Who Killed It: Toward a Hip Hop Theory

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A dissertation
submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington
2018

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Program authorized to offer degree:

English
This dissertation examines how the set of creative impulses and artistic methods initially ascribed to nineteenth-century American literary Realism continues to inform and shape present-day expectations and interpretations of hip hop narrative production. Realism emerges in the U.S. during a time of tremendous social transformation, including rapidly changing technological and scientific advancement, the rise of national industry, mass immigration, and shifting ideas about what exactly constitutes “American” civil society. In the midst of this social revolution, purveyors of Realism, and champions of the novel form in particular, turned their artistic efforts toward representing the lives and concerns of everyday people.

Although many of the artistic strategies developed by Realists have continued well into the present, most critics mark the end of Realism as a discernable literary movement at the turn of the twentieth century, and more specifically, around the time novelists began embracing the experimental techniques that would later become associated with modernism. However, this
dissertation argues that the original debates about the Realist novel as an egalitarian art form and vehicle for democratic representation remain stubbornly intact, finding their most salient present-day manifestation in discourses around hip hop narrative and cultural production. This project examines the work of three popular hip hop artists, Tupac Shakur, Kanye West and Janelle Monáe, each of whom deploy various literary strategies that challenge Realism’s hegemonic hold on popular culture, exposing how its legacy continues to haunt debates about race, gender, and representation in American popular culture. I argue that by engaging Realism, this trio of artists contributes to the longer and more radical project of disarticulating the genre’s ideological claims on mimetic representation as a practice of democracy.
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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my dissertation committee, Alys Weinbaum, Gillian Harkins, and Sonnet Retman. Special thanks also goes to Kathy Mork for her encouragement and guidance, especially in the home stretch.

The central questions of this project developed out of many years of teaching experience at the University of Washington. Thank you to the colleagues and friends I met while teaching in the Comparative History of Ideas Program at UW Seattle, including Amy Peloff, Cynthia Anderson, Christina Wygant, Erwin Thomas, and the late Jim Clowes. Thanks also to friends and supporters in the School of Interdisciplinary Sciences Program at UW Bothell, especially Ron Krabill, whose kindness and mentorship have helped guide me throughout the process.

I am extremely grateful to my family and to a handful of lifelong friends who have stuck by me for the duration of this journey, including Keith Feldman, Anoop Mirpuri, Rachel Hall, Ryan Lewis, Jen Ide, Amber Croyle, Beth Trinchero, and Brandon Washington. I am probably most indebted to my best friend, Rocky, who has patiently endured the past several months sitting next to me in front of a computer when I know he’d rather be playing outside. His sweet nature and goofy sense of humor are the light of my life.
Introduction:  
Everybody’s Protest Poetry: Reimagining Commercial Rap’s Reality Narrative

The ‘protest’ novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary. Whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena…This report from the pit reassures us of its reality and its darkness and of our own salvation; and ‘As long as such books are being published,’ an American liberal once said to me, ‘everything will be all right.’

James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1948)

Black writers tend to be read racially, primarily at the content level, as responding to racism, representing ‘the black experience.’ That black writers have been experimentally and innovatively engaged with the medium, addressing issues of form as well as issues of content, tends to be ignored.

Nathaniel Mackey, “Other: From Noun to Verb” (1992)

Hip hop didn’t invent anything…hip hop reinvented everything.

Grandmaster Caz, The Art of Rap (2012)

James Baldwin’s well-known critique of Richard Wright’s best-selling novel, Native Son (1940), speaks to a long and complicated relationship between artistic production, representation and race in U.S. popular culture. Baldwin claims that the commercial success of Wright’s protest novel was due in part to its predictable coupling of “realism” and “racial tension.” Baldwin puts forth Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) as the most appropriate literary ancestor to Native Son, and provocatively argues that Wright’s nihilistic main character, Bigger Thomas, is simply the inverse trope of Stowe’s docile slave, Uncle Tom:
Below the surface of this novel there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy. Bigger is Uncle Tom’s descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses. (23)

Baldwin juxtaposes the literary genres of sentimentalism and realism and points to their shared potential to reproduce damaging African American stereotypes.¹ In his critique, the protest novel fits the accepted framework of the “American scene” because its portrayal of reality doesn’t go far enough. Baldwin does not suggest abandoning realism as a narrative strategy, but rather advocates for a deeper, more robust engagement with it (one that moves beyond the basic mimetic treatment of sociopolitical conditions, especially those facing black people).

For Baldwin, the artistic depiction of reality requires “a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted.” Writers must work on “complexify-ing” (his term) the depiction of black experience and take the reader on a “journey toward a more vast reality” (15, my emphasis). If art hopes to intervene and effectively change the current society, artists must move toward what Cornel West would later call the “prophetic.” They must mine the reality of everyday life for its visions of the future, moving the reader towards something we cannot yet visualize or articulate, a society and a democracy yet to come.

Realism in both painting and literature emerged around the middle of the nineteenth century, first across Europe and then in the United States. In the U.S. context in particular,

¹ Literary critic Kenneth Warren contends that a principal difference between sentimentalism and realism is that in the former, “the redemption of the social world lay with the individual,” whereas in the latter,
literary Realism as a genre and a recognized movement appears at the end of the Civil War and becomes popular through the development of its various subgenres like naturalism and local color fiction. Realist writers and subsequent scholars of the period have never quite come to an agreement on what exactly counts as realism in the novel, but they generally agree on a few key principles. Perhaps the most frequently cited feature associated with Realism is its general opposition to Romanticism. As part of the repudiation of Romanticism, Realist writers aimed to depict the lives of ordinary Americans. What counted as a “real” life worthy of artistic depiction varied among writers such William Dean Howells, Rebecca Harding Davis and Henry James, but the central concern was, as J.A. Cuddon puts it, the “portrayal of life with fidelity…not concerned with idealization, [or] with rendering things as beautiful when they are not, or in any way presenting them in any guise as they are not” (Cuddon 729).

The time immediately following the Civil War was one of tremendous social upheaval, and several of the larger themes associated with Realism get forged in this particular historical moment. The industrial revolution created a wider gap between the rich and the poor, and writers attempted to reflect the rapidly changing economic and class realities by focusing on the lives of industrial workers and the middle class. In Social Construction of American Realism (1992), Amy Kaplan contends that Realism emerges as a kind of “strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change” (ix). She further argues that the critical discussions about Realism and the novel as an artistic form (by writers like Howells, James and others) become “an anxious and contradictory mode which both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the

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2 Local color fiction focuses on a particular geographical location by incorporating regional dialect, accents and social practices into the narrative. Some of the more popular texts of local color fiction include Charles Chesnutt’s The Wife of His Youth (1898) and The Conjure Woman and Other Tales (1899) as well as Kate Chopin Desiree’s Baby (1895) and The Awakening (1899).
For writers and readers alike, Realist literature helped theorize and manage a rapidly changing national landscape.

Raymond Williams argues in *Keywords* (1976) that the concept of “realism” itself was new in the nineteenth century, where the initial goal of artists was to represent experiences with “exceptional accuracy,” but later signaled a commitment to “showing things as they actually exist.” Artists sought ways to depict social circumstances and reality not as we would have them be, but as they actually are:

Realism is a new word in C19. It was used in French from 1830s and in English from 1850s. It developed four distinguishable meanings: (i) as a term to describe, historically, the doctrines of Realists as opposed to those of Nominalists; (ii) as a term to describe new doctrines of the physical world as independent of mind or spirit, in this sense sometimes interchangeable with naturalism or materialism (qq.v.); (iii) as a description of facing up to things as they really are, and not as we imagine or would like them to be—‘let us replace sentimentalism by realism, and dare uncover those simple and terrible laws which, be they seen or unseen, pervade and govern’ (Emerson, 1860); (iv) as a term to describe a method or an attitude in art or literature—at first an exceptional accuracy of representation, later a commitment to describing real events and showing things as they actually exist. (*Keywords* 258-259)

While defining Realism was an elusive task from the beginning, Baldwin’s later insights about the genre help us understand an inherent flaw in Emerson’s early claim that realism could somehow “replace” sentimentalism, especially when it comes to representing the everyday lives of democracy’s so-called “others.” The consequences of “showing things as they actually exist”
also meant writers ran the risk of unintentionally naturalizing or even normalizing legislated forms of inequality, namely those based on race, class and gender.

This dissertation examines how the set of creative impulses initially ascribed to nineteenth-century American Realists, such as the artistic desire to portray objective truth and the primary focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people, continues to inform and shape present-day expectations and interpretations of narrative production (and in the case of this project, hip hop narrative production). Realism emerges in the U.S. during a time of tremendous social transformation, including rapidly changing technological and scientific advancement, the rise of national industry, mass immigration, and shifting ideas about what exactly constitutes “American” civil society. In the midst of this social revolution, purveyors of Realism, and champions of the novel form in particular, turned their artistic efforts toward representing the lives and concerns of everyday people.

Although many of the artistic strategies developed by Realists have continued well into the present, most critics mark the end of Realism as a discernable literary movement at the turn of the twentieth century, and more specifically, around the time novelists began embracing the experimental techniques that would later become associated with modernism. However, this dissertation argues that the original debates about the Realist novel as an egalitarian art form and vehicle for democratic representation remain stubbornly intact, finding their most salient present-day manifestation in discourses around hip hop narrative and cultural production. This project examines the work of three popular hip hop artists, Tupac Shakur, Kanye West and Janelle Monáe, each of whom deploy various literary strategies that challenge Realism’s hegemonic hold on popular culture, exposing how its legacy continues to haunt debates about race, gender, and representation in American popular culture. I argue that by engaging Realism, this trio of
artists contributes to the longer and more radical project of *disarticulating* the genre’s ideological claims on mimetic representation as a practice of democracy.

I position debates about commercial rap and “realness” within the longer tradition of literary Realism in an effort to rethink its current hegemonic power. How do rappers as both writers and performers (across artistic platforms and multiple media representations of their “real” lives) negotiate the market demand for realism and authenticity? The work of the artists I explore in the following pages helps us understand the enduring social investment in realism as an often invisible but pervasive genre, as they draw on other modes of storytelling (such as fairytale, fantasy and surrealism) and challenge realism’s claims on accurate representation. In individual chapters on Tupac Shakur, Kanye West and Janelle Monáe, I discuss how each artist engages and critiques realism as an organizing factor of commercial rap’s economic success. I call their collective practice “verbing the real,” (or reanimating the commodified products demanded by the marketplace toward a more open and fluid epistemology of experience) and argue that the ubiquity of realism as an organizing theme compels this trio of artists to adopt and develop specifically literary strategies of artistic engagement.

As they reimagine rap’s reality narratives, they also challenge us to think against the predominant interpretation of rap as a kind of “protest poetry.” This does not mean that the artists treated here see hip hop as any less engaged in political questions. On the contrary, this project demonstrates how their unique engagements with realism point us toward new political visions and possibilities, new forms of democratic practice. The artists I look at in the following chapters do not simply reject hip hop realism but rather offer a new episteme, a new way of

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3 I follow Tricia Rose’s example of differentiating “commercial hip hop” from hip hop, but I instead use the term “commercial rap” rather than “commercial hip hop” because rap has been much more prevalent commercially than the other core elements of the culture (breakdancing, graffiti, dj-ing).
conceptualizing its aesthetic relationship to politics, and as Baldwin might say, point us forward and toward a more “vast reality,” toward a new hip hop theory.

**Realism: The Remix**

In order to understand the complicated and contradictory terrain of commercial rap and its challenges to dominant modes of representation, we must first locate hip hop realism within the longer history of American literary realism. My aim is not to read hip hop realism as an alternative form of realism, or an attempt to “do” realism. Rather I want to think about how hip hop developed (or carries on) a theory of its own, one that because of the hegemony of literary Realism in the U.S. has been forced to engage its narrative legacies. My specific interest, recalling the epigraph from Grandmaster Caz, is how hip hop “reinvents” or remixes realism.⁴

Drawing from lyrical analysis, artist interviews, and visuals, this dissertation explores how realism continues to organize both our understanding of and engagement with hip hop culture. Hip hop is a multimedia, intertextual art form, and my particular focus on the literary in this project (and how the literary gets visualized through video treatment) is not meant to ignore the other aspects of hip hop culture.⁵

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⁴ It’s no longer possible to talk about hip hop in monolithic terms—not that it ever was. But I mention this because for my purposes here, when I use the term “hip hop,” I do so with an explicit awareness of its multiplicity (and of its various sub-genres). When I say “hip hop,” I mean the four artistic elements associated with the culture, namely djing, break-dancing, graffiti writing and mc-ing or rapping. I also mean the culture more generally, as it is referred to in popular discourse.

⁵ In *Prophets of the Hood* (2004), Perry writes, “Rap music is a mixed medium. As an art form, it combines poetry, prose, song, music and theater. It may come in the form of narrative, autobiography, science fiction or debate. The diversity of media poses a challenge for the critic because she or he is called to evaluate the artistic production from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Moreover, the embodied nature of the art, the slippage that exists between the art and the artist, makes for another set of challenges when it comes to assessment and interpretation on both aesthetic and political levels” (38).
From a historical perspective, hip hop in the United States marks its beginnings around the time the Civil Rights movement ends. While the Voting and Civil Rights Acts of the mid-sixties marked significant legal gains for African Americans, it wasn’t long before the celebration developed into a growing realization that both the institutional and everyday social practices of racism remained stubbornly intact. The government’s covert domestic wars against activist groups like the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s further demonstrated that white supremacist ideologies continued to shape domestic policy. At the same time, globalizing economies led to the disappearance of manufacturing jobs from major cities across the United States. Along with the sociopolitical effects of structural abandonment, redlining and “white flight” to the suburbs, the “war on drugs” (buttressed by a massive militarization of inner-city police departments) led to an unprecedented expansion of prisons across the country. The uncertainty echoed the social upheaval of a hundred years earlier.

Historian Vijay Prashad places the birth of hip hop culture in the midst of this historical moment:

What’s interesting about hip-hop is that it emerges, in a way, as an ideology that the state has shifted. It recognizes that the state is repressive and not responsive. And it has a different understanding of the state than civil rights organizations that continue to operate under the assumption that we have a responsive state to whom we can make a plea. Like, ‘Please give us housing.’ See, the state has said, ‘We don’t give anybody housing anymore. We just give you police.’ And in a sense, the hip-hop ideology understands the shift in the state. (Chang, 42)

Prashad points to an important ideological shift in the post-Civil Rights moment, marking the 1970s as another time of profound sociopolitical change in the U.S., on both social and artistic
terms. Robin D.G. Kelley similarly argues that “the generation that came of age in the 1980s was
the product of devastating structural changes in the urban economy that date back at least to the
late 1960s” (192). Scholars of the culture such as Kelley, Mark Anthony Neal, Tricia Rose,
Murray Foreman, Marcyliena Morgan, Jeff Chang, Joe Schloss, Imani Perry, and others, have
laid the important groundwork for understanding the socio-historical roots of the culture.⁶
And while many of them share the kinds of concerns Baldwin had about the political limits of
mimetic representation, most of the scholarly debates about realism remain rooted in questions
about authenticity.

The concepts of “authenticity” and “realness” are often used interchangeably in hip hop
studies to describe similar cultural phenomenon.⁷ In “Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other
Cultures Threatened With Assimilation,” Kembrew McLeod argues that hip hop authenticity is
predicated upon a specific set of markers that emerge in the 1990s as a direct response to the
growing popularity of commercial rap. These indicators of authenticity include geographical
location, being true to oneself, being “authentically black,” supporting underground and not
mainstream acts, promoting “hard” masculinity (as opposed to “soft,” which was associated with

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⁶ For comprehensive historical documentation and analysis of hip hop culture, see Tricia Rose Black
Noise (1994), Nelson George, Hip Hop America (1998), S. Craig Watkins, Hip Hop Matters (2005), and
⁷ This issue is further complicated if we consider how hip hop scholarship itself is invested in these
debates. In an entry on “Hip-Hop” for Social Text’s 100th issue (Vol. 27, No. 3, Fall 2009), Michael Ralph
argues that even the formation of what counts as “hip hop” is historical, arguing that the terminology “did
not arise organically in the late 1970s. Hip-hop is, instead, an artifact of the late 1980s/early 1990s…[and]
emerged as a distinct cultural form as part of tow interrelated developments. First the commercial
potential of the genre defied all expectations…Then, there was the persecution of rap music faced during
the 1990s, when the U.S. Congress debated its detrimental effects amid a moral panic that viewed inner-
city gangbangers and drug dealers as obstacles to American decency.” He says that in this particular
moment, “the interests of professional scholars, fans of hip-hop, and rap pioneers converged to create
criteria that ultimately sought to distinguish the genre’s most innovated and progressive aspects of “rap
music,” which they considered crass, violent, and misogynistic—devoid of any aesthetic criteria worth
discussing. There soon emerged a consensus that hip-hop consists of four elements: DJ-ing, graffit, break
dancing, and emceeing (rhyming)” (141-142).
selling out), identifying with the “street,” and understanding hip hop history. Similarly, Jeffery Ogbar argues in *Hip Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (2007), “‘realness’ in hip-hop implies an intimate familiarity with the urban, working-class landscapes that gave rise to hip-hop in the 1970s, and Simon Reynolds actually incorporates authenticity directly into his definition of the “real” in hip hop:

In hip hop, ‘real’ has two meanings. First, it means authentic, uncompromised music that refuses to sell out to the music industry and soften its message for crossover. ‘Real’ also signifies that the music reflects a ‘reality’ constituted by late capitalist economic instability, institutionalized racism, and increased surveillance and harassment of youth by police.

Like McLeod’s definition of hip hop authenticity, in these two examples, hip hop realness means familiarity with the sociopolitical landscape and the material conditions of black communities, and taking an ideological stand against institutional racism and police brutality. Notably, both authenticity and realness often connote an ethos rather than explicating the specific artist’s engagement with the art form.

My study also, at times, collapses discussions of authenticity with realness, but with the caveat of reading both through the specific lens and legacy of literary Realism. In doing so, I build on the work of scholars like Imani Perry, who in *Prophets of the Hood* (2004), argues for more interdisciplinary understandings of how the literary functions in hip hop cultural production. She draws on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s theory of signifying and the African American literary tradition to situate hip hop as a form of narrative storytelling. When

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referencing hip hop realism directly, she writes: “Taking its name from a literary genre, realism in hip hop is an artistic format inextricably linked to the material conditions of black American urban communities” (88).

The ‘real’ is also an authenticating device responding to the removal of rap music from the organic relationship with the communities creating it…the real for hip hoppers means setting the terms for allegiance. It does not disallow fiction, imaginative constructions, or hip hop’s traditional journey into myth. Rather, it is an explicitly ideological stand against selling one’s soul to the devils of capitalism and assimilation as one sells the art form and lives life. (87)

Perry also points to the ways that hip hop realism can be a repository and a “living testimony” to black experience, adding that “the frequent calls in the hip hop community to keep it real not only require the maintenance of an authentic black urban identity; they also constitute a theoretical space that functions as a living testimony to African American experience” (87, my emphasis). In other words, realist hip hop narratives function as individual observations about shared experience. She claims: that “the ‘Real’ with a capital R, constitutes a political rather than purely sociological stance that gives testimony to the emotional state resulting from the experience of poverty, blackness, and the crisis of urbanity” (87). Her discussion of realism primarily focuses on the narrative techniques employed by artists to authenticate their belonging within the hip hop community, contending that realism in hip hop: “takes on two perspectives, ‘telling’ narratives and ‘being’ narratives, which in terms of understanding hip hop as the production of a community and of individual artists, are mutually dependent” (91). She further contends that, “the difference between a being and a telling narrative is that between personification and third-person didactics” (92). In other words, “being” narratives allow artists
to step into a role and personify an issue, whereas “telling” narratives are told from a third-person perspective and are meant as lessons.

**Hip Hop Realism: From Verb to Noun**

Much of the tension underwriting early debates about commercial rap, authenticity and realness stems from a genuine concern (by artists, activists and critics) that emerged in the mid-1990s about the mass distribution of rap music and hip hop culture to a group of young, mostly white teenagers, far removed from the culture’s socio-economic and cultural beginnings. There was a time when hip hop was about direct, community-based participation; today, anyone can adopt “hip hop” as an identity, from clothing to colloquialisms. Explicit phrases like “keeping it real” may have come and gone with the heyday of 1990s gangsta rap, but the insidious and invisible expectation of realness (driven primarily by the consumer expectations of white audiences) continues to organize much of what we hear and see in commercial rap.

In her book, *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008), Tricia Rose argues that one of the most powerful “mutual denials” in the hip hop “culture wars” has been the invisibility of its majority white consumers:

Commercial hip hop, as it has evolved since the mid-1990s, represents a new fascination with old and firmly rooted racial fantasies about sexual deviance (pimps and hoes) and crime and violence (gangstas, thugs, and hustlers). These images drive the racial subtext of white consumption of commercial hip hop, but now, this distorted form of cultural exchange is framed-masked by a post-civil rights rhetoric of color-blindness. (229).

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A poignant example of this is seen in Byron Hurt’s critically acclaimed documentary, *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (2006). During an interview with a group of white teenagers hanging out at a mall, Hurt inquires about their interest in and impressions of commercial rap music. A young woman, who looks to be sixteen or seventeen, speaks in a matter-of-fact tone, directly into the camera:

I’ve never been to the hood. I’ve never been to the ghetto. I grew up in, you know, an upper middle class, basically white suburb […] and to listen to stuff like that [rap music] is a way of [sic] us to see almost a different culture, well a completely different culture. It’s something that most of us have never had the opportunity to experience. I’ve never had to worry about drive-by shootings […] and the music […] it appeals to our sense of, (pause), learning about other cultures.

Her commentary casts commercial rap music and videos as real representations of “the hood” and “the ghetto.” She characterizes “drive-by shootings” as a form of cultural difference, which translates (echoing James Baldwin’s example of his friend, the American liberal) as an “opportunity” to experience a “completely different culture.” Before leaving the group of teens, Hurt asks whether or not such images reinforce negative stereotypes about black people, to which the girl and her three friends respond in unison, “Yes.”

The comments are hardly exceptional. I can attest from personal experience teaching in both urban and suburban college classrooms that white youth often proclaim allegiance to commercial rap or a particular rapper because he/she is so “real.” And the consumption of this perceived realist fantasy of authenticity has become extremely profitable, especially for record sales.
Hip hop scholars have argued that over 70% of commercial rap music is currently purchased and consumed by suburban white males. Not all scholars agree on the exact figures. For example, Bakari Kitwana’s book *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop* (2005) complicates this narrative and argues that the popular circulation of the “mythic 70%” figure should be challenged. Citing the inaccuracy of the method used to calculate the number, Kitwana says scholars should be more critical of figures based on Soundscan, as the record-tracking company does not 1) track the race of those who purchased cds 2) take into account the location of malls located in suburban areas frequented by teens who do not live in the suburbs, and 3) consider different kinds of cd purchasing practices (mom-and-pop stores, flea markets, mix-tapes, downloading, file-sharing, burning, etc.). Kitwana claims that the figure should be more like 40 or 50%, and argues that by perpetuating the myth of the white suburban male as primary consumer, critics are actively depoliticizing the purchasing power of young African Americans. Mythic or not, the perpetuation of the 70% figure has had staying power and continues to be reproduced in popular critiques about white consumption and cultural appropriation.

Commercialized rap had a firm hold on popular culture by the mid 1990s, an unprecedented moment when pop culture, technology and mass media crossed paths in ways never before imagined. Mass media consolidation reached its epoch in the 1990s, and at the beginning of the new millennium, five major broadcasting companies (Time/Warner, Disney, Viacom, Newscorporation and Bertelsmann) owned nearly all radio, TV and print media in the United States.¹¹ Four major record companies (Warner Music, EMI, Sony/BMG and Universal Music Group) controlled roughly seventy percent of the worldwide market and eighty percent of

the domestic market.\textsuperscript{12} The corporate agenda was strengthened and supported by federal regulations like the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which, for example, allowed larger companies to own and operate up to eight radio stations in one metropolitan area. Clear Channel eventually came to own and operate 1,240 of the nation’s radio stations, over thirty times what was legal to own under previous laws, quite literally taking programming power out of the hands of locally owned radio stations (Rose 19).

In terms of the commercialization of rap music specifically, equal in importance to the consolidation of media was the introduction of SoundScan technology in 1991.\textsuperscript{13} SoundScan used a bar code system to track “point-of-sale” purchases that, in turn, reported to a centralized database (Watkins 37). SoundScan was initially designed to chart national sales for record labels, but soon industry magazines, such as Billboard, began using SoundScan to report buying trends and what was popular. For the most part, the music industry embraced SoundScan. Not only was it a remedy to a previous sales reporting system often subject to bribery (some label reps were known to “gift” storeowners to lie about their sales data), but it also emerged as a way to identify popular genres and develop new artists geared toward consumer interest. Soundscan took the industry from simply understanding and tracking purchasing trends to actually enabling music labels to \textit{shape} markets based upon consumer tastes. Almost immediately, it became evident that musical sub-genres like country and rap, were in fact, both popular and profitable.

Within a few short years, a small group of music industry executives began calibrating highly elaborate and specialized marketing strategies based on SoundScan’s reporting (37). In the case of rap, this resulted in an unprecedented effort to commodify and market the style of rap

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
associated with early crossover appeal, so-called “gangsta rap.” Hip hop scholars like S. Craig Watkins and Tricia Rose contend that SoundScan was a key factor in the growing commercialization of gangsta rap. The first reporting from SoundScan in 1991 showed N.W.A.’s *Eifil4zaggin* as #2 in the first week and #1 the second (Rose, 15). A year later in 1992, Dr. Dre released *The Chronic*, remembered now as the pivotal moment when gangsta rap “crossed over” to popular culture. Even those critics who had previously argued that rap music was a passing fad or niche market could no longer deny the genre’s popularity. The proof was in the sales figures. A once localized phenomenon, rap was now part of national “urban” radio programming.

The timing of the commercialization of rap music (within the context of unprecedented media consolidation) resulted in a genre largely geared toward mainstream entertainment, and as a result, marketing efforts extended across a variety of media platforms, including print. In September of 1992, for example, Time Warner invested one million dollars into a new hip hop culture and lifestyle magazine called *Vibe*, headed by Quincy Jones and Russell Simmons.14 *Vibe* joined *The Source* as an authority on hip hop culture and music, marketing itself as hip hop’s version of “*Rolling Stone*.” *Vibe* actually did very well commercially and was competitive with reigning hip hop magazine, *The Source*.15 Artist profiles featured large, highly stylized pictures of rappers and other entertainers associated with hip hop.

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14 Russell Simmons dropped out of the project shortly before it launched reportedly because Carol Smith, a white woman (who admittedly knew very little about hip hop culture), was hired as publisher. Her previous experience in publishing had been with *Parenting* magazine. Simmons was quoted as saying “The idea that [this]’ll be the bible for the hip-hop community is dead” (quoted in Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 424).

15 *The Source* was founded in 1988 by two white Harvard students, and by 1991, reportedly had a circulation of 40,000. See Chang, 415. The third major hip hop news magazine, *XXL*, was founded in 1997 by two African American men, both former writers for *The Source*. Chang has written a fairly extensive history of how the commercialization of rap music effected the relationships between hip hop journalists, the magazines they worked for and the music industry more broadly speaking.
However, as the interview with the young people in Byron Hurt’s film demonstrates, rap’s white and suburban listeners tended to consume such images and stories about rap artists without knowing very much, if anything at all, about hip hop history or the culture’s socio-political beginnings. This presented several problems, including how commercial rappers themselves approached their performances. As Rose observes “At the same time, the artists themselves avoid considering the kinds of racial desires that likely drive white consumption of black entertainers (and therefore shape which types of images go mainstream). How would they look, admitting that they are pandering to white fantasies of the black gangsta, thug, and pimp, instead of just keeping it real?” (234).

**Realist to Realest: Toward a Hip Hop Theory**

The tension between African American artists and white audiences is not new. Nathaniel Mackey’s 1992 essay “Other: From Noun to Verb” borrows its title from a chapter in Amiri Baraka’s seminal work on African American music, *Blues People* (1963) that describes the history of white appropriation (both performance and criticism of) of black music. Baraka titles the chapter “Swing—From Verb to Noun” because:

Swing, the verb, meant a simple reaction to the music (and as it developed in verb usage, a way of reacting to anything in life). As it was formalized, and the term and the music taken further out of context, swing became a noun that meant commercial popular music in cheap imitation of a kind of Afro-American music (212-213, quoted in Mackey, 51). As jazz became more popular among white audiences and more formalized, the term “swing” became commodified; it became a noun. It ceased to “move” or be improvisational; it ceased being a performative response and became more of a performance as such. To “noun” swing
meant to attempt to stop its movement, to divorce it from the black community. According to Mackey, the shift from “verb to noun” signals the “erasure of black inventiveness.” He argues:

From ‘verb to noun’ means, on the aesthetic level, a less dynamic, less improvisatory, less blues-inflected music and, on the political level, a containment of black mobility, a containment of the economic and social advances that might accrue to black artistic innovation (52).

Mackey argues that “verbing,” is rooted in a kind of “fugitive spirit” (as resistance to multiple forms of commodification) that has long been at the heart of African-American literary and musical traditions. Mackey uses the term “othering” to describe a set of “countering, contestatory tendencies” and “black linguistic and musical practices that accent variance, variability” that seek movement away from noun and back to verb. Mackey argues that the artistic practice of “othering” engages the forms of social “othering” and subjection. In both Mackey’s and Baraka’s assessment, the “nourcing” of black art results in curtailment of “the economic and social advances that might accrue to black artistic innovation.” For Mackey, the practice of artistic othering “has to do with innovation, invention, and change, upon which cultural health and diversity depend and thrive” (51).

Tupac Shakur, Kanye West and Janelle Monáe, challenge realism’s ideological organization of commercial rap narratives by engaging it directly in their work. Each chapter charts the ways the artists reanimate and explore rap realism not as a noun, but as a verb. They seek to push realism beyond its representational limits and toward a “more vast reality,” as Baldwin might put it. They do so by “othering” it, by either making it more real (as in the case of Tupac Shakur), by exposing it as an organizing and interpretive genre (as the work of Kanye
West demonstrates), and by shattering its claims to representing reality altogether (as Janelle Monáe does).

