave such discourse uncritiqued will continually influence young black men to be seen as “problem people” instead of fellow brothers with problems (West, 5).

Despite the areas of knowledge performance opens up, the difficulty is translating such things onto the page as texts. As Paul John Eakin asks, “Is there ... a demonstrable difference between the psychological reality of selfhood and the linguistic articulation of that reality?” He continues to state, “Fieldwork devoted to the nature of subjectivity is obviously a tricky business, but I think it’s worth the risks” (4). I do not want to fall into the trap of boxing experience, squashing the very subjugated knowledge I aim to speak with. Still, as a scholar, the objectivist lives in me. It is the dominant voice in academics as reading and writing are central to our everyday lives and occupational security (Conquergood, 147).

Thus, my attempt to speak with subjugated knowledge through text is a tricky space.

Denzin calls storytelling “a performative self-act carried out before a group of listeners” (72). It is performative because story requires a relationship and interaction from those who are listening, thus creating a shared experience. Just as a statement can turn into a rumor several listeners down the road, every story is a “group story” (72). The story heard is never the same story that is told, making stories “multiple versions of shareable and unshareable personal experiences” (72).

This gives stories political stakes, for power privileges certain stories above others, certain personal experiences above others. Denzin writes, “It’s not that our language tells our stories for us; rather, we appropriate language for our own discursive purposes” (72). In talk about Hip-Hop and young black men, a certain story consistently seems to prevail (expressed in the phrase “Hip-Hop is...” “Hip-Hop should be...” etc.). The widely known story of black men being lazy, baby-making, law-breaking, gang-living, uneducated, undeveloped criminals veils the multiple performances of Hip-Hop and black masculinity that subverts such narratives. As Denzin writes, “There is no single life story or self-autobiography that grasps or covers all that a life is for a person” (72). Yet, when speaking on Hip-Hop and the black men who live it, many are convinced of a singular idea of Hip-Hop’s origin, purpose, and future. Further elaborated by Denzin:

The boundaries and borders between the multiple stories is never clear-cut, for the meanings of every given story is only given in the difference that separates its beginnings and endings from the story that follows. As one story ends, another begins, but then the earlier story overlaps with the one that is now being told. Stories become arbitrary constructions within the larger narratives that contain the story the teller is attempting to tell (73).

Therefore, stories reveal nothing about reality as much as they reveal about the tellers and hearers of those stories. Each teller and hearer speaks and listens from a “biographical position that is unique,” deriving from a larger group, from a cultural, ideological, and historical context (Denzin 72-73). Thus, “To understand a life, the epiphanies and the personal-experience and self-stories that represent and shape that life, one must penetrate and understand these larger structures” (Denzin, 73). By offering my own story, I aim to penetrate the larger structure my story is contained in, which is white supremacy and patriarchy (West, hooks, Dyson, Baldwin).

I also further this analysis through George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s theoretical framing of metaphors. Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but also in thought in action (3). Our ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (3). Lakoff and Johnson further articulate:

The concepts that govern our thoughts are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities... (3)

If Denzin is correct that our stories are unique based on our own cultural and biographical standpoints, then the metaphoric nature of our language (enacted through story) is a great method of penetrating these structures, marking those invisible ways power is constructed. Lakoff and Johnson further elaborate:

But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less

automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like. (3)

Thus by exploring my own metaphorical concepts, I show evidence of not only what white supremacy is like, but how hope and meaning is created, shared, and maintained under it. Cornel West states, “For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive” (23). In addition, whiteness loses power by marking it as visible (Nakayama and Krizek, 293). Because whiteness is considered normal and everything (Dyer, Nakayama and Krizek, Warren), “whiteness studies takes as its central mission to mark and thus make visible the unmarked cultural center of power, while also undermining that center by levying detailed descriptions, analyses, and critiques that work to deconstruct the power gained through invisibility” (Warren, 15).

In conclusion, I fear that the present general discourse on Hip-Hop is damaging towards young black men and will contribute to what Cornel West explains as nihilism. He writes, “the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat – that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning” (23). West further explains that the result of nihilism “is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others” (23). In other words, we can say the biggest threat is when young black men everywhere are collectively living the words of Jay-Z as he raps, “Fuck the world, why, cuz don’t nobody love us.”

While the popular discourse on Hip-Hop marks nihilism as the *cause* of “horrible rap,” I state with Michael Eric Dyson that it is the *consequence* of something more invisible and damaging, being (white)ness/supremacy/racism. If Hip-Hop has gone wrong, I find it best explained by Dyson. His words are worth quoting at length here:

The collapse of hope, the spiritual despair that floods black America, the clinical depression we suffer, are all the pernicious result of something more basic than black nihilism: white racism. I don't mean here just the nasty things many white folk believe about black folk. I'm referring to the systematic destruction of black life, the persuasive attack on the black sense of well-being, the subversion of black self-determination, and the erasure of crucial narratives of black self-esteem that are foundational to American versions of democracy. Nihilism is certainly self-destructive. That's because black folk were taught – and have had it reinforced across time, geography, and ideology – that our black selves weren't worth loving or preserving. Nihilism is the outgrowth, not the origin, of such harsh lessons. Without the destruction of white supremacy, black nihilism will continue to grow. (434-435)

Following Dyson, if we desire Hip-Hop to progress, then the burden cannot be placed solely on young black men as if the problem originates and will end with them. The politics of nostalgia, and the talk of values and attitudes from “conservative behaviorists,” which ignores political and economic structures, only inadvertently contributes to nihilism by keeping whiteness invisible and unmarked (West, 21). As my mother says, “White men were calling black women ‘bitches’ long before Gucci Mane ever did.” Thus I offer my own story as a way to put in motion, to put into performance, the multiple stories of young black men in

Hip-Hop like myself to understand how a body like mine can progress past the narratives of white racism towards a new, but ever learning, progressive subject.

Hip-Hop/Black Masculinity as destructive

“You ought to think about how you’re spending your free time,” she tells me. My friend is worried for me because I started recording rap songs. My artistic endeavors, as a performing artist, were nothing new to people. I am primarily a spoken word artist, a performance poet. It was actually how I was introduced to the field of performance studies. I started an open mic venue with a few of my colleagues and was performing bi-weekly for over a year at this point, in addition to performances at other big venues. I was more familiar with being on stage than off of it. A year later, she sits in front of me expressing concern for the first time. She was always a huge support for my art, but now she’s in front of me worried to the point that she felt advice must be warranted.

“I’m concerned about all this rapping you’ve been doing lately. Do you really think it’s what you should be doing? It looks like you’re living two different lives.” Twenty minutes later, I leave my friend’s apartment feeling confused. I’ve always spent time making art. What was so different about rapping that seemed different? I began thinking about the representation of Hip-Hop as destructive.

In the beginning of the 21st century, a massive campaign against Hip-Hop was led by pastor G. Craig Lewis through his sermon series entitled “The Truth Behind Hip-Hop.” His campaign was spreading rapidly through predominately African-American churches and news of his message finally reached my ears in my small college town of Carbondale. At that point, his sermons were a seven part DVD series that many were buying and sharing

with each other. Popping one of the DVD's in my laptop, I sat and listened to a 2-hour sermon that had a clear message – Hip-Hop is evil, presently and in its very origin. At the end of his sermon, he called the crowd to break and burn all their rap music and many people came forward and publicly destroyed their music in the name of God. The following excerpt is a message from his website:

Hip-hop has literally changed the face of our nation. It has caused our youth to lower their standards and set their sights on themselves and their own feelings rather than taking the harder road to success. They now see what is acceptable or fashionable to our society as being “weak or wak.” Hip-hop has turned our young boys into thugs and our young girls into young whores. It has caused marijuana and other illegal substances to become acceptable among our youth and is stopping our people from achieving real success. Whether we want to admit it or not we must adhere to the fact that we live in a society that promotes educated, properly dressed, well-mannered men and women. Hip-hop, however, tells our youth that it's okay to wear your clothes like a criminal, or dress like a bum. It's okay to look evil and talk in slang as long as you stay true to the culture of Hip-hop. But the real scary part is that many want the church of God to accept Hip-hop as a way to reach the youth that are already in it. (Resource).

The idea of Hip-Hop being destructive and the cause of malicious behavior among the urban youth is solely not the narrative circulating in the black church, nor the message of Pastor Lewis alone, but also the meta-narrative expressed socially. Oprah Winfrey, when speaking about Hip-Hop from her daily talk show, stated that she disagreed with Hip-Hop because it influences derogatory language and treatment of women. Also in 2006 director

Peter Sprier released his documentary *Black and Blue: Legends of the Hip-Hop Cop*, detailing the NYPD's undercover profiling and investigations of rappers lead by former police officer Derrick Parker. In the documentary, rappers testified to being followed and pulled over by cops for random drug searches in addition to officer Parker himself testifying about mandates he received to have a profile on every known rapper in or visiting the city. From the pulpit to the police station, hip-hop is seen as destructive not only to the person who lives it but also to the society that it is birthed from.

