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The Poetics of Praxis:
Analogy, Identity and Commitment in Hip-Hop Culture

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PhD in Text, Practice as Research
University of Kent

January 2012

Abstract

This dissertation contends that the distinctive poetic language of hip-hop enables individuals to understand and construct identities, as well as to challenge dominant narratives and provoke conscious shifts in their perceptions of self and community. Beginning with language, Chapter 1 explores the poetic structure of analogy and examines the cultural and cognitive roles that analogy plays in American hip-hop. Acknowledging the transcultural nature of identity in hip-hop, Chapter 2 examines Gautam Malkani's novel *Londonstani* and the ways in which postcolonial youth construct identities through analogy and hip-hop culture. Further developing the connection between art and audience, Chapter 3 applies Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of 'committed literature' to Christian rap and investigates the role of language in inspiring action and progressive change.

The companion album to the dissertation uses poetic structures and tropes to explore political, philosophical and sociological concepts, with the goal of inspiring listeners to reevaluate fundamental assumptions and beliefs that they may hold, in the tradition of committed literature. The album *Scholar* is available for free download online at BlakeBrandes.com and includes footnoted lyrics for all songs to encourage educational application of the music.

Acknowledgements

'Thank you' does not begin to describe my appreciation for the support, guidance and encouragement that my supervisor Dr. Caroline Rooney has provided over the past four years. Without her vision and unfailing positivity, this dissertation would simply not exist. From bringing me on-board with her *Global Uncertainties* project to co-organizing the Conference on Global Youth Cultures in October 2009 at the University of Kent, Dr. Rooney has given me incredible opportunities to succeed and do what I love. To the extent that I have been able to share my passion for hip-hop with her, I hope that I have returned a fraction of the inspiration she has shared with me.

Thank you to the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission, The British Council, Mary Denyer, Elizabeth Martin, Natasha Bevan, Gillian 'G-Coop from the land of pea soup' Cooper, Martin Rickerd, Theodore 'T-Diddy' Leinbaugh and all my fellow Marshall Scholars for making my journey to England possible and highly enjoyable. The intellectual and personal development I have experienced while here has been immense, and I hope to be able to share what I have learned with others around the world for years to come.

I would like to thank Scarlett Thomas, Donna Landry, David Herd and Rupa Huq for their feedback and encouragement on this project. Their observations have been insightful and have arrived at crucial points in the development of this dissertation. Thanks are also due to Ipshita Ghose for her helpful feedback on the *Londonstani* chapter, as well as to Matthew Fredericks and Odile Hobeika for their enlightening perspectives and entertaining philosophical discussions.

A project like this builds over years of research, and I would like to thank the mentors in my life who have guided me from my undergraduate days at Wake Forest University – Thomas 'TOP' Phillips, Jefferson Holdridge, Michael Hill and Jim Hans. Family friends also have a way of entering one's life at crucial moments, and for their support and wisdom I would like to thank Seamus Heaney, Declan Kiberd, Todd McEwen and Lucy Ellmann.

On the musical front, a big shout-out to Joe 'Focus' Martinez, whose swag is unstoppable. From melodies to photography, Joe brings professionalism and laughter to every project we undertake. Major thanks are also due to Kyle B. Jones, who has been unceasing in his support and loyalty as a teammate, friend and mentor over the past five years. Creativity develops over time, and my appreciation goes out to the early adopters: Matt Furst, Beal, Da'Ron, Jewelz, Katie D., Andre Ramone, Innuendo, my Lambda Chi boys and Agents of the Swarm. To all my other dear friends and colleagues, your presence in my life is a blessing and a gift.

Finally, it would take another entire dissertation to thank my family. As much as this project means to me, I know it means as much, if not more, to my incredibly loving parents, Rand and Beth Brandes. Without their encouragement, understanding, and guidance, this PhD would not exist. Nor would so many other blessings and opportunities in life. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I am also so grateful for my kind and inspirational grandparents, Hoffman and Norma Harris. My love for people and music was born in their home and has grown ever since.

My deep appreciation goes out to my dedicated and remarkable grandparents, Rodney and Bobbie Brandes, in whose loving care my drive for achievement and growth was nurtured.

So much love to Chris and Sally, who showed me how to care about people no matter where they are in life, and to Tim and Mary Lou, who demonstrate patience and kindness in everything they do.

This dissertation is dedicated to Valerie, who has been there through it all. I love you more than you will ever know.

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Introduction: 'The story of struggle'

As indicated by rapper Jay-Z's famous line 'I'm like Che Guevara with bling on, I'm complex,' a range of paradoxes exist in hip-hop culture.¹ Emerging from impoverished neighborhoods and taking up residence in corporate boardrooms, hip-hop has been both anti-capitalist and highly commodified. Despite an initial emphasis on communal celebration, rap also grew to become the largest cultural purveyor of 'black death' (via the glorification of internecine African-American violence) in the United States.² Combining numerous cultural and musical influences, this hybrid art form maintains an obsession with authenticity in spite of its *bricolage* origins and expressions. The sacred and the profane co-exist under its roof. Deeply conservative and individualistic perspectives on gender roles, materialism and firearms come into conflict with anti-authoritarian principles and democratic impulses.³ No single theory or approach can fully explain or explore hip-hop culture, and any attempt to do so will inevitably leave out more than it includes. Recognizing this challenge, I have attempted to trace the connections between language, identity and agency in hip-hop culture through conceptual models ranging from linguistics and postcolonial theory to cultural studies and literary criticism.

Exploring linguistic analyses of analogy in hip-hop, identity formation in British postcolonial youth culture and Christian rap as committed literature, I argue that poetic language in hip-hop culture can help individuals to understand and construct identities, as well as to challenge dominant narratives and provoke conscious shifts in their perceptions of self and community. In Chapter 1, I use the analogic scholarship of Keith J. Holyoak and Paul Thagard, Donald Davidson and David S. Miall and the hip-hop criticism of Nelson George and Imani Perry to examine the cognitive and cultural purposes for which rappers like Immortal Technique, Binary Star and Talib Kweli use analogies. In Chapter 2,

based on the work of postcolonial scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Rupa Huq, Claire Alexander and Stuart Hall, I focus on race, gender, consumerism and the role of hip-hop culture and analogy in postcolonial identity formation in Gautam Malkani's novel *Londonstani*. In Chapter 3, drawing on Theodor Adorno's cultural criticism and Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of 'committed literature', i.e. art which attempts to raise awareness in readers by encouraging them to examine their own assumptions and beliefs, I explore US Christian rappers' counter-narratives to mainstream hip-hop and hypercapitalist discourses and the poetic and rhetorical mechanisms by which Christian rappers attempt to inspire change in listeners' lives. The conclusion to the dissertation analyzes the applied research component, the hip-hop album *Scholar*, which uses poetic structures and tropes to explore political, philosophical and sociological concepts, with the goal of inspiring listeners to contemplate or examine certain assumptions and beliefs that they may hold, in the tradition of committed literature.

In 1984, the first widely published works of academic hip-hop criticism emerged in David Toop's *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop* and Steven Hager's *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti*.⁴ While these early works were understandably fixated on hip-hop's marginal cultural status, the scholarly study of hip-hop rapidly developed, with Michael Eric Dyson, Tricia Rose, Mark Anthony Neal, Todd Boyd, and Jeff Chang rising to lead a generation of academics through detailed cultural and historical analyses of hip-hop culture. Numerous essay collections also advanced more specific areas of study within hip-hop, including race, gender, aesthetics, and non-US rap.⁵ This growth of scholarship in the domains of literary and cultural hip-hop criticism has been subsequently mirrored by researchers and hip-hop practitioners in other academic fields. As hip-hop educators Marc Lamont Hill, Heather Day, Floyd D. Beachum and Carlos R. McCray have documented, the use of hip-hop in

educational and therapeutic settings has received increased attention and support since early studies in culturally relevant pedagogy in the 1990s.⁶ Both Carol Lee's quantitative experiments on using culturally relevant vernacular texts to teach literary interpretive skills and Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay's respective qualitative works developing the theory and practice of culturally responsive teaching have demonstrated the power and potential of hip-hop pedagogy to 'contribute to student confidence, curricular engagement, and teacher-student relationships'.⁷ Within the realm of Creative Arts Therapies, Don Elligan and Nakeyshaey M. Tillie-Allen have developed curricula for Hip-Hop Therapy with the goal of helping clients express themselves and negotiate their experiences, relationships, trauma and environments.⁸

Within the emerging field of hip-hop linguistics, H. Samy Alim has usefully explored the linguistic analytical pedigree of hip-hop and 'Hip Hop Nation Language'.⁹ Citing linguistic anthropology as a perspective 'which views language as social practice and as a tool for constructing one's identity', Alim examines religious praxis and consciousness as counter-hegemonic discourse in relation to Islam and hip-hop culture.¹⁰ In the same way that Alim traces the development of Islamic content and beliefs within hip-hop culture as a method of creating a nation-consciousness—moving 'from practical to discursive consciousness', from '*talkin* about it, to *bein* about it'—I examine the performance of Christian rappers in the context of religious praxis and hip-hop culture.¹¹ By analyzing the form and function of Christian rap, I also build on the research that Sandra Barnes and Anthony Pinn have respectively published on the development of Christian rap within church communities and the role of multi-faith spirituality in hip-hop culture.¹² While keeping these sociological and theological critiques in mind, I combine literary criticism and cultural studies to examine the linguistic choices Christian rappers make to convey their messages through hip-hop. Although much of the underground hip-

hop I had initially studied for the dissertation was oppositional and anti-mainstream, rappers rarely presented a comprehensive set of positive alternatives in the raps.¹³

Broadening my search, I found that US Christian rap contained more coherent and comprehensive counter-narratives to mainstream hip-hop and hypercapitalist discourses than did underground rap. The desire to connect research and praxis led me to examine the mechanisms by which Christian rappers connect language, identity, and action.

From a historical perspective within hip-hop culture, Christian rap falls into the tradition of socially conscious or ‘message’ rap, which Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel are credited with pioneering on their 1982 song ‘The Message’.¹⁴ As critical hip-hop authors Marcus Reeves, Ernest Allen, Jr., Bakari Kitwana, Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar and S. Craig Watkins detail in their respective works, the context and content of message rap derive from numerous sources, including the Black Power movement, the Nation of Islam (and its Five Percenter off-shoot), Afrocentrism, the Harlem Renaissance and countercultural spoken word artists and poets of the 1960s and 70s like Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets.¹⁵ Message rap has traditionally addressed problems of urban decay, drug use, HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, violence, police brutality, racism, mass incarceration and political corruption.¹⁶ The boundaries between message rap and other mainstream forms are fluid, in the sense that elements of social critique are often contained in otherwise materialistic, violent or misogynistic songs.

This complexity of the art form is exemplified in Lil’ Wayne’s ‘Lollipop’ remix featuring Kanye West and Static Major, in which Lil’ Wayne and Kanye spend three verses extolling their general greatness, sexual prowess and monetary worth before Lil’ Wayne’s clever closer on the final verse: ‘Safe sex is great sex, better wear a latex / 'cause you don't want that late text, that “I think I'm late x”’.¹⁷ Having taken the listener on a journey of objectification and hedonism, Lil’ Wayne surprisingly takes the opportunity to

impart basic sexual education in his final lines when he recommends wearing a condom and cautions against unintended pregnancy. Structurally, Lil' Wayne conveys a degree of realism and immediacy by including contemporary communication practices (texting) and their accompanying signifiers ('x' is a common text sign-off). In these lines, Lil' Wayne also connects the verbal delivery of his rap with a specifically contemporary textual phrasing, thereby highlighting the oral tradition's coexistence with textual technological developments, as well as the continuing evolution of language and the vernacular.

Also expressing cogent social commentary in the midst of otherwise reductive lyrics in 'Ignorant Shit' featuring Beanie Sigel, Jay-Z offers a broader cultural critique of mediated images of violence in American society when he says, '*Scarface* the movie did more than Scarface the rapper to me', indicating that cinematic portrayals of violence and crime were more influential in his life than similar musical depictions. This critique was specifically responding to the Don Imus scandal in which Imus, a US radio host, called the Rutgers women's basketball team 'some nappy-headed hoes'.¹⁸ The subsequent news media discussion focused on whether similarly racist and misogynistic rap lyrics were to blame for societal ills. Tellingly, Jay-Z responded to these claims that art is negatively deterministic in his subsequent line, 'Still that ain't the blame for all the shit that's happened to me'.¹⁹ Ultimately, the material and economic realities of Jay-Z's upbringing informed his early drug-dealing choices more than the media that he consumed.²⁰

Despite much of the negativity in mainstream hip-hop, the conscious content of message rap still occasionally appears in mainstream hip-hop through metaphor, as Jay-Z notes: 'I love metaphors, and for me hustling is the ultimate metaphor for the basic human struggles: the struggle to survive and resist, the struggle to win and to make sense of it all.'²¹ The artistic representation of hustling provides an imagined connection between the listener and the lived experience the rapper describes, and this narrative process can

provide entertainment, education and occasionally enlightenment as well. The mechanism for this connection is analogy, defined in the OED as ‘Correlation, harmony, agreement; correspondence or adaptation of one thing to another’ and ‘A figure of speech involving a comparison; a simile, a metaphor.’ As Jay-Z elaborates, ‘This is why the hustler’s story—through hip-hop—has connected with a global audience. The deeper we get into those sidewalk cracks and into the mind of the young hustler trying to find his fortune there, the closer we get to the ultimate human story, *the story of struggle*, which is what defines us all.’²² This story of struggle is the foundation of analogy. The challenge of creating connections between dissimilar objects or concepts and the struggle to understand and decipher these links is the hard work of poetry. The hustler struggles with dangerous and unpredictable working conditions, while the rapper struggles with language to elevate, convey or demystify experiences which he or she has lived or imagined. The active listener struggles to appreciate the depth of meaning and connection contained within these stories and experiences and to apply them to his or her own life or experiences. These relationships are not inherently noble, and it must be noted that a hustler is frequently a commodifier, part-businessman, part-drug dealer. The struggle may be framed in terms of success and survival, but those terms have monetary and mortal implications beyond an abstract idea of resistance or rebellion. People die, and drugs debilitate communities. The problematic environmental and political factors which support this lifestyle are also inextricable from the existence of the hustler. Yet, the aspirational and self-determined portrayals of the hustler undeniably resonate with youth across the world, as the global spread of hip-hop has indicated. The hustler paradoxically struggles both to survive by hustling and to escape the hustle, as hustling rarely provides a retirement plan other than prison or death.

When writing about contemporary US black culture, Tricia Rose contends that the largely metaphorical lyrics that form rap music are part of ‘the long history of black cultural subversion and social critique in music and performance’, a history which includes ‘slave dances, blues lyrics, Mardi Gras parades, Jamaican patois, toasts, and signifying’ which ‘all carry the pleasure and ingenuity of disguised criticism of the powerful.’²³ These cultural expressions have been a form of resistance when social and political oppression reduced or removed political and social agency within communities. Adam Krims cautions against focusing exclusively on cultural struggle without examining ‘how changes in the objective relations of production themselves connect to musical practice and experience.’²⁴ Rather than a caricature of Marxism that argues cultural expression is a product of economic determinism, Krims argues that cultural forms and economic conditions exist in a hermeneutic relationship. Hip-hop culture is an example of this relationship, as the initial means of production were hybridized adaptations of existing equipment (e.g. turntables and mixers) and previously recorded music (sampled records). Drawing from the surrounding environment, even to the point of plugging in sound systems to light posts in the New York parks, DJs and rappers produced a new-old form of music which, in turn, spawned an economically viable industry of hip-hop music and culture. The relationship continued to evolve as technology developed further (e.g. with Roland / Oberheim DMX drum machines and MPC samplers), and the sonic characteristics of the music followed. This cultural *bricolage*, ‘creation from a diverse range of materials or sources’, is an assemblage of found objects used to explore profound subjects.²⁵

The way these hermeneutic relationships evolved textually is equally complex, as cultural and sonic allusions, as well as direct sampling, led to highly intertextual lyricism. From rap’s beginning, phrases and tropes have been echoed, critiqued and remixed. A common locus for this activity is within rap battles, as MCs alter and counter each other’s

lines in an effort to prove lyrical superiority. For example, in a famous ‘beef’ that began in 1998 between Canibus and LL Cool J, Canibus issued the line, ‘Mad at me cause I kick that shit real niggaz feel / while 99 percent of your fans wear high heels’, humorously highlighting the perception that LL Cool J is a ‘ladies’ man’ who lacks street cred.²⁶ LL Cool J responded with a single entitled ‘The Ripper Strikes Back’ which featured the rebuttal, ‘Ask Canibus, he ain’t understandin’ this / ‘cause 99 percent of his fans don’t exist’.²⁷ This ‘flip’, as such lyrical reversals are called in hip-hop, explains LL Cool J’s proposition that the vast majority of Canibus’s fans are imaginary. The rappers each use the respective lines to critique a central component of their opponent’s identity, whether the perceived weakness of LL Cool J’s penchant for performing romantic songs or Canibus’s perceived obscurity due to lukewarm record sales. Eminem, however, takes the theme and expresses his own surreal lyrical identity when he says, ‘99 percent of aliens prefer earth’ in a freestyle on Sway and King Tech’s ‘Wake Up Show’.²⁸ With a single flip, Eminem alludes to a classic rap beef, subtly references his own on-going rap battle with Canibus and presents his other-worldly artistic personality by finishing the line: ‘so I’m here to rule the planet, starting with your turf’.²⁹ The sonic territorialism of rap is a metaphoric landscape where conflict and celebration co-exist and collaborate.

Although the combative nature of battle rap may seem to be little more than creative braggadocio and status competition, these linguistic acts are also public displays of language mastery and occasionally, subversion. The aggressive and hypermasculine battle rap competitions may seem highly regressive, but this artistic violence initially emerged as an alternative to physical violence. In the early 1970s in New York, hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa was inspired by the mediatized anti-colonial struggle of the 1964 film *Zulu*, and through historical self-identification, he eventually decided to form a Zulu Nation of his own which would embody the black solidarity that he witnessed in the

film.³⁰ As an alternative to the commodification of identity, Bambaataa represents a historicization of identity that provided an alternative to gang violence by appealing to a higher community self-definition of respect and celebration. By channeling the competitive energy of rival gangs into dance parties (with gangs even participating in rival ‘War Chants’), Bambaataa partially defused the destructive gang culture in New York during the late 1970s and early 80s. Rather than being merely oppositional, Bambaataa created a positive alternative to violent gang life by shifting the conceptual and historical understanding of his Zulu Nation organization away from gang culture and towards ‘Peace, Love, Unity and Having Fun’.³¹ The war cries of gangs like ‘Savage Skulls’, ‘Savage Nomads’ and ‘Black Spades’ transformed into ‘Zulu!’ as Bambaataa created a new mythology by reinventing the metaphors that the groups used to define themselves.³² While some factions within Bambaataa’s prior collective called the Bronx River Organization were resistant (including a splinter group of stick-up kids* who became known as the Gestapos), the possibilities for constructive redefinition of communal identity clearly formed the foundation of hip-hop culture.³³

The inherent performative nature of hip-hop also defines the context of identity formation by making it an inherently public act. As Tricia Rose explains:

Rap’s resistive transcripts are articulated and acted out in both hidden and public domains, making them highly visible, yet difficult to contain and confine. So, for example, even though Public Enemy know pouring it on in metaphor is nothing new, what makes them “prophets of rage with a difference” is their ability to retain the mass-mediated spotlight on the popular cultural stage and at the same time function as a voice of social critique and criticism. The frontier between public and hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate groups.³⁴

Rather than hindering its effectiveness, the popularity of hip-hop allows hip-hop practitioners to challenge political norms and provides a performative voice for individuals

* Youth who terrorize neighborhoods by committing armed robbery and assault. Stick-up kids are notably depicted in M.O.P.’s emblematic stick-up anthem ‘Ante Up’ (2000).

who may otherwise feel unheard or unable to express their experiences. Furthermore, as Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* demonstrates, hip-hop culture can provide a worldview and frame of reference for creating identities and negotiating boundaries. Although these practices are fraught with the contradictions of hip-hop culture itself (e.g. hypermaterialism and hypermasculinity manifested in violence, misogyny and homophobia), Malkani uses humor and nuanced character construction in his novel to explore the complex nexus of race, class and gender in London-based postcolonial Southeast Asian British boys. Through close readings of the language and hip-hop allusions of *Londonstani*, I argue that 'authenticity' and group identities are social constructs that exist within fluid boundaries and relationships. As Walter Benjamin notes about contemporary expressions of historical events and identities, 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'³⁵ These moments of danger appear whenever boundaries are contested between members (whether voluntary or otherwise) of a given social, ethnic or political group. Performances of identity such as speech and dress are the articulations by which community members signify (or reject) affiliation, and as such these acts are more heavily policed for 'authenticity', as the desi boys in *Londonstani* repeatedly demonstrate by their obsessive focus on 'proper' language and physical appearance.

Practice as Research

Over the past nine years, I have witnessed these concepts and ideas in action through my international travels and workshops on hip-hop culture in various classrooms in the UK, US, France and Morocco. Once exposed to cultural critiques that apply to their lives, students and young people begin to engage in critical analysis of the mediated concepts and messages that they consume on a daily basis, in addition to producing their own art to

respond to their lived experiences.³⁶ One of the most rewarding parts of working in these educational environments is the self-reflection and personal development that students undertake, and the way that teachers also adjust their perceptions and expectations of students is equally intriguing. After my hip-hop workshop at Minster College on the Isle of Sheppey in southeastern England, arts teacher Ms. Kingston explained that certain students with behavioral or learning disabilities were more engaged in the classroom than she had seen them be during the entire year. At Williamsburg Prep in Brooklyn, New York (formerly Eli Whitney High School, Jay-Z's alma mater), Teach For America educator Mr. Fredericks told me how one of his students who was underperforming approached Mr. Fredericks after my hip-hop workshop and asked if he could write a rap for his next writing assignment.³⁷ The student's rap was a poignant and moving account of his efforts to avoid gangs and violence, to achieve academically, and to recognize the struggles of others in his community.³⁸ I have witnessed students who had difficulties with verbal articulation become confident performers when they learn how to beatbox, and even normally reticent three-year-old children with severe mental and physical disabilities come alive when they experience beatboxing for the first time. At the Children's Center for the Physically Handicapped in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, one teacher told me that she had not seen a particular child smile in three months, but this child's face lit up when we started beatboxing together.

In addition to self-expression, education and therapy, contemporary youth are actively employing hip-hop for political and social activism. I have rapped and beatboxed with marginalized and disenfranchised youth on the streets of Paris and the shores of Morocco and have seen the microphone become megaphone. While I was researching contemporary Moroccan music and youth identity at a traditional music festival in Essouira, Morocco, a sixteen-year-old rapper named Lord TNT explained to me that he

performed hip-hop music because it was the only way that his voice would be acknowledged in his community and his society. This young man from Casablanca detailed how political repression coupled with high unemployment produced an environment where direct public dissent was impossible for Moroccan youth. To express his plight, Lord TNT veiled his opinions in multilingual metaphors that his peers could understand: a postcolonial code of the streets. While I was doing research on hip-hop culture in Paris, rappers and youth activists explained how they express their frustrations about systemic inequality and police brutality through rhyme, and their social cries for justice became strikingly manifest during the French riots of 2005 and 2007. Even more recently, Tunisian rapper El Général (né Hamada Ben Amor) is widely credited with spreading revolutionary fervor online as North African political protests began in early 2011. When asked about his influences, El Général cites Tupac Shakur as inspiration: ‘The kind of rap Tupac used was revolutionary. So when I became a rapper I wasn’t looking for love. I was looking to rap for the good of the people.’³⁹ These examples highlight the impact that hip-hop culture has had on a personal and political level for youth across the world.

When contemplating the application of my research for the ‘practice’ component of this dissertation, Hannah Arendt’s declaredly simple interpretation of the concept of *praxis* came to mind: ‘What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.’⁴⁰ This call to self-reflective action is intrinsically linked to Arendt’s understanding of the relationship between speech and action: ‘speech is what makes man a political being.’⁴¹ Thus, as James T. Knauer notes, ‘Arendt distinguishes action both from behavior, which is the predictable and automatic obedience to norms, and from purely instrumental activity, which is merely putting into practice a preconceived plan.’⁴² The notion of a speech act – action through speech – is a creative endeavor that ideally

manifests as much self-reflection as it intends to provoke. The call to ‘think what we are doing’ also contains a deeper implicit message – to do what we are thinking. In addition to reflecting before taking action, there is an equal need for self-analysis to ensure that our actions correspond to our thoughts and beliefs. Rather than mere avoidance of hypocrisy, this consistency of conviction (if not of position) demands a hermeneutic interrelation of theory and practice. That is to say that a commitment to reflective action is more process-oriented than goal-oriented.

The constant reevaluation of thought and action based on experience reflects the evolutionary process of adaptation, which rapper/scholar Baba Brinkman eloquently summarizes in *The Rap Guide To Evolution* as ‘performance, feedback, revision’.⁴³ Note that ‘performance’ is the first action in this process, and Arendt’s emphasis on *praxis* over *theoria* and *poesis* (the latter two being Platonic/Aristotelian concepts related to theoretical and production-based knowledge, respectively) highlights the inherently biological nature of *praxis*, in that it is embodied in some way by the performer/speaker. Yet, Arendt cautions against a Nietzschean glorification of the biological and argues that:

so long as we talk in non-political, biological terms, the glorifiers of violence can appeal to the undeniable fact that in the household of nature destruction and creation are but two sides of the natural process, so that collective violent action, quite apart from its inherent attraction, may appear as natural a prerequisite for the collective life of mankind as the struggle for survival and violent death for continuing life in the animal kingdom.⁴⁴

As with *praxis* itself, the analogic uses of biology have no inherent moral coding, and thus a struggle exists within its analogic applications as much as between its objects, i.e. creative destruction exists as much between analogic mappings as within the actual evolutionary processes the analogies seek to describe. Lyrical imagery is named, contested and remixed. Musical samples are recorded, re-recorded, chopped, pitched, re-sampled, layered and deconstructed. The content of these processes may vary, but the evolutionary form remains.

If silence is potentiality, speaking is the manifestation and declaration of being. Speaking also simultaneously acknowledges the existence of an Other, an audience. Reflecting on these perspectives of the speech act, the content of my dissertation and Arendt's understanding of *praxis*, I wrote, composed, produced, performed, mixed and mastered a hip-hop album entitled *Scholar* for the applied research component of this academic dissertation. *Scholar* contains ten tracks, each of which topically corresponds to a concept or area of the world I wanted to disclose (in the Sartrean tradition of committed literature). The album portrays the connections between language, identity and agency that I explore in the academic dissertation. As I rap in 'Overflow', 'Yeah, you know I'm multiple': I wanted this multiplicity to be evident throughout the album, blurring the lines between traditional conceptions of the hustling rapper as a 'man of action' and the pensive scholar as a 'man of contemplation' who is not socially or politically engaged.⁴⁵ The performance of identity on *Scholar* is expressive and instructive, with entertainment and education being the two primary goals. While still engaging in thoughtful discourse, I wanted to resist the notion that scholarship is exclusively the purview of the Academy, which is why the language use throughout the album ranges from street slang and hip-hop references to abstract concepts and literary allusions. This album is also the first non-pseudonymous collection I have published, and the shift from DJ Decryption (my most common pseudonym) to Blake Brandes feels like a public declaration of authorship and conviction that engages the discourses of authenticity which I explore in the dissertation. Comprehensive commentary on *Scholar* and its relation to the thesis appears in the conclusion of the dissertation.

In 2010, Jay-Z (and ghost writer dream hampton) released *Decoded*, a literary exploration of his autobiography, lyrics and hip-hop culture. Combining personal narrative with historical and critical analysis, *Decoded* provides an artistic template for *Scholar*,

which features lyrics thoroughly footnoted like Jay-Z's *Decoded*. Based on my desire to share the album with as many people as possible regardless of their financial situation, I am releasing *Scholar* online as a free download, complete with the footnoted lyrics and album art. I plan to use the album as a pedagogical tool in my classroom work with educational hip-hop workshops, and I hope that it will be useful to other teachers as well. By demonstrating the poetic capabilities of rap and hip-hop's compatibility with education, my aim is to foster discussions between students and teachers in a way that is relevant both to teachers' curricula and desired outcomes and to students' lived experiences and future goals. Beyond that, I can only hope to express truth, as I experience it, through art and the relationships in my life.

¹ Jay-Z. *Decoded*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010. p. 26.

² Watkins, S. Craig. *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005. pp. 2-3.

³ As David Herd notes, much like a rhyming Tea Party movement.

⁴ Toop, David. *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop*. Boston: South End Press, 1984; Hager, Steven. *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1984.

⁵ See for example: William Eric Perkins, ed. *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996; Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds. *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004; Gwendolyn D. Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham and Rachel Raimist, eds. *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*. Mira Loma, CA: Parker Publishing, LLC, 2007; Jeff Chang, ed. *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2006; Tony Mitchell, ed. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside The USA*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

⁶ See for example: Marc Lamont Hill. *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2009; Heather Day. "Hey Young World": Hip-Hop as a Tool for Educational and Rehabilitative Work with Youth'. (2009). *American Studies Honors Papers*. Paper 3. Online. Internet. 6 March 2011. Available WWW: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/americanstudieshp/3> ; Floyd D. Beachum and Carlos R. McCray. *Cultural Collision and Collusion: Reflections on Hip-Hop Culture*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2011.

⁷ Hill, p. 8. See also: Gloria Ladson-Billings. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994; Geneva Gay. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000.

⁸ Elligan, Don. *Rap Therapy: A Practical Guide for Communicating with Youth and Young Adults Through Rap Music*. New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 2004; Nakeyshaey M. Tillie Allen. 'Exploring Hip-Hop Therapy with High-Risk Youth'. *Praxis*. Vol. 5. Fall 2005. pp. 30-35.

⁹ Alim, H. Samy. *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006. p. 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 16, 22.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 22.

¹² Barnes, Sandra L. 'Religion and Rap Music: An Analysis of Black Church Usage'. *Review of Religious Research*. Vol. 49, No. 3. March 2008. pp. 319-338; Anthony Pinn, ed. *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

¹³ Notable exceptions (though sometimes problematic in other ways, e.g. occasionally violent or aggressively homophobic) would include Immortal Technique, KRS-One and Shad. More to the point, even rappers who occasionally have lines or even full songs that are positive or progressive (such as Talib Kweli and Common) do not offer comprehensive alternatives throughout the majority of their work. This is not to diminish the quality or impact of their work – it is only an observation on the relational (i.e. oppositional) tendencies in their raps.

¹⁴ Marcus Reeves observes that ‘Hard Times’, released by Kurtis Blow in 1980 and covered by Run-D.M.C. in 1984, was first notable socio-political rap song. While ‘Hard Times’ does present a general commentary on the unpleasantness of poverty and unemployment, ‘The Message’ offers a more personal and detailed narrative and cautionary tale of life in the ghetto, which I argue is closer to the form that ‘message rap’ has taken since 1982. Reeves elaborates: ‘A blunt, unflinching commentary on the state of black urban America, “The Message” instantaneously changed the nature of rap music from egocentric party music to a powerful sociopolitical vehicle for speaking the realities of black America. The MC expanded his role from dance floor mouthpiece to prophet of the streets, the musical messenger of the generation after black power.’ See Marcus Reeves. *Somebody SCREAM! : Rap Music’s Rise to Prominence in the Aftermath of Black Power*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2008. pp. 26-27, 36. For an account of how ‘The Message’ was written and composed, see Waktins, pp. 20-21.

¹⁵ See *Ibid*. See also: Ernest Allen, Jr. ‘Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap’. *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Ed. William Eric Perkins. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. pp. 159-181; Bakari Kitwana. ‘The Challenge of Rap Music from Cultural Movement to Political Power’. *That’s the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. pp. 341-350; Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar. *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2007.

¹⁶ Forman, Murray. *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.

¹⁷ Lil’ Wayne. ‘Lollipop Remix’. *Lollipop Remix*. Cash Money Records, 2008. CD.

¹⁸ Faber, Judy. ‘CBS Fires Don Imus Over Racial Slur’. *CBS News*. 12 April 2007. Online. Internet. Available WWW: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/04/12/national/main2675273.shtml>

¹⁹ Jay-Z. *Decoded*. p. 62. While it seems like the line should read, ‘Still that ain’t TO blame for all shit that’s happened to me,’ the phrasing is written again as ‘the blame’ several lines later, so I defer to the author.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 13-19.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 18.

²² *Ibid*, p. 19.

²³ Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994. p. 99.

²⁴ Krims, Adam. *Music and Urban Geography*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007. p. 153.

²⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*. Third edition, March 2005. Online version, March 2011.

²⁶ Canibus. ‘Second Round K.O.’ *Can-I-Bus*. Universal Records, 1998. CD.

²⁷ LL Cool J. ‘The Ripper Strikes Back’. *The Ripper Strikes Back*. Def Jam Records, 1998.

²⁸ Eminem. ‘Peace to Thirstin Howl Freestyle’. Online video. Internet. 6 March 2011. Available WWW: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qs8mqrlisZA>

²⁹ *Ibid*.

³⁰ Chang, Jeff. *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. Intro. DJ Kool Herc. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005. p. 94.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 105.

³² *Ibid*, pp. 102-107.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ Rose, p. 101

³⁵ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968. p. 257.

³⁶ According to the United Nations General Assembly, ‘youth’ are individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. This delineation is not meant to imply that children (14 years old and younger) cannot comprehend or critically engage hip-hop culture. In fact, my hip-hop workshops have frequently indicated that children often benefit the most from critical thinking and age-appropriate discussions about hip-hop culture, since they often absorb it without substantial critical mediation. See: United Nations. General Assembly. A/36/215 and Resolution 36/28, 1981.

³⁷ A narrative account of my hip-hop workshop with Mr. Fredericks’ class is attached as ‘Appendix A’.

³⁸ With permission from the student, his rap is attached as 'Appendix B'.

³⁹ Walt, Vivienne. 'El Général and the Rap Anthem of the Mideast Revolution'. *Time*. 15 February 2011. Online. Internet. Available WWW:

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2049456,00.html#ixzz1FwMAqfXy>

⁴⁰ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Knauer, James T. 'Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action'. *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 74, No. 3. September 1980. pp. 721-733.

⁴³ Brinkman, Baba. *The Rap Guide To Evolution*. Lit Fuse Records, 2010. CD. Brinkman makes an insightful analogic mapping of Darwinian evolutionary theory onto hip-hop culture while simultaneously using rap music to explain evolution.

⁴⁴ Arendt, Hannah. *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972. p. 172.

⁴⁵ The gender usage here is specific to me and not intended to be categorical, as there are obviously numerous female rappers and scholars.

Chapter 1

Form and Flow: The Role of Analogy in American Hip-Hop

At its most elemental level, hip hop is a product of post-civil rights era America, a set of cultural forms originally nurtured by African-American, Caribbean-American, and Latin American youth in and around New York in the '70s. Its most popular vehicle for expression has been music, though dance, painting, fashion, video, crime, and commerce are also its playing fields. It's a postmodern art in that it shamelessly raids older forms of pop culture—kung fu movies, chitlin' circuit comedy, '70s funk, and other equally disparate sources—and reshapes the material to fit the personality of an individual artist and the taste of the times.

- Nelson George, *Hip Hop America*

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience... in the mind of the poet, these experiences are always forming new wholes.