The chapters argue that by “verbing the real” in multiple and differing ways, these artists extend our understanding of debates over what “counts” as commercial hip hop production, expand forms of representation, and ultimately point the way forward to a more inclusive, “fugitive” democracy. By challenging realism as a democratic form of artistic representation, their work illustrates what political economist Sheldon Wolin has called the “occasional” or “fugitive” nature of democracy. Wolin uses the term “fugitive” to think about rare, unscripted moments when modern democracy “happens.” In his seminal book *Politics and Vision* (2004), Wolin argues that postmodern democracy can best be thought of as a kind of “ephemeral phenomenon rather than a settled system” (602). Instances of fugitive democracy “emphasize…[democracy’s] necessarily occasional character” (602).

Over the past three decades, rap narratives have popularized a necessary and sustained critique of formal democracy, and more particularly, have shown from a variety of perspectives how the modern democratic experiment needs to be continually re-conceived, rethought and even rebuked. Over and again, hip hop artists demonstrate that democracy needs to be practiced as something “other” than static forms of democratic governance, which have in fact, never actually been democratic. Cultural practices that go beyond the theatrics of formal elections and the melodrama of state power position themselves more in line with guerrilla warfare, or as Wolin puts it, “fugitive democracy,” and signal “perhaps the political moment, when the political is remembered and re-created. Democracy is a rebellious moment that may assume revolutionary, destructive proportions” (43, my emphasis). For Wolin, democracy is the will to imagine a collectivity, even when such an impulse may be destructive to the status quo. While
democratic theory has remained intact as an ideal form, and as “legitimation myth,” the practice of democracy has changed the way we think about it.

The methodology of reading hip hop’s fugitive moments is also inspired by Fred Moten’s work on “fugitivity” in jazz and bebop and its relationship to the Black Radical Tradition. Through a close reading of Marx, Moten demonstrates that the theory of modern capital rests upon a “counter-factual” that commodities cannot speak their own value but instead must be put into a system of exchange to realize their worth. Moten argues that racial slavery in the U.S. represents the “historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage (and knowledge of freedom) across the divide that separates slavery and ‘freedom.’”¹⁶ This ‘material heritage’ crosses slavery’s before-and-after divide, where its representations (in literature and music) mark the dissonance between physical enslavement and the resounding ‘freedom demand’ by African Americans for meaningful democratic inclusion in the U.S. nation. Such moments occur in what theorist Fred Moten calls “the break” (an apt metaphor for the cultural politics of hip hop) and are fleeting, illusory and oftentimes go unnoticed.¹⁷

Moten begins his study of the Black Radical Tradition with one of the most famous passages in African American literature, a scene where a young Fredrick Douglass hides and watches as a white master whips his aunt. Moten connects Douglass’ representation of Aunt Hester’s “heart-rending shrieks” to his depiction of the sorrow songs a few pages later, resulting in what Moten calls Douglass’ “incorporation or recording of a sound figured as external both to

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¹⁷ Using two turntables, two copies of the same record and extending the “breakdown” of the song, hip hop DJs literally created a “break” in time—an extension of space where there was none. MCs, B-boys and B-girls originally performed in the extended break.
music and to speech in black music and speech” (6). For Moten, Aunt Hester’s screams comprise one part of a complicated theorization of the aesthetic tradition. The material trace of sound as “external to music and speech,” figures both as “freedom demand” and as “freedom song,” but also resides outside of the “ confines of meaning.” For Moten, this constitutes the aesthetic and space of the “break”—a break in meaning that still attends to meaning—a break in sound that still attends to music, an always emergent and “fugitive” figuration, a freedom demand.

This collective memory—as well as its manifestations in cultural practices—constitutes what political scientist Cedric Robinson defined as the Black Radical Tradition. Moten’s formulation recalls Robinson’s explanation of the term in *Black Marxism* (1983):

The social cauldron of Black radicalism is Western society. Western society, however, has been its location and its objective condition but not—except in a most perverse fashion—its specific inspiration. Black radicalism is a negation of Western civilization, but not in the direct sense of a simple dialectical negation…[and] cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis. It is not a variant of Western radicalism whose proponents happen to be Black. Rather it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization. (Robinson, 73)

The freedom demand of Black Radicalism repudiates Western civilization, but not as the condition of its existence (not as a reactionary response to exploitation and oppression) but also as an alternative to European social life and historical development, as an offering of an alternative. Part of the central work of the Black Radicalism, according to Robin D.G. Kelley, is not just to imagine a world where oppression doesn’t exist, but to also work on elucidating the
processes by which the reproduction of structural inequality becomes “common sense…natural or invisible.”\textsuperscript{18} I argue that the work of the artists explored in this study offer such alternatives through the medium of hip hop culture.

\textbf{Chapter Breakdown}

Chapter One: “Tupac Shakur and the Art of Thug Life,” looks at the work of one of hip hop culture’s most beloved and iconic figures, Tupac Shakur. The chapter begins by examining the tendency by critics to position Shakur as either a “real” activist-artist or a “real” gangsta, instead arguing that Shakur works at the crossroads of competing images, engaging what Stuart Hall calls the “strategies and the politics of the image.” Shakur’s art (not just his image) fit squarely within the longer aesthetic and political tradition of the Black Panther Party (who also worked across different forms of media, including television, photography, art and documentary

\textsuperscript{18} Recalling Robinson’s work, Robin D.G. Kelley recently put it this way: “It is not enough to imagine a world without oppression (especially since we don’t always recognize the variety of forms or modes in which oppression occurs), but understanding the mechanisms or processes that not only reproduce structural inequality but make them common sense, and render those processes natural or invisible. The Black Radical Imagination is not a thing but a process, the ideas generated from what Gramsci calls a “philosophy of practice.” It is about how people in transformative social movements, moved/shifted their ideas, rethought inherited categories, tried to locate and overturn blatant, subtle, and invisible modes of domination. But what makes it “Black Radical”? What is the Black Radical Tradition? Cedric Robinson describes it as “the revolutionary consciousness that proceeded from the whole historical experience of Black people” and not merely formed by capitalist slavery and colonialism. It questions the capacity of racial capitalism to re-make African social life and succeed in generating new categories of human experience stripped bare of the historical consciousness embedded in culture. Black revolts, the expression of the Black radical imagination, were not necessarily formed by the logic of Western capitalism. But has modern racial capitalism formed in the afterlife of slavery so thoroughly shaped our consciousness as to make the kind of radical epistemologies Robinson identifies almost impossible to produce? Consider just how easy it is to fall into neoliberal logic of racial uplift, entrepreneurship, “branding,” or even the restoration of the liberal Keynesian welfare state as our movement’s main objective! This is why discovering and recuperating the Black radical tradition/imagination is so necessary—not in order to reproduce it but to understand its logic and fundamental demand: a complete critique of Western civilization and, as Fanon put it, a disordering of our current (colonial) social order.” Interview with Red Wedge Magazine. \url{http://www.redwedgemagazine.com/online-issue/black-art-matters-roundtable-black-radical-imagination}. Accessed 12 August 2017.
film). I argue that Shakur’s creation of an arts-based political philosophy he called Thug Life 
(The Hate U Gave Little Infants Fucks Everybody) is an extension of Huey P. Newton’s theories on reactionary and revolutionary intercommunalism.

Chapter Two: “‘Through the Wire’: Mapping the Mythos of Kanye West,” explores how Kanye West engages consumer demands for realism through an evolving self-presentation that involves sartorial display and experimentation with various literary genres, namely myth, fairytale and fantasy. In his explicit attempt to “break the media,” West dubs himself a “soldier of culture” who employs strategies of self-mythologizing and often adopts (and adapts) the typical cycle of the Hero’s Journey (birth, death and renewal). He also pushes against the boundaries of genre and representation in interviews, award shows, concert performances and, perhaps most famously, on live television. The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of West’s recent claim that he created his own genre, “the Kanye West genre.”

Chapter Three: “The Digable Planetary: Janelle Monáe and Hip Hop Fugitivity,” begins by tracing how the figurative personification of hip hop as female appears across a variety of discourses about hip hop “selling out” to pop culture. I look at the work of Janelle Monáe, whose album *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2006) literally dramatizes the chase and attempted capture of the “female fugitive.” The chapter charts how the mythology of Monáe’s alter ego Cindi Mayweather, fits the parameters of what Gayatri Spivak calls a planetary figure. Employing a variety of strategies including Afrofuturism and surrealism, Monáe’s Cindi Mayweather helps us think against the logic of realism.
Chapter One: Tupac Shakur and the Art of Thug Life

Popular culture…is an arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture—already fully formed—might be ‘expressed.’ But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it.

Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular” (1998)

You have to be logical. If I know that in this hotel room, they have food everyday and I’m knockin’ on the door everyday to eat and they open the door and let me see the party—see like them throwin’ salami all over, just like throwin’ food around—and they’re tellin’ me there’s no food in there…Everyday. I’m standing outside trying to sing my way in. ‘We are hungry, please let us in, we are hungry, please let us in.’ After about a week that song is going to change to ‘We hungry, we need some food.’ After two, three weeks it’s like ‘Give me some food, we’re bangin’ on the door.’ After a year it’s like, ‘I’m picking the lock, comin’ through the door blastin’,’ you know what I’m sayin’? It’s like you hungry, you’ve reached your level…We asked ten years ago. We was askin’ with the Panthers. We was askin’ them with the Civil Rights Movement…Now those people who was askin’ are all dead or in jail. Now what do you think we’re going to do? Ask?

Tupac Shakur, MTV interview (1995)

No individual artist looms larger in gangsta rap’s crossover narrative than the late Tupac Shakur. He stands at the literal and figurative crossroads between hip hop’s so-called “golden era” (usually marked as the time before the rise of N.W.A. in the late 80s and the popularization of gangsta rap as a subgenre) and what would later be dubbed the “bling era” (the mid to late 90s when popular rappers unapologetically celebrated material wealth). Shakur’s 1991 debut album, 2Pacaylipse Now, set the tone for the range of social issues he would address over the course of his career in songs such as “Brenda’s Got A Baby” (about teenage pregnancy) and “Trapped” (a critique of racial profiling and police brutality). From 1991 until his shooting death at the age of twenty-five in 1996, Shakur released four additional solo projects. His second album, Strictly 4 My N.*.*.*.*.z (1993) debuted at number 24 on the Billboard charts and included the now well-
known celebration of black women, “Keep Your Head Up.” Two years later, *Me Against the World* (1995), entered at the top of the Billboard charts and included the single, “Dear Mama.” Shakur was incarcerated at the time, but then notoriously signed a deal with Death Row Records in exchange for bail money and his next three albums. Shakur’s first project on Death Row was also rap’s first-ever double cd, *All Eyez on Me* (1996). He completed his final album, *The Don Kiluminati: The 7-Day Theory* (1996), just weeks before his murder. To date, Shakur has sold over 75 million albums worldwide, with about a third of these sales in the United States alone.\(^\text{19}\)

Shakur’s time in the spotlight may have been brief, but his massive impact on hip hop and popular culture continues to resonate into the present. Twenty years later, fans and critics alike debate both the merits of his art and the meaning of his public persona. Poets Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni have penned poems about Shakur, and academics and filmmakers have also contributed to a growing body of scholarship on his life, including Michael Eric Dyson’s seminal biography, *Holler if You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (2001), Jamal Joseph’s *Tupac Shakur: Legacy* (2006), and Lauren Lanzin’s Academy Award nominated documentary, *Tupac: Resurrection* (2003). Political scientist Karin Stanford recently observed that much of the public consideration regarding Shakur’s life falls into two distinct categories. The first tends to “emphasize his impetuous and reckless behavior, accentuate his confrontations with the criminal justice system, and condemn his angry lyrics,” while the second focuses more on his “intellectual gifts, humanitarian impulse, and outspoken critique of racism and

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\(^{19}\) Shakur also starred in several films (roughly one per year for the five years he was in the spotlight). They include *Juice* (1992), *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Above the Rim* (1994), *Bullet* (1995), *Gang Related* (1997) and *Gridlock’d* (1997). Shakur’s estate has also released several posthumous projects. For additional biographical and album information, see Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching For Tupac Shakur* and Jones, Ed. *Tupac Shakur, 1971-1996.*
injustice.” The latter, according to Stanford, seeks to explain or “contextualize Tupac’s pejorative behavior by calling attention to his experiences as a son of the Black Power movement and growing up as a disadvantaged Black male.” I would add a third category, one that can best be described as a Faustian narrative, a contained, teleological story in which Shakur starts out as a conscious rapper who later sacrifices his Black Panther heritage and activist ideals in exchange for release from prison and a record deal (via a contract with Suge Knight of Death Row Records). In this narrative, Shakur’s early albums serve as evidence of his previous understanding and allegiance to black revolutionary struggles and social justice, whereas his later work (the albums he recorded with Death Row) are deemed less conscious, less engaged with social issues, and primarily concerned with attaining individual material success. Even so, the common thread that ties all three camps together is the depiction of Shakur as a man caught between opposing worlds, as the revolutionary heir-apparent to the Black Panther legacy, on the one hand, or as a nihilist thug and a “rebel for the hell of it,” on the other.

21 Stanford argues that these dominant narratives conceal Shakur’s longtime, “on the ground” engagement with political organizing. She observes, “Despite the extensive coverage of Shakur’s life, writers overwhelmingly neglect to analyze his political beliefs and activism” because people often receive “a deficient portrait of Tupac’s perspective and proclivities,” adding that “viewed from an apolitical perspective Tupac Shakur is easily characterized as a social deviant rather than a political activist, who sometimes made mistakes…The final consequence of purging Tupac’s politics from explorations of his life is his exclusion from analyses of hip hop activism” (4). She cites Bakari Kitwana’s The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture (2003) and Yvonne Bynoe’s Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture (2004) as two examples that fail to consider Shakur’s contributions.
22 See Eithne Quinn. Nothin’ but a ‘G’ Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap. Quinn argues “As Tupac developed, his badman portrayals lost much of their political edge” (175). See also: Bruck, Connie. “The Takedown of Tupac,” where she writes “Tupac was famously split between what he himself referred to as his ‘good’ and his ‘evil’ sides, and that it was his darker side that seemed to have dominion during much of his tenure at Death Row […] friends insist…that was not the real Tupac. The real Tupac was gifted, sympathetic, intent on articulating the pain of young blacks in the inner cities” (47-48).
Rather than focusing on whether or not he was a revolutionary or a thug, this chapter instead examines how, as an artist, Shakur engaged the growing commercial demand for a fixed, stereotype of black male identity (one rooted in images popularized by the commercialization of gangsta rap). I argue that it’s actually Shakur’s innovative engagements with the genre of realism and the field of representation that deserve more critical attention. The difference between Shakur and the other two artists treated in this dissertation is that, in many ways, Shakur embraced and was the standard bearer for 90s “keeping it real” commercial rap. However, I do not believe it was without intention. Much of Shakur’s artistic output directly engages with what cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall calls modern media’s “racialized regime of representation” (a concept I return to in detail below). Ultimately, it’s not the refusal of commercial rap’s stereotypical identities (like “gangsta” and “thug”) that makes Shakur notable, but rather his ability to negotiate among them and simultaneously project an alternative vision for the future.

This chapter is split into two main parts: the first section examines how Shakur’s origin story and Black Power roots structure and inform his creative practice, and, in particular, his theorization of a performance project he called “Thug Life.” I begin by sketching a brief overview of Shakur’s lineage and point to examples of how critics tend to characterize his connection to the Black Panther Party. I focus specifically on Kara Keeling’s thought-provoking consideration of how Shakur’s image (what she calls his “star text”) circulates in popular culture and in relation to the legacy of the Black Panther Party. I both extend and refute Keeling’s reading, arguing instead that Thug Life ought to be read through the lens of what Antonio Gramsci called a “philosophy of praxis,” and as an important extension of the cultural politics and philosophy set forth by the Black Panther Party. The second section of the chapter considers

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how Shakur’s adoption of the alias Makaveli (after Renaissance political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli) informs some of the lesser-known pro-feminist aspects of his work, including Shakur’s critique of sexism within the Black Panther Party.

The main argument put forth throughout the chapter is that Shakur was not only deftly aware of the power of popular culture, as both a site of struggle over representation and, as Hall argues, a place where a socialist vision might be proposed and articulated. Shakur’s “thug” performance is both an indictment of racist media representations of black youth in the late 80s and early 90s but also an extension of the cultural praxis of the Black Panther Party. He verbs the stereotypical “thug” into a social movement (“Thug Life”), a clear extension of the black radical tradition he inherited in both theory and practice. In the epigraph above, Shakur both acknowledges and refutes the protest song’s relevance to the current political moment, saying, “‘We asked ten years ago. We was askin’ with the Panthers. We was askin’ them with the Civil Rights Movement…Now those people who was askin’ are all dead or in jail. Now what do you think we’re going to do? Ask?’”25 The political struggle of the previous generation was met with state violence and repression, and as a result, both the content and form (the types of songs) have changed. I argue that Shakur drew on his knowledge of history and his revolutionary heritage to offer up new imaginaries and his version of what he saw as practical solutions to social problems. Working within popular rap, Shakur brought forward a critique of U.S. culture, in this case through the medium of MTV.

25 Tupac: Resurrection.
Panther Power

The story of Shakur’s birth and early life are well known at this point but also helpful to recall for the purposes of this chapter. He was born in 1971 to Afeni Shakur, a member of the Harlem chapter of the Black Panther Party. Afeni was incarcerated and awaiting trial while pregnant with Tupac; she faced several conspiracy charges, along with twenty other Party members (known collectively as “The New York 21”) for allegedly plotting to blow up New York City buildings. She represented herself in the trial and was acquitted and released just weeks before Tupac’s birth, a story he later recalled in 1989 interview:

My mother was pregnant with me while she was in prison. She was her own attorney, never been to law school. She was facing 300 and something odd years. One black woman, pregnant, beat the case […] And a month after she got out of prison, she gave birth to me. So I was cultivated in prison. My embryo was in prison. (Lazin, Tupac: Resurrection).

Tupac was born into the struggle. His heroic characterization and deep reverence for Afeni’s courage and ability to defend herself counterbalances his recollection of how, as an embryo, he was “cultivated” in prison. In the same quote, Tupac points out that Afeni’s voice (her skills as an orator) made her an FBI target. However, Tupac didn’t romanticize growing up in an activist family, telling the same interviewer that he often felt like his mother “cared more about the people than her people” (my emphasis). He later positions himself (especially after his mother became addicted to crack) as a kind of self-made revolutionary and someone who succeeded despite his circumstance at home: “we didn’t have any lights…I used to sit outside by

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26 “The government raided every Panther’s house, especially the ones who they felt like could do the most damage as an orator. So they just burst in and put a gun to my mother’s head and said ‘don’t move. You’re under arrest,’” Ibid.
the street lights and read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. And it made it so real to me…that I didn’t have lights at home and I was sitting outside on the benches reading this book. And it changed me, it moved me” (Bruck, 47). From an early age, Tupac joined his mother at political organizing events and participated in rallies. He also became interested in the arts and joined the 127th Street Ensemble in Harlem at age twelve. His first stage performance was a benefit for Jessie Jackson’s 1984 presidential campaign, where Tupac played the role of Travis from Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. He later attended The Baltimore School of the Arts in Maryland and studied poetry, music and literature.27

Tupac credits Afeni for instilling in him the belief that he was “the Black Prince of the revolution.”28 She named her son in honor of eighteenth century Peruvian revolutionary and direct descendant of the last Inca ruler, Tupac Amaru II. Considered a *curaca*, or community leader, Tupac Amaru II led a successful rebellion against Spanish colonizers from 1780-83, one that reportedly disrupted the colonial economy and proved to be the “most serious challenge to Spanish authority since the sixteenth century” (Stavugm, xxxiii). When asked why she named her son after this particular leader, Afeni said:

I wanted my child to grow up understanding that he had a relationship with all indigenous people…I believe we are all the same. Unfortunately for me in this country, I actually think that we’re all from one human family and that a large part of what’s wrong with us in society is our not embracing that, understanding it, and acknowledging it. Because I was in a culture that nationalism was easy to go towards, I did not want my son to

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27 See *Tupac: Resurrection* (film) and Dyson, *Holler if Ya Hear Me*.  
28 Ibid.
understand his African-ness in those terms. I wanted him to understand his race as a way of connecting with other people rather than separating himself from other people.\textsuperscript{29}

Afeni encouraged Tupac to resist nationalist thinking. She wanted him to understand his African-ness as an indigenous identity that was connective and not divisive. That didn’t mean eschewing the particular reality of being black in the U.S. but rather tapping into a larger collectivity of experience, including indigenous epistemologies that preceded the historical facts of slavery and colonialism. Tupac was expected to draw upon a larger, non-reactionary revolutionary consciousness. This is something this chapter addresses later on, but in terms of his immediate family (both biological and chosen), political kinship and community praxis were always as important as blood relations.\textsuperscript{30}

Shakur’s revolutionary pedigree (often read through the specific historical lens of black nationalism) emerged as the primary vehicle through which his activism and art would be received and written about by critics. It’s not uncommon for critics to read him as a “knock off” of his parent’s generation of activists, or worse still, as not fulfilling the hopes they had for him. For example, in her essay “Seeds and Legacies: Tapping The Potential in hip-Hop,” Gwendolyn Pough claims that Afeni and Tupac may be the “physical embodiment” of the relationship between the Black Power era and hip hop, but they “can also be viewed as an example of the

\textsuperscript{30} Tupac’s godfather, Geronimo Pratt, and stepfather, Mutulu Shakur (his younger sister Sekyiwas’s father), were both a fixture in his early life. Mutulu was later incarcerated (and remains so today), in part due to his involvement with the 1979 prison escape of Tupac’s “aunt,” Assata Shakur. Tupac Shakur once told a journalist, “In my family every black male with the last name of Shakur that ever passed the age of fifteen has either been killed or put in jail…There are no Shakurs, out right now, free, breathing, without bullet holes in them or cuffs on his hands. None.” Quoted in Bruck, “The Takedown of Tupac Shakur,” pp. 48.
untapped potential and unfulfilled legacy” of the BPP. She goes further, saying Tupac “never did fulfill his destiny” or “live up to his legacy.”

Michael Eric Dyson puts it succinctly:

That birthright of black nationalism hung over Tupac’s head as both promise and judgment. Some saw him as the benighted successor to Huey, Eldridge, Bobby, and other bright stars of black subversion. In this light Tupac’s career was best imagined in strictly political terms: Rapping was race war by other means. Others see the Black Panthers as a strident symbol of political destruction turned inward. This would mean that Tupac’s violent lyrics and wild behavior suggest the ethical poverty of romantic nationalism. Tupac initially embraced the former view, though he quickly wearied of the aesthetic and economic imperatives it imposed. As he won fame and money, he brooked no ideological limits on what he could say and how he could live. But even as he exchanged revolutionary self-seriousness for the thug life, he never embraced the notion that the Panthers were emblematic of self-destruction. To be sure, Tupac saw thug life extending Panther beliefs in self-defense and class rebellion. (Dyson, 48)

This chapter builds on Dyson’s insight about Thug Life as an extension of Panther beliefs and extends it to include the specific ways Shakur not only embraced but also critiqued his ideological inheritance.

In her 1999 essay “A Homegrown Revolutionary,” cultural critic Kara Keeling argues that it’s Shakur’s image (or “star text”) that connects him most powerfully (and most problematically) to the black radical tradition. She argues that much of the style of the 1960s “rebellion chic” gets coopted and repackaged in the mid 1990s in order to sell records. She suggests the epitome of this trend is gangsta rap, and calls it a “hyper-commodified form of..."
rebellion” (59). Keeling argues that Shakur specifically “emerges as commodity, philosopher, and representative of the civil rights/Black Power generation” by reminding people (vis-à-vis his visual image) of a time when there were “real” forms of activism (she’s writing from the vantage point of the late 1990s). For Keeling, this is evidenced by the way people write and talk about Shakur as a disappointment for not living up to his revolutionary inheritance. Such accounts betray a kind of “nostalgia for the past,” and a particular “nostalgia for the Black Panther Party and the propagation of the Black Panthers as the real black revolutionaries” (60-61, my emphasis).

Keeling argues that the “global circulation” of BPP’s image (black men in leather jackets, berets, and holding guns) that was used to recruit young members, or “brothers on the block,” to join the Party has “come to define our cultural memory of the Black Panther Party” and “has played an immeasurably large role in establishing the Black Panther Party as the epitome of black radical militancy” (61). It’s also the one that most often gets reproduced in popular culture, and now “as is the case with the circulation of most images in postmodern culture, circulates devoid of the any serious and important thinking of people in the party” (61). Keeling notes that the later work of a more self-reflexive BPP, along with the work of feminist scholars like Angela Davis and Tracey Matthews, address the lack of representation of black women in the movement. Nevertheless, the popular image described above remains primary, circulating without corrective historical footnotes.32

32 Other notable considerations of the global circulation of Tupac’s image include conservative *NY Times* columnist, David Brooks’ Op-Ed, “Gangsta In French” (2005) and Jeremy Prestholdt’s study “The Afterlives of 2Pac: Imagery and Alienation in Sierra Leone and Beyond” (2009). Following the youth uprisings in the suburbs of Paris, Brooks insinuated that it was rap music (and not joblessness or tensions with the police) that were to blame for the unrest, writing “After 9/11, everyone knew there was going to be a debate about the future of Islam. We just didn’t know the debate would be between Osama bin Laden and Tupac Shakur.” Prestholdt’s thought-provoking and well-researched essay considers how Tupac’s
Keeling argues that Tupac’s “star text” has been linked to the Black Panther Party image and that the former “has been painstakingly fashioned in order to win the identification of people across the globe. This time, however, the call is to buy records, not to join a political party” (63). Keeling writes:

The consumption of Tupac’s music (and, I think it is fair to argue of rap music in general) has taken the place of political struggle as a means by which to redress social and economic wrongs. Unfortunately, in the place of the type of intellectual labor the Black Panther Party came to demand of its members, Tupac offers those who identify with him a ‘disjointed and episodic…conception of the world’ (Gramsci refers to this type of philosophy as ‘common sense’) which upholds and in many cases demands, the unequal distribution of wealth and the quest for ownership of private property, including, importantly, women as property. Perhaps most insistently, Tupac reveled in the potency of his inheritance, Panther-style warrior black masculinity…[which] serves to sanction and support Shakur’s own sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. (59)

I quote Keeling at length here because this assertion is the one the current chapter wrestles with most directly. I have no philosophical disagreement with her assessment of the image or its power to shape cultural memory and imagination. However, I don’t think it’s neither fair nor accurate to characterize Shakur as simply “reveling” in “Panther-style warrior masculinity.”

image functioned within the historical context of Sierra Leone’s Civil War in the late 90s, and following the work of Marc Sommers, how the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) specifically adopted Shakur as a kind of patron saint, a symbol of desirable masculinity and as part of their uniform. Most of these considerations share the assumption that it’s Shakur’s visual image and songs like “Me Against the World” or “If I Die Tonight” that resonate most with youth. There is no consideration that youth may also be responding to the songs that critique government corruption and systemic oppression. Neither of the examples above consider Shakur’s symbolic relationship to Black Power iconography.
Keeling does not consider any of Shakur’s music or interviews (she only uses one quote from him in her entire essay). To insist on Shakur as merely (and problematically) symbolic erases the historical specificity of his artistic output and how he engaged the image as part of his practice. Shakur often talked about his intention of raising the consciousness of a post-Civil Rights generation, as he does on “Holler if You Hear Me”: “And now I’m like a major threat / because I remind you of the things you were made to forget.” Speaking about Mutulu Shakur and Geronimo Pratt, Shakur said of his lyrics, “it was like their words with my voice…I just continued where they left off. I tried to add spark to it, I tried to be the new breed, the new generation. I tried to make them proud of me” (Bruck, 48). Shakur embraced the medium of rap music (along with its stereotypes, as I discuss below) not only as a method to challenge depictions of his own “reality” but also to make visible the real lives of those around him.

**Thug Persona**

Revolutionary. Outlaw. Gangsta. Thug. These terms have all been associated with Tupac Shakur and with the genre of gangsta rap more generally. The popularization of gangsta rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s (made possible by Soundscan data) had a profound effect on the genre’s turn toward a realist aesthetic. Inspired by the success of artists like NWA and Ice T, rappers embraced the mantra of “keeping it real” not only as a way to document daily life in their respective neighborhoods but also as a way to make money. Songs such as NWA’s “Fuck The Police” (1988) and Ice T and Body Count’s “Cop Killer” (1992) were seen as rallying cries against racial profiling and police brutality. Rappers also documented the underground economy and practices associated with “the game,” such as street hustling, drug dealing, and prostitution.
Historian Robin D.G. Kelley writes extensively about the critical distinction between rappers as writers and rappers as performers:

Whether gangsta rappers step into the character of a gang banger, hustler, or ordinary working person—that is, products and residents of the ‘hood’—the important thing to remember is that they are stepping into character; it is for descriptive purposes rather than advocacy. (190, my emphasis)

As writers of fiction, rappers “step into character” in order to faithfully reproduce the scene and portray the characters involved (this premise gets a bit trickier when considering a rapper’s embodied performance in a music video). Some of the raps are told from a first person perspective, as Kelley observes, while others creatively inhabit the personas of established figures in the neighborhood, such as the dealer or the pimp. Kelley argues that gangsta rappers employed such techniques “for descriptive purposes” and not because they are advocating for a certain way of life (like that of a gang banger or a hustler). As an art form, rap has long employed a variety of rhetorical strategies and embraced all kinds of musical and literary genres. But in the particular historical moment of the early 1990s, many gangsta rappers adopted a kind of realist mode of storytelling in an effort to represent their immediate environment. Ice Cube put it succinctly, “We call ourselves underground street reporters. We just tell it how we see it, nothing more, nothing less” (quoted in Kelley, 190).

Shakur employed many of the techniques mentioned above, and as a result was commercially labeled as a “gangsta rapper.” He rejected the term on several occasions: “When did I ever say I was a ‘gangsta rapper’? I’m an artist. And I rap about the oppressed taking back
their place… I rap about fighting back.”  

Karin Stanford argues that what separates Shakur from other gangsta rap artists “who defend their often crude and violent lyrics by insisting that their role is merely to report on the perverse nature of the U.S. political and economic system,” is that Shakur used “crude and course language” in an attempt to “develop solution-oriented ideas” and motivate his fans to also “do politics.”  