If I wasn't in the rap game
I'd probably have a key knee deep in the crack game
Because the streets is a short stop
Either you're slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot

Within those few shorts words, The Notorious B.I.G. captured what Cornel West describes as “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (14). Philly rapper “Freeway” would later rap, “Don't you know cops' whole purpose is to lock us down? An' throw away the key, but without this drug shit your kids ain't got no way to eat.” Living in the ‘hood can cause you to feel at times that you do not have options to escape poverty, homelessness, hunger and even death.

I remember visiting a young man at a juvenile correction facility in Tampa, Florida. As he sat across from me, he described how scared he felt being released. “I just don't know

what to do when I get out,” he tells me. I suggested, “Maybe you can go to college.” After a long pause, he replies, “Really? I never thought of that. I can go?”

Was the young man being manipulative, knowing all along he could go to college and avoid the behaviors that led him in the correctional facility that I was meeting him in? Maybe. However, what if he *truly* believed that he had no options? What if he never thought (before our meeting) that college was even available for him? What if he truly believed that the only way he could make it was by slingin’ crack rock or by having a wicked jump shot? Are there people in the world that believe selling crack or being exceptional in basketball are their only hope? Better yet, is that even hope at all? As The Notorious B.I.G. would say, “the streets is a short stop,” and I myself have had many friends who died on the streets, no matter what type of person they were.

Civil Rights activist and theologian James Cone brilliantly names an aspect of the black condition as “the tension between life and death.” He first explicates his definition of theology as “the continued attempt of the community to define in every generation its reason for being in the world. (p. 9).” Thus, he articulates *black* theology as, “the theology of a community whose daily energies must be focused on physical survival in a hostile environment. The black community spends most of its time trying “to make a living” in a society labeled “for whites only.” Therefore, the central question for blacks is “How are we going to survive in a world which deems black humanity an illegitimate form of human existence?” (p. 11).

Survival, in my own life, has been a constant theology for my family and me. My mother was the first to explain this to me as she worked multiple jobs as a single mother to support my little brother and I. Many times we ate fried baloney sandwiches for dinner. I

also learned this deeply when my mother would be enraged seeing a “C” on my report card. For her it was unacceptable. Before she whipped me for my grades, she would say that I had to be good in school because an education was the only way to “make it out.”

I also learned this from my community in the Southside of Chicago. On my eighth grade graduation, my friend was shot 8 times on his front porch after the ceremony. My friend was in a gang and because of his murder, a war began in the neighborhood that lasted three months and killed four of my friends all together. Things were getting bad, so my mother spent her savings and moved us to the suburbs. Yet even there, friends were still being shot and killed. Even as I write this, last week 46 people were shot (10 killed) during a Chicago weekend (which doing the math, averages to about a shooting every hour).

Nihilism is the *lived* experience of *coping* with a loss of hope and an absence of meaning (West 14;15). The problem I find in many writings of hip-hop and the bodies of black men that comprise it, is that they are often devoid of signs that the writer had any *lived* experience with nihilism. They may have lived in a poor urban community, but rarely had to cope with loss of hope. Furthermore, I find such writings to be insufficient to achieve what Dwight Conquergood would called a “dialogical performance” where self and other are brought together to “question, debate, and challenge one another” (9). As Conquergood defines, “Dialogical performance is a way of having intimate conversation with other peoples and cultures. Instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them.” (10).

Often I find myself being spoken about, instead of spoken to or with, when it comes to hip-hop, black masculinity, and the meaning of my black/heterosexual/hip-hop/male body. I have found myself stuck (and even embarrassed) to be known as a rapper for most literature I came across essentialized rappers as bad influences on the youth across the globe. Just as

Ragan Fox suggests in his performance “Skinny Bones,” my body signifies and reacts to what is projected onto it (11). As his thin, male, gay body is mistakenly read as HIV positive because of marginalizing discourses that frame cultural understandings of HIV, gay men, and body types – my black/heterosexual/hip-hop/male body is mistakenly read because of marginalizing discourses that frame cultural understandings of rappers.

One piece of literature that I want to specifically focus on, that I believe destructively frames cultural understandings of rappers like myself, is Thomas Chatterton Williams’ work “*Losing my Cool: How a Father’s Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture*”. Though these texts are small in comparison to the numerous body of literature about hip-hop, they are significant because of the self that is situated by the authors. Both authors (being black males scholars), point to their own lives as examples of the evils of hip-hop and especially rappers. This is also significant to me because I as well, a black male scholar, will point to my lived experience but not to make any essentialist claims about rap, but to open space for different views to engage and dialogue.

Williams is a writer whose work appears in the Washington Post and New York Times. In his book, Williams paints a vivid picture of how hip-hop influenced his life for the worst and why leaving it, through the help of his father, was the salvation of his life. Williams identifies himself as a bi-racial/black boy; his father was black and his mother was white. Clearly showing signs of identity struggle as he confesses, “Unlike some children of mixed-race heritage, I didn’t ever wish to be white. I wanted to be black” (6). Williams writes, “It was not enough simply to know and to accept that you were black—you had to look and act that way, too. You were going to be judged by how convincingly you could pull off the pose” (8).

Williams, arguably, finds that *pose* in hip-hop as he watches BET for the first time at a black barbershop. Williams narrates his experience as such, worth quoting at length here:

One morning, Ice-T's "New Jack Hustler" video came on, and though I didn't know the meaning behind the title—or even whether I liked what I was hearing—I knew for sure that the other boys in the shop didn't seem to question any of it, and I sensed that I shouldn't, either. All of them knew the words to the song and some rapped along to it convincingly. I paid attention to the slang they were using and decided I had better learn it myself. Terms like "nigga" and "bitch" were embedded in my thought process, and I was consciously aware for the first time that it wasn't enough just to know the lexicon. There was also a certain way of moving and gesticulating that went with whatever was being said, a silent body language that everybody seemed to speak and understand, whether rapping or chatting, which I would need to get down, too. (pp. 10-11)

Williams would later claim to have gotten that pose down exactly. So much so that he connects with a neighborhood kid names RaShawn, the model of the blackness he wanted to imitate (a conclusion he arrives to after witnessing RaShawn beat up a white kid). Also worth quoting at length, Williams writes:

The more I reflected on RaShawn, the more I pulled apart the imagery of that day's events and melded it with memories of my own confrontation with Craig, the more I began to realize something: The loose jeans falling from our hips, the unlaced kicks adorning our feet, the slang encrypting our speech, the slow roll choreographing our strides, the funky-ass hairstyles embellishing our

domes, the hip-hop soundtracking our days, the pigment darkening our skin (whether octoroon or fully black)—all these disparate elements congealed into a kind of glue that invisibly but definitively united people like RaShawn and me. As different as the two of us were, it was undeniable that we shared something with each other that neither of us had in common with either Craig or that white boy stretched out on the asphalt. What that meant, I suspected, was that I, too, could participate in some of the immense power that brothers like RaShawn wielded and exercised all over the place. It was a wicked genie that I, too, could summon if I chose, if I was just willing to play down the things I saw in my father's study—things that only put distance between RaShawn and me—and to play up the things I saw on BET, on the street, and on ESPN. (24-25)

In his work, Williams will later learn to play basketball, talk back to teachers, and beat up kids. Still, the pose for Williams was summed up not through basketball or music but in how he treated his girlfriend Stacy as he states, “truth is that, more than even playing basketball, it was being with Stacey, I felt, that validated me” (57). He further writes, “Winning her attentions authenticated my blackness and justified my swagger. (49). Though Williams’ father saw Stacy as “pure foolishness in his eyes, a street chick, five minutes with her amounted to a terrible price to pay for a piece of ass” (72), Williams confesses, “What he found so troubling I found intoxicating—Stacey was street and that was what was so hot. She was ’hood, she was hip-hop, she was black, she was real” (72).

Williams’ narrative frames hip-hop, rap specifically, as a destructive influence that almost ruined his life for the worst. He positions himself as an archetype for how hip-hop

culture is dangerous towards all urban youth. Yet, I do not believe that Williams' engagement with hip-hop is complete. As Cornel West writes, "to engage hip-hop is not to be spectator or bystander. One should be hip-hop as one engages hip-hop. One should try to shape and mold hip-hop to make it better, to make it more liberating-full of creative genius, full of political courage, and connected to the best of those who came before, such as Grandmaster Flash, Chuck D., Lauren Hill, and Gil Scott-Heron, as well as the Last Poets, Nina Simone and Curtis Mayfield!" (2). Williams, I would claim, has not engaged deeply with hip-hop, but flirted and played with it to misappropriately deal with his own issues of racial/gender performative identity. As Michael Eric Dyson would say, "...the arguments of many of hip-hop's critics demand little engagement with hip-hop. Their views don't require much beyond attending to surface symptoms of a culture that offers far more depth and color when it's taken seriously and criticized thoughtfully." (Dyson, xxi).

