

HIP HOP ILLITERATE:
HERMENEUTICS FOR THE FUTURE
OF AMERICAN LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM

Andrew R. Belton

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Approved by:

GerShun Avilez

Danielle Christmas

Meta DuEwa Jones

Mark Anthony Neal

Eric King Watts

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ABSTRACT

Andrew R. Belton: Hip Hop Illiterate—Hermeneutics
for the Future of American Literary Theory and Criticism
(Under the direction of GerShun Avilez)

This dissertation puts the critical reading practices and aesthetic techniques of the hip hop emcee at the center of a millennial theory of American literature and cultural criticism. While many disciplines have integrated aspects of hip hop culture into their fields of study, the distance maintained between traditional English literature departments and hip hop's deep literary archive has generated gaps for literature scholars to fill. In contrast to earlier work that emphasized the emcee's lyrics as an extension of conventional Western poetics, this dissertation demonstrates how emcees create their own theories of reading and literacy, alongside practices of critical interpretation and evaluation, which teach scholars how to read and interpret more canonical literary texts.

Through a series of suggestive close readings positioning hip hop concept albums as a novel form of literary production, the dissertation sets prominent emcees in critical conversation with acknowledged American writers, arguing that all these authors imagine a future American literature (and by extension, a future America) by first sounding the nation differently. In reading hip hop's shifting concepts of literature and interpretation as transformative of the role of the literary critic in the new millennium, I conclude with a brief consideration of the future of

literary and hip hop studies.

Specifically, using methods informed by Foucauldian discourse analysis and critical historiography, each chapter precedes by showing how the hip hop emcee cultivates aesthetic practices in conversation with earlier American literary and critical texts, building on techniques first explored in works like *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1933), *Mules and Men* (1935), and *The Color Purple* (1982). Ultimately, the project puts these canonical texts in critical dialogue with a number of self-consciously literary moments in hip hop, focusing on the emergence of a new genre of literature production, as seen in the emergence of hip hop concept albums the likes of Eric B. & Rakim's *Paid in Full* (1987), Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), and Nas's *Untitled* album (2008). Through the comparative reading of these hip hop albums and canonical black authors, the project considers how shifting the concepts of authority, expertise, literacy, reception, and literature away from the printed page expands the responsibilities of the literary critic and the possibilities for future literary studies.

My introduction begins by meditating on the dichotomy between the concepts of literacy and illiteracy, particularly as the former gets deployed for the purpose of standardizing what comes to constitute literature for study in the American academy. By exploring the early-twentieth century American folkloric tale, "How to Write a Letter," as related by Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men* (1935), I theorize the contours for developing a literary hermeneutics based in hip hop's aesthetics as a function of the fragmentation of the dichotomy between literates and illiterates exposed in the emergence of the hip hop concept album and in the pervasive horizon point of the American emcee's literary influence.

In chapter one, I recoup a literary genealogy of the emcee that predates hip hop's cultural emergence in America in the 1970s. Turning to W. E. B. Du Bois's well-known critical text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and a lesser known reflection in his writings, "My Country 'Tis of Thee" (1907), the chapter explores Du Bois's use of paratextual selection and revisions and redeployments of his previously published work as a prototypical style of sampling and remixing characterized in the techniques of hip hop production. I examine these structural procedures in Du Bois's writing in order to consider their centrality to American literary aesthetics and to track their development as a trope for sounding racial difference in the literary texts that inform American cultural belonging.

The second chapter investigates the idea of love as a critical legacy of black feminist thought and womanist theory by offering a critical reading of Lauryn Hill and the reception of her debut solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998). In the process of mapping Hill's location and embodiment in and outside of hip hop, the chapter offers a comparative reading of the critical debate chronicled in the 1987 issue of *New Literary History* between Joyce A. Joyce, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker, Jr. regarding the viability of love as a theoretical concept to build African American literary theory and criticism in the 1990s. This comparative reading considers what is really at stake when love is positioned at the margins of literature scholarship and outside the domain of hip hop, working to read Lauryn Hill's reception as an updated response to June Jordan's question, "Where is the Love?" from her seminal 1978 essay of that same name.

My final chapter takes up the question of how shifting the concepts of literature and literary criticism ultimately effect and transform the role of the literary critic in the twenty-first century. Interrogating notions of critical authority and expertise, I look specifically at Nas's

Untitled ninth studio album (formerly titled the *Nigger* album) and the controversy surrounding its release in 2008. Calling to mind Jonathan Culler's invocation of hip hop in his introduction to the PMLA's 2010 Special Topic issue, "Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First century," my chapter juxtaposes the 'disciplinary training' of literature experts at the second-half of the twentieth century with an analysis of black expressivity and American trafficking in racial stereotype in antebellum times. I showcase Nas's meditation on the concept of 'nigger' as a 'floating signifier' of American culture and ultimately read the emcee's attempts to engage the slur critically in ways that rethink and rework Frederick Douglass's earlier literary destabilizations of the myths surrounding the slave as subject in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855).

In the conclusion, I revisit many of the arguments made throughout the dissertation, adding a reflection on how I came to write this project as a reaction to the spoken-word poet Saul Williams's 2009 performance of *The Dead Emcee Scrolls: The Lost Teachings of Hip Hop* (2006) as part of the Carolina Performing Art Center's spring concert series. The conclusion meditates on the institutionalization of hip hop studies, allowing that although many academics have authored, edited, and led major studies and departments contributing to the expanding field, no scholarly works have taken an approach that emphasizes the genre's possibility for developing literary hermeneutics. Ultimately, *Hip Hop Illiterate* concludes by speculating about the possibilities of its theoretical framework and grammar for the future of literary analysis, highlighting how an analysis based on the hermeneutic practices of the American hip hop emcee suggests new possibilities for the future of American literary studies.

To my first reader, Dominique N. Reed, without whom *the* work
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: INTRODUCTION TO HIP HOP HERMENEUTICS.....	1
Definitions.....	1
Literary Theory after the Hip Hop Emcee.....	2
A Final Note on the Terminology of the Text.....	28
CHAPTER 1: BEFORE THE MIC.....	34
Sampling and Remixing American Literary Aesthetics.....	35
Some Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression in the Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois.....	48
CHAPTER 2: “WHERE DID OUR LOVE GO?”.....	58
<i>The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill</i>	59
Black Feminist Thought and Womanist Theory.....	69
The Politics of Making Everything Personal.....	79
CHAPTER 3: THE AUTHOR AND THE AUTHORITIES.....	84
Beneath the Shadow of the Literary Critic.....	85
Black Subjectivity in American Literature.....	98
CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF LITERARY (HIP HOP) STUDIES.....	108
APPENDIX: CHARACTERISTICS OF HIP HOP EXPRESSION.....	121
ENDNOTES.....	130
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	158

INTRODUCTION TO HIP HOP HERMENEUTICS

Definitions

Illiterate, adj.: Of persons: Ignorant of letters or literature; without book learning or education;
unlettered, unlearned.

Ill, intr. v.: U.S. slang (orig. and chiefly in the language of rap and hip hop): To behave badly or irrationally.
adj. and n.: Aggressive, irrational, crazy; unpleasant, bad.
Excellent, attractive; fashionable.

Literate, adj.: Of a person, society, etc.: acquainted with letters or literature; erudite, learned, lettered.
Literary.
Opposed to illiterate.¹

*Illiterate, adj.: Of a person, society, etc. (in the hip hop sense): To be acquainted with letters or literature in a manner that is considered aggressive, irrational, crazy, unpleasant or bad (in the black blues sense, which can also mean good or excellent);
Unpleasing, or unpleasantly literary.
Attractively, or fashionably illiterate.

*Author's definition.

Literary Theory after the Hip Hop Emcee

The hermeneutician is an interpreter, a mediator, who on the basis of his knowledge of a language makes understandable that which is not understood, that which is *no longer* understandable. This occurs when in the place of the word which is no longer understood, he puts another which belongs to the stage of the language [*Sprachstufe*] of his readers.

- Peter Szondi and Timothy Bahti, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*

I met a critic | I made her shit her drawers | she said she thought hip hop was only guns |
and alcohol | I said, “Oh hell naw | but yet it’s that too | you can’t discrimi-hate | cause
you done read a book or two...”

- Outkast (Andre 3000), “Humble Mumble” (2000)

Students of the game | we passed the class | cause nobody can read you | dudes like we
do...

- Jay-Z, “The Takeover” (2001)

And even after all my logic and my theory | I add a “motherfucker” so you | ign’ant
niggas hear me...

- Fugees (Lauryn Hill), “Zealots” (1996)

The theory behind our tactics: “The white man is always trying to know into
somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind

for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935)

The chief aim of this dissertation as a scholarly project is the realization of a longstanding critical challenge: to produce a theory of literature and its interpretation that accounts for the full complexity of literature's continuous historical production. Desires to determine a comprehensive theory of literature have, by necessity, coincided with both fundamental changes to the production of literature throughout history, and with structural changes to its study and its use to develop a literary academy over time. Always under investigation and at issue are the basic questions surrounding the nature of literature, the decisive qualities of literary language, and the best methods for the analysis of both. Like previous works of literary theory, *Hip Hop Illiterate* explores a hermeneutic schema that accounts for these structural and methodological changes to literature and its study, providing forward-looking answers to speculative questions about literature's nature and addressing inadequate contemporary assumptions about the best approaches for its disciplinary and institutional analysis. The project arrives at new concepts of literary analysis by first looking to the literary aesthetics of hip hop and building on the hermeneutic tendencies of the American hip hop emcee.

Said a bit more simply, this dissertation uses hip hop to teach scholars how to read all types and forms of literature. While the culture of hip hop is distinguished by four performative pillars, including the practices of deejaying, breakdancing, emceeing, and graffiti-writing, I have chosen here to focus primarily on the practice of emceeing and the figure of the hip hop emcee as

the energizing impetus for rethinking contemporary engagements with literary theory and literary criticism in American literature study. As William Jelani Cobb explains in the introduction and opening chapter of his *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (2008), the figure of the emcee is particularly suited to aesthetic study as “the most widely recognized” representation of hip hop and, perhaps by extension, American culture; and too as “the modern incarnation of the black verbal artist.”² *Hip Hop Illiterate* provides for an analysis of the emcee, additionally, as an exemplary practitioner of literary hermeneutics, a mediator of meaning in the long tradition of “the black preacher, the bluesman, and the boulevard griot.”³

Since the earliest manifestations of hip hop in the United States, as a distinctively American cultural practice in the South Bronx in the mid-1970s, innumerable lyrics and albums produced by hip hop emcees have represented some of the most resourceful (and ‘resource full’) approaches to the production of American literature and cultural criticism in the history of American cultural expression.⁴ Crafting an archive deeply influenced by and influential of the more canonical print-based narratives and scholarly analyses of American authors, emcees have added more to the nation’s rich resource of stories and criticism than perhaps any other group of contemporary authors, poets, and cultural critics. As such, a closer examination of the practice of emceeing, and the hermeneutic principles attendant to hip hop’s literary procedures, is necessary if the twenty-first century literary critic is to properly assess what all new opportunities exist for producing and sustaining literature, its interpretation, and its scholarship in America in the new millennium and digital age.

Recent works of fiction, including the likes of James Hannaham’s *Delicious Foods*, Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*, and Kiese Laymon’s *Long Division*, numerous collections of poetry by writers like Thomas Sayers Ellis, Jessica Care Moore, Kevin Young, and Saul

Williams, musicals like Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*, and plays and performances by Zakiyyah Alexander, in addition to a number of the novels by Paul Beatty and Colson Whitehead, to name only a few instances, all reflect the emcee's dynamic influence over contemporary American storytelling, performance, and literary production. Additionally, the conception, design, and manufacture of hip hop concept albums, the likes of Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), Mos Def's *The Ecstatic* (2009), Jay-Z's *American Gangster* (2007), and Ghostface Killah's *Twelve Reasons to Die* (2013), among many others, reveal what has gradually become a more self-consciously literary, narratively-dynamic, character-driven, genre-creating, and self-referential process of album production on the part of American emcees. The emergence and production of the first hip hop concept albums in the late 1980s, specifically, can be said to have inaugurated the more explicitly literary turn in hip hop production.⁵

Finally, with the millennial publication of a number of critical memoirs and allegorical autobiographies, including RZA's *The Tao of Wu* and Jay-Z's *Decoded*, the latter of which prioritizes the transcription of lyrics alongside the emcee's own critical interpretations, we see a sudden willingness by these cultural creators to intervene in the more academically acceptable medium of print to foster the more rigorous and instructive scholarship of their art form. All these formal expansions, critical interventions, and hermeneutic possibilities because a few generations ago a throng of disenfranchised youth living in the South Bronx, through nearly incomprehensible sociopolitical circumstances, birthed a seemingly inexhaustible cache of critics, performers, and cultural creators specializing in the production of sounds and lyrical voices so culturally distinct as American, that they have been defining the sounds, aesthetics, stories, fashion styles, visual representations, and cultural imagination of the United States ever since. The sheer volume of their literary archive puts these artists at the forefront of

contemporary American literature production, requiring that professional literature scholars take a more concentrated look at the literariness of their achievement. In this patient listening, *Hip Hop Illiterate* demonstrates the methodological potential of the emcee's considerable theorizations of literature and literary hermeneutics for use by the American literature scholar at the start of the twenty-first century.

Accordingly, this dissertation proceeds by exploring the procedures and strategies of lyrical narration and epistemological critique that occasion the emcee's conversion of her stories and encounters into aesthetic experiences and artistic interpretations of American life. The project takes this exploratory approach in order to identify the specific ways in which hip hop theorizes about itself as literary. Already numerous scholars have identified, with some urgency, a need for academically acknowledging the literary import of hip hop's poetics. In both his monograph, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (2009), and his introduction (with Andrew Du Bois) to *The Anthology of Rap* (2011), Adam Bradley explains how "raps are lyric poems," both within "the context of African American oral culture and the Western poetic heritage," adding that "every rap song is a poem waiting to be performed."⁶ His pronouncements about hip hop as poetry elucidate the numerous critical consequences that arise from failing to read and appreciate the emcee's lyrics for their "fundamental literary and artistic" value.⁷

While Bradley's studies succeed in producing a scholarly rationale for the close reading and analysis of rap as "lyrical poetry" (alongside "some of [Western] poetry's oldest forms"), it falls prey to what David Caplan disavows as the "debates over hip hop as poetry" that focus too narrowly on treating poetry as "an honorific term" detached from its historical contexts of oppression, and its continued deployment as a rationale for American literature's racialization and segregation.⁸ In his *Rhymes Challenge: Hip Hop, Poetry, and Contemporary Rhyming*

Culture, Caplan attends to the resurgence of an American rhyming culture as a function of the emergence and prominence of the hip hop emcee. Like Bradley, Caplan's interests rest primarily with hip hop's poetics, yet their projects conflict where Bradley's defense of hip hop's lyricism emphasizes its place within a long line of Western lyric poetry and Caplan commends emcees for their deviation (but again, as a kind of return) from that tradition. By making the rhyme central and essential to their formal strategies, in the face of a pronounced opposition to do the same by their print-based American poet counterparts, emcees within Caplan's reading rescue American poetry from the doldrums of the trendy late-twentieth century turns towards prose styling.

In many ways, these articulate positions are different sides to the same analytical coin, where the value of hip hop's rhyming lyricism and the emcee's use of literary language can only be critically observed in light of, and contradistinction to, conventional Western poetics, new and old. *Hip Hop Illiterate* reorients the discussion of hip hop away from these structural analyses of its formal poetic strategies towards a fuller consideration of how the emcee's narrative techniques and hermeneutic methods create new possibilities for understanding the nature, conception, and production of literary discourse in America, compelling millennial scholars to hear and interpret the art of the emcee on its own independent terms. My readings, as such, privilege other, less often explored generic comparisons between the lyricisms present in hop hop and the autobiographical, essay, short story and novelistic forms also used by American authors to produce literature.

As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. remarks in one of the seminal works of American literary theory, "each literary tradition, at least implicitly, contains within it an argument for how it can be read."⁹ Acknowledging the literariness inherent to hip hop's expansion of American expressive practice, beyond preliminary descriptions of the verses as an example of prosody,

Gates's assertion pushes us to investigate another, more prominent genre of literary production crafted specifically by American emcees, that is the emcee's creation and production of the hip hop concept album.¹⁰ Here, I am defining the *hip hop concept album* as any compilation of tracks arranged specifically to cohere sonically, thematically, or as a singular narrative, in ways that necessarily requires an engagement with the connection between an individual track's inherent meaning(s) and the larger collective meaning(s) of the album as a singular production and whole. This definition, then, can describe the production of mixtapes, digital and video albums, and other thematically or narratively cohering compilations. How an emcee prioritizes the relationship between each individual track and the album's reception as a whole, is another way of understanding the distinction I want to make here between commercial and literary (or concept) albums.

Some hip hop albums, for example, are purposely constructed as a compilation of singles, cohering rather loosely, if at all, to a singular vision, and with no clear organizational structure or relationship. Under this rubric, the progression of tracks on the album rarely establishes a clear beginning, middle, and endpoint for reception. The hip hop concept album is another thing entirely. As illustrative and constructive of a new genre of literary production in the American vernacular, the hip hop concept album is a unique generic construction of the American emcee, incorporating styles and approaches to narration that sometimes offer more fruitful comparisons between an emcee's verses and a critical or theoretical essay, or to autobiographical or historical writings, or to novelistic structures and discourse. An example of the difference between the two types of albums can be seen in Jay-Z's *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* (2000) and *American Gangster* (2007), where the former operates predominantly as a collection of singles for radio and club play and the latter is meant to be understood as having a single vision of composition.

Engaging what the emcee Jay-Z says, in the epigraphic verse above, about the emcee being a “student of the game,” we might articulate reasons for studying more closely the emcee’s construction of the hip hop concept album to uncover what formal practices she originates and how these practices become productive of a place where the “game” of literature production, study, criticism, and interpretation can be unpacked and theorized further. In fact, as Jay-Z asserts, emcees are not only “students of the game” but they “[pass] the class” because “nobody can read you | dudes like [they] do”—where the “you” of his verse easily implicates both other emcees as his lyrical adversaries and those so-called academic and critical experts whose limited approaches to hip hop as literature, the emcee often deems woefully inadequate.¹¹ Where Jay-Z betters his challengers, both as contentious lyrical combatants and authoritative and well-meaning academic readers, the verse suggests, is in a capacity for critical comprehension that includes ‘decoding’ and ‘encoding,’ to resituate Jay-Z’s language within the conceptual terrain of Stuart Hall, the institutional and ideological norms and predispositions of an American intellectual and literary culture that continues to operate within limited systems of literacy, interpretation, and knowledge production with regards to American culture and its attendant literatures.¹²

An example of this complicated capacity for literacy is masterfully dramatized in the eighth episode of season four of David Simon’s crime drama series, *The Wire*.¹³ In the episode, writers Ed Burns and Richard Price (author of *The Wanderers* and *Clockers*) offer a flawless televisual representation of those individuals who, following after Bakari Kitwana’s classification, might be described as a ‘hip hop millennial generation.’¹⁴ The scene opens with a group of raucous eighth grade students sitting in a West Baltimore classroom, distractedly listening to their math teacher drone on at the blackboard. The instructor, a certain Roland

Pryzbylewski or “Prezbo” as he’s more or less affectionately known, once a trigger-happy Baltimore police officer turned ineffectual middle school math teacher, dons the cap of the credulous authority in this slowly unfolding scene of inverted instruction. The minor lesson begins in stereotypical American media fashion, with the white teacher (Prezbo) attempting to motivate and ‘school’ his black (presumably low-achieving-to-illiterate) students on the solution to a basic algebraic word problem.

“Rashad has 82 apples and 12 friends,” Prezbo proffers, reading from the board. “7 have worms and 15 are rotten | He wants to distribute the good apples evenly | How many apples does each of Rashad’s friends get?” Overlooking the cultural tokenism inherent with Prezbo’s choice of “Rashad” as the name and representational link for the students in the word problem, the lesson progresses with two moments that stand out as indicative of the complicated dynamics of literacy available to students of color and hip hop millennials in the twenty-first century American classroom. The first comes when Prezbo reads the word *distribute* and a student echoes it back, questioningly. As teacher and authority, Prezbo reacts to the student by offering a substitute and simple alternative, “give out.” In turn, the student responds with yet another rhetorical challenge, if not a slightly aggressive and unambiguously hip hop reaction: “Well just say that, yo.” The next moment comes just as the scene shifts to the opening credits, after Prezbo, presumptively, calls out another student, who sits at the back of the classroom holding court: “Calvin, are you done already?” The particularly disruptive student responds in the affirmative, quickly offering the correct answer from the multiple-choice selections written on the board. “How’d you work that out so fast,” Prezbo sneers in startled disbelief. “Easy,” Calvin declares, “‘B-5’ got the dinks.”

What is revealed in both these scenes of instruction is a collective disregard for the rules of literacy (and authority) that restrict the students in their ability to discover solutions or produce knowledge according to their own intellectual capabilities, particularly within an institutional setting where their skills are constantly overlooked, undermined, or assumed to be non-existent. The fact that so many American emcees proclaim themselves middle and high school dropouts speaks to this unique disavowing phenomenon. The first student, who declares that Prezbo should “just say that” when he replaces *distribute* with *give out*, puts her finger squarely on the problem that students of the hip hop millennial generation perpetually face. Not the innocuous nature of the equation $(82 - 7 - 15 / 12)$, which would, by itself, be simple enough for all of them to solve, even for them to solve “fast,” irrespective of Pryzbylewski’s disbelief. Instead, the sequence showcases the problematics of an obfuscating educational language and how its institutional use is weaponized to divert students from the material that matters most. As such, the millennials in Prezbo’s classroom suffer epistemological dilemmas attendant to the biases of academic language and its tendency towards obscuring representations that leave certain communities out of the process of knowledge production more often than others. When Calvin makes his way to the blackboard to explain to Prezbo (and his classmates) how he came by the answer so quickly, the impasse traversed by these students is thrown into sharp relief.

In a symbolic dramatization of mastery-under-duress, Prezbo hands the chalk over to Calvin who had moments before asserted, “if you want, I can show you,” and who temporarily usurps the role of teacher and authority in order to deliver his mini-lecture to the classroom:

You did this with the early math class, right? So you like got 82 apples, 12 niggas [classmates break into laughter], and then how many blah, blah, blah... Then you went like “dinking” [gesturing to the chalk marks on the blackboard next to the correct answer]

all around this one and no other one. So the answer is “B–5.” Everybody get that? B–5. It got all the dinks. B–5 and I’m outtie, five thousand.¹⁵

Triumphantly returning to his seat at the back of the classroom, as classmates reward his effort with attention and applause, Calvin’s explanation leaves his peers exuberant in the face of their teacher’s embarrassed half-smirk. Prezbo, who begins the lesson in the privileged position of intellectual authority, ‘schooling’ his unlearned students, ends Calvin’s lecture in the position of the un-schooled novice—brought low by both students’ exposure of his problematic pedagogy and their own dynamic capacity for literacy beyond mere words and numbers.

By remixing the algebra problem, in his own vernacular style, and through the use of his own dynamic slang language, Calvin, as a “student of the game,” provides a vivid demonstration of the complex correlation between comprehension, context, literacy, and the ability to decipher institutional codes as they lead to the production of knowledge (“nobody can read you | dudes like we do”). His approach to finding the correct answer illustrates an *illogic* that ruptures the hierarchical relationship between student and teacher, between institutional authority and amateur syllogist, and ultimately between the traditional standards of reading and comprehension and hip hop’s resourcefulness in producing alternative pathways to knowledge production.¹⁶ Like the other hip hop millennials featured in the show’s fourth season, Calvin shows an aptitude for deconstructing the discourse, power dynamics, and authoritative codes of America’s most powerful institutions, in ways that are central to both hip hop’s hermeneutics and the emcee’s critical practice of knowledge production.

In sharp contrast to *The Wire*’s representation of hip hop millennials as postmodernist critics-par-excellence, many literature scholars and cultural critics adumbrate us with analyses that refuse to register hip hop’s immeasurable potential for producing meaning beyond

institutions, and systems of learning, that reify oppressive dualisms like authority versus amateur and literate versus illiterate. Much of the critical writing surrounding hip hop, a distinction I want to make from the critical work and scholarship that defines the field of Hip Hop Studies (in which *Hip Hop Illiterate* operates), can thus be characterized by a critical illiteracy and chronic misreading of hip hop's hermeneutics. Critics of hip hop remain intent on limiting the American public's understanding of the genre's interpretive impact and influence over national expression, and malign emcees as the predominately illiterate spokespersons of a predominately ignorant culture and aesthetic community. Take John McWhorter's *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America*, for example.¹⁷ In his arguments, McWhorter disclaims the political viability of any hip hop music and defames the emcee as a fraudulent and would be activist for civil rights and black liberation.¹⁸ Going further, McWhorter mocks the notion that there could be "something weightier, deeper" in hip hop that would require any critical inquiry at all.¹⁹ This, ironically, in light of his own study, which purports to do just that.

Hearing his arguments in dialogue with another of the prefatory epigraphs, McWhorter's reading of hip hop reproduces the illogic of Andre 3000's fictionalized critic. On the track, "Humble Mumble," Andre 3000 describes a scholar who believes that hip hop is "only guns | and alcohol," because she fails to acknowledge, or perhaps even recognize, the limitations of her own understanding of the genre based on certain inherited structures of knowing.²⁰ As the emcee admonishes, "you can't discrimi-hate | cause you done read a book or two"; a cautionary sanction, with scatological consequences, of the pitfalls of overestimating the value of one's intellect and ability to comprehend as a byproduct of received scopes of vision and knowledge born of both book-learning and learning to 'read' within institutional learning environments that devalue the discovery and practice of alternative forms of acuity.

Lauryn Hill, too, makes this point (in another of the epigraphic quotes at the start of this chapter). Revealing more about the alternative expressive strategies of the emcee, Hill's verse exhibits a non sequitur verbal dexterity and multivalent discursive composition—with lyrics ranging from her allegorical explanations of quantum mechanical physics (“two emcees can't occupy | the same space | at the same time”) to a description of “gamma ray” properties and fantastical musings about listening to a Carlos Santana serenade while “consuming mango juice” at the North Pole—that addresses the unique conundrum emcees face in performing for ‘readers’ who fall within the widest ranges of literacy and varying levels of correct training, disciplinary knowledge accumulation, and capacities for lyrical comprehension.²¹ Addressing crowds that range in diversity from the street-wise primary school dropout to the bookish Ivy-league university professor, emcees display what Mae Henderson, in theorizing a tradition of black women's writing and black feminist scholarship, calls “Ermenglossia” (after Mikhail Bakhtin's “heteroglossia”); that is, an ability “to locate the moment of understanding in the ear of the auditor.”²²

Unlike other poststructuralist theories of reception, Henderson's explanation of *Ermenglossia*, much like Lauren Hill's lyrical distillation of the emcee's range of listeners, puts emphasis on a “primacy of the addressee” that isn't always dependent on the listener maintaining an informed “subject position.”²³ Hill advances this idea, in a complementary fashion to Henderson's arguments, by rejecting outright the assumption that listeners inherently possess a capacity for reliability or even addressability as witnesses, interlocutors, and interpreters of the author/scholar/critic/emcee's meaning. Instead, the emcee compensates for the addressee's inherent unreliability by operating within a method of ongoing accommodation for the subject's

significant illiteracy in hearing, reading, and understanding properly. As Hill's declares: "even after all my logic and my theory | I add a 'motherfucker' so you | ign'ant niggas hear me."²⁴

The moment of understanding that evolves between the emcee and her addressee is not one passively awaited. This, because the "ear of the auditor" cannot, by the very nature of the emcee's utterance, ever achieve perfect perceptibility.²⁵ Instead, what Hill's lyrics demonstrate is how the very scope and possibility for hermeneutic comprehension in the addressee is built upon the emcee's capacity for a multiply discursive utterance—a "speaking in tongues" to adopt Henderson's language.²⁶ Which is to say, for those captivated listeners that the emcee addresses as part of *the crowd*, the practice of simultaneously delivering the logical, the theoretical, and the profane determines and contains the moment of understanding and interpretation as a dynamic and dialogic process fully orchestrated and accounted for by the performance of the emcee.²⁷

As an acronym, William Jelani Cobb reminds us, to *emcee* "is a whole 'nother thing entirely. Microphone Controller, Mic Checker, Master of Ceremonies, Mover of Crowds."²⁸ This catalogue of responsibilities delimits the rhetorical work inherent to the practice of emceeing. The ability to 'check' the mic—to 'control' it—in order to 'master' the moment as ceremonial and 'move the crowd'; all these functions become linked, etymologically, with the performance of the emcee. Meeting these duties, then, the emcee can be said to deploy a system of formal comprehension, in composition, under which the attention paid to orienting the crowd (with twice as many ears as auditors) becomes paramount. Lauryn Hill acknowledges as much in her articulation of the necessity for addressing the "ign'ant" in her verse. No addressee is outside of hip hop's domain and reach, as the desire to be *heard* by its chief literary practitioners far outreaches the limits of a desire to be *understood*. Hip hop, then, develops its rhetorical strategies to circumvent each of us as its unreliable listeners. The primacy of this function of the emcee, as

the positioner and mover of crowds, comes then to define the very process and possibility of hermeneutic comprehension within hip hop's literary terrain.

Like the hip hop millennials from *The Wire*'s Baltimore classroom, emcees make use of shifting slang and situational language to position each individual listener within the crowd of addressees, mediating the construction of meaning on both specialized and a collective plane. As such, "even after all [her] logic and [her] theory," Hill adds the "motherfucker" because the profane (and perhaps the incomprehensible), too, can open unexplored frequencies for literacy. Where the logic and language of formal knowledge production within the American academy can be unnecessarily heady and distancing, the language of hip hop cuts straight to the heart. For this reason, within the vocabulary of the culture, *to understand* is often omitted in favor of the more appropriate infinitive, *to feel*—as in the common hip hop expression: *Do you feel me?* The emcee's literary language is a dynamic one where the use of extended metaphors, homonyms, impersonations, personifications, and double-entendres—to name only a few of the compositional tools in her arsenal—allows the emcee to move along these multiple planes of discursive signification and knowledge production. In this way, to hear/listen/read and understand as an addressee within the emcee's crowd is an act of continuous hermeneutic movement.

The moment of being addressed by the emcee, which is also a ritual moment of hearing, listening, and of potential understanding for each individual addressee as a member of the meaning-desirous crowd of collective listeners, enacts a radical reorganization of the conventional standards of literacy, comprehension, and the logic of recognition that defines hip hop's unique form of expression. Under this unique system, "the role and position of the hearer/listener (and, by extension, the reader)" is expanded, as an effect of the emcee's

multivalent language, “from the act...of listening (or reading)” to the act of moving within an intricate geography of knowability with “multiple and simultaneous positions and positionalities” and various levels and stages of comprehension.²⁹ The trap, then, within such a sophisticated and underexplored system of knowledge production, comes with believing that the emcee’s engagement with and manipulation of language requires the individual listener’s consistent and conscious comprehension for any hermeneutic meaning to emerge within the crowd.

About this last point, there is so much more that must be said.³⁰ For now, above all else, *Hip Hop Illiterate* proceeds by taking what emcees like Jay-Z, Andre 3000, and Lauryn Hill, among so many others, have to say seriously. Particularly, by asking important questions about the blind spots we as literature scholars bring into our practice of literary hermeneutics by making methodological assumptions about the relationship between literacy, literary production, and literature study. What does it mean to be ‘literate’ in relationship to a hip hop text? How does an addressee in the emcee’s crowd ‘read’ an emcee’s lyrics and move to ‘feel’ her narrative? Does the emcee’s purposeful positioning locate us in the best place to interpret her complex and perhaps contradictory meanings? If so, how do we begin to explain this positioning as a hermeneutic principle of composition and engagement?

An emphasis on the literary nature of the strategies of hip hop emceeing is at the very center of any answer to these questions. By developing an awareness of the emcee’s method of knowledge production, we might uncover the hermeneutic principles inherent to hip hop culture. As such, classifying practices like emceeing as literary moves the American literature scholar further away from the strict adherence to the written form as the only substantive method of literature production. Of course, the emcee’s liberation of American literary expression from the restrictive precincts of the page must necessarily affect the nature of its interpretation. The

question American literature scholars must ask, then, is how this movement effects our abilities to read, comprehend, analyze, interpret, and criticize the entire canon of American literature as it has been produced for study. Here is where the project's emphasis on the hip hop concept album as a new genre of literary production proves decisive.³¹ Just as all writing isn't literature, all hip hop isn't literary, and the hip hop concept album offers a way of organizing an academic discussion of hip hop's narrative production in ways that might later be amended or extended to include other aspects of hip hop's literary production.