Shakur was adamant throughout his career that the explicit nature of his lyrics was necessitated by the politics he aimed to address. He didn’t want to simply be a “street reporter.” Rather he hoped his art could be a catalyst for social change by eliciting collective political action.

Shakur was very clear about his intention to use rap and performance as creative mediums for social change. When asked how he got involved with music, Tupac said, “I started off with poetry… And poets, I saw, were looked on like wimps… I heard on the radio that there were other poets who made records and they were selling, and it was working. Then I decided to change the method of my poetry” (my emphasis).  

When asked in a separate interview in 1995 why his music dealt with “gang-banging,” Shakur responded: “Let me say for the record, I am not a gangster and never have been. I’m not the thief who grabs your purse. I’m not the guy who jacks your car. I’m not down with people who steal and hurt others. I’m just a brother who fights

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33 *Tupac: Resurrection* (print book, pp. 132). Shakur often pushed back on the media’s use of terms. The commodification of black vernacular in rap lyrics also meant the commodification of terms like “gangsta,” “thug” and the n-word. Tupac often worked artistically on the level terminology (especially towards the end of his life), exploring broad definitions in songs such as “Shorty Wanna’ Be a Thug” (1996) and “I’d Rather Be Ya N.*.*.*.A.” (1996).

34 Stanford argues that “Despite the extensive coverage of Shakur’s life, writers overwhelmingly neglect to analyze his political beliefs and activism” because people often receive “a deficient portrait of Tupac’s perspective and proclivities” and “viewed from an apolitical perspective Tupac Shakur is easily characterized as a social deviant rather than a political activist, who sometimes made mistakes… The final consequence of purging Tupac’s politics from explorations of his life is his exclusion from analyses of hip hop activism”(4). She cites *The Hip Hop Generation* (2003) and *Stand and Deliver* (2004) as examples of books about hip hop and politics that are guilty of this omission.

35 *Tupac: Resurrection* (film).
Shakur saw his job as realist artist and author, as someone who wrote stories in an effort to change social circumstances, to fight back. He took his vocation very seriously, and in the same interview, explained how his formal training at the Baltimore School of the Arts, and especially his studies of theatre, informed his practice as a writer and performer:

It’s like you’ve got the Vietnam War, and because you had reporters showing us pictures of the war at home, that’s what made the war end, or that shit would have lasted longer…but because we saw the horror, that’s what made us stop the war…so I thought, that’s what I’m going to do as an artist, as a rapper. I’m gonna’ show the most graphic details of what I see in my community and hopefully they’ll stop it quick. (Shakur, 132)

He strove to write in visual terms. The analogy also recalls Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Shakur often referenced Shakespeare as an influence), where Hamlet enlists a group of players to “catch the conscience” of the king, hoping to illicit his murder confession. Shakur similarly assembled an evolving cast of characters in his raps, hoping his stories would “catch the conscience” of the audience and inspire listeners to organize for constructive change. For example, in songs such as “Brenda’s Got A Baby,” where Shakur sketches the story of a young girl who has been molested and ends up pregnant, he employs omniscient narration, “The girl can hardly spell her name / (That’s not our problem, that’s up to Brenda’s family) / Well let me show ya how it affects the whole community.” Shakur often tried to contextualize and complicate a story by entering the consciousness of several characters. For example, in the lyrics above, he stages a conversation between the narrator and voices within the community (“That’s not our problem”). Echoing

writers like Henry James, Shakur explained that it was his primary “practice” to “introduce a central character through whom he could develop a narrative” (Bruck, 48).

So why isn’t Shakur taken more seriously as a writer who engages and changes the medium? There are multiple answers to this question, but I would argue that one of the main obstacles for rappers is that they enter the terrain of popular culture on multiple, intertextual fronts and in relationship to earlier images. Shakur exists in the larger cultural memory, as Keeling observes, between stereotypical hypermasculinized images of the Black Panthers on the one hand, and as a bare-chested gangsta rapper with the words “Thug Life” tattooed across his stomach, on the other. There’s also a tendency, as Nathaniel Mackey and others have argued, that black writers tend to be “racially, primarily at the content level, as responding to racism, representing ‘the black experience.’” However, I argue that it was Shakur’s awareness of this fact (and working from its premise) that makes his contribution noteworthy. His baggy jeans, boxer shorts and bandana were not only symbols of an affirmative identity but also served as visual markers to those he knew were watching him, both to those who wanted to discredit his merits as an artist or had been groomed by way of gangsta rap’s reliance on gendered and racial stereotype to expect a “thuggish” appearance, but, perhaps most importantly, to those he hoped his message would reach. Shakur’s self-consciousness and carefully crafted self-presentation intended to draw multiple audiences. He knew his image possessed significant power.

As Tricia Rose points out, gangsta rap capitalized on the commodification of images and stereotypes such as pimps, hos and gangstas. Shakur embraced the moniker of “thug” in particular, but he did so as a sight of contestation, meaning that his work engages “thug” and

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37 Mackey, page 51.
attempts to (re)figure its signification, to verb “thug.” In an interview with MTV in 1995, Shakur explained:

When I say ‘thug’ I mean not a criminal, someone who beats you over the head, I mean the underdog…When my heart beats it screams thug life. To me thug is my pride, you know what I’m saying’? Not being someone who goes against the law. Not being someone that takes, but being someone that has nothing and even though there is no home for me to go to, my head is up high, my chest is out, I walk tall, I talk loud, I don’t stutter. I’m being strong. (Shakur 122)

Shakur understands and acknowledges that “thug” signifies “criminal” within the larger culture, but he wants to reimagine its meaning, that despite having nothing and “no home,” he’s still able to speak up and hold his head high. For Shakur, “thug” as a noun is qualitatively different than “thug life” as a verb.

In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall argues that in order to contest “a racialized regime of representation,” the problematic image needs to be inhabited (269). He begins by outlining three types of trans-coding (“taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings”). Hall concedes, “to reverse the stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it. Escaping the grip of stereotypical extreme…may simply mean being trapped in its stereotypical ‘other’” (272). In other words, the image “has not

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38 See: Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997). Not all critics believe it’s possible to change the meaning of an image by inhabiting the stereotype. In specific regard to rap performance see Carl Hancock Rux, “Eminem: The New White Negro” in Tate, Ed. *Everything But the Burden* (2003), 15-37. He argues, “The oppressed identity performance relies upon a collective agreement informed by a historical narrative that either supports the validity of, or opposes the construct of, these identities. Before a revisionist identity can be forged, there was an inheritance and acceptance of a construct—thus, even when the oppressed think they are revising their identities, updating the language of their identities, or endeavoring to better the circumstances of their identities, they are not—not completely and not actually—because no language in the American polyglot has ever been subscribed to by the collective that points to the very nature of human identity beyond elementary categorizations…” (19).
escaped the ‘binary structure of racial stereotyping’” (272). In another passage, Hall writes, “‘Stereotyping’ is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological,’ the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable,’ what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other,’ between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ Us and Them—’the Others’—who are in some way different—’beyond the pale.’

The only way to change stereotypical representations of reality is to actually engage with how stereotypes acquire power in the first place. Hall argues, “if you want to begin to change the relationship between the viewer [and] the image, you have to intervene in exactly that powerful exchange between the image and its psychic meaning, the depths of the fantasy.”40 To successfully critique media representations that allocate power based upon racial and gender identities, one must first realize that these representations are not simply a “distorted reflection of the real state of race relations.”41 To the contrary, as Hall argues, the social meaning of race, the social “fact” of race, is actually “media-mediated” through different forms of representation (hence, this dissertation’s focus on lyrical and visual forms of mediation). Hall further points out the most obvious forms of racism (the “symptoms”) are equally matched by those that are more difficult to ascertain (the “silences”). Hall argues that it’s imperative to pay critical attention to the silences in the same way we do the symptoms of racism, because media representations of race actually function more like cultural myths and “represent in narrative form the resolutions of things, which can’t be resolved in real life…they tell us about the ‘dream life’ of a culture” (6-7). Put another way, in order to comprehend the complicated logics of racism, one must go beyond

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
the surface indicators to “open up” stereotypes and thus increase the possibilities of the social meaning of an image.\textsuperscript{42} To contest stereotypes, one must not take the image at face value but instead “go inside the image itself;” to reveal its underlying logic. He argues that representations have to:

- occupy the very terrain which has been saturated by fixed and closed representation and to try to use the stereotypes and turn the stereotypes in a sense against themselves; to open up…the very practice of representation itself—as a practice—because what closure in representation does most of all is it naturalizes. (21)

For Hall, a new representation must be in dialogue with the stereotype it seeks to contest, to “occupy the very terrain which has been saturated” by that representation. It’s not sufficient to contest stereotypes by simply presenting a “better” or more “positive” image. Hall argues an engagement with stereotype must stem from an understanding of the power imbedded in it so as to reveal the underlying logic and constructed nature of its meaning. Art that does this ultimately unsettles the stereotypical representation’s claim to reality.\textsuperscript{43}

Shakur employs Hall’s strategy of working within the contentious site of meaning, or “trans-coding” the stereotype, in order to engage with the “social and symbolic order.” This counter practice “accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters as it were into a struggle over representation” (274). The practice seeks to expand and diversify the meaning of a stereotype. Shakur’s engagement with representation and stereotype can be


\textsuperscript{43} Imani Perry builds on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s work in The Signifying Monkey to make a similar argument about hip hop stereotype and hip hop storytelling: “Exploiting the stereotype while simultaneously expressing literary skill is one of the prominent ways of using the black literary tradition. The complex use of the structures of language and storytelling are critical features that help to describe what hip hop does, and to begin to develop a critical eye toward its evaluation” (64). I use Hall’s formulation here because I want to attend to the visual aspect of media representation.
directly tied to the cultural practices of the Black Panther Party (BPP). The mainstream media often referred to members of the BPP as “thugs,” a label that co-founder Booby Seale said he and Huey P. Newton had strategically anticipated:

Huey articulated to brothers on the block, and he articulated in a way that they understood it, what their rights were in law, and how, in fact, we could exercise a position in the black community to begin to show black people how we could defend… Now, the papers call the organization hoodlums and thugs…[and] when the Man called us “n****r” for 400 years, with all its derogatory connotations, Huey was smart enough to know that black people gonna say, ‘Well, they’ve been calling us…’thugs’, and ‘hoodlums’ for 400 years, that ain’t gonna hurt me, I’m gonna check out what these brothers is doing.’

For Seale being called a “thug” or a “hoodlum” was not detrimental but rather legitimized the cause of the Panthers in the eyes of “the brothers from the block.” There was a kind of solidarity with the people they aimed to reach and Newton and Seale believed it was “the brothers from the block” who would eventually lead the revolution (as vanguards of the movement).

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44 In her book Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic (2009), cultural critic Amy Abugo Ongiri argues that the Black Power era has profoundly shaped the terrain on which we interpret popular culture in the present. She writes, “Black Power culture epitomized by the Black Panther Party would come to valorize urban identity and street culture as primary expressions of Black authenticity and also resistance” (12).


46 In her book, Spectacular Blackness (2009,) Amy Abugo Ongiri claims one aspect of the legacy of the Black Panther Party is the “notion that the urban poor experience is definitional in the construction” of black authenticity (23). She writes, “Black Power culture as epitomized by the Black Panther Party would valorize urban identity and street culture as primary expressions of Black authenticity and also resistance…The vision of African American culture as urban, outlaw, and vernacular so powerfully affected developing notions of race, urbanity, and culture that it would greatly contribute to the distillation of that vision throughout American popular culture” (12).
One of the most dramatic challenges posed by the Black Panther Party was their practice of theorizing and presenting confrontations between regular folk and the police as “dramatic events.” By carrying guns, wearing uniforms and policing the police, the Black Panther Party revealed the mechanisms and conditions for the performance of power, effectively showing people that police have to get dressed up everyday and carry a gun in order to play the role of the police officer. The BPP also positioned themselves as community educators on the legal system, often observing traffic stops and informing people of their rights. Amy Abugo Ongiri goes further by linking these strategic practices to modes of representation:

The Panthers’ belief that armed propaganda could provoke people to identify with them as the vanguard party caused them to seek to translate every visual encounter with the Panther ideology into a lived experience of the revolutionary utopian possibilities that ideology presented…The Panthers thus self-consciously presented individuals and images whose revolutionary representation would provoke the possibility of radical social change by creating an identification between the visual representation and the viewer.

(36)

In other words, the images weren’t just about leather jackets, berets and guns (though this is the image that fascinated media). The images were also meant to demonstrate what another society might look like and how it might function. The photos of Party members serving children in the free breakfast program were just as important as photographs confronting police.

Of all the phases in his activist engagement, I would argue that Shakur’s Thug Life movement is probably the least theorized as a continuation of BPP philosophical praxis. Only recently has there been serious scholarly consideration of Shakur’s political practices. Karin

Stafford’s exceptional analysis traces five distinct periods of political activism in Shakur’s short life: 1) organizing in high school 2) support and participation in the New Afrikan Independence Movement; 3) membership in the New Afrikan Panthers in his late teens and early twenties; 4) using his “professional status and its accruements to support and implement his political ideas”; and 5) Thug Life movement (Stanford, 12). Like the BPP, Shakur wanted to change the public’s perception of those who had been labeled as “thugs” and was not at all interested in respectability politics. At times, his approach was downright harsh. At a dinner benefit, Shakur once told an intergenerational audience, “When I say, ‘Thug Life,’ I mean that shit because these white folks see us as thugs. I don’t care if you think you a lawyer, a man, an African-American. If you whatever the fuck you think you are, we thugs and n***s to these motherfuckers!”48

**Thug Life Praxis**

Shakur began developing the larger concept of Thug Life in his early twenties, and in one of Shakur’s first national magazine cover stories, journalist Kevin Powell (who interviewed Shakur several times over the course of his short career) witnessed this burgeoning theory in action:

> On a balmy September day at the Marcus Garvey School in South Central Los Angeles, Tupac stands before a room full of teachers and administrators, mostly women, and explains Thug Life. ‘It’s a double finger when you see people dressing like this,’ he says, pointing to his sagging jeans, pushing them down for extra emphasis… ‘Thug Life’ is

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what Tupac calls his mission for the black community—a support group, a rap act, and a philosophy. He explained that they acronym “T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E.” stood for “The Hate U Gave Little Infants Fucks Everybody.” It was meant as both an indictment of U.S. history and racist social structures, but also of present-day media representations of black youth as gang members and “thugs.” Shakur argued that his approach was effective because young black men “identify with thug life” and “because I’m not trying to clean them up. I am, but I’m not saying come to me clean. I’m saying come as you are…I take the good and the bad—we have to work through it, but we can’t work together if we’re not unified” (122).

Shakur envisioned bringing rival gang members together through his concept of Thug Life. He argued that there were several types of gangs, from the neighborhood level to the government. Once people understood gangs as one form of organizing among many, Shakur hoped to people would be willing to reorganize in an effort to address larger forms of systematic oppression:

Why all of a sudden is everybody acting like gangs are some new phenomenon in this country? Almost everyone in America is affiliated with some kind of gang. We got the FBI, the ATF, the police departments, the religious groups, the Democrats and the

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49 Kevin Powell, “Is Tupac Crazy or Just Misunderstood?” in *Vibe* (Feb. 1994).

50 In his book, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (2011), Michael Jeffries writes “Thug subjectivity is rooted not only in outsider and rebel status but in the fact that existence as a thug is based on the premise and knowledge that you are hated. Tupac acknowledges, ‘I know people are going to hate me,’ and the ‘hate’ in the acronym THUG LIFE is ‘Hate U Gave’—hate given by another to the thug, not hate born within and projected by the thug himself (89). Shakur himself put it this way: “I am society’s child. This is how they made me, and now I’m saying what’s on my mind and they don’t want that. This is what you made me, America” (*Resurrection*, film).
Republicans. Everybody’s got their own little clique and they’re all out there
gangbanging in their own little way.51

Echoing the Panther’s strategy of organizing “brothers on the block,” Shakur sought to organize
“thugs” and “gangstas” to meet the government-sponsored gangs. Black Panther co-founder,
Huey P. Newton’s influence on Shakur goes much deeper than passing along a “hypermasculine”
image of revolutionary cool-pose. Shakur paid homage to Newton on several occasions. In one
of his most famous songs, “Changes” (1998), he raps “It’s time to fight back, that’s what Huey
said / Two shots in the dark, now Huey’s dead.”52 As a teenager, Shakur also wrote a poem for
him called “Fallen Star,” where he writes, “They wanted 2 c your lifeless corpse / This way u
could not alter the course / of ignorance they have set/ 2 make my people forget.”53

Up to this point, critics have largely ignored an in-depth analysis of Newton’s political
philosophy in relationship to Shakur’s own, but I argue that the conceptualization of Thug Life
shares much in common with Newton’s central theories of “revolutionary suicide” and
“revolutionary intercommunalism.” In a series of talks and essays in 1971, Newton began
extending his theory of revolutionary suicide and applying it to an examination of empire.
Newton’s autobiography, Revolutionary Suicide (1973), takes its title from his philosophical
understanding of the relationship between life, death and revolution. In the opening pages of the
book, Newton builds on Emile Durkheim’s theory of the causal relationships between social
conditions and death, specifically death by suicide. Newton puts it this way:

52 “Changes” was released posthumously and has become one of the most popular Tupac songs. It was
53 Shakur, The Rose that Grew From Concrete (1999), page 111.
The concept of revolutionary suicide is not defeatist or fatalistic. On the contrary, it conveys an awareness of reality in combination with the possibility of hope—reality because the revolutionary must always be prepared to face death, and hope because it symbolizes a resolute determination to bring about change. Above all, it demands that the revolutionary see his death and his life as one piece. (6)

Newton argues that everyone must die, but there may also be some degree of choice in how we die. Newton presents two possibilities. One can either die a “reactionary suicide,” by allowing environmental forces to take over to the point of mental (“spiritual”) and physical death, allowing in a sense oneself to be murdered by those forces. Or one can choose a “revolutionary suicide,” a way of living that realistically confronts power and works to change negative forces. His intentional use of the term “suicide” signifies both the violent nature of opposing structural power and the possibility of agency in doing so. By opposing the status quo, the revolutionary risks an early death. The person who dies a “revolutionary suicide” is not suicidal, but instead struggles against negative forces that threaten a healthy life.

In the early years of the BPP (based on their readings of Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X as well as studying other freedom struggles around the world), the BPP had urged the necessity of a Black Nationalist strategy. In a series of public talks, Newton argued that because the U.S. had successfully become a global superpower or “empire,” it no longer made sense to seek the formation of “national” power as a challenge to U.S. hegemony:

We say the world today is a dispersed collection of communities. A community is a small unit with a comprehensive collection of institutions that exists to serve a small group of people. And we say further that the struggle in the world today is between the small circle
that administers and profits from the empire of the United States, and the peoples of the
world who want to determine their own destinies. (Hilliard and Wise, 187)

Recognizing the multinational corporation as an emerging powerful global force, Newton
described two ways to think about the interdependency of the dispersed “communities” created
by the consolidation of U.S. empire: reactionary and revolutionary. The theory of “reactionary
intercommunalism” recognizes that as a result of the globalization of capital, communities
(whether located in a particular location or as refugees) suffer a particular type of communal
systemic oppression. Additionally, “reactionary intercommunalism” names the interconnected
conditions of the world’s working and non-working poor. This theory recognizes that as the
globalization of capital increases, the nation state becomes less and less concerned with or able
to respond to the needs of its people.

The second type of formation, “revolutionary intercommunalism,” is the creative
response to this reality and contends that it’s through both localized and interconnected
community-based work that people can challenge empire’s systematic oppression. Newton
believes that a culture of common understanding between scattered global communities is made
possible through the very technologies of globalized culture. As he explains:

We are now in the age of reactionary intercommunalism, in which a ruling circle, a small
group of people, control all other people by using their technology. At the same time, we
say that this technology can solve most of the material contradictions people face, that the
material conditions exist that would allow the people of the world to develop a culture

54 The BPP created a newspaper called “Intercommunal News,” chronicling world issues. There was also
the Intercommunal Youth Institute (community school), health clinics, free ambulance service, free
breakfast and food programs, child center, free shoe and clothing program, and legal aid, among others.
See also: Clarence Lusane, “To Fight for the People: The Black Panther Party and Black Politics in the
that is essentially human and would nurture those things that would allow the people to resolve contradictions in a way that would not cause the mutual slaughter of all of us. The development of such a culture would be called revolutionary intercommunalism. (187)

This new cultural work could cultivate and foster an understanding that vulnerable, reactionary communities across the world actually possess more in common with one another (economically and materially) than they do with the wealthy, ruling class in their own nations. Newton did not predict when nor how this understanding would occur. But I believe his theory was intentionally left open and fluid so it could adapt to new technologies as they emerged. The important point is that culture would become a key site of intervention in this theory and a necessity in turning these reactionary communities into revolutionary ones.

Newton argues that culture brought on by the rise of the U.S. as a global hegemonic empire actually has the potential to serve as the medium for education and revolutionary organizing. This culture may be a way to bring people together in new ways, to create new allegiances. For Newton, in the future, the working class would no longer lead the banner for social change, but rather it would be the “unemployables” and “not regularly employed” (in Marxist terms, the “lumpenproletariat”) who would become the majority (and most influential) group:

It has been estimated that ten years from now only a small percentage of the present work force will be necessary to run the industries. Then what will happen to your worker who is now making four dollars an hour? The working class will be narrowed down, the class of unemployables will grow because it will take more and more skills to operate those machines and fewer people. And as these people become unemployables, they will become more and more alienated; even socialist compromises will not be enough. You
will then find an integration between, say, the black unemployable and the white racist hard hat who is not regularly employed and mad at the blacks who he thinks threaten his job. We hope that he will join forces with those people who are already unemployable, but whether he does or not, his material existence will have changed. (193)

The latter group, or “white racist hard hats” previously employed by industrial labor and largely working class, could potentially become aligned with fellow unemployables. One possible vehicle for such an understanding might be found in the rise of commercial rap music as global mass culture, as it opens up spaces where a socialist imaginary might be articulated.

Written twenty-plus years after Newton’s theories, Shakur’s concept of Thug Life is probably the most evident example of an artist’s intent to use popular culture as a site to build this kind of bridge. He sought to organize the “reactionary” group of so-called “thugs,” folks who had been formed as a reactionary community, and turn them into revolutionaries. Shakur understood that people interpreted his version of “thug” through a very specific (media-mediated lens), and as I argued above, he engaged that stereotype by inhabiting it. But there was also a more practical understanding of class-consciousness at work in Thug Life; Shakur saw thugs as unemployables, what he called the “underdogs” and outlaws. As Michael Eric Dyson argues of Shakur in Holler if You Hear Me (2001), “in embracing thug life, he was at once plague and prophet. Tupac believed he spoke for the desperately demobilized and degraded lumpen…those who ‘don’t give a fuck’” (218). Stepping into the role of thug meant Shakur would be

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55 See also Newton, “Uniting Against the Common Enemy.” To Die For the People (pp. 210-217).
56 Shakur also coined an acronym for the n-word as “never ignorant getting goals accomplished” (Dyson, 144). Jada Pinkett-Smith says Shakur “always felt he couldn’t betray what he would call ‘n***as in the gutter,’ she says, ‘because they had been there for him. They loved him, and that’s who he was here for” (150).
admonished for glorifying a predatory lifestyle, but perhaps more importantly, at least to Shakur, it also meant he could speak to (and on behalf of) those who belonged to an emerging reactionary class. Shakur explained his Thug Life concept:

I don’t understand why America doesn’t understand thug life. America is thug life. What makes me saying ‘I don’t give a fuck’ different than Patrick Henry saying ‘give me liberty or give me death’? What makes my freedom less worth fighting for than Bosnians or whoever they want to fight for this year? (Shakur, 122)

For Shakur, Thug Life retained rhetorical malleability and was a possible site for reaching and organizing those who might not otherwise be taken seriously as political actors. The philosophy of Thug Life, like the BPP’s unification of the “brothers on the block,” was an “educational and organizing tool,” one Shakur felt could have a genuinely positive impact on the community. Shakur believed that those who had been stereotyped as “thugs” could also be organized. Shakur knew that his political philosophy of Thug Life would be more accessible to his peers than trying to use language like “lumpenproletariat.”

Thug Life is rooted in an ethos of seeing even rival gang members as potential co-conspirators against systematic oppression. Shakur (along with his step-father, Mutulu Shakur) came up with a document called “Code of Thug Life,” a list of rules drafted primarily for gang members and drug dealers in order to “put the street life back on track.” With help from gang leaders, the Shakurs proposed a set of agreed upon rules (or “codes”) to bridge the communal gap “between the legal and illegal economy and culture.” The preamble to the Code states:

The thug life is a tool of the enemy as it exists today; it must change. The interests of outside forces are being served by the hustlers, because the crew has no dignity or honor,

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57 Stanford, pages 16-17.
and this must be corrected... We accept that the game will go on until our liberation.

What we won’t accept is that the game will destroy us from within before we get another chance to rumble and rebuild. We will not allow ourselves to be played by the covert operations, contelpro [sic], and low intensity warfare waged by the United States government.\footnote{Shakur, \textit{Tupac: Resurrection} (book), pages 116-117.}

The document concludes: “We must act now. The Code of the Thug Life will save us to fight another day” (117). The Code recalls earlier “survival programs” put forth by the Black Panther Party. The reactionary “thug life” is the condition created by current social circumstances, including histories of systemic racism, the drug game (especially when crack entered the market) and gangs. Rather than denouncing “thugs,” the document instead attempts to realistically understand the current state of things in order to reposition the community as “revolutionary.” Stafford contends, “‘The Code of Thug Life’ was designed to politicize gang members and get them ready for armed rebellion to oppose racist and economic oppression” (17). Tupac traveled to major cities to meet with gang leaders to promote the Code. One of the most notable examples was after the Los Angeles uprising in 1992. The Bloods and Crips came together (with Tupac) and signed the Code of Thug Life, and together, proposed a set of community initiatives (18).

Shakur also theorized freedom of movement between different ghettos as a right of passage for the artist whose art remains grounded in the concerns and dreams of oppressed people saying, “I feel as though the ghetto is the ghetto, and there ain’t ne’er a ghetto that I can’t go to and kick it. If you got love and you’re putting out real shit—if you’re kicking that shit from your heart, you can go wherever your heart wants you to go.”\footnote{Kevin Powell, “All Eyes on Him: Interview with Tupac Shakur” in \textit{Vibe} magazine. N.p. February 1996. Accessed 14 Dec. 2015. (http://vibe.com/archive/feb96/docs/tupac.html).} While others have pointed to this
kind of “keeping it real” as the mentality that both plagued rap in the mid 1990s and ultimately led to Shakur’s personal downfall, such readings drastically underestimate the scope and political aims of his artistic and activist intentions. Echoing Newton’s concept of revolutionary suicide, Shakur continually pledged his allegiance to Thug Life, in both song and interviews, saying, “It makes me want to give my whole life to it. And I will give my whole life to this plan that I have for Thug Life.”

Without the proper historical and theoretical context, this sounds nihilistic, but like his conceptualization of “Thug Life” as a form of revolutionary intercommunalism, Shakur saw “thugs” as the vanguard of the movement (in the same way that Newton imagined that organizing the “brothers on the block” would lead to social change). In Spectacular Blackness, Ongiri argues:

The vanguard model was the single most powerful model of identification in African American radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The reliance in African American radical politics on a vanguardist (sic) visual language and iconography that created an image of African Americans that was at once oppositional and open for broad identification formed the ways in which postwar American culture has come to construct African American culture and identity. Changes in postdesegregation (sic) African American culture have largely been naturalized as authentic outside of the debates of the Black Power era that created them. A return to those debates helps to situate what we have come to think of as “authentic blackness” at the moment of its creation. (193)

Ongiri points out that the Black Power era shaped popular culture’s notions of what counts as “authentic blackness.” Shakur’s interpretation of this legacy, for better or for worse, informs his

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60 Ibid.
decision to ground both his politics and his art with the thugs in the “hood.” As Shakur once told a reporter: ‘It would be an honor to die in the ‘hood,’ he said solemnly, as if he were reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. I’d rather die in the ‘hood, where I get my love. I’m not saying I want to die, but if I got to die, let me die in the line of duty, the duty of the ‘hood.’ (Chambers, 85)

Although his efforts to organize rival gangs through the Code of Thug Life impressed some, Shakur’s approach also sparked concern. Dyson sums it up in the following:

Tupac appeared to forgo the traditional meanings of revolution in favor of the thorny ambivalence of thug culture. On the one hand, the thug embraced the same secular teleology that ran through revolutionary rhetoric: flipping the economic order was the reason for social rebellion. Thugs are a product of unequal social relations. But thugs bring arbitrary correction to the imbalances that revolutionaries seek to redress. It is that arbitrariness that most offends political activists hoping to bring about social justice. On the other hand, thug logic undermines the society the revolution seeks to change. In the case of the thug, class reversals are sought as much through individual assertion as by collective enterprise. Thug ambition is unapologetically predatory, circumventing the fellow feeling and group solidarity demanded of revolutionaries (64).

In attempting to “verb the real” and organize reactionary “thugs” into the agents of revolution, Shakur ran the risk of actually promoting thug culture. Dyson notes the possibility of also condoning a “predatory” individualism that simply wants to reverse the current economic order. Dyson sees value in the ways that thugs undermine the current social order but also worries about the eschewing of collectivity and group solidarity. Shakur demonstrated an awareness of the possible pitfalls associated with his method.
Shakur realized that because he was still working within the media and representation, there was always the possibility that his message would not be understood.

There’s a bad part because kids see that and mimic you. I haven’t figured that out yet.

But the positive side is the kids who live in a house where the mother is a crackhead, he hears the rap, he’s like, ‘That’s every day, so I don’t have to feel ashamed.’ It cuts both ways. To me, it’s like, when I sing: ‘I live the Thug Life Baby, I’m hopeless.’ One person might hear that and just like the way it sounds. But I’m doing it for the kid that lives a Thug Life and feels like it’s hopeless. So when I say, ‘Hopeless,’ and when I say it like that, it’s like I reach him. And even if, when I reach him, it makes it look glorious to the guy that doesn’t live that life, I can’t help it. It’s a fad. He’ll drop the Thug Life soon.

But for the person I tried to reach, he’ll pick it up, and I’ll be able to talk to him.”