Williams has no relation to the lived experience of loss of hope or absence of meaning that hip-hop emerges from. For Williams, hip-hop is nothing more than a pose one uses to authenticate blackness. He does not see hip-hop as "an audacious act of personal self-transformation" or a "continuation of the politics of racial transformation" (Nama, p. 18). Instead, hip-hop was "Money, hoes, and clothes, that's all a brother knows; Fuck bitches, get money; G's up, hoes down; All I've got for hoes is hard dick and bubble gum—this was the rhetoric that was drummed (literally) into our heads" (50).

Dwight Conquergood's work in "moral mapping" helps me better understand William's experience. Most of the experience I have read in Williams' work could be interpreted as "the enthusiast's infatuation." Conquergood states, "Too facile identification with the other coupled with enthusiastic commitment produces naïve and glib performances

marked by superficiality” (6). This performative stance is unethical because it trivializes the other, glossing over distinctiveness with a glaze of generalities (6).

To essentialize hip-hop is sexist and classist because of what is seen and mimicked on BET is an aesthetic crime to the complexity and beauty of hip-hop. Furthermore, to essentialize BET as a network that only plays such videos and images is unfair to the network that is known to also play movies such as *Color Purple* and play the videos of “conscious rappers” such as Mos Def, Lupe Fiasco, and Talib Kweli. Dyson proves right when he states, “...those who fail to wrestle with hip-hop’s culture complexity, and approach it in a facile manner, may be misled into unhealthy forms of behavior” (xv).

Williams’ refusal to wrestle with the complexity of hip-hop culture misled him towards superficial behaviors of the very art that he now condemns. In 2010 Williams wrote an article in “The Wall Street Journal” entitled “President Obama’s ‘Rap Palate’” where he shows complete disgust that Obama listens to artist such as Lil’ Wayne and Jay-Z. Williams writes, “Mr. Obama is certainly not responsible for hip-hop's grip on black America, or for Mr. Carter's (Jay-Z) ideas and behavior. But what president would ever let Marilyn Manson drop by the White House? Is Jay-Z any better?” Williams essentializing of hip-hop and the rappers that comprise them adds to the framing of the cultural understanding that hip-hop is purely bad, sexist, and a degradation of black life. But let me be clear, many people within hip-hop (including myself) are such things, but we are not *entirely* these things.

Humbled Beginnings

As Bryant Keith Alexander once explained, my interest into this ethnographic project began as a moment of crisis. The American in me wants my borders defined, definitions

clear, safety ever present, and comfortability guaranteed. I thought life would be a math equation easily worked out if you plug in all the right variables. So when all of that is compromised, I have an intense longing to understand what's going on and why.

Therefore this project started during an epiphany, an interactional moment and experience than often leaves a mark on people's lives (Denzin 70). They are often moments of crisis, altering the fundamental meaning structuring a person's life (Denzin 70). My epiphany occurred during my last year in the Master's program.

I was a graduate student but my tardiness to class, cool persona, and nonchalant attitude towards people came off only as arrogant and immature. If I wanted any chance in salvaging my academic career, I needed to change. Thus began my process of reflexivity, of "turning back towards oneself" for reflection and understanding (Davies 4). I began to reflect on my performance as a black-male-heterosexual-teacher. What roles was I perpetuating? What image am I leaving among my colleagues (majority who are white)? What stereotypes, fears, and rationales was I feeding into? How will this affect the next young black male scholar in the department after me? These questions ran marathons in my mind.

To help my mind through all of these things, I would often listen to rap music. Much like Imani Perry and her colleague listening to Biggie Smalls during their eight-hour take-home examination in Property Law, rap music got me through. As she narrates from their experience, "The generated energy, the adrenaline rush, and the rhythm of the Biggie Smalls music he listened to while writing his exam all motivated him as he expressed his knowledge and skills of argumentation in text" (1). I often listened to rap to zone out of my over-

working reflecting. Something about the music settles and helps me in my endeavors. For me though it wasn't the music and raps of Biggie Smalls, but his mentee Jay-Z.

For me, Jay-Z represented resistance against white supremacy. It worked to remind me, as quoted from Michael Eric Dyson, of “the systematic destruction of black life, the pervasive attack on the black sense of well-being, the subversion of black self-determination, and the erasure of crucial narratives of black self-esteem that are foundational to American versions of democracy” (433). In my eyes, Jay-Z stood in opposition to all of that. He owned his own record label that became the first independent label to win a Grammy, owned his own clothing line, alcohol, restaurants, sports clubs, and a NBA team. Jay-Z was the first to have a sneaker deal for a non-sports star as well. On top of that, he broke the records of Elvis and The Rolling Stones with 11 straight number one billboard albums in 10 years, plus two-5-mic hip-hop classics as rated by *The Source* magazine. For me, Jay-Z was the ultimate hustler.

The Need for Cool

What connected me more with Jay-Z in addition to his achievements as a black man was his swag, i.e., coolness. Journalist Elizabeth Mendez Berry writes, “Jay-Z is a confident artist, and he's gotten rich by not making it personal – teaching the swagger but seldom betraying the emotional limp that caused it” (Berry). Pop culture commentator Todd Boyd further writes from his own experience, “I really got into Jay-Z's music. His matter-of-fact treatment of the life and the world around him spoke volumes to me” (xvii). For me, Jay-Z had an aura around him that made him untouchable. He acted as if he could care less about

what you say about him, do to him, plan against him, etc. No matter what, he would come out on top.

Being cool was not only important for me but for many black men according to numerous scholars. Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson in *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* write, “For many black males cool pose is a way to say, ‘you might break my back but not my spirit.’ Cool pose is the black man’s last-ditch effort for masculine self-control” (29). In the midst of living in white supremacy, the systematic destruction of black life and the black self, cool pose “provides a mask that suggests competence, high self-esteem, control, and inner strength. It also hides self-doubt, insecurity, and inner turmoil” (5). Cool pose becomes a performance designed to empower the black male and render him visible (5). They further elaborate at length:

By acting calm, emotionless, fearless, aloof, and tough, the African-American male strives to offset an externally imposed “zero” image. Being cool shows both the dominant culture and the black male himself that he is strong and proud. He is somebody. He is a survivor, in spite of the systematic harm done by the legacy of slavery and the realities of racial oppression, in spite of the centuries of hardship and mistrust. (5)

Jay-Z, for me, embodied the cool I was looking for. I always wanted to make his cool my own. I wanted protection and empowerment against the hostile world around me. Cool behavior fed two aims of mine since I was 12 years old: to be *real* and to survive. At this point the question may be, “Be *real* to whom?” and “Survive from whom?” The answer to both is black men. Both of these needs were not chosen agendas of my life. These agendas were imputed to me, forcefully, since the 6th grade.

Ascription & Consequence

I remember when my brother and I wore our fresh new pair of the Shaquille O'Neil's *Shaq Attacks* to school. As soon as one kid noticed them, he called the attention of the other kids and started to roast. Eventually, eight different kids were making fun of us as the entire cafeteria laughed. All day through school kids pointed and snickered that we wore shoes that came from Payless. For a week we never heard the end of it, followed by physical bullying during recess and walks home from school.

In Chicago, it was a social crime to be young, black, male and not have a pair of Jordans, and we learned that the hard way. We knew why our mother never bought them. On the surface she always yelled that she would never pay over \$200 for a pair of shoes (and since she always bought things in two's for my brother and I, she would've had to pay over \$400), but we knew the real reason was because people were being murdered for their Jordans. Till this day it is still not discussed how many kids were shot for their shoes in Chicago, or why Michael Jordan was never held accountable for his silence while many young men were executed for his name brand shoes (as well as Nike as a company). Nevertheless, the fact that wearing Jordans could cost you your life diverted my mother's desire to buy those shoes...but we still wanted them. We would've taken the chance of *possibly* being shot than *definitely* being bullied.

Vershawn Ashanti Young in his book *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity* says when reflecting on his own life, "When I fail to meet the class, gender, and racial notions that others ascribe to me, I'm punished" (XV). Here the process of being authenticated among my peers is named: first, you're *ascribed* with various standards for group membership (wearing Jordans), and next you're *punished* if those standards are met

(bullied). Starting with that experience, I became conscious that there was a certain performance of black masculinity that was required and not mirroring that performance meant consequences that I was not willing to face. Actually, I felt like I *couldn't* take those consequences. They were too costly, hurtful, and detrimental to my own survival.

Yet, mirroring that narrow performance of black masculinity was extremely difficult. I wasn't the man they wanted me to be. Most of the neighborhood boys were extremely athletic; I'm an asthmatic and always had difficulty playing sports. Most boys were in gangs and fought consistently in schools and on the streets; I was a pacifist because of my frail physique and avoided confrontations when I could. Most boys wore the newest fashion and shoes and apparel; I wore clothes and shoes from swap markets and Payless Shoe Stores.