To do (literary) theory, in any sense of that term, in the twenty-first century, requires a reorientation towards the text by the contemporary theorist. *Hip Hop Illiterate* chooses to orient the contemporary theorist towards the hip hop concept album as the emergent literary text of the new millennium. This reorientation in order to extend the definitional boundaries that limit our understanding of literature and literacy in an ongoing digital age. To extend these boundaries, as such, forces a long overdue disinvestment in the strict binary between *literacy* and *illiteracy*, both in American literature study and within the longer Western hermeneutic tradition. In a Western cultural context, being called illiterate has never been an apolitical designation and the capacity for literacy never merely a physiological capacity. The relationship between written representation, hermeneutic comprehension, and Western cultural value has always been motivated by dynamics of power, even when that relationship has been assumed to exist in a relatively straightforward and disinterested logic of linguistic signification and cognitive ability.

Hip Hop Illiterate troubles this framework by exploring the critical reading practices of the hip hop emcee and mapping a theory of interpretation based on hip hop's disintegration of the boundary between *readers* who are valued for adhering to the conventional systems of literacy and those who I deem hip hop's *illiterates* or *ill literates*. Selecting to study those who

constantly break from (and down) convention allows us to ask what happens when the basic expectations of literary theory and interpretation—that is, the reliance on reading and writing as the primary technologies of literacy—are deemphasized within the hermeneutic process. Can literary hermeneutics be inferred from texts, and aesthetic practices, that, effectively, leave writing behind? To ask this question is to take hip hop seriously as literature. It is an important question to consider when analyzing hip hop's process of literature production and dissemination of cultural critiques. To begin to answer these questions requires, at least, the mere suggestion of an alternative hip hop hermeneutics, emergent from the innovative literary practices of the American hip hop emcee and buried within the structuring practices of the hip hop concept album as a new genre of American literary expression.

In the vein of taking hip hop serious as literature (and seriously in its offerings of a theory of literature), we should recall a time in American literary history when the medium of print, and its implications for literature study and interpretation, were not yet so fully concretized as the standard in our institutions of higher learning. During the Library of Congress's great push for the transcription of American folklore and oral tales at the start of the twentieth century, for example, a tale stands out as a peculiar predecessor to the thematic approaches found in hip hop's texts. Zora Neale Hurston includes the tale, "How to Write a Letter," in her collection, *Mules and Men* (1935).³² Beyond the Hurstonian humor conveyed in its retelling, this story illustrates a number of the hermeneutic difficulties in representing language and apprehending rhetorical meaning when mediating between the spoken and the graphic. Hurston's critical solutions to these interpretive dilemmas help foreground many of the early mediations that widened the space between literacy and illiteracy in the burgeoning tradition of American literature study.

In this story, a farmer's desire to put the instruments and technologies of his daughter's formal education to use (and perhaps, to the test) are undermined by language's indeterminacy in writing:

Robert Williams said:

Ah know another man wid a daughter.

The man sent his daughter off to school for seven years, den she come home all finished up. So he said to her, "Daughter, git yo' things and write me a letter to my brother!" So she did.

He says, "Head it up," and she done so.

"Now tell 'im, 'Dear Brother, our chile is done come home from school and all finished up and we is very proud of her.'"

Then he ast de girl "Is you got dat?"

She tole 'im "yeah."

"Now tell him some mo'. 'Our mule is dead but Ah got another mule and when Ah say (clucking sound of tongue and teeth) he moved from de word.'"

"Is you got dat?" he ast de girl.

"Naw suh," she tole 'im.

He waited a while and he ast her again, "You got dat down yet?"

"Naw suh, Ah ain't got it yet."

"How come you ain't got it?"

"Cause Ah can't spell (clucking sound)."

"You mean to tell me you been off to school seven years and can't spell (clucking sound)? Why Ah could spell dat myself and Ah ain't been to school a

day in mah life. Well jes' say (clucking sound) he'll know what yo' mean and go on wid de letter.”³³

Here, Hurston illustrates the various dimensions of interpretive meaning that are distinguished and distinguishable by manifold levels of literacy. Her transcription of this clever anecdote ends abruptly, at the exact moment when her own education and literacy reveal a competency of which the farmer's daughter, even after several years of formal schooling, remains incapable. This tongue and cheek tale, unlike others in Hurston's collection, features a named speaker, “Robert Williams,” who communicates this fictional daughter's failure to Hurston in order to register an emerging communal understanding of the limitations to the capacity for reading and writing, newly available to African Americans post-American Reconstruction, as technologies of communication. “You mean to tell me,” the farmer-father says, “you been off to school seben years and can't spell (clucking sound)? Why Ah could spell dat myself and Ah ain't been to school a day in mah life.”³⁴

As a story so self-conscious about communal literacy, “How to Write a Letter” represents, thematically, a generational shift in the levels of access to and investment in formal education in America at the turn of the twentieth century. In studies conducted during the first decade of the century, W. E. B. Du Bois noted systemic issues standing in the way of African American higher education.³⁵ According to the second of those surveys, Du Bois notes that African Americans comprised less than one percent of American college students in 1910.³⁶ By 1915, a marked “expansion of public secondary education in the South” had led to increased enrollments by black college graduates.³⁷ “How to Write a Letter” emerges, then, in an American historical moment when the issues at the heart of continuing cycles of black illiteracy, from the antebellum histories of Southern legal exclusion, to the postbellum financial restraints of

sustaining access, all began to fade, permitting more widespread African American communal reading and writing practices (i.e. literacy) as no longer a cultural *malum prohibitum*.

As such, Hurston's early inclusion of this tale—which acts as one of the collection's few title stories—dramatizes this complex moment of transformation in American cultural history.³⁸ In the farmer's unapologetic assertion of his own illiteracy and in his immediate desire to dictate a letter to his daughter upon her return from college, we might read the presence of a communal aspiration for cultivating literacy, present at the time of the tale's narrative composition. We may also recognize in the daughter's learning and immediately exploited capacity for written communication, an early twentieth century investment by African American communities in the newest technologies available for cultural advancement, particularly as those technologies were being framed as offering the fastest means to economic self-sufficiency and racial uplift. Like the daughter in the story, Hurston, too, is recently returning home after years of schooling. Beyond the excitement conveyed at being home at the beginning of *Mules and Men*, what gets revealed in her writings about this homecoming is a deep sense of anxiety about the consolidating division between a generation of highly educated, highly literate African American college graduates like herself and their 'down-home' uneducated and mainly illiterate contemporary counterparts and forebears. "I didn't go back there," Hurston says, "so that the home folks could make admiration over me because I had been up North to college and come back with a diploma and a Chevrolet. I knew they were not going to pay either of these items too much mind."³⁹ Still, as she later acknowledges in the introduction, had she returned home "with a lot of form and fashion" someone would have quickly "sent word" to put her in her place.⁴⁰

As these prefatory remarks reveal, Hurston's anxious homecoming captures a moment of transition in America's cultural valuing of literacy and the attendant social and class formations

at the turn of the century—a transition marked by more stringent communal divisions between its literate and illiterate members, as attendant to the sudden and somewhat selective access to higher education.⁴¹ Regardless of the surfacing tensions between this newly educated class and their ‘down home’ counterparts, Hurston’s hometown of Eatonville (Florida) proved the ideal location for her to begin her anthropological work. As she confesses in the collection’s introduction, “I was glad when somebody told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folk-lore’...I hurried back to Eatonville because I knew that the town was full of material and that I could get it without hurt, harm, or danger.”⁴² Returning home, then, with the proverbial *diploma-in-hand*, Hurston’s education affords her a new standing within the community, one affirmed by her ability to transcribe for everyone the “tales [she] had heard as a child.”⁴³ Now dictated to her by her illiterate contemporaries, these tales lay the groundwork for Hurston’s intellectual exposure of American (read: white) readers to the sophisticated literary and social dynamics at work (and play) in African American discursive exchanges that simultaneously signify on literate and illiterate members outside the community.

Significantly, Hurston’s competency in letters, like that of the farmer’s daughter, is what allows her to share this potentially injurious game of signifying with her uninitiated readers. Ironically, it is also what subjects her to the potential harm of the game itself. As one of Eatonville’s own and “just Lucy Hurston’s daughter, Zora,” this particular form of communal play is something that Hurston would have understood to designate her as a *home-town girl*.⁴⁴ The contours of the game, however, would not have been (and perhaps might not be still) immediately apparent to her readers. By way of interpretation, at the moment when the farmer’s daughter’s education fails her; that is, in the daughter’s attempts to transcribe the father’s letter to his brother; that is, at the moment when her father makes the “clucking sound,” the nature of the

game that Robert Williams is playing on Zora (and that Hurston, in turn, can be read to continue playing on her readers) is presented for the attentive literary critic to decipher.

The daughter, though learned, is revealed to be illiterate, especially in relationship to both Hurston, who transcribes this tale, and Robert Williams, the story's interlocutor. Through her formal education Hurston has learned a bit more than the farmer's daughter in the story and instead of failing to transcribe the tale, presented by Williams as such, she chooses to represent Williams's sounding of the "cluck," parenthetically as "(clucking sound of tongue and teeth)."⁴⁵ Curiously Robert Williams, the tale's interlocutor, though described in the collection as down home and uneducated, seems to understand enough of language and letters to know the difficulty of representing this particular sound in print, both for the daughter in the story, and perhaps (is he also testing Hurston in his telling?) for Hurston herself.

As a trained anthropologist, Hurston's education designates her as one of the few members of her Eatonville community qualified to transcribe these tales. With her possession and utilization of this new technology of literacy, Hurston illustrates the ways in which her community continues to undermine the seeming dualism between literacy and illiteracy. The farmer, ostensibly illiterate, asks his learned daughter to pen him a letter. Despite her own education and literacy, she fails to do so. Robert Williams as also presumably uneducated, relates the tale to Hurston, another recent college graduate returned home, perhaps testing Hurston's level of literacy against that of the daughter's in the tale. And Hurston, who expertly transcribes the tale for her reader, passes Williams's test using a rhetorical figure that accounts for the indeterminacy of language, and sounds the indeterminate in writing by sidestepping the representation of the inarticulate, the pre-linguistic, the ante-script mule "cluck" as a problematic of written communication. Do Hurston's readers, ostensibly the most literate of all (and who

probably first included the father of American anthropology, Franz Boas, and Charlotte Mason, the wealthy literary philanthropist), recognize the irony in Hurston's use of the parenthetical in the text to include the clucking sound as a figuration for the inescapability of illiteracy in even the most highly educated literates surrounding this tale?⁴⁶

What is the literature scholar to do, then, with the presumed illiteracy of the hip hop text and emcee? As Chris Rock famously joked in his 1996 HBO television standup comedy special, *Bring the Pain*: "If you're black, you get more respect coming out of jail than school." The presumption being that at the start of the twenty-first century the so-called "smarty art niggas" who have gained a formal education are somehow less authentic, less reliable, less legible, and in some cases even less black, primarily because they've gained these advanced and specialized educational literacies. Hurston's transcription of "How to Write a Letter" anticipates these relational complexities in American culture generally, and American literary culture, more specifically. She provides American literature scholars an early example of the kind of work that must still be accomplished in the field of American literature study. As with the earliest transcriptions and scholarship of American folklore, hip hop offers limitless possibilities for understanding these complexities of American expression. The figure of the emcee, like Hurston, engages in critical reading practices that provide alternative pathways to knowledge and new hermeneutic principles for both literates and illiterates to work through and build on. By ignoring the inescapability of illiteracy, the contemporary scholar of literature operates at a comprehensive disadvantage to the hip hop emcee as a cultural and literary hermeneutician.

Attending, then, to the emcee as a *m.illennial c.ritic*, and preeminent author in this new phase of American literature production, allows us as critics and theorists of literature to move beyond the strict dichotomies of literate and illiterate that restrict our levels access to and

recognition of all available literary meanings. *Hip Hop Illiterate*, as such, focuses on the emcee as a model of the critic of literature *par excellence*, expanding definitions of literacy and introducing a new grammar for literature study along the way.⁴⁷ Much like the important academic work that treats hip hop as literature and applies the tools of literary analysis to the study of hip hop emcees and their lyrics, which includes for me Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (2004), and Greg Thomas's *Hip-Hop Revolution in the Flesh: Power, Knowledge & Pleasure in Lil' Kim's Lyricism* (2009), this dissertation offers an expansive treatment of hip hop's aesthetics and literary import. While these works do offer preliminary literary treatments of hip hop, they mostly privilege readings based in conventional literary analysis of the genre. My project, instead, formulates a new theory of literature, its production, and its criticism, as built on the hermeneutic practices of emcees. As such, my research proposes to be the first to demonstrate the ways that hip hop theorizes about itself as a form of literature and about emcees as practitioners of a unique hip hop form of literary hermeneutics.

Chapter One begins by recouping a literary genealogy of the emcee that predates hip hop's cultural emergence in the 1970s. Turning to the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, in works like *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the chapter explores early examples of textual sampling and remixing to explain how innovations in early twentieth century American writing influenced the rhetorical development of the practice of emceeing at the end of the century. More specifically, I examine Du Bois's recourse to remixing his own earlier published essays and his structuring use of paratextual selection through the incorporation of musical notations at the start to each chapter of *The Souls* text, as a method for creating thematic cohesive and sounding America as a nation.

In Chapter Two, I investigate the idea of love as a critical legacy of black feminist thought and womanist theory by offering a critical reading of the stardom of Lauryn Hill and the ideas of literary reception that coalesce in the release of her debut solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998). In the process of mapping Hill's location in and outside of the legacies of Black Womanist theorists (and hip hop circles), the chapter revisits the critical debate between Joyce A. Joyce, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker, Jr. regarding the place of love in black literary criticism. This comparative reading considers what is really at stake when love is positioned at the margins of literature scholarship and outside the domain of hip hop literary production, working to answer June Jordan's formative question, "Where is the Love?" by addressing issues surrounding reception and black masculinity.

The final chapter ends by taking up the question of literature and its shifting concepts, particularly the concept of the author and the literary authority. Interrogating the idea of critical expertise, I look specifically at Nas's *Untitled* (2008) ninth studio album (formerly the *Nigger* album) and the controversy surrounding its release. The chapter showcases Nas's meditation on the concept of 'nigger' as a 'floating signifier' of American culture, providing analyses of black expressivity and America's trafficking in racial stereotype that rethink and rework Frederick Douglass's earlier literary destabilizations of the myths surrounding the slave as (black) subject in his revisions to *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855).

How these shifts effect and transform the role of the literary critic in the twenty-first century leads to a conclusion that meditates on the literary archive, particularly as the idea of creating an archive connects to the institutionalization of literature for study. I explore the production of Yale's *Anthology of Rap* (2010), as such, to chart a past and future trajectory of Hip Hop Studies that accounts for hip hop as literature in ways that might avoid the politics of

legitimization and marginalization that had distanced hip hop from theories of African American literary expression for years. Finally, I recommend the ‘digital archive’ as a critical alternative to the literary anthology as an ideal instrument for the study of hip hop as literature.

As a theoretical proposition, *Hip Hop Illiterate* inaugurates what I hope will be an informative and critically viable approach to reading not only hip hop concept albums as literature, but that will offer a hermeneutic approach for rereading the entire American literary canon.

A Final Note on the Terminology of the Text

As a literary practice that values the conception, association, and deployment of intellectually generative phraseology, provocative slang, stirring neologisms, and thought-provoking colloquialisms, emceeing requires the attentive fan and critic to pay particularly close attention to the interpretations and meanings of familiar and unfamiliar terms. Heedful of this example, this project asks its reader to treat its nomenclature as an attempt to dig out new semantic space and cultivate fresh theoretical ground for discussing and critiquing hip hop as a distinct literary genre within the tradition of American literature. While designations may at times seem arbitrary, or even erroneous, the text is purposeful in its spelling and orthography, in keeping with significant distinctions that need to be made between theorizations that limit the discussion of hip hop to solely musical terms (sometimes alternatively referred to as *rap*), or as solely a form of entertainment, or in its emergence as a cultural artifact and form of historical/sociological recording, or even in primary discussions of hip hop as a type of political commentary. Instead, this project underscores how hip hop works on all these levels through its primary function as a form of literature.

As such, the most important designation the text makes comes with its elision of the commonly used hyphen between the words “hip” and “hop.” Because of the popularity of the hyphenated term, I have chosen to remove its presence from this text as a noun whose denotation can, at times, simultaneously, be too static, too general, and too all encompassing. As an all-encompassing designation, the term *hip-hop* can, too, often be used to refer to the entire cultural community, and while my primary objective in this project is to provide an interpretation of hip hop as it produces texts as literary products, a secondary motivation requires that I expand upon what Zora Neal Hurston has called the “little plays” or lived performances that emerge within black expressive communities, and the ways that hip hop as an expressive culture, conditions certain performances of identity as a process of reproducing preexistent racial and cultural narratives.⁴⁸ I say more about this within the project itself (including discussions of the use of stereotypes within hip hop and discussions about hip hop’s understanding of black subjectivity), but here are a few quick examples to orient the reader regarding the problematics of identification and authenticity within the hip hop community.

Consider, first, that in the wake of the death of the Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace), Bad Boy Records signed and released an album by the artist, Shyne, whose claim to fame was the coincidence of his voice sounding like the late-B.I.G.’s. Additionally, one might tally the number of emcees whose aliases appropriate the names of infamous gangsters, including Nas Escobar, Scarface, Childish Gambino, Yo Gotti, Rick Ross, and so on. These recursive instances of emcee alias selection call attention to the ways that hip hop generates identity as a referential and performative impersonation, shifting between poles of malleability and repetitiousness in its interpolation of emcee personas. Additionally, the grammatical designation of *hip-hop* as a noun is especially problematic for the current treatment, which posits the practice

of emceeing as an active aesthetic creation that perpetually generates a diverse set of artifacts, documents, styles, fashions, and performances (i.e. a gerund/present participle form of the verb that can function as a noun). Deploying, then, the less common, unhyphenated form of the word allows me to designate a difference with how hip hop will be discussed in these pages. Namely, as an activity enacted by emcees (and others) that generates the literary production or performance of literary hermeneutics. This choice of term predicates the unhyphenated form of the word as a variable practice that generates these aesthetic procedures, not as they produce cultural artifacts, but as they distinguish between the emphasis on those artifacts as commodities, historical records, political manifestoes, and so forth, and on them as new forms of literature.

Moreover, the text proceeds in favor of spelling out certain terms like “emcee” and “deejay” versus the alternative option of using their equivalent acronyms (“MC” and “DJ,” respectively). Again, this preference charts a distinction being made between designations that turn on the materialization and commodification of the culture for distribution and sale, or on the emcee’s accounts as historical evidence, and those that turn on the resistance to these as primary designations as a precondition for recognizing any literary elements. Rather than using the terms “MC” and “DJ” to designate those who produce hip hop lyrics and music for documentary purposes or profit, I use “emcee” and “deejay” to designate how a set of aesthetic practices and procedures are integrated into one’s *being-in-hip hop* as a literary, narrative, and performative practice, and how that conditions one’s *being-in-the-world* as a means of epistemological understanding.⁴⁹

The emcee, then, is defined and identifiable only when operating as a literary creator as such. Put differently, my use of the term *emceeing* throughout this dissertation defines not what an emcee produces (lyrics or albums), but how an emcee determines and deploys a set of

aesthetic practices within those artifacts. An emcee exists, then, as the sum of her performances and not as their point of origin. Unlike the author, in this regard, my designation of the American hip hop emcee is determined by recognizing her literary production as a variable and dialogic practice as a function of a community of creatives that include the deejay, the breakdancer, the graffiti writer, and the crowd of listeners. Such a conception opens up spaces for extending our definitions of literacy and the responsibilities of the literary critic, especially the *m.illennial c.ritic* who exists as a kind of academic or scholarly emcee. That is, as a mediator of meaning, and producer and disseminator of knowledge. Like the hip hop emcee, the millennial literary critic's position becomes determined by a critical ability to move the crowd (of scholarly and critical readers). As such, the American literary critic, following the American hip hop emcee, exists within a set of discursive practices that allows for the proliferation of meanings about the literary text, both within and outside the domain of hip hop as literature.

Finally, on my redeployment of the terms “illogic” and “illiterate” to account for the complication of meanings provided by a hip hop cultural translation of the word *ill*, I will say simply that this project contemplates the ways that literature critics and scholars, hip hop fans, fans of literature, emcees, academics, and the students, supporters, and signatories of both, are constantly vacillating back and forth on a pendulum of comprehension and incomprehensibility in relationship to their levels of literacy interacting with hip hop texts. Throughout this vacillating process, the levels and stages of literacy are shown to be completely dependent on an ability to decipher context (historical, cultural, and social), to account for what and how things are communicated (or miscommunicated and, in the digital age, telecommunicated), to recognize the use of codes, coding, code-switching, and the decoding that sometimes means deeming something indecipherable, but also the dependency of pursuing the referentially allusive, which

can appear both directly and indirectly, as historical and ahistorical, in the liminal and subliminal, from popular as well as sources most obscure. And a final finally, a dependency on the coherence of the very words in circulation to convey the meager meanings being communicated.

Being hip hop illiterate means realizing that the ground on which we stand as critical readers, both in relation to hip hop's texts and those of canonical American literature, is quite precarious. The interpretation of any text requires certain dexterity from the critic and an ability to recognize, acknowledge, and move between their own levels of literacy and illiteracy. When facing an archive that is as "ignorant" and "literate" as hip hop's, even the most astute, well read, and knowledgeable of critics and hip hop heads can be classified as the most ill-informed. The beauty, then, and perhaps the difficulty for theorists of hip hop as literature is the fact that its terms are terminally ill—fated to die quick deaths on the mouths of the genre's most prolific practitioners. Ill terms, as termed by ill emcees, destined to bend, fade, and falter, until finally they are born anew as fresh slang and novel neologisms in the minds of the illest of critics—the true hip hop illiterates.

My deployment, then, of that honorific term, *hip hop illiterate*, in the title is meant as my attempt to *emcee* a new and crucially important critical vocabulary. I offer it as a designation for literary critics seeking hermeneutic tools for the new millennium, *Hip Hop Illiterate* (both as a term and as a text) offers a new language and means of connecting those of us who would have developed a capacity for *ill literacy* across these various aesthetic frameworks and archives, as well as a means for evaluating and re-valuing those who continue to excel in executing a knack for indulgent *illiteracy*—that is, those with a knack for pursuing language and meaning to a place

where misunderstanding can be purposeful, performative, and productive—the most *illiterate* of us all, the hip hop emcee.

CHAPTER ONE: BEFORE THE MIC

This is a journey into sound. A journey, which along the way will bring to you new color, new dimension, new values, and a new experience. Stereophonic sound...

- Geoffrey Sumner, "Train Sequence" on *A Journey into Stereo Sound* (1958)

So I walk up the street | whistling this | feeling out of place | cause man do I miss |
a pen and a paper | a stereo | a tape of | me and Eric B...

- Eric B. & Rakim, "Paid in Full" (1987)

This is a journey into sound | A journey which along the way will bring to you new color | new dimension | new value...

- Eric B. & Rakim, "Paid in Full [Coldcut Remix]" (1988)

So I walk up the street | whistling this | feeling out of place | cause man do I miss |
a pen and a paper | a stereo | a tape of | me and Warren G...

- Snoop Dogg, "Paper'd Up" (2001)

Sampling and Remixing American Literary Aesthetics

So how will American literature sound? To commence with this exploration of hip hop as American literature, or alternatively, to continue with what has been introduced as a theorization of the conjunction between hip hop's aesthetics, the emcee's practice of literary hermeneutics, and the development of the hip hop concept album as a new genre of literary production, a few preliminary steps must be made in the direction of articulating a genealogy of American literary aesthetics. While the direction of these steps might at first appear to require a return, to historicizing the development of American literature according to some particular teleological rationale or to yielding a chronological account of canonical texts that align with the political or socializing function of the nation as previously or presently constituted,⁵⁰ my arguments are not oriented towards assembling a "history of the past" and its contingent explanations and institutionalizations of American literature, particularly not "in terms of the present" assumptions and configuration of the discipline (or nation-state) and the texts identified for literature study demonstrating U.S. constitutional or cultural ideals in the past or at present.⁵¹ Instead, this chapter provides the framework for mapping a "history of the [literary] present," where hip hop emerges somewhat unexpectedly as the dominant form of vernacular expression in the United States, providing with its arrival alternative understandings of American literature as composed through an aesthetics of sounding the nation differently, and establishing for those listening closely fresh links and previously unimagined lines of connection to earlier, underexplored practices in America's literary heritage.⁵²

Moving beyond the disciplinary boundaries that dis-integrate the literary scholarship of hip hop from the critical writings that have produced and imagined American literature for study, the chapter explores American literary aesthetics through suggestive readings of sounding

practices within both genres. That is, within American literature production as it might have been otherwise imagined and within the production of hip hop as American literature that I am proposing now. In particular, this investigation will explore how literary sounding practices are oftentimes excluded from or mistakenly attributed to an “anti-aesthetic” branch of American literary production.⁵³ Such a reading of the techniques deployed by hip hop’s chief literary practitioners (I mean, here, the emcee, but we can imagine also how these techniques are used in the performative work of deejays, producers, graffiti artists, and breakdancers) are included to illustrate how both the formal and thematic principles underlying hip hop’s construction, and the literary and critical reading practices inherent to emceeing have, to date, been largely devalued by literature scholars.⁵⁴ Often deemed to offer methods less than tasteful, less than sensible, less than pleasurable, and less than literate, according to Western aesthetic standards, emceeing practices when explored in depth reveal a highly literary approach that encodes within its aesthetic sensibility an inherent critique of the Western aesthetic project. Dismantling some of the most cherished organizational concepts in Western literature, hip hop reconstitutes American literary aesthetics within a *dynamically suggestive* terrain of sonic narration.⁵⁵ Ultimately, in this chapter, I argue that this terrain promotes the formation of new and future soundings of American national identity and provides a space for recovering corresponding narratives that express national belonging differently in the past.⁵⁶

In this vein, the chapter arranges a discussion of some “Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression,”⁵⁷ concluding with a reading of sampling and remixing as practices that show up, anachronistically, at the start of the twentieth century, in the writings of one of the seminal intellectuals constructing the American cultural imaginary and its aesthetic, W. E. B. Du Bois. The chapter reads Du Bois’s implementation of sounding structures, in texts typically lauded for

their historical, sociological, philosophical, and political importance, instead of for their imaginative use of compositional strategies explored specifically for literary purposes. Reading his editorial recourse to revision through a series of peculiar paratextual selections in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and looking at a lesser-known work of Du Bois's writing, a brief reflection published in his edited journal, *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line* (1903-1910), entitled "My Country 'Tis of Thee," I offer a rarely explored interpretation of Du Bois's writings as experimental work in narrative and fictive sounding that serves in its use of techniques of sampling and remixing as a precursor to the aesthetically experimental sounding practices later perfected in hip hop, and specifically in the hip hop duo Eric B. and Rakim's debut album, *Paid in Full* (1987).⁵⁸

In his introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (2002), Hal Foster identifies a far reaching "anti-aesthetic" principle emergent within the development of art and architecture at the end of the twentieth century.⁵⁹ Foster contends that there exists a propensity within art at the end of the century for producing "a critique [of Western art] which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them," collapsing all deconstructing artistic representations during that period under the banner of postmodernism.⁶⁰ Foster adds that, as a practice of postmodernist artists, "the very notion of the aesthetic [and] its network of ideas" has become "rooted in a vernacular" that works to deny "the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm."⁶¹ What Foster frames as the 'vernacularization' of the Western aesthetic realm, within an emergent anti-aesthetic approach to cultural production fin-de-siècle, other aestheticians have long identified as a development away from Western aesthetic norms and values towards alternative theorizations of aesthetic practice and away from Western methods of privileging certain kinds of cultural production and representation altogether.

In the introduction to Addison Gayle Jr.'s edited collection, *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), for example, Hoyt Fuller makes a necessary connection between transformations in critiques of Western literary aesthetics and the strategies of resistance to oppressive political regimes that marginalize non-white citizens from narratives of national belonging.⁶² The turn, as Fuller frames it, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," is a movement in which "revolutionary black writers [turn] their backs on the old 'certainties' and [strike] out in new, if uncharted, directions."⁶³ Here, Fuller's reading of the black back-turning journey towards a "new" and "uncharted" aesthetic future conflicts with Foster's account of deconstructing artistic representations at the end of the twentieth century falling within a postmodernist anti-aesthetic principle of production. Because Foster recognizes a desire and value to be gained in oppositional critiques of established Western cultural norms of representation, his reading of destructuring practices works to recover Western aesthetic patterns of privileging, valuing, and judging through a faulty logic of inversion. Fuller's vision, instead, offers the possibility of an alternative aesthetic realm outside and beyond the normative judgments of Western aesthetic practices.

Like other aesthetically radical artistic developments of the twentieth century, hip hop demonstrates an ongoing need to 'destructure' the Western aesthetic project, with its attendant and assumptive modes of representation, but in a manner consistent with Fuller's description of a political aesthetic venture. Within this terrain, Western concepts like 'the beautiful,' 'the sublime,' and the 'singular rational mind' all become subject to hip hop's destructuring. Additionally, emceeing as a practice of the critical interpretation of aesthetics, eschews the cultural restrictions and stifling primacy of the printed page as the preeminent medium of waging such a critique. Favoring, instead, strategies of sounding narratives of critique that expand the practices of cultural criticism and orature in ways that remap America's literary history and that

reorients its future productivity.⁶⁴ Ultimately, traditional aesthetic relationships previously presumed indissoluble come under increased critical scrutiny as the *illiterate* sounds that emcees produce register incomprehensible noise to the Western ear.

In place of previous aesthetic concepts, hip hop works through others more closely attached to the masses and underclass. Concepts, situated in the realm of popular culture, that emphasize, alternatively, the importance of sentiment over reason in the accumulation of meaning(s), affect and performativity over logic and standardization, and communal reception as an important process of knowledge production.⁶⁵ Slowly, the sense of harmony-in-knowing is replaced by an understated acquiescence to confusion, disorder, and discomfort; or alternatively, traded in for a cultural recognition of the aesthetic need for noise and noisiness to facilitate soundings that jar us into action (that move the crowd). Finally, the aesthetics found in hip hop, like those envisioned in Hoyt Fuller's description, enact a turning away from comprehension as the primary goal of aesthetic appreciation, allowing emcees to push expectation surrounding aesthetic experience and expression into realms structured by more enigmatically sensuous or bodily compulsions—beguiling crowds of listeners into feeling through an aesthetic maze that prioritizes productive bewilderment.⁶⁶

Readings of the emcee's alternative aesthetic expressions as part of an unmapped genealogy of American literary aesthetics confronts the contemporary critic of American literature with the dilemma of situating the disjuncture between African American forms of creative expression and the political project of constituting American literature for study.⁶⁷ As such, this chapter's delineation of some of the characteristics of hip hop expression efforts to orient the future study of American literature towards an appreciation of these alternative possibilities and practices of sounding the nation. As a dynamic of shaping a nation's cultural

imaginary, literary aesthetics play a large role in determining national values, tastes, and judgments. How do emcees participate in this process? To what extent does the emcee reconcile, subvert, or extend a longer tradition of sounding America? As Foster writes, “the idea that aesthetic experience exists apart, without ‘purpose,’ [and] all but beyond history” perpetuates a notion that “is now largely illusory.”⁶⁸ Reading the aesthetics of hip hop as purposefully deconstructing American literary expression, places that expression within a specifically political and racialized trajectory of *sounding the nation* as direct response to being *written out of the national narrative*.⁶⁹ That is, it allows all American citizens, constituted fully as such, to *sound America* for the purpose of *literalizing* their *Americanness*.⁷⁰ This, despite perpetual efforts at restriction legitimized by the nation’s founding documents and the accompanying ‘official records’ written into U.S. history. How, then, might we begin to interpret black expressive sounding as an ongoing disruption of the limits sustained in the American political project due to its revolutionary design and constitutional decisions to deny rights to its non-white citizens? Efforts to detach African American literary practice and cultural production from the aesthetic tradition that has shaped our narratives of national belonging, occlude recognition of practices like emceeing as engaged in a continuation of an American literary aesthetics of sounding the nation.