Shakur rapped about Thug Life and hopelessness because he wanted to reach the people who felt hopeless and were suffering. He wanted them to know he understood, even if it meant that those who didn’t live the Thug Life might see it as “glorious.” To the listener who only saw the surface image, who couldn’t relate, they would “drop it” soon enough. He says he’s still working out his method, and he realizes it “cuts both ways.”

Shakur used his music as a way to work through the social contradictions in his theory of Thug Life. A song from the *Makaveli* album (1996) entitled “Blasphemy” turns the ten commandments of the Bible into the ten rules of the street hustle: “My family tree consists of drug dealers, thugs and killers / struggling, known to hustle / screaming ‘fuck they feelings.’” A few lines later a different perspective emerges, “Dear Lord, don’t let me die tonight / I got words for my comrades / listen and learn / Ain’t nothin’ free, give back what you earn.” The first

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61 *Tupac: Resurrection*, film.
perspective is an acknowledgement (not a disparagement) of the speaker’s environment, a family tree of “thugs and killers.” The second perspective offers a different approach to the rules of the game. Framed by a plea to a higher power, the second example speaks directly to one’s “comrades,” and encourages a reciprocal relationship to one’s community. The lyrics, “give back what you earn” can relate to money, knowledge, or giving back one’s time. Shakur encourages the listener to engage in a more revolutionary way: “My Thug Nation /do watcha gotta do / but know you gotta change / Try to find a way to make it out the game / I leave this and hope God can see my heart is pure/ Is Heaven just another door?” Contrary to Shakur’s critics, there is plenty of lyrical evidence that Tupac didn’t change his stance on these issues. Just a few months before he was murdered, Shakur wrote a letter to Chuck D asking him to appear on a song called “The Struggle Continuez” (sic) from a proposed album called Euthanasia (Shakur, 194-195). The album never materialized but the finished song was released posthumously. Shakur raps, “Now, I was born as a rebel, making trouble for the devil / Take this gang bang shit, to a whole another level / Can you feel me now? /Armies in every city, definition of power / Players are you with me? - see the war is the prophecy / Survival is the strategy, rest in peace! / To my comrades that's deceased, organize the streets.”

For Tupac, the philosophy and practice of Thug Life was clearly rooted in Black Panther revolutionary intercommunalism and the philosophy that backed the BPP’s survival programs.\(^\text{62}\) While many rappers often associate themselves with the specific places where they are from (Jay Z and Marcy Projects, Nas and Queensbridge, NWA and Compton), Shakur often laid claim to

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\(^{62}\) Shakur also worked with four others, including his stepbrother, on the album Thug Life, Vol. 1. According to reports, the project “grew out of an earlier project called ‘Underground Railroad’….the idea was that the album would enable gang members to escape street life by becoming musicians” (Bruck, 52).
the “hood” more generally speaking.\textsuperscript{63} Because he spent his childhood in a variety of cities (New York, Baltimore, Marin City, L.A.), Shakur recognized the commonality among them:

I was starting to see the one thing we have in common as black people, is we share that poverty…I had knowledge this wasn’t just me. It was a bigger picture. It was my people getting dogged out. It wasn’t just my family. It was all of us. Moving to Baltimore and Oakland and Marin and New York, and the poverty helped me to relate to everybody’s struggle. (Shakur, 142)

This is probably the most obvious articulation of revolutionary intercommunalism as both an imaginary and real geographical space. It’s ironic that Shakur would later become the primary symbol of the feud between East Coast and West Coast rap. He clearly possessed a critique of the way systemic oppression functions in the “bigger picture” and had an expansive vision for how his specific struggles to help him relate to “everybody’s struggles.”

\textbf{Thug Life’s Patriarchy and Profeminism}

Despite its important contributions, for the most part, Thug Life remained a patriarchal endeavor. Other than a few mentions, women are largely left out of the document as actors with agency. Of the nearly thirty rules laid out in the Code, only two mention women explicitly: “No slinging to pregnant Sisters. That’s baby killing; that’s genocide” (12), and “Sisters in the Life must be respected if they respect themselves” (20). In the first instance, women are not seen as equal “players” in the game, but rather as prizes, baby-makers that need protection from the

\textsuperscript{63} I realize this claim is the antithesis of the predominant discourse about Shakur’s life, especially towards the end and as part of the so-called “East Coast vs. West Coast” rap war. Though beyond the scope of this current discussion, I would argue that Shakur’s attempts to think about the more generalizable geography of the “ghetto” actually challenges a key legacy of how Realism functions in hip hop culture, namely its tendency to focus on the regional or “local color” particularities of place.
harm of consuming drugs, so they can reproduce healthy children. The second rule is equally troubling, as it only extends “respect” to the women who “respect themselves.” There’s no clear outline as to what constitutes respecting oneself, but the wording positions the man as the one who will ultimately decide what that looks like, and thus whether or not a woman deserves his respect. It’s difficult to discern whether or not these additions to the Code reflect Tupac’s vision or Mutulu’s (or both), but they nonetheless uphold hegemonic notions of a heteropatriarchal community structure.

In his lyrics Shakur often struck an ambivalent tone about gender equality. In “Wonda Why They Call U Bitch” (1996), he sketches out a scene of a young woman in a club: “It was said you were sleezy, even easy / Sleepin’ around for what you need, see / It’s your thing, and you can shake it how you wanna / Give it up free or make your money on the corner.” Shakur’s tone initially seems understanding, acknowledging that sex work, much like hustling or selling drugs, is part of the underground economy, especially for women. He acknowledges her power, saying, “it’s your thing, and you can shake how you wanna.” But he then seems to change his mind, proposing a more conservative alternative, “But don’t be bad, play the game, get mad and change / Then you wonder why these motherfuckers call you names / Keep your mind on your money, enroll in school / And as the years pass by, you can show them fools.” Shakur champions a more traditional path to redemption, suggesting that the woman either accept the rules of the game or pull herself up by her “bootstraps” vis-à-vis education. However, by the end of the song, he has given up on her altogether, “But you ain’t tryin’ to hear me because you’re stuck / Headed to the bathroom, about to get tossed up / Got your legs open trying to get rich / I love you like a sister, but you need to switch / And that’s why they call you bitch, I betcha!” Unlike his complicated understanding of the historical and institutional constraints that produce and uphold
reactionary versions of Thug Life, Shakur seems less interested in the deconstruction or transcoding of the moniker of “bitch.”

Fans hold up songs like “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” “Keep Your Head Up,” and “Dear Mama” as proof that overall, Shakur was critical of patriarchy. These examples are certainly one aspect of how he wrote about the intersection of race, class and gender, but they are not the whole story. Moreover, because they’ve become the most-cited examples of his engagement with gender, much of Shakur’s most radical anti-sexist work remains unexamined. Take for example, the video for “Holler If You Hear Me,” which appeared on Shakur’s second album, *Strictly 4 My N.*.*.*.z* (1993). The visual treatment weaves together the concepts of Thug Life and revolutionary suicide, along with an embedded critique of how the concepts have typically been gendered as male. Where perhaps the Codes of Thug Life and Shakur’s lyrics may fall short at times on the issue of sex equality, a close reading of “Holler” reveals the complicated way gender resounds with race throughout an entire set of questions proposed by Shakur.

Although “Holler” was not released to radio as an official single, the video appeared in regular rotation on MTV and was an obvious counterpoint to the popularity of grunge music at the time. I argue that “Holler” has both a thematic and intertextual relationship to Pearl Jam’s enormously successful hit, “Jeremy,” which had been parked on Billboard’s top ten for months leading up to the former’s release. “Jeremy” tells the story of a white, suburban teenage boy, who after getting fed up with being bullied, takes a gun to school, walks up to the front of his class, tosses the teacher an apple, and then shoots himself in the head. The video’s visual

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64 For an in-depth discussion of Shakur’s ambivalence in representing women and sex-abuse charges, see: Dyson, “Do We Hate Our Women?” in *Holler if You Hear Me* (2001), pp. 175-200. “Wonda Why They Call U Bitch” was also a direct response to the well-publicized criticism leveled at Shakur from women’s rights activist C. Delores Tucker (including her challenge to Shakur being nominated for an NAACP image award).
technique is memorable for the way it begins with shots of newspapers and a reporter’s voice, saying “it is very relevant in America today.” The camera cuts very quickly in and out of several parallel scenes that simultaneously narrate the same story from different locations; a scene in the woods where Jeremy paints pictures on white canvases, a scene in the classroom where the other kids point and laugh at him, a shot of Pearl Jam’s lead singer, Eddie Vedder, sitting on a stool, singing. Each scene flashes in rapid succession, inducing confusion in the viewer. As the song reaches a crescendo, white cards fill the visual story with words. “3:30 in the afternoon / an affluent suburb / described as quiet / bored / Genesis 3:6.” Another camera angle in the classroom shows faint words on the chalkboard: “Anxiety Disorders,” “Environmental Stress,” ”Hereditary Factors,” together painting a grim picture of American suburbia. The undercurrent throughout the video implies Jeremy has somehow been failed by the social system: faulting the school, for not protecting him from the bullying, and his family, for not taking interest in him. The flashing of “Genesis 3:6” refers to the story in the Bible where Eve eats of the fruit of the tree of knowledge (then offers it to Adam), insinuating that Jeremy’s mother is at fault. The lyrics are “Daddy didn’t give attention / Oh, to the fact that mommy didn’t care.” It’s Jeremy’s mother who doesn’t care, but his father enables the family dysfunction by not giving “attention.”

Pearl Jam based both the song and visuals on an actual story of a teen who shot himself at school. MTV worried that by playing the video, they might be seen as condoning suicide. In an effort to mitigate the issue, they actually edited out one of the final moments in the video, changing how the audience would ultimately interpret its meaning (from a suicide to a mass school shooting). Daniel Wenger writes:
Pearl Jam did not intend to transform a suicide into a mass murder. MTV, however, excised a central image from the video’s final scene—of Jeremy raising the gun to his mouth. The censored version gives us Jeremy at the front of the classroom with the gun at his side, and then his classmates at their desks, hands raised, white shirts blood-splattered. Many viewers assumed the worst.\(^6\)

However, I don’t think the confusion over Jeremy’s final actions stem only from the editorial decision to remove this particular scene. There are several memorable images from “Jeremy,” such as the one of him wrapped in an American flag with fires raging in the background, that eerily reverberate with images of white male violence from the last twenty plus years, from Erik Harris and Dylan Klebold to Dylann Roof. (figure 1)

![Figure 1](image_url)

The question (and confusion) as to whether or not Jeremy turned the gun on himself or on his classmates structures the complicated intertextual relationship between “Jeremy” and

“Holler.” If “Jeremy” focuses on how one’s environment can lead to self-harm (or potential harm to the community), “Holler” flips this and shows how harming an individual can lead to community organizing and collective action against environmental forces. It’s a complete revision of the media tropes of teen violence.

There are striking aesthetic connections between “Jeremy” and Shakur’s “Holler if You Hear Me.” The latter also uses the cutting technique described above and opens with a voiceover (by Tupac), saying the system has made family life impossible:

There’s [sic] too many families that’s been affected by a wrongful death. This system and this country has torn apart my family and our family. You can’t have a black family and be together. The only way for us to ever get out of this predicament is to struggle to survive. If we want change, we’re going to have to fight for it. Ain’t nobody gonna give it to us. We’re just going to have to take it.

The beginning of the video shows a house with an older black man laying face-down on the sidewalk, dead. There’s a woman sitting on the stoop, crying, as a white police officer takes a black teenager into custody. Juxtaposing the visual scene with the voiceover opens up several interpretive possibilities. By saying that the “system” has torn apart the family, Shakur makes possible a reading of that perhaps the youth killed the older man. Or maybe it was the police. Perhaps the woman who is seen crying killed him. Is the youth being taken into custody because they are the suspect or because they are being taken to child protective services? This is further complicated by a shot of a black officer holding up a gun between his thumb and forefinger. He looks at it, then hands it over to a white officer. Did the black officer shoot the man? Or does the gun belong to the youth in custody? Did it belong to the dead man? Are the officers planting evidence?
The first part of the video concludes when another black man steps out of the shadows onto the scene, dressed in a hoodie and holding what appears to be a shotgun; he walks up to the police car, shows the officer his gun and opens the back door, freeing the young person in custody. We then see Shakur, as he walks a gun range with a group of young people shooting target practice in the background. Shakur smiles, twirling a police hat on his index finger, irreverently rapping straight to the camera: “And now I’m like a major threat / because I remind you of the things you were made to forget.” The young person at the center of the story remains androgynous until finally we are brought face-to-face with her in the video’s penultimate scene. She stands at the gun range, picking up a gun and taking aim at the viewer: with one full, graceful motion, the baseball hat comes off, and her long brown hair falls softly to her shoulders (figure 2). As the scene fades to black, the audience is faced with an entirely new reality and one that is very different from the kind of disaffected male nihilism often ascribed with Shakur (and actually depicted in the “Jeremy” video). By figuring the protagonist as presumably male, the video forces the viewer into the role of interpreter. The visual cues center on stereotypically male clothing; the puffy jacket, baggy jeans and backwards baseball hat. In many ways, the revelation of gender at the end of the video disrupts the cultural logic that one can actually “read” the visual cues of the black male body. Cultural critic Herman Gray argues that the popular figure of black masculinity under Reaganism “appears in the popular imagination as the logical and legitimate object of surveillance and policing, containment and punishment.” Gray goes on to say:

Rappers have used cinema and music video to appropriate this surveyed and policed space for different ends: namely, to construct or reconstruct the image of black masculinity into one of hyperblackness based on fear and dread. By drawing on deeply
felt moral panics about crime, violence, gangs, and drugs, these figures have attempted, often successfully to turn dominant representations of black male bodies into a contested cultural field. Black rappers imaginatively rework and rewrite the historic tropes of black heterosexual, masculine (hyper)sexuality, insensitivity, detachment, and cold-bloodedness into new tropes of fascination and fear” (403).

The video pulls the viewer into the kind of narrative described by Gray, through what Stuart Hall would term as the racial “regime of representation,” the stereotype. It is through an engagement with the stereotype, that Shakur is able to “unfix” it from its position. But rather than replacing it with another version of male representation, Shakur positions a young woman at the center of revolution. She is the representative of his theory of Thug Life (The Hate U Gave Little Infants Fucks Everybody), and the “hate” comes as a result of whatever transpired at the beginning of the video. She was failed by the system. This young girl doesn’t go home at the end. And she doesn’t turn the gun on herself like Jeremy. She chooses to join a group of young people and struggle, and we can assume, she chooses to struggle against the structural forces bearing down on her, including the police officers.

While it’s impossible to know for certain whether or not Shakur was inspired by the “Jeremy” video, they nevertheless read as two sides of the same coin. Read together, they present a snapshot of hopelessness. Recall Huey Newton’s definition of reactionary suicide:

Connected to reactionary suicide, although even more painful and degrading, is a spiritual death that has been the experience of millions of Black people in the United States. This death is found everywhere today in the Black community. Its victims have ceased to fight the forms of oppression that drink their blood. (Newton, 4)
But Shakur’s protagonist doesn’t commit suicide (like Jeremy); rather she resists spiritual death and embraces revolutionary suicide. Shakur’s voiceover about “this system” and “this country,” are held out without solutions, and in productive, artistic, tension. Some may interpret Shakur’s voiceover in the beginning as a longing for a patriarchal norm of family, but I would argue that the video itself debunks a kind of heteropatriarchal nationalism and replaces it with an alternative familial structure. Rather than being a victim of her social environment, she embraces revolutionary suicide (picking up the gun, joining the guys at the gun range). The centrality of the young female character, with her ambiguous identity and questionable circumstance, demonstrate Shakur’s commitment to both extend the philosophy of the Black Panthers and simultaneously critique the movement’s shortcomings when it came to female agency. Furthermore, figuring the protagonist of Thug Life as female challenges hegemonic representations of black men as the predominant face of social revolution.

The representation of female resistance also ties Shakur’s concept of Thug Life as a way to forge a family in resistance. For him, the idea of “family” and kinship was always political. In
a 1994 interview with *Esquire* magazine, he was questioned about having kids and answered the following:

Procreation is so much about ego…everybody wants to have a junior. But I could care less about having a junior (for what), to tell him ‘I got fucked by America and you’re about to get fucked, too…Until we get a world where I feel like a first-class citizen, I can’t have a child. ‘Cause my child has to be a first-class citizen, and I’m not having no white babies” (Chambers, 85).

For Shakur, the refusal to create a biological family in the U.S. is a byproduct of the racism that is built into both “America” and the world, a world that won’t allow him to feel like a first class citizen. He further complicates his argument by adding, “There’s no way around it unless I want to turn white, turn my back on what’s really going on in America.” The idea that he can choose to ‘turn white’ is compelling for several reasons. He figures whiteness as a choice, as a political position that embraces and perpetuates social ignorance. He doesn’t want to father ‘white babies,’ because for Shakur, race and politics necessitate a notion of kinship that refuses to reproduce the current conditions of anti-blackness in the U.S.

Shakur’s approach to such conversations was part of an overall practice that spanned throughout his short career and truly finds footing in his final album, *The Don Killuminati: The 7-Day Theory* (1996). On the album, he assumes the alias “Makaveli” after the Renaissance-era Italian philosopher, Niccolo Machiavelli. Here Shakur figuratively positions himself as a different kind of political realist and as a philosopher. The popular interpretation of this name change has largely found a home in conspiracy theories that Shakur faked his own death, but as I have argued elsewhere, Shakur’s final album is far more compelling when read as a

66 Ibid.
philosophical meditation on state power. Doing so also helps to contextualize Shakur’s specific engagement with realism and gender on his final album. Recalling Machiavelli’s assertion in the penultimate chapter of *The Prince*, that “fate is a woman,” Shakur reimagines and refigures female power as both agent and accomplice on “Me and My Girlfriend.” The song is an ode to his “girlfriend,” a metaphor for his gun. Rapper Lady of Rage is the voice of the girlfriend, personifying the gun as woman, saying “Sheeit, you motherfuckin’ right / I’m the bitch that’s keepin it live and keepin it hot / When you punk ass n***z don’t / N***a Westside! WHAT! Bring it on!” Her voice sounds out of control, and she speaks with a kind of urgency that belongs only to her (that Shakur’s character in the song has no control over but can only witness. The sound of his voice is much more restrained by comparison). Her performance recalls the kind of unrestrained power Machiavelli ascribes to fortune:

> Nevertheless, not to extinguish our free will, I hold it to be true that Fortune is the arbiter of one-half of our actions,” but that she still leaves us to direct the other half, or maybe a little less…I compare her to one of those raging rivers, which in flood overflows the plains, sweeping away trees and buildings, bearing away the soil from place to place; everything flies before it, all yield to its violence, without being able in any way to withstand it; and yet, though its nature be such, it does not follow therefore that men, when the weather becomes fair, shall not make provision, both with defences (sic) and barriers, in such a manner that, rising again, the waters may pass away by canal, and their force be neither so unrestrained nor so dangerous (97)

For Machiavelli, fortune is uncontrollable and can only be tempered by planning for her immanent arrival. Even then, the best one can do is try to learn from previous experiences and prepare their defenses accordingly. For Shakur (as Makaveli), this means understanding the
power the gun possesses on her own and the ways in which he can and cannot control what she will do.

On “Me and My Girlfriend,” we hear her voice, aggressive and nearly screaming, followed by gunshots and the sound of screeching tires, as Shakur (as Makaveli) raps: “Trapped in this world of sin, born as a ghetto child / Raised in this whirlwind (c’mon) / Me and my girlfriend, hustlin’/ felt in love with the struggle / Fuck em all / watch ‘em fall screamin’, automatic gunfire / Exorcising all demons.” The reference to “raised in the whirlwind” alludes to the title of the collective autobiography of the Black Panther New York 21, *Look For Me in the Whirlwind* (1971). When juxtaposed with the next line, “fell in love with the struggle,” the gun becomes his equal, his comrade in the struggle. He does what he can to exercise some control, but she has her own agency; her power is automatic. She is also ageless: “Picked you up when you was nine / Bought you some shells when you turned 22 / May be 45 but you still live / 17, like Brandy, you just wanna be down.” I would argue that the fact that her power does not belong to a singular gun belonging to the speaker but in fact flows through several guns (at different ages), demonstrates her metaphorical likeness to fortune.

**Conclusion**

Whether or not Shakur was a real activist or real gangsta, he understood deeply that art has the power to interrupt cycles of conformity and help us reimagine our social identities. He understood that the imagination has to change in order for change to become imaginable. Critical interpretations of Shakur’s work that attempt to impose a neat teleological mapping between the events of his short life and his oeuvre completely miss the way he deployed the artistic medium of rap music as a way to challenge the depictions of his own “reality” and the meaning of the real
lives of those around him. Like some of the early abstractionist painters who removed the frame in order to highlight the false distinction between the work of art and its surroundings, Shakur focused on presenting and representing the entire picture, including dramatizing the relationship between the artist and his audience. He faithfully painted the same picture over and over again throughout his career (the story of a young, black male who grew up in poverty in the post-Civil Rights U.S.), in dozens of songs, from his first album to his last, from “Trapped” (1991) to “Hail Mary” (1996). For Shakur, it was less about reproducing his particular perspective and more about forcing a kind of visibility into language (visual and written), so as then, to follow Stuart Hall’s point, he could work at “unfixing” the black male body from the grip of media stereotypes. For Shakur, art was an open space to think through politics, pleasure, fantasy and heresy. Like many prolific writers that preceded him, poetry became the place where he could both wrestle and rest with the complexity of life.
Chapter Two: ‘Through the Wire’: Mapping the Mythos of Kanye West

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?’


I’m not music. I’m not fashion…I’m just art. Life is a giant art project.

Kanye West, interviewed in Vogue (2014)

Kanye was right. Three words that became a slogan overnight, popping up all over the blogosphere, on t-shirts and even as the URL address for a new activist organization, “Color of Change,” co-founded by activist James Rucker and Civil Rights attorney Van Jones. Kanye West’s now infamous declaration on live television that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” publicly vocalized what many had been feeling and saying privately in the immediate wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.67 Despite its awkward delivery, West’s thirty-second

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67 West was invited by NBC and The Red Cross to appear on a national telethon on September 2, 2005. The telethon raised money to aid victims of Hurricanes Rita and Katrina. West appeared in a segment with Saturday Night Live comedian Mike Myers. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090300165.html George Bush later recalled in his memoir Decision Points (2010) that West calling him a “racist” was the “all time low” of his presidency. In a November 2010 interview with Matt Lauer on The Today Show, Bush doubled-down, saying that it was one of the “most disgusting moments of my Presidency.” West responded a few days later in a pre-taped interview with Lauer, saying “I would tell George Bush in my moment of frustration, I didn’t have the grounds to call him a racist.” Notably, it was the interview with Lauer that led to West’s decision to stop doing interviews, because during the taping with Lauer, the show’s producers played archival visual footage from the 2009 MTV incident with Swift (described later in this chapter). http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/10/kanye-west-apologizes-for_n_781655.html
deviation from the NBC teleprompter managed to address a wide variety of pressing social issues:

I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says ‘They’re looting.’ You see a white family, it says, ‘They’re looking for food.’ And, you know, it’s been five days because most of the people are black […] with the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible. I mean the Red Cross is doing everything they can. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way—and they’ve given them permission to go down and shoot us! George Bush doesn’t care about black people!"  

West’s short monologue pointed to three key topics; structural racism, materialism, and militarism, or what Martin Luther King Jr. once dubbed the “giant triplets” of “American tragedy.” West speaks to the history of structural racism (“the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible”), the culture of materialism, and the role the United States military plays in enforcing structural inequality, both internationally (“a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way”) and domestically (“they’ve given them permission to go down and shoot us!”).

I begin with West’s deviation from the script not only because his comments reignited hope that commercial rap artists could speak truth to power, but it’s also the moment West goes from being a well-known hip hop artist to a top-tier, and some would add “infamous” global

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68 Ibid.
69 (“Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence”) MLK reference “I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”
celebrity. In the years that followed the telethon, West has been widely criticized by the hip hop community for not quite “living up” to the political expectations engendered by this particular moment. However, I would argue that one of West’s most notable contributions to the culture has been his continued willingness to disrupt the realist demands of media, both in terms of his music but also in the public performance of celebrity. This chapter explores what I call West’s “fugitive” moments across a variety of public appearances, interviews, album lyrics and visuals. I contend that these moments cannot and should not be reduced to singular events or incidents, but rather form part of a larger, embodied artistic project (“I am art”) that challenges what Stuart Hall called the media’s racist “regimes of representation” more generally and how these regimes are embedded in legacies of Realism more specifically. West’s political contributions are rooted in an engagement with genre, both in public appearances and in pushing the boundaries of rap as artistic form.

I use the term “fugitive” here because, as I discuss at length in the dissertation’s introduction, political theorist Sheldon Wolin defines fugitive democracy as an “ephemeral phenomenon,” in that it is the off-script moments that constitute what we might characterize as the practice of democracy. West has become known to repeatedly deviate from both social and

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70 West was already well-known among music fans for his first album, the critically-acclaimed and Grammy-winning, The College Dropout (2004), but I would argue that the controversy of the telethon moment introduced West to a new demographic (and to mixed reactions). “Gold Digger” advanced to number one on the Billboard top 100 charts (it would remain there for another ten weeks) and broke several chart records. For example, on the Pop 100 chart, “Gold Digger” jumped from number ninety-four to number two, and became the biggest single advance ever. It also became West’s first Top 10 single on the mainstream Top 40 chart, a clear sign that he had reached a new audience.

71 While this chapter takes the bulk of its evidence from West’s rap oeuvre, namely song lyrics and videos, it should be noted that West is also a fashion designer, who began his fashion career several years ago by collaborating with Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs, and others. Before that, he ran a successful lifestyle blog for several years, and he has also written books, including a self-help book called Thank You and You’re Welcome (2009). He is widely considered an exceptional hip hop musical producer.

genre expectations in order to “tell the truth.” Although at this point he is probably one of the most written about artists of the last decade, much of the critical interpretation tends to psychologize both the artist and his work (often as it relates to his “real” life circumstances and ego). Some of the most interesting and brilliant readings of his work are still haunted by questions of whether or not he’s a narcissist or obsessed with his own celebrity. Statements by West such as the one that opened this chapter, “I’m not music. I’m not fashion… I’m just art,” often serve as evidence of his megalomania rather than his engagement with art. Perhaps such interpretations are simply the cost of doing business as a popular artist in celebrity-obsessed late capitalism, but I argue that it’s actually in West’s artistic engagement with modes of representation where we can locate something “real.” His continuous refusal to surrender to even the most basic media “rules” exposes not only how such norms are historically and socially constructed but also how we might challenge their potential fault lines. As he told talk show host, Jimmy Kimmel in 2014, “I feel like media does everything they can to break creatives (sic), to break artists, to break people’s spirits. And I feel like I do everything I can to break media.”

This chapter traces key features of West’s media-breaking methodology, a technique I argue is predicated on an awareness and artistic engagement with literary realism, both as the predominant mode governing popular rap narratives at the end of the 1990s and as an interpretive visual lens for rappers as performers. Each part of the chapter roughly corresponds with West’s artistic engagement with realism. My approach here is decisively literary, as I explore how West moves through different genres (in the writing of his raps but also in the writing and producing of his video treatments); namely mythology, fairytale and fantasy. In each

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of these undertakings, West levels similar critiques of the rationalizing (commoditizing) force of
realism as a narrative form and its market demand for stereotypical representations of racialized
and gendered authenticity. The chapter begins by sketching out what I refer to as the “self-
creation myth” produced by West across his first three albums, providing a clearer sense of both
his early career critical consciousness and aesthetic choices. I then turn to a consideration of his
fourth studio album, 808s and Heartbreak (2008), focusing on how the song “Pinocchio’s Story”
as well as the short film We Were Once a Fairytale embrace fairytale and romance as anti-realist
genres that challenge hegemonic norms of black masculinity in commercial rap. The third
section returns to mythology and explores the significance of the Phoenix from West’s short film
Runaway (2010). The chapter concludes with a brief consideration West’s development of
himself as an artistic genre and “the rant” as form of off-script, improvisational,
uncommodifable rap. I argue that these examples, when taken together, create a nexus through
which we can effectively read against the grain of the dominant interpretations of West’s work,
allowing us to see how his artistic output challenges mainstream definitions of both black
musicality and masculinity. By refusing to inhabit the narrow parameters of commercial rap’s
standards of realism or authenticity, West constructs an alternative form of “realness,” one that is
unpredictable and refuses to follow the program, a kind of authenticity constructed in motion,
one that moves from noun to verb. I’m not making the case that West’s entire body of work
challenges hegemony; it doesn’t. However, I think an exploration of West’s specific engagement
with realism (as an organizing and ideological framework) helps hip hop culture dislodge and/or
uncouple from commercial rap’s demand for gangstas and pimps at the end of 1990s. By
insisting on the artfulness involved in the construction of rap’s realist/realest narratives, West
opens up new possibilities for hip hop storytelling in the 21st century.
Between Malcolm X and Mount Olympus

Six months prior to Hurricane Katrina, Kanye West’s debut album, *The College Dropout* (2004), earned several Grammy awards, including Best Rap Album, partly on the strength of three successful, albeit very different singles. “Through The Wire” details West’s recovery after breaking his jaw in a significant car accident and, as I discuss later on in this chapter, serves as the basis for West’s personal origin myth. Other singles included “All Falls Down,” a song about a struggling, single mother attending college, and “Jesus Walks,” an anthemic ode to spirituality. In the years prior to his debut album, West’s eclectic approach as a music producer had served him very well; he’d produced several hit songs for other rappers, like Jay Z and Talib Kweli. But his unique approach to rapping (both in terms of content and form) initially hindered his career, and several record companies rejected signing West as a solo artist because they were unsure where he “fit” into rap’s commercial landscape. When Jay Z’s label, Rockafella Records finally agreed to sign him in 2003, their main motivation for doing so was to keep West on as a producer.