- T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets'

From its inception, hip-hop has been a culture of hybridity that selects elements from different cultures, art forms, and time periods only to recontextualize them in a local setting. Through this hybridity, hip-hop is simultaneously local, regional, national, and global. Samples of Middle Eastern sitars blend with Latin American flutes while a Jamaica-born New York rapper named Canibus rhymes about enlisting in the United States army to fight in Iraq. In 1974, West Bronx DJ Afrika Bambaataa founds the Afrocentric cultural organization known as the Zulu Nation and, eight years later, mixes German techno with American funk to produce the Electro-Funk masterpiece 'Planet Rock.' A contingent of underground MCs led by Peruvian-American rapper Immortal Technique traces the path of cocaine from the fields of Peru to the ghettos of the United States on 'Peruvian Cocaine' (a geographic journey), and New York MC Nas recounts a tale of street violence in reverse on 'Rewind' (a temporal journey). All of these examples demonstrate the vast spatial and temporal span of hip-hop and the manner in which unexpected connections between cultures and time periods can produce works of art that

are meaningful and enlightening. Analogy—a figure of speech that involves a comparison—functions like the artists in these examples: it brings together elements from different domains in order to create new meanings for its audience.

Although analogy is the most prevalent figure of speech in hip-hop lyrics, it is also an effective tool with which to understand hip-hop culture. Since analogy functions similarly to hip-hop, the study of analogy in conjunction with hip-hop is a useful undertaking to enhance one's understanding of both subjects. The conceptual and structural framework of analogy clarifies the postmodern tendencies of hip-hop culture by providing an organizational schema through which to access hip-hop music. Occasionally, academics in various disciplines comment that they do not understand hip-hop culture, and what they have seen of it in the mainstream media has disturbed them with violent, materialistic, and hyper-sexualized images.¹ Although these negative representations are indeed one element of hip-hop culture, they do not portray hip-hop in its entirety. The lack of public awareness of alternative forms of hip-hop and a corresponding lack of nuanced comprehension of hip-hop culture warrants a serious academic study that bridges the gap between the practice of hip-hop and an academic field of theory. To achieve this goal, this chapter will examine the historical background of hip-hop culture, the linguistic structure of analogy, the ways in which rappers use analogy in hip-hop music and ultimately, the ways in which analogy mirrors and explains hip-hop culture. By using examples from American rap songs, this study will incorporate the two subjects—hip-hop and analogy—into its own structure in addition to exploring the links between them. While this practice reveals the richness and diversity of hip-hop lyrics, it also highlights the academic utility of the lyrics. If hip-hop culture were only focused on 'exaggerated manhood, gang culture, and romantic visions of gunslinging drug dealers,' as *New York Times* columnist David

Brooks claims, then it would clearly be incapable of the articulate and nuanced political, social, and artistic expression that these examples will demonstrate.²

Because hip-hop has been a cultural force since the early 1970s, any attempt to summarize its massive impact on American and global culture is bound to omit significant information, but a brief overview will at least contextualize the subsequent discussion of hip-hop and analogy for readers who may not be familiar with the history of hip-hop. A traditional definition of hip-hop is ‘a cultural movement that includes four principal elements: rapping, DJ-ing, breakdancing, and graffiti.’³ Rapping is a form of rhythmic verbal expression that is often rhymed over an instrumental track called a beat. DJ-ing is the art of mixing two or more songs (originally on vinyl records) to produce a new song from their components. Breakdancing is a form of dance that combines gymnastic movements with stylings of martial arts, and graffiti is the marking of public spaces with spray-paint or markers, usually with artistic or territorial aims. Because ‘rap’ is the lyrical form of hip-hop music, the terms ‘rap music’ and ‘rap lyrics’ will be used henceforth to refer to the text of hip-hop songs.

Originating with Jamaican dancehall toasting, where DJs (disc jockeys) spoke and rhymed over records at parties, hip-hop took root during the 1970s in New York City at block parties, community gatherings where MCs (Masters of Ceremonies) would introduce songs that the DJ played and keep the crowd engaged with call-and-response chants and witty comments. Eventually, this entertainment on the microphone began to take the form of refrains and simple verses that were often humorous in nature. As rap music grew in urban New York, the other elements of hip-hop like graffiti and breakdancing developed with it, and eventually members of street gangs who had been involved in crime turned to hip-hop as a more positive way of resolving differences and finding a sense of community. Based on community celebration and solidarity, the origins of hip-hop were social,

political and artistic, long before the shift towards more nihilistic expressions of hip-hop culture like gangsta rap took hold.

The 1980s witnessed the rise of ‘message rap’ as rappers’ vocal delivery and rhyme schemes (often called the rappers’ ‘flow’) became increasingly complex. Although early rap records were party-oriented in their subject matter, rappers began to adopt more socially conscious lyrics as inner city life in the United States became increasingly dangerous and challenging with the rise of ‘crack’ cocaine, a drug that decimated many poor urban communities. An accompanying rise in crime and police brutality spawned another genre of rap in the late 1980s known as ‘gangsta rap.’ Much criticism has been leveled at gangsta rappers for their violent, misogynistic and materialistic lyrics (most famously in the form of civil rights activist C. Dolores Tucker’s campaigns and protests against gangsta rap throughout the 1990s), but these critiques are complicated by the sporadic political and existential expressions of hopelessness and rage that appear in the lyrics. In terms of marketing, American hip-hop culture gained national and international popularity via increasingly famous and commercially distributed artists (like Run-D.M.C., LL Cool J, Beastie Boys, Public Enemy and N.W.A.) and films (like *Wild Style*, *Breakin’*, *Krush Groove* and *Beat Street*) during the 1980s.

In the 1990s, rap music reached mainstream radio and overtook rock & roll as the most popular genre of music among young people in the United States.⁴ Stylistically, rap music diversified into numerous sub-genres, and the increasing regionalization of hip-hop spawned an ‘East Coast versus West Coast’ lyrical war that ended in the murder of two rappers, Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. A distinct separation also arose between ‘mainstream’ rappers like Master P and Puff Daddy and ‘underground’ rappers like Freestyle Fellowship and Ugly Duckling, the underground rappers defining themselves by their unwillingness or inability to adopt a ‘pop’ aesthetic that became known as ‘selling

out.’ Few rappers were able to navigate this binary division successfully, but those who did, such as Jay-Z, Outkast, Lil’ Wayne and Eminem, received both commercial rewards and critical acclaim. Since the 1986 Run-D.M.C. cover of Aerosmith’s ‘Walk This Way’, the fan base of mainstream hip-hop has been predominantly comprised of white teenagers, and this trend exploded in the 1990s as rap became increasingly popular in suburban areas.⁵ Similarly, this era saw the rise of Eminem as the first credible and commercially viable Caucasian rapper since the Beastie Boys and 3rd Bass in the late 1980s and early 90s, in what was and still is a predominantly African-American and Latino art form in the United States.

Since the year 2000, two sub-genres of rap music have come to dominate the airwaves of commercial radio and video stations: ‘bling’ and ‘crunk’ rap. The term ‘bling bling’ refers to sparkling jewelry and a style of rap music that glorifies material wealth and ostentatious spending. The term ‘crunk’ identifies a sub-genre of rap songs that feature minimalistic instrumentation and raucous party chants that encourage intoxication and hedonistic revelry. In response to the popularity of these genres, a backlash arose among many underground rappers who criticized these sub-genres as perpetuating stereotypes and cycles of poverty in urban communities.⁶ The rise of Christian rap during this decade is also attributed to rap audiences searching for more meaningful lyrics and positive messages, although the widespread permeation of hip-hop music was arguably equally responsible for its increased popularity among young in various cultural contexts.⁷ On a cultural front, mainstream media images of ‘hip-hop style’ asserted the labels ‘young, black, and urban’ to be fashionable, and this marketing strategy has resulted in the dominance of hip-hop as a stylistic trend for young consumers.⁸

Throughout the decades of change, one constant in rap music has been the presence of multifaceted analogy. In fact, in 1979 the first commercial hit rap song ‘Rapper’s

Delight' by the Sugar Hill Gang featured an entire verse of similes describing the (hyperbolic) impossibility of a great beat existing without the Sugar Hill Gang's involvement:

Like a can of beer that's sweeter than honey
 Like a millionaire that has no money
 Like a rainy day that is not wet
 Like a gamblin' fiend that does not bet
 Like Dracula without his fangs
 Like the boogie to the boogie without the boogie bang
 Like collard greens that don't taste good
 Like a tree that's not made out of wood
 Like goin' up and not comin' down
 Is just like the beat without the sound, our sound
 To the beat beat, ya do the freak
 Everybody just rock and dance to the beat

Although these similes are light-hearted and humorous, hip-hop represents a larger project to reclaim language of all types for a variety of purposes ranging from the revolutionary to the irreverent. While no single vision or revolutionary mission exists (and because many of its actors hold contradictory views), the common element that ties rappers of all types together is their manipulation of language. Whether they are advocating for social justice or advertising for alcoholic beverages, rap lyrics are a key component in hip-hop music because vocal melody is often secondary to a rapper's style of delivery (flow) and message. To put it simply, rap is usually rapped, spoken, shouted—not sung.⁹ In his book *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, Russell A. Potter identifies the sociological context for this study of hip-hop and analogy by framing the discussion in a linguistic discourse:

To return to language: whatever the spectacular politics of hip-hop, its most significant and continuing incursion is conducted within *language*—which is, conversely, the most potent and widely-dispersed medium of social control for the comfortable classes and their political sideshows. **If there is a field in which hip-hop's revolution will be fought, it will be first and foremost that of language, a fact which is underlined by the recurrent metaphoric mixture of rappers' own technologies (microphones, pencils, and tongues) with those of armed struggle (guns, hand grenades, artillery) [emphasis added].** Here, also, is a particular crossroads at which the linguistic and political theories of

postmodernism intersect with the theory and practice of hip-hop. Specifically, given the Signifyin(g) operations which constitute the core of hip-hop practice, the question must be asked: [...] Can linguistics provide a kind of model for the tactics and effectivity of the kind of cultural resistance staged by hip-hop?¹⁰

The answer to this question is a resounding ‘Yes!’ Hip-hop culture has a strong anti-authoritarian streak that pervades every element of it, and linguistics is a crucial battlefield where racial and class stereotypes and hegemonies are confronted, overthrown, and occasionally reinforced. In the earliest conceptions of Western philosophy, Aristotle recognizes both the power of metaphor and language as a site of social conflict when he argues that ‘the greatest thing, by far, is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt; and it is also a sign of genius.’¹¹ Despite this arguably elitist praise for skilled wordsmiths, Aristotle still has a vested interest in maintaining the political status quo through restrictions on language: ‘[Aristotle] seems to suggest in a great variety of ways that “slaves” must speak “plainly” before their masters, and thus abstain from the “genius” of metaphor. He explicitly repeats that “it is not quite appropriate that fine language should be used by a slave.”’¹² Modern attempts to discredit the literary and poetic value of rap lyrics are an exercise in this type of social control. By using complex linguistic constructions, rappers fight racial and class stereotypes that are deeply rooted in the history of Western civilization. Analogies play a central role in this struggle because they allow for political and social commentary that is associative and referential rather than being explicitly declarative. Furthermore, they provide a familiar structure in which to posit revolutionary ideas or language. In the same way that Aesop and La Fontaine critiqued the government and society in which they lived under the guise of innocuous fables, rappers often use seemingly egotistical analogies to critique their society. To understand these revolutionary tendencies and the ways in which they are employed, one must first analyze the linguistic structure of analogy before turning to a study of the ways in which rappers use analogies in their songs.

Although this study will deal with various tropes, a brief discussion of metaphor and simile is warranted since these two figures of speech are so widely represented in all types of rap music. The *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines a trope as ‘one of the two major divisions of figures of speech (the other being rhetorical figures); to trope is to turn or twist some word or phrase to make it mean something else. Metaphor, metonymy, personification, simile, and synecdoche are sometimes referred to as the principal tropes.’¹³ In common parlance, the term ‘analogy’ refers to both metaphor and simile, and for ease of classification, this study will use ‘analogy’ in that sense. Metaphor differs from simile in that a metaphor is ‘a figure of speech that directly associates two distinct things,’ whereas a simile ‘compares two distinct things by using words such as *like* or *as*.’¹⁴

Although literary critic I. A. Richards introduced a series of terms to describe the logical framework of tropes in his 1936 book *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Keith Holyoak and Paul Thagard’s *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought* provides more intuitive terminology for discussing the conceptual structure of analogies. The *source analog* (Richards’ *vehicle*) is ‘a known domain that a person already understands in terms of familiar patterns,’ and the *target analog* (Richards’ *tenor*) is ‘a relatively unfamiliar domain that the person is trying to understand.’¹⁵ More simply, the *source analog* is the familiar and understood situation or object to which the *target analog*, the new or unfamiliar material, is being compared. Furthermore, ‘analogical thinking is not “logical” in the sense of a logical deduction... yet the analogy is certainly not haphazard. In a loose sense, there is indeed some sort of logic—call it *analogic*—that constrains the way a person uses analogy to try to understand the target domain by seeing it in terms of the source domain.’¹⁶

To explore these concepts further, one can turn to the example of the rap battle. This particular ritual of hip-hop culture is useful for the discussion at hand because it contains the structural elements of an analogy in concrete terms. In a rap battle, ‘a lyrical war between or among rappers for prizes or bragging rights to see who is “the best,”’ rappers share a stage and alternate between insulting each other and boasting about their own skills.¹⁷ The goal of a rap battle is to elicit the most crowd applause through originality and skill in lyrics and vocal delivery. To achieve victory, battle rappers often employ analogies to create negative associations in the minds of the audience members. When one rapper is looking for something in the source domain (existing rappers familiar to the audience) to compare to the target domain (the rappers on the stage), he or she will choose a well-known rapper as the *source analog* to compare to his or her opponent, the *target analog*. By saying ‘you look like Flava Flav’s second-cousin’ to his opponent, one rapper takes an established rapper and cultural icon (Flava Flav, a disheveled member of the rap group Public Enemy) and uses that reference to demean his opponent’s status and abilities. Flava Flav is widely known as a clownish figure, and thus to diminish his already weak status with the relationship ‘second-cousin’ is to heighten the inferiority of the opponent.

To propose an analogy, or simply to understand one, requires taking what Holyoak and Thagard describe as a kind of mental leap:

Like a spark that jumps across a gap, an idea from the source analog is carried over to the target. The two analogs may initially seem unrelated, but the act of making an analogy creates new connections between them. Nothing ever guarantees that the target will actually behave the way the source suggests it should. [...] **Analogy must be recognized as a source of plausible conjectures, not irrefutable conclusions [emphasis added].**¹⁸

This formation of mental connections is the source of analogical power. Although the analogy may be partially appropriate, it may be more problematic than precise. Even though a battle rapper calls his or her opponent a ‘wack* rapper,’ it doesn’t make it so; however, it does plant that idea in the audience’s mind. This establishment of possible correlations between the source and target analogs reflects the creative quality of analogy: anyone can make any number of analogies between any subjects. The creator’s audience may reject or deconstruct the analogy, but that audience must consider the analogy to do so. Even if the analogy is rejected, it has still been created in a person’s mind and thus may have an impact on future reasoning processes.

In an analogy, ‘the source and target analogs might never have been explicitly associated before.’¹⁹ In fact, much of an analogy’s effect on the rap audience derives from its novelty. A rapper who creates a new analogy that surprises an audience has a deeper impact on the listeners because he or she draws new connections in their minds. If the listeners have previously heard the analogy, its impact is often diminished and unstimulating. Two interesting observations accompany this phenomenon. First, a person can listen to the same rapper make the analogy multiple times (i.e. each instance that the listener hears the song) without the impact of the analogy diminishing, but if another rapper uses the same analogy in a similar context, the listener has a tendency to discredit the effectiveness of the analogy. The exception to this trend occurs when the listener hears the same analogy in a different context that gives it new meaning or when the second rapper alters the analogy slightly to play off of the audience’s familiarity with the first rapper’s analogy (as in the LL Cool J – Canibus – Eminem intertextual battle cited in the introduction to this dissertation). The novel associations are an essential part of hip-hop culture, and the ubiquity of the word ‘fresh’ in hip-hop discourse reflects this appreciation

* Unskilled or bad

for innovation. In the context of the rap battle, a rapper's ability to select intelligent and humorous source analogs is highly valued. The novelty of these analogies is a prerequisite that must be met before the audience is willing to consider the analogy itself. The audience invests authorial authority in a rapper's lyrics (even if the rapper did not write the songs him- or herself) to the degree that another rapper who is perceived as plagiarizing lyrics is called a 'biter.'

Although subjective, audience response anchors this discussion because the ownership of the analogy is a perception rather than a physical reality. While one cannot normally observe audience reaction to an analogy except by interviewing individual listeners, video footage of rap battles and crowd reaction has become available on DVD and online video. Thus, an example of analogic authorial affirmation appears in the 2000 Blaze Battle in Chicago, where rappers Eyedea and Shells faced off in a final round of competition for a one minute and thirty second exchange of rhymes and punchlines. Eyedea effectively won the battle with his quatrain:

I'll grab the microphone and let you know I'm mad tight
 I'll let you know I could have been your Dad, right?
 Matter of fact, I was with your Mom last night:
 Matter of fact, I'm the reason your little sister's half-white.²⁰

Using his Caucasian ethnicity to his advantage, Eyedea combats Shells's previous attacks on his whiteness, (e.g. 'I'd be damned to lose against Vanilla Ice'; 'You're saying I'm wack because your man's white') with a metaphor that affirms Eyedea's ethnicity rather than ignoring it. Instead of denying his skin color as an identifying characteristic, Eyedea refutes Shells's critiques by implying that the visually recognizable quality of 'whiteness' would explain the skin color of Shells's (hypothetical) little sister.

The audience reaction to this quatrain was thunderous applause, but the crucial distinction between each rapper's skill appears in Shells's response to Eyedea. In an attempt to negate the power of Eyedea's lines, Shells states, 'I'm the reason that your

sister's half-black.' Both Eyedea and the audience express dislike for this blatant co-opting of Eyedea's original rhymes without any change or innovation aside from reversing the skin color reference. Recognizing authorship and authority has been a constant theme in rap music, from Rakim's claiming the authority to 'Move the Crowd' to Nas's celebrated 'Book of Rhymes.' This concern emerges in part from the historical legacy of African-American slavery in the United States. As a racial group that was systematically oppressed and subjugated, African-Americans had little official political power until the 1960s, and even then, the public image and voice of African-American communities was still largely dominated by corporate media representations. By claiming authorship and the power to address and affect audiences, rappers overturn this history of subaltern silencing. Almost every commercial rap CD has a multitude of egotistical claims about the self-proclaimed greatness of the rapper in areas ranging from purchasing power and sexual prowess to lyrical ability and stage presence. These claims are both a response to a racial history that denied the human worth of African-Americans and a reflection of the frequently aggressive nature of rap music as status competition. This existential cry was less crafted by market forces during the nascent stages of hip-hop when rappers more frequently came from underprivileged urban areas and wrote lyrics with less extensive corporate oversight.²¹ At that point in hip-hop history, a lack of economic affirmations of existence (i.e. conspicuous consumption as a marker of identity) necessitated an alternate declaration of existence. Rap music was this avenue, but concurrent with the increasing commercialization of the genre, more middle-class individuals began to rap. Although they were still marketed as 'street' artists, their affirmations of identity were not emerging from the original impoverished communities, even if they shared similar concerns or subject matter.²² The economic forces that motivated this transformation are complex, but the larger fact remains that identity issues are central to rap music in a way that differentiates it from other

musical genres by the sheer magnitude of self-referentiality. The rapper is front-and-center of his or her songs, and he or she is not going to allow the listener to forget it. This emphasis on authorial presence connects back to the high value of analogic innovation in hip-hop precisely because of the legacy of political silencing and cultural appropriation. In the rap battle, the audience is seeking authenticity and individual voice—one that actively and assertively throws off the legacy of oppression. These displays of intelligence are a direct response to a form of class warfare, as Gemma Fiumara notes, that is designed ‘to ensure that slaves remain constrained in such a stable way that the burden of their own submission does not weigh on the masters but it conveniently placed upon the slaves themselves; it is an essential pre-emptive condition that they be persuaded to speak plainly, to avoid fine language, and keep their minds confined with one vocabulary.’²³ Through original metaphors and similes, rappers affirm their creative power and personal authority in ways that oppose the historical linguistic constraints of slavery (such as forced illiteracy) and class warfare (such as the devaluation of Black Vernacular English).

One of the ways that rappers develop articulate analogies is through the creation of complex extended metaphors. Returning to the conceptual basis of tropes, one observes that the more elaborate an analogy is, the more characteristics of the source and target analogs align. Holyoak and Thagard describe *mapping* as ‘a systematic set of correspondences between the elements of the source and the target analogy.’²⁴ *Mapping* reflects a conceptual world in which extended metaphors create a complete system of connections, such as in the song ‘I Used To Love H.E.R.’ in which Chicago rapper Common creates an analogic system with a series of correspondences. For example, in Common’s song that details a fictional relationship with a nameless woman as a metaphor for his relationship with hip-hop music, the rapper employs the following mapping:

hip-hop = the woman

subject matter changes = her hair, dress, and behavioral alterations

(e.g. Afrocentric movement = braids, beads, medallions)

stylistic changes = different venues that she frequents

(e.g. club rap and party rap = the club and the house party)

This example of personification defines Common's life in relation to his love of music while simultaneously tracking the evolution of hip-hop as a musical genre. The specific qualities of the elements in the source and target analogs are important because Common often uses metonymy to connect elements of hip-hop culture with the music, such as the 'braids, beads, and medallions' line.²⁵ This mapping is an example of what Imani Perry calls a 'metonym created by the individual MC [that] represents the collective and signifies identity.'²⁶ The reference to Afrocentrism harkens back to the early years of hip-hop in the late 1970s and 80s, when artists such as Africa Bambaataa and the Native Tongues promoted an alternative, affirmative form of hip-hop based on the writings of authors such as Molefi Kete Asante and Cheikh Anta Diop. Supporters of this doctrine often wore 'braids, beads, and medallions' to symbolize their association with the Afrocentric movement, and thus external signifiers of culture accompanied the lyrical affirmations of Afrocentrism as well. Common aligns his individual experience with that of a collective movement, and this metonymic element of the mapping connects the communal, musical component (source analog) to the personal, cultural component (target analog). Obviously any analogic system has its limits (i.e. one does not need to assign correspondences for everything), but the more nuanced the analogy is, the more complete and reasonable it seems. Language is a process, not a system, and the mapping phenomenon is the process of generating a system. Analogy is an individual process, and each time an analogy is constructed, it is done so from a certain perspective with a certain background and set of

assumptions. The ‘same metaphor’ can entail a completely different set of factors and concurrences depending on its creator and interpreter.

Although no universal rules for creating or interpreting analogies exist, three factors constrain the formation of an analogy: similarity, structure, and purpose.²⁷ The fundamental conceptual base of an analogy is a comparison, and even analogies that contain negation are inherently depicting similarity. For example, Michigan rap duo Binary Star states, ‘For you cats and dogs without a muzzle, / barking in my face / that’ll carry no weight, like space shuttles’²⁸, and Immortal Technique raps, ‘I’ll choke your friends in front of you to prove that you’ve fallen off / And you won’t do shit about it, like the Church during the Holocaust.’²⁹ In the latter simile, the source analog ‘the Church’ is being compared to ‘you,’ presumably another rapper. The shared characteristic of the source and the target is inaction. Despite the fact that the linguistic structure of the comparison contains a negation, ‘you won’t do shit about it,’ the analogy is still expressing similarity, in the same way that space shuttles and ‘barking in my face’ ‘carry no weight’ in Binary Star’s simile.

Of course, these types of comparisons can be complex because analogies are capable of expressing *degrees* of similarity. For example, Immortal Technique claims that his detractors ‘will never stop me from blastin’ / You’re better off askin’ Ariel Sharon for compassion.’³⁰ Through this metaphor, Immortal Technique suggests that the chances of his ceasing to rap are less than those of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, noted for his aggressive military policies towards the Palestinians, showing compassion. This metaphor emphasizes the minimal degree of correspondence between the terms of the analogy because Ariel Sharon is not known for his gentle nature. Thus, by juxtaposing a person and an oxymoronic attribute, Immortal Technique effectively makes two comparisons: one between Ariel Sharon and compassion (dissimilar), and other between

the likelihood of his stopping rapping and of Sharon's demonstration of compassion (similar).

After similarity, the next basic constraint in the formation of an analogy is structure, or as Holyoak and Thagard describe it, 'consistent *structural parallels* between the roles in the source and the target domain.'³¹ The analogic enterprise is creative, and the structural correspondences between domains are the intellectual site of this innovation. In his introduction to *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, British critic David S. Miall conveys the ultimate goal of such an imaginative venture: 'the purpose of such metaphor is to help construct a conceptual world obeying its own internal laws of development.'³² Since language is normally used for communication of some sort, an analogy without coherent structure would serve little lasting function, aside from causing people to consider that very absurdity. Of course, an analogy can contain an extremely challenging structural association and still be communicative. One of the most celebrated examples of this phenomenon is French surrealist poet Paul Éluard's poem 'la terre est bleue comme une orange' ('The Earth is blue like an orange') from Éluard's 1929 collection *L'Amour la Poésie*. This simile sparked much praise and criticism for its richness and ambiguity, but structural correspondences still exist because color is a descriptive characteristic that applies to both the Earth and the orange. The figurative and associative connotations in this analogy may be diverse and diffuse, but even this surrealist simile contains structural parallels.

The final constraint on analogic formation is the purpose or reason for considering the analogy at all. Although this point may seem self-evident, it is the primary element of an analogy that distinguishes it from other linguistic constructions. Professor Donald Davidson draws attention to this distinction in his analysis of 'What Metaphors Mean':

No theory of metaphorical meaning or metaphorical truth can help explain how metaphor works. Metaphor runs on the same familiar linguistic tracks as the

plainest sentences do; this we saw from considering simile. **What distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use**—in this it is like assertion, hinting, lying, promising, or criticizing [emphasis added]. And the special use to which we put language in metaphor is not—cannot be—to “say something” special, no matter how indirectly. For a metaphor *says* only what shows on its face—usually a patent falsehood or an absurd truth. And this plain truth or falsehood needs no paraphrase—it is given in the literal meaning of the words.³³

In this statement, Davidson emphasizes that metaphors are no different from any other type of language in terms of their signifying function. Rather than being extraordinary linguistic devices, metaphors convey meaning in the same way that ‘ordinary’ language does. It is only through their use that the conceptual system of source and target analogs becomes expansive and powerful. Davidson goes on to give an example of this phenomenon by contrasting a lie and a metaphor:

What makes the difference between a lie and a metaphor is not a difference in the words used or what they mean (in any strict sense of meaning) but in **how the words are used** [emphasis added]. Using a sentence to tell a lie and using it to make a metaphor are, of course, totally different uses, so different that they do not interfere with one another, as say, acting and lying do. In lying, one must make an assertion so as to represent oneself as believing what one does not; in acting, assertion is excluded. Metaphor is careless to the difference. It can be an insult, and so be an assertion, to say to a man “You are a pig.” But no metaphor was involved when (let us suppose) Odysseus addressed the same words to his companions in Circe’s palace; a story, to be sure, and so no assertion—but the word, for once, was used literally of men.³⁴

From this example, one can surmise that metaphor is determined by the context in which the metaphor is used. This idea makes sense when one remembers that analogy formation is a creative enterprise, and thus the author’s and the reader’s imaginative *action* differentiates a metaphor from ordinary declarative and equational sentences. The ‘falsehood’ that Davidson references is usually what informs the reader (or audience) that a metaphor is present. Only when an equational sentence strikes the reader as literally untrue does the reader seek an alternate meaning. In Davidson’s ‘You are a pig’ example, one witnesses this phenomenon. Because most people do not consider themselves to be actual swine, the addressee would likely seek an alternate meaning to the statement. In

instances where the metaphor is literally true, the reader is usually aware that a metaphor is in use because of its odd context. For example, the statement ‘no man is an island’ is literally true, but it is unusual enough to cause the reader to seek a metaphorical meaning as well.

In contrast to metaphors, which tend to be literally false, similes are always superficially true. Any number of correspondences can be drawn between two things—again, it is the use and relevance of a simile that distinguish it from other language. Anything can be *like* anything else, but unless the author elaborates further, all the reader knows is that one thing is like another. This subtle distinction between simile and metaphor is important because simile expresses approximation while metaphor indicates equation. Similes typically require further elaboration, whereas metaphors are often initially comprehensible, at least in basic terms. A simile maintains an air of difference between the source and target analogs, but a metaphor declares a one-for-one relationship of equivalence. Metaphors are more conceptually aggressive because they assert exact equivalence, rather than suggesting it as similes do, and thereby definitively name both source and target analogs. In rap lyrics, the two tropes tend to be used interchangeably, but some rappers employ the terms with their specific qualities in mind.

Cognitive and Cultural Uses of Analogy

With the purpose of the creation of an analogy being at the heart of its formation, the reasons that rappers use analogies clearly warrant closer examination. For ease of organization, these reasons have been classified as either *cognitive purposes* or *cultural purposes*. Obviously, much overlap occurs between these categories, and the hermeneutic discourse between them aids in the exploration of both sets of purposes. Among the cognitive purposes for which rappers use analogies are:

- To add nuance and develop a quality or description
- To make an abstract concept concrete (create an image)
- To make something memorable
- To facilitate multiplicity of meaning (especially in wordplay)
- To condense meaning (e.g. allusion)

The cultural purposes for which rappers use analogies include:

- To make sociopolitical commentary
- To bridge disciplines
- To create humor
- To project ego
- To display intelligence and wit
- To intimidate or belittle opponents

Obviously these lists are not exhaustive, but they do encompass many of the most common uses for analogy in commercial and underground hip-hop.

The most general and frequent of the use for analogy is to develop or add nuance to a quality or description, such as when Big Boi from Atlanta rap group Outkast declares that when he is ‘on the microphone, you best to wear your sweater / cause I’m cooler than a polar bear’s toenails.’³⁵ This analogy contains a pun and a comparison that emphasizes the degree of Big Boi’s rapping skill. Rather than merely saying ‘I’m cool like a polar bear,’ Big Boi takes the comparison to the next level by choosing the coldest part of the polar bear’s anatomy as the source analog. The implication that Big Boi’s persona and lyrics are so ‘cold’[†] that they would cause the audience to don warmer apparel is a qualification of his lyrical abilities that combine sensory appeal with a specific image to make his boast memorable.

Big Boi’s statement from ‘ATLiens’ is an example of the way that rappers frequently use analogy to make an abstract concept concrete, often by creating an image. Another instance of this phenomenon appears when New Yorker Mr. Man raps, ‘I drop the greats like clumsy waiters drop plates.’³⁶ In this simile, Mr. Man takes the abstract concept of defeating great rappers and turns it into an amusing image that carries multiple

[†] Excellent

correspondences with the target analog. In addition to the idea that clumsy waiters presumably drop plates on the job (hence making the simile effective from a logical perspective), Mr. Man also posits the notion that he ‘drops the greats’ frequently because clumsy waiters presumably drop plates on a regular basis. Although he compares the actions of defeating the greats and dropping plates, Mr. Man also implicitly compares the greats and the plates themselves. This reading suggests that the greats are nothing more than common household items to Mr. Man.

Occasionally, these boasts contain analogies to encourage listeners to remember both the rapper and the subject matter through the sheer distance of the target and source analogs. For example, in the song ‘Conquistadors’ rapper Anonymous from Binary Star aligns his domination of his opponents with the civil rights movement:

These civil rights activists don’t want none of me
 ‘Cause in brief summary
 I’m ripping foes apart
 So remain seated like Rosa Parks
 Because I bus(t)[‡] like Montgomery³⁷

In these two similes, Anonymous invokes the memory of Rosa Parks, an African-American woman who remained seated in the front of a bus in defiance of a municipal segregation law in 1955, and Montgomery, the city in which the Rosa Parks incident and subsequent black boycott of the bus system occurred. While a listener might normally expect comments about the civil rights movement from an African-American rapper to be related to the continuing institutional racism in the United States, Anonymous uses these source analogs in reference to his opponents (‘ripping foes apart’) and his capacity for violence (‘bus[t] like Montgomery’) to surprise the listener and make a memorable comparison. Although the similes may seem problematic in that they do not reference the cultural context of the source analogs so much as the linguistic correspondences (‘remain

[‡] Anonymous plays off the near homophone to convey both ‘bus’ in the vehicular sense and ‘bust,’ which can have a number of different meanings in hip-hop parlance, including ‘to hit,’ ‘to leave,’ and ‘to catch someone doing wrong’.

seated' and 'bus[t]') between the source and target analogs, Anonymous is rather creatively inserting an important cultural reference into a song that is not intended as an exclusively educational exercise. Because the lyrics are predominantly lauding Binary Star's lyrical abilities, the inclusion of these analogies lends the song a subtle political tone that is unexpected and memorable.

One of the most lyrically engaging elements of rap music is wordplay, and rappers take particular pride in their ability to use analogies to facilitate multiplicity of meaning. For example, on the track 'Hater Players' Brooklyn rapper Talib Kweli claims:

My rhymes are like shot clocks,
Interstate cops, and
Blood clots:
My point is your flow gets stopped³⁸

Through a triple simile, Kweli posits himself in a position of authority from which he is able to regulate his competitors. The line, 'your flow gets stopped' takes on a host of meanings from the preceding source analogs. In reference to basketball shot clocks, the line means that a basketball player's dribbling, maneuvering, and shooting abilities cease because the shot clock dictates the amount of time a team can possess the ball. When the lyrics mention interstate cops, the term 'flow' can refer to a speeding car or drug trafficking, as the cops halt the flow of drivers or drugs. A blood clot stops the flow of blood through the body and can often be fatal. Thus, Kweli progresses from a discussion of sports, to law, and then to death. The increasing 'seriousness' of the topics heightens the perceived power of Kweli's claims. To stop a basketball player from shooting the ball may be inconsequential, but to stop a beating heart is a serious threat. Thus, with a single line, Kweli employs three distinct source and target analogs. This form does not violate the structural constraints of analogy formation because a one-to-one correspondence still exists between each term; one must simply consider each meaning of 'flow' as a separate target analog.

The reverse process of Talib Kweli's expansion of meaning is the type of analogy that condenses meaning, typically through the use of an allusion. Rather than employing multiple similes that reference a single line, condensation brings an entire scenario, story, or event to the listener's mind based on a single reference. For example, in spoken word poet-turned-rapper Sage Francis's 'Slow Down Gandhi,' an indictment of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Sage states:

And from up here I see Marines and Hummers on a conquest;
Underdogs with wonderbras in a push-up contest,
All for the sake of military recruitment.
It felt like Kent State the way they targeted the students.³⁹

This pointed political verse refers to the Kent State massacre, an event during the Vietnam War when the US National Guard killed student protestors at Kent State University in Ohio. The specific source and target analogs are clear: military recruiters are 'targeting' students for enlistment in the military in the same way that the National Guard 'targeted' the students to kill them. Yet, the allusion to Kent State evokes more historical background than a single event in which a domestic military unit attacked civilians; it also brings the entirety of the Vietnam conflict to mind. Through his initial analogy, Sage implicitly draws a comparison between Iraq and Vietnam as well. This powerful allusion becomes even more significant when one considers news headlines, such as '[Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld's Iraq-Germany Analogy Disputed,' that present contemporary instances of analogies being used to create and support political and military strategies.⁴⁰ With a single simile, Sage encourages the listener to consider an entire range of correspondences between Iraq and Vietnam—an implied mapping of sorts.