Another factor was my mother. My mother expressed often that she would not have her sons in a gang or "messin' wit tho boyz" who were in one. She threatened loudly "I'll beat da shit out of you if I eva find out you're in a gang!" and once gave me a public whoopin' because she caught me using a gang sign. She also had rules to monitor our time out of school. If I wanted to go anywhere, I had to report to her before leaving the house whom I was with, where they lived, the number of their parents (we didn't have cell phones and Facebook wasn't invented at the time), and give an exact time frame that I would be at that location. Lastly, I had to be in the house by the time the streetlights came on; there would be no hanging out at night.

Such a mother also raised Vershawn Ashanti Young as he writes, "But Momma was determined not to have boys who were in gangs or teenage girls who'd make her a grandmother" (25). Like my own mother, "She tried to protect us when she'd close the door. She locked the ghetto out. She told us not to get too close to it when it walked the streets or

wanted to visit, reeking of alcohol or drugs. She tried to shield us from the violence that seemed to lurked everywhere” (23).

Still, it was “tho boyz” that I wanted to be at peace with. Everyone made us separate, different, and strangers towards each other even within our own neighborhoods. My mother made it clear I wasn’t like “them.” School played this role as well, consistently marking my straight A’s, honor roll status, and publicly praising my efforts in class. Teachers had essentialist assumptions about my performance in school like I was innately smarter than other kids, which were proved by my grades. None of them knew that the grades were not a reflection of some unique ability I possessed, but of a stern discipline at home. There was a rule at my house: ass whippins’ for anything less than a B on your report card. My mother honored that rule for as long as she could. I worked hard in school because I didn’t want to get beat at home, not because I possessed something other kids didn’t. Honestly, I didn’t even like school. I shared in Young’s frustration that “Really, some of us – namely, me – are just plain tired of being required to perform all the time” (11). At school, I had to perform excellently or I would get a beating at home, which also meant getting beatings from peers because I was a “nerd.” Either way, I was never free from the threat and enactment of physical violence upon me due to failing to meet the standards of behavior that were ascribed.

Fed Up

The middle of my 8th grade schooling marked the beginning of a new identity for me. At this time, I’ve learned to accept the multiple performances required of me. However during this year I broke. I couldn’t take it anymore. I was depressed constantly, wounded, and often thought about suicide. Nevertheless, I learned my place in the world. I was called

the school nerd, lame, and faggot. My role at school was to perform excellently so others could cheat off my homework and exams. This way, people would not beat me up at school and my mother got the grades she desired of me. Everybody was happy while I was miserable. There was only one thing that kept me going: the idea that at the end I would come out on top of my peers. I had no idea what that looked like, but it was an ephemeral feeling. That all changed in Mr. Kun's science class.

Sitting in the back (the location where bullies want their nerds to sit so the chances of being caught was diminished), Mr. Kun randomly went on a rant about education. Looking out into the students he says, "I don't know why some of you students try so hard. I mean, the same students who are getting D's & F's are going to graduate right along with you getting the A's & B's." Something right there clicked for me. Mr. Kun was actually correct for my school operated on the "advancement program" where we were pushed from grade to grade despite our academic performance. I remember telling a college professor, "I never felt like I truly graduated from high school, more like pushed out of it." At that moment in class I decided to change some things. Like all humans, suffering was only endurable out of the belief that something good was going to come out of it. Mr. Kun made it clear though; despite what you do you will end up at the same place like everyone else. So what was the benefit of being the school nerd?

It was then I decided to change my focus from excelling in education towards being *cool*. The logic was simple, if being "smart" was getting me nowhere, then maybe being accepted by my peers would. There was also a new sense of freedom I've experienced. No longer did I have to be confined to the narrow notions of identity people held for me through schooling, which was only depressing me. I could focus on what the other kids were, *cool*.

Cool kids did not get beat up, were respected and popular, and also got the same advancement through school that I was striving to achieve.

Cool & Performance

I soon discovered that being cool was not something that just happened. One does not simply wake up in the morning with it. In order to be cool, one must *do* something and have that doing authenticated by an audience. Majors and Billson state, “Playing it cool becomes a routinized, stylized method for expressing the aggressive masculinity that pervades black life” (27). They further agree with Young when writing, “The performance aspect of being cool means that as a black performer leaves his house in the morning, he is “on” and cannot ever completely relax. Even when he is offstage, a black male may feel that he is onstage. And African-American males who are not celebrities find it essential nonetheless to perform” (4). Just as many notable scholars (Judith Butler and John T. Warren, for example) who’ve written about the blurred lines between performativity and identity have stated my identity as someone cool was going to be in direct relation with a stylized performance of my body. Majors and Billson further describe:

This style is highly individualized and is expressed through variations in walk, talk, choice of clothes (threads), and natural or processed hair (“do”). Starting in early adolescence, the young male learns how to develop and maintain his own brand of cool so that he will be “down” instead of “square”; one of the “ins” not one of the “outs.” If a young male does not conform to certain subcultural expectations for behavior, he risks not being in. (4)

Here they note that not only must I perform, but also that I must perform in a way that others will accept me. As if I was an actor auditioning for a role in a popular play, I needed a performance script. I needed a sort of laid-out manuscript that I can rehearse and put on. So I began to look around at the guys who were already accepted as cool and began taking notes for myself. I noticed that there were three major categories that all the cool guys fell under: Athlete, Money Bag, and Thug.

The athlete stands for obvious reasons. He can be good either in basketball, football, or baseball. But growing up in the South Side of Chicago in the 90's, no other sport was (and still is) important to Black Chicago boys than basketball. If your house had a basketball hoop, your backyard (or driveway where many people attached a hoop right above the garage door) became a social club. If there was any beef (euphemism for a conflict between two people) left unsettled, it would be handled on the court. If a guy wanted to impress a girl he was interested in, he would invite her and express his adolescent lust through his dribbles. Through the court we gambled on who would win games, praised those who were good, and made fun of those who were not.

Then there was the Money Bag. They wore the latest shoes, clothes, and wore excessive jewelry. Still, nothing signified the money bag more than his car. They never rode the bus with the rest of the kids, but often drove by the bus in their new car mocking our poverty. They also didn't have jobs like us because they received their money through their parents. Some of them were also good hoopers and had the basketball hoops set up in their backyards. They were walking double-edged swords; we loved them for being a image of what we can have for ourselves, yet hated them for always reminding us that we didn't have what they had.

Last there was the Thug. We rarely saw them in school for they were always suspended. Yet we often saw them on the block hooping or talking to girls. They were signified by their fighting (thus the reason why they were always suspended). Despite their violence, everyone looked up to them. They had a certain “I don’t give a fuck” attitude against the authorities we disliked. They dared to do what we only thought of. They would cuss out teachers, break rules, and take the punishment like a badge of honor. They seemed independent, free, and unruly. They made our lives a bit more exciting for you never knew what to expect from them and often were found as the subject of our conversations out the classroom.

Yet, I wasn’t any three of them. I still am a below average basketball player (or athlete for that manner). I’ve always been a bit weak physically and could not fully perform like others in this area. A big factor was my asthma. I could barely run down the court without grabbing for an inhaler. I also did not have money for my mother being a single parent. She also was a big influence in my reluctance towards being the Thug. Something about violence just wasn’t appealing to me (probably because I was so weak and had asthma, I often sought protection than confrontation). Thus being cool became a challenge, as the scripts I saw available felt inapplicable to me.

The New Cool

Eventually a fourth category emerged for me. It started on the blacktop (the parking lot) of my high school. Eddie, a thug and athlete who was one of the most popular kids in school, challenged me to a rap battle. Rumor somehow got around that I was an excellent rapper. I’ve been working on rhymes secretly with friends for months at this point after

hearing them freestylin' in the cafeteria before school one day. Later we would hang out after school, write rhymes, and battle each other just for fun. Eventually, I became the leader of our secret crew due to the advancement of my lyrics.

Somehow Eddie found out, and with the whole school (well, at the time it felt like the whole school) standing behind him, he challenged me to a lyrical contest. Rap battles at this point were not like the kind of the 70's and 80's where rappers just rapped a verse about any subject and whoever had the better lines won. Battles during my time were personal and violent. You made fun of each other's clothes, family, personality, etc., with additional rhymes about how you would beat or kill the other person. Anything was open. Worse, your "rep" (reputation) was on the line.

I resisted at first. Acted like I didn't hear his challenge. I was afraid. Eddie was tall, muscular, and known for beating people up at any moment. He picked on me from time to time as well. I was afraid that if I went to far, he would definitely swing. Plus I had too many openings for him to attack; the Payless shoes, no girlfriend, asthmatic, and bad fashion. I saw this as a lose-lose situation: if I win, he'll probably beat me up, and if I lose, my coolness credibility goes further down the drain.