As I argue in the introduction to this dissertation, the commercialization of rap in the late 1990s (supported by the massive success of gangsta rap) forced a specific aesthetic on the genre. In order to meet the demands of market expectation, rappers were often categorized into very limiting, binary forms of cultural representation rooted in realism. At the most extreme ends of the spectrum were “thugged out” gangsta rappers, personified by artists like NWA, Tupac Shakur, Notorious B.I.G. and Jay Z, and conscious “backpack rap,” which included well-respected but less commercially successful acts like Talib Kweli and Mos Def. West landed somewhere in the middle. Like pre-gangsta rap hip hop artists from the 80s and early 90s, such
as A Tribe Called Quest, Kid-N-Play, Kwame, Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince and others, West rapped about social issues, but he also rapped about relationships and having fun. His music appealed to a wide variety of audiences, from the so-called “conscious” rap aficionados to mainstream popular music enthusiasts.74 His sartorial style and preppy fashion-sense, which included baby-pink Polo shirts and skinny jeans, was decidedly antithetical to the baggy jeans and white T-shirt worn by many gangsta rappers. West comes along at a very specific historical moment in hip hop and popular culture. He incorporated much of the brash attitude and freedom of expression that gangsta rap insisted upon, but he did so with an intention to appeal toward a pop audience. In short, West’s brand of social consciousness, which was always aimed at pop music stardom, included a side helping of “fuck you.”

From the beginning of his career, West was defensive about his authenticity as a rapper. He grew up middle class and, unlike many of the successful 90s era rappers who came from inner-cities and staked their claim to authenticity by representing their neighborhood or housing project (think: Nas and Queensbridge Projects or Jay Z and stories of his life growing up in Marcy Projects), West didn’t fit into the paradigm of commercially successful rappers. Jay Z has remarked on the difference between himself and West on more than one occasion, saying, “We all grew up street guys who had to do whatever we had to do to get by. Then there’s Kanye, who has never hustled a day in his life.”75 West’s mom was a professor at Chicago State University, and his father, a former member of the Black Panther Party, worked professionally as a marriage counselor. West once told a reporter this upbringing formed who he would later become as an artist: “My father was a Black Panther. My mom was the first black female chair of the English

department. There is no awards show, there is no amount of Billboards; there is nothing that can define me or make me pass what my parents made me. And that’s exactly who I am.”

West embraced his lack of street credibility and positioned himself as a new kind of rapper, or as Complex magazine once put it, “West has a new vision of the world, starring him as the catalyst.”

West’s first three albums, what some have called “the higher education trilogy,” serve as the basis or blueprint for what I am calling his “creation myth,” a narrative strategy (that he will employ in a variety of ways for years to come). Early on, West stakes his claim to authenticity by claiming that “realness,” in fact, lay elsewhere, outside of commercial rap’s narrow definitions and commodified stereotypes:

When someone comes up and says something like, ‘I am a God,’ everybody says ‘who does he think he is?’ I just told you who I thought I was: a God. Would it have been better if I had a song that said, ‘I am a n***a,’ or if I had a song that said ‘I am a gangster,’ or if I had a song that said ‘I am a pimp?’ All those colors and patinas fit better on a person like me, right? But to say you are a God, especially when you got shipped over to the country that you’re in, and your last name is a slave-owner’s, how could you say that? How could you have that mentality?”

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78 See Heidi Lewis, “An Examination of Kanye West’s Higher Education Trilogy” in The Cultural Impact of Kanye West, pp. 65. Lewis’ essay positions “the trilogy” offers a compelling critique of formal education, arguing that “academics must confront and begin to mitigate these critiques in order to reconcile some of the tensions, real or imagined, that exist in the relationship between the academy and various people and communities, especially those existing on the margins” (66).

He pushes back against labels like “gangsta” and “pimp” in several ways, both through renaming himself a “God,” but also through his choice of language to do so. His use of the term “patina” here denotes the public’s very surface understanding of how images function in relationship to outward appearance and race. He challenges the listener to understand the longer historical relationship between what they see visually and how they’ve been conditioned toward placing a black rapper into a stereotype, like “gangsta” or “pimp.” West’s use of “colors and patinas” demonstrates his artistic intention to paint images with words, to paint a different picture by what by calling himself a God. Further, West talks about being “a” God, not “the” God. He compares the culture of celebrity (where individuals are put on a pedestal and are known to have specific talents and temperaments) to Greek mythology and Mt. Olympus.

The mythology West creates for himself (one that I argue throughout this chapter is based on cycles of death and rebirth) begins in October of 2002. He was driving home from a recording studio in Los Angeles and dozed off behind the wheel, crashing his car. After narrowly escaping death, West was more determined than ever to make his rap dreams a reality and with his jaw wired shut, recorded his first song, “Through the Wire.” The song was a hit and Roc-A-Fella signed him. Almost immediately, West began creating a myth about surviving death:

I think that God spared my life to make music and to help people, to always put out positive energy. One of the reasons why I don't have beef with any rapper or with anybody is because of the positive energy I put out. So even if I hold myself up, I'm not putting anybody else down.\textsuperscript{80}

West says God “spared” his life so that he can make music, figuratively ordaining West’s mission as an artist. After his near death experience he had too much to say and couldn’t wait until he’d healed to share it:

No use me tryin’ to be lyin’
I been trying to be signed
Trying to be a millionaire
How I use two lifelines
In the same hospital where Biggie Smalls died
The doctor said I had blood clots
But I ain’t Jamaican man
Story on MTV and I ain’t trying to make a band
I swear this right here is history in the making man

This is the very first time we’ve heard Kanye rap, the first time we’ve heard his voice, and his mouth is literally wired shut. He could barely speak or enunciate the words, but the catchy beat and iconic sample Chaka Khan’s “Through the Fire” (1984) made it an instant hit. West positions himself both literally and figuratively as rising from the fire and ashes of this accident in order to be rap’s new hero (later the “God” of rap). 81 He’s in the hospital in L.A. “where Biggie Smalls died,” basically situating himself in the place where one of gangsta rap’s icons passed on, and he evokes P. Diddy by saying he’s not “trying to make a band” (at the time,

81 West continually positions himself as an outside force who uses his talent to help the world. For example, his 2007 “Glow in the Dark” world tour centered on a speculative, sci-fi question: what if West had been sent to Earth from another planet in order to save humans from their total lack of creativity? But after he lands on our planet, his spaceship breaks down and he is subsequently stranded. The two-hour set features West trying to sing his way home. Most critics have read the planetary motif primarily as a reflection of West’s propensity towards megalomania, completely missing the similarities between his performances and engagements with Afrofuturism.
Diddy was the host of a show called “Making the Band” on MTV. West continually positions himself as a risk taker and innovator, a kind of hero figure who journeys into unknown places. West laments people’s inability to look beyond the surface marks.

At the beginning of his career, West follows the examples of several male rappers and fashions himself as a kind of heir to popular African American heroes like Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X. In his book *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (2007), William Jelani Cobb argues that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* serves as a kind of literary blueprint for many of what he calls hip hop’s “audiobiographies,” arguing that hip hop performance is “an extension not only of the black musical tradition... but of the autobiographical one as well.” Cobb puts it this way, “multiply Malcolm by four decades of ensuing history and add a breakbeat. The result would be an autobiography measured in percussion, not pages” (137). In Cobb’s reading, the dramatic story of Malcolm Little’s transformation from Detroit Red to Minister Malcolm X and later to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz shares a common narrative structure with first-person storytelling in hip hop. Many rappers pen stories of troubled childhoods and poverty that sometimes lead to participation in hustling or selling drugs. And like Malcolm X’s story, each phase of the rapper’s transformational journey (from legal troubles to spiritual redemption) becomes an integral piece to further self-realization and empowerment. As Cobb observes, what’s so appealing to rappers about Malcolm X as literary forefather is that he “never entirely shook Detroit Red, the street initiate who understood all the angles. And that fact alone explains why Malcolm became such a revered icon to the hip-hop generation in the late 1980’s” (133). Cobb further adds that Malcolm serves as the “ancestral hustler” because he was able to escape the trap of the streets “while never abandoning them.” Malcolm never forgot where he came from: “And thus, the trajectory of his life—birth, the
dissolution of his family, the experience of poverty and beginning of his life as a hustler, his incarceration, and his eventual redemption—is played out endlessly within hip hop” (133). The trope of the “Malcolm X formula,” as he calls it, remains prevalent in hip hop storytelling as a kind of barometer of heroic black masculinity.

West does not adopt the “Malcolm X formula” so much as he demonstrates his awareness of its pervasiveness as a trope and refigures it as part of his own myth-making strategy. For example, in the song “Gorgeous,” West raps:

Is hip hop just a euphemism for a new religion
The soul music for the slaves that the youth is missing
This is more than just my road to redemption
Malcolm West had the whole nation standing at attention
As long as I’m in Polos smiling, they think they got me
But they would try to crack me if they ever see a black me

West clearly understands hip hop’s trope of invoking Malcolm X’s story as the “road to redemption,” but he argues that hip hop is not just a “religion” for him. It’s actually the place where he enters the public sphere, where he enters the public imagination. West’s smile and Polo shirts act as a facade, masking his more radical self. It’s almost as if the rapper side of West is the Clark Kent who has the power to rip off his Polo shirt and reveal his Superman, his “Malcolm West,” recalling the night of the Katrina telethon, where “Malcolm West” had the “whole nation standing at attention.” However, he constructs a verbal formulation that brings Malcolm into his world rather than the other way around; he’s not “Kanye X” but becomes “Malcolm West.” And “the nation” here refers to the national audience tuned into the telethon, as opposed to the Nation of Islam. He later evokes Malcolm X again on the *Graduation* (2007)
album. In the song “Good Morning,” West raps “I’m like the fly Malcolm X, by any jeans necessary…Detroit Red cleaned up.”

I thought I chose a field where they couldn’t sack me
If a n***a aint shooting a jump shot running a track meet
But this pimp is, at the top of Mount Olympus
Ready for the world’s game, this is my Olympics.

West’s phrasing, “by any jeans necessary” echoes Malcolm X’s famous slogan, “by any means necessary.” While the reference to jeans can come off as surface and materialistic, it should be understood as part of West’s strategy to push the bounds of representation and stereotype through fashion. He was especially criticized early on for wearing “skinny” jeans (a fashion that would become the norm in years to come). Both media and other rappers, like 50 Cent, heavily policed West’s self-fashioning and sartorial choices, often pointing to his preppy clothing as an outward sign of his inauthenticity. But it was never West’s intention to fit the mold of a “real” commercial rapper, a point he would emphasize again and again in the years to come.

**Real Boy Raps and Fairytales**

“Pinocchio’s Story” appears as a bonus track on Kanye West’s fourth studio album, *808s & Heartbreak* (2008). Recorded live at a concert in Singapore, it stands in sharp relief to the rest of album as the only song for which West didn’t use Auto-Tune, the computerized program that automatically tunes a voice in the correct pitch, one of the main techniques he used on the

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83 “Gorgeous” from *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, 2010.
West freestyles over the screaming crowd, wondering aloud if the tragedies that had recently befallen him, most significantly the sudden passing of his mother, would have occurred had he not traded his once “real” life for the Hollywood dream. He asks the audience:

Do you think I sacrificed real life
for all the fame and flashing lights?
What does it feel like,
I ask you tonight
to live a real life?
I just want to be a real boy
They always say, ‘Kanye, he keeps it real boy’
Pinocchio’s story is,
I just want to be a real boy.

The parallel verse structure and use of the first person “I” positions West as a Pinocchio figure who “just wants to be a real boy.” For West, his early life, growing up in Chicago was the one that was “real.” He compares it to the “fame and flashing lights” of the life he is living now, the life that he wanted. By doing so, he actually reverses the trajectory of Pinocchio’s story, where the puppet succeeds in his quest to become real through the trials he endures, and in learning

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I think the significance of it being the “bonus” or “hidden” track on the album separates its from the rest of the album as its both conceived and constructed. Yet the title and the fact that it’s recorded live imply that it’s not a “true” part of the album.

85. *The Adventures of Pinocchio* was originally published in Italy in 1883 and first translated into English in 1892. In the serialized version Pinocchio died at the end, but for the book, Collodi added new chapters and included the Fairy with the Turquoise Hair—the “Blue Fairy.”
how not to tell lies. But in West’s version, the process is reversed; the more worldly success he has, the less “real” he becomes.

It’s this ambiguity of “real” that Ann Powers observes in her review of 808’s & Heartbreak. She argues that the album as a whole engages in “a meditation on realness as it’s been defined by materialism and machismo in the hip-hop world, and by love and sorrow in the larger one.” Powers observes that the musical form of the project, specifically West’s use of Auto-Tune and one of hip hop’s earliest instruments, the TR808 drum machine, forces “the listener to question what she [considers] real—regarding not only the sounds she hears, but also the emotions they invoke.” She questions not only the authenticity of the voice she’s hearing, but because it’s been manipulated through technology, the listener is unsure whether or not her own emotional response is genuine. Does the music provide the listener with a “real” emotional experience or is it conjured, like his voice, for effect? I agree with Powers that West pushes on the genre of commercial rap through the manipulation of his “real” voice, but he’s also pushing on the narrative constraints of commercial, realist rap. By adopting the storytelling form of fairytale in “Pinocchio’s Story,” West inverts the terms of what can be considered as “real” hip hop.

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86 Pinocchio skips school, falls prey to hustlers and thieves, and becomes an easy target for those hoping to profit from his youthful ignorance. Along his travels, Pinocchio encounters a fairy (Walt Disney would later name her the “Blue Fairy”) who promises him that if he can learn to behave and go to school, she will use her magical powers to transform him into a “real” boy. However, before the fairy can make good on her promise, a group of mischievous young men lure Pinocchio away to the “The Land of Play.” Once there, Pinocchio begins to notice peculiar physical changes in his appearance, including a pair of donkey ears that begin to sprout from the top of his head. He then gets conscripted into the Play Land circus to perform as a jackass. It’s only after spotting the Blue Fairy in the audience during one of his shows that Pinocchio recalls his heart’s original desire to become real. He finds the courage to escape the circus, makes amends to his carpenter father, Gepetto, and ultimately is granted his wish to become a real boy.


88 To be clear, I am in no way suggesting that West is the first to use fairytale or mythology in hip hop. From Slick Rick to Outkast, genre bending has long been an intrinsic part of hip hop storytelling. West is
This claim is further evidenced in West’s collaboration with Spike Jonze in a short film entitled “We Were Once a Fairytale.” The video accompanied the single “See You in My Nightmares,” and was originally set for release on iTunes in early September 2009. Shot in a documentary style that encourages the viewer to believe the video might be a scene from West’s real life, the film shows the rapper drunkenly wandering around a nightclub, singing along to his own song playing in the club. He stumbles from one room to another, falling all over the patrons, mostly women, and making a fool of himself. Many of the women reject him, and at one point a white male patron mistakes him for Lil Wayne. He ends up in a room alone, visibly defeated and sad. A beautiful woman walks in, whispering to him “everything’s going to be ok.” They start passionately kissing, but the scene then cuts to West waking up alone and to the realization that he’s been making out with a pile of pillows. He gets up and stumbles back into the club, then into a bathroom where he begins to violently vomit bright pink flower petals. After discovering a knife on the floor, West stabs himself in the stomach, and a stream of rose petals gush out onto the floor. Gasping for breath, he then reaches inside of his abdomen and pulls out a little furry creature that looks like a shriveled bear. The creature is actually attached to West through a thick red string, a kind of umbilical cord. As West holds “Henry” in his hand, he severs the string and

unique for his historical moment and for his global superstar status. Many rappers simply don’t have the reach he does in terms of audience. This dissertation concerns itself with popular culture and popular hip hop artists and the ways in which they artistically engage the commodification of hip hop (and its attendant demands for narrative realism and authenticity). West was originally scheduled to co-headline a tour with Lady Gaga. He publicly apologized to Swift during Jay Leno’s first week in a new time slot, where Leno brashly asked him how his deceased mother would have felt about his behavior. Shortly after, it was rumored Kanye had gone to India to live in an ashram, but then he was spotted at a Whole Foods in L.A. Tim McGraw was quoted as saying Kanye needed an “ass whupping” and President Obama took it one step further by calling him a “jackass.” In an odd twist of events, T-shirts popped up after the Swift incident that read “Kanye Hates White People,” echoing both the rapper’s assertion at the 2005 telethon for Katrina that “George Bush Doesn’t Care About Black People.” Roses are often associated with the Virgin Mary
hands the creature a small knife of his own. He then gives Henry an affirmative head nod that seems to say, “You know what you have to do. Go on.” Henry takes the knife and kills himself.

The name change from the album’s “See You in My Nightmares” to “We Were Once a Fairytale” encourages a reading of the video within the genre of fairytale, and within the context of Pinocchio more specifically. Nearly everything written about the video reads it as an allegory of West’s inner demons. Most reviewers interpret the video’s narrative as an uncomplicated, even flat, reflection of the rapper’s real-life circumstances. A writer for the New York Times summarized the film by saying it “offers a fictional depiction of an unlikable, antisocial Mr. West that eerily anticipates his real-life actions at an MTV awards show in September.”

But perhaps the little creature is more of a Cricket figure, not a demon but a nagging little bug of conscience like the one that wouldn’t leave Pinocchio alone in both the original and the Disney version of the tale. In Collodi’s original text, early on in the narrative, Pinocchio gets angry at the “Mr. Know-it-All” cricket and smashes him to death against a wall with a hammer. The cricket later returns as a ghost; this is one of several examples of the difference between the Italian and American versions of the story. In Disney’s 1940 film, the cricket has a much more significant role as Pinocchio’s companion and spiritual guide; he even acquires a first name, “Jiminy.” Jiminy Cricket serves as a kind of moral compass for the puppet. Combined with the dream sequence sex scene, one might infer that Kanye West (through the miracle of immaculate conception) gives birth to a life form (Jiminy Cricket, or JC) that must be both birthed and sacrificed in order for him to go on (to exist). In fact, one of the Cricket’s primary functions in

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the fairytale is to provide Pinocchio with a moral compass, a guiding conscience (not only when he is alive, but also after Pinocchio has killed him and he returns as a ghost).

The figure of the guide has long a long literary history in dream allegories, sometimes called “dream visions” that date back as far as the Middle Ages. The main character typically falls asleep and wakes up to find an inner guide, often a spiritual or animal guide, that leads the character into a different world, one that is not real. In the case of Pinocchio, Jiminy Cricket, the guide is both spirit and animal, acting as a kind of figure of conscience on the puppet’s journey to become real. But read within West’s version, this “guide” was what kept him in reality, in the world of consciousness. Perhaps killing it is the reality of waking up from a dream.

Pinocchio’s heroic journey is predicated on a desire to transcend mimesis (as a puppet) and become a “real” boy. Thomas Morrissey and Richard Wunderlich contend that *The Adventures of Pinocchio* retains its stature because of its unique blending of two types of narrative. Traditionally every epic hero goes through some form of death and resurrection, but, according to Morrissey and Wunderlich, the hero tends to follow one of two trajectories. The first is the “re-emergence from a journey to hell.” This is where the hero goes through various trials and comes back to tell of his ordeal, trying and often failing to enlighten others. The second kind is a “rebirth through metamorphosis.” They argue that the first is a trope of Western literary texts, and the second is more common to “fantasy or speculative literature.” Their claim is that these “two figurative manifestations are rarely combined,” with the exception of what they call “one of the greatest ‘fantasy-epics’ of our time,” *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Pinocchio experiences symbolic death and rebirth through both infernal descent and metamorphosis” thus uniquely positioning him as a “fantasy hero of epic proportions” (64-5).
This blending of myth and fantasy makes Pinocchio a perfect symbolic figure for West. As I mentioned earlier, in each of his iterations of his journey, West renames himself (perhaps becoming more of his “real” self with the passing of each new chapter). As “Pinocchio,” West interrogates the parameters governing heterosexist masculinity, specifically among commercial rappers. For his 2008 recording of *VH1: Storytellers* (where he devoted much of his performance to *808s and Heartbreak*), West delivers a nearly twelve minute mash up of “Pinocchio’s Story” and “Heartless.” Halfway through the performance, he lays down on his back and begins to freestyle about the “voices in my head when I lay in my bed.” He then unexpectedly calls out to one of the early millennium’s most celebrated gangsta rappers, 50 Cent:

Did I make you be heartless?

Did I make you be heartless?

50, look at me now

Singing on the ground

With my pink shirt on

Does this look gay to you?

Well, I don’t know what else to say to you.

It’s an intensely intimate and vulnerable moment, with West lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling and basically thinking out loud in front of a room full of people. He transforms a song about a romantic break up, “Heartless,” into a sincere inquiry about what makes 50 Cent, an early and very vocal critic of West’s authenticity as a rapper, act “heartless.” The mash-up of the two songs positions West as a Pinocchio figure (remember: Pinocchio is literally “made” in the
image of another man’s artistic vision), West reminds the audience that it’s the normative gaze of other men that decides what’s ok, what counts as being “real,” and what gets cast as deviant.  

West critiques 50 Cent in an adlib form, in a live performance setting, as if it’s off-the-cuff or made up in the moment, but he had addressed the issue in mainstream interviews since the beginning of his career. He told Details magazine: “what’s funny is that I feel like my outfits were very masculine and very hip-hop…Society tries to dictate the way a guy is supposed to dress and the way a guy is supposed to act, and I refuse to conform. A lot of these dudes would never be accused of being gay just because they all look exactly alike.” West directly links “dictating” the way a guy dresses to dictating his actions, how one is able to move through society. He refuses to be limited by an aesthetic that requires everyone to dress alike and points out that as soon as you deviate from that pre-scribed form of being, that’s when you get accused of being “gay.” As West told Sway in his first sit down interview with MTV in 2005:

After my parents got divorced and we moved to Chicago when I was 3, I would go see my father on Christmas, spring break and summer. My father was my everything, but during the rest of the time, my mother was my everything. Of course there’s a good side to that, but the bad side of that is that people call you a mama’s boy. It gets to the point that when you go to high school and you wasn’t out in the streets like that, and you ain’t have no father figure, or you wasn’t around your father all the time, who you gon act like? You gonna act like your mother…And then everybody in high school be like, ‘Yo, you actin’ like a fag. Dawg, you gay?’ And I used to deal with that when I was in high

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92 Kanye told a reporter, “segregation and snobbery and elitism should be the wack words. That should be what people use to dis people” (not the word “gay”), Details, page 52.
93 In the same interview with Details, Kanye said: “For me Jay-Z’s my big brother, but what he was to me in rap is what Marc Jacobs is to me in fashion—the feeling I get when I look at him is exactly what I got when I’d look at Jay-Z in the studio” (167).
school. And what happened was it made me kind of homophobic, ‘cause I would go back and question myself, like, ‘Damn, why does everyone else walk like this, and I walk like this?’ People be like, ‘Yo fam, look at you. Look at how you act.’ If you see something and you don’t want to be that because there’s such a negative connotation toward it, you try to separate yourself from it so much that it made me homophobic by the time I was through high school. Anybody that was gay I was like, ‘Yo, get away from me.’ And like Tupac said, ‘Started hangin’ with the thugs.’

West was one of the first commercial rappers to address systemic homophobia in hip hop. He admits his own homophobia stems from his socialization and the insecurities it produced in him about being perceived as gay. West’s early experiences were later reinforced by his peers in hip hop. As scholar (and openly gay rapper) Tim’m West explains in his essay “‘Hard to Get Straight’: Kanye West, Masculine Anxiety, Dis-identification”:

One shuts a battle down by calling a straight boy a fag. If the opponent is gay, he’ll never admit it; and there is little worse you could call him. It’s the most noninventive strategic kill in rap battles…it erases the possibility of a nonheterosexual identity as even being plausible among “Real Men” in hip-hop contexts, it conflates gender identification with sexual attraction in a way that denies any viability of queer masculinities. (109)

As Tim’m West points out, part of the problem is the conflation of gender identification and sexual attraction. Even in trying to address the topic, Kanye often fumbles his words and unintentionally reinforces stereotypes about gay men by equating his unique sense of sartorial style (and what he imagines is “good taste”) to the assumption that some people make about his sexuality.

The conflation between the question of West’s sexuality and whether or not *808’s and Heartbreak* is a hip hop album was hardly coincidental. Both point to a crisis in legibility. As Mark Anthony Neal points out, West “blur[ses] the line” between what is considered as “real” hip hop, saying that the album is: “the artistic culmination of a year of tumult in West’s life, beginning with the tragic death of his mother…and breakup with longtime girlfriend.”

Addressing each of the critiques about the methodology in making the album (Auto-Tune, the nearly sample-free format and the sonic spaciousness and predominance of singing in most of the songs), West passionately argues that the most challenging aspect of *808’s* (to commercial rap’s sensibilities) is not just the use of Auto-Tune but also the album’s unapologetic articulation of black male suffering. Can a successful commercial rapper actually make a “break up” album?

West knew the album’s nod to romanticism directly challenged the genre’s heteronormative power, but like many of his other projects, he uses the controversy to open up a conversation about the politics of his aesthetic choices, as he did in a February 2009 interview with *Vibe* magazine:

> There’s guys out there, nobody spoke on our behalf before. Whatever about the singing. Fuck all the singing, fuck the Auto-Tune, fuck the He’s a rapper, he’s not a rapper, he’s going through something, he has to get this out of his system, he’s crazy. Fuck all that. It’s men out there who have never had anyone to speak on their behalf about the way they feel in a relationship. We don’t feel like, Fuck you, bitch I’m gonna just fuck a whole buncha girls. No! We feel hurt. We feel pain. (65)

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96 It’s also worth noting how writing in the genre of romance (or failed romance) is also seen as antithetical to realist narrative required by commercial rappers.
West demonstrates how the argument over whether or not he’s properly “rapping” on 808s obscura deeper the point of the album. His intention was to use his art to express hurt and disappointment, not necessarily to make a “hip hop” album.

“Pinocchio’s Story” and “We Were Once a Fairytale” were, up to that point in his career, West’s most obvious forays into utilizing fairytale to specifically engage with narratives of realism. But in his next project, 2010’s *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, West changed tactics by incorporating “fantasy” as not only part of the project’s title but as the organizing theme of the album in general. In some ways, it shouldn’t be that surprising that West moved on from fairytale to fantasy. Historically speaking, fairytale serve the specific didactic function of passing down a culture’s rites and rituals, and in a sense, are bound by the rules of a recognizable social structure (and as such, can be limiting). Fantasy, on the other hand, allows the writer to create a world and rules of their own. West’s move from fairytale to fantasy, though not pronounced by West himself, still connotes a significant shift in how he engaged realism (on both a thematic and literary level). Although he’d been constructing what I’ve referred to as his “personal mythology” for years, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* is West’s first venture into classical mythology, where the themes of birth, death and resurrection would come to life in the character of the Phoenix.

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97 Maria Nikolajeva observes that: “Traditional fairy tales generally strive to preserve the story as close to its original version as possible, even though individual storytellers may convey a personal touch, and each version reflects its own time and society (see Zipes). Fantasy literature is a conscious creation, where authors choose the form that suits them best for their particular purposes. The purposes may be instructive, religious, philosophical, social, satirical, parodical (sic), or entertaining; however, fantasy has distinctly lost the initial sacral purpose of traditional fairy tales.” See “Fairy tale and fantasy: from archaic to postmodern.” *Marvels & Tales* 17.1 (2003): 138+. Literature Resource Center. Web. 13 Jan. 2014.
Runaway: Flight and the Phoenix

In conjunction with the release of his fifth studio album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010), West released a short film entitled *Runaway*. Written and directed by West, the thirty-five minute visual aired simultaneously (and live) on three networks. It tells the story of a beautiful bird woman who crashes to earth and is found by “Griffin” (played by West). In the film’s penultimate scene, the “Phoenix” explains to Griffin why she cannot stay with him in his world. She begins by posing a question, “All of the statues that we see, where do you think they came from?” West responds that artists make the sculptures. “No,” she corrects him, “They are Phoenix turned to stone.” Her words are punctuated by a series of visual flashbacks to ballerinas dancing to West’s performance of the title track, “Runaway.” Each ballerina is captured in the still frame of the flashback, holding a statuesque pose and seemingly frozen in time. The Phoenix continues, “You rip the wings off the Phoenix and they turn to stone. And if I don’t burn, I will turn to stone. If I don’t burn, I can’t go back to my world.” As the only time the Phoenix speaks (she screams before she speaks, a point I will return to below), their brief exchange draws together not only the previous scenes of the film, but also a more complicated set of philosophical positions about the relationship between art, artists and the commodification of women’s bodies.

The film opens with West driving down a narrow wooded highway, looking at himself in the rearview mirror and rapping “Dark Fantasy,” which has a heavy bass drum beat and measured cadence. The lush, dark green woods are juxtaposed with a pink and orange sky. It

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98 The film aired October 23, 2010, debuting simultaneously on MTV, VH1 and BET.
99 Phoenix was played by Victoria’s Secret model Selita Ebanks.
101 Ibid.
looks like sunset, and the camera slowly sweeps up and pauses on a comet streaking across the horizon. West drives toward the soaring fireball, rapping:

hey, teacher, teacher
tell me how do you respond to students?
and refresh the page and restart the memory?
re-spark the soul and rebuild the energy?
re-stop the ignorance, re-kill the enemies
sorry for the night demons still visit me
the plan was to drink until the pain over
but what’s worse, the pain or the hangover?

The opening question is a future-oriented, epistemological query that asks teachers to reflect on their practices and to consider the consequences of pedagogical practice. The song asks for a new beginning, one that can be lazily interpreted as yet another apology from West for the Taylor Swift incident, “sorry for the night.” But I think he’s also asking far deeper questions about the role teachers play in dispensing historical memory, the kind that either “re-stops the ignorance” but can also reconstitute and can “re-kill the enemies.” West’s verses also signal that this is the beginning of a new journey, a new chapter in his story, foreshadowing what is to come. The verse is suddenly interrupted by the crash of the Phoenix—a giant orange ball of fire from outer space. He gets out of the car and runs toward her (Figure 3).

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102 Mozart, “Requiem,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lacrimosa_(Requiem), translation, accessed December 12, 2012. That day of tears and mourning/When from the ashes shall arise/All humanity to be judged/Spare us by your mercy, Lord, Gentle Lord Jesus, Grant them eternal rest. Amen.
She’s unconscious, so he picks her up takes her home with him. Later we see her roaming around in the yard with the animals, a sheep, deer and a rabbit, all of which share the color palette of her feathers, pinks, beige and white. As he starts to play music, the percussion from the beginning of the song “Power,” the beat seems to draw her inside where she starts dancing.\footnote{The song never actually fully plays, but there is a vocal arrangement singing “hey hey hey.” The hook of “Power” is “No one man should have all that power.” a saying that has been interpreted as commentary of Kanye’s interruption of Swift’s acceptance speech. However, the line also echoes a pivotal scene in Spike Lee’s adaptation of The Autobiography of Malcolm X, where Malcolm has led a group of community members to protest at the police station. When he’s ready to leave, Malcolm (played by Denzel Washington) raises his arm and points in the direction he wants to go. Everyone falls quietly in line, and the white police officer quips, “No one man should have all that power.”} The overall scene gives the viewer an impression not only that she “fits” into his world but also that the two are forming a bond (through music).