Clearly, a substantial amount of overlap occurs between the cognitive and cultural purposes for which rappers use analogies, and an explicit engagement of these cultural reasons is also warranted. Although many of the previous examples in this study have employed analogy to make socio-political commentary, one more classic simile by

alternative New York rap trio De La Soul merits mention: ‘De La Soul is here to stay like racism.’⁴¹ The implications of this statement are profound and resonate deeply within the hip-hop community. By linking their source analog ‘racism’ to their target analog ‘De La Soul’ in a way that aligns their longevity with that of racism, De La Soul actually create a dialogue between the source and target analogs. Since De La Soul are bragging about their staying power, their simile makes the listener consider the ‘staying power’ of racism as well. Similarly, Chicago rapper Common asserts that his ‘sound surrounds you like racism—you feel it all around you.’⁴² In this example, the simile indicates the encompassing quality of both racism and Common’s musical presence. This commentary intimates Common’s experience with racism so that what may initially seem like another typical boast is actually a window into the rapper’s racialized perspective on the world.

In a similar vein, rappers often use analogies to bridge disciplines, especially between pop culture, literature, and politics. While many of these analogies tend to be allusive for humorous purposes, certain songs establish analogic mappings to juxtapose these connections in more challenging ways. For example, Sage Francis’s song ‘Narcissist, 2002’ critiques modern clothing and fashion trends through metaphors that highlight the economic and social class divisions that accompany these attitudes. One of his most innovative metaphors acknowledges how industrial capitalism encourages exploitation of workers in sweatshops to fuel the fashionable trends:

What I seen made my heart hurt, stomach turn, throat burn,
Teeth cringe, spine tingle, and ribs sting
I noticed that the swoosh symbol was nothing but a whip in mid-swing.⁴³

The ‘swoosh symbol’ is apparel maker Nike’s logo, and Sage interprets it as a whip instead of the traditional interpretation of it as a check mark. This metaphor refers to Nike’s widely publicized use of overseas sweatshops to make its popular brand of shoes.⁴⁴ The

whip is a reference to the harsh working conditions in these sweatshops, and thus Sage connects the domain of fashion with international human rights violations.

Although the political goals for creating analogies are prevalent in hip-hop, especially in underground rap music, the most widespread use of analogy in rap lyrics is to create humor. Hip-hop's origins as celebratory and jovial music still shine through all incarnations of rap, from serious political tracks with witty wordplay to violent, materialistic songs containing dark humor. Many of the lyrical rituals of hip-hop, such as the aforementioned rap battles, focus almost exclusively on humor, and it is rare to find a rap song that does not contain comedy in some form. The aspect of an analogy that creates humor is usually surprise, and this idea applies to hip-hop culture as a whole: '[Hip-Hop mogul and former head of Def Jam Records] Russell Simmons once noted that hip hop was about doing the unexpected. That unexpectedness constitutes the par excellence feature of hybridity: unexpected encounters lead to unexpected productions.'⁴⁵ Although the notion of hybridity will be discussed shortly, the element of surprise appears when source and target analogs are creatively connected from two unlikely domains. Wordplay and puns are the most common forms of analogic humor in rap lyrics, but hyperbole also plays a large role in hip-hop humor. The historical origin of this tradition is often traced to 'the dozens,' a contest of wit and verbal agility in which two people trade insults, often about each other's family members. Tricia Rose credits 'Afrodiasporic traditions' such as 'toasting, signifying, boasting, and black folklore' as the basis for 'rap's oral and protest roots,' and the humorous aspect of these traditions appears to have transitioned relatively unchanged.⁴⁶

As many of the examples in this study have shown, self-affirmation is a central preoccupation in rap music. With the exception of a few self-deprecating rappers like Slug, Sway, and Sole, rappers generally fill much lyrical space projecting their egos.

Louisville rapper iii even recorded a tongue-in-cheek song entitled ‘Egos Were Made For Rappers.’ This self-projection frequently elicits the largest complaint from critics of hip-hop, and indeed, one begins to wonder where the navel gazing stops and the art begins. Contemporary white/Asian/Latino/indigenous/female rappers are often indistinguishable from their black/male counterparts in terms of economic background, vocal delivery, subject matter, or ego projection. Although race plays a large role in disenfranchisement in America, it is not the sole explanation for ego projection in rap songs. Social, economic, political, and familial marginalization can all be contributing factors; the human competitive drive certainly contributes as well. As Baba Brinkman contends in *The Rap Guide to Human Nature*, aggressive posturing is strongly linked with status competition and sexual selection. The individual possessing the most socially affirmed status and greatest deterrent threats, whether through weaponry (an equalizer of physical strength) or intellect, is the most likely to survive and reproduce in a given environment.⁴⁷

In an effort to justify this pride, rappers often use analogies to display their intelligence and wit. While not usually an end in itself, this demonstration is the intermediate step toward a larger goal of sociopolitical commentary, intimidation of opponents, inspiration for partygoers, seduction of sexual partners or other projects. Not only do analogies highlight a rapper’s knowledge base, but they also reveal a penchant for creative phrasing. These qualities are necessary in a skill-based lyrical hierarchy, which is much more a concept than a reality in the modern era of corporate music domination. Even so, command of analogy still holds weight in the hip-hop community, as Anonymous from Binary Star illustrates when he says:

Keep comin' at me with that bull, I ain't a matador
 I'm just a microphone metaphor specializer
 I blow your mind like a drunk driver with a breathalyzer
 I recognize the fact that I'm so phat
 So when it comes to speech I'm an exerciser

You in a wack crew, and this is what you call terror
 You carry dead weight, you should've been a pallbearer⁴⁸

In a 2005 interview, Anonymous (now known as One.Be.Lo) recognized that he was not satisfied with being 'just a microphone metaphor specializer.' On his solo album 'S.O.N.O.G.R.A.M.,' he wanted to use the analogies in order to advance larger goals:

I used to just be a creative, lyrical emcee. I just wanted to say the illest thing I could think of. I was all about metaphors and punch lines. Now, I love the Binary Star album. Even though there was some substance, people focused on the punch lines. To me, 'S.O.N.O.G.R.A.M.' has dope punch lines but there are intense themes and true soulfulness to it. There is more substance to it. I'm trying to inspire people. Hip-hop was the big brother I never had or the father that didn't teach me. I learned about Malcolm X through being positive in hip-hop. I learned about being an entrepreneur and being independent through hip-hop. I didn't take classes.⁴⁹

One.Be.Lo's commentary illustrates the formative potential of hip-hop as well as the limits of analogy for analogy's sake. Although it is tempting to take a relativistic approach to analogy in rap lyrics and say that self-aggrandizement is as valuable to the listener as philosophical enrichment, One.Be.Lo affirms that hip-hop can have a substantive impact on young people's lives if the lyrics facilitate that development. Continually witty boasting is impressive, but at the end of the day, the listener leaves with little more than an appreciation for a rapper's lyrical skill. Imparting a message leaves a lasting impression that has the potential to change the listener's life.

Thus, a conceptual tension appears to exist between a logic of single origin expressed through narcissism, and a more holistic understanding of common origin which is non-hierarchical and relational. A logocentric understanding of reality forms the core of hip-hop's hypercapitalistic and violent tendencies – from commodification and branding to misogyny and homophobia. This individualistic and defensive mode of self-preservation is sustained by intense egocentrism. By contrast, the creative mode of expression selects from an unlimited range of possible source analogs without prejudging them. Yet these modes are not mutually exclusive, since aggressive or defensive use of analogy is still

relational, and an insulting analogy still acknowledges an analogical relationship to the recipient. As long as individuals are still engaging with one another, the possibility of increased understanding exists. In the same way that rappers opened white suburban teenagers' eyes to the realities of urban life (while simultaneously projecting a cool rebelliousness and swagger), hip-hop culture can serve as a bridge from one set of lived experiences to another.⁵⁰ This educational potential places logocentrism in the service of the collective, so that what begins as a reactive discourse can develop into a creative endeavor that connects individuals through a shared passion for language and music.

Having examined the conceptual and cultural reasons that rappers use analogies, one can finally turn to a discussion of analogy as a metaphor for hip-hop itself. To return to Russell Simmons' comment about hybridization, that 'unexpected encounters lead to unexpected productions,' one observes the way in which hip-hop culture adopts many external elements (target analogs) and makes sense of them in a local setting (source analogs). In *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, Adam Krims describes this process of localization by explaining how different cultures reorient outside influences to fit their needs: 'In Edmonton [Canada], a Cree [Native American] MC may deploy borrowed styles and images to rearticulate a locally specific set of conflicts and a stance toward his situation; [...] the cultural situation of reception and musical rearticulation may form a prism, whose mapping is no less important in many contexts.'⁵¹ Indeed, this mapping occurs on a daily basis as increasing globalization brings new music and cultural forms to the United States. Hip-hop has proven itself to be a remarkably versatile medium for adapting external elements to fit localized concerns.

Ultimately, analogy and hip-hop are all about relation. Analogy, like hip-hop, opens doors between people and cultures. It expresses similarity, correspondence, and increased understanding. Charles Johnson writes of poetry, 'In words we find the living

presence of others... language is not—nor has it ever been—a neutral medium for expressing things, but rather... intersubjectivity and cross cultural experience are already embodied in the most microscopic datum of speech.’⁵² Hip-hop gives a public voice to people who have been oppressed and silenced for centuries, and the cry of local struggle echoes with melodies from distant lands. With a conceptual foundation and a cultural dialogue, analogy lends hip-hop the strength of form and the versatility of flow. In turn, hip-hop gives analogy a medium in which it can truly reign supreme—like Queen Latifah in her prime.

¹ See, for example, Martin Kilson. ‘The Pretense of Hip-Hop Black Leadership’. *The Black Commentator*. (17 July 2003). Online. Internet. 19 May 2011. Available WWW: http://www.blackcommentator.com/50/50_kilson.html ; Larry DeWitt. ‘Rap Music: Making Excuses for a Degenerate Culture’. *Essays*. (August 2005). Online. Internet. 19 May 2011. Available WWW: <http://www.larrydewitt.net/Essays/Rap.htm> ; To be fair, some of hip-hop’s academic critics are more familiar with the nuances of the genre. See: John McWhorter. *All About The Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can’t Save Black America*. New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2008.

² Brooks, David. ‘Gangsta in French’. *The New York Times*. Editorials. (10 November 2005). Online. Internet. 6 April 2008. Available WWW: <http://select.nytimes.com/2005/11/10/opinion/10brooks.html>

³ Some scholars (e.g. Tricia Rose and Jeff Chang) conflate DJ-ing and rapping as ‘rap music’ for definitional purposes of hip-hop culture, though I find that the near universal emphasis on ‘the four elements’ of hip-hop culture within the cultural discourse itself necessitates the distinction between DJ-ing and rapping. Beatboxing or ‘vocal percussion’ is sometimes considered the ‘fifth element’ of hip-hop.

⁴ Charneski, ‘The Hip-Hop Generation’.

⁵ George, Nelson. *Hip Hop America*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998. p. 60. This phenomenon of white teenagers embracing commodified African-American popular music despite (or perhaps because of) parental protestations has a clear parallel in rock & roll during the 1950s and 1960s. See: Paul Willis. ‘The Golden Age.’ *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*. Eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 46.

⁶ The iconic underground rap response to stereotypical bling videos that feature scantily clad women, flashy jewelry, and expensive cars is The Roots’ parodic music video for their 1996 song ‘What They Do’, in which ironic subtitles undercut the exaggerated posturing and material excess in the video.

⁷ Kyllonen, Tommy aka Urban D. *Un.orthodox: church, hip-hop, culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007. pp. 102-104.

⁸ Adams, Cey, Brent Rollins and Sacha Jenkins. ‘Words and Images: A Roundtable on Hip-Hop Design’. *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*. Ed. Jeff Chang. New York: Basic Civitas, 2006. p. 117.

⁹ To nuance this statement, the vocal delivery of a rap is tonally pitched, so that even if a rapper isn’t ‘singing’, he or she is still pitching his or her voice at a certain harmonic frequency. Nevertheless, the emphasis of rap was initially more noticeably concentrated on the rhythm and lyrical content than on melodic structure, though rappers like Bone Thugs N Harmony, Kanye West and Lil’ Wayne occasionally blur the line between singing and rapping.

¹⁰ Potter, Russell A. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995. p. 64

¹¹ Fiumara, Gemma Corradi. *The Metaphoric Process: Connections Between Language and Life*. New York: Routledge, 1995. p. 1.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Murfin, Ross and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Second Edition. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003. p. 490

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 260, 447.

- ¹⁵ Holyoak, Keith J. and Paul Thagard. *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1995. p. 2.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁷ Westbrook, Alonzo. *Hip Hoptionary*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2002. p. 8.
- ¹⁸ Holyoak, p.7.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 4.
- ²⁰ Eyedea and Shells. *Blaze Battle*. 2000. Online video. Internet. 20 May 2011. Available WWW: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGk5jnf5xTI>
- ²¹ That being said, even some of the earliest message rap was performed at the request of record labels rather than artists. For an account of how 'The Message' was initially received by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, see S. Craig Watkins. *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005. pp. 20-21
- ²² Examples range from Run-D.M.C. and the Beastie Boys to Rakim and Kanye West.
- ²³ Fiumara, p. 2.
- ²⁴ Holyoak, p. 4.
- ²⁵ Common. 'I Used To Love H.E.R.' *Resurrection*. Relativity Records, 1994. CD.
- ²⁶ Perry, Imani. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. p.130
- ²⁷ Holyoak, p. 6.
- ²⁸ Binary Star. 'Masters of the Universe'. *Masters of the Universe*. Subterraneous Records, 2000. CD.
- ²⁹ Immortal Technique. 'Obnoxious'. *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records, 2003. CD.
- ³⁰ Immortal Technique. 'Industrial Revolution'. *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records, 2003. CD.
- ³¹ Holyoak, p. 5.
- ³² Miall, David S., ed. *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1982. p. xv.
- ³³ Davidson, Donald. 'What Metaphors Mean'. *On Metaphor*. Ed. Sheldon Sacks. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. p. 41.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*.
- ³⁵ Outkast. 'ATLiens'. *ATLiens*. LaFace Records, 1996. CD.
- ³⁶ Reflection Eternal. Feat. Mos Def and Mr. Man. 'Fortified Live'. *Soundbombing*. Rawkus Records, 1997. CD.
- ³⁷ Binary Star. 'Conquistadors'. *Masters of the Universe*. Subterraneous Records, 2000. CD.
- ³⁸ Black Star. 'Haters Players'. *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus Records, 1998. CD.
- ³⁹ Sage Francis. 'Slow Down Gandhi'. *A Healthy Distrust*. Epitaph Records, 2005. CD.
- ⁴⁰ 'Rumsfeld's Iraq-Germany Analogy Disputed'. *CNN.com*. (19 March 2006). Online. Internet. 7 April 2008. Available WWW: <http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/03/19/rumsfeld.nazis/>
- ⁴¹ De La Soul. 'Intro'. *Stakes Is High*. Tommy Boy Records, 1996. CD.
- ⁴² Common. 'Like They Used To Say'. *One-Nine-Nine-Nine / Like They Used To Say*. Rawkus Records, 1999. CD Single.
- ⁴³ Sage Francis. 'Narcissist'. *The Known Unsoldier: "Sick of Waging War..."* Strange Famous Records, 2002. CD.
- ⁴⁴ For detailed coverage of the scandal and Nike's response, see: 'EFJ Campaigns: Stop Nike Sweatshops'. *Educating For Justice*. (2 October 2006). Online. Internet. 20 May 2011. Available WWW: <http://www.educatingforjustice.org/stopnikesweatshops.htm>
- ⁴⁵ Perry, p. 13.
- ⁴⁶ Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994. p. 25.
- ⁴⁷ Baba Brinkman. *The Rap Guide To Human Nature*. Lit Fuse Records, 2010. Digital album.
- ⁴⁸ Binary Star. 'What It's All About'. *Waterworld*. Terrorist Records, 1999. CD.
- ⁴⁹ Jones, Todd E. 'The Birth of One.Be.Lo'. *The Elements*. Interview. (10 March 2005). Online. Internet. 7 April 2008. Available WWW: <http://www.hiphop-elements.com/article/read/6/6448/1>
- ⁵⁰ Although questions of whether these representations of urban life are 'accurate' and whether white suburban appreciation of them is merely cultural voyeurism are beyond the scope of this study, Bakari Kitwana explores these issues in *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005.
- ⁵¹ Krims, Adam. *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 199.
- ⁵² Johnson, Charles. *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988. p. 38.

Chapter 2

Analogic Identity in Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani*

Given the extent of those deepening [societal] divisions, it is perhaps surprising that the convivial metropolitan cultures of the country's young people are still a bulwark against the machinations of racial politics. This enduring quality of resistance among the young is no trivial matter. It is much more than an effect of multi-cultural consumerism and communicates something of the irrevocably changed conditions in which factors of identity and solidarity that derive from class, gender, sexuality and region have made a strong commitment to racial difference absurd to the point of unthinkability. The fact that so many British youth have been delivered to a place, as Nitin Sawhney puts it 'beyond skin' communicates how much those critical formations are still affected by the patterns of political culture championed by Rock Against Racism and its unruly movement during the late 1970s.

- Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*

Proposing a 'materialist theory of culture', Paul Gilroy echoes the central premise of Gautam Malkani's novel *Londonstani* – that racial difference for contemporary British youth is often more a matter of cultural affiliation ('class, gender, sexuality and region') than skin color.¹ Malkani's novel presents the teenage narrator Jas and his friends as cultural adopters of hip-hop, 'bling bling' economics and hypermasculinity, all of which fuel the boys' construction of a Desi (hybridized British Asian) identity. The epiphany of the novel occurs when the reader finally learns that Jas is actually a middle-class white male who has attempted to internalize the multiplicities of his peer group's amalgamated Desi identity in defiance of his family origins. The language and metaphors that the characters employ are the primary mechanisms by which they construct their identities. Drawing heavily upon mainstream hip-hop artists and culture, material goods and ethnic affiliations as reference points, the boys project themselves into highly gendered social roles which often equate femininity with weakness. At the same time, Malkani constructs his characters with a degree of humor that promotes a deeper understanding of them as individuals, thereby avoiding complicity in the formation of similar reductive stereotypes to those which the boys occasionally espouse. A selective study of the boys' primary

analogies and the source analogs from which they derive will interrogate the intersection of race, gender and consumerism within a cultural context of mainstream hip-hop and linguistic identity construction.

In contrast to a logic of commodification that aims to restrict possible meanings and readings, poetic analogy functions with an eye towards familiarizing the unknown and inspiring reflection on unexamined positions. Malkani likewise provides multivalent resonances and readings of his characters, predominantly through their own language use. The frequent deployment of internet/text abbreviations and spellings as well as Punjabi and Hindi slang renders this language familiar by the end of the novel, at which point the reader's own assumptions about Jas's ethnicity are challenged and revealed. This dual construction performs the poetic analogic process on the reader. As bell hooks notes in 'Postmodern Blackness', radical transformation and critique is difficult when it 'shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge.'² By exposing the linguistic and conceptual limitations of mainstream hip-hop culture while celebrating the creative diversity of expression with it, Malkani uses language to challenge conventional assumptions of race and performed identity. Furthermore, the reader engages with hip-hop culture and the boys' identity development through their individual perspectives, which is why Malkani's sympathetic and comic portrayals of the boys are effective on both a narrative and meta level. Thus, the boys' reductive use of analogy has the possibility of raising the awareness of the reader to examine his or her own analogic associations – a primary function of committed literature (which will be explored further in the next chapter). In my 24 October 2009 interview with the author, Malkani elaborates on the connection between the young British Asian individuals he interviewed in Hounslow while doing research for the book and his purposeful use of analogies (such as the mobile phone) throughout the novel to spark consciousness-raising discussions:

The question is how conscious the people I was interviewing were. And that's where the book comes in – to help make them conscious. Because it's when talking about the book and discussing the book that you can talk about the role of the mobile phone in their lives in a deeper way. So I think there are all these symbols out there. I really believe that we all live with symbols and that all our lives are constructed with symbols.³

'Havin the blingest mobile fone in the house is a rudeboy's birthright':

Hip-Hop, Race, Consumerism and Gender

In *Small Acts*, Paul Gilroy points to the development of an element of black popular culture in the 1990s which became removed from historical shared experiences of slavery, white supremacy and colonialism. Highlighting the chorus of Buju Banton's 1992 hit summer song 'Boom Bye Bye', Gilroy notes that:

'Boom bye bye ina de batty man head' conveyed just how important indexing these differences [of class, ideology, money, sexuality, gender and generation] had become for the formation of an arrogant racial absolutism that encompassed callous homophobia but moved far beyond it in pursuit of a militarized machismo that could make everybody certain about blackness once again and then command their allegiance. The idea of a common, invariant racial identity capable of linking divergent black experiences across different spaces and times has been fatally undermined.⁴

In response to a multiplicity of black identities, this 'arrogant racial absolutism' served to claim authority for an authentic blackness whose 'militarized machismo' became the litmus test for communal acceptability. Gilroy identifies the metaphorical construction of race as 'family' as the analogic location where 'definitions of authenticity are disproportionately defined by ideas about nurturance, about family, about fixed gender roles, and generational responsibilities.'⁵ While Gilroy is describing attempts to navigate contemporary black nationalism and Afrocentrism, this collective construction of identity also provides the boundaries and parameters from which members of a peer group select and perform their own individual identities. At the same time, the cultural forms which shape and reflect these constructions are not necessarily policy papers for community organizations. As Murray Forman comments, 'hip-hop is still fundamentally an *art form*

that traffics in hyperbole, parody, kitsch, dramatic license, double entendres, signification, and other literary and artistic conventions to get its points across.’⁶ In *Londonstani*, Malkani similarly uses these literary devices to interrogate, critique and satirize the art form itself, both for its problematic constructions and its amusing absurdities. Thus, the gravity of the sociological issues is balanced by the comic and sympathetic rendering of the characters, as Jas constantly interrogates the formation and implementation of these collectively-sanctioned social acts through an often ironic lens.

For example, when Jas and his friends pull up next to an Indian motorist who appears to be educated and middle-class, Jas’s friend Amit unleashes a string of abuse in response to the motorist’s protestation that he is merely ‘going about [his] business’:

Wat business you got goin? Readin fuckin batty books? Take some advice from me, don’t mess wid us. Cos we b da man round here n you b da gora-lovin bhanchod who can’t even speak his mother tongue, innit. Wat’s wrong wid your own bredren, brown boy? Look at us. We’s b havin a nice car, nice tunes, nuff nice designer gear, nuff bling mobile. But no, you wanna b some gora-lovin, dirrty hippie wid fuckin Radiohead playin in your car. Look at ma man Jas here. Learn some lessons from him.⁷

This exchange encapsulates many of the elements that the boys consider to be essential to their Desi group identity. Throughout the novel, an amusingly hyperbolic anti-intellectualism pervades the boys’ dialogue, seen here in the supposition that the motorist is ‘readin fuckin batty books’. This anti-intellectualism has colonial roots, as Frantz Fanon notes, in ‘the overall attitude of rejection of the values of the occupier, even if these values are objectively worth choosing.’⁸ The opposition of masculinity to formal education is also a frequent theme in the boys’ discourse and often becomes conflated with a racialized interpretation of masculinity which equates whiteness with effeminacy. The ability to inflict physical violence is a supreme virtue in this realm of hip-hop-inflected or ‘street’ hypermasculinity, and thus an appearance of weakness (equated with femininity and its proxies – whiteness, homosexuality, education, sensitivity, etc.) is intolerable.⁹ Amit’s

next comment about the ‘gora-lovin bhanchod [literally: white male-loving sisterfucker] who can’t even speak his mother tongue’ reflects the association of racial identity with native language proficiency, which in this case would not exist because the motorist has supposedly shunned his cultural origins for a new white British aspirational identity. Here, Amit shifts his attack to interpret the motorist’s lifestyle as a direct rejection of the boys’ cultural background, an act which Gilroy calls ‘the increasingly desperate assertions of homogeneity that flow out of black vernacular culture,’ but this accusation is ironic because the desi boys speak a hybrid dialect themselves.¹⁰ Amit’s subsequent request that the motorist look at Jas as an example of quintessential Desiness presents identity as a choice of cultural affiliation rather than skin signification, as if to say, ‘The white boy can be a desi, so why can’t you?’ Amit explicitly calls the motorist ‘brown boy’ and refers to his ‘bredren’, thereby placing the ironic racial construct within Amit’s interpretation of the Desi collective identity.

As Frantz Fanon notes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the identification and definition of blackness is necessarily relational to whiteness.¹¹ The desi boys define themselves oppositionally to cultural forms of whiteness instead of choosing an assimilationist or implicitly inferior position like Fanon’s ‘mimicry’. Rather than internalizing psychological colonial trauma like Fanon’s Algerian patients in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the boys export their insecurities onto others in their community, whether by attacking the innocent white boy Daniel or harassing the Indian motorist.¹² Although the desi boys have not personally experienced colonial oppression, they nevertheless adopt a reactive posture to everyone they perceive as existentially threatening to their narrowly defined identity. Malkani lampoons the boys’ self-stereotyping in a way that makes their abuse both comic and reflective of their own insecurities. They feel a need to tick each box on their inventory of racial signifiers, as if to preempt any potential criticism or challenge to their

authenticity or masculinity. Their oppositional self-definition requires that their community member who does not mirror their cultural preferences must be ridiculed and chastised, so that the boys can feel secure in their own collective construction of legitimate cultural expression. Malkani evokes the tension between a sympathetic reading of the motorist, to whom anyone who has ever been casually harassed can surely relate, and a sympathetic portrayal of the boys, whose rhetoric frequently reaches hilariously parodic levels. The humanizing quality of their vulnerability and seeming lack of self-awareness effectively complicates the performance of their one-dimensional thuggish personae.

The second half of Amit's verbal assault introduces the boys' primary source analogs of self-identification: material goods and music. The commodification discourse inspired by mainstream hip-hop calls for conspicuous consumption as an index of social status and individual worth. As the boys' mentor-cum-criminal mastermind Sanjay explains, 'once you'd made a commitment to what he called the "urban youth culture scene" an you'd decided that bling an designer gear in't a bad thing, then that's it':

This lifestyle, these material possessions, this is how you big yourself up, as they say. You will forever be judged and judge yourselves by your luxury consumerist aspirations, your nice stuff. And if you stop trying to big yourself up, others around you will make you look small pretty quickly, believe me. So as a dear friend of mine once said, you can never have enough bling.¹³

The boys' 'luxury consumerist aspirations' consist largely of cars, phones, clothes and jewelry. These items are more than consumer goods though – they are consumer identities. The aspirational quality of conspicuous consumption is reflected in Sanjay's final comment about the eternal quest for more bling. This acquisition principle creates both an endless demand and an incomplete sense of identity, because if the foundation of self is an unattainable goal, then perpetual feelings of internal instability are likely to arise.¹⁴ As identity is a process rather than a static sum of characteristics, the strong personal valuation of material goods allows for a fixed point of identification which is

always updated with the newest version, thereby simultaneously providing both predictability and novelty.¹⁵ This combination of the known and the novel exhibits a primary function of analogy – to provide a reference point or explanation of the unknown. Conspicuous consumption signifies the ostensible material wealth of the possessor (via a known quantity, the luxury item) and acts as a status-elevating visual introduction to the individual (the unknown quantity).¹⁶

Malkani employs a dual structure of analogy when dealing with commodification in the novel. On one hand, he presents the homogenizing and conformist effects of commodified analogy through the boys' consumerist self-identification and commodity fetishism. On the other hand, Malkani critiques commodification by presenting the boys as metaphors for hyperbolic hip-hop consumerism. The degree to which Malkani avoids reductive portrayals of the boys indicates the creative power of analogy. Rather than presenting the boys as negative walking stereotypes or metaphors alone, Malkani develops them into fully formed and sympathetic characters. In this way, Malkani opens up a space between uncritical acceptance of consumerist logic and a more nuanced creative performance of text and analogy. For example, although the desi boys perform fundamentally metropolitan identities, they also adopt lower-class urban identities, despite the fact that they have had middle class upbringings.¹⁷ The class-based representation of authenticity is complicated by their hyperconsumerist aspirations, as personified by Sanjay. Identity construction is an imaginative enterprise, and Malkani humorously illustrates the distance between the characters' presentation of themselves and their material surroundings, such as when Ravi reveals that his BMW actually belongs to his mother.¹⁸ The fact that the license plate even has his mother's name on it illustrates the absurdity of their abusive conduct towards the Indian motorist earlier in the chapter. The symbolic status of the Beemer allows the boys to project themselves into roles of authority,

despite the material reality of the maternal ownership of the car. Details such as these emphasize that the characters' identities are constantly being constructed and performed based on their imagined selves rather than actual experiences of urban poverty into which they verbally project themselves with their hip-hop inflected speech.

The individual material analogies used in *Londonstani* are notable for their multivalent construction. Rather than merely seeing cars as representations of power and wealth, Jas actually anthropomorphizes vehicles: 'It's like as if the headlights are the eyes, the grill the mouth an the wing mirrors the ears.'¹⁹ He tracks his personal development through the types of cars ('faces') he liked when he was younger versus those he preferred after he joined Hardjit's crew (the desi boys). Jas attributes the attitudes that the cars expressed to his preferences earlier in life:

I liked them cos they'd got friendlier faces. Take this red Nissan Micra that just pulled out behind us. It looked like a little, button-nosed puppy dog. The black Volkswagen Beetle parked in a drive on the left had got big friendly eyes. This was why, back when I was a gimp, I never got why everyone reckoned big flash cars were such big fuckin deals. Sure, flashy Mercedes were smiling cos a their massive grilles, but their faces weren't friendly cos it was more like some smug grin: I'm a fuckin SLK, look at me, you pleb. [...] I dig sports cars now a course, cos my head in't so stupidly fucked up these days an I try an not see the faces no more.²⁰

The humanizing quality of Jas's earlier association of cars with people reflects a more sympathetic worldview that he attempts to shun in an effort to adopt a hardened masculine posture (derisively referring to his past self as a 'gimp'). The power differential between the cars is also notable, as Jas reflects on the relative social status position that each car conveys. Through analogy, he externalizes the implicit message that driving each car suggests about its owner. An emphasis on masculinity becomes conflated with the class signification of the cars, and this shift is all the more powerful when Jas redefines his gendered metaphoric associations with cars:

Matter a fact it's the bodies I tend to notice now. Take the body on a Lexus SC430. So sleek an smooth you don't even notice its face. Like Christina Aguilera. The curves on an Audi TT make it J-Lo while the Porsche 911 GTS got a booty like

Beyoncé. An it in't just divas: I got the Bentley Continental GT as Snoop Dogg an the Hummer H2 down as 50 Cent.²¹

Moving towards sexualized objectification, Jas's car analogies become individualized with pop singers and rap artists rather than merely reflecting moods and characteristics of faces. The selection of specific body parts reflects a commodification of the female body that has long been present in mainstream hip-hop (and Western pop culture as a whole). Jas's multicultural panoply of female singers (white, Latina and black) suggests that there is no strict racialization of his objectification, but rather a deracialized echo of colonial framing of black women, most infamously represented in the Venus Hottentot circus act in the 1820s where a Khosian woman from South Africa was displayed on a pedestal with 'her buttocks exposed.'²²

Similarly, Jas's portrayal of cars as male rap artists initiates a string of homoerotic undercurrents that permeate mainstream hip-hop, where one often finds shirtless rappers flexing muscles and displaying tattoos. Jas connects male sensuality with vehicular operation, commenting on his friend Hardjit's muscular performance: 'The engine an drivetrain connected to his biceps, the brake pads connected to his pecs.'²³ The car becomes a direct extension of Hardjit's masculinity as a literal embodiment of the metaphor. Projecting personality and social status into the world, the vehicle represents a mobile identity controlled by an individual, so the performance of masculinity extends to the car as well. Muscle tone and physical prowess must be reflected in the operation and presentation of the car, while simultaneously rejecting the critique of a stereotypically feminine vanity. The tension between black male sexuality and homophobia is highly fraught in hip-hop culture, since the boundaries between displays of alpha-male masculinity and combative eroticism are often nebulous.²⁴ Even Hardjit, the extremely homophobic leader of Jas's social group, only has little headshots of attractive Bollywood actresses on his wall because he has 'saved most a the wall space for a full-body shot a

Arnold Schwarzenegger wearin just a headband an kachha [underwear] as Conan the Barbarian an his poster a Bruce Lee's bare torso from *The Big Boss*.²⁵ With Conan and Bruce Lee serving as violent ideals, Hardjit's room reflects the inherently egoistic nature of hypermasculinity. The ability to dominate others sexually or physically is an extension of a confidence derived from a resistance to vulnerability. The domination is not the point – the avoidance of insecurity is. Domination is the merely means to the end, which is why Conan and Bruce Lee are massive on Hardjit's wall, while the supposed objects of his desire are small headshots, rather than being full-size body posters.

In the same way that cars provide personal expression and physical mobility for the boys, phones also perform stylistic and logistical functions, as evidenced by Jas's Rudeboy Rule #2: 'Havin the blingest mobile fone in the house is a rudeboy's birthright. Not just for style, but also cos fones were invented for rudeboys. They free you from your mum an dad while still allowing your parents to keep tabs on you.'²⁶ Both the car and the phone represent mobility and freedom for the boys, and this independence heightens the value that they place on these items. Jas adopts a similar anthropomorphic perspective to the cars when he observes a lineup of luxury phones laid out on Hardjit's bed ('Side by side like Ferraris an Maseratis in the car park a your dreams') and judges them to be more 'fit' than the Bollywood girls on Hardjit's wall.²⁷ This fluid identification of material goods with sexuality demonstrates the interchangeable nature of the commodification discourse in bling capitalism. Cars, phones and women are all comparable on a scale of desirability as consumer objects. As Colin Campbell states, the activity of consuming:

has become a kind of template or model for the way in which citizens of contemporary Western societies have come to view all their activities. Since... more and more areas of contemporary society have become assimilated to a 'consumer model' it is perhaps hardly surprising that the underlying metaphysics of consumerism has in the process become a kind of default philosophy for all modern life.²⁸

While Jas feels that the phones represent social independence and luxury – both figuratively and literally since the ‘rudeboys’ deal in stolen phones as a business venture – they also reveal a reductive analogic mapping which denies full humanity to women and creates a self-identification dependent on conspicuous consumption.

The extent to which hip-hop has consumed the boys as much as they consume it is evidenced in the analogies through which they view the world. Descriptive passages of non-musical events and environments are infused with rap and R&B analogies, like when Jas describes the weeds in an overgrown field as ‘hairy green shit growin all over the place like Beenie Man’s dreadlocks.’²⁹ The initial inarticulate quality of the description ‘hairy green shit’ is buffered by the subsequent cultural simile. Through ironic juxtapositions like this one, Malkani simultaneously deflates and elevates his characters, and he often reveals the characters’ depth in these moments. Rappers even appear as socially conscious role models in the boys’ dialogue, such as when Jas defends a female friend who wears mini-skirts and knee-high boots: ‘You guys’re makin me feel like fuckin Wyclef Jean sayin this again an again an again, but all this stuff you’re sayin, it don’t make her a ho.’³⁰ Thus, hip-hop culture provides the boys with conceptual models of interpersonal interaction, from gangsta poses to pseudo-feminist defenses. Jas even points to the diversity of rappers’ body types to suggest that the definition of Desiness might not necessarily demand obsessive bodybuilding, though he concedes that for some teenage girls, a well-toned physique is a non-negotiable prerequisite for romantic interest.³¹

This nod to female complicity in the affirmation of hypermasculinity has long been debated in hip-hop culture, most notably in the ‘they’re not talking about *me*’ phenomenon.