Although various techniques define hip hop as a cultural process, literary practice, and aesthetic project, the discussion here will be limited to the genre’s four foremost principles of production. Understood now as a predominantly African American cultural and musical practice, hip hop has very definite roots in the post-industrialized social world of New York City, and specifically New York’s South Bronx in the 1970s.⁷¹ As part of a musical legacy, literary heritage, and aesthetic genealogy, however, hip hop production and the practice of emceeing

have a much longer lineage—with its literary and musical qualities developing out of a rich and complex tapestry of blended African diasporic (particularly Afro-Caribbean) musics, literary, and critical traditions.⁷² Additionally, however, the practice of emceeing has developed in close cultural contact with American literary forms, especially with those forms where an attention to sound is most prominent.⁷³ I contend that the practice of emceeing expands upon a number of structuring strategies that well predate the specifics of hip hop’s cultural emergence in the 1970s. This extended genealogy, ironically, centers the most fundamental principle of emceeing and hip hop composition as a practice cultivated from a centuries-long cultural proclivity for (and adherence to) instrumentation grounded in African traditions of rhythmic drumming; that is, in hip hop’s utter structural reliance on the percussive *beat*.

Describing the structural importance in the musical production of hip hop of “looped drum beats,” “bass frequencies,” “repetition,” and “rhythmic complexity,” Tricia Rose writes: “Rhythm and polyrhythmic layering is to African and African-derived musics what harmony and the harmonic triad is to Western classical music.”⁷⁴ In qualifying the underlying distinctions between African and European musical structure and compositional predilections, Rose continues, “[t]hese features are not merely stylistic effects, they are aural manifestations of philosophical approaches to social environments,” arguing that unlike its African counterpart, “Western tonal harmony is structurally less tolerant” to what might be considered “acoustically illogical” or “unclear sounds”; that is, the beats and noises not fully vulnerable to aesthetic comprehension and total critical control.⁷⁵ More than half a century earlier, Zora Neale Hurston also observed this distinction between African diasporic and Western musical practices as a philosophical reaction to environment, creating fictions to explain how such practices were

understood and interpreted by the first generation of free African peoples building homes and communities in the United States.

In her first published novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1933), for example, Hurston writes, “[U]s ain’t no white folks! Put down dat fiddle! Us don’t want no fiddle, neither no guitars, neither no banjos. Less clap,” adding in her omniscient narrator’s contextualizing commentary:

They called for the instrument that they had brought to America in their skins—the drum—and they played upon it. With their hands they played upon the little dance drums of Africa. The drums of kid-skin. With their feet they stomped it, and the voice of Kata-Kumba, the great drum, lifted itself within them and they heard it...The drum with the man skin that is dressed in human blood, that is beaten with a human shin-bone and speaks to gods as a man and to men as a God.⁷⁶

Remarkably, Rose’s reading of hip hop music’s centering of the drumbeat recovers for contemporary readers Hurston’s earlier dramatization of the enslaved African’s anatomical smuggling of rhythmic drumming into the New World, and her vision of an imagined free black community in pre-twentieth century America passing down the beat as an aesthetic inheritance. Responding to the drastic change of environment that came with African enslavement, transatlantic transportation, and forced dislocation to the Americas (and then with several successive migrations of African Americans away from the American South), the ancestral beat finds its fulfillment in hip hop as the production of African sound sounding itself as an emergent American national identity.

Hurston’s novel, then, gives the image of a free black community as a complex fiction of continuity obscured by diaspora, where provisional aesthetic turns away from Western

instruments and musical practices lead towards those befitting a newly forming, or reimagined, American cultural heritage. And here, I would argue, Hurston accomplishes the task of crafting a fiction *literalizing* her characters *Americanness*. Her ability to imagine this transient moment in U.S. history, post-Emancipation, post-American Civil War, when recently constituted African American full citizens are incorporating their first free communities and constructing their first true narratives of national belonging, Hurston presents this moment as an imagined instance of aesthetic transformation as well, where rhythmic drumming provides the appropriate score for a once enslaved peoples' novel sounding of the proclamation of their access to the American national narrative, literalizing their *Americanness* by ingratiating its realization as American cultural sounding. Hurston's vision, then, of a communal circle of black sounding prefigures hip hop's cipher circle, extending into the nineteenth century a reimagining of the practices of the emcee as the celebratory aesthetic of a nationalistic free American blackness. Still, her vision serves as just one of several examples of African American writers figuring sound into their fictions as the black embrace of American national belonging.

Meditation on the African American writer's powerful reliance on the concept of rhythmic drumming as constitutive of American national identity anticipates the practice of emceeing and hip hop production in ways that the singing and production of spirituals, folk songs, ragtime, blues, and the early jazz forms of Hurston's Harlem Renaissance never fully realized. A secondary sense of the beat's importance and the second principle central to emceeing and hip hop production comes in the emcee's sophisticated deployments of lyrical, metered, and rhyming verse, generating within each two bar (i.e. eight-beat musical count) sequence structuring strategies that have produced some of the most complex rhyme schemes ever expressed in the English language. This practice of interacting with and manipulating the

beat through grammatical inversions, slant, end, and internal rhymes creates a style of rhythmic expression now uniquely associated with hip hop as a literary genre. The emcee's sense of lyrical inventiveness, which manifests through rhyme placement within the verse, the sophistication of mono- and polysyllabic rhyme use, and through homonymic sound games that delay and extend meaning, connects the emcee's rhyming to the most innovative practices of prosody in American literary history. In conjunction with rhyming, the cultivation of *flow*, or the pattern of rhyme, rhythm, accent, and syllabic stress that the emcee uses to offset, disrupt, complement, or extend the 4/4 time structure (i.e. measure) of the musical beat, provides the third component important to hip hop's structural composition.

Adam Bradley locates the etymology of the term "flow" in the "Greek *rheo*" (which the German Romantics ruminated about as *rhuthmos*), which translates variously as "rhythm," "measured motion," or "a way of flowing; to flow."⁷⁷ Jelani Cobb picks up on and extends this formal etymology by providing the following popular definition and its attendant connotations: "The aim is to be fluid, liquid, protean in one's approach to sound. Water and blood flow, liquids take the shape of their vessels—in this case, the vessel is the particular beat composition."⁷⁸ At the most basic level, flow is about a relationship between the emcee's rhythm (or rhyming scheme) and the structure of the (musical) beat. How an emcee divides and stresses her syllables, arranges and enunciates her words, and combines these affects to deliver a verse of sixteen bars (i.e. the standard length of one verse on a typical hip hop track) form the idiosyncratic mechanics of her signature rhyming style as complemented by the beat—or *flow*.

Detailing his first time observing a hip hop cipher circle, Jay-Z captures the moment by describing the complex lyrical display put on by an amateur neighborhood emcee. In particular,

Jay-Z emphasizes the spontaneity and disordered nature of the emcee's rhyming style as a demonstration of his signature lyrical flow:

[Slate] was rhyming, throwing out couplet after couplet like he was in a trance, for a crazy long time—thirty minutes straight off the top of the head, never losing the beat, riding the handclaps. He rhymed about nothing—the sidewalk, the benches—or he'd go in on the kids who were standing around listening to him, call out someone's leaning sneakers or dirty Lee jeans. And then he'd go in on how clean he was, how nice he was with the ball, how all the girls loved him. Then he'd just start rhyming about the rhymes themselves, how good they were, how much better they were than yours, how he was the best that ever did it, in all five boroughs and beyond. He never stopped moving, not dancing, just rotating in the center of the circle, looking for his next target...the crowd moved in closer, the next clap kept coming, and he kept meeting it with another rhyme.⁷⁹

Stylistically, the emcee in Jay-Z's anecdote cultivates what might be termed a 'freestyle' or 'battle rap'-style flow. Characterized by his "call[ing] out" of and "looking" out for on-lookers as "his next target" and by his "rhym[ing] about nothing" and everything outside the circle, we learn from Jay-Z's shorthand that the emcee also rhymes in "couplet after couplet," that he "kept meeting [the beat] with another rhyme," and that he "never [lost] the beat, riding the handclaps."⁸⁰ All these elements constitute aspects of Slate's signature flow. Because Jay-Z's description cuts short of reproducing the specific lines or language of the emcee, we are left to wonder about the more intricate nuances of his lyrics or specific lyrical delivery. Yet, what Jay-Z's remembrance turns our attention to is the fact that flow is as much about content as it is about structure.

Contrary to definitions that limit understandings of flow simply to an emcee's structuring strategies, flow as Jay-Z describes it in this scene, is more about what is being said by the emcee-Slate than about how Slate is saying it. This extended definition of flow allows us to consider how the orienting of narration and selection of content for narration are as vital a part of the emcee's and hip hop's production as are the beat, rhyming, and the emcee's signature flow as structuring strategies. Narrative flow, then, leads us to the fourth and final principle of emceeing and hip hop aesthetic production, and that is the Hurstonian concept of *dynamic suggestion*.⁸¹

Zora Neale Hurston first introduces the concept of *dynamic suggestion* in her seminal essay on the cultural distinctiveness and value of black aesthetic practice, "Characteristics of Negro Expression."⁸² Coining the term to explain the dynamic exchange and positioning that occurs between a black dancer/performer and her audience/spectator, Hurston writes:

Negro dancing is *dynamic suggestion*. No matter how violent it may appear to the beholder, every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more. For example, the performer flexes one knee sharply, assumes a ferocious face mask, thrusts the upper part of the body forward with clenched fists, elbows taut as in hard running or grasping a thrusting blade. That is all. But the spectator himself adds the picture of ferocious assault, hears the drums and finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle. It is compelling insinuation. That is the very reason the spectator is held so rapt. He is participating in the performance himself—carrying out the suggestions of the performer...The difference in the two arts is: the white dancer attempts to express fully; the Negro is restrained, but succeeds in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests.⁸³

As a strategy of engagement in the tradition of black performance, dynamic suggestion makes participation a requirement of audiences and spectators (or readers and listeners) for the full completion of the expressive act. Hurston characterizes this mode of expression as an “impression” or “insinuation” that requires, in response to the self-restraint and selective apparatus of the performer, a movement or reaction on the part of the spectator away from some ambiguous starting point in relationship to that performer, or her aesthetics, towards a future point of real or imagined convergence or contact. Recall how, for example, in Jay-Z’s anecdote about the dynamics of the hip hop cypher circle, it is the emcee at the center who “moves constantly,” creating about him a hermeneutic ring that calls the surrounding crowd to “move in closer.”⁸⁴

In hip hop production, the emcee’s recombinant collection of complex images, sounds, metaphors, neologisms, stories, words, and ideas in fluid juxtaposition demonstrates this recourse to dynamic suggestion. Dynamic suggestion is, then, a method for constituting and organizing not just narrative, or the relationship between performer and content, but also the relationship between the performer and her audience. Through the collection, selection, and suggestion of dynamic content, a method for orienting audiences towards the performer is born to invest audiences in the imaginative completion of the initial expressive act. It is an approach that destructures and reconstructs audience expectation; that takes effect and sets audiences in motion. In this way, a common shorthand acronymic definition for the role of the emcee is to ‘make contact’ or ‘move (the) crowd.’ From beats to rhymes, from samples down to individual word choice, dynamic suggestion is hip hop’s *modus operandi* and organizing principle for content selection. It demonstrates the emcee’s unique method of engagement with an audience of listeners eager to complete the aesthetic action, in ways that reveal how meanings weaved in and

out of lyrics are simultaneously understood, misunderstood, and (to use a hip hop neologism) overstood.

Some Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression in the Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois

Too, dynamic suggestion provides for the secondary literary considerations of the emcee, designating temporal setup, narrative sequencing, and the selection of a content-specific orienting persona. Understanding how these techniques developed prior to the late twentieth century in black expressive and literary practice is important to recognizing why, by the end of the century, emcees emerge as the most prolific practitioners of American literary aesthetics, continuing a genealogy of production that efforts at sounding the nation. Within each of these four basic principles of composition are contained others. For example, the notion of *resourcefulness*, as a lesser component of dynamic suggestion, can be said to describe hip hop's production and prolific use of digitally recorded and synthesized sounds (like police sirens or the amplified echo of falling rain).⁸⁵ Additionally, the deejay's original backspinning to create the rhythmic base loop (i.e. breakbeat) out of select dance sequences on disco records, or even the emcee's sampling and remixing of another emcee's rhymes as a means of signifying or paying homage, are both examples of this process of accumulating and expanding available content as a means of resourcefulness in production.⁸⁶

As such, I have included as an appendix at the conclusion of this dissertation further examples of the "Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression," sampling and remixing Hurston's earlier example by highlighting the distinctiveness of black aesthetic practice in hip hop, and discussing in more detail minor techniques of hip hop's composition—of which sampling and remixing are two examples now to be explored and illustrated in the writings of W. E. B. Du

Bois and in the production of Eric B. & Rakim's studio debut, *Paid in Full* (1987). In what Robert Stepto has called W. E. B. Du Bois's "most inventive turn-of-the-century work," *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) offers American readers, then and now, a text simultaneously "assembled" and "orchestrated" by Du Bois to sound the nation differently by suggesting a racialized conceptual framework for reading America's transitioning national consciousness and cultural imaginary as it's beginning to take shape in literature and critical texts at the turn of the century.⁸⁷ His unique compilation of "Essays and Sketches," then, demonstrates what we might call a DuBoisian compositional penchant for perpetual editorial revision, or remixing, and complex paratextual quotation, or sampling, both in his thinking about race and the nation, but also in the formal ways that mark the aesthetic tendencies in his writing as a method of rendering a *text-as-remix of remixed texts*.⁸⁸

Bringing together several previously published essays and penned speeches with five "original" pieces written specifically for *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois repurposes previously written and published materials to comprise nine of the text's fourteen chapters, tying the chapters together through several structuring decisions that work both to sound the text and the nation, but also to move his readers beyond the restrictive precincts of the printed page.⁸⁹ At the center of his revised writings are the concepts of race, double-consciousness, the Veil, and the problematics of the color-line at the turn of the century, all weaved into a framework of remixed textual reflections offset by paratextual samples of both literary quotations from across the globe and throughout history, and of the sampled scores of musical notations for the "Sorrow Songs."⁹⁰ Kevin Miles calls Du Bois's editorial strategies a form of "repetition" invested with an "interest in the future," remarking that as a strategic compositional practice, Du Bois's repetition of materials previously rehearsed and made public acts as a way of resisting forgetful readers

who cannot “recollect back” or “have already forgotten” everything Du Bois “does not want [them] to forget.”⁹¹ Additionally, Miles contends that the musical notations are incorporated to buttress these editorial revisions, to bring the text together with the “haunting echo” of the music of the Sorrow Songs.⁹²

Nahum Chandler describes the process as Du Bois developing his “horizon of thought” as a black intellectual conceiving of race in America *fin de siècle*, writing, more specifically:

[T]he intertextual context of these essays offer the possibility of an historicization of the theoretical production within this text that can announce an interpretive recognition of Du Bois’s thought in *The Souls of Black Folk* as itself simply a quite ordinary expression of an originary horizon of conception and theoretical promulgation, the singularity of Du Bois’s inhabitation in thought, that had become normative in his enunciation by the time that he assembled that great small book of essays.⁹³

Chandler reads this penchant for recursive revision and self-sampling as a type of ‘assemblage’ that marks the “dynamic historicity of the production of Du Bois’s discourse” and that characterizes the early years of his writing.⁹⁴ As Du Bois’s discourse develops, his formal use of “variegated styles” of writing built “from the poetic, to the sermonic, to the statistical, to the narratological, to the forms of syllogistic logic, to the essay form in the belles-lettres tradition, and to the learned or scholarly” increasingly inform his formal practice, with Chandler adding that such a complexity of style allows *The Souls of Black Folk* to be “performatively engaged in a more fulsome way by the reader.”⁹⁵ As such, Du Bois’s recourse to self-selection in reproducing, in remixed form, his own previously published content becomes prototypical of an aesthetics of sampling and remixing in his writing style at the start of the century, offering an

early entry point into the genealogy of American literary aesthetics later found in hip hop as an American literary and cultural practice at the end of the century.⁹⁶

Like Miles's and Chandler's readings, my interest in Du Bois's revisions are rooted in a sense of his re-visioning of race and nation for the future of America. Robert Stepto brings our attention to the ways in which at least one of Du Bois's chapters plays with remixing as a method of authorial control in the opening "Of our Spiritual Strivings,"⁹⁷ but I contend, additionally, that the entire text operates as a remixed document, repurposing Du Bois's earlier writings in order to remake the official record of Americanness by sounding the nation differently. In this way, the essays in his text remix and revise America's earliest founding documents, remaking its *Declaration (of the nation's Independence)* and reconstituting its *Constitution* within a dynamically suggestive racialized framework that extends the scope of those documents to include ways of accounting for the country's non-white citizens as part of its cultural legacy and imaginary, and in ways that sought to extend (through constitutional amendments and civil rights law) the domain of rights and equality of treatment under the law hoped for by all of those same citizens. *Souls*, then, is a *remix text of remixed texts*, with its own self-selected texts increasingly apparent to the attentive scholarly reader, and with others more obscured but no less present when viewed from within a particular critical gaze.

Attention to the editorial strategies or sounding structures embedded within the paratextual elements of Du Bois's text, then, allows us to focus that gaze. We see, in his imaginative compositional strategies, the desire to think and write in nationalistic and narrative terms, with a form of choral framing necessitated by his editorial process. This approach reads the musical notations included as epigraphic elements at the start of each new chapter of the text as a sounding structure where Du Bois plays orchestrator and composer of a racialized national

imaginary. Engaging his readers through this dynamic extension of the hermeneutic moment and realization beyond the printed page, Du Bois operates in a manner, like the emcee, that requires his audience to move. The musical notations offer paratextual samples that must be sounded in real-time to make their meanings known. As such, Du Bois's reader either ignores the music of these paratextual selections, and the musicality of the text as a function of Du Bois's editorial construction of a new narrative of national belonging; or the reader completes the hermeneutic act by venturing to play the notations of the "Sorrow Songs" found therein on a home piano as foreground and background to the lyrics provided by Du Bois's remixed essays.

The selection of these sampled scores of musical notations, then, become a conscious part of the process of Du Bois's dynamic articulation of race, double-consciousness, the Veil, and the problematics of the color-line at the start of twentieth century, suggesting that the music of the Sorrow Songs is tied up into and central for Du Bois's sounding of American national belonging in *The Souls of Black Folk* as an imaginative text. Likewise, his engagement with music requires readers to leave the book behind in ways that work against Arnold Rampersad's assertion that such a turn to fiction wouldn't define Du Bois's writing until almost two decades later.⁹⁸ *Souls* stages Du Bois's anxieties about the future of the black people within the American nation-state at the turn of the century as a remixed, paratextually-driven, sample-heavy musical performance in a style prototypical of what comes to define hip hop emceeing. In the epigraphs, Du Bois offers a prototypical form of hip hop's choral framing, turning previously published writings into the sampling material for crafting (and cohering) his various concepts of race in American into lyrical essays with music accompaniment. His work, then, is not just a writing of race and the nation, but a musical and literary production of both.

Eric B. and Rakim's album, *Paid in Full* (1987), picks up on and represents the perfection of Du Bois's sounding strategies of sampling and remixing as an extension of the genealogy of what Chandler has named the "dynamic historicity of the production of Du Bois's discourse."⁹⁹ Eric B's incorporation of countless samples throughout the album and Rakim's complication of what had become the standard emceeing rhyming schemes of the day codified sounding practices that have helped make hip hop the sound of American national belonging in the twenty-first century. Writing about Rakim's invention of flow, fellow emcee and legendary lyricist Kool Mo Dee, writes, "Rakim is the most studied emcee ever. Any emcee that came after 1986 had to study Rakim just to know what to be able to do. Rakim is the author of 'flow'," adding that:

His rhyme style was the opposite of the yelling, energetic cadences of Run and LL. Little did I know at the time, but the sonic cadences that Run and LL used, which were the heightened volume of versions of Melle Mel's cadence, was [sic] on its death bed. Rakim's laidback flow was the death of the yelling style....¹⁰⁰

What is significant about Eric B. and Rakim's 1987 album, compared to other hip hop albums being produced at the time, is the duo's insistence on sampling and remixing—remixing with regards to Rakim's development of a new form of emceeing flow and sampling in terms of Eric B.'s incorporation of actual deejaying techniques and sounds into the album's production for radio play. In large part until this point, the sound of mainstream studio hip hop was largely very different than its street-level counterpart. Beats and tracks produced in studio lacked much of the cutting, scratching, and sampling of records that made the wizardry of deejays famous.¹⁰¹ *Paid in Full* (1987) becomes the album that emphasizes these techniques as part of the sound production for a mainstream hip hop studio album. As such, the sound of the album reinvigorated an

authenticity lacking in hip hop's American popular representation, sparking a revolution in the ways that these sounds would come to define not only the genre, but the nation as a whole.

To this latter point, it is significant that less than a year after the release of the album, many of its tracks began to be remixed internationally by deejays trying to reproduce its distinctly American sound. Most notably was the production of a remix track by the British electronic music and deejay duo of Matt Black and Jonathan More of Eric B. and Rakim's "Paid in Full" single into the now infamous "Paid in Full (Seven Minutes of Madness - The Coldcut Remix)." For an album that samples itself (through interpolations of its own first single "Eric B. Is President" on several of the various included tracks) and that came under intense scrutiny for its aesthetic treatment of the history of recorded black sounds as a resource rife for sampling (particularly for their uncleared sampling of James Brown), it makes sense that other deejays would seek to emulate their production and practice by sampling their album. The Coldcut remix to "Paid in Full" offers just such a sampling and remixing project, exemplifying the ways in which these techniques, as a genealogy of American aesthetic practice, came to be constructed, within international contexts, as a distinctly American way of sounding.

Interestingly, Coldcut's sampling and remixing of "Paid in Full" reimagines for us an earlier transatlantic remix and sample that extends Paul Gilroy's reading of the Black Atlantic and Du Bois's discourse on race and national belonging.¹⁰² In a rarely discussed piece of Du Bois's writing, a reflection of national belonging and sounding the nation entitled "My Country 'Tis of Thee," Du Bois demonstrates that sampling and remixing were not just a structuring strategies for his writings in *The Souls of Black Folk*, but were actually an important aesthetic legacy of sounding the United States as a nation differently.¹⁰³ Originally published in his edited periodical, *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line* (1907-1910) in September of 1907, "My

Country ‘Tis of Thee,” appears five years after the publication of *Souls* and continues Du Bois deployment of sounding practices as techniques particularly suited for racialized narratives of national belonging in the U.S. In this brief reflection, Du Bois experiments even further with his editorial method of remixing sampled documents as an aesthetic fascination; this time in ways that explicitly link the sounding of America as a nation to the aesthetic practices of sampling and remixing. Du Bois writes:

Of course you have faced the dilemma. It is announced, they all smirk and rise. If they are ultra, they remove their hats and look ecstatic; then they look at you. What shall you do? *Noblesse oblige*; you cannot be boorish, or ungracious; and too, after all it is your country and you *do* love its ideals if not all of its realities.¹⁰⁴

(Du Bois’s italics)

Framing for his reader a reflection on race and national belonging as the unlikely social occasion of a black citizen surrounded by “ultra” or patriotic white Americans, just before the ceremonial singing of the national anthem, Du Bois discovers in a literal moment of singing America an occasion for sounding blackness as an intervention into this sounding of the U.S. as an historically discriminatory and oppressive nation for African Americans. The signal occasion, then, is the singing of the patriotic anthem, “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” and the irony of his sampling this text comes in the fact that it is itself a sampled and remixed text.

Written in 1831 by Samuel Francis Smith, “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” or “America,” as the song was more commonly known, served as the country’s de facto national anthem until 1931, when “The Star Spangled Banner” was officially adopted (a quarter of a century after Du Bois’s publication of this piece). Taking its tune from the British national anthem, “God Save the Queen,” the national desire to replace this nineteenth century American patriotic song denies the

very centrality of an American aesthetics of sampling and remixing in its earliest moments of sounding national identity. Again, Du Bois sees the space and occasion of this sounding as an opportunity to extend this aesthetic genealogy by reframing the already reframed, and by remixing the already remixed, within a racialized logic of sounding the nation differently. “What will you do?” his reflections asks, when put into social environments where the singing of the anthem becomes an occasion for the African American citizen's affirmation or contestation of American national belonging.¹⁰⁵ “*Noblesse oblige*,” Du Bois writes, meaning, you have an inherent responsibility, as a privileged people, to act with generosity and nobility toward those less privileged than yourselves, again an ironic inversion of the context of American race relations, where Du Bois reads the black citizen into a position of privilege in relation to his white counterpart.¹⁰⁶

In a moment of sounding the nation, before the nation has found a sound for itself, Du Bois once again imaginatively remixes the terms of national belonging within a racialized framework for the black citizen desiring to add himself into the national narrative. “[A]fter all,” Du Bois advises, “it is your country and you do love its ideals if not all of its realities,” continuing:

Now, then, I have thought of a way out: Arise, gracefully remove your hat, and tilt your head. Then sing as follows, powerfully and with deep unction. They’ll hardly note the little changes and their feelings and your conscience will thus be saved:

My country tis of thee, | Late land of slavery, | Of thee I sing | Land
where my father’s pride | Slept where my mother died, | From every
mountain side | Let freedom ring! || My native country thee | Land of the

slave set free, | Thy fame I love | I love thy rocks and rills | And o'er they
hate which chills, | My heart with purpose thrills, | to *rise* above. || Let
laments swell the breeze | And wring from all the trees | Sweet freedom's
song. | Let laggard tongues awake, | Let all who hear partake, | Let
Southern silence quake, | The sound prolong.¹⁰⁷

Recasting the national narrative to account for blackness, Du Bois sees in the act of affirmation a possibility for contestation, which comes not through the performance of defiance or separation in the face of belonging, but as an act of sounding belonging differently. It is a moment that reaches out from the start of the twentieth century, by way of hip hop's perfecting of remixing and sampling as American literary aesthetics at the end of the century, into the twenty-first century when someone like Colin Kaepernick samples and remixes, out of Du Bois's lineage, the most pronounced contemporary terms of American national belonging; that is the concepts of faith, country, and football, by taking a knee and sounding a silent prayer as protest to America's continuing injustices against its black citizens.¹⁰⁸ It is in light of Du Bois's recursion to these aesthetics of sounding national belonging differently, that we might in our contemporary moment understand the occasions of sounding the nation as moments for rethinking, reframing, and remixing our contemporary American national narrative.

CHAPTER TWO: “WHERE DID OUR LOVE GO?”¹⁰⁹

Black women as readers and writers have been kept out of literary endeavor, so we had, and have, a lot to say.

- Sherley Anne Williams, “Some Implications of Womanist Theory”

You came into my heart | so tenderly | with a burning love | that stings like a bee | Now that I
surrender | so helplessly | you now want to leave | Oh, you want to leave me | Oh, baby, baby |
Where did our love go? | Oh, don't you want me? | Don't you want me no more? | Oh, baby...

- The Supremes, “Where Did Our Love Go?”

Who can disagree that there exists more energy being manifested and good work being brought to bear on black texts by black critics today than at any other time in our history, and that a large part of the explanation for this wonderful phenomenon is the growing critical sophistication of black readers of literature? Or that this sophistication is not directly related to the fact that we are taking our work—the close reading, interpretation, and preservation of the texts and authors of our tradition—with the utmost seriousness? What else is there for a critic to do? *What's love got to do with it...?*

- Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “What's Love Got to Do with It?”

It could all be so simple | But you'd rather make it hard | Loving you is like a battle | and we both
end up with scars | Tell me who I have to be | to get some reciprocity | See no one loves you
more than me | and no one ever will...

...Care for me, care for me | I know you care for me | There for me, there for me | Said you'd be
there for me | Cry for me, cry for me | You said you'd die for me | Give to me, give to me | Why
won't you live for me?

- Lauryn Hill, "Ex-Factor"

The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill

*I used to love her.*¹¹⁰ Lauryn Hill that is. I offer this as the precondition for my desire as a black male literary theorist contemplating studies of future American literary hermeneutics and aesthetics to turn to Lauryn Hill's debut solo studio album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), as the hip hop concept album that most prompts contemporary American literature scholars to speculate about the possibilities for future literary reception. And while I disclose this sentiment as an introduction to the personal historical context for my turning to Lauryn Hill as a preeminent emcee in hip hop's hermeneutic tradition,¹¹¹ the sentence's grammatical construction already belies the connection and adoration I'd hoped to convey. *I used to love her*—implying an experience and condition already past, something that has happened, had happened, but also something that doesn't happen anymore.

Much like this phrase, the present chapter reflects upon the already past idea of love as a critical legacy of black feminist thought and womanist theory useful for theorizing within American literary study. Simultaneously, the chapter considers love as a critical praxis that has been "passed on" to black women emcees as an unlikely (or unrecognized) group of

contemporary literary and cultural critics.¹¹² To *pass on* love as a critical legacy and praxis, while *passing* on love as a conceptual framework for developing literary theory fashions the notion of a cultural tradition as a limited temporal episteme, entrenched in the safety of the past where its primary possibility of influence is always already contingent upon the ways in which the present (or future) might actively resist its perpetuation. The distinction I make, then, between these two branches of womanist theorizing (i.e. black feminist thought and womanist theory) hopes to contextualize the work of black women emcees within the creative and critical project coalescing in the fictive and scholarly writings of Alice Walker, among others (including Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems).¹¹³

As such, this chapter positions black women emcees as literary and cultural critics who extend the reach of womanism as a critical tradition by using their lyrics and aesthetic production to narrativize possibilities for social transformation rooted in a theory of loving as a critical practice of listening to black women.¹¹⁴ In my estimation, this conceptualization of love already exists and operates in the culture as a type of “low theory” of reception that circulates and informs the day to day sometimes lost, other times forgotten, and otherwise occluded struggles of young, poor, and working class black women who engage with hip hop as a primary discursive form for their expression and cultural representation.¹¹⁵ In particular, I contend that black women emcees do more than voice the lives of these women, but create models for sustaining alternative modes of responsible and responsive reception in their practices of love and listening—models that plant seeds for future womanist resistance, activism, and literary theoretical exploration as a “counterknowledge” to the cultural silencing of women of color.¹¹⁶

This chapter, then, specifically attunes to the ways the work of Lauryn Hill engages in a womanist theorizing of reception by revisiting her 1998 debut solo studio album, *The*

Miseducation of Lauryn Hill, offering an analysis of the culture of reception and celebrity that surrounded the emcee following its release. Along the way, I seek to implicate my own participation in the cult of celebrity framing Lauryn Hill as an emcee by slipping briefly into autocritographical accounts of personal memories of listening to the album, adolescent feelings of loving Lauryn Hill as a result of that listening, and ongoing feelings of nostalgia for Hill's embodiment of a moment and phenomenon of cultural reception that I, along with many other hip hop fans, reflect back upon longingly.¹¹⁷ By mapping Hill's narrative, thematic, and aesthetic choices on *The Miseducation* album, and thinking about how those choices placed her in an unenviable position of critical scrutiny both within hip hop and American popular culture writ large, the chapter illustrates that for one of the rarest and briefest moments in the nation's history, a black woman's creative voice became the most significant and, in large part, venerated voice in the American public sphere.¹¹⁸

And so, I begin, once again, by stating the phrase that provided my first opening, even though it has already proven itself to be closed or resistant to my usage. *I used to love her*. Restated, as such, this sentence aligns rhetorically with a strategy requiring the reader, necessarily, to listen again; and then to listen again more closely. To revisit the words and press replay. The critical redeployment of this introductory sentence can be further complicated by an overhearing or re-cognition of what any hip hop historian should register as a reference to the Chicago emcee Common's (then Common Sense) single, "I Used to Love H.E.R.," a No I.D.-produced track from his sophomore album, *Resurrection* (1994). Alluded to in the chapter's orienting moment, this recording draws our attention to connections between Common's unauthorized and obscured history of hip hop as an explicitly misogynist tale of sexual longing and the personification of Lauryn Hill as the public spokesperson for an uneasy "assemblage" of

conflicting and emergent communities and their variant cultural representations—from a soon to be gangster rap fatigued generation of “consciousness” hip hop fans, to a premillennial coterie of nascently-black girl magical, belatedly third wave feminists, to the increasingly secularized, even blasphemously so, generation of black religious absconders, to the digitally mobilized and commercially catered to white suburban hip hop fan boys and girls, and so on and so on.¹¹⁹

Told from the point of view of a seasoned black male emcee reminiscent about the earliest moments in hip hop’s history, “I Used to Love H.E.R.” centralizes the black man-child lyricist and his desire to wax poetic about an erratic and somewhat amorphous black woman (here personifying hip hop) as the sexualized love object of black men’s communal desire. From the pair’s first encounter—when as a ten year old teleiophile the emcee learns to crave soulfulness as the embodied manifestation of this “old school” and presumably older black woman—the duration of the track weaves together several significant, if not also sexually suggestive observations about hip hop (e.g. “A few New York niggas | had did her in the park,” “Sitting on bone | wishing that I could do her” and “You could tell | by how her titties hung”).