The next scene shows them walking together through a field at night, where fireworks light the sky, and a parade marches by in full view. The marching band plays “All of the Lights” as a giant Michael Jackson head floats through the air suspended on each side by an angel, one white and one black. A small boy runs through with a stick of red smoke, first without a hat and
then with a pointed, KKK style hat (figure 4). In the live broadcast debut of the film, West said that this scene was supposed to get people to think about how we’re being defined by popular culture:

It’s the way society has set people up, to be able to control them—slave mentalities…you know, black people who feel they can’t go downtown or white people who feel like they can’t go all the way out south…creating this mentality by cultivating the ideals, and then you can just make people stand in their own mental jails.104

West tells the reporter the boy represents someone who is “free” before the cult (of popular culture) subjects him to limited ways of thinking. For West, the spectacle of popular culture marks the moment of social subjection. The joy and exuberance of the band (and initially the boy) is juxtaposed to the implied violence in the costume choice. Although West says the scene has nothing to do with the KKK, the hood cannot help but recall the symbolism of white supremacist terrorism. Given West’s interview comments, there’s a sense that the boy will be forced not only adhere to geographical limitations (“downtown” or “out south,” as he put it), but that creating the “mental jails” required to facilitate this process is one of the primary functions of popular culture.

The Phoenix’s indoctrination into culture continues in the next scene as they enter the dinner party. White servers wait on a table of black partygoers who are all dressed in white. In response to a question about the racial undertones of the film’s color scheme, West insisted that

the color palettes used throughout the film (including the racial appearance of the actors and actresses) was not meant to be a commentary on race relations. 105 Again, I think he wants to distance himself from imposing a reading and fully leaves the interpretation up to the viewer. The viewer decides on the meaning. West draws all of these visual cues and symbols from the collective cultural memory and without favoring one over the other, he forces them back on the viewer to interpret. One of the partygoers says to Griffin, “Your girlfriend is really beautiful…do you know she’s a bird?” West says dryly, “No I never noticed that,” to which the man replies, “I mean, like, leave the monkey at the zoo.” Upset, West pushes his chair away from the table and walks over to a piano.

The sonic texture of this particular scene gives it a realist, or documentary-style quality. There’s a bit of ruckus at the table, side talk and whispering. You can hear people clapping and dishes clanking indoors, but the sound also carries a kind of “inside” quality. This technique actually attunes the listener’s ear and piques attention, drawing us into the scene as we try to

105 Ibid.
make sense of it. The soundscape begins as “diegetic” (when sound comes from inside the film’s frame), and we can hear the footsteps of nearly two dozen ballerinas as they run out of the wings, summoned as West strikes the keys of the piano (figure 5). However, as he starts playing the song, the sound switches to “non-diegetic” (when the source of the sound comes from outside the film), signaling that we have left the realistic space of the party and entered into the world of West’s performance.

![Figure 5](image)

The ballerinas dance in slow motion as the camera zooms close in on the bodies of the women. Their slow, seductive movements are more in line with hip hop dance than ballet, challenging dominant discourses that tend to cast rap music and dance forms as the primary site of commodification of the female body.\(^{106}\)

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\(^{106}\) The sensuality of the dancer’s movement (and the Phoenix’s later refusal to be part of it) implicates so-called forms of “high” art in Western culture, such as the ballet, in the commodification of women’s bodies.
During West’s performance of “Runaway,” which is both the title of the film and the only song played in its entirety; the scene encourages the viewer to ruminate on the relationship between commodification and running away. He sings over and over again, “Baby, I got a plan; run away fast as you can.” This thematic pairing is later confirmed when the meal is served, and the waiters place a cooked bird in front of the Phoenix. The feathers are pink, beige, white, the same color scheme as her own. When she realizes what’s happening, she lets out an awful cry (more like a wail), what Fred Moten might call “fugitive” sound that is “external to music and speech.” She has seen herself as object, as an object of consumption and she is horrified. This moment will later be evoked when the Phoenix explains to Griffin why she will not stay and be “turned to stone,” that in order to be free, she must “burn.”

For most critics the metaphoric implications of *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and *Runaway* point toward a literal “rising from the ashes” of West’s career following the Swift controversy. By other accounts, the Phoenix was meant to stand in for West’s former girlfriend, model Amber Rose, whose shaved head, mixed race background and open bisexuality, made her a frequent target for West’s fans and detractors. Still others seemed to marvel at the sheer scope and largess of the project, both the album and the film. More than one reviewer characterized the projects as “maximal” in both the scope of its undertaking and the results:

‘My Beautiful Dark Twisted fantasy’ is…terrific—of course it’s terrific—a startling maximalist take on East Coast rap traditionalism. And yet that doesn’t matter nearly as much as it should, at least partly because of Mr. West’s insistence on his own greatness.

By not allowing for responses to his work other than awe, the value of the work itself is

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107 Moten argues that fugitive sound was forged in the “historical reality of commodities who spoke – of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage (and knowledge of freedom) across the divide that separates slavery and ‘freedom’” (6).
diminished; it becomes an object of admiration, not of study. Instead the focus is on the whole of Mr. West’s persona and character, which is more fractured and subject to a far wider range of responses. The result is that Mr. West becomes a polarizing public figure who happens to be the most artful pop musician of the day, not the other way around.¹⁰⁸

There were several reviewers who used the term “maximalist” as if it has some independent meaning outside of a comparison of West’s previous album, 808’s and Heartbreak, which was described as sparse or minimalist. The reviewer’s point, which I think is valid, is that it’s difficult to separate the quality of work from the constant chatter about West (by West himself and by others).

But such reviews, unfortunately have a way of reducing the Phoenix to a reflection of West’s persona, eclipsing its aesthetic connectedness to West’s previous work, especially in its themes: cycles of birth, death and resurrection; the connection between art, the spirit world and the material world; and the figure of the hero or savior. Like the story of Pinocchio, the Phoenix allows him to mourn a loss but also to step away from telling a “real” story and think of a single project as perhaps part of a narrative, as part of a larger cycle or journey of birth and death. It also allows him to critique rap as a genre that limits what artists can say or do. To put it another way, the figure of the Phoenix (like Pinocchio) allows him to de-literalize the narrative of his personal life in favor of a set of larger anti-realist themes. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us:

The meaning of the figure is undecidable, and yet we must attempt to dis-figure it, read the logic of the metaphor. We know that the figure can and will be literalized in other

¹⁰⁸ “Kanye West: Do Not Disturb” originally published Nov 21, 2010
ways. All around us is the clamor for the rational destruction of the figure, the demand for not clarity but immediate comprehensibility by the ideological average.\textsuperscript{109}

The figure of the Phoenix, historically, carries several layers of significance. The mythological bird, though associated with the cycles of birth, death and regeneration, is not always depicted as female. The basic cycle of the Phoenix is that when it “felt its death impending it collected aromatic plants, incense and amomum (a balsam plant) and made a nest. In one tradition it set fire to the nest and a new Phoenix rose from the ashes, in the other it settled upon its nest and impregnated it as it died.”\textsuperscript{110} The making of the nest signals the bird’s impending death and represents the figurative relationship between art and regeneration.

I think the implications of West representing the Phoenix as a woman are profound (recalling that he wrote and directed the film), especially within a larger critique of how realism shapes the genre of rap performance. She articulates a position that is both before and beyond social recognition and capture, as well as a future yet to come; she exemplifies a spirited unwillingness to submit to the rigid conditions of social intelligibility, of identity captured and named. She refuses to become a “thing” in his world (or thing-a-fied by his world) and refuses to be commodified as a condition of having a life with him. Hers is a powerful critical consciousness about female representation/commodification/reproduction (and articulates a kinship with all of the ballerinas in the videos and statues as former Phoenixes, Phoenixes turned to stone).

What makes \textit{Runaway} so compelling is the relational connection between the visual and musical scores, a connection that wasn’t apparent in just listening to the album. It’s as if the long form video takes the music to a level of abstraction that cannot be achieved within the music

\textsuperscript{109} Spivak, \textit{Death of a Discipline} (2003)  
\textsuperscript{110} Zimmerman, \textit{The Dictionary of Classical Mythology}, page 351.
video genre as it exists currently.\textsuperscript{111} By stretching the boundaries of form, West is able to tell a story about form itself. Although West long ago established himself as an innovator in video concepts, \textit{Runaway} goes far beyond anything before it. For my purposes here, the figure of the Phoenix as a fugitive figure allows us to read against the grain of subjection and its differential logics (race, sexuality and gender) without immediately collapsing them into distinct sites of linguistic and/or representational meaning. Reading the video as (pop) cultural theory helps elucidate a critical understanding of the central role female representation plays in the reproduction of commercial rap music. The figure of the Phoenix points to a kind of predicament in representation more generally. Even as West seeks to educate her on societal norms, to bring her into social life, she interprets this as a kind of death. Indeed, her choice to burn is a powerful refusal to submit and to therefore have to return to her world (seemingly to eventually be reborn into his—and enter the cycle again). This is not suicide. It’s a powerful choice to keep moving, to be reborn, to not stay fixed or be fixable. It’s a critique of the social order itself (especially in the light of the rest of the film’s critique of culture and popular culture as hegemonic. The scene in the beginning is the same as the scene as the end, but now we see that West is not running to “rescue” her, but rather to be rescued by her.

The Phoenix would make several appearances in the months following the release of \textit{Runaway}. West’s next project was a collaborative album and tour with Jay Z entitled \textit{Watch the Throne}. During this time, he performed a limited number of solo engagements, and in these shows, West himself began performing in a feathered bird mask (figure 6).\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{111} While \textit{Runaway} is clearly inspired by Michael Jackson’s \textit{Thriller} (1982), West’s short film visualizes nearly the entire album of \textit{MBDTF} (with “Runaway” as the centerpiece). Beyoncé’s \textit{Lemonade} (2016) would probably be the closest aesthetic relative of the project.

\textsuperscript{112} The kilt caused quite a bit of controversy on hip hop sites, mainly due to Lord Jamar taking to social media to call it a “skirt.” The rapper called West the “pioneer of this queer shit,” making several remarks
The Fugitive Aesthetics of Kanye’s “Rants”

By December 2013, West seems completely exasperated by answering questions about genre and how to classify his music. The release of 2013’s *Yeezus*, with its stripped-down cd cover design (it’s literally a see-through case with a small strip of red sticker) and rock-infused beats, reignited questions about the direction of West’s music. “There’s a new genre. I made a new genre called ‘Kanye West.’ They don’t even know the type of music this is. You can’t even put in ‘rap’ no more.”

This statement can be (and has been) read as just another dimension of West’s ongoing self-marketing or ‘branding.’ He makes this statement as he is publicly renaming himself as ‘Yeezus.’

In retrospect, we can see how each of West’s early artistic projects serve as precursors to the full elaboration of 2013’s *Yeezus* album and tour, where he repeats the cycle of birth, death and resurrection once again. However, this time he is resurrected as a Christ figure, Yeezus (which combines Kanye’s nickname “Yeezy” with Jesus). The recurrent theme of the misunderstood hero figure is also brought forward again through birth of Yeezus.

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114 It’s worth noting that in early Christian writing, the Phoenix was the symbol of Christ: “The Greek name for the Egyptian mythological bird, Bennu, a symbol for the rising sun. The bird, the only one of its kind, lived for five hundred years at a time, somewhere in the Arabian wilderness. At the end of that time it built its own funeral pyre of gums and spices, lighted the pyre with the beating of its wings, and was consumed to ashes. Out of the ashes grew a new Phoenix, which, in time, repeated the process. In medieval Christian writings it was a symbol of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ” (215).

115 Under the moniker of Yeezus, West creates his own fashion his own fashion season, “Yeezy Season,” basically renaming fashion week after his own collection.
The bird masks were eventually replaced by Martin Margiela jeweled masks for the 2014 *Yeezus World Tour* and used to mark a thematic divide between the first and second half of the show (figure 7). Kanye would wear a mask during the first half and then remove it after performing “Coldest Winter” (a song about the loss of his mother from *808s and Heartbreak*). In a way, the mask allows him to play a character for the first hour of the show and puts him in a cast with the other performers, the women in stocking masks. Between removing the mask and continuing with the rest of the show, West began inserting a kind of “interlude,” where he talked to the crowd about whatever was on his mind. However, he began doing so in concert regularly during the *Yeezus* tour. He would climb to the top of the elaborate stage setup (which incidentally was an enormous snowcapped mountaintop complete with a hellhound and a white Jesus character) and start just talking to the audience. Sometimes these “rants,” as the public
began calling them, would last over thirty minutes and that served as markers between the first half and the second half of the show).\textsuperscript{116}

There is a massive amount of popular commentary on the content of West’s “rants” (who he mentioned and how it fits within the pop culture pantheon and Slate.com actually compiled and transcribed all of the rants from the 2013 tour and published them as “The Gospel According to Yeezus”), but to my knowledge no one has yet to think about how West’s “rants” function as communicative forms, let alone how they are connected to foundational hip hop elements and traditions. Or how they critique the commodification of hip hop.

\textbf{Figure 7}

The rant is an extremely important part of West’s overall critical method and signals a rebirth of improvisation stripped down to the essentials of declamatory, freestyle speech and performance. The rant is the genre of “Kanye West.” The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)

\textsuperscript{116} The show was actually split into five sections, each with a title, definition and scripture projected on a giant screen: Fighting, Rising, Falling, Searching, Finding. One example of a screen detail was “Fighting (noun: violence or conflict, adjective: displaying combat or aggression, pugnacious, truculent, belligerent, bellicose. “Light beamed into the world, but men and women ran towards darkness.” Based on personal notes from Anaheim show Dec 2013.
defines “rant” as a noun, “a boisterous, or riotous scene or occasion; a festive gathering; a romp, a spree.” It also defines it as an “irregular tune or song.” And in another use, as adjective “used of actors or public speakers: a declamatory way of speaking; melodramatic, grandiose, or bombastic oration or delivery.” One interesting area where scholars have been studying the function of “rants,” along with “flames” and other forms of rhetoric, is in YouTube comments. Communication scholar Patricia Lange argues that as a genre rants tend to be that rants “assessed negatively” in popular culture and scholarship” and at best are cast as “pointless vents for selfish frustration” and are often dismissed online as “not civically meaningful.”

I argue that we should read West’s rants as part of an overall strategy for verbing the real. The artistic ability of rappers was once judged by how well they could improvise, how well they could perform in the cipher, how quick-witted their response was to an insult, and more importantly, how well (and creatively) they could craft a verbal insult in return. The commodification of rap removed it from the improvisational space of the cipher and replaced on-the-spot ingenuity with a record (and cd’s and mp3s). By developing the rant as a regular but also “irregular” (or uncontained, unscripted) part of the show, West brings back the improvisational aspect of performance. Each stop on the tour, he addressed different topics. Sometimes he called out other rappers. Sometimes he railed against the fashion industry or Nike executives (who refused to make more of his Yeezy shoes). Each of these performances made a particular show unique and were often shared on social media.

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There is some recent work in communications study that use genre theory to explain how “rants” function in Youtube comments. See Patricia G. Lange, “Video Rants: Anatomy of a Genre.” I quote Lange at length here because she makes some important points about the specific contexts for the interpretation of rants. I also did quite a bit of preliminary research about the usage of the term “rant” in recent popular culture, and much of it led back to the studies she cites here.
Conclusion

By 2016, West’s “rants” had become marketable television events. In an unprecedented move, the MTV Video Music Awards set aside four minutes of their program for West to say whatever he wanted. The move both legitimized but also coopted West’s previous “rants” at award shows. The network extensively marketed the event as a unique opportunity to turn in and see what West would do with his four minutes of unscripted airtime, the irony being of course, that his unscripted-ness was, in fact, put into the script. West used his time to announce his bid for president and introduce a new video:

I am Kanye West, and that feels especially great to say this year. I came here to present my new video, but before I do that, I’ll talk. Now, later tonight, ‘Famous’ might lose to Beyoncé, but I can’t be mad. I’m always wishing for Beyoncé to win, so.

But for people to understand just how blessed we are... It was an expression of our now, our fame right now, us on the inside of the TV. You know, just to put... the audacity to put Anna Wintour right next to Donald Trump. I mean, like, I put Ray J in it, bro. This is fame, bro! Like, I see you Amber. My wife is a G. Not a lot of peoples’ wives would let them say that right there. We came over in the same boat. Now we all in the same bed. Well, maybe different boats, but uh. But if you think about last week, there were 22 people murdered in Chicago. You know, like, people come up to me like, ‘Yeah, that’s right! Take Taylor!’ But bro, like, I love all y’all. That’s why I called her. So I was speaking at the Art Institute last year, and a kid came up to me and said “Three of my

118 Aside from the examples at the beginning of this chapter of West’s disruptions at award shows, it’s notable that West has never been nominated for a music award outside of the rap category, a fact that he and others have commented on several times (this is probably the most jarring for 808s and Heartbreak, which was commercially successful, and a totally sung album (no raps) over pop melodies (no samples).
friends died, and I don’t know if I’m gonna be the next.’ And it has to, you know you have to think, like, when you’re a senior and it’s the last month and you just don’t feel like doing any more work. If you feel like you seeing people dying right next to you, you might feel like, what’s the point? You know like life could be like, starting to feel worthless in a way.

West went on for a while longer before introducing his video, comparing himself to Henry Ford and Walt Disney. On one hand, it was compelling to see an artist get allotted the time to simply speak his mind, but on the other, it was like witnessing the formal containment of a once important, disruptive voice. Perhaps West’s vow to “break the media” will need to find a new strategy.
You gotta personify hip hop like a human being. It was a baby. It got some friends in school. Had some
sleepovers. Discovered body parts. It went to high school. It went to college. It got pregnant. Kinda
dropped out of college right before the finish line. Hip hop is now a 34-year-old single mother of three.
Hip hop is actually going to have to rediscover itself and become a subculture again.

Questlove, *Otherside* (2013)

Literary studies must take the ‘figure’ as its guide. The meaning of the figure is undecidable, and yet we
must attempt to dis-figure it, read the logic of the metaphor. We know that the figure can and will be
literalized in yet other ways. All around us is the clamor for the rational destruction of the figure, the
demand for not clarity but immediate comprehensibility by the ideological average. This destroys the
force of literature as a cultural good.


Following the title track on Nas’s eighth studio album *Hip Hop is Dead* (2006), the song
“Who Killed It” does not present itself as a question (note: there is no question mark), but rather
as an implied answer to the album’s persistent, although unstated, question (if hip hop is dead,
then who killed it?). Donning a James Cagney-style voice, Nas narrates the dramatic hunt,
capture and interrogation of hip hop’s accused killer, who he refers to at the beginning of the
song as a “dirty broad.” In a rhetorical move that has become all too commonplace and
unremarked upon, both hip hop culture and its killer are personified as a woman. The song “Who
Killed It” narrates a linear path from hip hop’s beginning to her “death” at the hands of the
commercial mainstream. He reminisces on rap’s early crossover to in pop songs like Run DMC’s

reference to “Who Killed It” because the writers remark upon what they call Nas’ “bizarre attempt to
mimic Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney” in the song, and they also cite the song as “Who Killed
It” without the question mark. The original cd release of the album did not have a question mark in the
song title, though it would appear later online with a question mark. The distinction is significant for the
argument put forward in this chapter. It’s also worth noting that the article (which called “Who Killed It” a
“terrible song,” makes no mention of the personification of hip hop or hip hop’s killer as a woman.
“Walk this Way” (1986) and Slick Rick’s “Children’s Story” (1988). Nas (as detective) continues to interrogate his suspect:

What were you born, ’77 or ’78?

She says, Nah it goes way to an earlier date

Slave times, claims the slaves said rhymes

But she fell in love with some fella named Clive

Who? Clive Campbell from Sedgwick Ave, the Bronx

Now she shows me the cash

I said who’s Clive? Don’t play with me, skirt

She said Clive Campbell. He’s Kool Herc. She tells the detective that she was born during slavery, situating rap within a longer genealogy of African American culture and musical expression. But her current incarnation as hip hop is because she fell in love with Clive “Kool Herc” Campbell (considered the godfather of hip hop). In the final scene, she drops her bag of “loot” (presumably the money she’s made by ‘selling out’ the culture) and begins to “vanish.” She then takes a dramatic last breath, telling Nas, “If you really love me I’ll come back alive.”

Nas’ personification of hip hop as female echoes earlier depictions by rappers like Common, and his well-known and widely-praised 1994 single “I Used to Love H.E.R.” (“I’d be geeked when she’d come around / Slim was fresh yo, when she was underground / Original, pure

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121 Ibid.
122 Kool Herc is credited with inventing the “break” in hip hop. By playing two copies of the same record, he was able to extend the breakdown in the song, allowing for space for dancers to improvise different moves (dancers were later known as “break” dancers or b-boys and b-girls). The legendary party in 1973 where Herc did this was his sister Cindy’s birthday party. Some have argued that Cindy Campbell should be considered “the first lady of hip hop.” See Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* (2005), pp. 67-84.
untampered and down sister /Boy I tell ya, I miss her”). Similar to Nas’ fugitive, Common extends the metaphor of hip hop as “she” or “her” and depicts a onetime “good girl” who has gone bad. She was a “pure” and “down sister” when she was “underground,” but she changes after she “goes out West” and meets gangsta rap:

Talking about popping Glocks serving rocks and hitting switches

Now she’s a gangsta rolling with gangsta bitches

Stressing how hardcore and ‘real’ she is

She was really the realest, before she got into showbiz

I did her, not just to say that I did it

But I’m committed, but so many n****s hit it

That she’s just not the same letting all these groupies do her

I see n****s slamming her, and taking her to the sewer

But I’mma take her back hoping that the shit stop

Cause who I’m talking bout y’all is hip-hop

Her turn to “gangsta raps” gets equated with “showbiz.” For Common, she was “really the realist” before she went mainstream, but now she has sold out and is sexually promiscuous.

Common raps that he “did her” but “not just to say I did it.” His love for her is “real,” unlike the other rappers he references who just use her. He also says that despite her sexually deviant behavior, he loves her and is willing to take her back. Common’s song has long been praised by both fans and critics alike, and as an example of classic conscious rap. And rather

[123]“I Used to Love H.E.R.,” Resurrection, Relativity Records, 1994. Some argue that “H.E.R.” stands for “Hip-Hop in its Essence is Real,” but I have not been able to verify this from interviews with Common.

[124]The song also serves as the cornerstone for the popular hip hop film Brown Sugar (2002). The two main characters grow up in the 1970s and 80s in New York and pursue careers in the hip hop industry. Sydney is a successful magazine editor and her best friend Dre is a music producer. The entire film
disappointingly, if we follow the extended metaphor into the present day, we see Questlove’s depiction of hip hop as a thirty-something single mother is actually Common’s cheating, ex-girlfriend. In short, not much has changed.

The metaphorical rendering of hip hop’s capitulation to the commercial mainstream as female is deeply troubling. I begin with this description because I believe that attending to this figure can help us think more productively against the realist logics governing the gendering of the “sell out” narratives. The “female fugitive” (as she is sometimes cast) embodies a kind of anxiety around a cluster of important issues, including the tension between the culture’s crossover success and a more meaningful political engagement. However, her unwillingness to adhere to some of the more basic rules of “realness” (like staying underground) means she also revolves around a conversation between them about whether or not hip hop has sold out to the mainstream (and the Common song is their favorite song). The film incorporates documentary-style interviews with real hip hop artists about when they first “fell in love” with hip hop. At the end of the film, it’s revealed that Sydney’s book is titled I Used to Love H.I.M. Although there is potential in the film to critique the personification of hip hop as a loose female, it rather clumsily recasts Dre as the inverse character who has sold out to the music industry for money. The story arc revolves around whether or not she can save him from this fate.

There are several theorists who are now working with fugitivity and feminism. See for example: Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity: Duke University Press, 2016. See also filmmaker and visual artist, Jamika Ajalon has recently begun doing work around what she calls the “Fugitive Archetype of Resistance” (FAR). In an explanation of her film Locations of the M/Othership1 (2011), Ajalon defines the “FAR” as a figure who “lives on the divide, a space occupied, transformed, and juiced by the soul energies of Women of Colour, (WOC), possess; we are a transient collective symbol of the FAR. I take liberties in using the word ‘we,’ but I believe, using the term WOC leaves interpretation wide open” (1). She uses Harriet Tubman as an archetype for a “terrain of possible future, which is ultimately the terrain of the FAR” (2). And although I began thinking about the female fugitive years ago, her work is worth mentioning for its focus in the “energies of WOC.” She says the FAR “phenomenologically and ontologically represents the spirit idea of becoming; the ways in which she escapes the repetitive stereotypes, traversing boundaries as subject and agent, (as world actors, creators, and producers of alternative realities)” (2). She uses the word archetype but not in a static way, noting “a fugitive archetype skews the eye-line of…surveillance—it’s hidden in plain view, resisting assimilation—to acquiesce is to be destroyed...” (2). http://www.jamikaajalon.com/texts/fugitive-archetype-resistance-metamorphical-narrative. Accessed Jan 3, 2014.

In the 90s, the representation of women’s bodies in music videos was central to feminist debates around rap music and misogyny, yet no one (to my knowledge) has written about the female personification of commercialization. This points to the need for more literary considerations of hip hop narrative production.
embodies the important, fugitive spirit of the anti-real. As Spivak points out in the epigraph above, we “know that the figure can and will be literalized in yet other ways.” Our job is to attend to the logic of the figure, to open up space for new readings and meanings.

This chapter examines how the work of Atlanta-based artist Janelle Monáe takes up and challenges the female personification of selling out, specifically through her creation of the time-traveling, runaway android, Cindi Mayweather. I argue that reading Cindi as a “female fugitive” challenges dominant depictions of commercial rap as an errant woman (a la Nas and Common). Monáe’s narrative engagement with realism aligns her work in important ways with the other artists considered in this dissertation who “verb the real” because she reanimates the gendered trope at root of hip hop culture into the female fugitive on the run. The chapter considers how Monáe constructs the mythology of Cindi Mayweather across a range of visual and musical texts (including lyrics, videos, interviews, blogs and Twitter posts), paying particular attention to the ways that liner notes function as literary supplement to the story being told. The movement of Cindi’s story across a variety of textual landscapes allows her to resist easy capture and commodification. Monáe’s process draws on an assemblage of different musical genres, including hip hop, funk and R&B and literary traditions, including Afro-futurism and Afro-Surrealism.

Monáe’s performance strategy in this regard recalls Daphne Brooks’ definition of “Afro-alienation acts” in her book *Bodies in Dissent* (2006):

In what I call ‘Afro-alienation acts,’ the condition of alterity converts into cultural expressiveness and a specific strategy of cultural performance. Afro-alienation recurs as a trope that reflects and characterizes marginal cultural positions as well as a tactic that the marginalized seized on and re-ordered in the self-making process. Akin to both Bertolt
Brecht’s pioneering theories in drama as well as to black feminist and diaspora scholars’ theories of the black experience in the Middle Passage, Afro-alienation acts draw from what Hortense Spillers describes as the ‘dehumanizing, ungendering, and defacing’ conditions that African peoples encountered in the New World. Having little access to the culture of property, to the culture of naming, or to patriarchal wealth, the mythically rendered black body—and the black female body in particular—was scripted by dominant paradigms to have ‘no movement in a field of signification.’

Monáe’s cultural strategy of the female fugitive aligns with “Afro-alienation” as it acts as both a trope and a tactic for critiquing and recasting realism. The self-making and mythologizing processes undertaken by Monáe in the creation of Cindi extends far beyond the bounds of simple resistance to stereotype. She creates an entire world wherein she can explore the parameters of identity.

Monáe’s work challenges realism as an organizing ideology of pop culture. As Brooks argues, “Afro-alienation…provides a fruitful terrain for marginalized figures to experiment with culturally innovative ways to critique and to disassemble the condition of oppression” and in ways that are specifically anti-realist: “Rather than depending on conventional realist methods to convey the humanity and value of black subjectivity, Afro-alienation opens up a field where black cultural producers might perform narratives of black culture that resist the narrow constraints of realist representations” (5-6). By casting Cindi as both “an alien from outer space” and a “cyber girl without a face,” Monáe invites an anti-realist reading, both of her artwork and her public persona.

Monáe’s self-presentation is central to her rendering of Cindi as a female fugitive. She has often remarked upon the fact that she wears black and white as a “uniform,” both to remind her that what she’s doing is work, but also to remember the uniforms that her parents had to wear. People often describe her sartorial style as “androgynous” because she favors black and white and wears suits most of the time. Writers often remark upon Monáe’s self-presentation and physical appearance. One thing that sticks out in all of the observations is the focus on her real-life “unrealness.” A writer from The Guardian recalls: “In person Monáe doesn’t feel very connected. When we meet she wears huge, round mirrored shades which obscure her face and stay firmly on throughout our interview, reflecting my own face back at me twice over.”128 And from another writer from GQ opines: “Not much about Janelle Monáe says ‘Homo sapien.’ The tailored intergalactic-butler uniform. The massive voice in the maybe-five-foot frame. Even her skin looks airbrushed.”129 I would argue that their comments ultimately reflect the success of Monáe’s desire to blur the lines between fact and fiction, between the narrative of Monáe’s “real” life and the fantastical mythology she creates for Cindi Mayweather. Again, what might be termed by Brooks as an “Afro-alienation” strategy renders it virtually impossible to create a coherent narrative about either woman, both of who figuratively stay on the run. As the chapter explores, Monáe further thwarts realism by messing up the teleology of both her and Cindi’s stories, weaving them together as Mayweather’s mythology unfolds across several albums. At times it’s difficult to ascertain which present-moment Monáe (as narrator) wishes to privilege in Cindi’s story or if her intention is to simply present Cindi not as a singular figure, but as a series of connected afterlives.