As Eisa Nefertari Ulen explains:

When I ask them, the junior high school girls, what they think when they hear hip-hop that denigrates women, that categorizes females as good or bad, they say they don’t worry about it. *They’re not talking about me* they say when I ask them about the songs and images that make our grandmothers suck their teeth in disgust. [...]

Just as slavery depended on the very Africans it dehumanized as slaves, this new system depends on the very women it denigrates as props for male bravado.³²

Reductive and misogynistic hip-hop perpetuates a value system of commodified relationships that hold objectification as the foundational unit of self-worth. The desire to present the self as the most attractive commodity on display is a fundamental component of this system. Zygmunt Bauman usefully explores this phenomenon of identity construction through his concept of 'the liquid modern individual':

Even if the self he or she is struggling to display and get recognized is deemed by the actor to precede, pre-empt and predetermine the choice of individual identity (ethnic, race, religious and gender ascriptions claim to belong to that category of self), *it is the urge of selection and the effort to make the choice publicly recognizable that constitutes the self-definition of the liquid modern individual.* That effort would have hardly been undertaken if the identity in question was indeed endowed with the determining power it claims and/or is believed to possess.³³

Here Bauman asserts that certain characteristics of identities are performed even if their origins are supposedly inherent to the individual. The boys in *Londonstani* assert this perspective when they critique the Indian driver neglecting to perform their version of his cultural background. They also hold simultaneously conflicting views about manifested identity when it comes to women, as when Hardjit critiques Samira (Jas's love interest) for being 'a ho' because she dresses 'like a ho, like a slut in all her slitty miniskirts,' thereby equating her dress (performance) with her identity.³⁴ Yet moments later in the conversation, Amit categorically rules out ever dating Samira because she is a Muslim, 'even if she was da fittest girl in da world.'³⁵ The tension between the fluid performance of identity and determinant cultural forces promotes a shorthand analogous system by which individuals are subject to commodification and instant appraisal based on enumerated qualities rather than a complex understanding of the individual. This approach to both 'other' individuals and 'other' cultures is problematic because, as Edward Said notes about Orientalism, it 'rarely [offers] the individual anything but imperialism, racism

and ethnocentrism for dealing with “other” cultures.’³⁶ In this instance, the power dynamics have been reversed, so that historically oppressed people have become those who manifest a colonial master narrative. These practices (along with misogyny and homophobia) result from a reductive understanding and subsequent judgment of the ‘other’ through the use of incomplete or presumptive analogies to define that individual. Yet, in portraying the tension between cultural determinants and identity performance in the boys’ discussion, Malkani demonstrates how the characters attempt to grapple with these complexities to form their own worldview and social boundaries, even as they try to negotiate conflicting beliefs and assumed values.

This type of analogic mapping is not limited to the simplification of others – the boys also use it to present themselves as a coherent whole. Jas finds the hip-hop metaphors and slang helpful because they provide a shorthand for self-expression – crude though it may be – that gives him a sense of communicative confidence that he lacked before:

... if I was the Proper Word Inventor I’d do two things differently. I wouldn’t decide that the proper word for a dickless poncey sap is a gay batty boy or that the proper word for women is bitches. That shit in’t right. I know what other poncey words like homophobic an misogynist mean an I know that shit in’t right. But what am I s’posed to do bout it? If I don’t speak proply using the proper words then these guys’d say I was actin like a batty boy or a woman or a woman actin like a batty boy. One good thing though: now that I use all these proper words I’m hardly ever stuck for words. I just chuck in a bit a proper speak an I sound like I’m talking proper, talking like Hardjit.³⁷

Jas has a speech impediment which often prevents him from expressing himself clearly, and reductive hip-hop slang provides him with a conducive way to connect with his peer group. His difficulties with language also metaphorically express his challenge of navigating two worlds and identities – his white middle class life (exemplified by his knowledge of the words ‘homophobic’ and ‘misogynist’) and his desi street life (exemplified by the ‘proper words’). The two worlds compete for Jas’s mind and his

tongue, while the amusing nature of his commentary on the various ways to express the idea of weakness demonstrates how homophobia and misogyny become intertwined in seemingly irreverent expressions of dismissal and/or condescension.

Mainstream hip-hop culture provides a wide range of analogic mappings for social relations (problematic though these mappings may be), and this simplification can appear to remove much of the uncertainty from negotiating individual identities. By automatically labeling certain behaviors as ‘gay’ or by classifying women as ‘bitches’, the complexities of gender relations become reduced to a derogatory attitude of hypermasculine posturing. Yet despite their social convenience, these constructions still disturb Jas, even if he feels powerless to change them. Throughout the novel, Jas is obsessed with the form of language more than the content, and his notion of ‘proper’ language being what is acceptable within his community rather than traditionally ‘proper English’ reflects the boys’ tension with formal education. The constraints of their self-constructed Desi/hip-hop group homogeneity only recognize a limited set of legitimate analogic mappings, which are artificially maintained to be authentic by individual assertion (by Hardjit, for example), despite being occasionally contested (by Jas). The internal policing of language creates a pressure to conform within the peer group, and Malkani highlights the boys’ exaggerated use of profanity as an example of their overcompensation when it comes to performing their identities among their peers.³⁸

Paki, Sher, Desi: Metaphors of Communal Identities

The section titles of *Londonstani* reflect the cultural affiliations and linguistic nuances that Jas experiences and also serve as metaphors for his personal development: Paki, Sher, and Desi. The novel opens with the desi boys assaulting a white boy whom they insincerely accuse of calling them ‘Paki’, a term made notorious during the anti-immigrant ‘Paki-

bashing' which became prevalent in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in part due to some skinheads' perception of Pakistani immigrants as 'passive, weak and, above all, different'.³⁹ The boys actively define themselves against this image of weakness and become the opposite — unprovoked aggressors. As the historically oppressed become the current oppressors, the boys cite the term Paki to allow external forces to define their self-perception. Despite the boys' hybrid existence as a combination of American, hip-hop, Sikh, Punjabi and British cultures, they find strength and clarity in the racial binary of ethnic slurs. External attacks allow for communal bonding, righteous anger and the assertion of a homogenous identity in the face of a de facto multicultural hybridity which the boys possess. Paul Gilroy highlights the conceptual problem with this approach:

... I am tired of the dualistic thinking that risks attempting to reduce the world to a set of theoretical categories and is such a recurrent feature of the drive towards simplicity which so often unravels both anti-racism and internationalism. This approach says that you are either for or against the nation, for blacks and against whites. It says that in the operation of racism there are only ever two great camps: the victims and the perpetrators, as if the fixity and coherence of these complex terms and positions can be readily and permanently established.⁴⁰

The irony is that the dualistic simplicity of anti-racism in this context is the driving force behind racism as well, which means that a recognition of the fluid complexity of identity performance is an alternative non-binary way to engage issues of race.

A further segmentation of 'Desiness' in the Paki section reveals the ways that ethnicity is both socially constructed and fundamentally relational. Hardjit is called upon to settle arguments for both the Sikh and Hindu communities, often in opposition to local Muslims:

You know how the people a Gotham City've got that Bat signal for whenever they need to call Batman? The homeboys a Hounslow an Southall should have two signals for Hardjit: an Om for when Hindus needed him an a Khanda for when Sikhs needed him. He always used to go on bout how Sikhs and Hindus fought side by side in all them wars. Both got beef with Muslims. Both support India at cricket. Both be listenin to bhangra, even though Sikh bredren clearly dance better to it.⁴¹

The analogic representation of Hardjit as Batman reflects the mythic construction of the Desi community's identity. He is a hero for the collective Desis, who despite their internal differences define themselves in opposition to Muslims.⁴² Claire Alexander comments on this phenomenon in the Black British community as well, in the way that notable divisions exist between Afro-Caribbean and African communities (and further sub-divisions within those communities), but everyone is 'black' when white people show up.⁴³ By contrast, Malkani states that he envisions a metropolitan identity more akin to Derek Walcott's poetic statement, 'I had no nation now but the imagination', which serves as a more utopian rejection of nationalism and ethnic division.⁴⁴ Hardjit presents the 'homeboys' from Hounslow and Southall, who share common musical and sporting preferences beyond their religious differences, as having the ability to choose elements of a cosmopolitan commonality instead of an essentialist determinism. Hardjit himself, however, has chosen to invest heavily in a devoutly Sikh identity and has surpassed even his parents' commitment to a historical or religious cause. Similarly, the use of the word 'Paki' (whether affirmatively or pejoratively) indicates a constructed identity which is not necessarily focused on origins but rather on creating a history and mythology of the present. As the desi boys fantasize about the attractive Muslim girl Samira, Jas notes:

If any a us ever got with Samira, her mum an dad'd probly kill her and then try an kill us. That's if our own mums an dads din't kill us first. An then that's if Hardjit din't kill us before they did. Mr. Ashwood had taught us bout the bloody partition a India an Pakistan during History lessons. What we din't learn, though, was how some people who weren't even born when it happened or awake during History lessons remembered the bloodshed better than the people who were.⁴⁵

This oppositional identity allows for the creation of stable analogues with historical gravity, thereby providing individuals with a sense of self-certainty, righteousness and involvement in a larger community/struggle. Communal identities require dense analogic networks to function, and while specific analogues may be in a constant state of negotiation and flux, the overarching narrative construction extrapolates a current identity

from historical events, real or imagined. Jas strikes at the primary difficulty of altering destructive adopted identities when Sanjay asks why people would be upset that Jas is dating a Muslim, given that ‘It’s the twenty-first century. Surely people have forgotten all that 1948 stuff.’ Jas responds, ‘That’s the problem, man. How can Hardjit’ve forgot something he weren’t even around to remember in the first place?’⁴⁶

One example of this multivalent identity construction through language is the second section title ‘Sher’, which means ‘lion’ and ‘tiger’ in Hindi, Urdu and Persian. One of the most direct cultural allusions that the title invokes is ‘Shere Punjab’, a UK-based Sikh organization which formed in response to Muslim men allegedly dating Sikh women and converting them to Islam. As Jas explains, ‘the Shere Punjab had a bit of religion thrown in as well, givin you something to pray bout, something to fight bout. [...] Hardjit wouldn’t fight for [the Duke of Scotland]... Not when he could fight for God.’⁴⁷ The ability of the group to fulfill numerous individual needs is part of what makes attractive; i.e., the more complete the analogic mapping, the more compelling the analogy. In the case of Shere Punjab, the idea that it can fulfill members’ need for significance, acceptance and community is augmented by its purported ability to fulfill existential questions as well through its religious component. In the same way that hip-hop culture provides a complex (if limited) worldview with analogies to simplify social relations, so too do groups like Shere Punjab.

On a primal level, the existence of Shere Punjab reflects Hardjit’s gender-based sentiment about goras: ‘Dey can take our food, but dey can never take our women.’⁴⁸ An obsession with cross-cultural interbreeding has historically been an operating force for both colonial empires and domestic organizations like Shere Punjab and the Ku Klux Klan.⁴⁹ The commodification of women is reflected in a further allusion to the section title - ‘sherwani’, an outfit worn by Indian grooms at weddings. Jas’s Indian friend Arun is

getting married. and when the boys question the dowry tradition, Ravi's father explains 'how the dowry business works':

After the wedding, the bride will come off her father's balance sheet and onto Arun's father's list of liabilities. She is an underperforming asset that brings in no income. The dowry offsets this transfer of liabilities. Then of course there is what accountants call exceptional charges. You could say these represent a father's final contribution to the bride's pension, perhaps a redundancy [sic] package.⁵⁰

When Jas protests that Arun's fiancée is not redundant because she is a surgeon, Ravi's father argues that that will change when she has children. This economic analysis fundamentally commoditizes gender relations and considers women to be property for the purposes of a financial transaction. The notion that women are inherently a liability has profound implications for social interactions. Because analogies shape individuals' perceptions of the Other, a societal structure which reinforces the devaluation of women based on non-contextual assumptions of worth risks producing a deep psychological rift and power divide between men and women. The transactional terminology of coming 'off her father's balance sheet and onto Arun's list of liabilities' reduces the bride to an itemized number rather than a partner or human being with relational status, and she is possessed by men, thus denying her independent agency despite the fact that this is a 'love marriage'.⁵¹ To call her 'an underperforming asset' is ironically to highlight both her professional performance as a surgeon (which if she were male would certainly be commended), and her assumed financial obligation to patriarchy. As Dale Spender notes, 'When there are a sexist language and sexist theories culturally available, the observation of reality is also likely to be sexist.'⁵²

Returning to the section title, a final flip of the word 'Sher' is 'Usher', the iconic American R&B singer who represents a sexualized urban cool. As Jas drives Sanjay's Porsche through London, he plays Usher's album *8701* and fantasizes about women throwing their underwear ('kachhian') at Usher's 'fly bod'.⁵³ As Jas tries to project

himself as Usher, he realizes that he lacks Usher's physique, and thus the attempt at metaphoric self-identification makes Jas feel inadequate by comparison. As Benson Fraser and William Brown write about celebrity identification, fans 'reconstruct their own attitudes, values, or behaviors in response to the images of people they admire, real and imagined, both through personal and mediated relationships'.⁵⁴ Jas seeks source analogs worthy of desire and attempts to determine whether he merits similar attraction as a target analog. Because fans and admirers have only limited personal knowledge of celebrities as source analogs, much of the identity construction surrounding them involves extrapolation based on textual clues and cultural contexts. Jas's perception of Usher is one-dimensional (as a singing sex object), and thus that is the only element of Usher's persona to which Jas compares himself. With deeper knowledge of his source analog, Jas might see Usher's youth leadership charity work as an alternate activity worthy of emulation, for example.⁵⁵ The mediated image of the pop star again reduces gender relations to simple signifiers of desire.

The final section title 'Desi' signifies an integrated metropolitan identity, as the representation of British Asian experiences evolves from the victimized immigrants (Paki) to the voluntary segregationists (Sher), and finally to the second- and third-generation British Asian Londoners who combine Bollywood and traditional Indian values with hip-hop culture and global capitalism. Linguistically, this shift is represented by the altered usage of the word 'desi', from its traditional Sanskrit meaning of 'countryman' to the street definition of 'homeboy'.⁵⁶ This linguistic transition is emblematic of the distinction that Theresa L. Ebert draws between 'ludic' and 'resistance' postmodernism. As Russell A. Potter explains,

'ludic' postmodernism is 'the postmodernism of play, of free fall, of delight in irresolution; "resistance" postmodernism... is a model of critique which, while aware of the complex interdeterminations of social and textual subjectivities, draws

deeply on Marxism's insistence on the correlatives of material conditions, and seeks quite explicitly to "resist" what it sees as humanistic pluralism.⁵⁷

Potter goes on to suggest that 'play... is potentially a powerful mode of resistance', and thus that it is possible to contain both forms of postmodernism in a single instance.⁵⁸ In *Londonstani*, the adoption and adaptation of the term 'desi' acts as both postmodern play and resistance for British Asian identities. The geographic migration of the term from India to the UK mirrors the signification migrating to refer to a subcultural member rather than a subcontinental countryman. As adopters of hybrid identities, the 'desi' members are not united solely by race, ethnicity, or nationality. They are self-selecting affiliates, and their playful use of the word 'desi' acknowledges the historical heritage of the word while recontextualizing it in a new environment. The resistance of traditional boundaries and identifiers through playful linguistic creativity provides a template for a progressive inclusivity. Yet, rather than being a purely deconstructed collective identity, the word 'desi' acknowledges a specific cultural and historical background, which serves as a conceptual basis for the group affiliation.⁵⁹ That being said, the boundaries and specifics of the 'desi' identities are constantly being performed and negotiated, as evidenced by the constant debates between Hardjit and the other desi boys about social codes and appropriate conduct.

Demonstrating the intersection of the ludic and resistance is also a key function of the comedic dialogue in *Londonstani*. Performative moments and the analogies used to express them are the foundation of collective identity construction. Seemingly quotidian conversations, jokes and comments all shape the subcultural members' perceptions of group norms and expectations. Yet, these collective identities are layered with other factors, such as geography. Tellingly, only the section title is 'Desi' – the novel is *Londonstani*. This shared metropolitan identity connects every character throughout the novel, as their performance of a desi identity is based on their localized responses to the

BBC (as a symbolic British institution), London's public transportation (as a perceived class symbol which they frequently ridicule), Hounslow's religious tensions (as symbolic territorial battles which combine historical conflict with displays of masculinity) and the UK desi beats scene (as a symbol of British Asian integration and cultural hybridity). The localized public performance of collective identities has also been a central feature of hip-hop culture since its inception. From rappers 'repping' New York's South Bronx to graffiti artists tagging territorial swaths through their cities, a deliberate emphasis on space and place pervades hip-hop. These performances establish the individual both as part of a community and as distinct within it. This dual claim to representivity and uniqueness often takes the form of linguistic expression, whether in the form of rhymes, slang or graffiti tags. For the desi boys, their self-designation as 'desi' and their familiarity with symbols of the UK establishment allow them to demonstrate a degree of cross-cultural literacy while rejecting what they perceive to be the dominant institutions in their locality. As Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter note, institutional oppositionality is often a key component of subcultural movements.⁶⁰ Yet, a metropolitan identity implies a degree of cultural fluidity that embraces varied connections and sources to create harmony, not unity. As Léopold Senghor writes, 'Man is therefore a composition of mobile life forces which interlock.'⁶¹ By the end of the novel, Malkani leaves open the possibility of a metropolitan identity that transcends sectarian divisions, even if those divisions still compose part of its framework. Rather than focusing on singularity, this identity is an exercise in multiplicity, both in terms of what constitutes a metropolitan identity and the attitudes of openness that characterize its expression.

Conclusion

Poetic analogy is about the construction and revelation of layers. New connections emerge from the juxtaposition of unlikely analogs, and these formations are constantly changing in an interconnected web of signification. In *Londonstani*, Malkani describes how contemporary South Asian British youth build, reveal and discard these layers of identity. The interplay of cultural identity construction with the broader adolescent challenge of negotiating independence reflects an explosively creative mix of languages, cultural references, and social groups. True to the title, this mix represents a specific locality and historical experience (suburban London in the early 2000s) while maintaining a more general resonance with adolescent male processes of self-definition. Although much of the hip-hop inspired rhetoric is superficially disturbing for its reductive tendencies, Malkani ultimately presents a hopeful vision for the possibilities of increasing individual awareness of the construction of identity. At the end of the novel, Jas and his father connect in a way that makes it apparent that Jas has voluntarily distanced himself from his family. When Jas's father says he is willing to go to jail for his son and reveals that it is Jas who has been distancing himself from the family, the reader suddenly gains a new perspective on Jas's family life. This revelation is mirrored by Jas's new (begrudging) understanding of his father as a caring parent, an awareness that points to the hope that individual interactions can change perspectives through increased reflection, which Malkani states was one of his goals in writing *Londonstani*.⁶² Malkani uses metaphor to draw a clearer picture of the way a mobile phone is used as a tether between mother and son, for example, while also acknowledging its power to enable peer interactions and indicate relative social status. These analogies operate both internally and externally to define the boys and to help them navigate and chart their relations. With a greater understanding and conscious selection of the analogies used in these construction processes, the hope is that more enlightened

choices will emerge, even from within the same culture, as when Jas references Wyclef Jean while defending Samira.

Despite this optimistic outlook, analogy functions by highlighting the dissimilarities as much as the likenesses. A healthy tension and understanding of identity as a process in motion encourages an appreciation of conflict for its creative potential. The structure of the section titles indicates that a withdrawal is sometimes necessary before acceptance, both on a societal level (Paki/Sher/Desi) or a personal level (Jas and his father). Describing his research for *Londonstani*, Malkani states:

My dissertation did, however, highlight one optimistic interpretation of what might be going on among Asian kids. Sociologist Tariq Modood had written about how voluntary segregation along ethnic lines might give minority communities the strength and self-esteem to assimilate with mainstream society later on, but on their own terms. The actions of some Asian kids might have looked unnecessarily aggressive and sometimes even ugly, but racism and discrimination were once very real threats. [...] As the threat of racism receded, surely these kids' aggressive, anti-assimilation ethic would follow? Perhaps that dynamic that Modood called "assertive ethnicity" and the evolution of Asian boys from victims to predators was a necessary step in the creation of a truly British Asian subculture - allowing kids to integrate on their own terms, bringing their own brand of Britishness to the table.⁶³

Malkani's emphasis on national identity indicates that group affiliations comprise human identity by default, but the form of expression that those affiliations take can be tolerant and inclusive. The struggle between community-focused ideals and the rampant individuality of materialism is a current generational challenge, but it is also a looming crisis in Western democracy, though that analysis is beyond the scope of the current discussion.⁶⁴ As Caroline Rooney notes, 'Malkani's logic implies that aggressive segregation could be thought of as a dialectical phase on the path to eventual integration; it shows us the unequal power relations that require a recognition of difference.'⁶⁵ Stephen Dedalus echoes in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, 'There can be no reconciliation... if there has not been a sundering.'⁶⁶ The delineation of distinctions allows for a reclamation of individual identity in a historical context of oppression, though the challenge then becomes

to avoid overcompensation in the form of narcissistic and retaliatory oppression of others. This tension indicates why no simple approaches to multicultural integration are possible, given that cultures are neither uniform nor static. Thus, focusing on the process of cultural interaction is perhaps more helpful than obsessing over the goal of reaching utopian co-existence.

For a more precise vision of this process of cultural interaction, Paul Gilroy offers up Britain's 'long experience of convivial post-colonial interaction and civic life,' which has, 'largely undetected by our governments, provided resources for a vibrant multi-culture that we do not always value, use wisely or celebrate as we should.'⁶⁷ While acknowledging the challenges that racism still poses, Gilroy also argues that popular culture like reality TV shows has shifted the discursive focus from racial differences to consumer differences. United by cultural and material consumption patterns, the desi boys (including Jas) share a hip-hop consumer identity that is informed by a historical background, but not determined by it. Hip-hop culture contains a version of the British post-imperial malaise that Gilroy terms 'melancholia', though the inverted hip-hop manifestations of this melancholia are verbal (and actual) guns that blast away insecurities instead of nativistic outbursts of postcolonial ennui over a bygone imperial British identity.⁶⁸ Both expressions of melancholia share frustrations about perceived historical injustices, and the defensive positions of the melancholic parties arise from a sense of insecurity about their future prospects. In contrast to nostalgic melancholia, Gilroy posits conviviality as a celebratory cross-cultural energy that creates a more inclusive and progressive public discourse. A constructive metropolitan identity seems congruent with conviviality, as multiple sources are brought together to produce a creative community that values analogy over authenticity.

Ultimately, hip-hop culture and *Londonstani* both boil down questions of authenticity to their component parts. Despite a predominantly middle-class suburban consumer base, rap music has largely revolved around affiliation and proximity to ‘authentic’ urban experiences, with a heavy focus on hypermasculine expression. As R.A.T. Judy notes, the concept of ‘authenticity’ in hip-hop has become detached from experiential identity and instead has become associated with consumer identity.⁶⁹ Put simply, ‘being real’ is no longer about what you do; it is about what you say and consume. Malkani demarcates this shift by focusing on Jas’s obsession with using the correct slang and the boys’ collective fixation on car models and stylish phones. The notion of authentic expression as a theatrical performance even occurs in Jas’s descriptions of the fight scenes in the novel, which are cinematic in scale compared to the substantially less dramatic reality of the physical combat that is actually taking place.⁷⁰ While the emphasis on form over substance may be a postmodern trait, it also reflects the late capitalist suburban shift away from lived hardship (in terms of physical or financial poverty) to perceived hardship.⁷¹ This is not to discount the perceptions of hardship at varying economic levels, but merely to emphasize that environmental influences on identity construction are social as well as economic. In fact, in hip-hop culture there is often an inverse relationship to one’s actual financial status, which is to say that poor rappers often flaunt jewelry or cars that they either do not own or cannot realistically afford, while rapping millionaires still discuss running the block and being crime lords.⁷²

Yet, as Jay-Z notes when he raps, ‘We make a million off of beats, cause our stories is deep’, the narratives and their poetic renderings are compelling both as art and as entertainment.⁷³ In *Decoded*, Jay-Z elaborates on that line:

This line feels kind of thrown off, but it’s maybe the strangest line on the whole record. I’ve been describing a place that’s full of violence, where the scramblers on the corner are trying to make enough money to move, where God doesn’t visit, but

the irony is that the stories that came out of this place—a *block from hell*—would make millions for the storytellers.⁷⁴

The power of the art that Jay-Z is describing is linguistic in form and formative in application. Through descriptive language and analogy, rappers can convey gruesome realities to listeners who have never experienced these environments, and the degree to which those listeners have internalized these identities and experiences as their own is a testament to the rappers' effectiveness. This power can promote increased interracial interaction, and it can also disseminate reductive gender stereotypes. Once the analogic form has been adopted as a component method of identity construction and interpersonal relation, the substance that fills it determines the impact it has on the listener or reader. As the next chapter will explore, Christian rappers have used the form to raise the awareness of the listener, with the goal of prompting the listener to take action. As Gilroy implies in the opening quote of this chapter, cultural forms which use poetic analogy in constructive ways can have a widespread effect on societal understanding and acceptance, though the appropriation of analogy for reductive ends will require constant contestation and critique. Analogy can be a catalyst for compassion or a justification for objectification – the devil is in the details.

¹ Gilroy, Paul. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. p. 4.

² hooks, bell. 'Postmodern Blackness'. *Postmodern Culture*. Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 1990). Online. Internet. (11 December 2010). Available WWW:

http://muse.jhu.edu.chain.kent.ac.uk/journals/postmodern_culture/v001/1.1hooks.html

³ Brandes, Blake. 'Our lives are constructed with symbols: An Interview with Gautam Malkani'. Canterbury, UK: 24 October 2009. Unpublished Interview.

⁴ Gilroy, Paul. *Small Acts*. London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993. p. 2.

⁵ Gilroy, Paul. 'It's a Family Affair'. *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. p. 89.

⁶ Forman, Murray. 'Foreword'. *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. p. xii.

⁷ Malkani, Gautam. *Londonstani*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2006. p. 22.

⁸ Fanon, Frantz. *A Dying Colonialism*. Trans. Haakon Chevalier. New York: Grove Press, 1965. p. 62.

⁹ See Chapter 2, 'Campaigning for Respect', from Elijah Anderson. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999. pp. 66-106.

¹⁰ Gilroy, *Small Acts*, p. 2.

¹¹ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York, Grove Press, 1967. p. 110.

¹² Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. London: Penguin Books, 2001. pp. 200-250.

¹³ Malkani, pp. 160-161.

¹⁴ As sociologist Claire Alexander notes, conspicuous consumption has served to unify disparate racial and class groups around a shared fixation on black urban youth style as an indicator of financial success: 'It is also true, however—and as a further complication—that large numbers of black youth have become mobilized around these same symbols of material success. This has created an image of lifestyle and wealth which belies the insecurity of black youth in employment, but has also helped to focus and mobilize black youth aspirations. These symbols have been adopted of markers of the "alternative economy" as well as of more traditional forms of black employment. They have thus become an integral part of black youth style, which has served to integrate disparate groups of youth, rather than distinguish them as they might wish. It has also served to blur the symbolic boundaries of perceived class identities, and further obfuscate the race/class dichotomy. As one of my informants commented, if one sees a black man with a BMW, a mobile phone, a designer suit and gold jewellery [sic], he could either be an insurance salesman or a drug dealer—or both.' (Claire Alexander. *The Art of Being Black*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 96)

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman argues that this perpetual dissatisfaction is the basis of consumer culture in contemporary western capitalism. See Zygmunt Bauman. *Consuming Life*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007. pp. 98-99.

¹⁶ In 'Marketing dreams: The political elements of style', Stuart Ewan elaborates: 'style has become a critical factor in definitions of self. As one enters, or falls into encounters with other people – intimates and strangers alike – style is a way of stating who one is: politically, sexually, in terms of status and class. Style is a device of conformity, or of opposition. Style conveys mood. Style is a device by which we judge – and are judged by – others. It is worn on the surfaces of our bodies; it organizes the space in which we live; it permeates the objects of our daily lives; it is often mistaken for subjectivity. To "have a lot of style" is an accolade of remarkable personhood.' (*Consumption, Identity, and Style*. Ed. Alan Tomlinson. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. p.43)

¹⁷ Graham, James. 'An Interview with Gautam Malkani: Ealing Broadway, 6 November 2007'. *The Literary London Journal*. Vol. 6, No. 1. March 2008. Online. Internet. (19 December 2010). Available WWW: <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2008/graham.html>

¹⁸ Malkani, p. 24.

¹⁹ Malkani, p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Muhammad, Fatimah N. 'How To NOT Be 21st Century Venus Hottentots'. *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*. Eds. Gwendolyn D. Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham and Rachel Raimist. Mira Loma, CA: Parker Publishing, LLC, 2007. pp. 126-127. (article: pp. 115-140)

²³ Malkani, p. 19.

²⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points to the rise of US black nationalism in the 1960s and 70s as the period when the Black Power and black aesthetic movements directly connected homophobia and sexualization of the black male body with a larger political conception of blackness that both celebrated and feared black male sexuality. See: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. 'The Black Man's Burden'. *Black Popular Culture. A Project by Michele Wallace*. Ed. Gina Dent. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992. pp. 78-79. (article: pp. 75-83) Paul Gilroy also comments on the reduction of representations of blackness to 'materialism and misogyny' and the construction of 'black men as both sources of pleasure and sources of danger' in *Small Acts*, p. 228.

²⁵ Malkani, p. 68.

²⁶ Malkani, p. 40.

²⁷ Malkani, p. 68.

²⁸ Campbell, Colin. 'I shop therefore I know that I am: the metaphysical basis of modern consumerism'. *Elusive Consumption*. Eds. Karin M. Ekström and Helene Brembeck. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004. pp. 41-42. (article: pp. 27-44)

²⁹ Malkani, p. 95.

³⁰ Malkani, p. 65.

³¹ Malkani, p. 183.

³² Ulen, Eisa Nefertari. 'They're Not Talking About Me'. *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*. Eds. Gwendolyn D. Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham and Rachel Raimist. Mira Loma, CA: Parker Publishing, LLC, 2007. pp. 142, 146. (article: pp. 141-147)

³³ Bauman, p. 110.

³⁴ Malkani, p. 64.

- ³⁵ Malkani, p. 65.
- ³⁶ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. p. 204.
- ³⁷ Malkani, pp. 44-45.
- ³⁸ Graham, 'Interview'.
- ³⁹ 'Skinheads don't bovver with the West Indians, probably because they are tough. Pakistanis are a favorite target because they seem passive, weak and, above all, different. "They smell, don't they?" says the son of a London docker. "It's all that garlic. I mean, they've no right to be here." One skinhead described the "Paki-bashing" technique to a British television interviewer: "You go up to them and bump into them, and then you nut them right, and then you hit them, and as they go down you give them a kicking, bash them with an iron bar, and take their watches and rings and things like that.'" 'Britain: The Skinheads'. *Time*. 8 June 1970. Online. Internet. (2 October 2010). Available WWW: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,909318-2,00.html>
- ⁴⁰ Gilroy, *Small Acts*, p. 68.
- ⁴¹ Malkani, p. 78.
- ⁴² I use 'Desi' when referring to the collective identity and 'desi' when referring to individuals, as in 'the desi boys'.
- ⁴³ Alexander, p. 60.
- ⁴⁴ Graham, 'Interview'. Quote from: Walcott, Derek. *Collected Poems: 1948-1984*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986. p. 353.
- ⁴⁵ Malkani, p. 48.
- ⁴⁶ Malkani, p. 203.
- ⁴⁷ Malkani, p. 81.
- ⁴⁸ Malkani, p. 139.
- ⁴⁹ Williams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman. 'Introduction'. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Essex: Pearson Education Ltd, 1994. p. 193.
- ⁵⁰ Malkani, pp. 173-174.
- ⁵¹ Malkani, p. 173.
- ⁵² Spender, Dale. 'Language and Reality: Who Made The World?' *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*. Eds. Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley and Alan Girvin. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. p. 146.
- ⁵³ Malkani, p. 135.
- ⁵⁴ Fraser, Benson P. and William J. Brown. 'Media, celebrities, and social influence: identification with Elvis Presley'. *Mass Communication and Society*. Vol. 1, No. 1. May 2002. p. 187. (article: pp. 183-207)
- ⁵⁵ 'Usher's New Look – Youth Programs'. *New Look Foundation*. Online. Internet. (17 October 2010). Available WWW: http://www.ushersnewlook.org/youth_programs/?id=0001
- ⁵⁶ Graham, 'Interview'.
- ⁵⁷ Potter, Russell A. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995. p. 2.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ Hip-hop also provides this type of historical and cultural background which serves as the basis for group affiliation.
- ⁶⁰ Heath, Joseph and Andrew Potter. *The Rebel Sell: How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*. Chichester (UK): Capstone Publishing Ltd., 2006.
- ⁶¹ Senghor, Léopold Sédar. 'Negritude.' *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Essex: Pearson Education Ltd, 1994. p. 31.
- ⁶² Brandes, 'Interview'.
- ⁶³ Malkani, Gautam. 'What's right with Asian boys'. *Financial Times*. 21 April 2006. Online. Internet. (11 January 2011). Available WWW: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/9f2bb9fc-d03b-11da-b160-0000779e2340.html>
- ⁶⁴ For a trenchant analysis of the culture of corruption and mercantile greed that led to the global financial meltdown in 2008, see Matt Taibbi. *Griftopia*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010.
- ⁶⁵ Rooney, Caroline. 'Re: Londonstani Draft 2.' Email to Blake Brandes. 25 January 2011.
- ⁶⁶ Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 1922. p. 187
- ⁶⁷ Gilroy, Paul. 'Melancholia or conviviality: The politics of belonging in Britain.' *Soundings*. 2005. Online. Internet. 20 May 2011. Available WWW: <http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/articles/gilroy.html>
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ Judy, R.A.T. 'On The Question of Nigga Authenticity'. *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. p. 113.
- ⁷⁰ Graham, 'Interview'.

⁷¹ Obviously, the notion of ‘hardship’ is a perception for all people, and ‘objective’ measurements of financial or physical poverty do not necessarily reflect the individual adaptations and feelings about that level of subsistence.

⁷² The most striking example of the latter is Rick Ross, a Miami-based rapper who became famous for his epic tales of drug running, gunplay and ‘knowing Noriega... the real Noriega’. Photos surfaced of Ross serving as a corrections officer, an accusation that Ross did not deny. Ross’s continued success as a rapper, despite the fact that his previous occupation belied direct opposition to everything he rapped about, signified that hip-hop as violent theater had gone as mainstream as professional wrestling.

⁷³ Jay-Z. *Decoded*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010. p. 214.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 215.