Characterizing the evolutions of this nameless black heroine’s episodic maturation over time and across regions, Common’s extended metaphor narrativizes the woman’s life as an endless series of uses and abuses by a litany of black male suitors/emcees, building towards the track’s final revelatory moment when the lyrics disclose the true nature of his personification. “Cause who I’m talking about ya’ll | is Hip Hop.” Given in punctuation to the track’s obscure personal history of an unnamed black woman, Common’s lyrical mastery of this gendered personification, where hip hop is metonymized as a promiscuous black woman, makes clear that black women (as objects of desire) are interchangeable in the black male imagination. Caricatured here by Common without cognizance of his cultural (or rhetorical) impact, the silent

and nameless black woman could be any girl or woman growing up in the proverbial hood and, as such, she becomes a symbol of every black male's idealized fantasy—that is, the black woman rendered voiceless, the exchangeable and interchangeable object of black men's sexual desire.

Where Common conceives this version of hip hop as *herstory*, the problematic tying together of the black male emcee's vision of hip hop culture and his vision of a sexualized and objectified black womanhood suffocates the reality of what it looks (and sounds) like living as a black woman and moving through the hegemony of America's patriarchal spaces. Beneath the full weight of Common's misogynist vision and gendering, the listener is provided an account of this anonymous woman who becomes less and less desirable to the lyricist narrating her story due to her assumed sexual promiscuity. In the end, when Common confesses (as much to himself as to the listener) that he still loves her and is committed to her despite her many presumed indiscretions, the emcee's inability (and by extension the black man's, for the emcee is almost always stereotypically gendered male and black) to imagine the black woman as anything other than the idealized object of his sexual desire, or as victim of sexual interactions in need of his benefaction and rescue, or as commodity for his "homosocial exchange" is narratively completed.¹²⁰

The necessity, then, of black women's voicelessness in Common's narrative history of hip hop is presented as the violence inherent within such a gendered personification. Common perpetuates this narrative of the black woman's cultural silencing as a creative and sexual fantasy foundational to the black male emcee's aesthetic productivity; that is, as the very structuring logic of his hip hop expression. To this last point, I'll just add that although Common's narration makes specific and continuous reference to occasions of his listening to the unidentified black

woman whose life is being recounted for listeners, he does so without ever providing a specific quotation of anything she has said to him or without giving sound to her voice at any point throughout the production.¹²¹ Three years following the release of “I Used to love H.E.R.,” Common would feature Lauryn Hill in a duet entitled “Retrospect for Life” produced with a similar structuring logic.¹²² Ostensibly a progressive track about a financially and emotionally struggling black couple’s hard fought decision to terminate a pregnancy, “Retrospect for Life,” actually occludes important critical discussions about the cultural and political restrictions to a black woman’s right to choose, the history and politics surrounding her reproductive health, and more generally the toxic social attitudes that present challenges to her personal efficacy and self-determination with regards to sex and sex safety, conception, childbirth, and the ability to provide an emotionally healthy and financially sustainable home environment for child rearing, by offering primarily instead of the pregnant black mother’s voice, the father’s one-sided, self-interested, back-and-forth first-person monologue about whether or not *he* should keep the child.

As such, the narrative’s structure and content demonstrate with what increasing complexity Common’s desire to present an image of black masculine vulnerability invests in the work of patriarchy, making black men increasingly complicit as benefactors in the cultural silencing of black women. Notably, the track is produced at about the same time that a not-yet-public feud between Lauryn Hill and fellow Fugees-group member, Wyclef Jean, is boiling over into an as-yet-still unresolved disbanding of the group due to what later gets reported interchangeably as Lauryn Hill’s decision to carry her first-born child, Zion, to term, Hill’s decision to produce her own solo album at the height of the group’s fame, or the inability of Hill and Jean to work together after a painful break-up or following hurt feelings over unrequited love on one or either side. Whatever the cause, Hill would spend the majority of 1997 and 1998

recording the tracks for her debut solo album as her partnership with her black male emcee Fugees-group members was coming to an end. Her feature on Common's single, "Retrospect for Life," would be recorded and released in that same year.

That Hill signed on to perform this particular feature (again about a black couple's fears and anxieties over a potentially aborted pregnancy) speaks to her experiential and creative concerns at the time of the song's recording and her own album's production. Her considerably limited use as an emcee in the track's production, however, speaks to a much larger and more far-reaching concern for the ways in which black women as artists are pushed to the margins of black expression by their black male counterparts, underscoring multigenerational structures of cultural silencing that the release of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* works, aesthetically, to subvert.¹²³ Unlike Common's performance, which allows him to stage his emceeing as an original form of skill and mastery over narratives of black birth and life, Hill's lyrics on the track are interpolated.

A remixed cover of the 1971 Stevie Wonder song, "Never Dreamed You'd Leave in Summer," from the *Where I'm Coming From* album, Lauryn helps contemporize and re-contextualize the following lyrics by giving them a black woman's vocal texture and popular expression for the first time:

I never dreamed you'd leave in summer (in summer) | You said you would be here
when it rained (when it rained, it rained) | Oh, oh, oh I never dreamed you'd leave
in summer (you said you wouldn't leave) | Now the situation's made things change
(things change) | Why didn't you stay? | Stay, stay, stay, stay, stay, stay, stay |
Mmm stay | Uh-uh oh why didn't you stay...

("Retrospect for Life," lyrics by Lauryn Hill, Syreeta Wright, and Stevie Wonder)

Compared to the original:

I never dreamed you'd leave in summer | I thought you would go then come back
home | I thought the cold would leave by summer | But my quiet nights will be
spent alone | You said there would be warm love in springtime | That was when
you started to be cold | I never dreamed you'd leave in summer | But now I find
myself all alone | You said then you'd be alive in autumn | Then you said you'd be
the one to see the way | No, no no no no I never dreamed you'd leave in summer |
But now I find my love has gone away | Why didn't you stay?

(“Never Dreamed You’d Leave in Summer,” lyrics by Syreeta Wright and Stevie
Wonder)¹²⁴

Co-written by Stevie Wonder and his then-wife Syreeta Wright—an extraordinary black woman songwriter, demo and background vocalist, and solo recording artist in her own right—the lyrics capitulate to the universal melancholy of being unable or unwilling to let go of a lost love.¹²⁵ “Retrospect for Life” recasts that melancholy as the burden born of choosing not to bring a pregnancy to full term.

For the song to relegate the voice of Lauryn Hill, as a black woman emcee, to singing semi-appropriated lyrics in the background, reproduces, in part, the earlier silencing of Syreeta Wright’s voice on the original Stevie Wonder track. Particularly, as Hill’s performance of the lyrics in three and sometimes four part individually recorded choral harmonies signals a Stevie Wonder-esque style of vocal rendering, the absence of her emceeing becomes unimaginable where a song focused on this particular content almost requires her voice as a pregnant black woman emcee, at very least in dialogue with Common’s.¹²⁶ Although the recorded echo of Hill’s voice across the several harmonic registers, in addition to her vocalized humming of the tune in

the background, and her subliminal half-articulations and almost inaudible restatements of Common's lyrics, lend to the track's production a dialogic effect, the two emcees never come into true dialogue.¹²⁷ Instead, the sound of Hill's voice is put to use as the symbolic representation of the black mother's/woman's pain (as "primal scream" in childbirth?)—a sound that has a long history in the American recording industry. One that begins to stretch into the much older history of the American industry of black enslavement.¹²⁸

Simultaneously limiting Hill's vocal presence on the track to these soundings, without utilizing fully her abilities as an emcee, "Retrospect for Life" attempts to render the black woman's thoughts about the pregnancy incomprehensible, speechless, or as an ante-speech in the song's narrative framework. Common's failure to imagine the articulate sounds of the mother's uncertainty in dialogue with the father's, as part of the song's conceptual production, then, reenacts the violent absencing of black women's voices from the narratives of American history, all in an attempt to reduce the sound of Hill's voice to a commercially consumable form of black women's pain. In the end, where "Retrospect for Life" sublimates the mother's indecision about having a child into the father's expression of vulnerability-as-creativity, the song concludes with Common issuing the chauvinist imperative for the mother to go forward with the pregnancy: "Quit smoking the weed | and the beadies | and let's have this boy."¹²⁹ After his already extended delivery of 28- and 29-bar verses (beyond the typical 16-bar choral breaks), this final imperative leaves no room for the pregnant woman to speak or be heard, suppressing even Hill's singing—which attempts to resist the song's compositional limitations by rendering anew the lyrics to Wright and Wonder's soul song as an encoded choral objection to the marginalization of narratives about black women as expectant mothers (and artists)—to the background.¹³⁰

A year later, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* album would realize its own version of a response to this track, in the song entitled “To Zion.”¹³¹ As a more autobiographical track about Lauryn Hill’s lived decision not to terminate a pregnancy, “To Zion” attempts to fill in the silences left behind by her noticeably absent bars from “Retrospect for Life.” Featuring no other black male lyricists or vocalists, but accompanied by the pain-filled strumming of Mexican guitarist, Carlos Santana, the track begins with the following verses from Hill:

Unsure of what the balance held | I touched my belly overwhelmed | by what I
had been chosen to perform | But then an angel came one day | told me to kneel
down and pray | for unto me a man-child would be born | Woe this crazy
circumstance | I knew his life deserved a chance | but everybody told me to be
smart | "Look at your career," they said | "Lauryn, baby, use your head." | But
instead I chose to use my heart...

If Hill’s vocal performance on the earlier Common single is defined by its aesthetic suppression, then “To Zion” articulates its objection to that objectifying silence by offering Lauryn Hill’s personal thoughts and reflections on the choice to have her son as a recent black mother—appending the fictional black mother’s narrative from “Retrospect for Life” with her own personal story, all as part of an imaginative rebuttal to her hip hop colleague’s limited conceptual imagining. The implicit interpersonal pressures to abort, the falsely presented choice between making a life and making a living, and her meditations on the divinity of black motherhood—all themes woefully absent from Common’s earlier lyrics—are now given center staging in Hill’s solo performance. Instead of withholding the choice to go forward with her pregnancy until the track’s concluding line, Hill revels in this as a bygone conclusion at the close of the first verse,

where the song then breaks immediately into its joyous chorus: “Now the joy of my world lives in Zion,” resounding in its celebration of the child’s life in the here and now.¹³²

These aesthetic differences between Hill’s and Common’s tracks offer a glimpse into Lauryn’s differing sensibility as a black woman emcee on *The Miseducation* album. Her celebration of life, love, and motherhood make central themes typically absent from her black male counterparts, and cut against the self-indulgent and self-congratulatory staging of black masculine vulnerability-as-creativity charted in tracks like Common’s “I Used to Love H.E.R.” and “Retrospect for Life.”¹³³ Ultimately, I contend that these differences are what distinguish *The Miseducation* album as a hip hop album from other albums in the genre of that era (even from those produced by other black women emcees). Throughout, songs like “Lost Ones,” “Ex-Factor,” “Everything is Everything,” and “Doo Wop,” to name only a few, repurpose quintessential hip hop narratives and aesthetic practices to engender and re-gender receptive expectations for the listener of the practice of emceeing that includes and accounts for the black woman’s voice. Throughout, Hill offers narrative corrections to earlier marginalization, circumscription, and silences instantiated by her black male counterparts.

Black Feminist Thought and Womanist Theory

Commenting upon similar rhetorical moves of black women emcees predating Lauryn Hill’s rise to prominence, Tricia Rose contends that alongside a commitment to resisting relegation to the “margins of public discourse,” the largest concern expressed in interviews by earlier black women emcees like Queen Latifah, Salt (from Salt-N-Pepa), and MC Lyte was a fear that their words and work would be “interpreted as anti-black male.”¹³⁴ Rose explains:

Black women rappers interpret and articulate the fears, pleasures, and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the margins of public discourse. They are integral and resistant voices in rap music and in popular music in general who sustain an ongoing dialogue with their audience and with male rappers about sexual promiscuity, emotional commitment, infidelity, the drug trade, racial politics, and black cultural history.

Tracking the critiques of these black women emcees as in dialogue with, rather than antagonistic towards, their black male counterparts, Rose notes an awareness on the part of black women emcees of “the dominant discursive context within which their responses [to the sexism of black male emcees] would be reproduced.”¹³⁵ And so while many black women emcees in the 1980s and early 1990s resisted the marginalization of their voices and narratives by black men in hip hop, as Rose continues to point out, “[they] were uncomfortable with being labeled feminist and perceived feminism as a signifier for a movement that related specifically to white women.”¹³⁶

By the late 1990s, however, Lauryn Hill’s sensibilities as an emcee reveal a softening towards feminism, or at least towards that version of Black Feminism that Alice Walker would term Womanism.¹³⁷ As an increasingly useful framework for the critique of black men in hip hop and American culture, womanism offered black female emcees like Lauryn Hill an intersectional mode for addressing black men’s complicity with patriarchy and oppression of black women. On “Doo Wop (That Thing),” the first single from *The Miseducation* album, for example, Hill critiques the inability of black men (her contemporaries, and perhaps, older generations) to engage in loving relationship with black women as a critical practice.¹³⁸ Hill rhymes:

The second verse is dedicated to the men | more concerned with his rims and his
Timbs than his women | Him and his men | come in the club like hooligans | Don't

care who they offend | popping yang (like you got yen) | Let's not pretend | the
ones that pack pistols by they waist men | Cristal by the case men | Still in they
mother's basement | The pretty face men | claiming that they did a bid men | Need
to take care of they three or four kids | When they face a court case when the child
support late | Money taking and heart breaking | Now you wonder why women
hate men | The sleepy silent men | The punk domestic violence men | Quick to
shoot the semen stop acting like boys and be men...¹³⁹

Exceedingly critical, Hill speaks to black men about a number of issues plaguing her community as a sister, a mother, a close friend, and a potential partner, in a way that holds them responsible for and responsive to doing something specific to correct these actions. The love conveyed through such a positioning, however, elevates her critique far above the rhetorically antagonistic.

Perhaps her words are the lost pieces of advice alluded to in Common's "I Used to Love H.E.R.," offered as a "second verse" to soften the punch after thoroughly critiquing black women's complicity with patriarchy earlier in the track. It is this affinity for balanced critique on both sides of the gender divide that, I believe, positions Hill to offer honest insights into the detrimental logic underlying performances of black masculinity within the hip hop community. By modeling, aesthetically, a form of love as critical legacy for black men to learn and practice, Lauryn Hill's critical work on the album creates a space for black men to listen to a black woman's voice open them up for critique as a cultural necessity, not as something to be taken offense at, but again as something to be learned from—an education in *The Miseducation*.¹⁴⁰ As a form of responsible and responsive receptive practice, it is the listening as an offering of love to Lauryn Hill's critique without offense that creates a model of reception with possibilities for the future of literary study.

Writing nearly two decades earlier, June Jordan, in the essay version of her National Black Writers Circle opening remarks, frames the anxieties of presenting a lecture on the futures of black women writers and literary reception as follows: “I wanted to see if it was possible to say things that people believe they don’t want to hear, without having to kick ass.”¹⁴¹ Jordan continues, “From my childhood in Brooklyn I knew that your peers would respect you if you could hurt somebody. Much less obvious was how to elicit respect as somebody who felt and who meant love.”¹⁴² Jordan’s concerns at addressing “the intellectual Black community” assembled at Howard University in 1978 to discuss issues of feminism and the future of literary study can be instructive to understanding Hill’s capacity as a black woman emcee to address her black men as colleagues and contemporaries decades later, and too the larger crowd of listeners making up her mainstream American listening public.

Jordan frames this as a problematic of addressability, asking herself (and her audience) an honest question: “Where is the love?” For Jordan, identifying as a Black Feminist in 1978, and wanting to address the legacy of black women’s literary and cultural production, was a question of how to fashion love into a critical praxis. It is the “decisive question,” she stated then, that sits at the start of the critical analysis of “anyone or any thing--whether history or literature or my father or political organizations or a poem or a film.”¹⁴³ Being a Black Feminist, for Jordan, meant performing a radical practice of self-love that turns inwards, towards the personal, as a move that can alter the addressability of the other outside the self. The structuring of love as theme and creative incorporation of personal experiences from Lauryn Hill’s life as a method of production on *The Miseducation* album are exactly what allow Hill to achieve this addressability in her audiences. As an emcee, she realizes what June Jordan only imagines decades earlier as a

possibility of reception, a black woman who could “say things that people believe they don’t want to hear, without having to kick ass.”¹⁴⁴

In her 1986 essay, “Some Implications of Womanist Theory,” Sherley Anne Williams writes, “black women writers have been urging black men not so much to ‘come down [and] fight,’ as to come down and talk,” an invitation to connect as both responsibility and responsiveness.¹⁴⁵ Later, Williams poses an important critical consideration that allows us to speculate on the futures of reception through the looking-lens of womanist theorizing. Williams asks us to consider if “our rereadings of female” writing and the “image” of women in writing, will not also “change our readings of men”?¹⁴⁶ A simple question to ask, but one with a complex history that connects June Jordan to Lauryn Hill, separated by two decades of Black feminist thought and womanist theory. It is the question that conjures the treatment of scholar Joyce A. Joyce (more on her in a moment) and forces us to forge a path (by way of The Supremes) to the present moment of asking black men, “Where did our love go?” Looking to the literature of black women’s writing, the question of “Where did our love go?” raises the matters of addressability, responsibility, responsiveness, and love for black men to underexplored scenes of instruction in the work of black women artists.

Writing about the “absence of models, in literature as in life,” Alice Walker, who first offered the term *womanism* for critical exploration in the tradition of black women’s writing, provides just such a scene of instruction for black men as writers, scholars, and emcees in the American literary tradition to observe, interpret, critique, test, and propagate the need for responsible and responsive reception of black women.¹⁴⁷ In her acclaimed novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), a novel marked by its own gender dividing controversies, Walker models a principle of reception that Lauryn Hill’s *The Miseducation* album extends.¹⁴⁸ The scene comes

toward the conclusion of the 1983 Pulitzer-Prize winning text, after Celie, the story's protagonist and primary interlocutor, has just had her heart broken by the mercurial blues singer and her finicky female lover, Shug Avery.

In a letter to her younger sister, Nettie, a missionary in Africa whose erroneous death has recently been conveyed inadvertently in the text, Celie writes:

Mr. _____ seem to be the only one understand my feeling. | I know you hate me for keeping you from Nettie, he say. And now she dead. | But I don't hate him, Nettie.... | After all the evil he done I know you wonder why I don't hate him. I don't hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug. And two, Shug use to love him. Plus, look like he trying to make something out of himself. I don't mean just that he work and he clean up after himself and he appreciate some of the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I'm satisfied this is the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feels like a new experience.¹⁴⁹

Of all the characters who experience transformation over the course of the novel, Celie's is by far the most comprehensive, but rivalled perhaps by the transformation of Mister. We are introduced to Mister early in the novel as a lecherous widower preying on Celie's younger sister, Nettie.¹⁵⁰ After a stifled attempt to gain Nettie's hand in marriage, Mister reconciles himself to Celie as his slightly older child-bride. The first two-thirds of the novel is defined by his objectifications and violent abuses of his less-desired wife, Celie, committing unforgivable atrocities that include emotional torment and verbal abuse, beatings, the forcing of endless domestic labors without rest, rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and concealing for years the

letters that “keep her from Nettie.”¹⁵¹ This catalogue of his violent abuse of Celie in the first two-thirds of the novel leaves little room for Mister’s narrative redemption. And yet, like a great blues turn, the final third of the novel offers this unique fictive character the chance at a final transcendent act.¹⁵²

Instructively, it is Celie’s critique of Mister—in the form of a “curse” (“Until you do right by me, I say, everything you dream about will fail.”)—that ultimately forces him to evaluate the nature of his life to take more responsibility for his past and present actions, and to become responsive to the need to make amends and befriend Celie.¹⁵³ And so, it’s not until novel’s end, when Celie and Mister spend days on the porch with “a cold drink” talking “about [their] days together with Shug,” that Celie begins to register the changes in Albert.¹⁵⁴ What’s most significant about his transformation, and what provides a surplus or luxury that allows the two characters to become friends—which the text clearly distinguishes from the things that allow Celie not to “hate him”—is what gets described in the letter to Nettie as him “trying to make something out of himself.”¹⁵⁵ While that quality is not limited to his working, cleaning up after himself, and appreciating the wonders “God was playful enough to make” (all are still requirements), its defining mark is an ability to “really listen” to Celie as a black woman.¹⁵⁶ Mister demonstrates this capacity a number of times before Celie registers its significance, which is linked in the narrative to his recognition of this act of responsible and responsive reception as part of a natural order.¹⁵⁷ “I’m satisfied,” he tells Celie, “this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man.” Perhaps most significantly, in his recognition of this new form of loving as a practice of reception, is Mister’s discovery that what it means to be a “natural” man is to listen to women. That is, his living out of a new vision of his black masculinity. As he tells Celie, “It feels like a new experience.”¹⁵⁸

As I have already suggested, Lauryn Hill, on the precipice of a new millennium of black women's literary and cultural production, broke new ground in hip hop and American popular culture, as a black woman emcee who showed black men how to listen to her voice and critiques without taking offense; that is, without taking it personally. The irony in that being that she did so by turning inwards and making her personal experiences public and popular, political and pedagogical. What, then, were the conditions conditioned by such a production of the personal? And why were black men, suddenly, so responsive and addressable to those conditions? Already, I have cited June Jordan's raising the decisive question, "Where is the love?" as a moment that sheds light onto these shifting historical conditions. Additionally, the writing of Alice Walker, and her offering a womanist response (and scene of instruction) to the question of "Where did our love go?" for black men to replicate, provides yet another critical pathway for rethinking black men's receptiveness to the voices of black women. Another such moment comes with Joyce A. Joyce's response to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s and Houston Baker, Jr.'s responses to her article, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," in the journal *New Literary History* in the fall of 1987.¹⁵⁹

To attempt to put into its proper historical context the "heated nature" of the exchange that came to be known as the Joyce-Gates-Baker "feud" would be nearly impossible.¹⁶⁰ The 1980s was a fruitful period in the American institutional history of black literary studies.¹⁶¹ During that time a number of black scholars saw a rise in their "teaching in predominantly white institutions....making more \$50,000 a year" and becoming what I like to reflect on as a newly established, financially-legitimized, and institutionally-empowered Black intelligentsia.¹⁶² In many ways (that Joyce outlines in her articles), the scholars at the head of that table were Houston Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—men who she dubs, sarcastically, "vanguards of

Afro-American literary criticism.”¹⁶³ Houston Baker, Jr.’s 1986 M.L.A. presidential campaign, as the first African American president of the organization, is yet further evidence of the prominence of these two men in the field at the time. As another anecdote in evidence of the power wielded, consider that the 1986 M.L.A. convention was punctuated by a proceeding closing invite-only house party style celebration in Baker’s Presidential Suite.¹⁶⁴ Within the Academy’s race to theory, African American theoreticians like Baker and Gates were fast becoming stars. As Joyce points out in her final word on the feud, both men became emboldened in their powers over “inclusion” and “exclusion,” directing the practice of African American literature criticism and theory in ways that scholars are now more be capable of fully disentangling.¹⁶⁵

“What’s Love Got to Do With It?” Gates poses to Joyce through an appropriation of the title to Tina Turner’s 1984 pop hit. Joyce reacts to this question by reading closely Gate’s choice of this particular song. Her assessment:

This song represents the denial of love and the degeneration of values that begin with self-love and are reflected in the way one human being responds to another....the video flaunts the Black woman as a sex object for Black men *and* white men...This video and the song lure our young people into the world of glamour, rapacity and ignorance...[that] manifest the self-hatred and self-denial widespread among contemporary Black Americans.¹⁶⁶

When we surmise that Joyce’s essay is responding to Gates (and Baker) in almost real-time publication in the fall of 1987, we realize that the “contemporary Black Americans” that she speaks about are in all likelihood the increasingly visible members of the first hip hop generation. The culture wars (and war on gangster rap) are right around the proverbial corner,

and Joyce's comments read as both denunciation of, and warning to, the newly established, legitimized, and empowered Black institutional intelligentsia, of which Baker and Gates are positioned as gatekeepers. For Joyce, then, the dangers of distancing love from the critical praxis of addressing one's black women colleagues in predominantly white-reader publications, and predominantly white-occupied academic spaces, provides a poor model of black male critical misogyny for a younger generation of black male emcees and hip hop cultural producers. As Joyce writes:

Both [Baker] and Gates broke the most important code of the signifying tradition: they failed to attack by subversion (to speak in such a way that the master does not grasp their meaning). They failed to demonstrate love and respect for a Black sister.¹⁶⁷

Additionally, Joyce reads this "failure to demonstrate love" as part of the complex processes of defamiliarization and "lack of commitment" that are typical of a "poststructuralist sensibility."¹⁶⁸ She points out that this sensibility is particularly elitist and sexist in nature, writing "I would never have guessed that their...replies would respond with misogynist, paranoid, elitist, and paternalistic signs."¹⁶⁹ What's love got to do with it?" Gates asks, through a ventriloquizing act that puts Turner's voice, as a black woman artist, to use for his intellectual purposes, without supplying the critical analysis of Turner's positioning ("within the dominant discursive context," to borrow Tricia Rose's language) that Joyce provides as entryway to identifying the importance of love and the problem with Baker's and Gates's problematic patriarchal critical defamiliarization.

The answer to this question, it seems, lies in the question itself. Gates's appropriative use of Tina Turner's voice ("What's Love Got to Do With It?"), as issued in retort to Joyce A. Joyce,

and framing his discussion of the place of poststructuralist theory in black literary criticism, displaces the work that love has got to do in critical analysis. It is the work of opening up texts like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (but also "anyone and any thing" to recall June Jordan's words) to responsible and responsive reception. Gates's and Baker's responses to (and treatment of) Joyce, then, are contextualized within a multigenerational cultural dynamic of black men resistant to listening to the voices of black women, while still putting their voices to critical and aesthetic use.

What the responses of these black male literary theorists reveal is what is really at stake when love is pushed to the margins of the work we do as literary scholars, particularly as scholars and theorists of African American literature, whose intellectual engagement necessarily entails a responsibility to the communities of color whose cultural narratives, practices, products, and performances we love, and to whom directing our responsiveness has been most valuable for sustaining a political resistance to, critical engagement with, and critique of the systemic oppressions the black community has faced throughout this country's history. As such, the example offered by Mister's practice of love and listening as a transformative vision of black masculinity provides a guide for Gates and Baker as literary scholars (as well as to the black male emcees of Lauryn Hill's generation) toward a more responsible and responsive reception of Joyce's critiques of their writings, and to a more inclusive (and less explanatory) mode of response.

The Politics of Making Everything Personal

That black men had somehow, in the space of less than a decade, learned to listen to Lauryn as a black woman emcee is evidenced, anecdotally, by my own adolescent purchase of

the album (one alongside almost another half million others sold within its first week of release).¹⁷⁰ It was all anyone was listening to that year.¹⁷¹ Add to this the fact that the album itself was not released officially until August 25th, with more than half the year in its rearview, to say that *The Miseducation* was the only album anyone was listening to, is to attempt to capture the pervasiveness of its cultural popularity. It was in heavy rotation on my Walkman, on local Washington, D.C. radio stations, and generally was being talked (and debated) about by everyone I knew. I remember when the single “Doo Wop (That Thing)” became as ubiquitous with listening to local D.C. urban radio stations as the commercials themselves, and when it’s music video was released for air on The Box, I remember arguing with my younger brother about the 99 cent surcharge that would appear on our parent’s cable bill if we ordered it for our neighborhood friends to watch.¹⁷² As June Jordan points out in her essay, the test of any black woman writer’s influence can be measured in her being remembered, or at least in her not being forgotten.¹⁷³ From the moment of her solo album’s release, Lauryn Hill, I would argue, has been remembered well.

Taking as a point of departure, then, Hill’s moment as a black woman emcee caught center focus in the spotlight of the American popular cultural gaze, it is important to remember the number of black male emcees who have, since *The Miseducation* album released, specifically referenced Lauryn Hill or her album in their lyrics and interviews. The depth of this legacy speaks to the power and endurance of the critical space of addressability and reception she helped shape for herself and other black women emcees in hip hop.¹⁷⁴ Additionally, the expansion of black male emceeing practice, post-*The Miseducation*’s 1998 release, to include more male emcee singing performances, with the examples of artists like Cee-lo Green (formerly of the Atlanta-based hip hop cavalcade, Goodie Mob), Andre 3000 (with the *Love Below* album),

Kanye West (with *808s & Heartbreak*), and Drake, to only name a few, extending the tradition that Lauryn Hill helped make laudable. In truth, Hill's legacy of popularity exceeds restrictions to solely the hip hop community. After being nominated for ten Grammy's, and winning five, including Album of the Year, Hill's critical voice was cemented in American culture as central to definitions of love and hip hop for a new generation of American pop cultural listeners at the precipice of a new millennium. Continuing into the twenty-first century, listening to Lauryn Hill has been maintained as a practice designated important to understanding the history of American literary and cultural production. In that vein, in 2014, the United States Library of Congress's National Preservation Board voted to select *The Miseducation* album for conservation in the National Recording Registry. It was added to the registry on March 25, 2015.¹⁷⁵

What is a "new experience" and radical about *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* album (in the long lineage of black women's writing and creative production in America) is Hill's ability to integrate the personal details of her life, with the pedagogical lessons of Black Feminist Thought and Womanist Theory, while offering a critique of the gender politics within hip hop and American culture, and making that critique so popular that men would want to listen. Hill's engagement with love as a personal, political, popular, and pedagogical concept allows her to continue a legacy of womanist theorizing that calls (black) men to account for the ways in which black women are constantly objectified and silenced, in what June Jordan calls the "deliberated strangulation against the possible lives of [black] women" in America.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, Hill offers a means of identifying the institutionalizing structures that put or kept in place these methods of objectification as a tradition of cultural silencing within the American use and circulation of black women's voices, bodies, and intellectual and life-sustaining work otherwise.

Contemporary nostalgia for Lauryn Hill, nearly twenty years after the release of her debut album, and despite a relatively silent career as an emcee,¹⁷⁷ hinges upon this innovative framing of love as a lucrative theme within hip hop production and her modeling of the confluences between the personal, the political, the popular, and the pedagogical as a critical legacy of black womanist theoretical approaches to reception. Our nostalgia attempts to understand (or better, to put some distance between our misunderstanding of) Lauryn Hill's cultural legacy and impact as a black woman emcee who, still, twenty-plus years later, requires yet more listening. If black men were opened to listening to Lauryn Hill in 1998, despite structural conditions that desired for her voice to simply be put to objectifying use by black men, then what legacy of listening has opened up in that wake? How (or) does my writing here, as a black man literary theorist, continue in that legacy? What Lauryn Hill's album demonstrates is that the opportunity to practice listening to black women comes with an attached responsibility and call for responsiveness from listeners, especially listeners who are black men. That call requires black men as scholars and theorists, as emcees and as millennial critics (M.C.s), to engage the legacies of Womanist Theory as a mode of analysis for critiquing the representations, practices, and performances of black masculinity in American culture. Hill's work provides us a model of love and listening to write and theorize a future of responsible and responsive reception.

This chapter could easily have been titled, "All the Emcees are Black Men, All the Vocalists are Black Women, But Some of Us Listen to Lauryn Hill."¹⁷⁸ Hill's album demonstrates how loving black women requires a new form of listening as responsible and responsive reception. Her work positions us to engage all the ways that listening to black women can force scholars of literature to eschew critical defamiliarization, abstraction, and feigned objectivity towards an articulation of theories and scholarship that takes and makes everything

personal. This, to open ourselves up to (and to open up) the needed critical spaces that only listening to the most marginalized voices within a society can make available¹⁷⁹ Historically, in the United States, that has meant an active resistance to listening to, as legitimate and authoritative, the voices of black women; creating the conditions by which the practice of responsible and responsive reception of black women could not have been more opposed.

Perhaps, Lauryn Hill is the improved personification of hip hop, its intimate and empathetic interlocutor. Unlike the gendered version in Common's song, Lauryn performs personal acts of love that prepare American culture, as other, for addressability. Love, as a critical praxis and theoretical framework, with all its complications and implications, provides black men with a capacity for aesthetic creation and intellectual productivity detached from the structures of desire that require black women's objectification. The capacity to discover a black masculine maternal creativity exists in Lauryn Hill's vision of listening, in structuring a black male creative expression and aesthetic approach beyond the exploitation, objectification, and marginalization of black women. Getting America to listen to a black woman was an unprecedented accomplishment in 1998. Getting Americans to heed her advice and example in the twenty-first century is the work emcees, writers, theorists, and critics still have ahead. I used to love her. Lauryn Hill, that is. I still do. I always will. And simply to write *I used to love her* registers love as a critical legacy. Renders it for future theoretical use in critical redux.

CHAPTER THREE: THE AUTHOR AND THE AUTHORITIES

You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.

- Frederick Douglas, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

They say we N. I. | double G. E. R. | We are | much more | Still we chose to ignore | the obvious | We are the slave and the master | What you looking for? | You the question and the answer...