‘Our Favorite Fugitive’

A year after Nas pronounced “hip hop is dead” and cast a woman as the primary murder suspect, Janelle Monáe signed a record deal with hip hop mogul Sean “Puffy” Combs and released *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)* (2007). Monáe was already familiar to hip hop fans for her contribution (alongside Outkast’s Big Boi) to the *Idlewild* soundtrack (2006), and her deal with Puffy’s Bad Boy Records ensured a larger distribution across hip hop culture. Monáe was born in 1985 in Kansas City and often cites her working class background as her primary inspiration, both for her music and her sartorial choices. Her father drove a garbage truck, her stepfather worked at the post office and her mom was a custodial worker. Monáe told *The Guardian* in 2010, “I come from a very hard working-class family who make nothing into something.” She says the idea for the character of Cindi Mayweather specifically stemmed from this upbringing: “I grew up in the language of the oppressed and the oppressor. I just felt that it was time to talk about that. It made me want to continue to unite people with music and bring awareness to the working class, the have-nots, and those who are discriminated against.”

Her sentiment to represent the working class and the “have-nots” recalls the aims of earlier purveyors of realist storytelling, however her engagement with realism as a genre ultimately points toward different ways to “do” realism, ones that I argue continue to defy categorization.

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130 She has told several interviewers that she wears black and white as a “uniform” and homage to her parents who had to wear uniforms to work.
Critics often remark on the fact that Monáe’s music defies genre description, as she draws on the musical influences of punk, electric, R&B and hip hop. She has been compared to everyone from Michael Jackson and Meshell Ndegeocello to Prince, David Bowie and George Clinton. Some have called what she does funk, R&B, Post-soul, Afro-punk, and Afro-futurism. She may be working in the genealogy of other pop musical traditions, but she is also working within a hip hop tradition, as one cultural critic recently dubbed her music “alternative hip hop.” Hip hop shares in the Afro-futurist tradition, from Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock” through to Digable Planets and Outkast. Monáe also raps in several her songs.

To date, Monáe has released an EP and two studio albums, *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)* (2007), *The ArchAndroid: Suites II and III* (2010) and *Electric Lady: Suites IV and V* (2013). Each installment chronicles the adventures of the character of Cindi Mayweather, the android “rock star,” whom Monáe says represents the “other” in a variety of forms, where the metaphorical figure of “the android is just another way of speaking about the new other.”

**The Chase**

Extensive liner notes frame each installment of the *Suites*. I begin each of the following two sections by quoting part of the liner notes to give a sense of how they frame a set of

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135 Afrofuturism is not a new concept in hip hop. From Erykah Badu’s *Baduizm* (1997) and OutKast’s *ATLiens* (1996) and *Aquemini* (1998), the space and Mothership themes set forth by Sun Ra in the early 1970s have long informed hip hop artists. There has been no attention paid, however, to how Parliament-Funkadelic might have influenced gangsta rap (beyond the beats, of course and the inception of G-funk). But is there not something also Afro-futuristic about Ice Cube’s “It Was a Good Day,” (1992), where Cube constructs a speculative fiction about what a perfect day in his neighborhood would look like?

questions established in the album. *The Chase* (like all of Monáe’s albums sets the scene for her story:

*Metropolis Suite I of IV: The Chase*

The year is 2719. Five World Wars have decimated the earth. To escape from the ecological destruction, mankind had banded together to create one last great city named Metropolis. Under the rule of the evil Wolfmasters, the city becomes a decadent wonderland known for its partying robo-zillionares, riotous ethnic, race and class conflicts and petty holocausts. But zillions come to Metropolis hoping for a better life…because if you can make it in Metropolis, you can make it anywhere. Into this turbulent world is born Android No. 57821, an Alpha Platinum 9000 named Cindi Mayweather. Unlike other androids, Cindi’s programming includes a rock-star proficiency package and a working soul. Although she is a state-of-the-art organic android, Cindi must abide by THE RULES…the set of laws that decree that, above all things, androids shall never know love—especially with a human.

The idea for *Metropolis* was inspired, in part, by Fritz Lang’s 1927 film of the same name (figure 8). She says, ‘The quote [from Lang] that I was really inspired by was ‘the mediator between the mind and the hand is the heart.’ In the same interview, she described the project as:

It’ll happen—there’ll be a point where the android’s brain will have mapped out that of a human’s, and their knowledge will have surpassed that of ours. And we won’t be able to differentiate the speaking voice of an android from an actual human’s. I do believe that that will be true, because of the rapid speed of technology and nanotechnology advancing…. I know that we will live in this world. How will we all act? Will we teach our kids to fear the android? Will we treat the android inhumanely? Act superior? I want
people to wrap their minds around that. I think that we need a mediator, if we’re all
gonna rewrite history, and not oppress the Other. The Archandroid, Cindi, is the
mediator, between the mind and the hand. She’s the mediator between the haves and the

Monáe situates the future ethics of human action towards androids-to-come in a consideration of
the past, saying we can “rewrite history, and not oppress the Other.” Like Fritz Lang’s
Metropolis, Monáe literalizes the trope of the robot as exploited, alienated worker. But she also
genders and racializes her narrative of class struggle.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Figure 8}
\end{figure}

However, Cindi is also more than an exploited worker. According to the mythology, she
possesses special qualities and talents that mark her as dangerous. The “Primer” continues:
But Cindi is precocious and marked for a special destiny. First, as fate would have it, she becomes the leading voice of a rebellious new form of pop music known as cybersoul. And then, with the eyes of the world watching her, she falls in love with a robozillionaire…a dashing human named Anthony Greendown. Horrified, the Star Commission conducts a thorough investigation. Ending months of public outcry and tabloid speculation, the Droid Control rashly sentences Cindi Mayweather to immediate disassembly. Within the hour, Cindi becomes a criminal, a runaway android, escaping into the Wonderground. And licking their evil chops, the Wolfmasters set the wheels of hell in motion, calling forward bloodthirsty aliens, petulant poltergeists, and devilish bounty hunters with only one command: Cindi Mayweather must die...

Cindi is the only android with the programming of “a rock-star proficiency package and a working soul.” It’s the music that catapults her to escape, to seek freedom. The liner note’s final exclamation that she “must die” also indicates that her “working soul” also makes her a sentient being (or that “disassembly” is not enough to actually kill her). Cindi represents a threat to society because she creates her own genre of “new rebellious music” called cybersoul and falls in love with a zillionare human.

Ironically, her story mirrors the traditional narrative of “selling out” to the pop culture mainstream (she even escapes to the Wonderground, a play on the trope of the underground which is a prominent authenticating device for “real” hip hop). But she doesn’t really want to be underground, as she sings on “Many Moons”:

We’re dancing free but we’re stuck here underground/And everybody trying to figure their way out/Hey, hey, hey, all we ever wanted to say/Was chased, erased, and then thrown away/And day to day we live in a daze…REFRAIN: We march all around ‘til the
sun goes down, night children (night children gather ‘round)/Broken dreams, no sunshine, endless crimes, we long (for freedom)/You’re free but in your mind, your freedom’s in a bind….

The stakes are literally reversed, suggesting that for Cindi, participating in popular culture serves as a defiant act against systemic oppression. Her working soul separates her from the other androids, making her a truth-teller but also a target for destruction.

Throughout the songs, lyrics and video performances, Monáe (the storyteller) both constructs and deconstructs the narrative of Cindi Mayweather. She says her work is meant to elicit an “emotion picture for the mind” (NPR). The formal/aesthetic literary strategies employed by Monáe are meant to address the “issue of power specific to the music industry: the dehumanization of the commercial marketing of black performance”138 As Monáe told a reporter:

For Cindi it's about realizing that you have all these feelings, and you have the power to change the community by voicing your truest thoughts. Your voice is so important, and once you realize that your voice can shape a community and move a community forward, that's when you realize that it's time to put that into action and go after it. I also feel like it's a step forward for me as a narrator and an artist (my emphasis).139

Monáe considers herself both as writer/narrator and artist and someone working across several mediums: “I’ve never viewed myself as ‘just’ a musician or singer...I’m a storyteller who wants to tell untold, meaningful, universal stories in unforgettable ways. I want to do it all, study it all

138 Royter, Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era, page 190.
139 Ibid.
and find my place in it.” Like Kanye West’s embrace of multiple genres (mythology, fairytale and fantasy) as well as artistic mediums (music, fashion, film), Monáe prioritizes the story over what form it must take.

Monáe figures “the chase” as both metaphor and methodology, as a way to engage the deep structures around race, class and gender that govern the very parameters of popular culture. She begins the suite with “the chase” and uses it as a framework for the entire project. “The Chase,” therefore speaks as a counter-narrative or an alternate vision of the woman who “sells out” the culture. Yet, she does not fully escape. Monáe situates the argument over hip hop and popular culture as being both gendered and racialized. By adopting the alter-ego Cindi Mayweather, Monáe embodies the chase. The arch of her projects thus far situate her within the parameters of the past as well as the future. She is not free of either and works within and between them.

**The ArchAndroid**

In the liner notes for *The ArchAndroid (Suites II & III)*, we learn that Cindi Mayweather was actually cloned from the DNA of Janelle Monáe (who we find out is really from the year 2719 but forced to come back to the present, both in the form of Cindi and as her future self).

Dear listener,

The enclosed songs, text and images are the work, visions, and dreams of Janelle Monae, Palace of the Dogs Patient #57821. I have decided to release this work in accordance with the Inspiration Information Act. (I would like to stop here to openly state that I have been

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coerced into this decision by the Zoids, that I am convinced now that 1954 is not just a year—it is an army…that the Palace of the Dogs is haunted and has been for many years…and that many things in the “real world” around us are not what they seem.. but I digress…) As the director of the Palace of the Dogs Arts Asylum, a state-of-the-art federal facility for mutants, lost geniuses and savants, I must tell you that Janelle Monae is rather unique. Her Metropolis story-Suites 2 and 3 of which are compiled here-is compelling, and on some emotional level, dare I say it, believable. Her story has four major components:

1. That she, Janelle Monae, is actually from the year 2719;

2. That she was snatched, genoraped and de-existed in that year—or in 21st Century parlance, she was kidnapped by some bodysnatchers after work one day, then she had her genetic code sold illegally to the highest bidder at a body farm, and then lastly, she was forced into a time tunnel and sent back to our era;

3. Back in the year 2719, there is now a famous android named Cindi Mayweather whose organic compounds were cloned from Ms. Monae’s stolen DNA;

4. Cindi Mayweather is the mythic ArchAndroid, who has been sent to free the citizens of Metropolis from the Great Divide, a secret society which has been using time travel to suppress freedom and love throughout the ages. Dubious claims and inconsistencies aside, is Janelle Monae crazy? Is she truly from the year 2719? Is she making music with apparitions? Is her direct cloned descendant The ArchAndroid? Is there a world called Metropolis waiting for us in the future? A world full of elves and dwarves? Humans and androids? Clones and aliens?\footnote{Monâe, \textit{ArchAndroid}, Liner notes.}
There is much to unpack in this particular framing of the album. The movement and mental time-travel it takes for the reader/listener to oscillate between the year 2719 and the present day (where we are supposedly reading the note from Max Stellings in the 21st century) requires a great deal of mental gymnastics to ascertain the relationship between the past and present.

We learn from the note that the Arts Asylum has custody of Janelle Monáe, who says she’s been “genoraped,” and that her genetic DNA (the DNA we are told in the first album primer contains “rock star” capabilities) was actually taken forcibly from Monáe and used to make Cindi. She was kidnapped by “bodysnatchers” and her DNA was “sold illegally to the highest bidder.” Monáe herself is actually from the future (2719) but was forced to come back to the present day through a “time tunnel.”

This revelation makes Janelle Monáe out of place in the 21st century. It also makes her a person from the future and forecasts a world to come, where DNA is sold at body farms in order to create workers. The revelation also tells us a story about the past, recalling the history of black women’s bodies being used against their will to work and make workers during slavery. Time collapses on top of itself, and Janelle and Cindi are now figuratively bound together across time and space because of their shared experience of bondage. The commodification of both women is achieved through their shared number 57821, which dehumanizes and institutionalizes.

The introduction of Monáe’s DNA into the story also signals to the reader that Cindi is not just an android; she’s also a cyborg (part human, part object—robot) who problematizes notions of the “human.”142 Her soul and “rock-star proficiency” are directly related to the

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142 There is an important difference between androids and cyborgs, where the latter requires some material element that is considered biologically human. Monáe’s DNA is also used to make the “Electric Lady” of Monáe’s latest album. She’s not just “electric” anymore (which is an android), but is a “lady,” a human…which I think, technically makes her a cyborg.
“genrorape” of Monáe. Cindi’s body, Monáe’s and like that of the enslaved body of the black woman, becomes the site of technological reproduction commodified. As Alexander G. Weheliye argues:

> It is precisely because slavery rendered the category of the human suspect that the reportedly postslavery black cultural production cannot and do not attribute the same meaning to humanity as white American discourses. These inscriptions of humanity in black culture provide particular performances of the human—singularities, if you will, that always incorporate their own multiplicities—as opposed to mere uncritical echoes of the white liberal humanist subject.\(^{143}\)

Echoing Weheliye’s observations, Monáe’s “particular performance of the human” also incorporates “the multiplicity,” where the “most radical gesture of marking the boundaries and limitations of the human itself” (30).

**Q.U.E.E.N.: Music as weapon**

> When asked by an interviewer how she can make a difference, she responds: “Music is my weapon. I won’t remain silent. We need to be visible and we need to be loud. We are not objects.”\(^{144}\) Unlike Tupac who uses THUG LIFE acronym to take a term with negative connotation and turn it into a practice to change a stereotype, Monáe takes a “positive” term and flips it to embrace the terms that “others” and marginalize people. In a 2013 interview with Fuse TV:

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Atlanta R&B whiz Janelle Monáe scored her highest-charting album yet with *The Electric Lady*, which debuted at No. 5 on the Billboard 200 this week. The album was led by the funky single “Q.U.E.E.N.,” a title that stands for much more than just a powerful female. “‘Q.U.E.E.N.’ definitely is an acronym,” Monáe explains during an interview at Fuse HQ. “It’s for those who are marginalized.” She says the “Q” represents the queer community, the “U” for the untouchables, the “E” for emigrants, the second “E” for the excommunicated and the “N” for those labeled as negroid. “It’s for everyone who's felt ostracized,” she adds. “I wanted to create something for people who feel like they want to give up because they’re not accepted by society.”145

**Figure 9**

**Time Traveling and Theories of Afro-surrealism**

Most scholars place Monáe’s work in the lineage of Afrofuturism (as a positioning of alien-ness or otherness that critiques the confines of place but also signals an engagement with

technology). Mark Dery in “Black to the Future” (1993) used Afrofuturism to refer to “African American signification that appropriates images of advanced technology and alien and/or prosthetically enhanced (cyborg) futures.” It engages magical realism and “non-Western cosmologies,” but also critiques the past in an effort to look to the future. Afrofuturism emerged as a working theory across a range of art long before it was named and then deployed as a critical lens (a point I return to in the discussion below on surrealism). In the introduction to a special issue of *Social Text* (2002) entitled “Future Texts,” Alondra Nelson traces the more recent incarnations of the topic to a list-serve she ran as a graduate student in 1998. According to Nelson, the list-serve worked with the definition of Afrofuturism as:

‘African American voices’ with ‘other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come.’ The term was chosen as the best umbrella for the concerns of the “list”—as it came to be known by its members—‘sci-fi imagery, futurist themes and technological innovation in the African diaspora.’ (9)

In some ways, Afrofuturism fit a utilitarian need for organizing a particular set of artistic thoughts and concerns rather than actually being a catch-all concept.

Afrofuturism in black music, as Kodwo Eshun argues in “More Brilliant Then The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction” (1998), manifests as a critique of Western notions of the human: The idea of slavery as an alien abduction means that we’ve all been living in an alien-nation since the eighteenth century. The mutation of African male and female slaves in the eighteenth century into what became negro, and into an entire series of humans that were designed in America. That whole process, the key behind it all is that in America

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none of these humans were designated human. It’s in the music that you get this sense of the human as being a really pointless and treacherous category. (192-193)

J. Griffith Rollefson argues in his essay “Robot Voodoo Thesis” that this is why Fred Moten’s work on fugitivity helps us see how “black artistic performance holds the potential of expressing an imminent critique of Western rationality and its systems of meaning from an embodied position. Afrofuturism is in this regard a decidedly materialist rather than idealist project” (106).

The important claim to make about Monáe’s work is that she positions the black female body at the center of both past and present critical discussions on how race and gender intersect with technology, production and reproduction.

So then what is the difference between Afro-futurism and Afro-surrealism? When Mark Dery first coined the term “Afro-futurism,” one of his questions was “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” One of the interesting things about Cindi Mayweather as the female fugitive is that Monáe quite literally mythologizes the fugitive into a tale of unreality. Part of the practice of Monáe’s surrealism is to “other” herself to herself, something she does through the conflation of her own narrative with that of Cindi. For example, we don’t really know who is Tweeting when Monáe visits the Yale campus and remarks that she could “see myself here.” (figure 10). It’s easy to assume that it’s Cindi because of the classes she hopes to take in “time traveling” (which we assume will be offered in the future, where Cindi currently resides). But she also mentions wanting to take a class on surrealism, which suggests that Monáe may have already completed that class.
Robin D.G. Kelley recently remarked upon the connections between Afrofuturism and surrealism in an interview with Redwedge online magazine. When asked about the political potential of Afrofuturism and its relationship to the Black Lives Matter movement, Kelley responded:

I cannot say for sure, only speculate. First, I can’t see a direct correlation between Afrofuturism and the rise of Black Lives Matter because I am of the minority opinion that neither is so new. Versions of Afrofuturism were already here, embraced, debated, struggled over throughout much of the 20th century. My chapter on surrealism in *Freedom Dreams* gestures at this, but so does the first chapter “In Search of the New Land” which links Sun Ra and Marcus Garvey. Afrofuturism is wonderful; it is also a new word for a longer Black radical tradition of Marronage, seeking out free space, liberated territory.\(^{147}\)

As Kelley points out here and elsewhere, the Black Radical Tradition has long included considerations of Afrofuturism and he has written extensively about surrealism. In his co-edited volume with Frank Rosemont, Kelley argues that surrealist movement’s roots were both African and Anti-colonial. For example, the 1924 French surrealist’s manifesto:

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We Surrealists pronounced ourselves in favor of changing the imperialist war, in its chronic and colonial war, into a civil war. Thus we placed our energies at the disposal of the revolution, of the proletariat and its struggles, and defined our attitude towards the colonial problem, and hence towards the colour question.

In the Black Radical Tradition, as Kelley points out, surrealists were not simply against Western civilization but they also presented different ways of doing and being altogether. Recovering these histories in the present is a practice oriented toward other possible futures. In that way, Afro-surrealism and surrealism are forms of doing Afrofuturism. They are not separate endeavors.

In the case of Monáe, she often practices the techniques associated with surrealism.148 Part of the theory that she was working towards was made while on the road performing. Each night she would paint a picture while on stage. This automatic painting style led her to the next incarnation of Cindi, as an “Electric Lady.” She told one reporter:

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148 From *Key Theory* terms: surrealism: “The movement originated in France in the 1920s and was a development of Dadaism (q.v.). The surrealists attempted to express in art and literature the workings of the unconscious mind and to synthesize these working with the conscious mind. The surrealist allows his work to develop non-logically (rather than illogically) so that the results represent the operations of the unconscious…Andre Breton issued the first manifesto (there were three altogether) of surrealism, which recommended that the mind should be liberated from logic and reason. Breton had been influenced by Frueidian analysis and had experimented with automatic writing under hypnosis. The surrealists were particularly interested in the study and effects of dreams and hallucinations and also in the interpenetration of the sleeping and waking conditions on the threshold of the conscious mind, that kind of limbo where strange shapes materialize in the gulfs of the mind. In his second manifesto (1929) Breton explained how the surrealist idea was to revitalize the psychic forces by a ‘vertiginous descent’ into the self in quest of the secret and hidden territory where all that is apparently contradictory in our everyday lives and consciousness will be made plain. There was a ‘point’ in the mind, he thought, where, beyond realism, one attained new knowledge…The long-term influence of surrealism all over the world has been enormous. Apart from poetry, it has affected the novel, the cinema, the theatre, painting and sculpture. A great many writers have continued to explore the territories of the conscious and semiconscious mind; delving into and exposing the private chaos, the individual hell” (terms in theory, 882-883).
The title of this album was really inspired by my painting. I got the opportunity to tour around the world for a while, and I would paint every single night. I would paint this image of a female silhouette, and I didn't quite understand why I was painting the same image of a female silhouette. I went home and talked to my therapist about a number of things, and she encouraged me to name this character, so I did. When I looked at the paintings I said, ‘This is the Electric Lady. She is beyond.’ So I started to think about a world where there are a million girls and women who are electric ladies and I wondered, ‘Well, who is this woman in the 21st century and what does she think about?’

On the one hand, Monáe is using the techniques of surrealists to work in the now, in the present moment, but she does so with an eye toward the future. She sees the picture she’s drawing of the Electric Lady as being a future incarnation that she then has to imagine in the present.

On her first album, *Metropolis: The Chase*, Monáe creates a kind of surrealist rap in the “Cybernetic Chantdown”

Civil rights, civil war/Hood rat, crack whore/Carefree, nightclub/Closet drunk, bathtub/Outcast, weirdo/Stepchild, freak show/Black girl, bad hair/Broad nose, cold stare/Tap shoes, Broadway/Tuxedo, holiday/Creative block, Love song/Stupid words, erased song/Gun shots, orange house/Dean man walking with a dirty mouth/Spoiled milk, stale bread/Welfare, bubonic plague/Record deal, light bulb/Kept back kid, now a corporate thug/Breast cancer, common cold/HIV, lost hope/Overweight, self esteem/Misfit, broken dream/Fish tank, small bowl/Closed minded, dark hold/Cyber girl, droid control/Get away now they trying to steal your soul/Microphone, one stage/Tomboy, outrage/Street fight, bloody war/instigators, third floor/Promiscuous child, broken dream/STD, quarantine/Heroin user, coke head/Final chapter, death bed/Plastic
sweat, metal skin/Metallic tears, mannequin/Carefree, nightclub/Closet drunk, bathtub/White House, Jim Crow/Dirty lies, my regards!

The chantdown is really the first indication of surrealism in her work: I want to think about how surrealism informs Monâe’s work, especially on this last album. Which one of the characters raps? Is it JM or Cindi, and if it’s Cindi, which one? In interview: “Monâe says she’s hesitant to call herself a rapper. Or even a singer for that matter. ‘I just like to communicate,’ she says. ‘If the lyrics call for something more urgent, which that rap did, then I’ll take that route. I wanted to make sure, just in case, if anyone had any questions about what this song was about that I was able to bring it home with the message.’”

Her work recalls the definition of surrealist principals by David Gascoyne (1936): “It is the avowed aim of the surrealist movement to reduce and finally to dispose altogether of the flagrant contradictions that exist between dream and waking life, the ‘unreal’ and the ‘real,’ the unconscious and the conscious, and thus to make what has hitherto been regarded as the special domain of poets, the acknowledged common property of all” (3).

She chants “Outcast, weirdo, stepchild, freakshow: black girl, bad hair, broad nose, cold stare”

Amiri Baraka coined the term “Afro-Surreal” in 1988 in an essay about Henry Dumas. Baraka argues: “Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Toni Morrison, and Henry Dumas are the giants of this genre of Afro-Surreal Expressionism. Jacob Lawrence, Vincent Smith, and Romare Bearden are similar in painting; Duke, Monk, Trane and Sun Ra in music” (164). He goes on to say “The most important and significant art uses the revelation of truth (fact, reality, etc.) as a

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function of its beauty! Pythagora’s number as essential symbol of reality means that correct is legitimate and provable, as is incorrect. If there is real and unreal, there is also wrong and right, scientific and unscientific” (165). Baraka’s critique of the real is also the critique of the wrong and the scientific. He’s not saying they don’t exist, but he is asking after their claims to rationality. He continues:

The liberation of African American people and the ultimate destruction of Imperialism are inherent in nature itself, scientifically predictable. So the great African American artists are these people and their development. The artist carries life’s number. Art is science because it is a form of knowing....Art is the life of people, society, and nature. The theme is always our real lives in actual society, as unbelievably complex and dialectical as they are. Creativity is the basis of evolution. The Afro-Surreal Expressionism of Dumas and the others mentioned unfolds the Black Aesthetic—form and content—in its actual contemporary and lived life...The very broken quality, almost to abstraction, is a function of changes and transition. It is as though the whole world we inhabit rests on the bottom of the ocean, harnessed by memory, language, image to that ‘railroad of human bones’ at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean...History and culture are expressed through the detail and emotion. Real and unreal, it would seem, defining the disintegration and the ‘crossed Jordan’ of wholeness or liberation, are contending themes and modes. (165-166)

Baraka’s claim is that he is thinking against the notion that there is something “natural” in black expression, but he is saying that there is something that can be accessed and in the black experience and the social “life” of people that can be accessed and comprise a Black aesthetic.
But the Afrosurrealist’s questions are not anti-real, but rather find their footing in an expanded notion of reality that defies time and space by centering the here and now. “Surrealism does not signify unreality, antireality, the nonsensical, or the absurd. On the contrary, surrealism—an open realism—signifies more reality, an expanded awareness of reality, including aspects and elements of the real that are ordinarily overlooked, dismissed, excluded, hidden, shunned, suppressed, ignored, forgotten, or otherwise neglected” (3). The surrealists accomplish this by “rejecting all forms of domination and the dichotomous ideologies that go with them—intolerance, exploitation, bigotry, exclusiveness, white supremacy, and all race prejudice—surrealists make the resolution of contradictions a high priority” (4).

In 2009, D. Scot Miller, citing the influence and work of Baraka, began writing what he called the Afrosurrealist manifesto. Years later he reflected on why he thought it was a necessary intervention to the discourse on Afrofuturism: He reflects on why he wrote the Afrosurrealist manifesto:

With the rise of Afrofuturism, I saw many of the same traits of Futurism becoming embedded in it. Afrofuturism began to reflect the same love for speed, the same belief in the superiority of technology over craft, and seemed to be working towards establishing nationalism within its core tenets. Though—or maybe because—Afrofuturism lacked the cohesion that a manifesto provides, it had begun to veer into superstition, anti-intellectualism, and exclusion. I believe that there were quite a few people who were witnessing the same thing, but were given no alternative. The black avant-garde artist, the woman artist, the gay artist, the disenfranchised and under/mis-represented had nothing in the contemporary zeitgeist that speculated on a real-time, unifying, collective vision.
On a personal level, the discovery of The Afrosurreal was a liberating experience.¹⁵³

Global Mass Culture and Planetary Feminism

Monáe-as-Cindi’s aesthetic vision can also be read as a perspective outside of the Earth, perhaps in space and can also be read through the lens of what Gayatri Spivak calls the planetary. Spivak asks her readers to adopt a similar relationship to discourses of “globalization” through what she calls “planetarity.” Her book, *Death of a Discipline*, brings together a series of lectures given at the University of California, Irvine in 2000. She calls for “a new comparative literature” (6). The academy finds profit in the proliferation of “other” voices, voices that have been designated as multicultural. The book’s final chapter, “Planetarity,” argues for a new reading practice—one that replaces the global, as “globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere”—with the planet as the horizon of imagination. (72). Spivak argues that replacing the global, national, and continental ways of reading with “planetary” ones would open a comparative studies with more political potential to cross national and cultural borders. For Spivak, the appeal of planetarity resides in its indecipherability. One can easily think the globe by looking at the “abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes,” but to think the planet requires us to think something else. Spivak argues that the planet dwells in the space of “alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan” (72). To define the planet’s meaning as belonging to another system of relations effectively “others” the planet, making it seem more present—like a dorm room or a rented apartment—rather than a childhood home. The planet can never be our permanent home, but remains, instead “on loan,” inherited—just one of many

transitory—even migratory—dwellings humans inhabit from the womb to the grave. Spivak writes:

Some years ago, writing on the work of the subaltern studies collective, I had commented, ‘the figure of a woman is pervasively instrumental in the shifting of the function of discursive systems….the figure of woman-as-mother-as-vagina is important in Freud’s explanation of the uncanny. In our attempt to track planetarity as making our home unheimlich or uncanny, we will construct an allegory of reading where the discursive system shifts vagina to planet as the signifier of the uncanny, by way of nationalist colonialism and postcoloniality. This is in keeping with my method: gender as a general critical instrument rather than something to be factored in in special cases” (74).

Spivak’s ideas about planetarity and the function of it as a reading strategy challenge the realist, rationalizing logic and literalization of “globalization.” Part of the definition of planetarity she takes from Freud’s idea of making the familiar strange (Heimlich vs unhemlich). This is a direct reference to the mothership (the vagina). Birth engenders the duality between the word/non-word, the conscious/unconscious, to the human experience.

Spivak makes a similar move by naming the planet our home that “is not home” (73). She characterizes the methodology of planetarity as “the defamiliarization of familiar space” (77). According to this argument, therefore, a genealogical inquiry is central to a feminist politics and always rooted in the female body, in the womb, in reproduction. Spivak contends that the genealogical method keeps “gender as a critical instrument rather than something to be factored into special cases,” and in doing so, we can learn to read in new and important ways (74). For Spivak, the “planetary” lives and articulates itself in the space between positive identity and otherness, both marking and masking the very site of struggle through the positing of a figure.
It’s writing is to “write the self as its othermost” and to “blur the outlines between that graphic and globalization” (91). Spivak argues that literary studies must take the “figure” as its guide because the meaning of the literary figure is always “undecidable.” Scholars must make intentional attempts to “dis-figure it” and “read the logic of the metaphor,” a logic that is always rooted in historical claims to truth. At the end of the project, Spivak argues that we need a reading practice that:

- goes beyond the stereotypes of globalization or the token gestures of pluralism as practiced even in the academy. It is best imagined from the precapitalist cultures of the planet....It is, however, the right of the textual to be so responsible, responsive and answerable. The “planet” is here, as perhaps always, a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right. Its alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous—an experience of the impossible. It is the collectivities that must be opened up with the question “How many are we?” when cultural origin is
detranscendentalized into fiction—the toughest task in the diaspora. (102)

One reason to read the planet is to tap into the relationship between alterity and collectivity. How do we think about culture as a way of asking, “how many are we?” It seems to me that this is a question that Monáe is consistently posing throughout her body of work thus far. She does so across time, space and different embodiments.