"Nigga I hear you got tho barz. Don't be no bitch. Spit that shit!"

The crowd grows a little bit bigger. "Who told you I can rap?" is all I can say as I try to come up with a great reason to not battle. Eddie turns to the crowd smirking while saying, "I knew he was gonna be a pussy." The crowd laughs and I feel a bit smaller.

"Look, since you scared nigga, I'll spit first."

Then Eddie begins his assault. He made fun of my voice, my shoes, clothes, no car, big head, everything. Then added how he'll "fuck me up" this way and that. The crowd is

even bigger now with a sea of eyes looking at my every reaction, tension blanketing the parking lot about what would happen next. I listened to all Eddie said but didn't get mad until he talked about my little brother. He stood next to me and like all big brothers – I had a soft spot for him. I never noticed how much I didn't mind the jokes and laughs towards me until they were directed to him. My brother couldn't rap. I can only imagine how he felt being swept up in my battle with no ability to defend himself. Something about his vulnerability at that moment aroused zeal in me to beat Eddie, despite the consequence that would ensue from it.

Eddie ends his verse with the laughs, cheers, and praise from the crowd behind him. Filled with more anger than fear, I get in Eddie's face ready to spit my verse. The crowd grew larger, catching the attention of the security guards, as "Oh!'s" and "Damn!'s" left the lips of those in attendance. The line that ended the battle and catapulted my rep was about Eddie's double life with two girls in school. Everyone knew he was cheating on one girl with the other, except the women themselves (granted, they were very suspicious because they heard the rumors as well. But no one ever spoke about this out loud). After minutes of impressive punch lines, metaphors, and wordplay I stare directly in Eddie's eyes, fist clinched, and rap...

You two-faced, we all now you cheat on ya chick

By eating out Tiff's pussy then coming home to kiss Ash on the lips

While rapping the line I point out Tiffany and Ashley in the crowd. The whole audience lets out a unanimous shout of excitement, clearing marking me as the winner. Security breaks us up shortly after, warning us to get ready for classes. Before the crowd dispersed Eddie walks up to me and cocks back his arm, but with an open hand instead of a closed fist. We gave

each other “dap” (a stylized handshake) and he congratulated me by saying, “Good shit! I didn’t know you could go hard like that!” His praise was followed by numerous more from the audience, giving me dap, hugs, and calling me the winner.

Throughout the rest of the day, I was the talk of the school. Not only did I win a rap battle, but also I beat Eddie of all people. Suddenly, Eddie’s friends wanted to hang out with me and learn to rap, girls took interest in me, and Eddie himself became a close friend to me. Money Bags offered me rides to school and Thugs protected me. The fact that I couldn’t play ball no longer mattered. Some time later word reached other schools and more challenges came my way; all of them ended with me as the victor. Other kids began writing lyrics and asking me for my advice. All this helped mask the insecure, frail, school nerd I really was. A fourth category for coolness emerged: The Rapper.

Represent?

Being a rapper, I was caught up in a world beyond myself. The rules were different when I was rapping against friends in my school. The only reputation on the line was my own. However when I started rapping against people throughout Chicago, I became the representative for my neighborhood. When I started rapping against people in other states, I represented my whole city. Because I was unbeaten, an invisible yet visceral target was on my back. I didn’t realize that the rise of my own rep would jeopardize the rep of others, nor how important it was for people to maintain their credibility at all costs. Many times I found myself in a violent situation after battles and had to have a “crew” (a group of men willing to fight) with me for protection.

I was cool but at a cost. I was also rising during the East Coast vs. West Coast beef, personified in Tupac and Biggie Smalls. During that time you had to choose sides, and as a rapper many people would ask me, “So do you flow more with the east or west coast?” Not having an answer was not good enough. You had to choose and be ready to defend your argument, even fight for it (which ended up as the case in most situations). People asked me who I listened to, who I liked, and from whom did I want to get a record deal from. It all was a bit overwhelming. I just wanted to rap to be cool, yet the world around me wanted me to pick sides, get a recording contract, and represent all my affiliations. No longer could I stand for myself. I had to always represent. While rapping, I would always be a metaphor.

While struggling to navigate the new rap world, I began listening to other artists. I didn't start listening to rappers till I was one myself (my mother only played R&B in the house and spent majority of my time outdoors) so the pool was exciting and overwhelming all at once. Who do I listen to? Where do I start? Who did the people respect? I began by simply tuning in to the radio at night, plus watching MTV and BET. The biggest single I can remember was Jay-Z's *Hard Knock Like (Ghetto Anthem)*. His album, *Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life*, was album of the year in the streets and even won a Grammy for best rap album with more hit singles like *Can I Get A...* and *Money, Cash, Hoes*. Still, I didn't give Jay-Z a serious ear. Actually, I only knew the songs that were popular on the radio and television. Other artists also appeared during that, but no one connected with me. The only artist I also liked was Eminem because of our connection as rap battlers. But he wasn't enough for me. I got tired of putting my rep on the line battle after battle. Simply, I didn't want to be just a rapper. I wanted my coolness to be something real whether I rapped or not. Eminem couldn't provide that for me despite his tremendous skill in lyricism.

Connection

Sitting in the school's security office for theft (which being seen in trouble raised my coolness greatly), the officer suddenly paused in his speech towards me as the television interrupted with a special news brief about an attack on America. It was September 11, 2001. Seeing the towers fall seemed unreal. Immediately, the principal announced that school was cancelled for the rest of the day and ordered us to stay in our homes. I was nervous more for my mother since she worked downtown, so if a heavy populated city were the target she would be in jeopardy. We all went home, scared, and glued our eyes and ears to every news update on the attack in New York.

That same day, Jay-Z released his album *The Blueprint*. In midst of everything going on, a few friends called me and asked if I heard the new album yet. "Man, you gotta hear this shit!" one kept saying. To take my mind off things, I went to the nearest record store and bought a copy. At this point I never really listened to Jay-Z besides his radio singles. *The Blueprint* was his sixth studio album. I heard him loosely before for nothing gave me a reason to give him a serious ear. The album cover and title sold me more than anything really. Sitting and smoking a cigar like some sort of don with shades on, the cool he had intrigued me. There was a stream of confidence and wisdom that flowed from the cover, like an Obi-Wan Kenobi choosing me to become his young student as he'll give me the blueprint to his cool, success, and skills.

I got home, turned off the news, and put on my headphones to listen. For two hours I listened and replayed every track on the album. The samples and soul-centric sound mixed with the street lyrics of Jay-Z made him appear *above* other artists I was listening to. Knowing common knowledge of his achievements outside of rapping, he seemed to only rap

because he *chose* to. It was as if he doing us a favor to rap with us like a father coming from home and taking time to play with his children. It made me respect him more. Maybe that's because every time he referred to someone other than himself on a record he called them "young scraps," "youngins," "scrapper," "young fucks," and "little mans."

Another part of the album that resonated with me was that it was somehow all about him and yourself at the same time. His number one single was *Izzo (H.O.V.A.)*, a theme song solely about him. Later he would release *Jigga That Nigga*, in addition to *Hola' Hovito* being on the album. Though the songs were all about him, I sung them like they were about me as well. Reciting lyrics like "Wasn't born hustlers, I was birf' in em" gave me a sense of security about the world around me. When Jay-Z rhymes:

Can't leave rap alone the game needs me
 Haters want me clapped and chromed it ain't easy
 Cops wanna knock me, D.A. wanna box me in
 But somehow, I beat them charges like Rocky
 H to the izz-O, V to the izz-A
 Not guilty, he who does not feel me is not real to me
 Therefore he doesn't exist
 So poof...vamoose son of a bitch

I felt powerful. Through his lyrics I was needed in the rap game, overcoming in those set against me (haters and cops), and dismissive of those who weren't in agreement with me. I was able to redefine my world. No longer was my rep on the line at battles, for what would the game be without me! Plus, it was *my* choice whether I wanted to rap or not. Later, I built a reputation that one had to prove himself worthy of me to rap against him. Everybody else

was “young scraps,” “youngins,” “scrapper,” “young fucks,” and “little mans” while I was *Jigga That Nigga*. I didn’t accept everyone’s friendship and showed up late to events as if I was the star of the show. This attitude later was brought to the classroom. I treated teachers like I was *allowing* them to run the class. If I ever got in trouble, I would just talk my way out of it. As much as I conceptualized him, I was Jay-Z himself. Singing his anthem was singing my own.

The reason I write is for change. I believe that things can be different, better yet; I believe *people* can be different. Moreover, I believe *I* can be different. Without this hope, what other option stands when a chauvinist is confronted with his sexism, a dogmatic preacher with his heteronormativity, or a hip-hop artist with the implications of his capitalism? Paulo Freire may say I believe in “problem-posing education” where “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (83).