- Nas, “N.I.*.*.E.R. (The Slave And The Master)”

You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please don't forget it.

- James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew”

If performativity requires a power to effect or enact what one names, then who will be the ‘one’ with such a power, and how will such a power be thought?

- Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*

Beneath the Shadow of the Literary Critic

In the introductory essay to the journal for the Modern Language Association's 2010 Special Topic issue, "Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First century," Jonathan Culler frames a unique problematic for the serious theorist of literature in the new millennium. Culler writes, "the future of literary criticism will doubtless depend, in part, on what happens to literature: Will a different model of literature emerge, and, if so, will there be new tasks or opportunities for criticism?"¹⁸⁰ Culler's account of literature's shifting organization—from a "fixed text that emerged as the condition of possibility of criticism in ancient Greece" to "an event, a specific instance of singular interaction" in our millennial moment—demonstrates the ways that the emergence of distinct theoretical "models of literature" prompt very abrupt critical anxieties about the ability of old methodologies to properly reflect on and illuminate texts within these new modes and moments of literary theorization and production.¹⁸¹

Culler cites, in particular, the "rise of rap" as a fresh "model of literature" in the twenty-first century, detailing an inadequacy in the scholarly responses to the special issue's invitation to "sketch some future possibility" of what I classify a *millennial criticism* that addresses hip hop's mode of literary production alongside other "newly prominent forms of discourse."¹⁸² His identification of rap as the paradigmatic instance of literature's mutability comes as a much-needed meditation on the importance of hip hop in redefining our professional understanding of literature and literary criticism, and occasions the present analysis concerning prevailing assumptions about who should provide its literary critique. Considering the recent iteration and pervasive shift in the concept of literature that hip hop represents and bearing in mind the possibility of millennial criticisms arising out of such novel modes of production, certain important critical questions arise.

Among these are many of the following: How do we begin to envision the role and responsibilities of the literary critic changing in the new millennium? Is the academic critic's current position as expert of literature and culturally privileged authority of knowledge production challenged by these fresh conceptual shifts in our understanding of literary texts? Does the function of the academic critic remain fixed in the face of these (and any other) transformations? Within such an examination, we might also reasonably return to an interrogation of the connections between literary interpretation, academic authority, and critical expertise.¹⁸³ What special value (if any) do these qualifying assumptions have on the exploration of available meaning(s) and interpretive contexts for literary texts? What value will (or even should) these assumptions have on the production of literary and cultural meaning(s)?

This litany of fundamental interrogations in the terrain of literature scholarship represents a foundational aspect of the disciplinary training in theory received by scholars of literature in the twentieth century—during a time in which the rise in schools and “-isms” of literary and critical theory brought about a widespread academic standardization in the methods of literature study.¹⁸⁴ Obscured within these methodological processes (in the turn to theory) were certain seizures of critical authority that saw the status of the author come under increased intellectual scrutiny. Noting then the connection between historical shifts in the concept of literature and subsequent negations of the critical authority of the author, this chapter argues for the rise of the hip hop emcee as the millennial critic par excellence. By turning to a purposeful reading of the Queensbridge emcee, Nas (Nasir Jones), whose 2008 *Untitled* ninth studio album sparked a critical controversy addressed perfectly to the exigencies of what “new tasks or opportunities [emerge] for literary criticism,” the chapter will address what roles and responsibilities arise for the literary critic under this new system of literature production. Additionally, this chapter

addresses the function of critical authority and academic expertise in marginalizing the voices of emcees as cultural critics in America.

But before we can address the suppression of the voice of the contemporary American hip hop emcee, we should reflect on the historical circumstances surrounding the suppression of the critical authority of the author of the literary text. While charting a dominant hermeneutic principle of literature study emerging at the start of the twentieth century, Roland Barthes observes a rationale for the author's waning critical authority. Barthes writes:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash...To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic.¹⁸⁵

Once a major key to interpretation, the eminence of the author, Barthes claims, no longer orders "a limit on [the] text" by linking its meaning to the critic's biographical pursuit of the author and his or her "explanation of the work."¹⁸⁶ "Writing," Barthes observes, instead "[becomes] that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away; the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."¹⁸⁷ His formulation demonstrates how nineteenth century French authors like Balzac and Mallarmé drive towards a new structuration and function of writing that gives birth to new types of critical readers. Within this system, the reader (and the practice of reading itself) materializes "the space on which all the quotations that

make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost,” enacting a measure of textual unity that manifests “not in its origin but in its destination.”¹⁸⁸

This shift, necessarily, introduces new assumptions about critical authority. For Barthes, the “removal of the Author” from textual analysis, such that “at all levels the author is absent,” becomes possible only because of the emergence of the literary critic.¹⁸⁹ Grounded in the ability to eschew the personal—for the Barthesian reader is “without history, biography, [or] psychology”—and emboldened by a disciplinary training that privileges objectivity, the critical reader of the twentieth century produces “a single field” where “all the traces by which the written text is constituted” are brought together.¹⁹⁰

In contrast to Barthes’s reading, Michel Foucault keys the dynamics of “disciplinary power” inherent to this usurpation of authority away from the author towards the critic through an analysis of techniques Foucault calls “correct training.”¹⁹¹ “The chief function of the disciplinary power,” Foucault reflects, “is to ‘train,’ rather than to select and to levy; or, no doubt, to train in order to levy and select all the more.”¹⁹² (188). For Foucault, a recognition of the techniques of power in correct training reveal how disciplinarity as a process of power makes (or interpolates, to use Althusser’s language) individuals “both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.”¹⁹³ The special maintenance of these disciplinary practices gives rise to a newly habituated professional class of critics of literature—those who come to deploy critical authority as a mechanism of disciplinary power through “the use of simple instruments: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it—the examination.”¹⁹⁴ Although Foucault’s analyses of “correct training” and “disciplinary power” focuses primarily on the evolution of penal institutions, the implications of his argument for

pedagogical processes and the implementation of disciplinary training in the institutionalization of the academic humanities should not escape our critical appreciative.¹⁹⁵

If authors, then, as Barthes announces, and Foucault makes distinguishable, are subject to levels of critical suspicion and aristarchic usurpation, in relationship to the interpretation of their texts, and as a function of the rise of the academic critic, then how do we imagine emcees (as the preeminent authors of our time) fairing in the face of such comprehensive disciplinary correction? Indeed despite pronounced shifts in the academy's attitudes about hip hop as an emergent mode of literature, literary critics still cultivate covert practices of censure, born from the disciplinary entitlements of authority and power, when emcees attempt to produce their own style of writing and offer up the theoretical means to its interpretations.¹⁹⁶ As such, the censure of emcees can be read as a disciplinary practice of academic critics wrestling with a transformation that would see the privileges of critical authority and expertise striped away by the emcee. This process, the chapter assumes to occur in ways yet to be fully comprehended or perhaps even recognized by literature scholars.¹⁹⁷

Which brings us to the suppression of the voice of the hip hop emcee as a literary and cultural critic. In the very first moment of public access to his album's content, Nas calls into question the comprehensive nature of the criticism directed at his controversial production of the album and the widespread public apprehension regarding his attempt to title the album with what many consider the most shameful and consequential insult in American history.¹⁹⁸ On the track "Hero," the album's first single, for example, Nas reflects:¹⁹⁹

It's universal apartheid | I'm hog-tied | the corporate side | blocking y'all from
going to stores and buying it | First L.A. [Reid] and Doug Morris was riding with
it | but Newsweek articles startled big wigs | They said, Nas | Why is you trying

it? | My lawyers only see the Billboard charts is winning | forgetting | Nas the only true rebel since the beginning | Still in musical prison | in jail for the flow | Try telling Bob Dylan, Bruce, or Billy Joel | they can't sing what's in their soul | So *Untitled* it is | I never change nothing | but people remember this | If Nas can't say it | think about these talented kids | with new ideas | being told what they can and can't spit...²⁰⁰

Nas arguably more than any other emcee has benefitted from the critical endorsement of his work within the American academy.²⁰¹ Yet, here, he begins to make clear how the terms of critical authority and academic expertise work to silence even the most academically acceptable of emcees. His distillation of the critical risks of routinely silencing and censoring the amateur voices of “talented kids | with new ideas” is important as an introductory motif to the album. In part because this theme situates the posturing nature of the criticism registered against him. But also, because it links that censure to a politics of racial oppression conceived in the confluences of capitalism, racism, media (mis)representation, juridical prejudice, and (for my concerns here) the deployment of critical authority as an instrument of disciplinary power in the American academy and its ivory towered institutions of higher education.

The quick succession of verses on this introductory track suggestively juxtapose collaborating systems of racialized oppression (“universal apartheid”), violence (“I’m hog-tied”), economic disenfranchisement (“the corporate side | blocking ya’ll from going to stores and buying it”), discriminatory media representation (“Newsweek articles startled big wigs”), corporate disinvestment (“only see the Billboard charts is winning”), and unequal protection under the law leading to an American prison industrial complex (“Still in musical prison | in jail for the flow”). Juxtaposing these many systems of racial discrimination allows Nas to

contextualize his artistic censure as a less acknowledged form of racial violence that works in collusion with these other structures to systematically silence his critical voices and the voices of other individuals that society deems unintelligent, unintelligible, and inarticulate. By asserting his will to leave the album “Untitled” and declaring that he will “never change nothing,” Nas demonstrates the immediacy with which critical authority is invoked to circumscribe the constructions of racial subjectivity circulating beyond the academy. Additionally, as a black man and emcee in America, he rejects the ways that he is pressed to align with the terms of those critical discourses on subjectivity or be rendered mute by an exertive practice of critical authority.

Reactions from political leaders and academic critics at his provocative attempt at titling the album *Nigger* registered a near universal rebuke in the public sphere. And this, even before a single track or verse was released from the (still largely unproduced) album.²⁰² The iconic civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, for example, seemed to capture America’s collective (if ill informed) disgust best in a statement to Fox News regarding the album’s purported title. Jackson, at that time, asserted:

The title using the N-word is morally offensive and socially distasteful...Nas has the right to degrade and denigrate in the name of free speech, but there is no honor in it...Radio and television stations have no obligation to play it, and self-respecting people have no obligation to buy it.²⁰³

Jackson, who the following year experienced his own “n-word controversy,” goes on to add: “I wish he would use his talents to lift up and inspire, not degrade, making mockery of racism.”²⁰⁴ Others, including the likes of Hakeem Jeffries, Al Sharpton, John McWhorter, and even Oprah Winfrey, would add their voices in protest against Nas’s use of the racial epithet as a potential

album title, in clear contrast to the critical reactions to other contemporaneous publications employing the word as a point of reference and departure. Works like Randall Kennedy's *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (2002), Stephanie Smith's *Household Words: Bloomers, Suckers, Bombshell, Scab, Nigger, Cyber* (2005), and even Jabari Asim's *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who shouldn't, and Why* (2007), not only found publication and distribution through large publishing houses and academic presses, but also received their fair share of positive academic reviews and endorsements.²⁰⁵ By contrast, the critical reaction to Nas's use of the word largely ignored the long history of American literary publications making use of the term without mainstream censure or pushback.²⁰⁶

Nas's function as an American hip hop emcee, I want to suggest, positioned him uniquely as someone susceptible to such widespread criticism. Insofar as the figure of the emcee embodies its own set of American cultural stereotypes, Nas became a scapegoat for hip hop's extensive history of deploying the term, as a function of the culture's supposed anti-intellectualism. As such, his attempt to continue the history of hip hop's circulation of the term in his use of the slur as his album's title immediately elicited a number of adverse responses from cultural authorities that worked to exert a form of disciplinary power to mute his critical use of the term. Nas responds to these critics by denouncing their commitments to disciplinary (and discriminatory) power, rejecting their assumptions of critical authority over his expression. "If Cornel West was making an album called *Nigger*," Nas reflects in an interview, "they would know he's got something intellectual to say...to think I'm [going to] say something that's not intellectual is calling me a nigger, and to be called a nigger...is counterproductive, counter-revolutionary."²⁰⁷

Significantly, Nas names Cornel West as the style of American academic professional that most would find critically authoritative and acceptable when speaking about the complicated

issues of racial subjectivity and self-representation in America. Beyond his function as a cultural signifier of African American intellectualism, West is also one of the few academics to have produced his own hip hop album.²⁰⁸ By naming West, then, Nas signifies both on his role as the preferable public voice on all race matters, but also on his less well known public practice as an emcee. For Nas, West's unique position within these two seemingly oppositional communities allows him to represent not only those who are afforded the cultural privilege of authoritative speech, but also those who are most often targeted and disqualified from doing so.

It follows, then, that amidst the widespread backlash against Nas, and despite his own professed disregard for the term's prevalent use within African American and hip hop communities, it follows that Cornell West would be one of the few scholars to come to the emcee's defense:

Nas is a towering artist. I support his artistic freedom, and his deep love for black people and justice, I think, permits him to use any word he wants to use. It's a little different than nonenlightened folk with bigoted views.²⁰⁹

By acknowledging Nas's right to use the word and valuing his ability to speak critically on the topic of racial subjectivities, West provides an easy rationale for thinking about the approach of the emcee as a form of critical engagement and attempts to lend his own critical authority to Nas's voice over the public cries of other disapproving critical voices. When we recall, however, that Nas announced the tentative title almost a full year before officially releasing any of the album's content, we begin to recognize in West's impulse to protection a principled response to those many public disavowals of Nas as an emcee, but also a response that is perhaps equally ill-informed.

Again, I want to suggest that Nas references West not out of reverence for his authoritative status within an American public intellectual and academy community. Neither is the invocation made in order for West to lend credibility to emcee's voice and production efforts—despite any awareness on Nas's part of being an untrained and amateur cultural critic.²¹⁰ Instead, I contend, that West is specifically named as an intellectual and cultural authority who has recently turned to the practice of emceeing as a form of critical experimentation and engagement—the discursive practice that marks Nas as expert.²¹¹ Referencing West, in this way, allows Nas to delimit and deconstruct the boundaries that would separate him as an emcee from West as a critical authority, precisely at the point in which the public positioning of each figure's critical voice is scrutinized for having (or, in Nas's case, not having) authority.

His open acknowledgement of West's reputable intellectual standing simultaneously elucidates and rejects the prevailing assumptions about the hip hop emcee's own supposed anti-intellectualism—by citing an established scholar who has recently embraced the practice of emceeing as an ideal discursive medium. And yet, in coming to Nas's defense, West speaks not as a practicing emcee and peer of Nas's, but as one expertly trained in the critical authority of disciplinary power. His defense extends, then, the reach of disciplinary power over Nas by offering authorized support (and perhaps even permission) for the emcee to speak publicly. Nas, on the other hand, refuses to partake in this performance of disciplinary power. By releasing the album, he situates his critical voice, within that vast field of critical authorities, not by privileging his own training or highlighting his alternative expertise, but by recognizing his location at the margins of their discursive terrain. As such, Nas subverts his positioning as an unqualified (or disqualified) speaker by enacting within the album's production a fresh form of *resource full* and *resourceful* performance of black subjectivity. As such, the emcee's critical

assessment and narrative treatment of America's cultural trafficking in racial stereotype brings to light earlier examples of anti-authoritarian African American literary representations of racial subjectivity, in order to demonstrate a new method of critical engagement being authorized in the performances of the American hip hop emcee.

On another of the album's original singles, "Ya'll My Niggas," for example, Nas offers the first signs of his critical method by introducing his representation of *the nigger as subject*. In this representation, the emcee enacts the performance of his literary construction of what I term *a nigger subjectivity*—a dynamic persona enacted by the emcee as the speaking subject of a first-person character-driven narrative materializing the long history of an American racial stereotype.²¹² Nas begins the track rather typically, engaging his listener in a style of direct address common to hip hop lyrical production:

Find a room to lock yourself in | and close the door | It's some | heavy concepts
that we gotta explore | We gotta | strip the word down | rugged and raw | The
rhetoric of Martin King | just ain't around no more | Du Bouie ain't here | James
Baldwin neither | They all were leaders | But they ain't help me get this Porsche
two-seater...²¹³

Directing his audience to ruminate on the emcee's status as the natural beneficiary of critical racial discourses of the past, Nas articulates his own critical position by proffering a catalogue of intellectual predecessors. Citing the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin, Nas evokes a tradition of black intellectual criticism that supplements new strategies of critique with each successive generation. As the lyrics illustrate, however, the "rhetoric" (or languages of critical engagement) specific to African American critiques of American racism have changed since the times of these great "leaders" and, as such, the verse

continues: “to be a Fortune 500 C.E.O | it took rap,” attests to hip hop’s pursuit of wealth as part of the successes of citizenship under American capitalism as this generation’s contribution to that critical register.

This discourse of fiscal accomplishment is significant to Nas’s critique of racial subjectivity in America in that it accounts for the emcee’s appropriation of prior critical discourses on race as a process of hip hop’s accumulation and expansion of available resources. Typically, under capitalism, the idea of resources is restricted to the availability of materials, goods, property, commodities, and wages. The emcee, however, extends capitalism’s rhetoric of resources by including concepts and ideas as part of their “cultural capital,” with Nas specifically utilizing the stereotypical American concept of the “nigger” as a literary and critical subject.²¹⁴ As such, the capital accumulation that allows Nas to purchase his “Porsche two-seater,” also makes the rhetoric of figures like King, Du Bois, and Baldwin available in a wealth of intellectual reserves to be exploited by the emcee.

Being part of a generation of youth born to strategic U.S. economic disinvestment, Nas (like many of hip hop’s earliest generation) learns to make the most of whatever is at hand and available—an economy of production against privation that registers as both resourceful and resource full.²¹⁵ The nigger as the subject (of history, of narrative, of the American cultural imaginary), then, offers the full weight of its cultural capital as an amalgamating term straight out of the oppressive discourses on race in America, providing Nas a unique resource for critiquing a long tradition of American critical authority. By the conclusion of the first chorus of “Ya’ll My Niggas,” and continuing midway through the second full verse of the track, Nas begins to advance his method of speaking for (and through) the concept of the nigger as a racial stereotype, cultural pseudonym, and narrative subject, by delving deeper into his construction of

this first-person characterization and narrating consciousness—developing a distinctly identifiable personality for his unusual performative persona. As his imaginative creation muses:

Trying to erase me from y'all memory | too late | I'm engraved in history | (I'm
here my niggas) | Speak my name | and breath life in me | Make sure y'all never
forget me | (Cause y'all give me life) | Cause y'all use my name so reckless |
Whether to be accepted or disrespected | (And I love it) | And I love it | especially
when y'all do it in public | and I'm the subject | Cause y'all my niggas...²¹⁶

Here the addressee is forced to register the emcee's significant shift in identification and speaking voice through an implication meant to be endearing and engendering. If the emcee customarily advances behind the constructed lyrical mask of a narrating persona (e.g. Nas emcees under the aliases of "Kid Wave," "Nasty Nas," "Nas," "Escobar," "Nastradamus," and so forth), then the emcee of the above passage advances by manufacturing a mask of masks.²¹⁷

The first-person personal pronouns, *I*, *me*, and *my*, then, spoken throughout the verse, reference back to a subject whose identity is distinct from the one Nas has spent years cultivating as an emcee and performer. While the second-person plural pronoun, *ya'll*, lingers over us as Nas's addressees, implicating his listeners in the performance through a *stereotypical Othering* that calls us to account for our own racial subjectivity.²¹⁸ Though Nas's regular emceeing voice is present earlier on the track—when he issues a critical call for the listener to "Find a room to lock yourself in | and close the door"—his persona quickly transitions into a performance that reifies the concept of the nigger as a speaking subject by removing the familiar biographical details of Nas's life as the source material or point of origin for the suddenly ambiguous speaker. This moment inaugurates a turn in the album's critical approach to performing racial subjectivity, deviating from the generic norms where an emcee might use the n-word as a term of

endearment for others or as a popularized vernacular form of self-identification, to a place where Nas can narrativize the word as part of rhetorical procedures of impersonation and prosopoeia that enmesh the consciousness and voice of this complex cultural stereotype in sound. “Some niggas are full time | some *play* and *pretend*,” Nas prefaces in an earlier verse, further alerting the astute listener to the emcee’s rhetorical strategy throughout the verse and album as a whole.²¹⁹

Nas’s dissimulating performance, then, provides the opportunity to understand this characterization of nigger subjectivity, not as an autobiographical representation of the emcee, but rather as the sonically rendered voice and consciousness of a historically situated, widely circulating American cultural stereotype. This is a rhetorical deployment that allows Nas to “play and pretend” at embodying a concept with immense cultural weight and currency. To call the emcee’s approach here literary is to recognize its indebtedness to a history of African American expression that engages stereotypical myths circumscribing black identity.

Black Subjectivity in American Literature

In particular, Nas’s meditations on the nigger as subject reflect back on black literary and critical responses to subjugating conceptions of the *slave as subject*, especially those that became most prominent in the United States between the publication of Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).²²⁰ Frederick Douglass, specifically, acts as a predecessor and literary resource for Nas’s characterization of the nigger as subject, connecting the emcee and the autobiographical writer in their engagement with stereotypical representations of blackness across space and time. Revisiting Douglass’s second autobiographical narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), then, in light of Nas’s literary representations of the nigger as subject, reveals how ‘expert’ readings of Douglass’s

rhetorical approach to refuting fictions of black identity lapse in mistaking his representations of life as an enslaved person for an uncritical deployment of the word slave as a racialized self-identifier. Douglass's decision to reissue his autobiography, only three short years after the publication of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, offers immediate critical response to the ubiquitous circulation of stereotypical representations of blackness as put forth in that most authoritative of abolitionist texts. His need to issue this response, against his own critical contemporaries, lends Douglass's 1855 autobiography to moments of rhetorical resourcefulness not unlike those found in Nas's album production.

In the preface to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass's conspicuously anonymous editor positions the author's writing in direct opposition to Stowe's text and its status as the authoritative work on the subject of American slavery and the slave as subject. Careful not to name Stowe directly, the editor's discussion makes clear his attempt to evoke *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for his contemporary reader:

If the volume now presented to the public were a mere work of ART, the history of its misfortune might be written in two very simple words—TOO LATE. The nature and character of slavery have been subjects of an almost endless variety of artistic representation; and after the brilliant achievements in that field, and while those achievements are yet fresh in the memory of the million, he who would add another to their legion, must possess the charm of transcendent excellence, or apologize for something worse than rashness.²²¹

Uncle Tom's Cabin, as the abolitionist text already on the minds of many at the second half of the nineteenth century, quickly became the most widely circulating book (outside of the bible) in America. It was the novel that Abraham Lincoln allegedly quipped was “the book that made this

Great War.”²²² As such, when Douglass’s editor references a “work of ART” depicting “[t]he nature and character of slavery” whose “brilliant achievements” are “yet fresh in the memory of the million,” he means to summon for his readers the most prominent anti-slavery document of that age.²²³

Popular as it was, Stowe’s work was not without detractors. While Southerners openly challenged the authenticity of the novel’s representations of the white South and questioned the legitimacy of its depictions of the horrors of enslavement, few of Stowe’s black contemporaries voiced any open dissent over its fictionalized depictions of black subjectivity in the antebellum South. Yet, after carefully evoking Stowe’s text in the opening of his preface, Douglass’s unidentified editor continues, “[t]he reader is, therefore, assured...that [Douglass’s] attention is not invited to a work of ART, but to a work of FACTS—Facts, terrible and almost incredible, it may be—yet FACTS, nevertheless.”²²⁴ From the start, *My Bondage and My Freedom* is arranged as a critique of fictional representations of black subjectivity in nineteenth century U.S. society and culture. In setting Douglass’s writing up as a factual response (“there is not a fictitious name nor place in the whole volume”) to the stereotypical fictions made prominent by Stowe’s sentimental novel, the editor authorizes Douglass’s criticism of those circumscribing notions of the black enslaved person as a literary subject.²²⁵ As such, the editor’s preface places Douglass’s “factual” representations of American enslavement in opposition to other prevailing literary portrayals. Its clamorous distancing of Douglass’s writing from the terrain of literature works both to legitimize his account against accusations of fabrication and inauthenticity, and to sharpen its contrast with fictitious works, like Stowe’s, that trafficked in racial stereotype.

The unusual anonymity of Douglass’s editor, however, challenges a straightforward reading of the preface’s plea that the writing contained within is a strict “work of FACTS.”

Consider that the anonymous editor later admits, “the best Preface to this volume” is one written by Douglass himself, in the form of a letter responding to the editor’s “urgent solicitation for such a work.”²²⁶ As a paratextual element, this solicited letter is then represented in the text as a dominant portion of the unnamed editor’s actual preface. In combination with the editor’s anonymity and Douglass’s attached name in signature, the preface within a preface emerges as a trope intimating the possibility of both the letter-as-preface and the anonymous editor’s preface having been written by a masquerading Douglass.²²⁷ The necessity for such a literary dissimulation speaks to the ways that Douglass’s experience of the disciplinary (and discriminatory) power of his contemporaries worked to censure and silence his critical voice as a former enslaved black person writing his own autobiography.²²⁸ Douglass uses this rhetorical pretense, then, to circumvent the living prejudices that restrict his full expression of black subjectivity and authorial control. As his paratextual (and prefatory) letter states:

I see, with you, many reasons for regarding my autobiography as exceptional in its character, and as being, in some sense, naturally beyond the reach of those reproaches which honorable and sensitive minds dislike to incur...I see, too, that there are special reasons why I should write my own biography, in preference to employing another to do it. Not only is slavery on trial, but unfortunately, the enslaved people are also on trial. It is alleged, that they are, naturally, inferior; that they are *so low* in the scale of humanity, and so utterly stupid...²²⁹

Douglass’s insistence that he “write [his] own biography,” as a means to resist slavery as an institution and to redress perceptions of black inferiority, inducts a space for the author to challenge “those reproaches” as demeaning accusations against his humanity.²³⁰ The power and prominence of those stereotypically dehumanizing perceptions require him to circumvent

convention in order to discover alternative means for authorizing and authenticating his narrative and critical authority. By usurping the role of volume editor from the very start (in the volume's prefatory moments), Douglass links the dehumanization of American enslavement to the authorizing practices of American literary production. A closer reading of his manipulation and editing of the volume's text shows Douglass's attempt to make of his life a fiction perfectly molded and fitted to combating the cultural stereotypes circumscribing black identity in the nineteenth century, particularly as those stereotypes are disseminated by white literary authorities and their authoritative texts.²³¹

What is particularly striking about Douglass's rhetorical approach in the first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), in comparison to his dissimulating approach in the second publication, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) is his deliberation on the use of the word slave as a racial identifier. "You have seen how a man was made a slave," Douglass writes in the first published *Narrative*, "you shall see how a slave was made a man."²³² This figure comes both in climax and prelude to two of Douglass's most memorable narrative moments—his dirge against the cargo ships entering and leaving the Chesapeake Bay and his final battle with the "nigger breaker" Covey.²³³ Douglass's turning on the word slave as a racialized self-identifier reflects his deep entrenchment in the discourses of abolitionism at that time in his life. His use of the chiasmus structures the narrative, centering a literary inversion to underscore the abolitionist theme of social transformation through the emancipation of the black slave subject.

By 1855, however, Douglass has abandoned this figure, demonstrating a more complex rhetorical approach and critical understanding of the limits of freedom under American critical authority and using the word slave (or its strategic absence from the text) to designate those

limits. His erasure of the inverting literary figure of the chiasmus, then, works to negate the idea of the slave as a racialized subject in order to negotiate the comprehensive use of the word slave as an identifier of racial subjectivity. After a decade of reflection on the meaning and significance of his first published autobiography, and especially considering the recent popularity of Stowe's novel and its stereotypical representations of blackness, Douglass begins to illustrate his resistance to white critical authority in terms that extend his critique beyond enslavement. Where his writing in the *Narrative* prioritized the abolitionist agenda of emancipation, *My Bondage* stresses his denunciation of popular conceptions of blackness within the American cultural imaginary. His decision to omit the chiasmus, then, is purposefully made editorially conspicuous, calling for a deeper literary analysis of its absence.

At the moment of the omission, Douglass draws the reader's attention to its loss by quoting, in its entirety, the two-page, four-paragraph passage from the original 1845 *Narrative*. This resourceful redeployment of the prior publication's *scene of transformation* reproduces Douglass's initial encounter with Covey and his lamentations on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay, but cuts short of replicating the ontological equation of his social position (as an enslaved person) with his rhetorical acknowledgement of his nominal status as "an American Slave." Again, he makes use of the technique of paratextual quotation as a means of editorial control and self-correction, eliding the final chiasmus as part of his response to critical authorities like Garrison (the autobiographer's first editor) and Beecher Stowe, whose assumptions of literary and critical expertise regarding the slave as a racial subject, worked to reinforce cultural prejudices that limited the possibilities of black subjectivity in America.

Douglass writes, then, against the use of the word slave as a cultural signifier of black subjectivity by embracing the possibility of constructing the slave as a literary subject under

black authorial control. Note his editorial changes to the chiasmus within *My Bondage*: “You have, dear reader, seen me humbled, degraded, broken down, enslaved, and brutalized, and you understand how it was done; now let us see the converse of all this, and how it was brought about.”²³⁴ His resistance in returning to and turning on the word slave as a racial referent and self-identifier can be read easily in the fumbling rhetoric of this edited version. The overall effect of these editorial choices creates a critical performance of elisions and additions that make of his life a literary work to be used towards the evisceration of the word slave as a racialized identifier of black subjectivity in America in the nineteenth century. Douglass’s recasting of the slave as a literary subject to be crafted and manipulated by anonymous (or unauthorized) black editorial practices creates a vision of how black life might be verified and validated by devitalizing its stereotypical representations, especially as written into the culture under the sign of nominal enslavement by white critical authorities.

In the twenty-first century, Nas extends Douglass’s editorial practice, by assimilating his critical method of deploying racial stereotypes for the purpose of undermining their cultural capital. He develops Douglass’s critical discourse on race and the slave as subject by engaging the word nigger as a floating signifier and stand-in for blackness throughout American history. The emcee’s recuperative reading of Douglass exposes the ways in which American discourses on race and black subjectivity continue to make use of stereotypical monikers that denigrate and dehumanize African American into a new millennium.²³⁵ By opening up the airwaves to address these issues of racial representation and the use of words like nigger (or “nigga”) as racialized identifiers of black subjectivity, Nas forces all Americans—not just those critical authorities engaged in the study of American literary and critical history—to confront the protracted prejudices of a tradition of critical authority that continues to limit the possibilities for imagining

and redefining black subjectivity within the nation's cultural imaginary. Representing a new method of literary and critical engagement, Nas (as an emcee) gives voice to those whose very use of the language challenges the assumptions of critical authority inherited from the past.

Why, within his quest for millennial criticisms, Culler evokes the pervasiveness of hip hop culture, in general, and the influence of rap performance on literary culture, in particular, is a peculiar moment in the American literary academy's critical engagement with hip hop practices and practitioners. For Culler, the rise of rap represents a complicated negotiation of conventional and emergent modes of literary production. The (in)ability of the literary critic to meet the demands of these new modes is the essential concern of twenty-first century criticism. Yet, as Culler writes, "the work is mute, and the critic must speak for it," an assumption that indulges in the notion that only academics are qualified as authorities and experts to do so.²³⁶ As Nas's critical method and resourceful performance on the *Untitled* (2008) album makes clear, there are alternative possibilities for critical engagement beyond the academic tradition of disciplinary writing. And by appealing to the emcee's presentation of the nigger as narrative subject and listening to his critique of the cultural referent as representative of black subjectivity, American literature scholars can begin to remap the connections between disciplinarity and discriminatory power—particularly where academics are tasked with functioning as institutional gatekeepers for complex and variegated systems of racial oppression rooted in histories of expertise and critical authority.

Both Nas's and Douglass's performances rely on rhetorical procedures to critique the use of fictional concepts like the slave and the nigger as terms of endearment, empathy, and oppression throughout U.S. history. And while neither ever settles on the idea that such terms might fully encapsulate black identity, their critiques recognize the power adherent to trafficking

in such stereotypes. On the one hand, Douglass makes of his life a fiction to combat stereotypical assumptions perpetrated by white critical authorities about black subjectivity in the nineteenth century. On the other, Nas enlivens the fictional concept of the nigger as a narrative subject in order to critique the critical authorities that would silence his voice as an emcee and black male speaking subject. When weighing their critical interventions against the so-called experts, it becomes clear just how often critical authority is invoked to reinforce or reproduce racial stereotypes as a function of disciplinary power. Instead of aligning with Douglass's critical rejections of the word slave as a racial signifier of black subjectivity in American history, for example, contemporary literary and cultural critics persist in the authoritative use of the term to characterize and frame an entire ancestry of persons of African descent forced to live and survive for centuries of enslavement. Instead of de-authorizing and devaluing the language of white enslavers (versus *masters*) who kept these persons enslaved, critics attack and attempt to invalidate the innovative engagement of the critical voice of an emcee like Nas as nonexpert.