Chapter 3

What Would Sartre Do?: Committed Literature and Christian Hip-Hop

At first glance, European cultural theorists and Christian rappers may not seem to be the most likely ideological companions. As a pioneering existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre was a prominent atheist, and Theodor Adorno critiqued the fascist tendencies of Christian right-wing radio in the United States during the 1930s.¹ However, both thinkers' positions on the notion of committed literature are surprisingly applicable to the stated mission of many contemporary Christian rappers (namely, salvation in Jesus Christ and the creation of disciples). An analysis of Sartre and Adorno's positions on committed literature can be applied to Christian hip-hop to explain this developing music genre as a socio-political force and a highly coherent repository of anti-commodification discourse in post-bling hip-hop culture. From questions of authentic expression to autonomous art, Adorno and Sartre provide a lens through which to understand Christian hip-hop as committed literature, though one must also acknowledge substantive conflicts between the rappers' messages and the theorists' political agendas. In examining these tensions, this study will assess the degree to which Christian rap 'ain't entertainment... it's timeless truth' (to quote Lecrae in 'Jesus Muzik'²) and whether this purported instrumentalization of the art form—one in which art may be used as the vehicle for a message—compromises or complements its aesthetics.

In *What Is Literature?*, Sartre defines the notion of 'commitment' in literature as the act of an author who has 'committed himself in the universe of language' and 'can never again pretend that he cannot speak'.³ Although Sartre says that 'to speak is to act', he qualifies the speech of writers by calling it 'action by disclosure'.⁴ By revealing something about the world, the author can draw the readers' attention to it. If this

revelation is a characteristic of the readers themselves, then they gain a degree of awareness to which they must respond, even if that response manifests as denial. As Sartre explains, ‘the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about.’⁵ This definition envisions the writer’s task as both conceptual (to raise awareness) and concrete (to change individual mindsets and behaviors). Yet, as Adorno notes, the goal of committed literature is not to create detailed political manifestos or elaborate policies. From Adorno’s perspective, ‘committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions... but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes.’⁶ This qualification distinguishes committed art from political rhetoric. By provoking a state of reflection, the author attempts to effect a deep change within the reader’s assumptions and/or perspectives on a part of the world, rather than making specific political prescriptions.

Sartre asks the next logical question: ‘What aspect of the world do you want to disclose?’⁷ Committed literature frequently displays two goals: to expand the reader’s understanding of the Other and/or to challenge the reader him/herself. These goals are inextricably twined, as Sartre notes when he states that the reader ‘knows that he is *seen* at the moment he *sees* himself’.⁸ As the spectator gains awareness of being watched in the midst of the self-reflective act, he or she can no longer be a passive consumer of text. The author knows the reader feels implicated by this new-found awareness, and the reader must acknowledge the author’s perceptive assessment of the reader’s assumptions or positions. This engagement is the reason the author takes the risk of committing words to public viewing: by placing him- or herself in the reader’s cognitive space, the author demands a response. The form that the response takes is not the committed author’s primary focus; rather, it is the act of provoking a response in the first place.

Yet, Sartre realizes that a general emotional response to committed literature is not sufficient for it to make a societal impact. His next question is: 'What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?'⁹ Sartre's own response is for the reader not only to gain awareness but also to 'assume full responsibility for the object that has been thus laid bare'.¹⁰ This demand for accountability enriches the meaning of 'committed' literature. The author commits words and thoughts to the page through a speech act, and then he or she asks for a reciprocal commitment from the reader. While acknowledging this goal, Adorno felt the didactic quality of committed art was too easily commoditized, which is a mild critique compared to his contempt for explicitly popular art. It is easy to see why Adorno opposed popular art in favor of autonomous art—art without direct purpose or function—for if the definition of entertainment is audience passivity and non-reflective action, then it is ill-suited to inspiring active commitment. The easy consumption of a medium ostensibly disengages an audience, since individual responsibility is a function of the recognition of oneself as an individual with expectations of behavior. This is the reason that Soren Kierkegaard said that 'the crowd is untruth'.¹¹ When an abdication of individuality occurs, the commitment of responsibility to a community is no longer borne by the individual but rather a nebulous grouping of 'the crowd'. When it encourages individual audience members to participate in a group experience that makes no real demands on them, popular art fails the test of engendering reciprocal commitment.

Despite this dire assessment, popular art does not necessarily require audience disengagement. In fact, the accessibility of popular art often means that it can have a more profound impact by becoming 'edutainment' – reaching an audience through the entertainment value of the art, and then educating them once they are participants.¹² This principle of entertaining engagement has been the stated mission of Christian hip-hop, as

one of the most popular contemporary Christian rappers Flame explains: ‘The reason I even do this rap ministry is ‘cause I see the influence of secular rap and hip-hop on the urban community and the whole world at large. And I just want to communicate God’s heart, and I want to show the relevance of the Bible in my music.’¹³ As hip-hop has grown to become a popular global art form, a community of Christian rappers has risen to challenge the commercialism, hedonism and egotism that mainstream manifestations of hip-hop present. By using the popularity of the medium to subvert its materialistic impulses, Christian rappers are creating committed art that mirrors Sartre’s schematic for effecting individual change.

The song ‘Way Out’ from Flame’s 2004 eponymous album fits Sartre’s model of committed art while simultaneously addressing Adorno’s critiques of artistic authenticity in the medium. The track begins with an excerpt of news reports from the 1999 Columbine school shooting in Colorado, USA – an intriguing juxtaposition with the content of the rest of the song, which predominantly addresses urban-dwelling individuals. The Columbine shooters were two disenchanted white suburban teenagers, and thus Flame appears to be expanding the message of the song to struggling individuals from all backgrounds, rather than just inner-city youth. In the vein of committed art, Flame’s goal of disclosure is evident from the chorus:

We need a way out
 Take a look and examine the streets
 The famine in [fam in the] streets
 Young [y’all] cats just be handlin’ heat
 Don’t speak another word on how it’s hard
 Unless you pointin’ me in the direction of the Lord
 We know it’s real; that’s why we need a way out.¹⁴

As indicated by the brackets above, there are several ambiguous homonymic moments in the chorus that reinforce Flame’s call for listeners to examine their lives. The dual phrasing ‘famine in streets’ and ‘fam in the streets’ indicates a communal identification of

the speaker with the listener ('family') while acknowledging a deep spiritual or material lack ('famine'). The subsequent line conflates 'young' and 'y'all' to create a direct address to an imagined listener. The concept of 'handlin' heat' can refer to carrying firearms, but it also evokes the notion of 'playing with fire' – two concepts that are intertwined in Flame's critique of violent urban life ('the streets'). The following exhortation anticipates protest from the listener – 'Don't speak another word on how it's hard.' As Sartre indicated, once disclosure occurs, the listener must respond. Here, Flame rejects potential excuses, but he also employs the double-meaning of the word 'hard', which in hip-hop slang can mean 'rugged' or 'tough' in an admirable way. By instructing the listener to refrain from speaking 'another word on how it's hard', Flame critiques celebratory portrayals of violent street life. His qualification 'unless you pointin' me in the direction of the Lord' suggests both a reconceptualization of God as a model worthy of emulation and an acknowledgment of the difficulty of achieving a personal standard worthy of God. This act identifies the goal of the disclosure – to bring the listener to God, and more specifically, Jesus (whose name is being whispered in the background throughout the chorus) as a 'way out'. As Adorno noted about committed art, there is no exact description within the song of how to find a 'way out' through Jesus; rather, the goal here is for the listener to 'turn to Jesus', rather than to promote a specific conversion ritual.

In the introduction to 'Way Out', Flame anticipates Adorno's cautions about authenticity and appropriation in committed art. Adorno critiques Brecht for affecting 'the diction of the oppressed... It is a usurpation and almost a contempt for victims to speak like this, as if the author were one of them.'¹⁵ For Adorno, authenticity of experience seems to be a primary criterion for acceptable subaltern representation, and in the hip-hop community, a similar requirement exists. If the speaker is not seen to be 'real' (i.e. authentic), then he or she is not accepted or celebrated within the community, and in a

historical context Adorno feared the fascistic results of taking this ‘jargon of authenticity’ to extremes, though clearly this jargon has more dire implications in the political realm than in the artistic realm.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Flame understands the need for his audience to know that he identifies with them through his own experience, as Christian rappers have been criticized for their paternalism and condescension.¹⁷ Thus he begins the song by implicitly challenging the violent and materialistic master narratives of self-proclaimed ‘hood rappers’ and establishing his own experience-based counter-presentation of alternatives: ‘So many cats speak on what’s going on in the hood, as if we don’t still experience struggle. But with the struggle, I want to offer you the way out, the way of escape, which is known to be the source – J-E-S-U-S.’¹⁸ During this spoken introduction, a male voice behind Flame is whispering various afflictions of inner-city communities, such as ‘murder, babies havin’ babies, crime, drug houses, drug busts’. This voice serves as a counterpoint to the ‘Jesus’ whispering voice in the chorus, as a problem-and-solution structured call-and-response.

Having established his position and goal, Flame offers his and his crew’s personal history to stress their credibility:

Everything that y’all did, we done done before
 And the measure y’all did it in, we done done and more
 Cats didn’t just start livin’ grimy
 Death didn’t just start tryin’ to find me
 Vest didn’t just start gettin’ slimy
 Been in the streets and we know it’s real
 Been in environments where cats done got killed
 Over some drug money.¹⁹

Here, a combination of linguistic specificity and situational vagary are central to Flame’s identification with his audience. Flame portrays struggles that confirm audience expectations of low-income urban life, and listeners will ostensibly connect with Flame’s outlined experiences, to the degree that he does not even need to go into detail, as he indicates in the second verse: ‘Most definitely been rejected; I just held it in / So now I see

what you see, plus I feel what you feel / so it goes without saying that what is real is real'.²⁰ The last phrase references a common hip-hop expression, 'Real recognize real', which suggests that authentic individuals will identify each other without substantial amounts of background information. At the same time, the specificity of Flame's language connects even more directly with a listener accustomed to speaking and hearing these phrases, references and narratives. There is an intimate sense of communal affiliation due to Flame's adoption of mainstream hip-hop diction, and these linguistic signifiers act as the bonds that connect the rapper to the listener. Analogy becomes a metaphor, relating the known and the unknown through a linguistic bridge.

As for the content of Flame's identification with urban individuals, Adorno's second major critique of committed art addresses it through the aestheticization of violence: '... by turning suffering into images, harsh and uncompromising though they are, it wounds the shame we feel in the presence of the victims. For these victims are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them.'²¹ Here Adorno raises concerns that suffering can serve a voyeuristic or even pleasurable purpose (*Shadenfreude*), which becomes even more troubling when that suffering is commoditized. The consumption of suffering as entertainment rather than shameful tragedy has the potential to perpetuate violence and desensitize those who might otherwise stop it. By contrast, the response that Flame seems to proffer is that he can share the struggle and pitfalls of these experiences so that others will not have to suffer the same fate. This refutation reiterates Flame's explicit instrumentalization of his art and the fact that his intended audience are not idle consumers but people who are suffering. In fact, in the third verse he rejects any discussion on the subject that is not focused on emerging from the deadly lifestyle: 'It's crunch time, so don't speak about the struggle / You showin' us nothin' unless you show us how to escape the hustlin' / In this war zone.'²²

Adorno seems unconvinced by this didactic undertaking: 'The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic principle of stylization, and even the solemn prayer of the chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed.'²³ Through this protest, Adorno's philosophical position becomes clearer – he opposes *any* accommodation to the world, regardless of its intention. By contrast, writers of committed literature strive to provoke a fundamental self-examination within the reader, often by depicting pain and injustice in an attempt to reduce the frequency with which they will recur in the future. Perhaps it is the removal of a degree of horror that allows that reflection to occur, less hindered by fear, paralysis or trauma. Nevertheless, Adorno feels that conveying the meaninglessness and inherent lack of moral coding in the world should be the goal of art, as he claims in his praise of Kafka: 'He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away.'²⁴ This perpetual disquietude seems to have a singular focus on negating evil without positing a good, though the challenge largely seems to lie in identifying 'evil' without actively defining a 'good'. However, it seems that losing forever 'any peace with the world' is the first step towards committed action, since that recognition demands a movement away from resignation.

Disputing Adorno's assertion that there is 'no exit,' Flame insists that there is a 'way out' of the existential crisis.²⁵ Rather than aestheticizing violence, he uses the imagined listener's experiences as his reference point: 'Everything that y'all did, we done done before.'²⁶ Once he has created mutual identification and let the listeners know that they are not alone in their struggles, Flame makes his call of disclosure:

So hard to see through you with the truth 'cause you tellin' lies
 And I can see to your heart straight through your eyes
 That you frontin', drug money is stealin' your joy
 Now you huntin', lookin' for somethin' to give you some joy.²⁷

With a penetrating verbal gaze, Flame demonstrates the dichotomy of what Eithne Quinn (channeling Judith Butler) calls two simultaneous performances in rap tracks:

'performance *in* the text' and 'performance *of* the text'.²⁸ In this quatrain, the performance *in* the text is the act of a narrator informing the listeners that he is aware of their spiritual emptiness. This corresponds to Sartre's act of disclosure by attempting to provoke the listener into a state of self-reflection. It is unlikely that Flame will individually address the majority of the listeners in person (performance *of* the text), so the act of disclosure is the main commitment – *and makes the committed word manifest*. By identifying deep insecurity in the listeners, the narrator brings it to their attention and demands self-reflection. That realization is the first step towards the assumption of personal responsibility and the recognition that a change is possible.

With this assertion, Flame delivers his proposed solution:

Now peep game, call His name and He'll save your soul
 Watch you grow, slowly let go of struggles before
 And it'll show, lots of brothas will follow your lead as the Holy Ghost
 Draw you in close, and teach you His creeds.²⁹

The goal of this project is individual empowerment through the active choosing of Jesus and the gradual release of past adversity. Though lacking specific suggestions, the outline provided is 'tha big picture'; namely, conversion to Christianity and the creation of a community of disciples.³⁰ The proposed plan of action is an initial commitment to Christ, an escape from a past life of 'struggles before' and doctrinal education through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. The emphasis here is on a personal shift from violent inner-city self-reliance to seeking for support from God, as Flame indicates during an interlude within the song when he quotes Lamentations 3:40, 'Let us search and try our own ways,

and again turn to the Lord.’³¹ Inspiring this ‘turn’ is the goal of Flame’s work of committed art, as we will see in the following analysis of Christian rappers’ proselytizing mission.

After the Music Stops: MCs as Missionaries

From a historical perspective, one can view the rise of Christian rap as a long-fomenting theological counter-rebellion against the rise of nihilistic and hedonistic G-funk (gangsta) rap in the mid-1990s. As hip-hop critics Eithne Quinn and Todd Boyd note, ‘G-funk’s phenomenal success marked “the death of politics in rap music,” coinciding as it did with the sharp decline in sales of radical rap acts such as Public Enemy and KRS-One.’³² While early rappers occasionally mixed Christian themes with largely secular rap (e.g. MC Hammer and Tupac), a new generation of strictly Christian rappers emerged in the mid-2000s, many of whom signed to Reach Records, Cross Movement Records, and Lamp Mode Recordings, all independent US Christian rap labels. Rather than mixing religious and secular themes, these artists (such as Lecrae, Tedashii, Trip Lee, Sho Baraka, Flame, Ambassador, Cross Movement, Shai Linne, Pro and Json) rap exclusively about Christian topics and perspectives. This singular focus can be seen as a response to a postmodern understanding of the world where people (including rappers, as Eithne Quinn argues) are ‘composed of elements which do not cohere, of contradictory tendencies’.³³ Christian rapper Tommy Kyllonen (a.k.a. Urban D.) explains what the current generation of Christian rappers perceives postmodernism to be:

[P]ostmodernism is a melting pot of beliefs with no standard worldview. Therefore, people with this pluralistic worldview are highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for everyone regardless of their culture, race, or tradition. They focus on the relative truths of each person. Interpretation is up to the individual. Truth is really whatever you want it to be.³⁴

Hip-hop culture specifically has been viewed as a bastion of postmodernism, as Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby note: ‘Hip-hop not only disrupts many classical disciplines and

approaches to knowledge, but challenges theories of modernity by publicly holding them in contempt. So instead of being fixed, hip-hop identities are resolute. Instead of being fluid, they flow.’³⁵ While the previously listed Christian rappers are inevitably diverse in flow and message, they retain a striking consistency of purpose throughout their works. As Lecrae succinctly explains in ‘After The Music Stops’:

I'm out to take the Bible, create disciples
Who make disciples, disciple-cycles
That's why I want the beats to knock
So after the music stops, you can meet the Rock.³⁶

This explicit statement of praxis solidifies the place of Christian rap as committed art, with equal dedication to the commitment (to ‘make disciples’) and the art (for ‘the beats to knock’). In fact, Lecrae directly equates the quality of his art with its influence on his audience. In exploring his mission and audience, one can view Christian rap as an extension of broader evangelical efforts, albeit with a unique cultural angle of engagement. This section will first examine Lecrae’s proselytizing goals and then explore what Jean-Paul Sartre (channeling Baudelaire) calls ‘a double simultaneous postulation’ – the dual audience of believers and non-believers.³⁷

The final reported words of Jesus Christ are known as the Great Commission, which Matthew 23:18-20 (NIV) relates:

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

This command serves as a mission statement for Christians, and it serves as the basis for Lecrae’s song ‘Send Me’. On the track, Lecrae laments young people who have an encyclopedic knowledge of mainstream rappers but have not heard of Jesus, as well as ‘people deep in Africa’ and in China who ‘are dyin’ men until they know who died for sin’.³⁸ A postcolonial reading of these lines (including the unfortunate ‘Chinamen’

phrasing of ‘In China men are dyin’ men’) suggests a Christocentric worldview paired with rhetorically colonial portrayals of Africa and China. Yet, these ‘perfectly poverty-stricken people with no view’ do not exclusively exist abroad, as Lecrae notes: ‘Americans ain’t Christians they just practicin’ the rituals’.³⁹ In addition to the dual problems of ignorance of Christ and inadequate faith/worship, Lecrae further opines that ‘no one signing up to go on missions this summer / Rather sit at home and watch Xzibit pimpin’ a Hummer’. After several descriptions of death and gun violence (in the US and the Middle East), Lecrae concludes: ‘I know this is a graphic view / I pray that it’s attackin’ you / Tractin’ you, to act and do what you see in the back of you’. As his act of disclosure, Lecrae is attempting to arouse the listener’s sympathies through his descriptions of foreign and domestic suffering and death without Jesus. This instrumentalization of suffering is what Adorno rails against, as the representation of suffering becomes fuel for an illicitly pleasurable self-righteous anger that Lecrae foments to inspire listeners to take up missionary work. The musical production of the song reinforces this sentiment, with a militaristic beat throughout and the aggressive shouting of ‘Send me – I’ll go!’ in the chorus. More problematic than the pleasurable component (which Adorno portrays as an injustice against the represented victims) is the notion of militant evangelism, which harkens back to the Crusades and subsequent Orientalist colonization of non-Western cultures. The rhetoric of ‘saving the unenlightened (savages)’ was a primary justification for European mass-colonization of the world, and the re-introduction of this phrasing for contemporary mission work presents similar problematic assumptions about indigenous cultures.

Nevertheless, having detailed the many challenges facing fulfillment of the Great Commission, Lecrae explains what followers of Christ should be doing with their lives. In ‘After The Music Stops’, he asks, ‘After the show, after the set; after the music stops, what’s next? / Will there be fellowship, prayer, disciples? Will you open your Bibles?’⁴⁰

Here, the focus is supporting the ministry and the church rather than direct social action, and this theme is the general consensus in Christian hip-hop, as Urban D affirms: ‘The Christian hip-hop community needs to take it beyond the concerts and the CDs we produce... We need to become a proactive part of discipleship in a local church.’⁴¹ This goal is consistent with a theological understanding that the belief in Jesus Christ is the most important component of a person’s faith. Combating poverty is a secondary goal if the impoverished person does not believe in Jesus. Of course, socially progressive community work does happen through churches and ministry, but it receives rare mention in Christian rap. Even when it appears, the implicit understanding is that this outreach is a means to reach non-believers and bring them to Jesus. Yet, as Lecrae notes, Christ wants disciples, not just converts.⁴² This level of commitment demanded is intimidating, especially to the hip-hop community, as Urban D. explains: ‘[E]merging generations have made noncommitment a lifestyle. Noncommitment isn’t countercultural anymore; it’s an accepted characteristic of mainstream pop culture, propagated by pop-culture messages. The content of many hip-hop songs is anticommithment at its core.’⁴³ As a medium, Christian rap is not merely a committed art form of disclosure – it also actively propagates commitment as an ideal.

The basis for this commitment is community engagement (in contrast to the hyper-individualism of mainstream hip-hop culture). Lecrae’s demands of prayer, Biblical study, fellowship and disciple creation all revolve around the relation of the individual to the community. Interestingly, there is a strong gendered component to these calls to discipleship, with Christian rappers constantly calling for the creation of male disciples. This summons appears to come from two places, one historical and the other socio-cultural. The first is the twelve male disciples of Jesus, to whom Lecrae devotes a verse in ‘After The Music Stops’, and the second is the need for urban male mentorship and

parental substitutes, which is why the rappers ‘keep a couple young dudes around us / and teach ‘em the same truth God used to ground us’.⁴⁴ In ‘Hey Young Man’, Christian rapper Soul P. states that he and his urban contemporaries are the ‘product of a culture where fathers didn’t raise us’.⁴⁵ As Urban D. responds, ‘A spiritual family needs to step in and fill those gaps. We can’t fill a father’s shoes, but we can provide some male leadership for young men growing up without a dad.’⁴⁶ Lecrae’s initial prescriptions can be seen as an effort to structure an individual’s life around Christ, and structure is a crucial component of commitment, which is meaningless if opportunities to demonstrate it do not arise. Regular engagement with Christian communities and teachings develops a committed lifestyle—characterized by *discipline*—that is at the core of Lecrae’s preference for discipleship over mere conversion.

This linguistic convergence of ‘disciple’ and ‘discipline’ emphasizes why Christian rappers interpret the Great Commission as a call both to create disciples and to train them. As the OED states, discipline can mean both ‘instruction imparted to disciples or scholars; teaching; learning; education, schooling’ and, in a religious context, ‘the system or method by which order is maintained in a church, and control exercised over the conduct of its members; the procedure whereby this is carried out; the exercise of the power of censure, admonition, excommunication, or other penal measures, by a Christian Church.’ As Lecrae and Urban D. attest, the cycle of discipleship and discipline is crucial because commitment and involvement create ownership and responsibility between an individual and his or her community.⁴⁷ If the disciple is merely a student with no proselytizing duties, then he or she is a passive community member receiving instruction. However, if there is an immediate expectation of missionary work and community participation, then the call to commit is reciprocated. As the religious definition of discipline indicates, a significant component of Christian commitment is submission to both Jesus and Church

doctrine, and this surrender suggests a tension with both Sartre's view of commitment tasked with invoking responsibility in the individual and Adorno's opposition to religious absolutism.

In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno draws a direct connection between authenticity and authoritarianism.⁴⁸ The notion of authenticity presupposes an idealism that is easily corrupted and instrumentalized by political polarization, even where its advocates purport to have noble intentions. Adorno argues that the language of authenticity overwhelms any progressive goals it may claim, including those of religious adherents:

Nevertheless, the sacred quality of the authentic's talk belongs to the cult of authenticity rather than to the Christian cult, even where—for temporary lack of any other available authority—its language resembles the Christian. Prior to any consideration of particular content, this language molds thought. As a consequence, that thought accommodates itself to the goal of subordination even where it aspires to resist that goal. The authority of the absolute is overthrown by absolutized authority. Fascism was not simply a conspiracy—although it was that—but it was something that came to life in the course of a powerful social development. Language provides it with a refuge. Within this refuge a smoldering evil expresses itself as though it were salvation.⁴⁹

Thus, the goal of subordination is the primary locus of tension between Christian rappers and Adorno. Yet, the rappers protest that the submission to Jesus is not necessarily an abdication of agency, but rather the suppression of ego in favor of a realignment of values. Adorno's critique seems primarily focused on a worldly leadership claiming the 'authority of the absolute', which begs the question of whether a more egalitarian alignment of Christian individuals would necessarily fall under the same rubric when using Jesus as an altruistic ideal. Sartre and Adorno's emphasis of the primacy of the individual is at odds with Flame's admonition in 'The King' that 'you got to let loose of your throne and follow Jesus'.⁵⁰ The elevation of Jesus as 'the King' is potentially what Adorno fears, since the individual loses the 'throne' of self-determination. To follow Jesus, adherents must leave the attachments which physically bind them to the material world in favor of an ideal.

Both Adorno and the rappers oppose commodification, but their solutions are substantially opposed – the rappers argue that a focus on the self in general is the problem, whereas Adorno claims that only the notion of an authentic self is problematic. Adorno and the rappers may find unlikely common ground in that Adorno rejects divinizing the self, and the rappers could plausibly argue that Jesus is the ultimate example of self-sacrificing divinity. Nevertheless, it is certainly ironic that a highly anti-authoritarian art form would be used in the service of encouraging and enforcing Church doctrine in such an explicit way.

Two Worlds Collude: Audience in Christian Rap

The final component of Sartre's analysis of commitment is the recognition of a double articulation – the need for a writer to reveal him- or herself to people of similar backgrounds, and to explain the Other to others.⁵¹ This discussion of audience is particularly relevant to Christian rap in the American Evangelical community, which is predominantly rural and white, though there is a small (and largely segregated) African-American minority as well.⁵² On the Albert Mohler Program (a conservative Evangelical radio show), guest host Russell Moore interviewed Lecrae and asked the following in his introduction:

How can Christians take art forms that exist – whether that's opera or opry or hip-hop – and speak to that in a way that really meets the highest levels of expectation for that art form, while at the same bringing in a distinctively Christian message? There's a lot that conservative American Christians are missing when we're not paying attention to what's going on in hip-hop culture. I think there's a lot in the lyrics of hip-hop music, and sometimes even in the presentation, even in the worst... there's something there that we ought to have compassion upon. [...] Maybe these artists are picking up on a side of life that some of us aren't paying attention to. We're not seeing it because of where we live, or we're not seeing it because we don't want to see it. Maybe being confronted with the message of contemporary hip-hop music will cause us to see some things that Jesus is seeing right now.⁵³

Again, the notion of confrontation and disclosure appears at the heart of committed art.

Yet, the power dynamic that Moore describes is noteworthy, as he states the audience

‘ought to have compassion upon’ the portrayals in rappers’ narratives rather than merely listening to them or understanding them. This call for compassion reframes the engagement from passive listening to active commitment, to take ownership of the new information rather than merely acknowledging it. Moore also mentions the aesthetic challenge of meeting ‘the highest levels of expectation for that art form’, and Lecrae responds with his advice for aspiring artists:

I definitely often would encourage people, especially artists, (1) to know their Word; I mean, obviously God calls us to know our Word, just as laymen... so that it’s who you are, to live it authentically, and also to live in the context of authentic Biblical community, so that your community can challenge you as well in your gifting and your effectiveness. I have plenty people in my life who say “Man, you’re doing alright, but you can grow in this area...” and this just caused me to study and hone my craft even more. And I think ultimately community are the people who will help you to see things from the proper perspective, artistically and as far as being effective in the Word.⁵⁴

Indicating the degree to which the medium and the message are related in Christian rap, Lecrae connects the role of community in supporting spiritual development with that of crafting artistic excellence. As previously discussed with ‘real recognize real’, the appeal to authenticity is a central concept in the hip-hop community, and this emphasis has migrated into Lecrae’s framing of the religious domain as well. Although the concept of religious authenticity has doctrinal roots in Scriptural accuracy, Lecrae refers to it here as ‘who you are’, which is to say, an identity. Without personal authenticity, Christian rappers cannot connect with a hip-hop generation who thrive on the connection between artists and the experience they relate through their art. Without religious authenticity, the rappers cannot reach their own Christian communities, who are sometimes distrustful of secular music in general and hip-hop in particular. Thus the hip-hop adage ‘show and prove’ summarizes the tightrope of authenticity upon which the rappers must tread. The degree to which they do it successfully ultimately determines their appeal to ‘believers’

and ‘non-believers’ alike (though a dichotomous understanding of ‘believers’ and ‘non-believers’ is overly simplistic).

Throughout their songs, Christian rappers reveal their strategies of engagement with different audiences on the belief spectrum. According to Flame in ‘Real One’, people of non-Christian faiths (including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, Mormons and Christian Scientists,) are ‘wicked’ (Flame says, citing Romans 1) for not representing the ‘authentic and real Jesus’.⁵⁵ Although Muslims are also criticized frequently in the song for their doctrinal corruption, denunciations of Jews are notably absent in Christian rap in general. Undoubtedly the complex historical relationship between Christianity and Judaism, particularly during the Holocaust, plays a role in this omission. As for Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions, the typical depiction of areas where these religions are practiced (such as India and China) focuses on the absence of Christianity rather than the presence of other faiths. This portrayal of populations who ‘ain’t saved... in a country where sharin’ [the Christian] faith will get [you] shot up’ is a primary justification for missionary work, and again hearkens back to colonial rhetoric of bringing light to the dark uncivilized world.⁵⁶ A degree of irony exists in the rappers’ use of this discourse, since it was the Christian colonial powers who brought these African-American rappers’ ancestors to the United States as slaves. Yet despite these occasional confrontational moments, Christian rap generally steers away from direct engagement with other faiths in favor of focusing on struggling believers who are uncertain or weak in their faith.

That being said, Lecrae does address relativism regarding other faiths and secular humanism in ‘Truth’.⁵⁷ Rather than a strictly dismissive attitude, Lecrae attempts to engage these philosophies through his acts of disclosure. In this process, he produces a complex deconstruction of the concepts he is discussing, which makes his conclusion of

absolute Truth all the more striking. For example, Lecrae ends the song by addressing a common argument against the existence of God:

Look, man, some people say that God ain't real 'cause they don't see how a good God can exist with all this evil in the world. If God is real, then He should stop all this evil 'cause He's all-powerful, right? What is evil though man? It's anything that's against God. It's anything morally bad or wrong. It's murder, rape, stealing, lying, cheating. But if we want God to stop evil, do we want Him to stop it all or just a little bit of it? If He stops us from doing evil things, what about lying, or what about our evil thoughts? I mean, where do you stop, the murder level, the lying level, or the thinking level? If we want Him to stop evil, we gotta be consistent; we can't just pick and choose. That means you and I would be eliminated, right? Because we think evil stuff. If that's true, we should be eliminated! But thanks be to God that Jesus stepped in to save us from our sin. Christ died for all evilness. Repent, turn to Jesus, man.⁵⁸

In his analysis, Lecrae identifies the complexity of evil as a concept, while also highlighting the specificity of this claim (i.e. not just the existence of a God, but a *good* God). Rather than a simplistic binary view of evil just being anything that offends God, Lecrae separates the action from the thought, and this Cartesian split returns to the foundation of committed art. Humankind's continued existence is contingent on the presence of evil because to eliminate it would require the destruction of humanity. Although Adorno would obviously contest the moral coding of that statement (while still acknowledging that humans are incapable of perfect purity), the inextricability of thought and action means that committed art *can* operate on the level of an individual's deepest thoughts and beliefs to produce a change of behavior. If Jesus is the personal intervention, then the listener has a duty to recognize the relation between thought and action, and he or she must make the first mental step of faith to seek a positive behavioral change in his or her life.

Furthermore, Lecrae questions relativism as a philosophical principle:

Man, see some folks say, "All truth is relative, it just depends on what you believe." You know, "Hey man, ain't no way to know for sure who God is or what's really true." But that means you believe your own statement; that there's no way to know what's really true. You're saying that that statement is true. You're killing

yourself. If what's true for you is true for you, and what's true for me is true for me, what if my truth says yours is a lie? Is it still true? Come on man.⁵⁹

Here Lecrae presents a rather narrow view of agnosticism, which, contrary to his portrayal, is not necessarily prescriptive in its uncertainty. A claim to relativism normally admits the possibility of relativism itself being incorrect; therefore, the goal of relativism is often larger than personal philosophy – it advocates domestic political neutrality. In *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah explains that there is a useful distinction between individual and state policy regarding neutrality among identities. Between individuals, religious tolerance is optional, though common prohibitions against harassment, violence etc. still apply. However, as a state policy in a liberal democracy, neutrality is a requirement because the state's primary duty is to its citizens as equals, or as Appiah terms it, 'neutrality as equal respect'.⁶⁰ Lecrae's argument is more confrontational than constructive, with the goal of calling the listener's beliefs into question. Rather than accepting a pluralistic viewpoint, Lecrae is rousing listeners to examine their worldview in another attempt at disclosure for people who passively accept a postmodern understanding of identities and truth claims.

Lecrae's final claim against secular humanism as a philosophy revolves around the concepts of Christian self-effacement and divine purpose:

See, there's this thing called "secular humanism"; it says man is the source of all meaning and all purpose. You know what I'm saying? We're just the result of a big cosmic explosion. We don't really have a purpose or meaning, so we just come up with our own purpose. We're the source of our meaning and our purpose. How can a man, which is the product of chance, a finite being, be the source of purpose and meaning? You can't. You're created with purpose man. Get with the Creator y'all.⁶¹

Taking issue with materialistic self-determination, Lecrae suggests an alternative to listeners who may feel lost or intimidated by postmodern demands of individual purpose creation. Railing against both the presumptive arrogance of secular humanism (a depiction which secular humanists would likely echo about Christian fundamentalism) and the

perceived nihilism in this philosophy, Lecrae attempts to instill a sense of meaning and origin ('the Creator') in a deconstructed postmodern existence. Again, the appeal here is not to staunch advocates of secular humanism or relativism, but rather to listeners who may accept these positions by default of growing up in a Western capitalist society. The goal of Christian rap is to convert the uncertain, not the opposition.

Furthermore, the appeal to non-believers is tempered by a caution about compromising the Christ-centric focus of the music. While some Christian rappers like Soul P. are comfortable mixing traditional rap themes of swagger and partying with Christian messages, Lecrae is opposed to any dilution of the Christian content of his songs:

My rhymes' intent is to point straight at the Cross
 Without using clever lines and hints
 I know you'd probably be impressed if I cleverly used my melodies
 To share Christ without using his name heavily
 But I'd rather be saying his name so much
 You could never get me confused or discredit me.⁶²

In this explicit declaration of his artistic mission, Lecrae echoes Nietzsche's cry, 'Beware of all picturesque men!'⁶³ In a (possibly ironic) push for directness, Nietzsche says, 'The pathos of poses does *not* belong to greatness; whoever needs poses at all is *false*.'⁶⁴ Lecrae similarly indicates that an artistic enshrouding of his political message could potentially compromise its integrity, either by being too vague or by lacking scriptural depth and conviction. He frames this artistic choice as a defensive position to preempt criticism or confusion about the content of his message. By presenting an unapologetic testimony of his faith, Lecrae shows listeners that he has complete conviction in his beliefs, and this sense of certainty is clearly part of the 'show-and-prove' mentality that he uses to portray 'authenticity' to his listeners. If inauthenticity is anathema to hip-hop fans, then a Christian rapper with firm commitment to a singular message has the potential to resonate strongly within the hip-hop community. Yet, despite Lecrae's protestations about the aesthetic directness of his message, Christian rappers (including Lecrae) frequently employ

analogies, allusions, and other literary devices in their lyrics. Rather than obscuring the Christian message, the complexity of the lyrics complements the rappers' mission of reaching multiple audiences.