- Hip hop is one of the first examples of what Stuart Hall defines as “global mass culture.” In “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” Stuart Hall defines global mass culture as being very different from “English identity and the cultural identities associated with the nation-state in an earlier phase” (178). Instead:
Global mass culture is dominated by the modern means of cultural production, dominated by the image that crosses and recrosses linguistic frontiers much more rapidly and more easily and that speaks across languages in a much more immediate way. It is dominated by all the ways in which the visual and graphic arts have entered directly into the reconstitution of popular life, of entertainment and of leisure. It is dominated by television, by film, and by the image, imagery, and styles of mass advertising. (178)

Monâe’s work in particular presents a challenge to Western rationality through the embodiment of Cindi Mayweather. Cindi moves between past, present and future, between Cindi as cyborg and Cindi as Monâe. Because she is multiple, she challenges the notion of a singular, autonomous subject or personhood. Her planetary, non-teleological movements demonstrate the falsity in linear notions of time and autonomy, of authenticity. In this light, genres don’t even make sense. She constructs the possibility of other kinships. Through the visual mythology of Cindi Mayweather we experience the world from a variety of everyday spaces across time, but the story also allows the reader/viewer to orient ourselves not only as spanning across time and history, but also as “earth-dwellers,” as witnessing our lives from the outside. Monâe uses such tropes and themes of outer space to draw on historical genealogies of the past that engender and encourage new forms of collective, future thinking—forms that do not collapse or disparage local differences but rather, invite listeners to think about not only where we’re from—but, to borrow a line from rapper Rakim—where we’re at.

Conclusion

Monâe was “four years into a new album” when she decided to audition for the role of Mary Jackson in *Hidden Figures* (2016). Speaking about her decision to put her music on hold,
Monáe said, “I was a bit puzzled and upset that, as a young woman of color, I had no clue who these women were…I knew that I needed to drop what I was doing and make sure that no other young girl or boy would go on without knowing about these brilliant women who helped get America into space.”

She added that, in “both Moonlight and Hidden Figures, black people are presented as layered, complete human beings, not one-dimensional and not monolithic.”

Monáe’s work continuously reveals to us the ways in which realism and authenticity are gendered discourses and the importance of telling stories in ways that intervene.

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Conclusion: Toward a Hip Hop Pedagogy

My words are weapons, and I’m stepping to the silent, waking up the masses, but you claim that I’m violent

2Pac, “Violent” (1991)

For as long as I can remember, hip hop culture has informed nearly every aspect of my understanding of the world and identity, but it wasn’t until I got to college that I was able to step back and thinking historically and critically about the culture. The question that first initiated this project took shape around a simple curiosity. Does hip hop have a politics? And is a hip hop politics rooted in popular culture even possible? If so, what does it look like? Who gets to participate? Who actually decides what counts and doesn’t count as hip hop?

The three artists I chose to examine in the dissertation collectively represent twenty-five plus years and a variety of approaches to these questions. Tupac’s Thug Life may have sparked my initial interest in the relationship between hip hop aesthetics and politics, but Kanye’s unparalleled use of metaphor and mythology, and Janelle Monáe’s embodied performance of female fugitivity have kept me returning to questions about the relationship between aesthetics and politics.

The project drew both its inspiration and title, “Who Killed It: Toward a Hip Hop Theory,” from a Nas song from his 2006 album Hip Hop is Dead. It’s a double entendre. The meaning of “who killed it” marks both uneasiness about hip hop’s growing commercial popularity (how its success can be life-threatening to the culture itself) and simultaneously evokes recognizable talent and skillset, the ability to “kill it” on the mic, to be recognized by
one’s peers as a wordsmith. In the first meaning, I explored the commodification of rap and how for some, that commodification brings a perceived restriction on originality and inventiveness in rap as a poetic form. In the second meaning, the project tries to think about the artistic response to that commodification and perception.

The third component in the title “Who Killed It” comes from the actual narrative arc of Nas’ song, which I talk about in detail in the dissertation’s final chapter. Nas, like many rappers before him, actually personifies the tension between hip hop authenticity and “selling out” as female. Grappling with the full implications of this title, which has oddly enough been with me since the inception of the project (the same year the album came out), has kept me focused on what I hoped to accomplish in the pages of the dissertation. I am aware that further considerations of this topic would necessitate a deeper critical engagement with both performance theory and sound studies. Analyzing embodied performance more carefully would help me situate the politics of self-fashioning and visual spectacle in ways that I have only begun to gesture at in the project’s current incarnation.

As it stands, “Who Killed It” focuses on how the language of rap realism straddles the line between refusing to sell out and being willing to step to the mic and represent the harsh ‘reality’ of his/her geographical location (such as the hood or the ghetto). The massive popularity of gangsta rap in the mid 90s resulted in a kind of commodification of realness (where realness was once seen as a practice rooted and regulated in community, it gets twisted, repackaged and sold in the stereotypical figuration of the black male gangster). Yet many of the major considerations of hip hop realness thus far have been written through what I would call a socio-historical lens, seeing rappers as responding to their environment, and telling it like it is. As a result, authenticity and realness often connote an ethos rather than explicating the specific artist’s
engagement with the art form. While I would never dismiss the importance of how realness connects artists to their respective communities, especially those that have been historically underrepresented and neglected, my project attempted to give equal import to the specifically aesthetic ways that post 1990s rappers also push on the boundaries of artistic form.

By repositioning realness within a longer tradition of American literary Realism, my aim was to think more broadly about the social and psychological aspects of how Realism (as a genre, and I would argue as the foundational American literary genre), continues to shape national and cultural hegemony. I am also interested in how genre expectations are built into dominant culture in ways that are not visible but continue to shape audience appeal (cross-over to white audiences). By situating the conversation about hip hop realism within the longer genealogy of American literary Realism, we might rethink the set of artistic practices and specifically literary strategies employed by hip hop artists as belonging to (or challenging) established techniques such as omniscient narration and emphasis on descriptive language and place (as in local color fiction).

Each chapter of the dissertation examines the work of a hip hop artist who directly engages realism or “verbs” the real in some way. Tupac Shakur verbs the stereotype of gangsta rap’s “thug” figure into a future-oriented vision of community-based praxis called “Thug Life.” Shakur’s peformative embodiment of the thug is both an indictment of racist media representations of black youth in the late 80s and early 90s (part of the “get tough on crime” agenda) but also an extension of the cultural praxis of the Black Panther Party, particularly Huey P. Newton’s conceptualizations of “revolutionary suicide” and “revolutionary intercommunalism.”
Kanye West employs mythology, fairytale and romance as anti-realist narrative genres that challenge hegemonic norms of black masculinity and realness in commercial rap. The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of West’s development of himself (“Kanye West”) as an artistic genre and its signature form, “the rant,” as a kind of off-script, improvisational, uncommodifiable rap. I argue that these examples, when taken together, create a nexus through which we can effectively read against the grain of the dominant interpretations of West’s work, allowing us to see how his artistic output challenges mainstream definitions of both black musicality and masculinity.

The third chapter examines how Janelle Monáe’s work takes up and challenges the female personification of hip hop’s crossover to the mainstream, specifically through her creation of the time-traveling, “female fugitive,” Cindi Mayweather. The chapter considers how the mythology of Cindi Mayweather gets constructed across a range of visual and textual landscapes (including lyrics, videos, interviews, blogs, Twitter posts and liner notes), arguing that this allows her narrative to resist easy capture and commodification. Monáe’s process also draws on an assemblage of different musical genres, including hip hop, funk and R&B and a myriad of literary traditions, including Afro-futurism and Afro-Surrealism. Up to this point, the pervasive figure of the “female fugitive,” as I call her, has remained under-theorized as a hip hop trope. I think she’s a figure worth exploring in more depth, both in terms of her history but also the other ways she’s been (re)figured in hip hop and popular culture by artists other than the ones I treat here.

As much as possible, I tried to let the work of the artists form the basis of an emergent theory of hip hop. I tried to think about the artists as authors whose work spans a variety of
 mediums (and in a way, creates new forms of storytelling that may not even have a name yet, one that is written, visual, on social media, and across several albums and projects.

Stuart Hall once said that studies of popular culture are only useful insofar as they help illuminate and challenge the functioning of social power. That is not to say that hip hop or popular culture ought to be burdened with the job of assuming formal politics. It cannot do so anymore than it can be imagined to be devoid, outside or “without” a politics. However, I believe we must continually find ways to recognize and attend to the constitutive nature of our social fabric as well as ask critical questions about the informal ways that people organize themselves in relationship to power.

There is a thread running through hip hop, despite its commercial success, that remains fundamentally rooted in a collaborative, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive tradition and epistemology. Mark Lamont Hill and Emery Petchauer’s recent book on hip hop pedagogy, *Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education Across the Curriculum* (2014), argues for the development of teaching practices that do not solely rely on the “products” of hip hop, like lyrics, but instead develop practices based on the core elements (and practices) of hip hop. They say that the reliance on lyrics overshadows a focus on “aesthetic forms, ways of doing, or cultural logic” produced by hip hop epistemologies. I appreciate how they talk about cypher theory, kinetic consumption and participatory knowledge production, but I would argue that an attention to lyrical production doesn’t necessarily have to focus on lyrics as the “products” of hip hop. Literary genre studies (when combined with considerations of representation) can help us better understand how different historical moments produce preferred meanings and interpretations of what we consider “reality.”
For example, in my own pedagogical practice, I try to take hip hop out of the realist genre of interpretation in order to help elucidate (not disregard) its politics. Close-reading skills across a variety of texts and mediums reveals the multiple layers of hip hop philosophy and practice. Methodologically, we look at lyrics, interviews, social media and videos but also analyze secondary material (criticism about the artist and their artistic output). The goal is always to historicize and think about the constructed (and constrained) nature of writing and performance, to situate the narrative practice of the artist, to ask how they choosing to tell the stories they tell.

How do we think about a hermeneutics of hip hop that moves in and out of the frame of realism without losing either its aesthetic innovations or its important claims to anti-racism and its historical rootedness in African American culture and practice? I also teach a course that I developed as a masters student called “The Textual Appeal of Tupac Shakur,” where we explore the literary, historical and political influences present in Shakur’s work. We look at a variety of theoretical and literary texts, including Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* and Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, as well as various selections from the works of Antonio Gramsci, Huey P. Newton and Afeni Shakur. We read these texts alongside Tupac’s lyrics and interviews in an effort to understand the depth of his interdisciplinary and intertextual engagement with philosophical and political questions. In another course called “The Chronicles of Ye: Kanye West and the Hero’s Journey,” we look at how West’s art, including music videos, short films and interviews, dialogues with both ancient and modern heroic tales (from *The Odyssey* to the legend of Muhammad Ali). Students are asked to read a variety of texts from world mythology and develop projects that resituate a consideration of West’s work. Both classes attempt to take students out of the kind of surface-level thinking that can often characterize early engagement
with hip hop studies and toward a deeper consideration of how hip hop artists are changing the way we read, write and receive all stories.

“Who Killed It: Toward A Hip Hop Theory” developed out of these teaching practices, and out of a genuine interest in how artists navigate the commercialization of hip hop culture through strategic engagement with the form itself, pushing on the boundaries of genre and pushing their audience toward to question what gets to count as part of a recognizable “reality” in the twenty-first century. As the chapters of the dissertation show, this is an uneven process, and because much of it still takes place within the media-mediated realm of representation, is one that Hall might call “without guarantees.”
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Kanye West and Jay-Z.

Appendix A

Tupac: “Holla If Ya Hear Me”
Aww yeah, uhh, uhh
Holla if ya hear me, yeah!

[Verse One]
Here we go, turn it up, let’s start
From block to block we snatchin hearts and jackin marks
And the punk police can’t fade me, and maybe
We can have peace someday G
But right now I got my mind set up
Lookin down the barrel of my nine, get up
Cause it’s time to make the payback fat
To my brothers on the block better stay strapped, black
And accept no substitutes
I bring truth to the youth tear the roof off the whole school
Oh no, I won’t turn the other cheek
In case ya can’t see us while we burn the other week
Now we got him in a smash, blast
How long will it last ‘til the po’ gettin mo’ cash
Until then, raise up!
Tell my young black males, blaze up!
Life’s a mess don’t stress, test
I’m givin but be thankful that you’re livin, blessed
Much love to my brothers in the pen
See ya when I free ya if not when they shove me in
Once again it’s an all out scrap
Keep your hands on ya gat, and now ya boys watch ya back
Cause in the alleys out in Cali I’ma tell ya
Mess with the best and the vest couldn’t help ya
Scream, if ya feel me; see it clearly?
You’re too near me -

[Chorus]
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”

[Verse Two]
Pump ya fists like this
Holla if ya hear me - PUMP PUMP if you’re pissed
To the sell-outs, livin it up
One way or another you’ll be givin it up, huh
I guess cause I’m black born
I’m supposed to say peace, sing songs, and get capped on
But it’s time for a new plan, BAM!
I’ll be swingin like a one man, clan
Here we go, turn it up, don’t stop
To my homies on the block gettin dropped by cops
I’m still around for ya
Keepin my sound underground for ya
And I’m throw a change up
Quayle, like you never brought my name up
Now my homies in the backstreets, the blackstreets
They fell me when they rollin in they fat jeeps
This ain’t just a rap song, a black song
Tellin all my brothers, get they strap on
And look for me in the struggle
Hustlin ‘til other brothers bubble -

[Chorus]
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”

[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”

[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”

[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”

[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!

[Verse Three]
Will I quit, will I quit?
They claim that I’m violent, but still I keep representin, never give up, on a good thing
Wouldn’t stop it if we could it’s a hood thing
And now I’m like a major threat
Cause I remind you of the things you were made to forget
Bring the noise, to all my boyz
Know the real from the bustas and the decoys
And if ya hustle like a real G
Pump ya fists if ya feel me, holla if ya hear me
Learn to survive in the nine-tre’
I make rhyme pay, others make crime pay
Whatever it takes to live and stand
Cause nobody else’ll give a damn
So we live like caged beasts
Waitin for the day to let the rage free
Still me, till they kill me
I love it when they fear me -

[Chorus]
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”

[2Pac] You’re too near me, to see it clearly

[repeat 4x]
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”

[repeat 2X]
“Hard!” .. “Tellin you to hear it, the rebel” - P.E.
“Tellin you to hear it..”

“Hard!” .. “The rebel”
“Hard!” .. “The rebel”

[repeat 12X to fade]
[2Pac] Holla if ya hear me!
“Hard!” .. “The rebel”
Appendix B

Tupac: “Me And My Girlfriend”

[Lady of Rage:]  
Sheeit, you motherfuckin’ right  
I’m the bitch that’s keepin it live and keepin it hot  
When you punk ass n***az don’t  
N***a Westside, WHAT! Bring it on

[Tupac:]  
Look for me  
Lost in the whirlwind, ninety-six, Bonnie and Clyde  
Me and my girlfriend, do one-eighty-five when we ride  
Trapped in this world of sin, born as a ghetto child  
Raised in this whirlwind (c’mon)  
Our childhood years recall the tears heart laced with venom  
Smokin sherm, drinkin malt liquor, father forgive her  
Me and my girlfriend, hustlin, fell in love with the struggle  
Hands on the steering wheel, blush, while she bail out bustin  
Fuck em all, watch em fall screamin, automatic gunfire  
Exorcisin all demons  
Mafias on the side, my congregation high, ready to die  
We bail out to take the jail back, n***az united  
Our first date, couldn’t wait to see you naked  
Touch you in every secret place, I can hardly wait  
To bust freely, got you red hot, you so happy to see me  
Make the front page primetime live on TV  
N***a my girlfriend, baby forty-five but she still live  
One shot make a n***a’s heartbeat stop

[Lady of Rage:]  
What! I’m bustin on you punk ass n***z [automatic gunfire]  
Run n***a run! [gunfire] I’m on yo’ ass n***a! [gunfire continues]  
Run n***a, duck and hide! N***a I’m bustin all you bitches!  
Run n***a, yeah! Westside! Uh uh uh! Die n***a die!

[Tupac:]  
My girlfriend, blacker than the darkest night  
When n***z act bitch-made she got the heart to fight  
N***a my girlfriend, though we seperated at times  
I knew deep inside, baby girl would always be mine  
Picked you up when you was nine, started out my life of crime  
With you, bought you some shells when you turned twenty-two  
It’s true, nothin compares to the satisfaction
That I feel when we out mashing, me and my girlfriend

[Chorus: Tupac]
All I need in this life of sin, is me and my girlfriend
Down to ride to the bloody end, just me and my girlfriend
[x2]

[Tupac:]
I was too immature
To understand your ways, inexperienced back in the days
Caused so many arguments and strays
Now I realize how to treat ya, the secret to keep ya
Bein faithful now cause now cheatin’s lethal
We closer than the hands of time, deeper than the drop of mankind
I trust you dearly, I shoot blind
In time I clock figures, droppin n****z as we rise
We all soldiers in God’s eyes - now it’s time for war
Never leave me baby, I’m paranoid, sleepin witcha
Loaded by my bedside crazy
Jealous when you hang with the fellas, I wait patiently alone
Anticipated for the moment you come home
I’m waitin by the phone this is true love, I can feel it
I’ve had a lot of women in my bed, but you the realeast
So if you ever need me call, I’ll be there through it all
You’re the reason I can stand tall, me and my girlfriend

[Chorus]

[Tupac:]
I love finger fuckin you, all of a sudden I’m hearin thunder
When you bust a nut, n****z be duckin or takin numbers
Love to watch you at a block party, beggin for drama
While unleashin on the old timers, that’s on my mama
I would trade my life for yours, behind closed doors
The only girl that I adore, everything I’m askin for
Talkin to me beggin me to just, take you around
Seventeen like Brandy you just Wanna Be Down
Talkin loud when I tell you be quiet you move the crowd
Bustin rounds, activatin a riot, that’s why I love you so
No control, down to roll, unleash
After a hit you break apart, then back to one piece
Much love to my one and only girlfriend, the world is ours
Just hold me down, baby witness the power
Never leave a n***a alone, I love you black or chrome
Turn this house into a happy home, me and my girlfriend
[Chorus x3]

Lost in the whirlwind, ninety-six, Bonnie and Clyde
Me and my girlfriend, do one-eighty-five when we ride
Trapped in this world of sin, born as a ghetto child
Raised in the whirlwind - look for me
Appendix C

Kanye West: “Runaway”
(Feat. Pusha T)

[ Kanye West ]
( Look at you [x14])
( Look at you [x8])
( Ladies and gentlemen, la-ladies and gentlemen)
( And I want to show you how you all look like beautiful stars tonight)
( And I want to show you how you all look like beautiful stars tonight)
( And I want to show you how you all look like beautiful stars tonight)

And I always find, yeah, I always find somethin’ wrong
You been puttin’ up wit’ my shit just way too long
I’m so gifted at findin’ what I don’t like the most
So I think it’s time for us to have a toast

Let’s have a toast for the douchebags,
Let’s have a toast for the assholes,
Let’s have a toast for the scumbags,
Every one of them that I know
Let’s have a toast to the jerkoffs
That’ll never take work off
Baby, I got a plan
Run away fast as you can

She find pictures in my email
I sent this girl a picture of my dick.
I don’t know what it is with females
But I’m not too good with that shit.
See, I could have me a good girl
And still be addicted to them hooodrats
And I just blame everything on you
At least you know that’s what I’m good at

See, I always find
And I always find
Yeah, I always find somethin’ wrong
You been puttin’ up with my shit just way too long
I’m so gifted at findin’ what I don’t like the most
So I think it’s time for us to have a toast

Let’s have a toast for the douchebags,
Let’s have a toast for the assholes,
Let’s have a toast for the scumbags,
Every one of them that I know
Let’s have a toast to the jerkoffs
That’ll never take work off
Baby, I got a plan
Run away fast as you can

R-r-ru-ru-ru-run away
Run away from me, baby

(Look at, look at, look at, look at you)
Run away from me, baby
(Look at you, look at you, look at you)
Run away
Run away from me, baby

[Pusha T]
24/7, 365, p*ssy stays on my mind
I-I-I-I did it, all right, all right, I admit it
Now pick your best move, you could leave or live wit’ it
Ichabod Crane with that motherfuckin’ top off
Split and go where? Back to wearin’ knockoffs, huh?
Knock it off, Neiman’s, shop it off
Let’s talk over mai tais, waitress, top it off
Fools like vultures wanna fly in your Freddy loafers
You can’t blame ‘em, they ain’t never seen Versace sofas
Every bag, every blouse, every bracelet
Comes with a price tag, baby, face it
You should leave if you can’t accept the basics
Plenty hoes in a baller-n***a matrix
Invisibly set, the Rolex is faceless
I’m just young, rich, and tasteless, P!

[Kanye:]  
Never was much of a romantic,
I could never take the intimacy.
And I know I did damage,
‘cause the look in your eyes is killing me,
I guess you’ve got another advantage
‘cause you could blame me for everything.
And I don’t know how I’m a manage,
If one day you just up and leave...
Oh, I haven’t fucked in so long
You been puttin’ up with my shit just way too long
I’m so gifted at findin’ what I don’t like the most
So I think it’s time for us to have a toast
(Ladies and gentlemen!)
Yeah, I always find somethin’ wrong
You been puttin’ up with my shit just way too long
I’m so gifted at findin’ what I don’t like the most
So I think it’s time for us to have a toast

Let’s have a toast for the douchebags,
Let’s have a toast for the assholes,
Let’s have a toast for the scumbags,
Every one of them that I know
Let’s have a toast to the jerkoffs
That’ll never take work off
Baby, I got a plan
Run away fast as you can
Appendix D

“Pinocchio Story”

Wise men say
Wise men say
Wise men say
The baddest n***s out there bro
Never figure out real love
You’ll never figure out real love
You’ll never figure out real love

It’s so crazy
I got everything figured out
But for some reason I can never find what real love is about
No doubt
Everything in the world figured out but I can never seem to find what real love is about

Do you think I sacrificed real life
For all the fame of flashing lights?
Do you think I sacrifice a real life
For all the fame of flashing lights?

There is no Gucci I can buy
There is no Louis Vuitton to put on
There is no YSL that they could sell
To get my heart out of this hell
And my mind out of this jail
There is no clothes that I could buy
That could turn back the time
There is no vacation spot I could fly
That could bring back a piece of real life
Real life, what does it feel like?
I ask you tonight, I ask you tonight
What does it feel like, I ask you tonight
To live a real life
I just want to be a real boy
They always say Kanye, he keeps it real boy
Pinocchio story is, I just want to be a real boy
Pinocchio story is to be a real boy

It’s funny Pinocchio lied and that’s what kept him from it
I tell the truth and I keep running
It’s like I’m looking for something out there trying to find something
I turn on the TV and see me and see nothing
What does it feel like to live real life to be real?
Not some facade on TV that no can really feel
Do you really have the stamina...
For everybody that sees you and that say ‘where’s my camera?’
For everybody that sees you and says ‘sign my autograph’
For everybody that sees you and says that ‘you all that’
You all that
I just want to be a real boy,
Pinocchio story goes, I just want to be a real boy
Pinocchio story goes...

And there is no Gepetto to guide me, no one right beside me
The only one was behind me I cant find her no more,
I cant find her no more I cant...
the only one that come out on the tour and stay, stay, stay...
Back when I was living at home and this was all a big dream

And the fame will be got caught
And the day I moved to LA
Maybe that was all my fault
All my fault to be a real boy
Chasing the American dream,
Chasing everything we seen
Up on the TV screen
And when I- the Benz was left
And the clothes was left
And the hoes was left
You talk the hoes to death thinkin the money that the-
You spent the doughs to death
And tell me what-tf for a real boy

They say Kanye you keep it too real boy
Perspective and Wise man say, one day you’ll find your way
The wise man say, you’ll find your way
The wise man say, you’ll find your way
The wise man say
Appendix E

“Monster”
Kanye West
(Feat. Rick Ross, Jay-Z, Bon Iver & Nicki Minaj)

[Bon Iver:]
I shoot the lights out
Hide til its bright out
Whoa, just another lonely night
Are you willing to sacrifice your life?

[Rick Ross:]
Bitch I’m a monster no good blood sucker
fat motherfucker now look who’s in trouble
as you run through my jungle all you hear is rumbles
Kanye West sample, here’s one for example

[Kanye West - Chorus:]
Gossip gossip
n**s just stop it
everybody know (I’m a motherfucking monster)
I’m a need to see your fucking hands at the concert
profit profit, n***a I got it
everybody know I’m a motherfucking monster
I’m a need to see your fucking hands at the concert
I’m a need to see your fucking hands at the ...

The best living or dead hands down huh?
less talk more head right now huh?
and my eyes more red than the devil is
and I’m bout to take it to another level bitch
there you go again, ain’t nobody as cold as this
do the rap and the track triple double no assist
but my only focus is staying on some bogus shit
argue with my older bitch acting like I owe her shit
I heard the people saying raps are gettin trap mayne
bought the chain that always give me back pain
fucking up my money so yeah I had to act sane
Chi n***a but these hoes love my accent
she came up to me and said this the number 2
if you wanna make it number one your number 2 now
this that goose an’ Malibu I call it Malibooya
God damn Yeezy How I hit em with the new style
know that motherfucker well, what you gonna do now
whatever I wanna do, gosh it’s cool now
nah gonna do, uh its a new now
think yo motherfucker really really need to cool down
cause you will never get on top off this
so mommy best advice is to get on top of this
have you ever had sex with a pharaoh
I put the pussy in a sarcophagus
now she claiming I bruise her esophagus
head of the class and she just want a swallowship
I’m living the future so the presence is my past
my presence is a present kiss my ass

[Kanye West - Chorus]

[Jay-Z:]
Sasquatch, Godzilla, King Kong
Lochness, Goblin, Ghoul, a zombie with no conscience
question what do all these things have in common
everybody knows I’m a motherfucking monster
conquer, stomp ya, stop your silly nonsense
none of you n****s know where the swamp is
none of you n****s have seen the carnage that I’ve seen
I still hear fiends scream in my dream
murder murder in black convertibles
I kill a block I murder avenues
rape and pillage a village, women and children
everybody wanna know what my Achilles’ heel is
Love I don’t get enough of it
all I get is these vampires and blood suckers
all I see is these n****s I’ve made millionaires
milling about, spilling there feelings in the air
all I see is these fake fucks with no fangs
tryna draw blood with my ice cold veins
I smell a massacre
seems to be the only way to back you bastards up

[Chorus]

[Nicki Minaj:]
Pull up in the monster
automobile gangster
with a bad bitch that came from Sri Lanka
yeah I’m in that Tonka, color of Willy Wonka
you could be the King but watch the Queen conquer
OK first things first I’ll eat your brains
then I’ma start rocking gold teeth and fangs
cause that’s what a motherfucking monster do
hairdresser from Milan, that’s the monster do
monster Giuseppe heel that’s the monster shoe
Young Money is the roster and the monster crew
and I’m all up all up all up in the bank with the funny face
and if I’m fake I ain’t notice cause my money ain’t
let me get this straight wait I’m the rookie
but my features and my shows ten times your pay?
50k for a verse, no album out!
yeah my money’s so tall that my barbie’s gotta climb it
hotter than a middle eastern climate
find it Tony Matterhorn dutty wine it
while it, Nicki on them titties when I sign it
have these n***s so one-track minded
but really really I don’t give a F-U-C-K
forget barbie fuck Nicki she’s fake
she’s on a diet but her pockets eating cheese cake
and I’ll say Bride of Chucky is child’s play
just killed another career it’s a mild day
besides ‘Ye they can’t stand besides me
I think me, you and Am should menage Friday
pink wig thick ass give em whiplash
I think big get cash make em blink fast
now look at what you just saw I think this is what you live for
Ah, I’m a motherfucking monster!

[Bon Iver:]
I-I crossed the line-line
and I’ll-I’ll let God decide-cide
I-I wouldn’t last these shows
so I-I am headed home
[repeated]
Appendix F

“Many Moons”  
Janelle Monae

[Verse 1:]
We’re dancing free but we’re stuck here underground  
And everybody trying to figure they way out  
Hey Hey Hey, all we ever wanted to say  
Was chased erased and then thrown away  
And day to day we live in a daze

[Refrain:]
We march all around til’ the sun goes down night children  
Broken dreams, no sunshine, endless crimes, we long for freedom (for freedom)  
You’re free but in your mind, your freedom’s in a bind

[Chorus:]
Oh make it rain, ain’t a thang and the sky to fall  
(The silver bullet’s in your hand and the war’s heating up)  
And when the truth goes BANG the shouts splatter out  
(Revolutionize your lives and find a way out)  
And when you’re growing down instead of growing up  
(You gotta ooo ah ah like a panther)  
Tell me are you bold enough to reach for love?  
(Na na na...)

[Verse 2:]
So strong for so long  
All I wanna do is sing my simple song  
Square or round, rich or poor  
At the end of day and night all we want is more  
I keep my feet on solid ground and use my wings when storms come around  
I keep my feet on solid ground for freedom  
You’re free but in your mind, your freedom’s in a bind

[Chorus]

[Cybernetic Chantdown:]
Civil rights, civil war  
Hood rat, crack whore  
Carefree, nightclub  
Closet drunk, bathtub  
Outcast, weirdo
Stepchild, freak show
Black girl, bad hair
Broad nose, cold stare
Tap shoes, Broadway
Tuxedo, holiday
Creative black, Love song
Stupid words, erased song
Gun shots, orange house
Dead man walking with a dirty mouth
Spoiled milk, stale bread
Welfare, bubonic plague
Record deal, light bulb
Keep back kid not corporate thug
Breast cancer, common cold
HIV, lost hope
Overweight, self esteem
Misfit, broken dream
Fish tank, small bowl
Closed mind, dark hold
Cybergirl, droid control
Get away now they trying to steal your soul
Microphone, one stage
Tomboy, outrage
Street fight, bloody war
Instigators, third floor
Promiscuous child, broken dream
STD, quarantine
Heroin user, coke head
Final chapter, death bed
Plastic sweat, metal skin
Metallic tears, mannequin
Carefree, night club
Closet drunk, bathtub
White house, Jim Crow
Dirty lies, my regards

[Closing Lullaby:]
And when the world just treats you wrong
just come with me and I’ll take you home
No need to pack a bag
Who put your life in the danger zone?
You running dropping like a rolling stone
No need to pack a bag
You just can’t stop your hurt from hanging on
The old man dies and then a baby’s born
Chan, chan, chan, change your life
And when the world just treats you wrong
just come with me and I’ll take you home
Shan, shan shan shan-gri la
Na na na na na na na na na na
Vita

Georgia M. Roberts was born in Central Oregon, and currently lives in the Seattle area. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from University of California, Berkeley, and a Masters degree in English from the University of Washington. In 2018 she earned a Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Washington in English.