All this speaks to the present condition of literary and cultural criticism and the crisis in the humanities. That there are others who wish to speak (and have much to say and have much to teach us) is a lesson that many American academics are beginning to recognize. What will be our relationship to these critical others? How will our present assumptions about critical authority and expertise structure our responses to their voices? Will we learn from their methods or be replaced by emcees as the millennial critics usurping our traditions of critical authority and expertise in the new millennium? Such considerations prove vital to the possibility of developing a millennial criticism. Perhaps old methodologies must always be replaced. Perhaps, it is our legacy as critics to divest the practices of criticism of the punitive properties of disciplinary power. If we trust the line of thinking that maintains that these new concepts of literature will

necessarily shift our assumptions and approaches to literary criticism, then we must work to recognize our responsibility for incorporating the emcee's methods into our own critical approaches. Whether or not we come to accept this duty, ultimately, we cannot pretend that the shifts in the concept of literature will leave the literary expert, authority, and critic unscathed.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF LITERARY (HIP HOP) STUDIES

This dissertation set out to reflect upon the critical reading practices and aesthetic techniques of the hip hop emcee. Throughout it has sought to place the practices of the emcee at the center of a millennial theory of American literature and cultural criticism. While other academic disciplines have, historically, more readily integrated objects of study from hip hop culture into their fields, this project demonstrates how narrowly literature scholars have broached the exploration of hip hop's deep literary archive. In contrast to earlier scholarly work emphasizing the emcee's lyrics as an extension of conventional Western poetry, this dissertation demonstrates the ways emcees generate their own theories of reading and interpretation that coalesce in a necessary comparison between hip hop lyrics and other genres of literature production and writing.

Through a series of suggestive close readings, then, of the hip hop concept album as a novel form of literary production, the project ultimately teaches literature scholars how to read and interpret hip hop texts alongside more traditional literary texts—through what I have called a hip hop hermeneutics. As such, the dissertation sets prominent emcees in critical conversation with canonical African American writers, filling theoretical gaps in literary scholarship by arguing that all these authors imagine a future American literature (and by extension a future America) by first sounding the nation differently. In reading hip hop's shifting concepts of literature throughout each chapter, this dissertation ends by detailing the ways hip hop's hermeneutics might become transformative of the role of the literary critic in the new

millennium. I would like to conclude here with a brief consideration of how I came to this project and what its initiatory moment might mean for the future of literary and hip hop studies.

In March of 2009, in coordination with the Carolina Performing Arts Center, and nearly a full decade into the new millennium, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Music Department organized a serial exhibition of public performances bringing together instrumentalists and artists of traditions generally held in a type of dichotomous aesthetic opposition. In a three day event rather grandly titled: "Hopes, Dreams, Realities: A Festival of Music and Poetry,"²³⁷ these innovative productions showcased the London-based Arditti String Quartet—an ensemble known as much for their technically vibrant interpretations of contemporary classical compositions as for their firm resolve to perform pieces by living composers (and led by British violinist Irvine Arditti)—orchestral pianist and composer Stefan Kitwin, who at that time served as the George Kennedy Distinguished Professor in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Music Department, and the celebrated slam poet, writer, and musician, Saul Williams, an African American artist and actor known particularly for his blend of spoken-word, alternative hip hop, and politically charged theatrical performances. The organizing logic behind the performative series was the seeming promotion of a groundbreaking union between two contrasting aesthetics and styles of music, with Saul Williams's recitation of a hip hop influenced spoken-word poetry standing in for an African diasporic tradition, and Kitwin and the Arditti String Quartet's recreation of the Swiss composer Thomas Kessler's original arrangement representing a modern exhibition of Western classical "art music."²³⁸

Williams, in his honorific standing as the American slam poet laureate, was tabbed to present selections from his previously published collection, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls: The Lost*

Teachings of Hip-Hop (2006)—a text professing to be a type of autobiographical exposé, but exemplifying what poet and African American literary critic Kevin Young has theorized as in the tradition of the African American “shadow book.”²³⁹ The collection’s introduction, which Williams labels “A Confession,” is voiced by a narrative persona of the artist’s contrivance. Intimate in its first-person perspective, the voice, which the reader accepts in earnest as Williams’s own, commences the narration by fictionalizing circumstances by which the slam poet has discovered an anachronistically ancient hip hop *Urtext* (the eponymously named “dead emcee scrolls”) stuffed within the excavated cavity of a graffiti artist’s spray paint can abandoned in the New York City subway. “Older than something written in the eighties or even the seventies,” Williams writes, “It felt ancient. If I had found it in a museum, I’m not certain I would have linked it with graffiti. But finding it in a spray can in a graffiti site put it in an unusual context.”²⁴⁰

In detailing the Qumran Cave-like discovery (albeit for a nascent hip hop generation),²⁴¹ Williams, as the manuscript’s increasingly duplicitous narrator, conveys the sequential discovery of these scrolls, abandoned long ago along the subway tracks running beneath New York City, the deciphering of their pages, the coopting of the poems decoded within their initially illegible script, and ultimately the performance of these poems as the narrator’s own within the publication’s introductory chapter. Over the course of this confession, the reader is slowly made aware of the clandestine means by which each appropriated piece has helped secure the acclaim and stardom for which Saul Williams, as a real-world poet and actor beyond the text, has come to be known.²⁴²

While the intimacy of Williams’s narrative voice allows this fabricated story of discovery to masquerade as a genuine autobiographical confession, the same deceptive pretext of the

manuscript's discovery loses all its literary complexity for the Carolina audience encountering its lyrical performance in Chapel Hill in March of 2009 for the first time. As such, the experience of listening to Williams recite *his* dead emcee rhymes, as featured alongside Kitwin and the Arditti String Quartet, authorized (for those attendant at the event) an institutionalizing detachment of the lyrics from the original fictive context that gave them their literary urgency. In effect, the performances as conceived by the Carolina Performing Arts Center, UNC's Music Department, Saul Williams, and the other artists involved in the "Hopes, Dreams, Realities" event, reframed the verses of William's published narrative, removing them from one fictive context and replacing that context with another.²⁴³

I want to conclude here, as a theorist of hip hop as literature and as a scholar of American literary theory and cultural criticism, by orchestrating a brief discussion of this new institutional context for hip hop's consumption in light of the Williams performance and towards a consideration of the future of hip hop's literary study. Conceived in the convergence of the financial interests of both public and private institutions, their governing bodies, and the enterprising artists and scholars that surround, and that are supported by, the American academy as an enabling infrastructure, the presentation of Williams's verses (and by extension other hip hop cultural productions) without their original framing contexts, and for academic consumption, stages the need to interrogate the disciplinary organization of black cultural products within the American academy as most pertinent to the deeper concerns regarding the literary study of hip hop that my dissertation project engages.²⁴⁴ Perhaps the substitution of one orienting context for another is simply a disinterested effect of any institutionalizing processes, though my sense is that this process of institutionalization structures a very specific and political historical context for the ubiquitous millennial institutionalization of hip hop studies into the American Academy

writ large. And while many academic disciplines have addressed the institutional benefit of integrating hip hop into their fields of study, the distance maintained between traditional English literature departments and hip hop's deep and richly literary archive has generated gaps that *Hip Hop Illiterate: Hermeneutics for the Future of American Literary Theory and Criticism*, as a research and theoretical project, has attempted to fill.

In retrospect, a quick look around the room, on that evening of the Williams performance in March of 2009, would have revealed what strange bedfellows academia can create. Chapel Hill locals flaunting an array of colors as diverse as the faces in the crowd were accompanied by learned professors, who sat somewhat silently avoiding the eyes of their more rambunctious students, who were themselves, ironically or not, rocking an assortment of graphic superhero tees and Nike Airs. These, and more discrete others, including graduate students like myself and hip hop fans from neighboring "Durham County,"²⁴⁵ all sat waiting, rather restlessly, shoulder to shoulder with many of UNC's predominately-white population. All gathered and eagerly awaiting the concert's start. After a few moments, the Arditti String Quartet with Kitwin in accompaniment took to the stage arranging themselves to our anticipatory applause and after a brief pause these instrumentalists all began to play. In this way, for a little over forty minutes, the artists proceeded from one musical sequence to the next, with much energy and aplomb, and with their efforts only fleetingly interrupted by the vigorous and grateful cheering of the crowd's classical music enthusiasts—all without a sight or sound of Saul Williams.

For those not properly initiated into the rites of hip hop celebrity, I should remark on certain cultural expectations regarding the unanticipated absence of Williams at the concert's start. Unfortunately, within the tradition of hip hop performances, this type of thing is rather notorious for happening. Last minute cancellations and rescheduling, missing group members,

shows beginning too late or running too far behind to possibly make up the emcee's scheduled catalogue, this all, in many ways, becomes part of the experience. Within that context, Saul's absenteeism, while potentially upsetting, registered nothing all that new for those of us in the crowd accustomed to moving in and out of hip hop circles. Though, the nature of this performance's shifting context as a hip hop performance incorporated into a college concert series at UNC's Memorial Hall—a world-class performance space that offers the technical capabilities and architectural designs to showcase a diverse array of topnotch performances with acts as varied in their staging as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Kodo drummers of Japan to Tony Bennett and Yo-Yo Ma—perhaps unconsciously had already begun to alter our hip hop sensibilities and expectations.²⁴⁶

Unlike pioneering Bronx deejays who hotwired sound systems to siphon electricity from New York streetlights, and organized unsanctioned block parties that pumped life into and produced culture out of the postindustrial environs of urban decay, the university's presentation of Saul William's lyricism significantly altered the context of hip hop's original creation, production, and consumption to accommodate for shifting audiences within this academic terrain. Paramount in this transformation of space and context was an aesthetic sensibility where respectful meditation and reflection (as directed towards the appreciation of the performance as high art) gets prioritized over an active and embodied aesthetics of engagement. That is to say, where Western classical performances ask audiences to sit back and relax, fold your arms, and contemplate the beautiful harmonies, hip hop performances call audiences to 'clap your hands,' 'move your body,' and 'scream.'

By intermission, the jig was up. After almost an hour of music, with no excuse or justification being offered as to Williams's withdrawal, those hip hop fans in the audience

gathered in the lobby with words less than kind for the Carolina Performing Arts Center, the Arditti String Quartet, Kitwin, and for Saul Williams himself.²⁴⁷ Others, passing through the lobby altogether, headed straight out of Memorial Hall into the open air, delighting to share a smoke or merely the evening chill, and kept on going, off into the night for other indulgences. For those who remained, the second half proved more rewarding of our patience, if not any less unsettling of our expectations. As I found in the coming weeks, months, and years of my graduate study, the elision of these boundaries between hip hop as a cultural performance and the institutionalizing procedures of the academy called my attention to the extraordinary circumstances by which certain exigencies at the start of the twenty-first century were beginning to coalesce into new critical paradigms. For my thinking, the connection between this performance and my criticisms about the limits of hip hop's literary study have been invaluable. Williams's academic reconceptualization and contextualization of hip hop within this performance jumpstarted my own intellectual questioning of the ways in which hip hop was becoming accommodated towards academic institutions and their disciplinary contexts.

At this point, a necessary elision must occur. To attempt to recount each of the strange details of the remainder of that night would prove too imprecise a testament. Suffice it to say that about two minutes into the second half of the performance, Saul Williams did finally step outside of the shadows and onto the amphitheater's dais to grand applause, and yes, as leisurely as you please, sauntered onto the stage without so much as a salutary nod or wink to acknowledge or admit his postponement. From there it might be said that the performance was simultaneously an unimagined success and an unmitigated failure. What had been proposed in the event as a marriage of two aesthetic mindsets, of two musical value systems with disparate technical tendencies, revealed in that performance the common-sense discontinuities between such

incongruent traditions. Williams, with his cadre of classically-trained instrumentalists, produced a discordant performance of beat-less rhymes that conjured a visceral reaction that has remained the primary impetus for my research on hip hop within American institutions of higher education. It seemed to me then that in a sudden frenzy to capitalize on hip hop's cultural capital, academic journals, conference papers and panels, authorized anthologies, published monographs, and campus musical performances were presenting hip hop in a cultural context adverse to its own aesthetic sensibility.

The conundrum that this presentation raised—and by extension, the conundrum that the institutionalization of hip hop in the American academy raises—as a matter of course and point of argument suggests that the methodologies of the American academy still have much to learn from hip hop as a cultural practice. What the pervasive institutionalization of hip hop makes apparent, this project contends, is the lack of an academic acceptance of hip hop's methodologies. On the one hand, there has been a necessary academic profusion of much-needed writing and scholarship surrounding hip hop after decades of the form being generally ignored by the most preeminent scholars and critics. On the other hand, what an engagement with performances like Williams's reveals is some missed theoretical step. A bridge in the process of hip hop's institutionalization that still needs communication. This, then, is the critical work *Hip Hop Illiterate* has proposed to undertake.

The term I continue to use to describe these forced alterations to hip hop as it has made its way in and through the American academy is *institutionalization*. While there might be more scholarly ways to define this disciplinary process, I believe, anecdotally, the best way to explain this practice is to borrow the definition from one of the all-time great cinematic critiques of America's disciplinary institutions. In a scene from Frank Darabont's film, *Shawshank*

Redemption (1994), the prisoner Red (played by Oscar-Award winning African American actor, Morgan Freeman) describes a fellow inmate's attempted murder of another prisoner (and close friend) because of the psychological conflict arising from his intense desire to remain incarcerated in the prison that has been his home for almost fifty years. The dialogue unfolds as follows:

Andy Dufresne: I just don't understand what happened in there, that's all.

Heywood: Old man's crazy as a rat in a tin shithouse, is what.

Red: Oh Heywood, that's enough out of you.

Ernie: (to Heywood) I heard he had you shittin' in your pants.

Heywood: Fuck you!

Red: Would you knock it off? Brooks ain't no bug. He's just...he's just *institutionalized*.

Heywood: Institutionalized, my ass.

Red: The man's been in here fifty years, Heywood. Fifty years! This is all he knows. In here, he's an important man. He's an educated man. Outside, he's nothing! Just a used up con with arthritis in both hands. Probably couldn't get a library card if he tried. You know what I'm trying to say?

Floyd: Red, I do believe you're talking out of your ass.

Red: You believe whatever you want, Floyd. But I'm telling you these walls are funny. First you hate 'em, then you get used to 'em. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on them. *That's institutionalized*.

Unnamed Prisoner: Shit. I could never get like that.

Ernie: Oh yeah? Say that when you been here as long as Brooks has.

Red: Goddamn right. They send you here for life...that's exactly what they take.

The part that counts anyway.²⁴⁸

(Italics my emphasis)

While many connections between value, power, knowledge, and habituation have been illuminated theoretically, Red makes the connection between our disciplinary institutions and the power they have to consolidate and constrain our knowledge of ourselves (or of the world beyond ourselves and our place in that world) easily consumable. The walls of institutions are funny, as Red affirms, whether pedagogical or punitive, and the effects of that institutionalization on ourselves and our works of art can be as damaging and life-threatening to those objects of study as Shawshank prison has been for Brooks over his fifty-plus years of incarceration.

This truth is revealed in many of the earliest reflections on the institutionalization of Black Studies into the American Academy in the late 1960s and '70s. At the time black students and professors were asking legitimate questions about the nature of the scholarship that would surround their works of art and genius, especially as responses to applicable historical exigencies coalescing to force these scholars to authenticate and legitimize their practices in terms that they themselves saw as limiting. Now as hip hop finds itself positioned within the academy under the sign of similar circumstances, the production of new scholarly methodologies that eschew legitimization offers unique hip hop approaches to knowledge production. As Red implicates in the reflection above, we scholars, as diligent students of history and products of the processes of institutionalization ourselves, only have so much time before any real resistance to those institutionalizing processes will be too late to forgo. To think of the true function of institutionalization, within a literary frame, is to understand the ways in which we are coerced

into allowing our lived experiences to be retold in conformity with previously learned experiences; to remake our narratives into the accepted narratives of others.

In the hip hop track, “Respiration,” from the Brooklyn duo Black Star’s debut album, the emcee Mos Def describes a protagonist descending into the chaotic familiarity of his Bedford-Stuyvesant community grasping at the dystopian disarray characterizing his home environment.²⁴⁹ Voicing a sentiment that echoed my own leaving Memorial Hall’s auditorium on that evening in March, Mos Def announces: “I’m wrestling with words and ideas | my ears is pricked | seeking what will transmit | the scribes can[’t] apply to transcript.”²⁵⁰ That Mos Def, as an emcee, can be put into critical dialogue with the French literary critic Roland Barthes—who in his influential meditation on the photographic image, *Camera Lucida* (1980), discusses the importance of not losing those moments of significance and meaning when an artistic production wounds us as an audience—demonstrates the full possibilities of a hip hop hermeneutics.²⁵¹ As Mos Def continues, “this ain’t no time where the usual is suitable | tonight’s alive | let’s describe the inscrutable”; the inscrutable not only of Saul Williams’ performance, but, too, of this new manner of “staging” hip hop within the American academy.

Certainly, there are reasons enough to take a breath. The sudden institutionalization of hip hop, of course, is attended by a certain shortsightedness surrounding its assimilation into the mechanisms of knowledge production within American institutions of higher education. What is this thing we are calling hip hop as it takes shape within the academy? Why does it sometimes look and sound so unfamiliar? The clash between of Williams’s lyrics and the quartet’s inventive melodic movements arranged into concert what amounted to *beautiful noise*—a harsh combination that could no more be danced to in the traditions of hip hop’s earliest cypher sessions, than they could be silently contemplated in the time-honored ritual of Western classical

concerts.²⁵² I guess in true hip hop fashion, I just wasn't feeling it.²⁵³ The moments of disjuncture, of friction, within the performance, were paraded out as if they themselves were the innovation—the thing to be admired about the performance. Institutionalization, I want to suggest, designates, diagnoses, distinguishing hip hop in these ways. My analysis (e.g. through comparative readings of scenes of formal instruction, close-readings of exemplary works of black literary theory and scholarship, investigations of the critical discussions surrounding literacy and textuality, a critique of the centering of the written text and the marginalized place of the black vernacular, to delimit just a few points of contention) enacts a reassessment of certain critical choices and theoretical paradigms undertaken by literature scholars in the second half of the twentieth century in an attempt to reevaluate the place of hip hop albums as literary texts (and the scholarly readings of those texts) within the American literary tradition.

Ultimately, I want to put hip hop's aesthetics forward as an emergent theoretical paradigm for literature scholars concerned with the future of American literature study. I contend that hip hop provides contemporary scholars with new hermeneutic approaches to answering seminal questions about the changing nature of literature in the twenty-first century, the formal shifts in the structuring of our literary academies, the function of the critic, the limits of certain interpretative frameworks, and the import of vernacular languages and music to our understanding of the new technologies of the digital age inform literary practice. Within the limits and restrictive potential of Western theory, the urgency of establishing new and necessary critical possibilities, I believe, is a critique previously anticipated in the earliest moments of the institutionalization of Black Studies and continued in the institutionalization as Hip Hop Studies. Clearly, then and now, the appropriateness of these approaches to the reading and teaching of African American cultural expression left much to be desired.

As such, I foresee the implications of this project pushing the boundaries of literary scholarship by reopening possibilities for the evaluation of the critical approaches to the study of literature. What is clear is that hip hop's influence on American culture is pervasive. What *Hip Hop Illiterate* attempts to make equally apparent is that the influence of hip hop on American literary production is equally pervasive. Approaching, as such, a theorization of hip hop's aesthetic techniques and hermeneutic practices allows scholars and critics to raise fundamental questions about the nature of literature and the methods of its study. This type of theory involves an excavation and unsettling of tradition. While restricting the topics of my research project to provide a sufficient disciplinary frame for a dissertation, my scholarship proposes an expansive approach that looks beyond just literary practice as the domain for the deployment of hip hop's hermeneutics. As such, this manuscript is presented as the first of a three part series that deploys hip hop hermeneutics as a meta-critique in the reading of wider ranging Western philosophical texts, and towards the development of new epistemology of belonging in the twenty-first century that revises our understanding of concepts like being, subjectivity, citizenship, and globalization. The follow-up projects, tentatively entitled, *Don't Sweat the Technique: The Illogics of a Western Philosophical Critique*, and *Discographies of the Dispossessed: Hip Hop in the Mandarin Speaking World*, expand on the approaches inaugurated here by extending the critique beyond hip hop's institutionalization as a method of critical reading to a method for critiquing our ways of knowing and producing knowledge, at least as both methodologies continue to be legitimized within academic contexts.²⁵⁴

APPENDIX: CHARACTERISTICS OF HIP HOP EXPRESSION*

The following is a rough outline of some of the lesser characteristics of hip hop expression. It is offered in supplement to the four principles of hip hop production previously discussed in this dissertation.

Mobility, or Actualizing Mutability

I fly with the stars in the skies | I am no longer trying to survive | I believe that life is a prize | But to live doesn't mean you're alive...

In this very moment | I'm king | In this very moment | I slay | Goliath with a sling | In this very moment I bring | Put it on everything...

- Nikki Minaj, "Moment 4 Life"

The expression of the American emcee is not so much a chronicle of her experiences as it is evidence of something that exists before and beyond the limits of her biography—something that permeates her entire mode of being. And that thing is mobility, or an actualizing mutability. The emcee produces language as a “deep” and expressive discourse, flooding her performance with a fluidity of utterance interested in one thing only: engendering alternative narratives of reality within the complex effects of interfolding expressivity, performativity, and productivity. When she announces herself as an emcee and speaking subject, the certainty of her historical existence and positioning is always immediately brought into question by the performativity of her expression. The details of the reality she presents, from one moment to the next, must and will shift, then, as she attempts to actualize each new iterative pronouncement.

As such, the emcee replaces the boundaries between experience and the language of the imagination. Her expressive performativity is imaginative and productive, a strategic articulation. Additionally, her discourse exists in the public sphere in relation to an assuming (and unassuming) audience. Every ph(r)ase and stage of the emcee's existence is performatively expressive and expressly performative—her language, her lyrics, her dress, her positioning in relationship to her music. Even the personal and autobiographical details of an emcee's life become material for exhibition and performance. No matter how mundane a moment, or insignificant a stage, there is always sufficient space in an emcee's pronouncements for such expressive performance.

Sampling

I'm not a biter | I'm a writer | for myself and others | I say a *B.I.G.* verse |
I'm only bigging up my brother | bigging up my borough | I'm big enough
to do it | I'm that thorough | plus I know my whole flow is foolish...

- Jay-Z, "What More Can I Say"

A lust for incorporating cultural artifacts is the second most notable characteristic of hip hop expression. In this way the emcee, the deejay, the producer, and the crowd all do wonders to the extension and explosion of the cultural meanings and contexts of original documents through their perpetual proliferation as resources and cultural references. Sampling, thus, acts as a type of attenuating practice of cultural decontextualization. The sample passes as a form of critical reinterpretation in redeployment; a black borrowing and extension of cultural meanings that leaves behind the origin and the originary. The interpretive impulse surrounding the sample allows for the emcee to innovate in the construction of the mix and the remix, a commingling of

the new with the old, of tradition with disruptions to and dismantling of tradition. In some contexts, sampling is seen as an appropriation, a refashioning that occurs at the moment of the emcee's self-fashioning.

Hip hop's greatest expansion of the idea of black signifyin' is its ability to deploy the sample devoid of its original context, to re-contextualize references, and to extend the nature and meaning of influence through an endless obscuring of origin and originating context. The craft behind such a procedure is that there can never be enough dismantling of context and meaning, enough obscuring of reference and referents. For hip hop expression, the reverence for the reference found in other mediums of literary production is lost and forgotten in the fluid proliferation of the hip hop sample.

Bewilderment of Meaning(s)

I'm fearless | Now hear this | I'm earless (less) | and I'm peerless (less) |
That means I'm eyeless (less) | which means I'm tearless | Which means my
iris | resides where my ears is | Which means I'm blinded | but I'm a find it |
I can feel it's nearness | but I'm a veer so | I don't come near...

- Lupe Fiasco, "Dumb It Down"

After sampling, the next most striking manifestation of hip hop expression is the desire to explode meaning. Everything that the emcee articulates carries this desire. For the desire to explode her meanings is a desire for multiplicity and an ability to mean in an infinite number of possibilities and potentialities. As such, hip hop approaches the literary narration of life as a reproduction life's quite literal chaos. Its indecipherability. Its incomprehensibility. As such, the knowledge that proliferates through an emcee's lyrics demonstrates provocative slippages;

uninterruptible, interminable, and sometimes uninterpretable as articulations filled up with double-meanings and innuendos. The emcee's articulations express her desire to compress as much meaning into as little as possible, as few words, phrases, verses as necessary, and simultaneously to express with such an abundance that there becomes an overabundance of possible meanings. The desire to explode meaning, in its implosion of meaning, allows for a knowledge and production of excess, of too much, and of falling by the wayside in hip hop expression.

Metaphor

(Here we go) Damn | Here we go again |
Everybody saying | what's not for him |
But everything I'm not | made me everything I am |
(Here we go) Damn | Here we go again |
People talk shit | but when the shit hits the fan |
Everything I'm not | made me everything I am...

- Kanye West, "Everything I Am"

The metaphor in hip hop operates as the central syntactical principle of "dynamic suggestion," where the audience is allowed to participation in the production of meaning. As such, the lyrical delivery acts as a performative text, where things are not ever what they appear to be on their surface. The metaphor allows for a refashioning of the expressive into the dramatic, into an expressive staging of the lyric. Even the emcee herself acts a metaphor for the act of expression as mediation. That is, as an intermediary and mediator already between the deejay (or producer) and the audience, and too between the audience and the possibility of finding lyrical meaning.

Like the critic, the emcee deploys metaphor as an act of interpretation, in all its literary aspects (e.g. as personification, metonymy, and simile). As such, every lyric is metaphorically carried out and undertaken, invested with an ear towards expressing meaning as an act of translation, an act that strikes with a force to represent, in the moment of her enunciation, the one thing as exactly the other. This lyrical process begins the deconstruction of the space between thing and other, as a kind of destruction of difference. Her moment of articulation is the moment of the eventful, the catastrophe, of rupture, and disruption. Through metaphors, the emcee shows that hers is a language of action, a performative diction. Her expression transcends the purposelessness of direct communication, escapes the meaninglessness of the project of non-connective meaning-making.

Freestyle

I bomb atomically | Socrates' philosophies | and hypothesis |
can't define how I be dropping these | mockeries | lyrically perform
armed robbery | flee with the lottery | possibly they spotted me |
Battle-scarred shogun | explosion when my pen hits | tremendous |
ultra-violet shine | blind forensics | I inspect you through the future |
see millennium | Killa B's sold | fifty gold | sixty platinum | shackling |
the masses | with drastic rap tactics | graphic displays | melt the steel
like blacksmiths...

- Inspectah Deck (of the Wu-Tang Clan), "Triumph"

The lyrical freestyle is characterized by advanced technical uses of spontaneity and immediacy. Often such performances are used to create spontaneous myths of origin, legends of existence,

articulations of material realities, and ontologies where breakdowns occur between what is different, what is possible, what is impossible, and what is inevitable. The question arises in hip hop of whether the world of language has reached its totality, whether the relationship between the sign, the signifier, and the signified cannot be “remixed.” Freestyle is the practice that forces the emcee to struggle with the issue of legibility and reducibility. The space this implosion of words hollows out creates an opening which is itself an enclosure, an internment, a reduction. In fact, the freestyle is the ultimate straitjacketing of emceeing, where everything within experience and thought, the ins and outs of language and philosophical discourse, can no longer be structured or contained. Anyone who has attempted an expression of freestyle lyrics understands as much.

The Battle Motif

Many styles | more powerful than gamma rays | my grammar pays
like Carlos Santana plays | “Black Magic Woman” | so while you fuming
I’m consuming | mango juice under Polaris | you’re just embarrassed
cause it’s your “Last Tango in Paris” | and even after all my logic and my theory
I add a “mother fucker” | so you ignorant niggas hear me | and you remember
to take notes | as I sow my rap oats | and for you biting zealots | here’s a quote...

- Lauryn Hill , “Zealots”

The battle motif acts as a moment of critical self-reflection on form, content, and techniques of performance. The battle exposes the emcee’s desire for a discourse of discord, where one is excited by the possibility of accusation, and displays an extreme will towards confrontation. The battle is like a baby’s cry or woman’s scream, an “acting out” or “causing a scene.” In literary terms, the battle—through the unexpected juxtaposition of each emcee’s responses, which is

itself a type of forced confrontation of unlike elements—ritualizes a form of competitive self-criticism and destructive innovation, where the back and forth elements are forced to find resolution or be destroyed in the dominance of the other.

Staging

His palms are sweaty | knees weak | arms are heavy
There's vomit | on his sweater already | mom's spaghetti
He's nervous | but on the surface | he looks calm and ready
to drop bombs | but he keeps on forgetting | what he wrote down
the whole crowd goes so loud | he opens his mouth
but the words | won't come out | he's choking now
everybody's joking now | the clock's run out | time's up
over | Blow!

- Eminem, "Lose Yourself"

Traditionally, the emcee's role was to negotiate the beat and the deejay's sense of rhythms and time for the audience through his narrative staging. Thus, structure and structuring of rhymes comes down through hip hop as a function of the emcee's role as mediator and through her visibility as the centralized figure on a stage. Spatiality, then, is a characteristic of hip hop expression, where the insistence on location and staging takes precedence even when no stage is present. As techniques, the repetition of the chorus line, the imposition of the emcee's breathe and systematic use of the pause or unexpected silence, the complexity and deployment of her rhyme schemes, including the internal rhyme points where the crowd can be left to linger or

tarry, are all techniques that reproduce the positional functionality of the stage as the emcee seeks to mediate in a structure that remembers the legacy of the stage.

Narration

You either make a way | or stay sobbing | the shiny apple is | bruised but sweet
and if you choose to eat | you could lose your teeth | many crews retreat | nightly
news repeat | who got shot down and locked down | spotlight to savages |
NASDAQ averages | my narrative rose to explain this existence |
amidst the harbor lights which remain in the distance...

- Mos Def, "Respiration"

Narration is language rendered essential through acts of violence. Narrations seek to recount what have not (and perhaps cannot) be properly recounted, cannot be verified and objectified as actualized or realized events in a determined history. Narrations recount events of a history that is not historical, that is out of the very domains of history as they have been established. Narration disallows for subjectivity or lived experiences, and simultaneously gives voice as the lived and unlived, the belonging to no one that is every particular moment. Narration is the temporalization of expression.

Timelessness, or The Art of the Deejay

The art of deejaying, like the art of emceeing, is to make the audience enter her sense of time. Time no longer operates along a continuum. Neither is it continuous, contiguous, or chronological in scale. That is to say, there is a breakdown in the linear logics, the linearity, of perceived time. Instead, time can be folded in on itself, collapsed, and ruptured in ways such

that the present becomes indistinguishable from the past, from the future. To think along the discontinuum of the deejay's sense of time is to allow for a hermeneutic principle that sees around corners, a prophetic hermeneutic that anticipates what is coming. Such a logic of time allows us to rethink our relationship to the past and the future in hip hop expression.

*These, of course, do not constitute an exhaustive list of all the strategies of expression deployed in hip hop.

ENDNOTES

Introduction: Introduction to Hip Hop Hermeneutics

¹ From the *OED*.

² See William Jelani Cobb. *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic*. New York: New York University Press, 2008; p. 7 and 13-14, respectively.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴ For a thorough history of hip hop's earliest decade, see Jeff Chang. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005. See also the more recent work by Joseph C. Ewoodzie. *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. For alternative approaches to hip hop's early history, see Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn. *Yes Yes y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002. See also, Joe Conzo's (and Johan Kugelberg) edited collection, *Born in the Bronx: A Visual Record of the Early Days of Hip Hop*. New York: Rizzoli, 2007.

⁵ While the onset of the hip hop concept album as a recognizable method of intentional hip hop aesthetic production can be demarcated by any idiosyncratic selection of commercial album entries specifically contextualized by a scholar as having emerged inevitably and organically at some particular moment in time, I want to resist, slightly, the strict restriction of the periodization of the hip hop concept album's emergence to the late 1980s. The legacy of influences, both musically and in terms of African American narrative expression, on the hip hop concept album's emergence as a special form of literature production would be undermined by such a formulation. I will, however, concede that Eric B. & Rakim's 1987 *Paid in Full* album offers the aberration that may help literary scholars recognize some of the important tropes of this new genre, even if this concession conceals the irony of discussing narrative progressions in hip hop production as related to an album structured to cohere more sonically than in terms of its fictive storytelling. The release of the emcee Slick Rick's *The Adventures of Slick Rick* album on Def Jam a year later (1988) would offer the more narratively-oriented lyrical storytelling component, with attendant organizing and interspersed performative skits, as techniques necessary for full conceptual cohesion in the hip hop album's genre-specific mode of literary production. Still, as an historically-identifiable genre, the hip hop concept album comes to form in the late 1980s and dominates production in the early 1990s, persisting as a unique mode of production well into the twenty-first century. This persistence as a mode of production even as the technologies of circulation move away from the album as the ideal method of hip hop consumption, expanding the ways hip hop audiences consume an emcee's lyrics and music.