Having addressed the opposition, we can finally turn to the primary audience with whom Christian rappers engage – questioning believers. This group includes people who are casually interested in Christianity, nominally Christian, partially active in the Church, or questioning their faith. A certain autobiographical trend appears throughout these songs, as the rappers attempt to recommit themselves and find renewed conviction when they feel lost or questioning. For example, 'Prayin' For You' finds Lecrae recounting the story of a friend who is struggling in his faith:

He say he readin' daily, but he ain't really learnin'
 He been to church but say that he ain't moved by any sermon
 His faith's weak – he ain't prayed in a week
 [.....]
 He keep the TV off – videos just make him feel
 That he ain't really nothin' without money, girls and shiny wheels.⁶⁵

Over the course of the song, it becomes clear that despite having a supportive family and a relatively stable life, the friend feels a substantial disconnect from God and is questioning his purpose and immoral inclinations. At the end of the final verse, Lecrae reveals that the friend is actually him – a hip-hop rhetorical strategy to engage the listener in a third-person narrative before the final disclosure. This technique can be employed to portray the rapper in a vulnerable and sympathetic light, as many mainstream and underground rappers do not readily admit weakness.⁶⁶ In this case, the goal is misdirection – by drawing a sympathetic portrait of a struggling believer, Lecrae places the listener in a superior, if empathic, position. With his final revelation, Lecrae indicates that despite his fiercely rapped convictions, he can be as vulnerable and weak in his faith as other believers.

This admission relates to another persuasive technique used to bring potential believers into the Christian fold – the acceptance of an individual with all his or her faults

and vices. In ‘Take Me As I Am’, Lecrae acts as an exemplar for a sinner who can turn to Jesus:

I talked to a cat the other day, and he was like, “Man, I really want to come to Christ, but I gotta clean my life up first; get my sins together.” I told him, “I used to think that way too. I thought I had to change myself before I could come to Christ. But Christ changed me. Let me tell you my story...”⁶⁷

The scriptural basis for this position is Ephesians 2:8-9, ‘For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast’ (NIV). This is why Lecrae says ‘Christ through faith’ before the song begins. By reciting narratives of doubt and despair, Lecrae attempts to provoke self-reflection in the listener so that the act of identification with the narrative becomes an act of disclosure that brings the listener into the Christian fold. With a strong emphasis on feelings of insecurity and lack of self-worth, Lecrae presents the frailty of his humanity as the self-imposed barrier to accepting Christ’s love:

But why would You die for me?
My whole life I’ve been working for Satan while he fed lies to me
[...] I figure hell is what I deserve
But Your word says we all fall short, so I guess we all ought to burn.⁶⁸

A certain masochistic thread runs through these self-effacing songs, with Lecrae making statements like ‘How dare I compare my pain? / I deserve flames’.⁶⁹ This framing is based on the idea that humans are condemned by original sin and are only redeemed by the death of Jesus. A believer must spiritually die and be reborn in Christ. As an undeserving recipient of this spiritual redemption, believers are instructed to suppress their egos, since salvation is an act of faith rather than any action they themselves can take (or take credit for). Predictably, this position infuriates Nietzsche, who sees Christians revenging themselves on life (a process he calls *ressentiment*) through a ‘morality that would unself man’.⁷⁰ This opposition stems from Nietzsche’s validation of the fundamentally biological basis of human existence, which is necessarily an individualistic sensory experience.

Yet the Christian rappers' denunciation of egotism is also a historically-situated response to the reign of hypercapitalism in American society. A class-based Marxist emphasis on intellectual enlightenment and overturning dominant ideologies interacts intriguingly with Christian rappers' call to spiritual enlightenment by resisting capitalistic ideologies. The anti-materialistic and anti-individualistic messages in Christian rap appear in direct opposition to the predominant ethos of mainstream hip-hop culture. Yet as the Russell Moore interview with Lecrae reveals, Christian rappers still have a challenging task of making their art palatable to contemporary audiences of diverse backgrounds and worldviews. From conservative Christians to secular hip-hoppers, the rappers present their subject matter with an eye towards mediation, as Sartre suggests: 'a writer is committed... when he causes the commitment of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and others, to the reflective. The writer is, *par excellence*, a mediator and his commitment is to mediation.'⁷¹ Sartre's ideal form of committed writing is that which short-circuits the conscious processing of the information being received and directly triggers a reflective response, or as poet Seamus Heaney phrases it, 'the cultural depth-charges latent in certain words and rhythms, that binding secret between words in poetry that delights not just the ear but the whole backward and abyss of mind and body'.⁷² One of the most effective ways to provoke this reaction is through analogy. The direct relation of new information to existing concepts in the readers' minds means that the connection occurs immediately. The readers are free to reject the connection as incomplete or inaccurate, but nevertheless the suggestion of the analogy has forced the readers to juxtapose two concepts, whether they agree with the analogy or not.

Conclusion: Messianic Messengers

In Christian rap, the narrative of personal redemption is fundamentally inflected with the larger vision of Messianic salvation. The post-historical positioning of individuals' actions, replete with the ability to change and escape the past, echoes the conversion meme of turning to Jesus for theological salvation. The basic tenet at work here is what Pierre Bouretz describes as 'a messianism that delineates, on the horizon, a consummation of history, or announces its apocalyptic interruption, suggesting a continuous perfection of the world or at least its progressive repair, affirming the possibility of something beyond immediate experience of keeping us from being entirely certain that no such thing exists.'⁷³ The dual strands that Bouretz describes, alternatively completion or radical interruption, are unlikely points of connection between Sartre and Christian rappers. In the time and space before the consummation of history, individual choice is placed in full relief. No longer dependent on empirical validation of God, and not yet reconciled to God for judgment, humans possess a moment of true free will in which they can exercise independent choice. While the Christian rappers see this choice as whether or not to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, Sartre presents the opportunity to make a firmly historical commitment to progressive change. Sartre's notion of committed literature also seeks an interruption, though perhaps only apocalyptic in the sense of destroying previously held assumptions or worldviews. Despite Sartre's atheism, the promise of a Derridean 'empty messianism' promotes an attempt at humanistic 'progressive repair', thereby separating the content of Sartre's atheism from the form of a political project that seeks to increase collective understanding through individual redemption.⁷⁴

An important distinction between these two visions of redemption is obviously the endgame. If Sartre's committed approach is partial and gradual, then the Christian rappers, in contrast, present a starker absolutist approach. In Flame's apocalyptic song '2nd Coming' with Shai Linne and Pastor Jeff White, Shai Linne delivers a messianic vision:

In the scriptures we find facts, pictures of divine acts
 Prophesied God provides wisdom the mind lacks
 At History's climax, more vivid than IMAX
 The sky cracks with Jesus on some, "I'm baaaaaack"
 Now, just try to visualize the most glorious sight ever to hit physical eyes
 Holy angels in Christ who gets minimalized
 In splendor arrives and all the dead in Him will arise
 Believers who are alive become a matured order
 And caught up in the clouds like evaporated water
 To be captivated by the Master's grace and aura
 Before He activates the slaughter on the cats who hate the Torah
 The file wildin' out and doubt and wouldn't call on Him
 And now crying out for the mountains to fall on 'em
 The dead come out the grave at the holy judge they look
 They're broken up and shook while He opens up the books
 All sins will be weighed not ignored
 And law breakers slayed by the sword by the day of the Lord
 While we gaze and admire His greatness, liars and fakes
 Who hate Messiah - they expire in the fiery lake
 Made for Satan and his angels sent to deceive
 Multitudes who refuse to repent and believe
 The elect have no hell to fear
 Cause we're related to the Judge like the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air⁷⁵

Dramatically invoking awe and fear, the intense and highly scriptural apocalyptic content of the verse emphasizes the rapturous event of Christ's return in its full sublimity. The cinematic quality of this depiction and the complex internal rhymes of the verse highlight the dual appeal of Christian rap as entertainment and salvation. With a substantially legalistic emphasis and a charged orchestral beat, Flame, Shai Linne and Pastor Jeff White create an aural apocalypse that drives home the stakes for the listener. Belief in Jesus Christ will save the elect on Judgment Day, though 'all sins' committed by 'law breakers' will be 'weighed' and punished 'by the sword'. If encouragement and self-reflection are not enough to provoke awareness and repentance, then fear (*à la* the religious retreat scene in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) can be another rhetorical tool in the quest to instill discipline and promote conversion. One of the challenges with this approach is that a universalizing tendency often obscures or negates the historical reality and cultural context in which the ideas originated and are currently being implemented.

Shai Linne seems to make a effort to connect the apocalyptic vision with contemporary pop culture references (IMAX and the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air), although these moments feel more like culturally signifying bookends in an otherwise traditionally doctrinal presentation of the messianic vision.⁷⁶

The efficacy of such a fear-based approach notwithstanding, Christian rap as committed literature offers a template for viewing hip-hop as an avenue for personal and societal change. In a recent interview, Jay-Z explains his strong view on hip-hop as a cultural force:

I think hip-hop has done more for racial relations than most cultural icons (and I say, save Martin Luther King because his Dream speech we realized when President Obama got elected). But the impact of the music – this music didn't only influence kids from urban areas, it influenced people all around the world. Racism is taught in the home. I truly believe that racism is taught when you're young, so it's very difficult to teach racism when your kid looks up to Snoop Doggy Dogg. And if you look at clubs and how integrated they have become... before, people partied in separate clubs. There were hip-hop clubs, and there were techno clubs, and now people party together. Once you have people partying, dancing and singing along to the same music, then conversations naturally happen after that. And then within conversations, we all realize that we're more alike than we're separate.⁷⁷

The ability of committed literature to provoke self-reflection can also inspire greater interpersonal connectivity and understanding, as Jay-Z notes. This is the power of hip-hop as a cultural movement that goes beyond the written or performed word. Rather than being a solely individual experience and pursuit, hip-hop is inherently social and analogic. The practices and performances of the culture encourage community engagement and collaboration. While change can begin on an individual level, its growth spreads through shared frames of reference, and hip-hop culture still retains the hopeful potential of being as 'committed' as it is 'literature'.

¹ Adorno, Theodor W. *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.

² Lecrae. 'Jesus Muzik (featuring Trip Lee)'. *After The Music Stops*. Cross Movement Records, 2006.

³ Sartre, Jean-Paul. 'Writing, Reading, and the Public'. Trans. Methuen B. Frechtman, *Literature in the Modern World*. Ed. Dennis Walder. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. p. 83.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp.82, 83.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 83.

⁶ Adorno, Theodor W. 'Commitment'. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Eds. Rodney Livingstone, Perry Anderson, Francis Mulhern and Ronald Taylor. Trans. Francis MacDonagh. London: New Left Books, 1977. Reprinted in *Literature in the Modern World*. Ed. Dennis Walder. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. p. 91.

⁷ Sartre, 'Writing', p. 83.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 82.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 83.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, Soren. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

¹² Of course, there is no inherent moral coding to popular art, as evidenced by D. W. Griffith's controversial 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, which presented a pro-Ku Klux Klan revisionist historical account through a massive cinematic production.

¹³ 'Flame's "Our World Redeemed" EPK Promo Video'. *Cross Movement Records*. (8 February 2008). Online. Internet. 26 March 2009. Available WWW:

<http://www.crossmovementrecords.com/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=43963&columnid=4459>

¹⁴ Flame. 'Way Out'. *Flame*. Cross Movement Records, 2004.

¹⁵ Adorno, 'Commitment', p. 95.

¹⁶ Adorno, Theodor W. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

¹⁷ For example, see UK Hip Hop's review of Christian rap group Acts 29 (excerpted): 'As if Acts29 themselves have learnt nothing from the moral of this story, far too much of the latter two thirds of this album is blatantly evangelistic and crudely didactic. Often lacking in irony or rhetorical strategy, the great potential for fun and original hiphop suggested by the album's opening tracks is all but forgotten half way into the set. Tracks like the Braille-produced 'Sweet Tooth' and 'Déjà vu' treat their audience like naughty schoolkids with pompous sermonising about the perils of materialism and the need to aspire to squeaky-clean [sic] piety. The heavy-handed moralism exhibited by aforementioned cautionary fables of people who took the wrong path may have been the vogue at the turn of the '90s but in 2002, message-rap needs to be significantly more cunning – otherwise it just sounds smug and like preaching to the converted. The album sinks to its lowest and lives up to all the worst stereotypes of Christian rap with the dreadful City-High-esq [sic] condescension of 'We know'.' Kaplunk, Sumo. 'Acts 29: Underexposed'. *UKHH.com*. (2002). Online. Internet. 14 August 2009. Available WWW: <http://www.ukhh.com/reviews/nonuk/1104.html>

¹⁸ Flame, 'Way Out'.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ Adorno, 'Commitment', p. 96.

²² Flame, 'Way Out'.

²³ Adorno, 'Commitment'. p. 96.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 97-98.

²⁵ My sincerest apologies to all parties involved.

²⁶ Flame, 'Way Out'.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ Quinn, Eithne. *Nuthin' but a "g" thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. p. 124.

²⁹ Flame, 'Way Out'.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ *Ibid*.

³² Quinn, *Nuthin'*, p.144, quoting Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You? Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, pp. 38-59.

³³ Ellis, John. *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*. Revised Edition. London: Routledge, 1992. p. 93.

³⁴ Kyllonen, Tommy aka Urban D. *Un.orthodox: church, hip-hop, culture*. Michigan: Zondervan, 2007. p. 126.

³⁵ Darby, Derrick and Tommie Shelby. *Hip-Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason*. Chicago: Open Court, 2005. pp. 209-10.

³⁶ Lecrae. 'After The Music Stops'. *After The Music Stops*. Cross Movement Records, 2006.

³⁷ Sartre, 'Writing', p. 88.

- ³⁸ Lecrae. 'Send Me'. *After The Music Stops*. Cross Movement Records, 2006.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁰ Lecrae, 'After The Music Stops'.
- ⁴¹ Kyllonen, *Un.orthodox*, p. 179.
- ⁴² 116 Clique. 'Begin With The End'. *13 Letters*. Reach Records, 2007.
- ⁴³ Kyllonen, *Un.orthodox*, p. 145.
- ⁴⁴ Lecrae, 'After The Music Stops'.
- ⁴⁵ Soul P. 'Hey Young Man'. *The Premiere*. Beatmart Recordings, 2006.
- ⁴⁶ Kyllonen, *Un.orthodox*, p. 132.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 145.
- ⁴⁸ Adorno, 'Jargon', p. 5.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*.
- ⁵⁰ Lecrae. 'The King (featuring Flame)'. *After The Music Stops*. Cross Movement Records, 2006.
- ⁵¹ Sartre, 'Commitment', p. 87.
- ⁵² 'Race Ethnicity Information for 2007'. *ASARB.org*. (10 August 2009). Online. Internet. 17 August 2009. Available WWW: <http://www.asarb.org/statistics.html>
- ⁵³ The Albert Mohler Radio Program. 'Hip-Hop in the Name of Christ'. 16 July 2009. Online. Internet. 17 August 2009. Available WWW: http://albertmohler.com/radio_show.php?cdate=2009-07-16
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*.
- ⁵⁵ Flame. 'Real One'. *Flame*. Cross Movement Records, 2004.
- ⁵⁶ Lecrae, 'Send Me'.
- ⁵⁷ Lecrae. 'Truth'. *Rebel*. Reach Records, 2008.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid*.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid*.
- ⁶⁰ Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. p. 91.
- ⁶¹ Lecrae, 'Truth'.
- ⁶² Lecrae. 'Nothin''. *Real Talk*. Cross Movement Records, 2005.
- ⁶³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, Inc., 1967. p. 257.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid*, original emphasis.
- ⁶⁵ Lecrae. 'Prayin' For You'. *After The Music Stops*. Cross Movement Records, 2006.
- ⁶⁶ See Jin. 'Love Story'. *The Rest Is History*. Virgin Records, 2004. For other notable exceptions, see confessional rappers Slug and Sage Francis.
- ⁶⁷ Lecrae. 'Take Me As I Am'. *Real Talk*. Cross Movement Records, 2005.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid*.
- ⁶⁹ Lecrae. 'Breathin' To Death'. *Rebel*. Reach Records, 2008.
- ⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 292.
- ⁷¹ Sartre, 'Commitment', p.86.
- ⁷² Heaney, Seamus. *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. London: Faber and Faber, 1980. p. 150.
- ⁷³ Bouretz, Pierre. *Witnesses for the Future: Philosophy and Messianism*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. p. 6.
- ⁷⁴ As Caroline Rooney notes, 'Derrida treats of "empty messianism" as an alternative form of activism, rejecting Jamison's claim that it is utopianism.' See Caroline Rooney. *Decolonising Gender: Literature and a Poetics of the Real*. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2007. p. 210.
- ⁷⁵ Flame. '2nd Coming'. *Our World: Redeemed*. Cross Movement Records, 2008.
- ⁷⁶ Michael Eric Dyson usefully highlights the difficulty of converting religious belief into youth action via contemporary slang alone: 'There is a desperate need to reach young blacks, to touch them where they live. But stereotypes about black youth culture can't replace the hard work it takes to get inside that culture. Indiscriminate, anachronistic slang can't do the job that real love and respect will to win their appreciation and gain their ears and eyes. The real challenge is to translate the gospel into action—to sever it from bourgeois respectability and moralistic condemnation and to use it as a weapon of the suffering and oppressed to make justice a reality.' Dyson advocates an activist role for religion in the name of justice, rather than merely serving as a social activity or a tool of fear. See Michael Eric Dyson. *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. pp. 137-138.
- ⁷⁷ 'Jay-Z'. *Oprah Presents Master Class*. Season 1, Episode 1. OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network. Original airdate: 1 January 2011.

Conclusion: An Analysis of *Scholar* by Blake Brandes

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.

- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*¹

Hip-Hop music engages this transformative naming process. Rappers powerfully articulate the state of the world, the United States, local communities, and the self. Hip-hop songs transmit information to masses of people and by naming conditions, provide the starting point for reconceptualization and actualization of a more just state.

-Heather Day, 'Hey Young World'²

In *Keywords*, cultural studies pioneer Raymond Williams delineates three distinct meanings of 'culture': 'a process of cultivation and growth,' 'a pattern of living and a way of understanding' and 'a thing, a product, an art work.'³ Williams notes that these definitions of culture are not mutually exclusive, and that in practice they are intimately interconnected. This dissertation has attempted to portray the interconnections between the cultivation of creative analogies and identities, the patterns of applying those analogies and identities to communities, and the art that emerges from those communities. The art work then prompts the cultivation and growth of new analogies and identities, thus re-starting the cycle of cultural production. From the initial hip-hop analogies that evolved into an international cultural movement, we see efforts to name and change the world internally (within individuals) and externally (within communities). In Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani*, postcolonial youth struggle with race, gender, national identity and consumerism as they negotiate communal expectations that alternatively limit and empower them. Through Christian rap, a model of artistic praxis surfaces that challenges the materialistic and egotistical conventions of mainstream hip-hop while attempting to inspire tangible changes in listeners' lives. Each of these examples integrates the

developmental, epistemological and artistic components of culture with the goal of tracing the path from language to identity to awareness to action. Understanding the intermediary processes between language and action is essential for critical pedagogy, progressive community development and artistic expression. Hip-hop is well positioned to facilitate this understanding and thus provides the framework for the applied component of this dissertation – a hip-hop album entitled *Scholar*.

Through the creation and distribution of *Scholar*, I have three goals: to entertain, to educate and to challenge. As the Christian rap chapter indicates, didactic art is not always aesthetically pleasing art. In order to engage the listener, my aim is to create tracks that are sonically pleasing and contain commercial-level production and vocal delivery. Having aligned the form with conventions of contemporary hip-hop, the content of each of the ten tracks addresses a different topic that I feel warrants engagement, the ‘aspect[s] of the world’ that I ‘want to disclose,’ as Sartre explains the mission of committed literature.⁴ Having heard the perspectives on the album, the listener will hopefully be able to use the album as a discussion point for critical pedagogy around hip-hop culture, a teaching tool in the classroom, a starting point for reevaluating his or her perspectives on language, identity and community, or even just as an entertaining album to bump in his or her ride. I want to avoid being too prescriptive about the potential uses of the album, since I suspect that listeners will be creative with it in more ways than I can imagine. The question of whether an instrumentalized response to the album is even necessary also arises. Is it enough for listeners to contemplate and enjoy the album, and for me to accept the pedagogical and community-building responsibilities as my calling outside of art (though certainly not separated from artistic expression)? By making the album and lyrics available for free download and providing lyrical footnotes, I leave that decision in the hands of the listener.

In terms of the production process, I composed and performed all of the music without using instrumental samples. I wanted this album to be as ‘original’ as possible, although I recognize that the idea of playing a synthesizer on a keyboard to emulate a flute blurs the boundaries of simulacrum, even if the performance and recording are original. Tonally, I wanted to convey a degree of urgency on certain tracks like ‘Prose to the Praxis (Fire Work)’ and ‘Overflow’ by using minor-key orchestration and dramatic drums. On contemplative tracks like ‘Word Playa’ and ‘Struggle’, I opted for piano and sparse arrangements to provide space for the lyrical gravity to be felt. Joe ‘Focus’ Martinez provides sung vocals on four tracks, which enhances the relational component of the album since harmonies are literally relationships between notes. Joe’s friendship and support have also meant a great deal to me since we began performing a cappella music together during our undergraduate studies at Wake Forest University, and having his creative expression on the album makes the sung component relational as both harmonic form and friendship. Joe also co-wrote all of the parts he sings by adapting ideas and phrases I had outlined and representing them through his own words and melodies. This collaborative process embodied the analogic process of taking material from one source (my writing) and interpreting it through another perspective (Joe’s creative mind and worldview) to create a hybridized version of the contributing sources. These sung choruses and lines are hopefully more accessible and powerful for having been collaborative.

Turning to the lyrical content of the album, I strive to test the poetic and allusive limits of rap as a medium by including a multiplicity of meaning and message in nearly every line on *Scholar*. Connecting the album to the dissertation, I use analogy for the cognitive and cultural purposes detailed in Chapter 1 on tracks like ‘Education,’ where I subvert and reappropriate mainstream hip-hop terminology of gunplay and violence in order to depict certain conditions that are conducive to academic success, such as the

alignment of personal passion with academic study, parental involvement and a willingness to take creative risks. On 'Word Play', I use the personification of language to describe a relationship akin to Common's personification of hip-hop in 'I Used To Love H.E.R.' By explicitly connecting rap and poetic language through literary terms (e.g. trope, meter, enjambment), Shakespearean quotes and wordplay, I hope to bridge a perceived divide between rap and poetry. Further exploring analogy in the song 'Blake Is Like,' I employ similes and metaphors to construct an identity (a process that occurs throughout the album) based on social justice and communal acceptance.

Extending this commentary to the themes of individual and collective identity construction discussed in Chapter 2, 'Progress' describes a progressive vision of social change. Focusing on character and action over more superficial manifestations of identity, I propose a conscious reevaluation of historical determinism to create new communal norms of tolerance and metropolitanism that better individuals and societies. 'Overflow' demonstrates a multiplicity of identity through language and imagery as I rap in French, Arabic, Portuguese and English. By resisting the notion of a singular 'authentic' identity, 'Overflow' heeds Adorno's warnings about authoritarian authenticity while also applying them to similes such as 'your rap is like an autocrat, the way it's illegitimate.' On this track I also deconstruct the logic of capitalism ('between subject and object, the verb is to profit') and the historical assumptions of misogyny ('people aren't property and girls aren't commodities') that appear in *Londonstani*. Finally, adopting the narrative revelation technique of *Londonstani*, 'Struggle' tells an empathic tale of suffering and class identity that unravels the occasional hopelessness of contemporary suburban American life.

Shifting to direct applications of Sartre's notion of committed literature, 'Pause' discloses the ramifications of US social policy towards homosexual couples and families. Beginning with a discussion of gay adoption and moving into an argument for legalizing

gay marriage, I take a public stand on what I believe is one of the most significant contemporary American civil rights issues. Public conversations about homosexuality are rare in hip-hop, to the point that some rappers whom I interviewed for my research were hesitant even to comment at all about homophobia in hip-hop. Although gay adoption is a highly divisive topic in the United States, only by having civil conversations can attitudes and opinions shift. By showing the impact that banning gay adoption and fostering has on children who have been neglected, abused and abandoned by their straight parents, I hope to move the conversation beyond religious ideology and into the realm of tangible implications for children. Similarly, when framed in a historical context, the typical arguments for denying couples same-sex marriage (e.g. it is a redefinition of marriage; every child deserves a mother and a father) do not hold weight given the current civil institution of marriage in the United States and Kwame Anthony Appiah's articulation of 'neutrality as equal respect' discussed in Chapter 3.⁵ In terms of challenging individuals to reevaluate their beliefs and positions in the tradition of committed literature, my hope is that this track will spark dialogue both within the hip-hop community and outside of it.

Another exploration of the themes in Chapter 3 involves creating an alternative ego-ideal, or 'inner image of oneself as one wants to become,' in 'Blake Is Like.'⁶ While many rappers perform aspirational rhymes about material wealth and sexual conquest—50 Cent's 'P.I.M.P.' could be their manifesto—I wanted to present an alternate vision of the self as heroic based on acceptance and empathic action, without imitating Christian rap's self-negation. Although the imagery in the song occasionally veers towards the messianic, the final line affirms an egalitarian love through the dual meanings of the word 'over': 'I'm your equal forever; I'll never be over you.' In contrast, some of the more hyperbolic lines on *Scholar* ('I'm rap's Martin Luther / y'all are just missing kings;' 'I'm Che Guevara plus the Reign of Terror.') satirically imitate the absurdly grandiose claims that

rappers often make and then deflate these claims by alluding to the Reformation ('so bring the Reformation to the Great Chain of Being') and artistic license ('don't trust the wearer, especially when in the [mic] booth') respectively. Furthermore, 'Prose To The Praxis (Fire Work)' presents the complexity of viewing art as revolutionary. By juxtaposing historical references of actual revolution (e.g. The French Revolution) with rappers' oppositional claims, I attempt to interrogate the notion that hip-hop alone is a political force. While the chorus cites the need for social activism and skill development to promote actual revolution, my ambivalence is captured in the line 'It's not a chore for me to score a soundtrack with the impact to make a system blast.' Is the 'system' here a political system or merely a sound system? Perhaps both, and the following line questions the introduction of commodification into the art of revolution: 'Poetry is born on beats until you need the cash / Now all these rappers wearin' chains – free at last.' If the goal of progressive social movements is to enable rappers to engage in conspicuous consumption, then that mission has been accomplished.

Will hip-hop bring revolution or will it merely be the soundtrack to the revolution? When considering the limitations of hip-hop as political activism, John McWhorter's critique in *All About the Beat* is clear: 'there is nothing hip-hop music or hip-hop "culture" has to offer black America in terms of political activism.'⁷ McWhorter's larger argument is that mass transformational revolution along the lines of the political and social revolutions of the 1960s is unlikely to happen again in the United States in the near future. McWhorter takes issue with claims that hip-hop is not just helpful or instructive but actually revolutionary, and to the extent that much rap is largely oppositional, I agree with him. However, I point to the demonstrated educational, therapeutic, social and artistic applications of hip-hop that have resulted in a more integrated American culture over the past thirty years, culminating in the election of an African-American as president in 2008.

Cultural revolution is a gradual process of increasing awareness and understanding of others to change fundamental attitudes that inform policy decisions (for example, attitudes about same-sex marriage that prompt people to vote ‘for’ or ‘against’ laws that would ban it). Political revolution of the type that has swept North Africa and the Middle East in 2010-2011 has largely been facilitated by social media and a more interconnected youth culture. To the extent that hip-hop provides a cultural foundation to build communities and alliances of individuals who are passionately engaged with their political and social structures, it is a supporting structure of political revolution.

If hip-hop is more style than substance, more attitude than activism, then where does the praxis happen? Through this dissertation and album, I hope to demonstrate the connection between academic criticism and cultural practice as a launching point for personal projects of identity construction and pedagogical activism. Hip-hop has a multiplicity of audiences and practitioners, and the interdisciplinary dialogues that can occur between artists, academics and activists are crucial to the development and use of hip-hop as praxis. The ESRC-sponsored conference on Global Youth Cultures that Dr. Caroline Rooney and I organized at the University of Kent in October 2009 was such an event, where academic papers and panels on art, education and politics joined forces with political hip-hop theater, Palestinian rap and international Youtube singers for a spirited engagement of scholarship and performance. As a result of the relationships forged during the conference, Dr. Rooney and I coordinated a showing of the political hip-hop theater performance *The Rebel Cell* by Baba Brinkman and Dizraeli in Cairo, Egypt. Before the show, local youth came to the theater to discuss hip-hop culture and learn basic rapping and beatboxing skills. During an ‘audience participation’ part of the *Rebel Cell* performance in which Baba Brinkman and Dizraeli improvise a rap about progressive change based on audience suggestions, a woman stood up and said that she wanted to see

democracy and accountable leaders in Egypt. After the performance, she explained that her community was frustrated by the governmental corruption and lack of political voice that the people possessed, and that she was encouraged by the hip-hop performance, which depicted a rapped debate over theories of democratic change and capitalism in response to a fictional 1984-esque totalitarian British government. Less than 10 months after the *Rebel Cell* performance in Cairo, the Egyptian people did make their demands for democratic change heard by calling for President Hosni Mubarak's removal from office in January 2011. Although there may not be a direct causal link between cultural production and political revolution, the ability of art and satire to give voice to the frustrations and absurdities of contemporary social and political processes provides a sense of hope and possibility in an otherwise cynical vision of entrenched injustice and corruption.

In the Epilogue of *Decoded*, Jay-Z says the following of hip-hop's mission in the world and our responsibility to it:

... the story of the larger culture is a story of a million MCs all over the world who are looking out their windows or standing on street corners or riding in their cars through their cities or suburbs or small towns and inside of them the words are coming, too, the words they need to make sense of the world they see around them. The words are witty and blunt, abstract and linear, sober and fucked up. And when we decode that torrent of words—by which I mean really *listen* to them with our minds and hearts open—we can understand their world better. And ours, too. It's the same world.⁸

This powerful interpretation of hip-hop and the creative mind captures the spirit of this dissertation. Rappers across the world are pulling dramatic images and experiences from their environments and channeling them through hip-hop. By making the familiar unfamiliar and the unfamiliar familiar, the poetic analogies of hip-hop build new worlds from the fragments of the existing one. Urban, suburban and rural identities interact, spar and celebrate together. Playful and philosophical messages are woven into rhymes that reach millions of ears. To listen, to decode, to assess, and then to become – that is our duty

as active listeners and practitioners. 'Greatest weapon in the world on the tip of yo tongue. ONE.'⁹

¹ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th Anniversary. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2000. p. 88.

² Day, Heather. "'Hey Young World": Hip-Hop as a Tool for Educational and Rehabilitative Work with Youth'. (2009). *American Studies Honors Papers*. Paper 3. p. 70. Online. Internet. 6 March 2011. Available WWW: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/americanstudieshp/3>

³ Duncombe, Stephen. 'Raymond Williams, "Culture," from *Keywords*.' *Cultural Resistance Reader*. London and New York: Verso, 2002. p. 36.

⁴ Sartre, Jean-Paul. 'Writing, Reading, and the Public' from Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Methuen B. Frechtman, 1967, reprinted in *Literature in the Modern World*, ed. Dennis Walder, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. p. 83.

⁵ Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. p. 91.

⁶ Akhtar, Salman. *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books Ltd, 2009. p. 89

⁷ McWhorter, John. *All About The Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America*. New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2008. p. 8.

⁸ Jay-Z. *Decoded*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010. p. 308.

⁹ Brandes, Blake. 'No Idea's Original.' *Scholar*. Decrypt Productions, 2011. CD.

Matthew Fredericks
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Appendix A

Williamsburg Prep Visit

i.e. Blake Brandes Masters a New York Classroom

Blake did not have an easy audience. My 6th and 7th period students (11th graders and 10th graders respectively) verbally flayed me when I first began Teach for America. My classroom, aside from the typical adolescent boisterousness, has the added challenging dimension of racism between my Latino students and my Black students. Some of my students have learning disabilities and emotional disturbances. One of my students was released from a psychiatric ward a week before Blake's visit: no one in his family knew what to do with him, so they sent him to school. Growing up in Crown Heights, Flatbush, and Bed-Sty has made my students tough. They are also intelligent, generous, and warm, but these virtues surface only after your credentials have been established and their respect won. Though I had absolute confidence in Blake, I nevertheless confess a certain measure of curiosity about how he would fair.

"Why don't you love us, mista? Why didn't you let us hear your friend rap?" asked my first period class the following morning. "Mista, you buggin: how you invite a guess speaker that raps and not bring him to 2nd period," asked my next class. Third period didn't say anything immediately, until a student raised her hand and inquired as to when Mr. Brandes would be make an appearance. In less than 24 hours, word had spread around the school: Mr. Fredericks had a guest speaker who rapped in five languages and "brought the house down."

Well, how did Blake do it? Let's start with ethos. Blake established his ethos by free styling to the words on the quiz I had given the students at the beginning of class. The quiz covered unemployment, GDP, CPI, and inflation. Somehow, Blake explained the circumstances of his visit, rhymed places in Brooklyn with economic terms, and reviewed the quiz vocabulary in this impromptu rap. Duly impressed, the students listened.

The logos: Blake told his personal narrative to illustrate that passion and academics are not mutually exclusive. Blake recounted how his inchoate interest in rap first flourished when his U.S. history professor allowed him to write a rap instead of an essay on the topic of the Vietnam War. At Wake Forest University (where I met Blake), he continued to develop his fascination with language by studying metaphor in Shakespeare, post-colonial literature, and hip hop simultaneously. When he interviewed for the Marshall Scholarship, the board asked him a surprise question, "Can you rap?" Fortunately, Blake was able to not only rap, but do so in English, German, French, Arabic, and Spanish. At this juncture in Blake's story, I wandered if my students would start to drift and become disruptive, but Blake suddenly began rapping in all five languages. When he delivered his peroration in Spanish, I had to work to keep the class seated. They were so excited, they wanted to dance along.

The pathos: at one point, as Blake circulated about the room, he almost tripped over a plug. The cord popped out of the wall; the class laughed. I glared at those who laughed and began to think about how I could cover for Blake. I need not have worried. Blake

nonchalantly bent down, picked up the cord, and rather than plug it back into the wall, pretended to plug it into his own hand. Whenever he touched the cord to the palm of his hand, he began beat boxing. After a few moments of mimicking kick, hi hat, and snare drums whenever he plugged the cord into himself, Blake took a pen out of his pocket. He alternatively wrote on his palm with the pen (producing a scratchy, turntable sound) and plugged the cord in (and beat boxing). The students were enthralled. “If you make a mistake and play it off, that’s good; if you make a mistake and then make it look intentional, that’s even better,” Blake told me afterwards.

Blake used the emotional enthusiasm his performance generated to deliver the core message that “Passion + Academics = Success.” He also conducted a beat boxing workshop. The following day, I quizzed the students on what Blake had taught them. 95% of the class remembered Blake’s formula for success, could explain it, and recalled the three basic beat boxing elements (boom, ts, ka). The only student who did not recall was the young man who had just been released from the psychiatric ward—but he did try to imitate Blake the entire class.

Blake is a master performer and triumphs through connecting with even the most challenging of audiences.