Likewise, seeing the world as a reality in process, I also see the self as a reality in process. I see, as Paul John Eakin writes, the “subject as process” (11) or as Freire once wrote, “... beings in process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (84). If one seeks change, one must realize that their *self* is not static but is always in prep for change. As Satoshi Toyosaki writes, “Human growth becomes possibilized when we, human beings, understand our identity as an unstable construct and, thus, a conflictual site - the site of both the same and the different. How do we, human beings, change? Isn’t this question a very important element of identity studies in

intercultural communication?” (241).

Yet how do we engage this process? If our beings are becoming, how do we know where to enter? How do we, as Toyosaki writes, “possiblize” our human growth? How do we gain the power to critically perceive our world and ourselves? I find the answer in what Toyosaki calls “praxis-orientated autoethnography.” Praxis-oriented autoethnography “understands the autoethnographer self as the implicated and intersubjective self, performatively accomplished by the dialectic of nuanced consensual and conflictual theorization of his or her identity/identities” (249).

In other words, it is a critical exploration of self that informs your communicative practices with others in the present, while at the same time, points your communicative practices with others towards the future. It is a methodology predicated on hope. As Freire wrote, “...dialogue cannot be carried on in a climate of hopelessness. If the dialoguers expect nothing to come from their efforts, their encounter will be empty and sterile, bureaucratic and tedious” (92).

Though Freire was thinking of two separate bodies in dialogue, I return to Toyosaki in opening up a dialogue with the self in what he called “critical selfhood.” Toyosaki defines critical selfhood as “a self-reflexive, purposeful, and conscious materialization of one's subjectivity. An employing act in dialectical tension between stabilizing and de-stabilizing one's identity” (240). This, I believe, expounds on Conquergood's “dialogical performance” as defined:

This performative stance struggles to bring together different voices, worldviews, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other

together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another. It is a kind of performance that resists conclusions; it is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between the performer and text open and ongoing. (9)

Praxis-oriented autoethnography is a methodology that causes self to have a conversation with *self as other* in a dialogical performance. It is “narrative evidence of critical selfhood – self-reflexive, purposeful, and conscious employment of one’s subjectivity” (Toyosaki 251). This also echoes Freire: “Finally, true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking – thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved” (92).

This is why I became a rapper. I wanted to be different, to change, to transform myself. I was born Bryant Antonio Payne, but as a rapper I was “RhymeZ.” As Bryant, I was insecure and afraid, constantly running from the invisible boogey man that stalked me at home, in the neighborhood, and at school. However, as RhymeZ, I was fearless, confident, and unbreakable towards a world that wanted me broken. Later, “RhymeZ” became “J.Heavens,” a moniker in honor of my little brother, Joshua, who passed away. J.Heavens became a new self, one that taught me a way of being in life, in relationship to women, the world, and myself.

Paul John Eakin writes, “In forming our sustaining sense of self, we draw on models of identity provided by the cultures we inhabit” (46). Likewise, J.Heavens drew from models of identity provided for him, for me. Problem was, that model was destructive to black life, subverted black self-determination, and was void of crucial narratives of black self-esteem (Dyson, 434-435). (White)ness/supremacy/racism deemed black masculinity, and the hip-hop

we embodied, as savagery. bell hooks is right as she states, “At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling (16).

Just as Williams noted in his own biography, I too drew from a model that deemed my identity as, “Money, hoes, and clothes, that’s all a brother knows; Fuck bitches, get money; G’s up, hoes down; All I’ve got for hoes is hard dick and bubble gum” (50). In fact, the more J.Heavens grew into that model, the more my culture affirmed him. As hooks writes, I found myself in a prison of the mind unable to find my way out. hooks further elaborates, “In patriarchal culture, all males learn a role that restricts and confines. When race and class enter the picture, along with patriarchy, then black males endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity” (16). Within hip-hop itself Dyson gives a brilliant depiction of how destructive models of masculinity are affirmed, worth quoting at length here:

The moral of the story is that had more support been given to the so-called positive hip-hoppers and to revolutionary rappers who detested body bags and beer bottles; who encouraged black men to “be a father to your child”; who advocated love and respect for black women; who sought to build black communities; and who encouraged youth to study black history, the gangsta rap tide might have been stemmed. At least, gangsta rappers might have been forced to take the internal criticisms of their hip-hop peers more seriously because such criticisms would have had moral and economic support. After all, it’s easier to get an album made if you’re “pimpin’ hos,” “cockin’ glocks” or generally bitch-baiting your way through yet another tired tale about how

terrible it was to come up in the hood without your father while blaming your mama for the sorry job she did, than if you're promoting radical black unity or the overthrow of white racism. (421)

Now please do not misunderstand me at this point; I do not “blame” rap for my own mistreatment of women, my lack of care for community, and the violence I displayed towards others in the world. Hip-Hop did not teach me these things for I already was a sexist, violent, greedy man since I was a boy. As Judith Butler would point out, the performative accomplishment of my identity would be compelled by social sanction and taboo, an individual way of doing in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions (271-276). (White)ness/supremacy/racism and capitalistic patriarchy, as a culture and system of power, would ask me (a black male outside of that system) to “learn and participate in the rules of the powerful for it is the powerful who have made the rules, as well as the game, in the first place” (Warren 88). Thus, my body must be docile, controlled, and regulated for this system to function properly (Warren 89).

In short, culture taught me how to be sexist, violent, and greedy long before hip-hop came into the picture. Moreover, my sexism, violence, and greed *turned* hip-hop into something destructive, not the other way around. As Dyson states, “It wasn't until rap made a huge impact on white kids that the music was so roundly attacked. As long as the “bad” effects of rap were restricted to black kids, its menace went undetected, unprotested, or it was flat-out ignored” (422). Hip-Hop is innocent. It was me, and the culture that I uncritically accepted, that disrespected women and was corrupted by greed.

Praxis-oriented autoethnography thus becomes not only helpful, but also necessary for “doers who critically engage in their doing of their identity” (Toyosaki, 249). Toyosaki

further defines praxis-oriented autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing which narrates one’s path to the hopeful and transformative way of experiencing his or her cultural identity and assists him or her to live in the moment, and to live the moment with present hope and future hopefulness” (250). Likewise, this writing is autobiographical, but also autoethnographic as I possibilize new experiences of my cultural identity in the now with hope that I, along with others, will hopefully learn new ways of doing in the world.

Enter Jay-Z

It was clear I could rap. Ever since the rap battle on the school parking lot I became a voice. I was no longer invisible. Within weeks, one peer after another would challenge me in front of others for a battle. Rap battles themselves became a sort of proving grounds, of what though I am unsure. Yet one after the other, challengers would lose. The more wins I acclimated, the more requests came. However, the difference was that requests were coming in from different schools, different neighborhoods. Still, it was an unwritten rule to accept a challenge so I began battling whoever wanted a piece of me. Most people told me that I was unbeatable because I was original. My rhyme scheme, flow and dictation were new, and rightfully so, because I too was new to rap.

My mother never allowed rap music in the house. All I heard was Luther Vandross and Sade growing up, so rapping was a new experience for me. I wasn’t listening to rap music before I started rapping, so I had no model to go off on. I just did what sounded good in my head, plus I was a natural performer so I knew what I had to do to get the crowd hyped. I was suddenly swept in a new world that started out as harmless fun, yet I knew something powerful was behind what I was doing. I mean, think about this, I actually used rap to stand

up against one of the biggest gangsters and bullies in the whole neighborhood...and it worked. I defended my brother, our name, and looked a kid in the eye who was known for a fight or two. Me – the kid with asthma and no muscles who couldn't shoot a jump shot in his life, yet alone never been in a fight, actually backed down the kid every one was scared of. It was as if being a rapper could actually change things, at the least, change me.

As my rap-battling career was picking up, many people would begin talking to me about the latest music being played on the radio (as if I knew anything). One rapper that kept popping up was Eminem. Being that he was a rap battler and I was a rap battler, there was a connection I had with him. I gleaned a lot from watching videos and audiotapes of his time in the Rap Olympics, an event that used to be held every year for rappers across the country to rap against each other in an elimination setting. Eminem became my teacher in rap battling, showing me the value of having “punchlines” and metaphors as you rapped against your opponent. The more clever the metaphors and the more personal the punches, the more likely you would win. Plus, he was a white boy signed by Dr. Dre and that alone had the streets buzzing about him. The foundational things I learned in rap came from Eminem.

But I still didn't connect with Eminem. At the time I couldn't really buy his whole “white poor trash” story. I also didn't really like the raps about killing women, hating his mom and popping ecstasy pills. Yes, he was great in *how* he said things, but I couldn't connect with *why* he said them. We lived in two different worlds. I listened to Eminem the way an apathetic student attends a classroom, “Teach me what I need to make it to the next level.” I learned tactics, but nothing more.