⁶ See Adam Bradley. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009; pp. xi-xxii. See also, Adam Bradley and Andrew Du Bois, Eds. "Introduction," in *The Anthology of Rap*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011; pp. xxix-xxxiii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Bradley and Andrew Du Bois, p. xxviii.

⁸ See David Caplan, *Rhymes Challenge: Hip Hop, Poetry, and Contemporary Rhyming Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; p. 1-24. See also Adam Bradley. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009; p. 15.

⁹ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; p. xx.

¹⁰ In many ways, the current research project attempts to use hip hop, as an African American vernacular expressive form, in ways similar to what Albert Murray and Houston Baker, Jr. do with the blues, what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. does with signifying, what Mae Henderson does with black Pentecostalism, and what Fred Moten does with jazz. The lack of a comprehensive theorization of hip hop's hermeneutic mode of literary interpretation, expression, and aesthetic practice, then, is my primary goal throughout this dissertation. For these other examples, see Albert Murray. *The Hero And the Blues*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973; Houston Baker, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; Mae G. Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Women Writer's Literary Tradition," originally in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. Cheryl Wall, Ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989; and Fred Moten. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

¹¹ See Jay-Z. "Takeover," on *The Blueprint*. Roc-A-Fella Records/Def Jam Recordings, 2001.

¹² See Stuart Hall. "Encoding, decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Simon Durin, Ed. New York: Routledge Press, 1993; pp. 90-103.

¹³ See "Corner Boys." *The Wire: Season Four*. Writ. Ed Burns and Richard Price. Dir. Agnieszka Holland. Home Box Office (HBO) Video, 2007. DVD.

¹⁴ See Bakari Kitwana. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2002.

¹⁵ See, again, "Corner Boys." *The Wire: Season Four*. Writ. Ed Burns and Richard Price. Dir. Agnieszka Holland. Home Box Office (HBO) Video, 2007. DVD.

¹⁶ I use the term, *ill logic*, here, as a further play in the vein of my term *illiterate*. As a homonymic double entendre, the concept turns on the standard definition of illogic, which *OED* defines as "the opposite or reverse of logic," with logic being that "branch of philosophy that treats of the forms of thinking in general," extending it in a hip hop sense to denote a type of *ill logic* or form of thinking that is necessarily more aggressive, irrational, crazy, and unpleasant; but simultaneously excellent, attractive, and fashionable.

¹⁷ See John McWhorter. *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America*. New York: Gotham Books, 2008.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁰ See OutKast. "Humble Mumble," on *Stankonia*. La Face Records/Arista, 2000.

²¹ See Fugees. "Zealots" on *The Score*. Ruffhouse/Columbia Records, 1996.

²² See Mae G. Henderson. *Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014; p. 13.

²³ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁴ See Fugees. “Zealots” on *The Score*. Ruffhouse/Columbia Records, 1996.

²⁵ See Mae G. Henderson. *Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014; p. 13.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 1-22.

²⁷ Throughout the dissertation, I default to the use of the term crowd over other available concepts.

²⁸ See William Jelani Cobb. *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic*. New York: New York University Press, 2007; p. 8.

²⁹ See Mae G. Henderson. *Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014; pp. 13-14.

³⁰ My purpose throughout this dissertation is to expand upon the ways in which the emcee’s engagement with language, in the form of narratives of American cultural critique, expand the possibilities for the creation of hermeneutic meaning within each individual listener’s aesthetic experience, but also for us as a crowd of scholars of African American, African Diasporic, and American literatures, more generally.

³¹ I am defining the “hip hop concept album” as any compilation of tracks arranged to cohere sonically, thematically, or as a singular narrative, in ways that necessarily requires an engagement with the connection between any individual track’s inherent meaning(s) and the larger collective meaning(s) of the album as a whole and singular production. This, then, can include mixtapes, digital and video albums, and other thematically or narratively cohering compilations. How an emcee prioritizes the relationship between each individual track and the album’s reception as a whole is another way of understanding the distinction I want to make here. Some albums are purposely constructed as a compilation of singles, cohering rather loosely, if at all, to a singular vision, and with no clear organizational structure or relationship establishing for the tracks a clear beginning, middle, and endpoint. An example of the difference between the two types can be seen in Jay-Z’s *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* (2000) and *American Gangster* (2007), where the latter is meant to be understood as having a single vision of composition.

³² All references to *Mules and Men* and “How to Write a Letter” can be found in Zora Neale Hurston and Cheryl A. Wall. *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1995.

³³ See *Mules and Men* in Zora Neale Hurston and Cheryl A. Wall. *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1995; pp. 43-44.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 43-44.

³⁵ See Marybeth Gasman and Roger L Geiger. *Higher Education for African Americans before the Civil Rights Era, 1900-1964*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2012.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁸ It is the second in the volume to explicitly discuss both a *mule* and a *man*, or the farmer/father figure.

³⁹ See *Mules and Men* in Zora Neale Hurston and Cheryl A. Wall. *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1995; p. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 9 and 10.

⁴¹ Consider Du Bois's elitist (not meant pejoratively) emphasis on the importance of higher education in the "The Talented Tenth" essay, for one example.

⁴² See *Mules and Men* in Zora Neale Hurston and Cheryl A. Wall. *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1995; p. 9-10

⁴³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 43-44.

⁴⁶ Significantly, Hurston uses dialect writing to tell this story (and others throughout her oeuvre). I read this decision as illustrative of other anxieties she has about the relationship between sound, language, representation, and writing. The ways these elements come together to fix and limit meaning is something I see Hurston's writing working to resist. The rhythm created, then, by her use of dialect in this story creates an interesting analogue between the father's talk about the dead mule ("Our mule is dead") and his talk about his educated daughter ("our chile is done") that imagines the daughter's formal education as a kind of (social) death that marks her belonging in and outside of the community. Hurston's use of dialect creates an aural link to this educational transformation of the black community as linguistic figuration to capture the texture of the African American vernacular practices limited by their reproduction on the printed page. This link can then be understood as the boundary between those at the end of the century who hear and those who read literature as part of an American literary tradition. What is a black Southern farmer to do with an educated daughter—the text seems to ask—where the divide first imagined as the difference between literate and illiterate Americans seems to solidify and find its academic equivalent in the divide between the American literary academy and the hip hop archive at the start of the twenty-first century.

⁴⁷ While many academic disciplines have addressed the institutional benefit of integrating hip hop into their fields of study, the distance maintained between traditional English literature departments and the hip hop archive has generated gaps for literature scholars to fill. And while a number of academics, including Tricia Rose, Michael Eric Dyson, Imani Perry, Mark Anthony Neal, Robin Kelley, and Marcyliena Morgan, among countless others, have authored, edited, and led major studies and departments contributing to the expanding field of Hip Hop studies, generally, and to the increased scholarship of hip hop as literature, more specifically, few scholarly works have taken an approach emphasizing the need to theorize literature based on the genre's literary hermeneutics.

Chapter One: Before the Mic

⁴⁸ See Zora Neale Hurston. "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in Winston Napier's edited collection, *African-American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 31-44.

⁴⁹ Heidegger uses the term "dasein" to describe this type of "being in the world." See Martin Heidegger. "Exposition of the Question of the Meaning of Being" in *Being and Time*. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Eds. New York: HarperPerennial/Modern Thought, 2008; p. 1-34.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Lobby's "Introduction" to American aesthetics in the edited volume, *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 1-36; also, for a more specialized account attributing a socializing function to American literary aesthetics, see Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

⁵¹ To understand my movement as a step towards a "genealogy" of American literary aesthetics is to pivot, however briefly, in the direction of Michel Foucault's genealogical analysis as a hermeneutic method. Without running the risk at the start of my own theoretical analysis of rehearsing too much of Foucault's thinking on the subject and having the reader mistake the hip hop hermeneutic method being proposed here with Foucault's methods of analysis, I want instead to acknowledge, generally, an indebtedness to Foucault's original conceptualizations of the complex relationships between systems of thought, power, and institutional practices--for how such analyses have suggested possibilities for reading an alternative relationship between hip hop, American literature, the American literary academy, and contemporary designations of American literary aesthetics. Additionally, this chapter was written and revised in the American "Age of Trump" and my resistance to contemporary cultural ideals should be understood fully within that political context. For more on Foucault's genealogical method, see Gary Gutting's "Foucault's Genealogical Method," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 15, Issue 1, Sept 1990, pp. 327-343; See also Michel Foucault. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow, Ed. New York: Pantheon Book, 1984; pp. 76-100. For the language adopted in the passage, see Michel Foucault. "The Body of the Condemned (From *Discipline and Punish*)," in *The Foucault Reader* Paul Rabinow, ed. New York: Pantheon Book, 1984; p. 178.

⁵² See Michel Foucault. "The Body of the Condemned (From *Discipline and Punish*)" in *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow, Ed. New York: Pantheon Book, 1984; p. 178.

⁵³ See, for example, the "Introduction" to Hal Foster's edited collection, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, New York: The New Press, 2002. Foster's introductory use of the term "anti-aesthetic" is also discussed at length in this chapter.

⁵⁴ There are of course exceptions to his rule, with examples like Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004; and Adam Bradley's *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2009.

⁵⁵ I take the term, *dynamic suggestion*, from the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, in her seminal theoretical writing on black aesthetics and expression, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," originally published in the Nancy Cunard anthology, *Negro: An Anthology (1934)*. I contend that Hurston's piece offers an early twentieth century theorization of black aesthetics that remains underexplored as a source for contemporary theorizations of American aesthetics. As quoted here, see Zora Neale Hurston.

“Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in Winston Napier’s edited collection, *African-American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 31-44.

⁵⁶ For more on sounding the nation, see Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*. New York: Seagull Books, 2007. See also, Alexander Weheliye. “Sounding Diasporic Citizenship,” in *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005; pp. 145-198. For a treatment of the notion of “sounding” in connection with visual art and visibility studies, or “sonic visibility,” see Krista Thompson. *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

⁵⁷ The titular play (“Characteristics of Hip Hop Expression”) on Zora Neale Hurston’s seminal piece, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” is meant as a methodological demonstration of the techniques of sampling and remixing discussed at length in this chapter. In addition to these techniques, I include in this chapter a discussion of the four most essential elements in hip hop composition (including the importance of the beat, rhyming, flow, and dynamic suggestion). Additionally, at the end of this dissertation, I expand upon these four basic compositional strategies by including other structuring elements of lesser importance in hip hop (of which sampling and remixing are just two examples). Again, for comparison, see Zora Neale Hurston. “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in Winston Napier’s edited collection, *African-American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 31-44.

⁵⁸ For the references to *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) used throughout this chapter, see W. E. B. Du Bois. “*The Souls of Black Folk*,” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*. Nathan Huggins, Ed. New York: The Library of America, 1996; pp. 357-547. A copy of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” originally published in the September 1907 issue of *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line* (pp. 5-7), can be located in The W. E. B. Du Bois Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. For a more extensive discussion of the importance of sampling to hip hop musical production, see Joseph Schloss. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014.

⁵⁹ While Foster’s collection brings together a diverse set of Western cultural theorists and aestheticians, including the likes of Jean Baudrillard, Jürgen Habermas, Fredrick Jameson, and Edward Said, the work is primarily concerned with defining the postmodernist aesthetic approach to visual art and architecture. My arguments are concerned more with issues of narrative, musicality, and the sonic in aesthetic representations of American literature. See Hal Foster. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. New York: The New Press, 2002; pp. xvi-xvii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁶² See Hoyt Fuller’s “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” in *The Black Aesthetic*. Ed. Addison Gayle. Doubleday, 1971; pp. 3-16.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁴ In his *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2009), Adam Bradley makes the point that hip hop is an extension of Western poetics and orature that connects back to some of the oldest poetics traditions in the West, citing for example a connection to Homer’s epics. I want to read hip hop’s literary practices, instead, as a departure from and dismantling of conventional Western standards of poetry and narrative. This process of dismantling begins with reorienting our understanding

of hip hop's literary genealogy to African and African diasporic traditions. For more on these traditions, see Toyin Falola and Fallou Ngom's edited collection, *Oral and Written Expressions of African Cultures*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2009.

⁶⁵ See my introductory comments about the false dichotomy between literacy and illiteracy within a Western literary frame, found in the introductory chapter to this dissertation, "Introduction to Hip Hop Hermeneutics," pp. 1-31.

⁶⁶ The idea of noise and bewilderment as aesthetic alternative desires to harmony in hip hop are explored at length, for example, in Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: Published by University Press of New England, 1994.

⁶⁷ As I will discuss shortly, this also forces literature scholars to confront the role literary texts play in constituting or reconstituting the United States as a more all-inclusive nation-state.

⁶⁸ See Hal Foster. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. New York: The New Press, 2002; pp. xvi-xvii. See also Hans Jauss. *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

⁶⁹ For more of how texts create the nation-state, see Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2016.

⁷⁰ I will say more on the notion of "literalizing Americanness" in the following paragraphs but offer this concept in contradistinction to Benedict Anderson's argumentation of the rise of nationalism due to its written and visual (cartographic) documents. I counter with the idea of sounding the nation, through sounding structures that disrupt the (official) written record, as a more inclusive project that dismantles the hegemony of canonical (written) narratives of national belonging. Again, see Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2016.

⁷¹ For a thorough history of hip hop's earliest decade, see Jeff Chang. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005. See also Joseph C. Ewoodzie. *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. For alternative approaches to hip hop's early history, see Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn. *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002. See also, Joe Conzo's (and Johan Kugelberg) edited collection, *Born in the Bronx: A Visual Record of the Early Days of Hip Hop*. New York: Rizzoli, 2007.

⁷² See Alexander Weheliye's "In the Mix," in *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005; pp. 73-105.

⁷³ In her chapter, "Hip Hop's Mama: Originalism and Identity in the Music," Imani Perry argues against attempts to cast hip hop as other than "black American music." Perry progress this argument along national and diasporic lines. My insistence of talking about hip hop as American literature is an attempt not to recover a normalized, or institutionalized, reading of American literature, but to recast American literature as an incomplete African diasporic practice. In some ways, this project is purely speculative, imagining a future American nation-state where the aesthetics of African American expressive practice win out in the reconstitution of the United States as an all-inclusive political and cultural landscape. For more of her arguments on the politics and aesthetics of hip hop, see Imani Perry. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

⁷⁴ See Tricia Rose. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994; p. 66.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 66-67.

⁷⁶ See Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine: A Novel*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008; p. 29.

⁷⁷ See Adam Bradley. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2009; p. 6.

⁷⁸ See William Jelani Cobb. *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic*. New York: New York University Press, 2007; p. 87.

⁷⁹ See Jay-Z. *Decoded*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010; pp. 4-5.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁸¹ See note number 52. See also Zora Neale Hurston. "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in Winston Napier's edited collection, *African-American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 31-44.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 31-44.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 35-36.

⁸⁴ See Jay-Z. *Decoded*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010; p. 5. For more on the hermeneutic circle, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Andrew Bowie. *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

⁸⁵ See Joseph Schloss. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014.

⁸⁶ Typically, under capitalism, the idea of resources is restricted to the availability of materials, goods, property, commodities, and wages. The emcee, however, extends capitalism's rhetoric of resources by including material (e.g. disco sample, city subway train) and nonmaterial (concepts and ideas) items as part of their cultural capital. I further discuss the concept of resourcefulness in the third chapter of this dissertation, "The Author and The Authorities."

⁸⁷ See Robert Stepto. *Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979; p. 52.

⁸⁸ I use terms like remix and sampling, here, instead of others more favorable to established literary readings, like repetition or intertextuality, to mark a difference in strategies of revision that account for non-writing or text-specific forms of layering and interconnection grounded in sounding practices. Kevin T. Miles, for example, reads Du Bois's repurposing of the previously published essays as a form of repetition, or "recollect[ion] forward" (200). I argue, instead, that Du Bois's perpetual self-selection and editorial revision of previously published content repurposes these materials within structures of sounding the nation and framing texts in sound or its notational representation as embedded within and framing Du Bois's writing, especially in *The Souls of Black Folk*. As a compositional difference more approximate to hip hop's sounding aesthetics and its use of remixing and sampling as structuring strategies, I deploy these terms rather than the more traditional literary techniques and designations of textual allusion or

revision. See K. T. Miles. "Haunting Music in *The Souls of Black Folk*." *boundary 2*, vol. 27 no. 3, 2000, pp. 199-214.

⁸⁹ Following Robert Stepto's example, I am hesitant to call even the work comprised in the final five chapters "original" as Du Bois's penchant for revision in his writings, research, and reflections between 1894 and 1902 towards compilation and completion of *The Souls of Black Folk* requires a debt of archival research and readings across Du Bois's oeuvre that would take a lifetime of scholarly work and interest to achieve. Both Stepto and Nahum Chandler, however, provide excellent examples of such scholarship, discussing how works like "The Afro-American," "The Evolution of Negro Leadership," "Striving of the Negro People," "American, Negro," "The Freedmen's Bureau," "The Relation of the Negroes to the Whites in the South," "The Present Outlook for the Darker Races of Mankind," "The Religion of the American Negro," "To the Nations of The World," and "The Negro As He Really Is," and too even the posthumously published, "Beyond the Veil in a Virginia Town" (written in and around the summer of 1897) all provide evidence of Du Bois's aesthetic sampling and remixing of his earlier work in and throughout the *The Souls of Black Folk*. See Robert Stepto's "The Quest of the Weary Traveler: W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*," in *Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979; pp. 52-91; and Nahum Chandler's scholarly introduction to W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015; pp. 1-32; and the essays contained therein, some for the first time in publication.

⁹⁰ In the final chapter of Du Bois's compilation, he discusses the history of black music and sound in the United States, choosing "Sorrow Songs" instead of "Spirituals" to term that "haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men." See *The Souls of Black Folk* in W. E. B. Du Bois: *Writings*. Nathan Huggins, Ed. New York: The Library of America, 1996; pp. 357-547. For the chapter, "The Sorrow Songs," see specifically pp. 536-547.

⁹¹ K. T. Miles. "Haunting Music in *The Souls of Black Folk*." *boundary 2*, vol. 27 no. 3, 2000; pp. 200.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 199-202.

⁹³ See Chandler's scholarly introduction to W. E. B. Du Bois, and Nahum Dimitri Chandler. *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015; pp. 1-32.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹⁶ See Joseph Schloss. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014.

⁹⁷ See Robert Stepto's "The Quest of the Weary Traveler: W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*," in *Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979; pp. 52-91.

⁹⁸ See Arnold Rampersald. *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976; p. 127.

⁹⁹ See the scholarly introduction in W. E. B. Du Bois, and Nahum Dimitri Chandler. *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015; pp. 1-32.

¹⁰⁰ See Kool Mo Dee (Mohandes Dewese). *There's a God on the Mic: The True 50 Greatest MCs*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003; pp. 321-329.

¹⁰¹ See Joseph Schloss. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014.

¹⁰² See Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

¹⁰³ Published originally in the September 1907 issue of *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line* (pp. 5-7), a copy of this issue can be located in The W. E. B. Du Bois Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁸ I would like to thank Elizabeth Grunfeld for suggesting the idea that Kaepernick might in some way be sampling and remixing Tim Tebow's infamous touchdown celebration (taking a knee in prayer at the back of the end zone) in his protest, following my presentation of some small part of this chapter as a job talk at Oklahoma State University on January 31, 2018.

Chapter Two: "Where Did Our Love Go?"

¹⁰⁹ Many of the ideas in this chapter have developed through several iterations and from the guidance of too many to recount now. I would be remiss, however, if I did not credit the original back and forth Facebook "conversation" that transpired between myself and the modern griot, autodidact, and independent scholar, Noah Michael Barnes, whose critical challenges and retorts first helped me sharpen my analysis of Lauryn Hill and her debut album. I would also like to thank the queer black troublemaker and black feminist love evangelist, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who helped direct me to June Jordan's indispensable talk, "Where is the Love?", when I was struggling to find a framework for understanding Lauryn Hill's thematic incorporation of love as a theoretical strategy opposed to the oppressive objectifications of black women emcees. An original transcript of the Facebook exchange still exists in the public domain and can be accessed at the following web address: <https://www.facebook.com/Andrew.R.Belton/posts/142320605820195>.

¹¹⁰ In the same year that Lauryn Hill emerged as a black woman emcee of note for mainstream hip hop audiences, as a member of the hip hop crew, the Fugees (which included Wyclef Jean and Pras Michel), Chicago emcee Common (then Common Sense) released the now classic track, "I Used to Love H.E.R." as the first single for his sophomore second-effort album, *Resurrection* (1994). This chapter precedes with an introductory reading of the significance of the Common track and its title as a critical opening to

investigating Lauryn Hill's personification as a black woman emcee within hip hop and the American popular cultural imaginary; particularly in response to the success of her debut solo album, which performatively remixes the titles of Carter G. Woodson's 1933 cultural study of the American public school system and its systematic indoctrination of African American children, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) and Michael Campus's cinematic adaptation (*The Education of Sonny Carson*, 1974) of Sonny Carson's 1972 autobiography, *The Education of Sonny Carson*.

¹¹¹ Few topics spark more contentious discussion within hip hop circles than arguments about Lauryn Hill's place in and influence over emceeing as an aesthetic tradition. Points on both sides usually cite her debut album for its genius in uniquely blending previously distinct musical genres of hip hop, reggae, R&B, and soul in a manner that came to be demarcated by the generic designation *neo-soul*. While the category of neo-soul is useful for thinking about the musical production on Hill's album, the current reading is interested in a strict categorization of the album as hip hop with a focus on the designations of its aesthetic practices as examples of emceeing. It is important to be conscious of how Hill's gendering as a black woman emcee attempts to encode her vocal practices on the album as outside the domain of emceeing as a lyrical practice. I want instead to re-gender emceeing as a formal practice that subsumes other types of black women's vocal performances and articulations to expand our understanding of the place of black women in hip hop production.

¹¹² In the essay, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text," Mae Henderson contemplates the evolving injunction at the end of Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (1987): "This is not a story to pass on." Henderson contends that Morrison's relationship to her reader—as author and amateur historian writing in both instances against America's collective "national amnesia" for "[t]hings too terrible to relate" in the "sexual exploitation of slave women by white men"—troubles the final reading of this injunction as an effort at cultural silencing. Henderson points out the dialogic nature of the injunction, interpreting the phrase, additionally, as an injunction **not** to forget, repress, or ignore the lessons offered by *Sethe* and *Beloved*'s lives. As she writes, "the importance of our private memories becomes, ultimately, the basis for a reconstructed public history." I want to pick up on these dueling interpretations in my meditation on love as simultaneously inherited (passed on) by critics as a critical legacy and praxis of black feminist thought and womanist theory and abandoned (passed on) as a non-critical approach to developing black literary theory. I am equally interested in Henderson's reading of the equation between "private memory" and "public history" that becomes indicative of the work *The Miseducation* album does in translating the personal experiences of Lauryn Hill into material to instruct and construct American cultural practices of reception. For Henderson's reading, see Mae G. Henderson. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text," in *Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora: Black Women's Writing and Performing* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp.76-96.

¹¹³ See Layli Phillips's "Introduction—Womanism: On Its Own," in *The Womanist Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. xix-lv.

¹¹⁴ In her 1980 article, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," Deborah McDowell calls for (and outlines the limitations of) Black feminist critics "defining the methodology" of, choosing the "theoretical framework" for, and developing the "contextual approach" to the analysis and historicization of the works of Black women writers as black feminist criticism. McDowell's call responds in-text with an assessment of the "many thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities" available for analysis in Black women's writing, pointing out the flaws in reading these commonalities as encompassing of a "Black feminist aesthetic." In the present chapter, I want to offer a womanist theory of reception that responds to the call

(and limitations) outlined in McDowell's piece. As McDowell's piece is also a response, see both her own chapter, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," and Barbara Smith's "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," in Winston Napier's *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 167-178 and 132-146, respectively.

¹¹⁵ Jack Halberstam adapts the concept of "low theory" from the writings of Stuart Hall, defining the idea as theory that "seeks not to explain but to involve," as a "mode of accessibility" and "counterknowledge in the realm of popular culture" that resists the "serious" and the "rigorous" in order to think alternatives to knowledge production that are counterhegemonic and outside the zones of "disciplinary correctness" and "approved methods of knowing." My thinking through love as a low theory of reception, then, uses Lauryn Hill's engagement with her black male emcee and cultural counterparts to interrogate moments of knowledge production that prioritize explanation over involvement, as particularly noted in the critical exchange between Joyce A. Joyce, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker Jr. that will be discussed later in this chapter. For more on "low theory," see Jack Halberstam. "Introduction: Low Theory," in *The Queer Art of Failure*. N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 1-25.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

¹¹⁷ Admittedly, Lauryn Hill became my first celebrity crush, predominantly after watching her performance in Whoopi Goldberg's 1993 comedy sequel, *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habitat*, but also after listening to her voice three years later on the Fugees' thematically brilliant second and final studio album, *The Score*, released from Ruffhouse and Columbia Records on the eve of Valentine's day, February 13, 1996. I offer these personal reflections as part of a tradition of black men's critical interventions in Black feminist criticism. For more on "the uses and usefulness of the autobiographical male 'I'" and on autocritography as a scholarly mode of writing, see Michael Awkward's "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism," in Winston Napier's *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 540-556, and his *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir*. N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999. For more on the future possibilities of a black masculinity influenced by Black feminist thought, see Mark Anthony Neal's *New Black Man*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

¹¹⁸ There is, of course, a long history of black women's voices circulating as the focal point of American national attention. Going as far back as the colonial interrogations of Phillis Wheatley's poetry, to Sojourner Truth's touring speeches for black women's suffrage, to Fannie Lou Hamer's protests against the racism of the 1964 Mississippi delegation to the Democratic National Convention, to Anita Hill's congressional testimonies against the confirmation of Clarence Thomas, these events and the suppression of the voices of the black women involved speaks to a longstanding tradition of cultural silencing in the United States. Connecting black woman emcees to this history is important to understanding how these legacies continue to play out in the twenty-first century.

¹¹⁹ I take, somewhat out of context, Alexander Weheliye's discussion of Black feminist theories of the human, and his coining of the term "racializing assemblages" to try to understand the various communities representing generational, gender, class, and racial differences that coalesce into a receptive listening public for Lauryn Hill's album. Searching for a term to register the distinct political possibilities available to this disparate listening group is a task of my project as a whole. In the introduction I turn on the word "crowd" as the dissertation's parlance of choice. For more on the hip hop crowd as a unique listening public, see my introductory chapter, "Introduction to Hip Hop heremeneutics." For more on

racializing assemblages, see Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

¹²⁰ Calling this an "idealized vision of the black woman" does not exclude or excuse the negative connotations that come with such ideation. This racialized attempt to reconcile within one figuration the "Madonna-whore" complex leaves hip hop practitioners suffering from an inability to understand and articulate love beyond sexual desire or as commitment to an exploitable object. I read *The Miseducation* as offering a corrective to this discourse on love in hip hop. For more on "homosocial exchange," see Eve Sedgwick's seminal work, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

¹²¹ Here, I am reminded of Fred Moten's analysis of "the fact of the commodity's speech" in Sigmund Freud's "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret" section of Volume 1 of *Capital*. Without rehearsing Moten's entire argument, I want to offer that as part of the circumscribed presence black women occupy within the industry of hip hop, there exists a continued desire to construct their speech (and by extension their singing and emceeing) as a strict commodity. That is, to strip black women's voices of anything personal, autobiographical, or uniquely-identifiable as belonging to an individual life lived and equate its universal representation to a capacity for exchange that is always already an attempt to sexualize and objectify the black woman as a commodity to be used, abused, consumed, and valued, but never loved. See Moten's "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," from *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minn., MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 1-24.

¹²² The song would serve as a single for Common's third studio album, *One Day It'll All Make Sense*, 1997, though the irony of this album title belies the structuring logic underlying both these tracks (as will be discussed).

¹²³ It is important to note that by 1998, several black women emcees had produced and released their own solo studio albums. Artists like Roxanne Shanté, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Yo-Yo, Da Brat, Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, The Lady of Rage, to name only a few, had all already released albums by the time Lauryn Hill's debuted. Add to that the commercial success achieved by groups like Salt-N-Pepa and TLC (which featured the emcee, Lisa "Left-Eye" Lopez). The point is not that Lauryn Hill's album was the first or even among the first by a black woman emcee, but that aesthetically her approach was distinct from that of her peers, creating the conditions for her near immediate and vast international stardom and critical reception.

¹²⁴ I haven't been able to find a thorough academic treatment of the black woman producers, songwriters, and demo and background vocalists who worked, primarily, outside of the limelight at Motown. Before her emergence as a solo artist, Syreeta Wright definitely qualified as one of these women. I make special note of her place in the song's writing here to highlight not only the cultural silence surrounding her work as a songwriter alongside her former husband, but also to evoke her connection to The Supremes as a demo-song vocalist. Often a demo track is used to sell a featured recording artist on the viability of a song's production possibilities and the work required of songwriters like Wright to take on the role of demo vocalists to sell their song material is another virtually unexplored academic project. For a history of Motown Records (one of which I am particularly inclined to recommend because it shares its title with the current chapter), see Nelson George's *Where Did Our Love Go: The Rise and Fall of Motown Sound*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987. For a history of the role women played in building Motown and

shaping its sound, see Raymona Gordon Singleton's *Berry, Me, and Motown: The Untold Story*. Chicago: Contemporary Book, 1990.

¹²⁵ See Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Penguin Freud Reader*. Ed. Adam Phillips, London: Penguin Books, 2006, pp. 310-326.

¹²⁶ For more on Hill's style of singing on the track mimicking Stevie Wonder's, see for example, Wonder's production of the singularly-voiced choral harmonies on "Love's In Need of Love Today," from his *Songs in the Key of Life* (1976) album. This issue of singing original versus singing covered material is particularly important when considering the issue of royalties for one's musical production. The history of exploitation of black artists not owning the "master rights" to their music is a long and troubled legacy in the history of the American music industry. The ways in which this practice was extended to black women artists on black-owned labels is of particular note here. With that said, as a featured artist on the track, Lauryn would have most likely been paid a lump sum for her performance, already positioning her at the margins of the creative production and future financial earnings of the song. For more on the legacy of copyright in hip hop, see Richard L. Schur. *Parodies of Ownership: Hip-Hop Aesthetics and Intellectual Property Law*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press and University of Michigan Library, 2009. See also the edited collection, *R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music*. Norman Kelley, Ed. New York: Akashic, 2002.

¹²⁷ See Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

¹²⁸ See again, Fred Moten's discussion of the primal scream, in "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," from *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minn., MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp.1-24.

¹²⁹ See Common, "Retrospect for Life," on *Resurrection*. Relativity Records, 1994.

¹³⁰ Fred Moten frames an argument for black performance that allows us to read Lauryn Hill's silencing (and by extension the silencing of other black women emcees, artists, and intellectuals) by Common (and by extension other black male emcees, artists, and intellectuals) as part of the condition of possibility that allows for black male creative expression. Moten writes, "the performative essence of blackness (or, perhaps less controversially, the essence of black performance) is in *being maternal*" (16). As such, the creative expression of black men in America requires the suppression of black women's essential nature and capacity for (re)production, in order to transform the "maternal" essence of black performance into a commodity brought to market by and through black men's creative and intellectual productivity. To this point, I am suspicious of gendered performances that attempt to relegate black women's creativity to the margins of black expressive production, in order to secure the public marketplace for black male creative recognition and wealth generation. Common's "Retrospect for Life" speaks directly to this condition. The song links his cooptation of the narrative of pregnancy to his desire to breakthrough in the hip hop market. His discovery of possibilities for the maternal within himself (in lyricizing about his internal struggles over terminating the fictive pregnancy he has co-opted) can only be legitimized by the pained voice of Lauryn Hill as pregnant black woman and emcee singing the song's chorus. Simultaneously, Lauryn Hill's presence on the track, but absence in emceeing, updates into a contemporary context the productive value Moten discusses in Douglass's reproduction of the scene of Aunt Hester's whipping and her primal screams (and, too, Abbey Lincoln's soundings on Max Roach's "Protest") with her performance of dis-, in-, and articulate sounds in the background of the track. The persistence of her voice

in the background augments and disrupts Common's lyrical flow in order to reframe and register the black maternal "objection" to the cultural silencing and objectification that both of Common's tracks, "I Used to Love H.E.R." and "Retrospect for Life" attempt to make standard. See Fred Moten's "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," from *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minn., MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp.1-24. See also, Hortense Spillers' discussion of the black man's unique ability to discover the "female within," in her "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in Winston Napier's *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000, pp. 257-279.