Appendix B

Choices

by Josue Alvarez

I was born in Brooklyn in 1992
I'm going to school to make a future because it's possible
I don't want to keep living in the projects
I would love to make my mom happy by going to college
My parents came from the Dominican Republic
Ever since I was little they kept me in check
I went to Fire Department High School
People kept on telling me to join in a gang because it's cool
I kept on saying no school comes first
I needed some help so I started going to church
So one day I went to school on a Friday
I had not friends so I was walking alone by the door way
A kid came from behind me and hit me from the back
I feared for my safety I didn't swing back
I feared because I knew he was in a gang
So I decided to be friendly and give him my right hand
His friends kept on saying "pop him"
I'm telling him please don't do it I don't want no problems
I had nothing to say
All I had on my mind was my mom and my grades
I had to transfer to the district office so they sent me to Brooklyn Tech
I wanted to go to a better school and I got accepted to Williamsburg Prep
That's when I started getting better grades add making the right step
I just want a better life and I'm trying my all and my best
Now I have friends and good communication
This program can change my life and help me with my education
I would help others that's having a struggle like the Great Depression
I would like to say when I'm doing my work I don't hesitate
I will succeed I will motivate
I am in control like a pitcher on the mound
My push to succeed will come from Upward Bound

Prose to the Praxis (Fire Work)
by Blake Brandes

Yo, it's that Fire Work
 A work of fire
 The kind of light that only deep and darkest hurt inspires
 Re-arisen with a mission like recidivism when I'm spittin' ash and volcanic raps
 Social activism in a system what I give 'em like *Soulfire* till their hands'll clap¹
 And you can bring the water
 But it creates the steam
 Like when you block my vision
 It just creates a dream
 And I'm a sleepwalker
 So I will clench the fist
 And truth be told, even with a blindfold, I'mma show you what you're up against
 This is the will to power²
 This is the art of war
 And if you bring the beef
 Good thing I'm a carnivore
 And I've been makin' paper³
 So my arms are sore
 'The brick walls in life
 Let us show who wants it more'⁴

And if you want awards
 I'll take you to task
 It's not a chore for me score a soundtrack with the impact to make a system blast⁵
 Poetry is born on beats
 Until you need the cash⁶
 Now all these rappers wearin' chains
 Free at last

Chorus:

It's that fire work
 Learn a skill
 When the revolution comes
 Burn and build
 Every day through the lessons and the layoffs
 I have come to bring the flame
 Order out of chaos

It's that fire work
 Breathe the smoke
 They said we couldn't move the world cuz the lever broke⁷
 But I'mma take it from the prose to the praxis⁸
 Revolution till we knock the globe off its axis⁹

If you are what you buy, then I'm not buyin' it¹⁰
 Saved by the grace, or can you buy survivorship
 See how loud the sirens get, callin' blocks out to the rocks¹¹

So if I take you up and show you the poverty hanging over the Hollywood Valley
 I'll make your balloon pop¹²
 Because their heads are high
 Not with respect
 But from a life that is founded on a disconnect¹³
 I mean no disrespect
 Because I'm guilty too
 But I'll still call you out – cuz that's what the guilty do
 Whenever we consider if a sinner should be shamed
 We often tend to save it if the sin is the same
 So give me forgiveness if the sinnin' that we blame
 Is the sin that we commit, just said with another name¹⁴
 And if the structure of the sentencin' is drivin' you insane
 Then I'll say I'm sorry bout the sequence that I sang
 But better bring the heat if the tyger's what you tame¹⁵
 Cuz I'm tearin' up a beat, plus I'm known to make it rain¹⁶
 It's that trickle-down
 In full effect
 So if I('m) Maximili
 Protect ya neck
 Ask Marie Antoinette how that cake taste
 What goes up must come down – Blake wait!¹⁷

Chorus

I'm Che Guevara¹⁸
 Plus the Reign of Terror
 On the back of my shirt:
 'Beware the mirror'¹⁹
 Plus don't trust the wearer, especially when in the Booth
 It's always Honest Abes who get slain when they tell the truth
 I'm the living proof, plus some fiction²⁰
 May the Lord give you a piece – benediction²¹
 So if you're sickened, I'll say you fly as chickens
 Or say you fly as penguins cuz your ice flow's quickly sinkin'²²
 With the liquor that you're drinkin' makes me think that you are blinkin'
 Only just to stay alive and to stop yourself from thinkin'
 Cuz we're all gonna die, it's just a matter of time
 What's the matter – does the pattern always seem to cause crime?
 If we tryin' to stay alive or we just tryin' to shine
 When the Sun crashes into Earth, we all goin' blind²³

Final Chorus:

It's that fire work
 Learn a skill
 When the revolution comes
 Burn at will²⁴
 Every day through the lessons and the layoffs
 I have come to bring the flame
 So this is the payoff²⁵

It's that fire work
 Breathe the smoke
 They said we couldn't move the world cuz the lever broke
 So I'mma take it from the prose to the praxis
 Revolution till we knock the globe off its axis

¹ If the goal of my previous album *Soulfire* was to combine the romantic with the polemic, the mission of *Scholar* is to entertain, to educate and to challenge the listener. 'Fire Work' describes the revolutionary process of creative destruction and the inner fire required to overcome obstacles along the way. It also portrays the engagement of passion (fire) with pedagogy (work) to create a more just future.

² In *Ecce Homo*, Friedrich Nietzsche defines the 'will to power' as 'the ruthless courage in matters of spirit, the unlimited power to learn without damage to the will to act.' This view of courageous scholarship linked directly to action underlies the central idea of the PhD in Text, Practice as Research, for which *Scholar* is the applied component. My thesis is that the distinctive poetic language of hip-hop enables individuals to understand and construct identities, as well as to challenge dominant narratives and provoke conscious shifts in their perceptions of self and community.

³ In contrast to rappers who are making paper (money), I just wrote a PhD dissertation.

⁴ A quote from Randy Pausch's inspiring talk 'The Last Lecture.'

⁵ Can art lead a political revolution or only contribute to the cultural foundation that makes revolutionary movements possible?

⁶ The revolution will be commodified. Theodor Adorno critiques the 'culture industry' which produces mass-marketed consumer art, in contrast to 'autonomous art,' which is not purposeful (i.e. 'art for art's sake').

⁷ 'Give me a place to stand, and with a lever I will move the whole world.' –Archimedes (trans. Francis R. Walton)

⁸ I offer Hannah Arendt's declaredly simple interpretation of the concept of *praxis*: 'What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.' This call to self-reflective action is intrinsically linked to Arendt's understanding of the relationship between speech and action: 'speech is what makes man a political being.' Taking discourse 'from the prose to the praxis' is the act of applying scholarship to the world as we experience it on a personal level.

⁹ In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche also calls for the 'revaluation of all values' as 'an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity.' This radical de-centering echoes Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of 'committed literature', i.e. art which attempts to raise awareness in readers by encouraging them to examine their own assumptions and beliefs.

¹⁰ Gautam Malkani's 2006 novel *Londonstani* presents the teenage narrator Jas and his friends as cultural adopters of hip-hop, 'bling bling' economics and hypermasculinity, all of which fuel the boys' construction of a Desi (hybridized British Asian) identity. The association of self-worth with consumer identities creates problematic relationship dynamics between genders and within communities, as Zygmunt Bauman documents in his treatise on consumer culture, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

¹¹ The Sirens of Greek mythology lured sailors to their death against the rocks with a seductive song, and police sirens memorialize urban death on the block, often because of the rock (crack).

¹² A remix of Yelawolf's line from 'Daddy's Lambo': 'So if you take me up and show me the balcony looking over the Hollywood Valley I'll make your balloon pop.' Yelawolf's song portrays a lavish Hollywood life of conspicuous consumption and inherited wealth (cleverly contrasted with his more modest Alabama upbringing). I wanted to imagine what else might be seen from that balcony.

¹³ While some people use drugs constructively or creatively, many more people use them to disconnect from the realities of their environments. As the subsequent lines indicate, I am not judging but challenging listeners to become more conscious and aware of their choices.

¹⁴ These lines refer to the practice of condemning other peoples' sins while excusing one's own, simply because the sins are different.

¹⁵ My namesake, poet William Blake, is the author of 'The Tyger.'

¹⁶ Shout-out to Da'Ron.

¹⁷ The final section of this verse uses Economics terms to invoke income inequality while drawing parallels to the French Revolution. In 1789, the rise of Enlightenment ideals combined with widespread hunger in France (due to rising food prices and national debt) and prompted the overthrow of the monarchy, King Louis XVI of France and his wife Marie Antoinette, who were later executed by guillotine. Maximilien Robespierre led the subsequent Reign of Terror, during which thousands of individuals accused of being enemies of the Revolution were also guillotined.

¹⁸ Che Guevara was an Argentine Marxist revolutionary who was a major figure in the Cuban Revolution. His 'Guerrillero Heroico' portrait is also one of the most iconic images ever commodified.

¹⁹ Backstabbers beware: all that will be left is the knife and your own reflection.

²⁰ With lines like 'I'm Che Guevara / plus the Reign of Terror,' I satirically imitate the absurdly grandiose claims that rappers often make and then deflate these claims by citing artistic license to fictionalize an identity.

²¹ A benediction is an invocation for divine help, blessing, and guidance. In this instance, the divine help arrives in the form of a gun ('a piece') instead of inner peace.

²² 'ice flow' = bling rap

²³ A fatalistic conclusion and an existential wake-up call.

²⁴ Given the inevitability of the eventual extinction of human life, the final chorus becomes more nihilistic.

²⁵ The revolution arrives and vindicates the preparatory fire work that has been done.

Word Playa by Blake Brandes

Word playa verse dater
 Think pad prince paper
 Sweep her off her feet, take her on a tangent¹
 But did I cross the line? I call that enjambment
 I call that enchantment, every time she spoke
 Let her hair down for me to climb like a trope
 And free her from the tower, 'cept the line nearly broke
 So she say sure nuff, she holdin' me close²
 Sibilant shimmerin' scintillating synonyms
 She could save shells that souls had been livin' in³
 Give a chance to live again, but refrain from repetition
 Endless curse to walk the Earth – existential definition
 Stuck in a prison made of 26 epistles⁴
 And every single epithet is dreaded like a missile
 And every single evanescent effort to do evil
 Is met with the ever-present pressure of an equal
 And opposite, I read her face like scholarship
 She was the type of seraph to make the bold call it quits⁵
 Never got acknowledgment, but I didn't mind at all
 Guess they say that every hero always has a fatal flaw
 I could take a fall... and a winter too
 Like a solstice sun, my shine is dimmin' boo
 But sometimes on the flipside it feels like the longest day
 And even when she's gone, she's only just a song away

Chorus:

Word playa,
 Play on, play at
 Say word playa
 Play on, play at
 Say word playa
 Play on, play at
 Say word playa
 Play on

Word killa terror dactyl
 Murderous burden is hella tactile⁶
 I amicably played the amateur
 But I could only love her in five foot parameters⁷
 To be or not for me, that is the test
 To sleep – her chance to dream, that is the rest
 Watch me sling the errors of my fortune
 All of my sin taxed me in high portion⁸
 So I'm driving discourse without poetic license
 Stay in double lines so as not to make her frightened
 But the test is double blind and so is the assignment
 Never stayed in solitary, got out on consignment

Askin' what a sign meant, answer endlessly deferred
 Question what's the difference between the spoken and the written word⁹
 It's a bit absurd, but then so is she
 I guess it takes more than a rhyme to make poetry

Chorus

Thought Word Action Habit
 Character Destiny – caught, labyrinth
 Hang the men of tar for who they are
 So I question whether that was written up within the stars
 Beginnings call out what the winnings are
 Except for the hands that are later dealt a winning card
 But that's a skinny draw – I'm talkin' slim chance
 Sketchy odds, never lands like Rembrandt¹⁰
 So what's best to do? The best you can
 Use the lexicon to effect a plan
 And when perfection is murderin' progression
 Then don't let the enemy of good kill expression
 Cuz the subalterns stay silent if they choose to be
 But if you think the mute don't talk, well that's news to me
 Truthfully, all language is signed
 By the hand of the creator in this moment in time
 (RHYME)

Chorus

Don't hate the word, playa
 Hate the definition

¹ 'Word Playa' is an ode to language in the analogic style of Common's 'I Used To Love H.E.R.'

² The first eight lines describe my playful relationship with language, from literary terms (enjambment – the continuation of a phrase over two lines of poetry; trope – a figure of speech like metaphor or simile where the words have a figurative rather than literal meaning; caesura [so she say sure nuff] – a break or pause in a line of poetry) to my efforts to 'free her from the [Ivory] tower' of esoteric academia. The malleability of language is represented by her response, letting her hair down, which indicates the varying degrees of formality and informality that language can express. The way language is 'holdin' me close' indicates the personal and performative nature of language as an expression of identity.

³ A sibilant and existential twist on 'Sally sells sea shells by the sea shore.'

⁴ This quatrain indicates both the challenge of originality and the endless creative possibilities of the system of signification known as the English language (26 epistles = 26 letters).

⁵ Typography word play: 'type,' 'face,' 'seraph (angel) = serif (details at the ends of letters),' 'bold'

⁶ 'Murderous' and 'burden is' are both dactyls, a poetic metrical foot containing one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.

⁷ Iambic pentameter contains five poetic metrical feet called iambs, each contained one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable, as demonstrated in the subsequent lines.

⁸ A creative re-interpretation of Hamlet's famous soliloquy, complete with a 'syntax' reference and a homophonic pronunciation of 'portion' and 'Porsche,' which leads into the next line about driving discourse.

⁹ Jacques Derrida's conceptual framing of *différance* proposes that meaning is relative to the context in which a signifier exists and what follows it (i.e. meaning is deferred) and that a signifier's meaning can only be determined by identifying how it is different from other things (i.e. meaning is difference).

¹⁰ The first half of this verse questions the concept of fate and the metaphysical lottery that determines when and where people are born. The American dream of social mobility has had some historic setbacks (most notably slavery).

Progress by Blake Brandes

Life's not about success, it's about progress¹
 And they say, 'who you are is who you spend your time with'
 So assemble teams who will help you take the next step
 Affiliate with betters; yo, that's not a secret best kept
 I'm my brother's keeper but an only child
 So I help my fam up whenever I hold it down
 Like a King without a crown, we startin' a movement
 Not to make it perfect but to make an improvement²
 Who is practical? I just let the passion flow
 Let 'em throw stones if they feel it's irrational
 Everything is tactical; we go international
 Gain a little traction yo, that's what we takin' action for
 If you're classical, then think outside the Bachs
 Even if your show panned, the hidin' has gotta stop
 And if it's Baroque, you know I'll remix it
 I'mma call the future though the number's unlisted³

Chorus:

We gonna be alright, let it ride, let it ride
 We gonna be alright, let it ride tonight
 We gonna be alright, let it ride, let it ride
 We gonna be alright; we gonna be alright

Joe 'Focus' Martinez:

Yo we gonna be alright, even if we design
 Something deep inside, I can free your mind
 Can we disagree without seeking to divide
 Can we save the peace without leaving the divine⁴

Blake:

We can lead the tribe out the hood of the clan
 Cuz a background of trust will create a promised land
 And if that is utopia then I suggest we open up
 A possibility that we can get a step closer to⁵
 Cuz I am not beholden to the past, every memory
 Is now what I choose to be, rest is old news to me
 Talkin' how it used to be, actin' like we duty free
 When the language of compassion needs more fluency

Joe:

Yeah I flow fluidly, half-this, half-that
 But you know my song's all Sinatra and the Rat Pack⁶

Blake:

So keep me in mind when you in N-Y
 I'll tell you a story at the end of the N line⁷

Chorus

‘Verse-re in it put’ – run the platter back
 ‘Boundaries the police’ – in a habitat
 ‘Construct a are differences’ – imagine that⁸
 Sorry if the sentences are written so you have to grasp
 It in retrospect, all I’m really sayin’ is
 That we as a group choose to define relationships
 And it may be best if we use as a test
 The way people act, not the way people dress

Or the skin tone or the style of speech
 No matter what your batter, we’ll get wild for weeks
 Cuz if you a freak, I’m a Free Range Educator
 Always Knowing everything, come on ride my elevator
 Take you to another level, levitate your mindstate
 You lookin’ bananas, and I’m feelin’ like a prime mate⁹
 It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
 How we hold it on our shoulders just to keep from goin’ under¹⁰

¹ In contrast to the ambivalent revolutionary fervor of ‘Prose to the Praxis (Fire Work),’ ‘Progress’ is generally unambiguous in its advocacy of progressive, incremental social change. The first quatrain in this verse describes my philosophy about success in life.

² ‘Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.’ –Martin Luther King, Jr.

³ The final quatrain of this verse references a number of classical composers from different eras: Johann Sebastian Bach (and sons), Frédéric François Chopin, Joseph Haydn and Franz Liszt. Musical forms and styles evolve and develop over time in the same way that social policy does.

⁴ This quatrain contemplates whether a false mutual exclusivity exists between spirituality, secularism and civil discourse.

⁵ An idealistic future must be envisioned before it can be approached. Breaking historical cycles of factionalism and violence (the dual meaning of ‘[neighbor]hood of the clan / hood of the [Ku Klux] Klan’) requires a renewed commitment to trust and dialogue.

⁶ Here, Joe refers to the power of music to subsume (at least temporarily) cultural or racial differences. In the 1960s, The Rat Pack was an eclectic group of performers which included Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop. Max Rudin describes the diversity of the group: ‘one black, one Jew, two Italians, and one feckless Hollywoodized Brit, three of them second-generation immigrants, four raised during the Depression in ethnic city neighborhoods.’ The saxophone part in the background during this line is playing ‘My Way’ by Frank Sinatra, who also famously sang ‘New York, New York’, which is referenced in the following line.

⁷ The neighborhood of Astoria is the last stop on the N subway line in Queens, New York.

⁸ The reverse word order mirrors the reverse beat of the instrumental with the goal of temporarily shifting the listener’s frame of reference. The surreality of this section pairs form with content, as reimagining the social construction of difference is likely disorienting for many people. Group identity construction relies heavily on policing boundaries of language, dress and gender performance, whereas I suggest a more action-based approach to collective self-definition. Moving beyond superficial (i.e. external) distinctions to promote dialogue about communal actions and responsibilities has tangible benefits for progressive change in societies as a whole.

⁹ What’s a song about progressive change without a few pick-up lines?

¹⁰ A tribute to the original socially conscious rap song, ‘The Message’ (1982) by Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel. The original line is: ‘It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from goin’ under.’

Overflow by Blake Brandes

Wesh wesh mon frère, je viens de l'univers
 Où les rimes sont sublimes et on se met les mains en l'air
 Je reste solitaire, contre les injustices
 De la terre, la terreur, et aussi de la police
 J'habitais au Maroc, on faisait du beatbox
 Je parlais l'arabe avec des jeunes rappeurs du bloc
 Drustu fil maghreb, fi medinat Fez
 Saudiqati fi Rabat me mettait à l'aise
 É agora, vamos embora, não tenho medo
 Porque se acha que acabou, é muito cedo¹
 If someone else has played you, then don't think I hate you
 I believe that everyone in life can make a breakthrough
 As long as it takes you, I forgave it all
 Cuz if there's a heaven there's a message on the wall
 Saying that we get back whatever we have lived
 And as for this love, well, it's only mine to give²

Chorus:

Hey, I'm being pushed to the limit
 Start it with a mic and won't stop until I kill it
 Yeah, I'm talkin' overflow
 And if you test me again, then it's on fa' sho'
 I know that the bridge gon' burn
 Askin' myself when they all gon' learn
 Best back up, duck down or get low
 Cuz when it starts, don't stop, like a river I overflow³

Ana lubnani, shukran ala ilati
 Yo I Choueir I mix it up, cuz this is really me⁴
 Yeah you know I'm multiple, all my raps are quotable⁵
 I hope to make the rain from my brainstorm potable
 So that it will overflow, governments are overthrown
 When the weeds that corrupt are rooted out if overgrown
 Like a mobile phone when they reach into your pocket
 It takes a committed active citizen to stop it⁶
 Yeah you see the logic; that's why we launch the rocket
 Between subject and object, the verb is to profit⁷
 Separate the people from the products of their labor
 And encourage them to favor the commodities and paper⁸
 I don't call it 'money'; it creates 'mo' need'
 Plus a seemingly insatiable inflation of the greed
 And it's unsustainable, the draining of the seeds
 For debatable ingrainings of the flock and the feed⁹

Chorus

Yo, can a revolutionary get his grind on
 Every day I'm feelin' like I'm in another time zone
 People over places, so you gotta know that I'm home
 With my fam, always stayin' rooted like a rhizome¹⁰
 Remember botany? I leave it like misogyny
 See it like a distant past; I call that astronomy
 Girls aren't commodities, and people aren't property
 So ladies, if there's no respect, say 'get the hell up offa me'¹¹
 I am on an odyssey; iller than the Iliad¹²
 Oil's like a Trojan War, the way we always drillin' it¹³
 My rhymes are like the planet, the way they say I'm killin' it
 Your rap is like an autocrat, the way it's illegitimate¹⁴
 In a battle of wits, you'll get outgunned
 Y'all produce albums, I produce outcomes¹⁵
 And stay cool, cuz I'm stone-cold sober
 If my flow's not solar, then hell froze over¹⁶

Chorus

¹ Translation: [French] Yeah yeah my brother, I come from the universe / Where the rhymes are sublime and we throw our hands in the sky / I stand alone against the injustices / Of the earth, the terror, and also the police / I lived in Morocco and used to beatbox / I kicked it in Arabic with young rappers on the block [Arabic] I studied in Morocco, in the city of Fez / My friend from Rabat made me feel at home / [Portuguese] So now let's go, I'm not afraid / Because if you think it's finished, it's not over yet

² We cannot always control what happens to us, but we can choose our response to it. Love rejected is still love expressed.

³ 'Overflow' expresses the feeling of frustration that I saw among marginalized youth throughout my travels in France, Morocco and Egypt. Police brutality, lack of educational opportunities, social isolation, high unemployment and political corruption all contributed to this simmering rage. Hip-hop was frequently one of young people's only public means of voicing their grievances, and when the anger boiled over, the results were dramatic and destructive, as demonstrated by the French riots of 2005 and 2007.

⁴ [Arabic] 'I am Lebanese, [I say] thank you to my family.' Choueir is the small town in the mountains outside of Beirut where my maternal Lebanese relatives lived.

⁵ In 'Song of Myself,' Walt Whitman writes, 'I contain multitudes.' The complex and contradictory nature of identity has been evident since Plato admonished poets for depicting God as having more than one form (since a perfect entity would have a 'fixed nature'). Identity is performed and constructed, not static and predetermined.

⁶ 'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.' – widely attributed to Edmund Burke, though no source text has been definitively identified.

⁷ The logic of capitalism: between the producer, the consumer and the commodity lies the profit for the owner. As Karl Marx explains in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844): 'The laborer becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, indeed, the more powerful and wide-ranging his production becomes. Labor does not only produce commodities, it produces itself and the laborer as a commodity, and in relation to the level at which it produces commodities. The product of labor is labor, which fixes itself in the object, it becomes a thing, it is the *objectification* of labor. The *objectification of labor* manifests itself so much as a loss of objects, that the laborer is robbed of the most necessary objects, not only to maintain his own life, but even objects with which to labor. Indeed, labor itself becomes an object, which only with the greatest effort and with random interruptions can be acquired. Appropriation of objects manifests itself so much as estrangement, that, the more objects the laborer produces, the fewer he can own and so he plunges deeper under the mastery of his product: Capital.'

⁸ Marxist critique in a nutshell.

⁹ Unsustainable short-term greed is the destructive excess of capitalism. The increasing consolidation of business and property in the hands of multinational corporations has demonstrable effects on producers and consumers, e.g. agricultural giant Monsanto controls of 90% of the soybean seeds in America through its patented gene and requires farmers to repurchase seeds (rather than saving and reusing them) each year. Also, everything is now made of corn (including you).

¹⁰ Every experience in life has taught me that ‘who’ is more important than ‘what.’ The character and dedication of the people involved in any project are more important than an objective assessment of their skills, and for me, the physical location where I am is secondary in importance to the people who are there with me.

¹¹ Misogyny is predicated on the objectification of women and rooted in the historical context of women actually being property. The struggle for equal rights and respect requires conviction and action from both men and women.

¹² Shout-out to Homer.

¹³ This line is an example of ‘low art.’

¹⁴ Battle rappers typically insult opponents by referring to them as weak (and using problematic synonyms for weak like ‘gay’ and ‘effeminate’). I thought a real insult would be to refer to someone as an illegitimate dictator whose policies and repression cripple a nation and a people.

¹⁵ As I say in ‘Soulfire,’ ‘I’m not a rapper, I’m a rhymin’ social activist.’

¹⁶ I don’t drink alcohol, but my raps are dope.

No Idea's Original by Blake Brandes

I'm in a liminal space¹
 My raps originate from a subliminal place²
 But the conscious mind guards like a sentinel waits
 And the writer's block jump ya like you sittin' on weight³
 Whether shoulders or the streets we always sittin' on greats
 But the thought gets lost 'tween the sinners and saints⁴
 I hang on the periphery and center my aim⁵
 Cuz risk and opportunity: considered the same

I'm the difference, between rags and riches
 Between a tattered package and the mayor takin' pictures
 Between a cinematic graphic action-packed adventure
 And a massive battle rap in which I win it with a clincher
 I'm a ninja – that's why I make the ladies sigh⁶
 Volume up, gain high, when I let the fader ride⁷
 I'm only takin' sides whenever the major prize
 Is to see the insight only shown to patient eyes

Why? Cuz fear will leave your mind killed
 All of these scenarios are like a mine field
 And wise navigation will produce a high yield
 If you have an iron will, you don't need to try steel⁸
 But the guns and germs⁹
 Gon' spread through the hood cuz the hunger yearns
 The way an idea takes a hundred turns
 Before it arrives for your mind to learn

Chorus:

No idea's original - there's nothing new under the sun¹⁰
 That's why we gotta finish what we've begun
 From the first to the last, just refer to the past
 Cuz that's what's gonna tell you how it's all done (x2)

If it don't compute, you might be the type real
 Who's lookin' unfamiliar, twenty-five to life deal
 On appeal, with a record deal, how the mic feel
 When it's a lifeline to the iceberg – chiiiiiiiii¹¹

Titanic, undefined panic
 Thinkin' every shadow lookin' like a live cannon
 Y'all might brandish, the heat when y'all standin'¹²
 Underneath the weight of always takin' wide stances¹³
 Breadth afield, I got one hand beneath the wheel¹⁴
 Cross over bases, I know how the speaker feel¹⁵
 Boss of the aces, I know how to keep it real
 Cost to the patients, I know how to keep it illlllllll

... Insurance premium¹⁶
 Focus on the messaging, not focused on the medium¹⁷
 And if the money short, then they will be steppin' large
 With your life in the balance, just like a credit card

Shimmy shimmy ya, shimmy yam, shimmy yay¹⁸
 Blizzy off the hizzy make you dizzy everyday
 And they say 'bills everywhere; trill everything'
 But Blake stands for 'Bring Love And Kill Everything'¹⁹
 Contradiction? Raise the opposition
 Cuz I feel the tension with the logic's imposition²⁰
 And I'm in a position, to send the logic missin'
 I'm not logocentric when the ransom note is written

Y'all just logo-centric cuz of the branding on your shirt²¹
 Y'all just in a panic cuz a Brandes put in work
 Y'all will never manage the mechanics of rammin' ceramics
 through mountains of granite 'til you've mastered all the training first
 So getcha grind on / getcha cheese grater
 I'll sign a check like: hand up, 'Please, waiter'
 Avant-garde so I bring the real static
 Every record that I make's a postmodern *Illmatic*²²

No idea's original - there's nothing new under the sun
 Even if the odds 100 to 1
 Yo, we gotta try harder than just pumpin' a gun
 Greatest weapon in the world on the tip of yo tongue²³

ONE²⁴

¹ A liminal space is a threshold or transitory space where possibilities exist.

² When freestyling (improvised rapping), I allow my mind to become a liminal space where ideas flow and connect disparate elements to create new analogies and images. The Socratic idea of having a 'daimonion,' an intuitive and creative inner voice, seems to align well with freestyle rap or any other spontaneous artistic endeavor.

³ Overthinking can lead to paralysis, which is why 'flow' or 'getting in the zone' is so crucial in hip-hop. 'Sitting on weight' is a drug metaphor – a person might get 'jumped' (robbed) if he holds onto his stash for too long.

⁴ We build our understanding of the world from the ideas of those who came before us, but the interpretation of the original ideas tends to evolve (or devolve) over time.

⁵ The 'periphery and center (core)' model of understanding political and economic flows between consolidated areas of power (either geographic or social) and marginal areas features in postcolonial critiques of imperialism, such as Robert Young's *White Mythologies*, in which Young describes postmodernism as 'European culture's awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world.'

⁶ A 'sai' is a dagger-like martial arts weapon, famously used by Raphael of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

⁷ High volume of product equals high financial gain, given adequate pricing and market demand. Also, volume and gain are acoustic terms to describe loudness in music.

⁸ Excessive fear prevents action, but a degree of caution ('yield') is still necessary to navigate dangerous situations, lest one be forced to use a gun ('steel').

⁹ Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.

¹⁰ This track pays tribute to Nas's 2002 track 'No Idea's Original' from *The Lost Tapes*.

¹¹ This quatrain plays off the saying 'real recognize real... and you lookin' unfamiliar.' 'Studio gangstas' are rappers who claim street cred when in reality they perform a fictionalized identity. For example, Maimi-based rapper Rick Ross claimed on 'Hustlin' to 'know Pablo Noriega, the real Noriega / he owe me a hundred favors,' despite the revelation that Ross is actually a former corrections officer. In an interview with AllHipHop.com, Ross later admitted that he does not personally know Pablo Noriega.

¹² The iceberg and Titanic references describe the danger of becoming involved in actual violent conflicts of the type that killed Tupac and Biggie ('brandish the heat' = 'pull out a gun')

¹³ The primary point: Lack of commitment to an issue ('taking wide stances') can spark internal conflict and/or violent defensiveness. The secondary allusion, as summarized on Wikipedia: 'On June 11, 2007, US Senator Larry Craig was arrested at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport on suspicion of lewd conduct in a men's restroom, where he was accused of soliciting an undercover police officer for sexual activity. During the resulting interview with the arresting officer, Craig insisted upon his innocence, disputing the officer's version of the event by stating that he merely had a 'wide stance' and that he had been picking a piece of paper from the floor.' None of these events would have been remarkable except that Craig was a prominent conservative politician who had a record of supporting anti-gay legislation.

¹⁴ As opposed to 'depth of field,' a 'wide stance' would presuppose a 'breadth of field,' which taken into a new domain would become 'breadth afield.' The second half of the line references Herman Hesse's 1906 novel *Beneath The Wheel*, which describes the clash between genius and the traditional educational system in turn-of-the-century Germany.

¹⁵ A 'crossover' separates high and low frequencies of audio, e.g. for use with a subwoofer (bass).

¹⁶ The massively bloated cost of health care in the United States has been a boon for insurance companies. On March 23, 2010, the Affordable Care Act became law, although how the full implementation will affect insurance premiums and uninsured Americans remains to be seen.

¹⁷ My general preference is to focus on a non-rap topic in my raps, rather than obsessively talking about the art form. I still engage in intercultural critiques and allusions, but 'rap for rap's sake' is not as interesting for me, as it tends to be more oppositional than critical. Textual allusion: McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium is The Massage*. Prod. Jerome Agel. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1989.

¹⁸ Which is not to say that I do not enjoy randomly quoting Ol' Dirty Bastard's 1995 classic, 'Shimmy Shimmy Ya.'

¹⁹ Drake, 'Miss Me' (2010): 'Bills everywhere / Trill everything / and Drake just stand for 'Do Right And Kill Everything.' Props to Joe 'Focus' Martinez for the 'Bring Love And Kill Everything' flip.

²⁰ The homophonic use of 'raise/raze' indicates the tension between logocentric conceptions of written language and more dynamic constructions of meaning as a speech act (cf. Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida).

²¹ A tongue-in-cheek connection between logocentrism (the notion of a single origin) and commodification, which asserts a singular, original identity of commodities.

²² Avant-garde music is noted for its occasionally discordant or atonal use of sound, including static (which is also slang for intense confrontation). *Illmatic* is Nas's classic 1994 debut rap album.

²³ The speech act can topple dictatorships and revolutionize societies – build and destroy. The gun can only wound and kill.

²⁴ A way of saying 'goodbye' and an abbreviated form of 'One Love,' which connects the singularity of the individual ('one') to the collective ('love').

Blake Is Like by Blake Brandes

Chorus:

Like satellites that arrive
Reflect your candlelight
Music washing over you
Makes you feels so right

Wakin' up in the dawn
You don't have to walk alone
Even when your heart is breakin'
You're never on your own

Blake is like half-Libra, half-library¹
Poetry that's deep, and you know I never sleep
Cuz sleep is the mother of dreams
And I'm related by birth
86,400 seconds per day on this earth
I get meta for change, I ain't afraid of this verse²
I'm just takin' a turn, to grab this mic kid
And every day I ask myself what this life is
My answer's always an analogy of likeness³
Like, I like this, patience in a crisis
Cyrano de Bergerac, I smell what the sign is⁴
With my silence, used to be the shyness
Until my confidence grew up to where my height is
So now they call me highness, but that's a misnomer⁵
Cuz I get lower than the catacombs of Roma
Or a soldier beatin' civilians into a coma
Or saying that a person should ever have an owner
So I think the onus is on us to stand up
So come on put your hands up, and question what they hand us
You don't need a brand, you just need a Brandes
Brothers in a hurry, don't worry yo, we can't rush
But we're still fraternal, naught without labor⁶
Raise up your voice; we can talk without paper
Until the citizens united cannot be divided⁷
By supremely high prices and the mercenary violence

Chorus

Blake is like an earthquake, hurricane, plus the rain⁸
CNN for your brain, also the most trusted name
And that may be news to some of you,
but once you do get the picture, then listen, I will up and bust the frame
Rock your world view, this is for the girl who
Helped me comprehend what men who have courage do
So I encourage you to work hard and tell the truth
There are people on this earth put here to help you through

And I am one of them, even when it's thunderin'
 Come into the fold, and you will find the love within
 And when the hungry fins circle and you can't float
 I'll be on that lifeboat, come on grab that tightrope
 You know that the Serengeti's filled with wildebeasts
 But I've seen killa bees make jungles of village streets⁹
 Workers get the honey and try to protect the hive
 But when it comes to money, few make it out alive
 The frontline does work that's often most commendable
 But sadly they're the ones who are also most expendable
 Pawns in the game just trying to be kings
 When they reach the other side, so they keep moving
 Not knowing that the rules don't allow it, in the palace¹⁰
 There's a court with a jester who knows the most about it
 But he can never shout it, so he must pretend to be
 The clown who is down... to share it all in simile¹¹

Chorus

Blake is like a visionary sight
 The revelation hits you like a cemetery might¹²
 Cuz dust is our destiny; love is all we have
 Only what remains after everything has passed
 So everything we grasp is fleeting - ephemeral
 We can only read and start a fire - kindle¹³
 Often guns are drawn by soldiers... with pencils¹⁴
 Words aren't my weapons, they are my utensils
 Blake is like... a knife through illusions
 Trimming off the fat, and clearing the confusion
 Blake is like a fork in the road of your life
 The light there to guide like a star in the night
 Blake is like the spoon that feeds you when you're weak
 The voice deep inside that inspires you to speak
 Blake is like... nothing that you've ever seen
 Grow until I die, call me emerald cuz I'm evergreen
 And a rock, I can tell by how they pine for it
 I love this world so I went and wrote a rhyme for it
 And will that fix all the problems? I doubt it
 But I couldn't just sit here and do nothing about it¹⁵
 I can only show you the path, point to the moon¹⁶
 Even though I'm young, it'll still all be over soon
 But I thought this message was long overdue
 You're my equal forever, I'll never be over you.¹⁷

Chorus

¹ In 'Blake Is Like,' (a reimagining of 'Nas Is Like') I wanted to create an alternative ego-ideal, or 'inner image of oneself as one wants to become.' While many rappers perform aspirational rhymes about material wealth and sexual conquest—50 Cent's 'P.I.M.P.' could be their manifesto—I wanted to present an alternate vision of the self as heroic based on acceptance and empathic action, without necessarily resorting to self-negation.