As my raps grew better, and the people who loved them grew in number, so did my excitement for deviance grow. I realized that the more untamed I was, the sexier I appeared

to girls and the more respectful I appeared to the boys. I began to cuss out teachers, steal, and even jumped myself into a fight or two. My school had a three-strike rule before being expelled, and I was rapidly heading out the door towards expulsion. Eventually, my deviant behavior would have me sitting in the security office because of theft. It was September 11, 2001 – the day two planes were used to destroy the twin towers in New York City.

Me and the security officer watched the news as the world was trying to process exactly what was happening in New York. As we watched I forgot that I was actually in trouble, and so did the security officer. We sat together in silence, eyes glued to every detail of the television, trying to pull ourselves from the shock of what was actually happening. Phone calls flooded the school with concerned parents demanding their child be released from school and sent home immediately. My mother was one of those parents. My mother worked in downtown Chicago, a few floors below the office of Senator Barack Obama. When the attack happened in New York, many feared that other metropolis cities were going to be attacked as well, so people left their jobs in droves to be reunited with the families until someone knew what was actually going on.

Within an hour of the attack, the principal announced that school was cancelled for the remainder of the day. We were instructed to go straight home and stay indoors. Like the naivety of all children, I completely lost interest in the attack over the joy of being sent home early. Though, no one actually planned to go home. Extra hours from school meant time to play basketball, rap and listen to music, mess with girls, and ride bikes. None of our parents could make it home in time, for most of them worked downtown where the good jobs were, and thus we all knew we had another three hours before parents got home (factoring in bus routes and rush hour).

Within an hour of getting home, a friend called me asking, “Yo B! Have you heard that new Jay-Z yet! Man you gotta hear this shit!” There was a record store nearby still open because Jay-Z’s *Blueprint* was the most anticipated album for the season. I personally didn’t hear much of Jay-Z before that. *Blueprint* was Jay-Z’s 6th album, but I didn’t really give him much listen. I was predominately wrapped up in learning how to battle rap from Eminem still. I was actually still pondering if I wanted to buy the album, until my friend tells me, “...and he has a track with Eminem on it!” Next thing I knew I was walking towards the record store.

The album was almost sold out by the time I got there, but I was able to get my hand on a copy. The album cover itself spoke volumes to me. Jay-Z gave the aura of a leader. Better yet, an aura that mixed the gentleman with the gangsta. Staring at that cover, I wanted to get to know him. Plus, I figured that if he was good enough to spar with Eminem then he must be good enough to listen to intentionally.

I was nodding my head from the time I placed the headphones over my ears and listened to that first track *The Ruler’s Back*. Unlike Eminem’s constant rhetoric of victimhood, Jay-Z spoke of overcoming. Within the first track his message was simply, nothing threatens me. Cops, lawyers, money, nothing can take me down. Even more, he sounded so damn cool while doing it all. In the streets of Chicago, we have a phrase called “woofing.” It means when someone’s bite isn’t as hard as their bark, someone who brags a lot with no substance behind their claims. If anyone ever got disqualified immediately in the world of rap, it was due to someone calling out the fraud in his or her lyrics. If you bragged about all the guns you have, but in reality never even seen one, then you were in trouble. This is actually how I often won my rap battles, by calling out the fraud in my opponent’s lyrics. I never had to lie in my raps, which gave me much respect on the streets.

Jay-Z as well didn't sound like a fraud to me. There was a tone in his voice that convinced me that everything he said was real. When he called himself "the voice of the young people, mouthpiece for hustlers," I felt like I was listening to a sage who would show me the ropes I was trying to handle. What really intrigued me though, was when Jay-Z rhymed, "I'm representin' for the seat where Rosa Parks sat/ Where Malcolm X was shot, where Martin Luther was popped." I was very familiar with the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., even at a young age. Dr. King and I share the same birthday. Every year my mother would give me King memorabilia to remind me of how special my birthday was, and also who I would become. I read a bit on the struggle of the civil rights movement.

Therefore, when I heard Jay-Z say he was representin' in the very places where struggle was most salient, more visceral, and most threatening, I heard in his voice an invitation to resist. Granted, I did not know how to define (white)ness/supremacy/racism, but I knew I hated being stopped by the cops for simply walking down the street, or seeing white kids with more things than I had. When black kids in my neighborhood thought of white people, we thought of happiness. We didn't know what problems they had, but we knew it had to be better than poverty, violent neighborhoods, crack, and police who hate you.

After the first track, I respected Jay-Z as a role model. He was the body I was looking for to anchor and sustain my own sense of identity (Eakin 11). As far as I can recall, I listened to that album every day for months. I memorized every lyrics, every dictation of his voice. I even sampled the "uh" he would periodically insert between every other rhyme. As people heard the music I was making, it was common to hear the phrase, "You sound a bit like Jay-Z." After *Blueprint*, I wanted more of Jay-Z. I went back and purchased his previous five albums and listened to his music, though I was only interested in the songs that

everybody else already knew. Soon I was dating multiple women, hanging with drug dealers, disrespecting the law, and became completely narcissistic. I wanted people to make my name, J.Heavens, their own theme music.

Epiphanies

“Epiphanies are interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people’s lives.

In them, personal character is manifested. They are often moments of crisis. They alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person’s life”. Norman Denzin (70).

“You have two choices; either you can call your grandmother or I will. Either way, you’re expelled from school pending if the parents want to press charges.” I was on my third strike, sitting in the security office once again. This time, I wasn’t in trouble for theft. I was in trouble for having sex with a girl in the school hallway after school. The whole scene was caught on newly installed security cameras that we failed to notice. Her parents wanted to file statutory rape charges against me.

I had a knack for causing women to fall for me. I couldn’t go with the gangsta image, for violence wasn’t really my thing. Plus, I was still an asthmatic with no muscles. I also couldn’t go with the athletic image nor the image of the fly kid (the kids who always wore the newest shoes and clothes), we were too broke for that. Being a player though, was my mode. I thought more about girls than I thought about anything else. Girls, for me, was Jay-Z’s defining swagger. One of my favorite lines of his came from *The Dynasty* album, “I’m a pimp by blood, not relation/ Ya’ll be chasin’, I replace them, Huh”. Also, *Big Pimpin’* was a previous hit record of his that I was accumulated to. In the documentary *Jay-Z’s Backstage:*

Hard Knock Life Tour, I watched with eyes glazed over as women had liquor poured down their blouse and men were receiving oral sex in public bathrooms. The conquest of women, to me, signified a level of respectability that I wanted from other men.

bell hooks clarifies this a bit for me as she writes, “In many African-American communities the black man who womanizes, whose whole life is based on lies, secrets, and silences, is often seen as the epitome of desirable manhood” (121). I learned that “fucking is all that matters” (hooks 121). So as my popularity grew with my rapping, so also did my actions towards trying to sleep with girls grew. Jay-Z taught me a lot about how to get them. I learned that I was a pimp; I don’t need them, they need me. I displayed an aura that sleeping with me was a privilege, because dammit, I’m J.Heavens. So I began “pimpin’ hoes.”

Yet here I sat in the security office, expelled from school. It was absolutely embarrassing, for my mother and grandmother had no idea about this side of me. They actually thought I was still a virgin. My greatest fear was my mother. She preached avidly to me about the importance of school. She herself was finishing a bachelor’s degree in psychology as she worked a fulltime job and raised my brother and me by herself. She deeply believed (and does still) that school was a way out of poverty. To call her and say that I was being kicked out, and for sleeping with a girl, was crushing towards my pride.

I went from cool to ridicule. How dumb could I have been? Losing status felt like the judgment of God. The charges were dropped since I too was a minor, but I didn’t want to go back to school anymore to face the laughs. So I convinced my mother to send my brother and me to a school in another district. When we arrived, I was once again swept up in the ascription that I should be a brute. I needed a cool again to avoid being picked on and bullied (and not only for me, but for my little brother). Through battle raps and my Jay-Z bravado, I

quickly ascended as a popular kid in school leaving the troubles of my past behind.

College

“We can no longer work together.” I was sitting in my boss’ office as he was firing me from my graduate assistantship. I disrespected my boss to the point that I rightfully deserved my sentence. I publicly was speaking and writing against the very person I was suppose to be working for. A part of me really loved my bad boy antics. Yet, it all was catching up with me. I lost all my funding for school. The assistantship covered my tuition and gave me a stipend to have a living. Within a single conversation, everything was gone and I began to panic wondering how I was going to finish school and have food to eat.

The next day, as I sat in the office of my professor I was dealt another blow. “Bryant, I can no longer support or advocate for you. I am stepping down as your advisor and ask that you seek someone else.” My advisor was distancing herself from me because of my behavior and antics. I also caused a bit of a stir in my department for sleeping with multiple women deceptively. She knew this, as well as everyone. My personal behaviors of “pimpin” were a disgrace to the values of humanity that my department stood for. In two days, I lost my advisor and all my funding for school. Everything I worked hard for was taken away, and by my own doing. I could not revert to my typical rant of how “everyone is against me.” There was no mother to move me to another district, no way to sweep everything under the rug. I was forced to deal with myself.