- ² Identities develop and change through self-reflection and metaphor, hence ‘meta for change.’ Props to Valerie for the phrase.
- ³ ‘Blake Is Like’ is an exercise in simile, comparing likeness. We understand our reality through a series of analogies and stories about what objects and events are and what they mean.
- ⁴ Edmond Rostand’s 1897 play *Cyrano de Bergerac* portrays a talented poet, musician and duelist who has a rather large nose that causes his self-confidence to suffer.
- ⁵ Braggadocio, deflated.
- ⁶ The motto of my fraternity Lambda Chi Alpha is the Greek ‘kalepa ta kala,’ meaning ‘naught without labor.’ In the previous line, I allude to ‘brothers’ and fraternal ‘rush’, and the subsequent line connects ‘labor’ to the idea of the labor movement.
- ⁷ *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* was a 2010 US Supreme Court case that ruled that corporations could make unlimited contributions to independent political broadcasts during political elections as part of their First Amendment rights to free speech. The conflation of corporate spending in politics with free speech sets a concerning precedent in that it effectively permits corporations to ‘buy’ elections through indirect campaign support.
- ⁸ This verse uses imagery of natural phenomena like weather patterns and animals to convey power dynamics and relationships.
- ⁹ Mercenary soldiers are often children in developing world conflicts.
- ¹⁰ In a game of chess, each side only has one king. A pawn that reaches the other side of the board can become a queen, but there can only be one king.
- ¹¹ The ‘sad clown’ is a naïve stock character that often represents an artistic combination of sentimentality and sadness. In these lines, I combine the sad clown with the figure of the satirical jester / Shakespearean fool, who cleverly critiques the powerful under the guise of comedy and allegory.
- ¹² The rather messianic build-up of ‘a visionary sight’ is clarified as being a realization of mortality. Sometimes the recognition of death is helpful to appreciate life.
- ¹³ The fire of learning, combined with Amazon’s e-book reader, the Kindle. This summary sentence + single-word-punchline style of rap is a nod to Big Sean, Lil’ Wayne and Drake, all of whom frequently employ it.
- ¹⁴ I like the idea of literal soldiers metamorphing into artistic soldiers with the addition of two words (Derrida’s *différance* at work!).
- ¹⁵ When considering the limitations of hip-hop as political activism, hip-hop critic John McWhorter’s position in *All About the Beat* is clear: ‘there is nothing hip-hop music or hip-hop “culture” has to offer black America in terms of political activism.’ McWhorter’s larger argument is that mass transformational revolution along the lines of the political and social revolutions of the 1960s is unlikely to happen again in the United States in the near future. McWhorter takes issue with claims that hip-hop is not just helpful or instructive but actually revolutionary, and to the extent that much rap is largely oppositional, I agree with him. However, I point to the demonstrated educational, therapeutic, social and artistic applications of hip-hop that have resulted in a more integrated American culture over the past thirty years, culminating in the election of an African-American as president in 2008. Cultural revolution is a gradual process of increasing awareness and understanding of others to change fundamental attitudes that inform policy decisions (for example, attitudes about same-sex marriage that prompt people to vote ‘for’ or ‘against’ laws that would ban it). Political revolution of the type that has swept North Africa and the Middle East in 2010-2011 has largely been facilitated by social media and a more interconnected youth culture. To the extent that hip-hop provides a cultural foundation to build communities and alliances of individuals who are passionately engaged with their political and social structures, it is a supporting structure of political revolution.
- ¹⁶ Effective teaching is not about providing answers but showing students how to find answers.
- ¹⁷ Although the imagery in this song occasionally veers towards the messianic, the final line affirms an egalitarian love through the dual meanings of the word ‘over’ as ‘superior to’ and ‘done with’.

Education by Blake Brandes

Chorus:

This is the education of a generation
 Complacent, not patient, no determination
 I don't know where to go from here
 TV says that we're livin' in a world of fear
 But that cloud's got a silver linin'
 If there's a future, I'm gon' find it
 Open my eyes and take a stand
 The power to change the lies, it lies in our hands¹

Yo I let the hammers fly, build a life that's glamorized²
 Multiply the choices and forget when forms are standardized³
 Way below my reading level, way above my pay grade
 Education and success often bear the same name
 But the passion plus the academics is the only way to finish⁴
 Plus the only kinds of limits are those self-imposed
 Road-blocks, don't stop, even when the light is dim⁵
 And once you reach the top, then you invite a friend⁶
 Cuz we can never do this on our own, if nobody's home
 Then it's that much harder to be smarter and avoid the chrome⁷
 I loan the facts, till they're critically amassed
 And there's no test-osterone that we can't pass⁸
 When we let the tech blast, that's the science we advance⁹
 Who the livest in the lab, who the drivers in the van¹⁰
 Guard the future, guard the present, 'til the hate is history
 I don't worry now, cuz I trust the synchronicity

Chorus

If experience is a teacher, isolation's ignorance
 And I guess that failure's the professor of ascent¹¹
 Cuz we can only rise if we fall, fly if we all
 Jump off into the abyss, risk to be at fault¹²
 And I don't wear a wrist watch, cuz I never check the time
 Never watch the wrist, cuz the present I accept as mine
 And I mine the mind, for the permutation that's creative
 That's how I achieve – when the frequency is unrelated¹³
 That is how you make the innovative in an oversaturated
 Environment, tireless we strive with no complainin'
 I find souls are waitin', mired in the boredom
 When we said the sky's the limit, didn't mean Air Jordans¹⁴
 Cuz it's time to step up, I appoint guards
 To rebound, stay centered and never take a charge¹⁵
 Those who shoot and hang could really learn from shot clocks
 Cuz life'll break your backboard if your lid pops off
 (What) life'll smash your glass if your rims pop off¹⁶
 (What) life'll grab you fast if your Tims pop off¹⁷

(What) life'll often pass you if you do not try to tackle
 When the ball is in your court and the moment's lookin' at you
 It's a crapshoot, nothing easy's worth doin'
 Except to make it effortless, but that is just the first movement¹⁸
 I'm never truant, cuz I show up, and show out
 Enough with theatrics, it's time for the showdown

Chorus

Up in life's lab, kids are focused on the chemistry
 Whether drugs or love, sayin' it was meant to be
 But I believe the structure is the product of a rupture
 A disconnect to get respect and figure who is tougher¹⁹
 Of course this is measured in a crooked flask
 They are always cookin' fast but so afraid of the looking glass²⁰
 And when they bring the heat, yo it's not a Bunsen burner²¹
 Cuz by the time they're five, they'll have seen a hundred murders
 Actin' like electrons who bring the negativity
 But they've got momentum so it's hard to stop the energy²²
 If there is an enemy, it's woven like genetic code
 Deep inside our history, so we can rarely let it go
 But I'mma let it flow, rap osmosis
 High concentration till the membrane opens
 We can make a pro-team, if we learn from every play
 I came here to replicate messenger RNA²³

Chorus

¹ 'Education' captures the spirit of *Scholar*. As a call for critical reflection, a challenge to youth, a strategic map and a subversion of violent discourse, 'Education' is the track I hope to share with students across the world (upon hearing it, former Teach For America educator Mr. Fredericks said that he wished the 'Education' had been available to play for his classes when he was teaching in Brooklyn). The first half of the chorus lists common perceptions of contemporary youth in America and laments the negative and paralytic impact that television seems to have on young people. The second half of the chorus invites young listeners to prove that analysis incorrect—to demonstrate active engagement with their communities and take ownership of their educational experience.

² Gun terminology appears frequently in 'Education' as a stark reminder of the stakes for youth living in poverty for whom education may offer the only hope out of their current situation. In this line, rather than letting the hammer fly (firing a gun) to destroy, I use the hammer constructively to build an attractive future. I find that students often disconnect from traditional education when they no longer see its relevance to their life or a prospective future they have imagined for themselves.

³ Education can open creative and unexpected life paths and opportunities, such as the academic study of hip-hop.

⁴ This is my formula for educational achievement: Passion + Academics = Success. Making the educational experience relevant to a student's interest is not solely the teacher's responsibility, although the incorporation of culturally relevant texts and art can help to engage students who might otherwise not have a reference point for the traditional curriculum. This is the pedagogical application of analogy: connecting new information and concepts to existing reference points that the student already knows or understands.

⁵ Often we inhibit our own achievement through self-doubt and self-sabotage.

⁶ Whether formal or informal, mentoring relationships are crucial – an involved and invested individual who can provide guidance and feedback is vital for social and educational development.

⁷ Young people who are left unattended after school are more likely to be involved in antisocial behavior or excessive TV consumption (See: Ash, Katie. 'Survey Finds More Children Unattended After School.' *Education Week*. 7 October 2009.)

⁸ Conflict resolution skills are critical for surviving high school, street life and modern workplace environments.

⁹ 'Let the [TEC] blast' also means 'fire the gun.'

¹⁰ 'The lab' is also slang for 'the recording studio.'

¹¹ Creative pedagogy in the classroom can use analogy to facilitate experiential learning, such as teaching public speaking and performing skills by teaching students how to rap and beatbox.

¹² Taking creative risks, like writing raps for essays in college, can often pay off if the creator keeps the audience in mind.

¹³ Creativity and innovation often happen when unusual ideas or objects are considered in relation to one another. For example, one chapter in my PhD discusses Christian rap through the theories of French philosopher/author/activist Jean-Paul Sartre and German cultural critic Theodor Adorno. Often when I am seeking inspiration for a specific project, I ask myself, 'What two ideas or thinkers could I bring together to see how their ideas relate?'

¹⁴ Success as measured by footwear is another example of status competition, although as rappers like New York MC Najee have explained, if people grow up having nothing, the ability to buy and wear expensive products is often meaningful and important to them as a tangible indicator of how far they have come.

¹⁵ To rebound from adversity, to stay centered in the face of distraction or frustration, and to avoid getting a criminal record.

¹⁶ The basketball metaphors reflect the danger of losing one's cool and using firearms.

¹⁷ Timberland boots, popular in the hip-hop community.

¹⁸ Learning the basic fundamentals of a skill is important, but the true reward comes from the difficult task of maintaining focus and purpose in order to see a project through to completion.

¹⁹ Rather than accepting culturally predetermined explanations of delinquent behavior, I see many high school issues to be problems of negotiating status competition in destructive ways.

²⁰ Unfortunately, the relative importance of unhealthy status competition can lead to self-destructive behavior.

²¹ 'Heat' and 'burner' are both slang terms for a gun.

²² Despite my optimism, I am not naïve – behavioral patterns are difficult to adjust, especially if communal and environmental factors are reinforcing negative behaviors.

²³ The final quatrain describes my mission through biological metaphors – to educate and build a thoughtful community of conscious individuals who will spread their knowledge and passion throughout the world.

War Is What We Do Not See by Blake Brandes

Installin' red linen and things like a Communist regime
 Puttin' black marks on dreams like the Stazi behind the scenes¹
 Kamikaze with the red dot, axis of triple beams²
 I'm rap's Martin Luther; y'all are just missing kings
 So bring the Reformation to the Great Chain of Being³
 Bottom to the top like a Lambo's wings⁴
 I could shine a light like a lamppost brings
 To the street, beat a sword till the anvil sings
 Make the puppet dance when the hand pulls strings
 Digits busy workin' so I can't hold bling
 I like my wars cold and my ammo green
 And my curtains made of iron so my camo's clean
 Hunkered in my bunker while they try to rock my proxy⁵
 Until I let the napalm flash like paparazzi
 Yo I'm not a Nazi, but I rule like a fascist
 And my base jump for me like the rise of the masses⁶

Ask the middle classes why they call me Bougie B⁷
 I rep the proletariat until they truly free
 Forget class action, I'mma bring a class war
 To they back door, cuz it sound like what they asked for
 I'm pressin' fast forward, blast from the past
 Yo forget the fightin', put the cash in the bag
 Democracy's nice, but it's only a tool
 Cuz we need a corporate sponsor for colonial rule⁸
 But I'm more gazpacho than Gestapo⁹
 A little less Congo and a little mo' Morocco
 A little more Rothko, put you in a red square¹⁰
 So what if the social fabric's lookin' threadbare

I don't need a J.D. to know you got it bad¹¹
 But hey, if nothing else, at least you got a lotta swag¹²
 I stay swagged out, if you live in a glass house
 I'd be careful when all the tear gas is passed out¹³
 Watch 'em ask, 'Why'd it happen to me?'
 Banality of evil while you're tappin' your feet¹⁴
 Rappers say they killers and they always droppin' bombs
 But they spend their whole life trapped in the Panopticon¹⁵

Chorus:

Keep your eyes closed, just focus on the beat
 It don't matter what you think, it don't matter what you read
 Act like it's a game till the tank's in the streets¹⁶
 Cuz war is the thing that we do not see (x2)

How can you not see, sittin' in the hot seat
 Six o'clock coverage? Better chance of rollin' Yahtzee
 They say to not speak, no time for dissent
 No money in the budget till it's time for defense¹⁷
 Huh, cut the schools, cuz an educated populace
 Is the only option if we ever plan on stoppin' it
 That can't happen, so bring on more draftin'
 More scholarships turn minorities to captains¹⁸
 More hollow ships turn minorities to captives
 More hollow tips make minorities inactive¹⁹
 More borrowed gifts as the sorrow shifts
 From the killed kids to the killers' life by the time tomorrow hits
 Ask the Parliament, they can take a vote
 We got a gulf to bridge, so we better make a rope
 Cuz while we're hangin', boys are out bangin'
 But we focus on the slang 'stead of fightin' all the slangin'²⁰
 Everything is spectacle. We need a pair of spectacles
 To keep us highly skeptical cuz we are all susceptible
 To all the professionals who tell us what we need to do
 And it's all acceptable, except we all will leave confused
 Don't drink the Freedom Juice, it goes bad quick
 Half the Middle East got a taste; now they're mad sick
 I wouldn't take a sip unless it was home brewed
 Domestic always better than imported, home dude²¹
 What's new, better yet what's news
 We're all playin' chicken while the fox is in the coup²²
 Got 'em with a scoop, but that just means better lies
 So the revelation won't be televised

Chorus

¹ 'War Is What We Do Not See' critiques the highly mediated experience of reality in the 24-hour cable news environment of contemporary Western society. With more information instantly available through the internet than at any other time in human history, middle-class American life seems ironically more removed from the realities of actual conflict than at any point since Vietnam, when the media actually helped bring the war to an end by displaying its truly grotesque toll. The opening lines of 'War' provide a Communist throwback by name-checking Stalin, Lenin, Marx and Putin, as well as the delightful home furnishings of Linens & Things, a US-based home accessory store.

² The 'red dot' refers to the Japanese flag and Kamikaze pilots during World War II, as well as to a targeting sight on a gun, which guides the shooter by shining a red laser along the shooting trajectory, thereby producing a 'red dot' on the target. A triple beam scale is frequently used by drug dealers to measure product. Thus, the 'axis of triple beams' refers to the often fatal intersection of violence and the drug trade, as well as alluding to the Axis of Evil, which was former President George W. Bush's designation for Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

³ Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation against the perceived corruption of the Catholic Church in 1517. The Great Chain of Being is a conceptual understanding of the world that was used throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods to justify monarchs' rule of nations by claiming they had God-given authority, known as the 'divine right of kings.' It was a static, top-down hierarchical ordering of society, beginning with God and the angels, descending through kings and lords and ending with peasants. This structure was also applied to the family, with the father being the top of the hierarchy, the wife in the middle and the children at the bottom.

⁴ Car doors that open vertically.

⁵ This section describes a proxy war, in which two powers fight ideological or territorial battles by funding and arming other nations rather than attacking each other directly, like the US and the USSR during the Cold War.

⁶ In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx theorized that the proletariat (workers) would rise up against the bourgeoisie (owners of capital) to overthrow the capitalist system and establish a classless society.

⁷ 'Bougie', derived from 'bourgeois,' has a hip-hop connotation meaning 'pretentious or trying to rise above one's class', which I always find to be amusing given its Marxist associations.

⁸ As Immortal Technique raps in 'Cause of Death', 'Colonialism is sponsored by corporations / That's why Halliburton gets paid to rebuild nations'.

⁹ 'Gazpacho' is a cold vegetable soup. The Gestapo were the state secret police of Nazi Germany.

¹⁰ Mark Rothko was an abstract expressionist painter, famous for his dark and moody paintings of large quadrilaterals. The 'Red Square' in Moscow is next to the Kremlin and has been the site of numerous military parades throughout history.

¹¹ A 'J.D.' is a Juris Doctor, a law degree in the US. 'JD' is also Jermaine Dupri, an Atlanta-based music producer and rapper who produced the Usher hit, 'U Got It Bad' (2001).

¹² 'Swag' is corporate-branded promotional merchandise. It is also an abbreviated form of 'swagger' which was popularized in 2008 by Soulja Boy's 'Turn My Swag On' and subsequently spread enthusiastically by Lil' B, Justin Bieber and Tyler the Creator (from the group Odd Future Wolfgang Kill Them All).

¹³ Suppression of dissent has a way of coming back to haunt oppressors.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt's 1963 work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* proposes that evil deeds throughout history have been committed by ordinary people who accepted false or distorted premises that the state advocated and thus believed that their actions were acceptable or normal.

¹⁵ In 1785, English philosopher Jeremy Bentham designed a prison called The Panopticon in which the guards could observe all of the prisoners at all times, but the prisoners could not tell when they were being watched. Michel Foucault argued that all hierarchical structures in Western society, from schools and factories to hospitals and the military, have adopted the conformity-enforcing structure of the Panopticon.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard's book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991) describes the way that modern warfare has been transformed into virtual warfare mediated by images on TV, radar and computer screens.

¹⁷ In May 2011, while the US Congress was seriously considering slashing social and educational spending across the board, the US House of Representatives passed a \$690 billion defense budget, which would 'provide a 1.6 percent increase in military pay, fund an array of aircraft, ships and submarines and increase health care fees slightly for working-age military retirees. The bill meets the Pentagon's request for \$119 billion to fight wars in Iraq and Afghanistan' (Yahoo News).

¹⁸ For many low-income US students (including many white students), military service appears to provide the only financially viable option for a college education.

¹⁹ 'Hollow tips' are hollow-point bullets that expand upon impact, thereby increasing tissue damage and decreasing the likelihood of the bullet exiting the target and creating collateral damage.

²⁰ Controversy and moral outrage over rap music (for example, anything Fox News host Bill O'Reilly has ever said about rap music) tends to focus on the negative representations in the music rather than the underlying socioeconomic conditions from which they arise. While the violence, homophobia and hypermaterialism are worthy of critique, questions like that posed on Bill O'Reilly's 14 November 2003 segment 'Is Gangsta Rap Hurting America's Children?' often overlook more significant issues of childhood hunger, poverty, neglect, educational discrepancies and substandard housing.

²¹ While not all domestic political revolutions are successful or have positive outcomes, the US track record on international regime change is abysmal.

²² As Nas says of Fox News in 'Sly Fox', 'The sly fox, Cyclops – we locked in the idiot box.'

Pause by Blake Brandes

In the beginning, there was a man in the garden¹
 And the first transgression would've become the first pardon
 But the other end of the bargain was the knowledge of self
 And ever since that day we've been callin' for help²
 After that morning there was Eve in the scenery
 The core of the problem was a seed of indecency
 Or so it's been reported, even more so recently
 Morsels of judgment growin' with increasin' frequency³

But please, consider for a moment
 If two straight parents are the only one component
 That could help a kid in foster care, or even adopt
 The debate's not between havin' straight or gay pops
 It's between havin' some parents or none at all
 Social care sittin' there, make a hundred calls
 New family needed who will both love and feed him
 But the same folks who beat him also claim to love freedom
 Except when it comes to the parentin', arrogant
 We'll take ten divorces, but no gay marriages
 What's the definition? We already changed it
 To be about love, not a property arrangement
 It used to be the property of daughter turned to wife
 No legal protection and a poverty of rights
 But thankfully it shifted from the black and the white⁴
 To include two adults who just want to make a life
 Together, whether they have children or not
 Are monogamous or callin' friends to chill at the spot
 Whether tolerant, religious, or a bigoted knot
 No matter how they configured, they still gettin' it got⁵

I'm an ally – I'm allied with the truth
 Labels are unstable when applied to a group
 So friends stay strong, we reppin' your cause
 Until all the laws will allow us to pause⁶

¹ The intro and outro of 'Pause' contain excerpts from Dan Savage's lecture at the University of South Florida on September 23, 2009. Embracing Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of committed literature, i.e. art which attempts to raise awareness in readers by encouraging them to examine their own assumptions and beliefs, 'Pause' discloses the ramifications of US social policy towards homosexual couples and families. Beginning with a discussion of gay adoption and moving into an argument for legalizing gay marriage, I explore what I believe is one of the most significant contemporary American civil rights issues. Public conversations about homosexuality are rare in hip-hop, to the point that some rappers whom I interviewed for my research were hesitant even to comment at all about homophobia in hip-hop. Although gay marriage and adoption are highly divisive topics in the United States, only by having civil conversations can attitudes and opinions shift. By showing the impact that banning gay adoption and fostering has on children who have been neglected, abused and abandoned by their straight parents, I hope to move the conversation beyond religious ideology and into the realm of tangible implications for children. Similarly, when framed in a historical context, the typical arguments for denying couples same-sex marriage (e.g. it is a redefinition of marriage; every child deserves a mother and a father) do not hold weight given the current civil institution of marriage

in the United States and Kwame Anthony Appiah's articulation of 'neutrality as equal respect' in modern liberal societies. In terms of challenging individuals to reevaluate their beliefs and positions in the tradition of committed literature, my hope is that this track will spark dialogue both within the hip-hop community and outside of it.

² The Genesis story is commonly cited as one example of Biblical inclination against gay marriage ('It was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.'). However, I like to envision the Fall as the beginning of individual responsibility, the moment where we no longer receive direct divine guidance. Although I understand the argument that scripture gives divine guidance, I am referring to unquestionable tactile deity-to-human intercession by God in contemporary human lives. Negotiating the relationship between the individual and the collective has been the story of human history, and the gradual progression of consciousness raising has been remarkable, culminating in the contemporary liberal democracy. Although many imperfections and injustices still exist within liberal democracies, the arc of history does bend towards justice.

³ Homophobia is, by definition, fear—fear of difference, of the unknown, of the loss of familiar social or familial structures. Social constructions of masculinity in the United States are frequently predicated on virility and aggression, and male homosexuality is seen as threatening those constructs by embracing femininity. By extension, homophobia is a form of misogyny, which historically has been manifested in the virgin/whore dichotomy that places women in a no-win situation of either being limited by notions of purity and servility or being condemned for 'immoral' behavior. The notion that Eve's consumption of the apple in the Garden of Eden was the first sin and that she 'corrupted' Adam survives to this day.

⁴ The definition of marriage has shifted substantially from women having few property rights (under British common law and early American colonial law) and a prohibition on interracial marriage (until *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967 ruled anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional).

⁵ As Dan Savage notes, modern heterosexual marriage can be 'monogamous, or not; they can have children, or not; it can be a religious ritual, or not; it can be for life, or not. It's up to them. There are certain things we understand about what marriage means for everybody, but beyond those very limited things... every single marriage is whatever the two people in it say that it is.'

⁶ The expression 'pause' is used among some members of the hip-hop generation to 'deflect' the perceived homosexuality of a statement someone just said. I wanted to reclaim the word as a goal – to achieve full equality for same-sex couples in America.

Struggle by Blake Brandes

When the factories closed, Dad went to middle management¹
 It was just a 9-to-5, but it felt like abandonment²
 Just to feel alive, there was the knife handle gripped
 Gently stroked the thighs before she started panickin'³
 Sold all her life, lookin' in a cracked mirror⁴
 Everything fuzzy – lies makin' that clearer⁵
 She was airbrushed, but longed for a brush with air⁶
 Price of living on the top: saw that there was nothing there⁷
 Stayed in the suburbs, but lived sub-urban⁸
 Purred when she posed, but still lacked purpose⁹
 Though looking at the servants, felt better by comparison
 Second child worse off – family's the embarrassment¹⁰
 Not a case of parentin' that failed to stop the trouble
 More a case of starin' in the face without the struggle¹¹
 The open field appeals, but you always need to hold a fence
 Cuz without gravity, there's nothing you can grow against¹²

Chorus:

This is for the struggle
 Dedicated to the struggle
 Everybody's gotta hustle¹³

Now for the challenge: 'Discover who you are'¹⁴
 But maintain the balance: 'Don't go too far'¹⁵
 Cuz the other side is greener, but that is just a lesson
 When the food that doesn't feed you seems to feed on your depression¹⁶
 Everyone is guessin', but the few with certitude
 Always seem to want to lead the rest of us in servitude
 And if you ask for further proof, they always pull the weakest link
 Everybody's done a study – tell us what the people think¹⁷
 So she starts to reach the brink, 'bout the time she reached the sink¹⁸
 Never wakin' from the dream, though she can't ever sleep a wink¹⁹
 With the razor poised in air, feeling all the poisoned air
 Tears streaming down her cheeks, wonders if the boys'll care²⁰
 But she shaves her arms and legs, beating back the throbbing dread²¹
 Wishing she could do it, but she'd rather be a mom instead²²
 So she puts the blade away and lies there numb
 Pain locked in the closet for another day to come²³

Chorus

Everybody hurts, but we overcome
 Though not everyone knows where the hurt is from²⁴
 Way I heard it from him, that was her choice
 Way I heard it from her, that was God's voice
 They observe relative to their prospects
 Whether suburbs or the projects²⁵

Yo, we all project from our background
 So it's always hard to let the past down²⁶
 And I've been let down hard in the past
 Two-sided story when we sawed it in half²⁷
 Not a magic trick, just a tragic mask
 We could all use a hand but we're too scared to clasp²⁸
 So we gotta hold out, hope we hold on
 Through the triumph and tragedy we go on
 So long, till we meet again
 And if you believe, this won't be the end.²⁹

Chorus

¹ In Hickory, North Carolina, where I grew up, the employment base shifted from manufacturing jobs in the furniture and tape industries in the 1990s and 2000s to fiber-optic cable companies and service sector jobs, largely due to outsourcing (although Hickory's furniture industry is still significant). Thus, middle management positions became the new middle class 'standard' occupation. This song is based largely on the experiences of my middle class friends and their families.

² For many workers expecting to spend their entire lives at a single company, deindustrialization and the subsequent layoffs felt like a betrayal of their dedication to their company. The idea of it being 'just a 9-to-5' implies that he theoretically shouldn't invest so completely in his job, but it has become part of his identity. Also, this line sets up how the father's job was perceived by the daughter. Outwardly, everything is normal (in the sense that a 9-to-5 job is unexceptional), but in the daughter's mind, the departure of the father from home is perceived as abandonment.

³ The ambiguity here plays off of the emotional violence both father and daughter feel has been done to them, as well as the question of actual interfamilial violence. More concretely, this image refers to the daughter planning to cut herself, (ironically to 'feel alive'). There are also undertones of sexual development before emotional maturity, which is another avenue that teens sometimes explore when trying to feel something in a world that feels lifeless to them.

⁴ The daughter's self image has been distorted and shaped by the media culture and socializing forces in which she has grown up. A constant bombardment of advertising has left her with a fragmented sense of self, to the point where it's uncertain whether they're selling her products or she's selling them insecurities. One of these major insecurities is her appearance, which is developed in the next lines.

⁵ The 'fuzziness' of youth and innocence is ironically contrasted with the 'clarity' of advertisers' articulation and creation of needs and desires. Also, 'fuzzy' indicates an indefinite sense of reality, which self-directed 'lies' about her life and body attempt to clarify.

⁶ The notion of being trapped in a suburban environment that demands conformist perfection. The airbrushing of her pain, her appearance, and her life contrasts with her desire for the freedom to feel and express herself. Also, a play on 'hair brush', contrasting a controlled environment with letting her hair freely flow in the air.

⁷ She realizes that once all of her needs and wants are easily fulfilled, she has nothing to live for. The irony of being at the material level of success to which everyone aspires cuts deep. This line also sets up a potential dramatic reversal, as the listener may have thought the daughter was a victim of domestic violence or human trafficking up to this point in the verse.

⁸ The difference between 'stayed' and 'lived' is important here. When I moved to New York, I was struck by how many people talked about places they 'stayed at' rather than 'lived in'. This distinction indicated that a house is just a residence that you stay in, but living is something that you do while moving. The daughter feels the stagnation of residing in a comfortable suburban environment, while her lived experience ironically feels even worse than urban poverty.

⁹ Again, the daughter's public performance conforms with the social expectations placed upon her, while she does not actually feel fulfilled.

¹⁰ The line questions who should feel better by comparison – the family or the servant. Also, the first half of the line sets up the expectation that the second child will be more aimless than the daughter, only to flip the expectation by suggesting that the second child is possibly worse off because of his/her family, not his or her actual behavior.

¹¹ Yet, we cannot just blame the parenting strategies for the situation or the individual child's actions. This quatrain explains the point of the song. The notion of 'starin' in the face' without taking action reflects a Joycean paralysis in the midst of an existential crisis.

¹² Plants and muscles cannot grow without gravity or pressure. Growth only occurs through resistance and struggle. Similarly, choices (artistic and otherwise) often require parameters ('a fence') to prevent paralysis.

¹³ As Jay-Z says in *Decoded*: 'I love metaphors, and for me hustling is the ultimate metaphor for the basic human struggles: the struggle to survive and resist, the struggle to win and to make sense of it all.' In the chorus, I play off of the dual notion that 'everybody's gotta hustle' and 'everybody's got a hustle' – the imperative and the observation.

¹⁴ This is, of course, not the actual challenge. The real challenge is to create who you are, but identity is frequently discussed in terms of discovery, as if one's life purpose is just over the horizon, waiting to be revealed.

¹⁵ Encouragement to 'discover yourself' is often accompanied by the tempering 'but don't do anything too crazy, don't stray too far from societal expectations and don't do something particularly subversive or rebellious'.

¹⁶ This couplet has multiple interpretations: (1) the despair of hearing 'it gets better' when life seems hopeless; (2) the struggle of following one's artistic dream, even if it doesn't pay well; (3) the way that art is often created from pain and sadness; (4) the way that eating disorders create an inverse relationship with food, which ties in with earlier references to body image; (5) the way that material objects, such as food, can become anthropomorphized and given power over our psyches; (6) additional readings encouraged.

¹⁷ Referring to the uncertainty of the postmodern age, where the internet constantly yields competing claims and contradictory information for any number of topics ('the weakest link') and authority is constantly questioned. Yet, it is those with absolute certainty who command strong followings in this age as well – fundamentalism has a strong appeal in a sea of relativism and uncertainty. Applied to the narrative, this general uncertainty manifests itself in the daughter's life through aimlessness and a lack of passionate commitment to anything in her world.

¹⁸ The narrative returns, with the protagonist on the edge of giving up, as she walks into the bathroom.

¹⁹ Again, the sense of unreality pervades her life, conflating the sleeping and the waking world.

²⁰ The emotional climax of the song – will she kill herself? Her reflection on whether the boys will care sets up the final quatrain.

²¹ She has decided not to kill herself, for the time being. Instead, she shaves her arms and legs, another body image reference, seemingly in response to the boys.

²² Now a major ambiguous development occurs – is she a teenager saying that she'll remain alive to one day be a mother? Or is she a mother who is living in suburbia, and the 'boys' are her children?

²³ The ambiguity lingers – will she pass on the suburban life of despair to her future children (if she is a teenager), or will she return to kill herself at a later date (if she is already a mother)? The notion of her lying numb suggests paralysis even at the decisive moment. She cannot even bring herself to commit suicide, so even now she continues a life of endless postponement. But perhaps this pain for 'another day to come' will be her motivation to make a change, or to express what she is feeling through art in an effort to recognize and overcome it.

²⁴ Much pain and anger is displaced, which is why self-reflection is so critical for self-improvement.

²⁵ Everyone's suffering is relative to his or her position in life; nevertheless, a sense of perspective can help lessen the hurt.

²⁶ 'Letting go' is easier said than done. Humans respond to circumstances based on past experiences, and while we can consciously attempt to circumnavigate those automatic responses, repetitive conditioning and loss aversion can make it difficult to change.

²⁷ The breakdown always reveals differing expectations in what was once thought to be a shared vision.

²⁸ We spend much of life afraid of commitment and/or rejection.

²⁹ Through the struggle, we bond together. What we share is greater than what divides us. And if you believe, this won't be the end.

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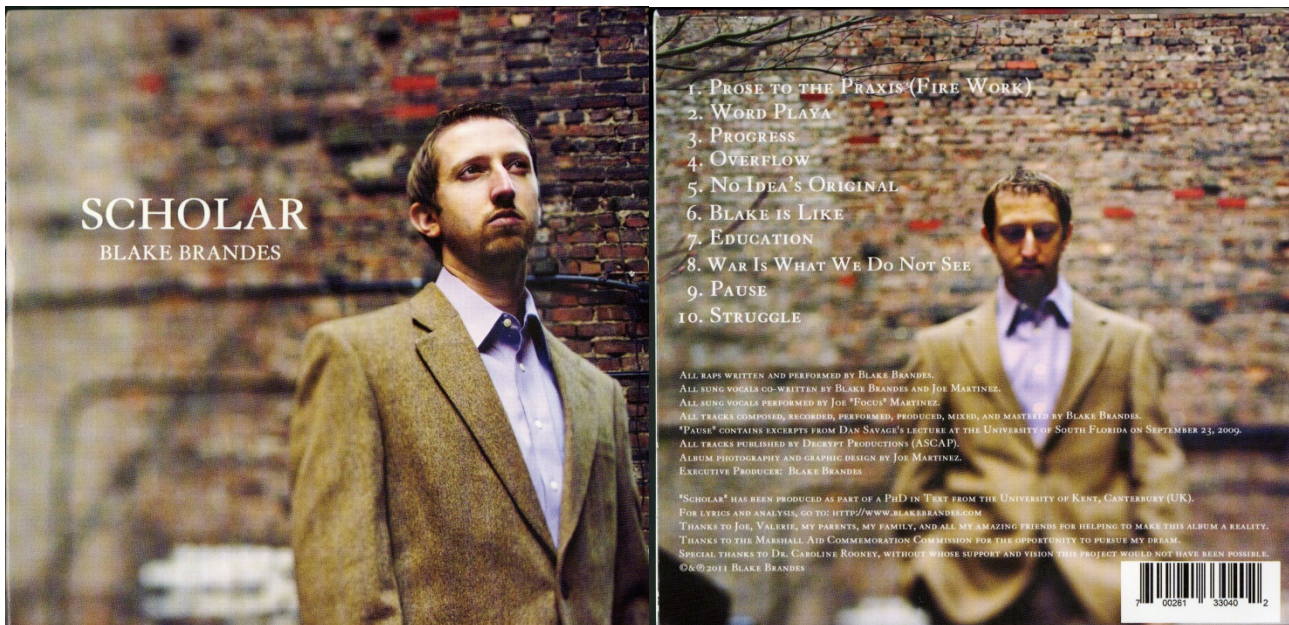
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