As I went home, I began reflecting. It hurt losing my funding, it hurt losing my advisor, but what hurt the most was feeling like my life was on repeat. I was so ashamed I couldn’t even tell my mother what had happened. I began reliving that moment in the high

school security office. For some reason, the same behavior that landed me in that office was the same behavior that had my academic career in jeopardy. In that moment, I felt trapped. How can I be free of myself? Even as a graduate student and spoken word artist, I was still just as inhumane as I was in high school sleeping with girls in school hallways.

It was at this moment, that I truly wanted to change. I wanted to be a different man, one that genuinely cared for others instead of trying to care because that's what conscious black men are suppose to do. However, all I was left with was frustration. I searched for models; men who were just as poor as me, fatherless as me, raised in bad neighborhoods as me, who were as sexist and violent as me, who were once arrested as me, yet were changed. I looked towards other black male scholars yet came up wanting. I even researched my ancestry hoping I would discover that I had a great grandfather who was a professor or something. As Eakin writes, I needed a body image to anchor and sustain the new identity I wanted to adopt (11). But where is that body image? I constantly felt the sting of the static notions of my own identity, even as a child. The constant black male mug shots on the news, all the black villains in movies and lack of black heroes, and the many repeating complaints I heard as a boy from black women gave me the notion that black men were stuck. As bell hooks elaborates:

When women get together and talk about men, the news is almost always bad news. If the topic gets specific and the focus is on black men the news is even worse. Despite all the advances in civil rights in our nation, feminist movement, sexual liberation, when the spotlight is on black males the message is usually that they have managed to stay stuck, that as a group they have not evolved with the times (16).

Destabilizing Jay-Z/Destabilizing Myself

Frustrated, I gave up. I felt static, that change was beyond my reach. I wanted to be a better man, but felt like I needed some initiation to do so. One night, I decided to smoke some weed (which was a rare practice for me) and listen to my favorite rapper Jay-Z. He recently released *Blueprint 3* and I haven't given it a serious listen. The primary reason I didn't listen was because I judged, with a lot of the general public, that Jay-Z "lost his way." Many of my personal friends told me it was his worst album yet, so my motivation to listen to it was low. Yet with free time and an open heart, I played it from the beginning of the first track. In that moment, I realized something I never realized before: Jay-Z was different. Within the first track Jay-Z raps:

People keep talkin' bout Hov take it back
 I'm doin' better than before why would I do that?
 Ain't nothing cool bout carryin' a strap
 Bout worryin' your moms and buryin' your best cat
 Talkin' bout revenge while carryin' his casket
 All teary-eyed bout to take it to a mattress
 I'm talkin' bout music, I ain't talkin' bout rap
 You talkin' bout who's hot, I ain't talkin' bout that
 The conversation is changed, Lets yap about that
 I don't run rap no more I run the map

Was this the same Jay-Z? Is this the same man who bragged extensively about the weapons he would use now saying that there's nothing cool about having a gun? Jay-Z later raps in the same track:

And now that that's that lets talk about the future
 We have just seen the dream as predicted by Martin Luther
 Now you could choose to sit in front of your computa'
 Posin' with guns, shootin YouTube up
 Or you could come with me to the White House, get your suit up
 You stuck on being hardcore, I chuck the deuce up

The last line rung in my ears, “You stuck on being hardcore, I chuck the deuce up (an euphemism for leaving something behind).” No wonder my friends said “Jay-Z lost his way,” for he wasn’t the same Jay-Z we heard back in high school. There was no bragging about weapons, any display of toughness, but exactly the opposite. In fact, Jay-Z spoke back to me who wanted him to “take it back.” It was then that I realized, that Jay-Z was possibilizing new ways of experiencing his identity and giving me permission to do the same. This new Jay-Z was everywhere on the album. In his song *D.O.A. (Death Of Auto-Tune)* he raps, “I don't be in the project hallway/Talking about how I be in the project all day/That sounds stupid to me.” This was a new Jay-Z I was hearing.

In *Empire State of Mind* featuring Alicia Keys, he warns women not to give into the temptation of the fast life in New York, and in *On To The Next One* featuring Swizz Beats he says “Hov’s on that new shit” and that if people want his old self that they should just buy his old albums because “I gotta keep it moving.” If this was a blueprint, this was a blueprint to destabilize myself from the static identity I felt trapped in. It was a blueprint to move ahead. I began to even think about his personal life. Jay-Z was a married man at this time, the same man who said that he replaces women and is big pimpin’. How could I have missed this? How could I have missed this progression?

The biggest record that signified a change, for me, was *Off That* featuring Drake. The record starts off with Jay-Z saying, “Welcome to the future...” and ends his first verse with “Welcome to tomorrow.” The chorus of the song told me I was experiencing a different man:

Whatever you about to discover, we off that
You about to tell her you love it, we off that
Always want to fight in the club and we off that
But you can't bring the future back
Ya'll steady chasing the fame, we off that
Oversize clothes and the chains, we off that
Niggas still makin' it rain and we off that
But you can't bring the future back
Tell them hatas get off me
Cris we off that
Timbs we off that
Rims we off that
Yeah we off that
Is you still on that
And we still making money
Cause we still on that

The lyrics of this chorus literally confronted everything I learned, loved, and thought about Jay-Z. Fighting in clubs, chasing fame, baggy clothes, oversize chains, and throwing money on strippers (the meaning behind “makin’ it rain”) was old, “we off that.” Sitting in my room and listening to the album, I began to feel empowered. Jay-Z was the closet person

I knew who came from my world, and he was moving forward. I began to think that maybe I could as well. By possibilizing new ways to experience his identity, he gave me the initiation I was searching for to possibilize my own. Once again, Jay-Z became the body image that anchored and sustained my sense of new identity.

Out of a sense of nostalgia I went back to *Blueprint*. I wanted to hear the old songs that I knew, but I also wanted to appreciate deeper how much Jay-Z has progressed. I went to my one of my favorite records *Renegade* featuring Eminem. Listening to Jay-Z, I had an epiphany; Jay-Z was *never* all bad. Jay-Z begins the beginning of that record:

Say that I'm foolish

I only talk about jewels

Do you fools

Listen to music or

Do you just skim

Through it?

I must say, hearing that caused me to self-reflect again on why I listened to him. Did I actually *listen* to him or just skimmed through his music because of the pre-proscribed boxes I've placed him/me/us in? I was tempted to place us in another box. I was tempted to move us from the "bad boys" box to the "good boys" box. But have I ever just let Jay-Z be? Have I ever let myself just *be* – a fully processing subject that is growing and learning with all my flaws and goodness? I was tempted to move from static identity to static identity. But this time, I couldn't make that move for there are still aspects of Jay-Z that my own being does not agree with. Neither one of us are good or bad black men. We are just black men: living, experiencing, and progressing.

Jay-Z and I were changing, and just that very fact that I *could* was a genuine revelation for me. I thought of the very fact that he is in a committed, dedicated relationship with another human being. This Jay-Z who was “big pimpin’” was now a married man. This Jay-Z who bragged about shooting you with various guns is now “off that” and is done with baggy clothes and chains. But like the critics that he addresses in his lyrics, there is a pull from our (white)ness/supremacy/racism culture to “go back to the old Hova’.” Jay-Z “question the unquestioned narrative” (Toyosaki, 251) of who we, as black men, are. Black men are not static brutes, but fully fluid subjects about to change.

Closing Remarks

Jay-Z is constantly praised for representing the hustlers, the ones trying to cross the threshold of poverty to riches. As Bakari Kitwana writes, “Jay-Z is a bridge between the black poor and black elite” (100). Julius Bailey also explains, “Jay-Z shows the trials and tribulations of assimilation into the American dream by focusing on the invisible man’s plight of doing business at the street corners where the sun doesn’t shine” (11). Cornel West even states, “Jay-Z is someone, without debate, who peers into the darkness of the human social condition and works his way through that darkness,” but further elaborates, as I am, that Jay-Z “serves as a force, particularly for minorities, of creating a new identity” (4).

Jay-Z and I are still in conversation. Whereas everyone marks Jay-Z’s material progression as a mode of transformation, I mark his body, the ways in which he performs his black masculinity differently. Jay-Z, as well as I, is still becoming and that process should be marked to decenter the narrative that black men are incapable of being subjects. I still flat out with the capitalism and bragging of his money, the heteronormativity of his lyrics, and the

still objectification of women though he is a married man now. However, he *is* married. That does not mean that he's no longer patriarchal, but it does mean that there is a possibility that he can progress. He's against carrying guns, fighting, and sagging jeans. Jay-Z, like all black males, cannot be easily categorized. The fluidity of our subjectivity must be marked if we want to communicate a narrative to everyone, black men and women, that change is *possible*. The space is there, it just has been covered by propaganda that wanted us to remain as brutes.

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