¹³¹ See Lauryn Hill's "To Zion," on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Ruffhouse/Columbia, 1998.

¹³² The significance of Hill's naming of her son "Zion" points to the influences of Rohan Marley, her long-time ex-partner (often misidentified as her ex-husband) and Zion's father, and the Jamaican Rastafari religion, on her music. Rastafaris reassign the term "Zion," a synonym for Jerusalem, as a mythos of a Black utopia opposed to Babylon (itself a synonym for Western society) and the oppressive and exploitative systems of anti-black violence and materialism characterizing western capitalism. Interesting, here, is how the song equates embracing black motherhood with the emergence of this Black utopia through its incorporation of Zion's name. Also, the implication of a Black utopia being a post-apocalyptic state of being is suggested through the connection between the death of the potentially aborted child (in Common's "Retrospect for Life" track) and its after-life as initiated through bringing the pregnancy to term. For more on the Rastafari religion and "Zion" as a Black utopia, see Erin MacLeod's *Visions of Zion: Ethiopians and Rastafari in the Search for the Promised Land*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.

¹³³ The latter of which reads like a letter of apology to the emcee's soon-to-be aborted fetus; that is, until the final transcendent line.

¹³⁴ See Tricia Rose's text, now seminal to the field of Hip Hop Studies, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. In particular, see chapter five, "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music," pp. 146-182.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 149.

¹³⁶ Ibid p. 176.

¹³⁷ See Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

¹³⁸ See Lauryn Hill, "Doo Wop (That Thing)," on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Ruffhouse/Columbia Records, 1998.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ The unique organizational structure of Hill's album lends to this pedagogical reading. Several vignettes offer scenes of instruction that extend tracks by including discussions of love in a classroom led by Ras Baraka, the son of Black Arts poet, Amiri Baraka, and a Newark city councilman and eighth grade teacher at the time of the recording. In these skits, Baraka uses the Socratic Method to guide a group of students through a critical discussion of love as a nontraditional subject matter. Ironically, these vignettes (and the album) begin with Baraka doing a roll call to take attendance, with only one student noticeable

absent; ostensibly, an adolescent Lauryn Hill. Additionally, the title of the album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, playing (as previously mentioned) on Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933), the album's cover art, which features a traditional classroom desk, with requisite no. 2 pencil in the slot carved out at the top, and Lauryn Hill's face (and the album's title) etched, graffiti-style, into the face of the desktop; all reference back to the inadequacy of America's institutional education system. Specifically, I read these structuring devices as Hill's skepticism about traditional schooling, offering Baraka's performative classroom as a type of antithetical alternative. Perhaps also the items signify the miseducation that Lauryn received like every little girl on the streets of the hood and within hip hop. As a result, Lauryn is skipping class and the album offers the possibility for yet another alternative education; Lauryn's womanist to Baraka's patriarchal. Baraka, who takes as subject matter something Hill's album insists black men are not expert in, wields influence and authority in the classroom. Hill, conversely, serves as foil to Baraka as male instructor; a counter sage, offering a Mis(s) education with love as the album's centralizing theme. See Lauryn Hill, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Ruffhouse/Columbia Records, 1998. See also, for Baraka's discussion of recording the classroom skits, Laura Checkoway, "Inside 'The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill'," last modified August 26, 2008.

¹⁴¹ See June Jordan's "Where is the Love?" in *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays of June Jordan*. New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002, pp. 268-274.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 268.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 268

¹⁴⁴ For this quotation, and all of the quotations presented in this paragraph, see June Jordan's "Where is the Love?" in *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays of June Jordan*. New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002, pp. 268-274.

¹⁴⁵ See Sherley Anne Williams, "Some Implications of Womanist Theory," in Winston Napier's *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 218-223.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 220.

¹⁴⁷ See Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

¹⁴⁸ I refer to the much-publicized issues with Ishmael Reed and the film adaptation of her novel by Steven Spielberg, which was famously railed against as anti-black men and stereotypical in its depictions of black men. For the scene to be discussed, see Alice Walker. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Books, 1982.

¹⁴⁹ See Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Books, 1982; pp. 259-260.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 260.

¹⁵² One of the nuances of Walker's writing in the novel is the steady progression of the representation of Mister's name in the text and the transformation of his character. The implication being that Mister's transformation from Mr. _____ into Albert offers the kind of ascent narrative that Albert Murray describes as typical of the blues hero. While it would be hard to classify Mister as a hero, Walker's

decision to reintegrate him into Celie's life after her return from heartbreak in Memphis is an interesting narrative choice offering Mister a very minor arc of redemption. For more on the blues hero and narrative fiction, see Albert Murray. *The Hero and the Blues*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

¹⁵³ See Alice Walker. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Books, 1982; p. 206.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

¹⁵⁵ The language of the text is curious here. Walker writes that it is their mutual love of Shug, and the fact that Shug once loved them both, that allows Celie not to hate Mister. But the realization of a friendship is something else entirely, a "Plus" that the text remarks on as a necessary surplus to overcome the pain of their history together and build towards a new future. See Alice Walker. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Books, 1982.; p. 260.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

¹⁵⁷ At the funeral of Sofia's mother, Walker includes a preliminary scene of Mister's transformation. In the letter recounting for Nettie her first time encountering Mister after leveling her critique/curse, Celie writes: "Talking to Mr. ____ such a surprise I can't think of nothing. Not even nothing else to say. | Mr. ____ stand waiting for me to say something, looking off up to his house. Finally he say, Good evening, and walk away." Two details strike me as significant. Mister's "waiting" for Celie to speak, which is a complete reversal of his earliest characterization in the novel, and the narrative use of the word "Finally" before he does speak, which implies again even more time and waiting, but also a desire to be released from the obligation of speaking on Celie's part. Both details seem to register the change in Mister, who clearly would like to invite Celie up to the house, but who holds and waits and then attunes to Celie's needs and release her from his desire. See Alice Walker. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Books, 1982; p. 224.

¹⁵⁸ In her "Introduction: Black Women Writers Speaking, Listening, and Witnessing," to *Speaking in Tongues, Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Mae Henderson offers an expert reading of the critical role of listening between black women in Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In her discussion, Phoebe, as Janie's "earwitness" and interlocutor, empowers the protagonist to tell her story as a "thoughtful and engaged addressee" (11). Ultimately, this 'depth hearing' calls on Phoebe not only to be an "empathetic listener," but also, potentially within Henderson's reading, the narrator of Janie's story. While listening between black women allows them to partake in and exchange roles as narrators of each other's stories, listening by black men to black women, I want to suggest, allows black men to discover a new form of masculinity which, to evoke Hortense Spillers, reveal the female within himself. See Hortense Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in Winston Napier's *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000, pp. 257-279.

¹⁵⁹ For full reference to all three scholarly articles, including Gates's "What's Love Got to Do with It? Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom," Baker's "In Dubious Battle," and Joyce's "'Who the Cap Fit': Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," and for the prompting Joyce piece, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," see, for convenience, Winston Napier's *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 298-312, 313-318, 319-330, and 290-297, respectively and in order of their mention in this note.

¹⁶⁰ In the “Introduction” to his *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), Winston Napier puts the “feud” into a proper theoretical context, providing some historical framing along the way. See pp. 1-33.

¹⁶¹ For the best treatment, in my estimation, of this period of development in black literary studies, see Ronald Judy’s work (but especially his opening chapter) in *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

¹⁶² See Joyce Joyce’s “The Problems with Silence and Exclusiveness in the African American Literary Community,” in Winston Napier’s *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 475-481.

¹⁶³ Ibid. p. 475. See also Joyce’s original rebuttal to Gates and Baker’s responses, “Who the Cap Fit: Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.” in Winston Napier’s *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 319-330.

¹⁶⁴ While the details of this event can only be speculated upon, the fact of its occurring are certain. I first became aware of this celebration in private conversations with Mae G. Henderson while at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a graduate student and have since had the party confirmed by other scholars.

¹⁶⁵ See Joyce Joyce, “The Problems with Silence and Exclusiveness in the African American Literary Community,” in Winston Napier’s *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; pp. 475-481.

¹⁶⁶ See Joyce Joyce, “Who the Cap Fit: Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.” in Winston Napier’s *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000; p. 302.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 328.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 321.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 320.

¹⁷⁰ According to data collected by SoundScan, at that time Lauryn Hill set the record for first-week album sells for a female artist working in any genre. For other statistical information about the album as record breaking for sells and Billboard See Randy Reiss’s archived article, “Lauryn Hill’s Chart-Topping Miseducation Sets Records,” last modified September 2, 1998. <http://www.mtv.com/news/500990/laury-n-hill-s-chart-topping-miseducation-breaks-record/> <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/inside-the-miseducation-of-laury-n-hill-20080826?page=4>

¹⁷¹ Which is already itself a purposeful misremembering, because that was also the release year for several now classic hip hop albums and emcee introductions, including Outkasts’s *Aquemini* album, Big Pun’s *Capital Punishment*, Jay Z’s *Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life*, Mos Def and Talib Kweli’s *Black Star*, DMX’s *It’s Dark and Hell Is Hot*, and even the Black Eyed Peas debut, *Behind the Front* in 1998.

¹⁷² In an act of televisual artistry that imagines the contiguity of the past as indistinguishable from cultural performances reproduced in the present, the music video for “Doo Wop (That Thing)” split-screens two

versions of Lauryn Hill from her apartment window and, too, from a block party stage that traverses 31 years of black communal history, from 1967 to 1998. Coupling contemporary representations of a black neighborhood in New York with representations of that same neighborhood at the height of the Civil Rights movement, the video connects the idea of cultural legacies as tied to black women's cultural production from past to present. See lauryrnhillvevo, "Lauryn Hill - Doo-Wop (That Thing) (Official Video)." Youtube video, 3:56. Posted June 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6QKqFPRZSA>

¹⁷³ See June Jordan's "Where is the Love?" in *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays of June Jordan*. New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002, pp. 268-274.

¹⁷⁴ As examples, emcees as diverse in their feminist sensibility as 50 Cent, Eminem, Jay Z, Kanye West, Nicki Minaj, Talib Kweli, to name only a few, have evoked Lauryn Hill's name or album in their lyrics, with many more discussing the emcee and her work in interviews. In fact, I would suggest (somewhat facetiously) that in 2018 it's harder to find an emcee who does not refer to Lauryn Hill and *The Miseducation* album in some way. Of Hill's popularity at the time, Che Guevara, co-producer of "To Zion" says, "I knew she had a big fanbase....but I didn't know how many people would be into [the album] because a lot of it is so personal." See Randy Reiss. "Lauryn Hill's Chart-Topping Miseducation Sets Records," last modified September 2, 1998. <http://www.mtv.com/news/500990/lauryn-hills-chart-topping-miseducation-breaks-record/>

¹⁷⁵ See Library of Congress. "National Recording Registry To 'Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive'" [Press Release], March 25, 2015. <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-15-041/national-recording-registry-to-ac-cent-tchu-ate-the-positive/2015-03-25/>

¹⁷⁶ See June Jordan's "Where is the Love?" in *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays of June Jordan*. New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002, pp. 268-274.

¹⁷⁷ Hill's catalogue consists of exactly four albums: two as a member of the hip hop group the Fugees, *Blunted on Reality* (1994) and *The Score* (1996); one solo studio album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998); and one live album, *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0* (2001).

¹⁷⁸ A referential play on the Patricia Bell-Scott, Gloria Hull, and Barbara Smith edited collection, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982.

¹⁷⁹ I'm reminded of Gayatri Spivak's treatment of the notion of the subaltern (after Gramsci) in the essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and the idea that women (of color) are most often those who fall outside of the "mode of production narrative" that becomes the official record of a culture. Though Spivak, at the end of an earlier version of the essay, answers her own titular question by imploring us with the knowledge that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" and ultimately that "[t]he subaltern cannot speak," I want to trouble her notion of "hearing" a bit, by way of Mae Henderson and Fred Moten, by asking, Can the Subaltern Sing? Or, Can the Subaltern Sound? Or, Can the Subaltern Scream? More to the point of this chapter, "Are American Black Women Emcees Subaltern?" To evoke the idea of subalternity into a discussion of black women as emcees already troubles Spivak's insistence on a regimented restriction against the term's use as a pseudonym for the oppressed. Yet, her own understanding of the politics of language that are subverted in the singing voice give me reason to believe I'm not completely out of turn for making this comparison. For more on Spivak's treatment of the subaltern as female, see her extended discussion, "History," in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*:

Toward a History of the Vanishing Present. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. See also, Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak's *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*. New York: Seagull Books, 2007.

Chapter Three: The Author and the Authorities

¹⁸⁰ See Jonathan Culler. "Introduction: Critical Paradigms" in *PMLA* 125.4 (2010); pp. 905–915.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 907.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 907-908.

¹⁸³ Notably, in the year 1977, several theorists began to clarify the idea that authority provides significance to interpretation as a function of training and the development of critical expertise. Jean Starobinski, for example, provides a brief survey of the emergence of critical expertise by analyzing the historic uses of the term, "criticism," in eighteenth century France. See his translated essay, "Criticism and Authority" in *Daedulus* 106.4 (1977): 1-16. See also Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), which I engage in the current essay. For a monograph-length treatment of literary criticism and authority, see Patrick Parrinder, *Authors and Authority: English and American Criticism, 1750-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), but also originally published in 1977.

¹⁸⁴ I refer to these as schools of literary and critical theory to call attention to the disciplinary and institutional nature of their hermeneutic and pedagogical aims. I include among these theoretical models such as Structuralism, New Criticism, Marxist and Psychoanalytic analysis, Deconstruction, and New Historicism, among others. See Robert Dale Parker, ed. *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*, Third Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015; See also J. W. Bertens. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. Third Ed. New York: Routledge, 2014.

¹⁸⁵ See Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977; pp. 142-148.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁸⁸ Notably Barthes's essay ends with the line: "...the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." A close reading of his analysis reveals not a birth (of the reader) but only an expanded role for the critic (as expert reader). My understanding of Barthes's argument, then, delimits the ways that the critic of literature usurps authority from the author by solidifying new assumptions about literature's production and new philosophies (or theories) of its optimal interpretation. Again, see Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977; pp. 142-148.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁹¹ See Michel Foucault. "The Means of Correct Training: Hierarchical Observation (From *Discipline and Punish*)" in *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow, Ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984; pp. 188-205.

See also the lecture, “What is the Author?” (in the same edition), pp. 101-120, where Foucault provides a thorough response and critique of the arguments in Barthes’s essay, “The Death of the Author.”

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁹³ This transfer of authority, from author to critic, might also be read as a process of transition in the relationship to power within the modern collapse of the dichotomy between public and private. The creation of hybrid sites of reading, writing, and critical debate like European coffee houses during the eighteenth century, for example, establish venues where the breakdown of public/private gets solidified towards the display of these new forms of power and towards the formation of what Jürgen Habermas calls the “public sphere.” See Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989. See also Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan, eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004; pp. 42-50, for a reading of the emergence of public education and academic institutions as arenas of state-sponsored knowledge production. Finally, for the language quoted in the sentence, see Michel Foucault. “The Means of Correct Training: Hierarchical Observation (From *Discipline and Punish*)” in *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow, Ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984; p. 188.

¹⁹⁴ See Michel Foucault. “The Means of Correct Training: Hierarchical Observation (From *Discipline and Punish*)” in *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow, Ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984; p. 188.

¹⁹⁵ For example, Foucault discusses how the school building (like the prison) became a “mechanism for training,” describing the logic behind its architectural design as creating a “pedagogical machine” and an “apparatus for observation” not unlike the perfectly punitive panopticon. Yet, even more corrective, I would argue, are the uses Foucault outlines for “normalizing judgment” and “the examination,” particularly in the training of academic professionals. See Michael Foucault, “The Means of Correct Training: Hierarchical Observation (From *Discipline and Punish*),” in *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow, ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984; pp. 193-205. See also the section (in the same edition) on “Panopticism,” pp. 206-213.

¹⁹⁶ Culler’s discussion of hip hop reflects this covert practice as he reads “the rise of rap” and its cultural ubiquity as a “motif of return” or as a shift back to poetic formalism within our contemporary moment (908). Such an ‘expert’ reading necessarily conforms to the existing academic scholarship surrounding hip hop as literature, especially as put forward in Adam Bradley’s discussion of rap as “new-school music” but “old-school poetry.” See Adam Bradley. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009; pp. xi-xxiii. Both Culler and Bradley, ultimately, reduce the novelty of emceeing to an antiquarian mode of literature production, denying the genre its right to an interpretation based completely in its novel theorization of itself as literature.

¹⁹⁷ Mae G. Henderson also interrogates the uses and abuses of disciplinary power as it manifests in the literary critic’s professional function as a writer of the academic book review. Henderson argues, persuasively, that the critic’s assumption of authority over the author, in this critical task of review, consistently devalues the writing of black and women writers. Her argument, generally, has been crucial to my own thinking with regards to understanding the manifestations of power in academia—specifically where the critic of literature operates as an instrument for silencing the voices of critical others. See Mae G. Henderson, “Authors and Authorities” in *Speaking in Tongues & Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; pp. 145-151.

¹⁹⁸ Originally promoted as the *Nigger* album, Nas came under intense social pressure from organizations like the NAACP and from black political leaders like Al Sharpton and Rev. Jesse Jackson, forcing him and his record label to reconsider the political fall-out from releasing an album with an historically injurious word for a title. For more on this controversy, see Daniel Krep, “Nas Talks To RS About New Album Controversy While Politicians Join Fight To Prevent Title,” (October 2007) available online: <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/nas-talks-to-rs-about-new-album-controversy-while-politicians-join-fight-to-prevent-title-20071026>; see also Shaheem Reid, “Nas Explains Controversial Title, Denies Reports of Label Opposition,” (October 2007) available online: <http://www.mtv.com/news/1572287/nas-explains-controversial-album-title-denies-reports-of-label-opposition/>; and Shaheem Reid, “L.A. Reid Stand ‘Firmly Behind’ Nas Over LP Title; 50 Cent Calls It ‘Stupid’,” (October 2007) available online: <http://www.mtv.com/news/1572402/la-reid-stands-firmly-behind-nas-over-lp-title-50-cent-calls-it-stupid/>

¹⁹⁹ Additionally, Nas released a music video for the track, “Be a Nigger Too,” just before the release of “Hero” as the album’s first official single. Eventually this track would be cut from the album altogether, due reportedly to issues clearing its samples. See “Nas- Be a Nigger Too *NEW* Music Video! (High Quality),” 8:39, uploaded by “zillmatic,” June 10, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiaeUtASxzI>.

²⁰⁰ See Nas. “Hero,” on *Untitled*, Def Jam Recordings, 2008.

²⁰¹ In 2013, for example, Harvard University’s Hiphop Archive & the W. E. B. Du Bois Research Institute at the Hutchins Center announced the naming of an academic fellowship in honor of Nas (i.e. the Nasir Jones Hiphop Fellowship). In 2015, Nas was awarded the W.E.B. Du Bois Medal from Harvard’s Hutchins Center, Harvard’s highest honor in the field of African and African American Studies. Additionally, Nas’s work has received some of the most exhaustive academic treatment. See, in particular, the monograph-length study of the emcee’s first studio album, *Illmatic* (1994). An edited collection entitled *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas’s Illmatic*. Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, Eds. New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009. Notably, the editors’ decision to explore and critique Nas’s debut album coincided with the controversy surrounding his *Untitled* (2008) album’s production and promotion. Also, as recently as 2017, Harvard’s Powell M. Cabot Professor of American Literature, Elisa New, has used the emcee and his lyrics (and his reading of American poetry) to promote several of HarvardX’s “mooc” courses offered to alumni and sparingly to a more general digital public.

²⁰² The promotion of Nas’s album began nearly a full year before its release. As such, much of the criticism of the album was based squarely on the emcee’s promotion of its controversial title and not as a result of any public review of its content.

²⁰³ See Shaheem Reid, “Nas’ New LP: Is Def Jam Balking At Controversial Title,” (October 2007) available online: <http://www.mtv.com/news/1572186/nas-new-lp-is-def-jam-balking-at-controversial-title/>; also see Nekesa Mumbi Moody, “Nas Names New CD After Racial Epithet,” *The Washington Post*, October 19, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/19/AR2007101900897.html>.

²⁰⁴ During the lead-in to a Fox News broadcast, Jackson was caught with an open mic disparaging then democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama with his use of the n-word. See Ryan Tate, “Jesse Jackson Did Use The N-Word,” (July 2008) available online: <http://gawker.com/5026087/jesse-jackson-did-use-the-n-word>. For the language quoted here, see Shaheem Reid, “Nas’ New LP: Is Def Jam

Balking At Controversial Title,” (October 2007) available online:
<http://www.mtv.com/news/1572186/nas-new-lp-is-def-jam-balking-at-controversial-title/>

²⁰⁵ These texts were published and distributed by Pantheon Press, the University of Minnesota Press, and Houghton Mifflin, respectively.

²⁰⁶ Included in the number of texts written by African American authors who deploy the term as a title are works like Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1858), Dick Gregory’s *Nigger: An Autobiography* (1964), Cecil Brown’s *The Lives and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger* (1969), Jalil Al-Amin’s (formerly H. Rap Brown) *Die Nigger Die!* (1969), and Gil Scott-Heron’s *The Nigger Factory* (1972), to name only a few. Additionally, Carl Van Vetchen’s novel, *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Flannery O’Connor’s short story, “The Artificial Nigger” (1955) provide examples of white mainstream literary uses of the slur as an eponymous reference.

²⁰⁷ See Shaheim Reid. “Nas Changes Controversial Album Title: ‘It’s Important To Me That This Album Gets to The Fans’,” (May 2008) available online: <http://www.mtv.com/news/1587737/nas-changes-controversial-album-title-its-important-to-me-that-this-album-gets-to-the-fans/>.

²⁰⁸ See Cornell West & BMWMB, *Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations*, Hidden Beach Records, 2007.

²⁰⁹ See Dan DeLuca. “N- Again As Rapper Nas Puts Forth Then Backs Off the N-word in Titling His New Album, Artists and Academics Have Many Words About It,” in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 20, 2008, http://articles.philly.com/2008-07-20/entertainment/25246128_1_illmatic-nasir-jones-n-word.

²¹⁰ Nas, infamously, discontinued his formal education after completing only the eighth grade. That the emcee, then, is positioned by his critics as an untrained amateur who is necessarily incapable of adding anything new to the critical discourse on race in America is consistent with much of the critical silencing of the so-called illiterate masses throughout American history (particularly with those masses are African American).

²¹¹ Cornell West’s album, *Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations*, was officially released as a CD in August of 2007. The controversy surrounding Nas’s preemptively titled *Nigger* album began in October of that same year.

²¹² The deployment of racial (and racist) stereotypes, as a basis for fictive representation, is a literary technique deep-rooted in the African American literary tradition. Without rehearsing some of the more offensive examples of this style of figuration, I am interested in two particular publications that work as early models for hip hop’s approach. The first comes in Frederick Douglass’s characterization of the slave as a literary subject in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). The significance of this comparison is discussed in the present chapter. The second example comes from Richard Wright’s characterization of Bigger Thomas, the protagonist whose name itself enacts a type of homonymic slippage that would rewrite “Bigger” as a literary representation of the American “nigger,” in *Native Son* (1940). I choose to focus here on Douglass’s work (as opposed to Wright’s), because I hope to show how this figuring technique extends to even earlier moments of African American literary production. However, comparisons between Nas’s production and Richard Wright’s work would, I believe, offer examples equally fruitful. Of more contemporary note is James Hannaham’s novel, *Delicious Foods* (2015), which characterizes and personifies crack cocaine as a speaking first-person narrator within his first-person character-driven narrative and reworking of this trope of racial stereotype as speaking subject.

²¹³ Nas, “Ya’ll My Niggas,” on *Untitled*, Def Jam, 2008.

²¹⁴ For more on the concept of “cultural capital,” see Pierre Bourdieu. *Language and Symbolic Power*. John B. Thompson, Ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. See also Pierre Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Randal Johnson, Ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. For Bourdieu’s engagement with ideas of authority and artistic production, see Pierre Bourdieu. *Free Exchange*. Hans Haacke, Ed. England: In association with Blackwell Publishers, 1995.

²¹⁵ For more on U.S. postindustrial disinvestment in urban centers and the resourcefulness of hip hop’s earliest generation, see Tricia Rose’s “Voices from the Margins: Rap Music and Contemporary Black Cultural Production,” in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994. See also Robin D. G. Kelley. *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

²¹⁶ See Nas, “Ya’ll My Niggas,” on *Untitled*, Def Jam Recordings, 2008. See also “Nas – Ya’ll My Niggas (Official Video),” YouTube, 6:03, uploaded by “LiquidSwordsHipHop,” November 25, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-mNjh2y_rM

²¹⁷ The trope of the mask itself has a long history in African American expression, dating back (perhaps most famously) to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask,” and continuing through to hip hop in tracks like the Fugees’s “The Mask” from *The Score* (1996) album.

²¹⁸ Again, two moments in black expressive culture stand out in relation to Nas’s interpolation of the listener. The first, a poem by Countee Cullen entitled “Incident,” reflects on being called “Nigger” as an eight-year-old black youth visiting Baltimore for the first time. The other is the moment in chapter five (“The Lived Experience of the Black Man”) of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* when he reflects on being interpolated by the phrase, “‘Dirty nigger!’ or simply ‘Look! A Negro!’,” calling it a “suffocating reification.” For the Cullen poem, see Countee Cullen. *Countee Cullen: Collected Poems*. Major Jackson, Ed. New York: Library of America, 2013. See also Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Charles Lam Markmann, Ed. New York: Grove Press, 1968.

²¹⁹ Nas, “Ya’ll My Niggas,” on *Untitled*, Def Jam, 2008.

²²⁰ For a treatment of American enslavement and attempts to ‘write’ the slave into being, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s chapter, “Literary Theory and the Black Tradition,” in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 3-58; see also Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²²¹ See Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. New York: American Classics, 2008; p. 105.

²²² See Cindy Weinstein, *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 1-14. On the veracity of the quote’s historical attribution to Lincoln, see Daniel Volaro’s “Lincoln, Stowe, and the ‘Little Woman/Great War’ Story: The Making, and Breaking, of a Great American Anecdote,” in *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2009, pp. 18-34.

²²³ See Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. New York: American Classics, 2008; p. 105.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ This would not be the first time Douglass had written his own preface. In 1848, in an Irish edition publication of his first memoir, Douglass also does so. Of interest to me here is the fact that the editor of *My Bondage and My Freedom* goes unnamed, while hinting at a close connection between himself and Douglass. For Douglass's 'Irish' preface, see *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997): 111-112.

²²⁸ Douglass's critical censure, particularly as suffered under William Lloyd Garrison and received from A. C. C. Thompson, is well rehearsed in scholarship. My reading is interested, instead, in how Douglass makes use of this editorial anonymity and self-censure as a method of critique. For other manifestations of Douglass's approach to critical positioning, see William Andrew's "The Uses of Marginality, 1850-65" in *To Tell A Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 167-204.

²²⁹ See Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. New York: American Classics, 2008; p. 106.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ In addition to Douglass's potential masquerade as editor, several of the editorial decisions of the 1855 autobiography stand out. Significantly, the title page takes the opportunity to challenge the prevailing logic of black enslavement through the use of another paratextual element, an exergue, taken from the writings of Samuel Coleridge. It reads: "By a principle essential to Christianity, a PERSON is eternally differenced from a THING; so that the idea of a HUMAN BEING, necessarily excludes the idea of PROPERTY IN THAT BEING." Also, Douglass's choice to have African American physician and author, James McCune Smith, write the introduction to the volume extends his desire to inaugurate a politics of black self-authorization. Interestingly, in his introductory remarks, Smith suggests that Douglass's volume "is an American book, for Americans, in the fullest sense of the idea," offering yet another veiled critique of American racism and the distancing of black bodies from the narratives of American national belonging. See Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. New York: American Classics, 2008 pp. 103-137.

²³² See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. New York: The Library of America, 1994; pp. 1-102.

²³³ Ibid., pp.58-65.

²³⁴ See Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. New York: American Classics, 2008; p. 270.

²³⁵ The idea of "stereo-typing" is used here to connect the black ethereal voice of the emcee with a tradition of African American writing. The material production of the type-written text is compared to a production of literature mediated through the contemporary mass technology of the stereo (and radio). The mediation of sonic technologies like the radio, stereo speaker, headphone, and mp3, in the production of African-American literature, is an important consideration of my larger study, particularly as these technologies reproduce limiting visions and narratives about blackness. For more on the development of

sound technologies and blackness, see Alexander Weheliye. *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005.

²³⁶ See Jonathan Culler. "Introduction: Critical Paradigms" in *PMLA* 125.4 (2010); p. 906.

Conclusion: The Future of Literary (Hip Hop) Studies

²³⁷ As of April 2015, an audio and DVD recording of the March 5th performance is still housed within the University of North Carolina's Music Library archives and is made available via their service desk under the included title. See also a recording by Saul Williams and the Arditti String Quartet truncating their UNC performance for sell and distribution, made available through Williams' website: http://saulwilliams.com/NGH_WHT/.

²³⁸ For perspectives on philosophical differences in the compositional quality of diverse musical traditions, see Judith Becker's "Is Western Art Music Superior?" in *The Musical Quarterly* (Vol. 72, No. 3, 1986), pp. 341-359, Jan Ling's "Is 'World Music' the 'Classic Music' of Our Time?" in *Popular Music* (Vol. 22, No. 2, May, 2003), pp. 235-240, and J. H. Kwabena Ketia's *Ethnomusicology and African Music: Collected Papers* (Accra, Ghana: Afram Publications, 2005). See also a discussion of the technical differences between European and African musical traditions and dissimilarities in their compositional techniques as related to hip hop music in Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Published by University Press of New England, 1994), pp. 65-72, and Dawn Norfleet's chapter on "Hip-Hop and Rap" in *African American Music: an Introduction*. Mellonee Burnim and Portia Maultsby, Eds. Second Ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015; pp. 354-389.

²³⁹ In the opening chapter of Kevin Young's reflection on the African American "shadow book," Young describes the shadow book as "a book that we don't have, but know of, a book that may haunt the very book we have in our hands." Young goes on to theorize several types and instances of these "shadow books" as they turn up (or go missing, as it were) in the African American literary tradition, citing for example W. E. B. Du Bois's *Africana Encyclopedia*, Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia*, and the lost second book of poetry of Phillis Wheatley. For more on Young's conceptualization of the "shadow book," see *The Grey Album; On the Blackness of Blackness*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2012; pp. 11-19. For more on Saul Williams' engagement with the "dead emcee scrolls" in the tradition of the African American "shadow book," see *The Dead Emcee Scrolls: The Lost Teachings of Hip-Hop and Connected Writings*. New York: MTV Books/Pocket Books, 2006; pp. xi-xxx.

²⁴⁰ See Saul Williams. *The Dead Emcee Scrolls: The Lost Teachings of Hip-Hop and Connected Writings*. New York: MTV Books/Pocket Books, 2006; pp. xviii-xviii.

²⁴¹ The Wadi Qumran Caves, located near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, were the discovery site of some several hundred ancient texts containing religious writings and artifacts that have come to be known more commonly as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

²⁴² The celebrity achieved by Saul Williams at the end of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first century, in part due to his unique ability to embody a kind of black radical aesthetic, merging the recitation of slam poetry with his special blend of performative old-school hip hop enunciative histrionics, can be clumsily located in his designation as the face of the Slam Poetry movement of the 1990s. His coronation as "Grand Slam Champion" by the judges at the *Nuyorican Poets Café*—a forum for young

poets, musicians, and artists in New York City's Lower East Side—prompted Saul to be featured in the 1996 documentary, *Slam Nation*, and later to star in the feature film *Slam* (1998), which helped cement his rise to stardom. Interestingly, Saul recasts his rise to stardom in the manuscript as a function of his fictive discovery of *the dead emcee scrolls* as a seminal hip hop ur-text, offering a unique perspective on the relationship between stardom and the appropriation of black expressive forms. While the contrived theft is concocted (within the narrative syntagm) to add urgency for those reading the poetry and lyricism that follows in the collection, Williams seems (consciously or otherwise) to be extending on the trope of the (un)reliability of the African American autobiographical author by intentionally crafting this prefatory fiction—a trope that pulls his text into a tradition with others like Frederick Douglass's narratives (with their renaming of individuals to protect identities), James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (with its controversial attribution and delayed revelation of authorship), and even The Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* with Big Bank Hank's "borrowing" of Grandmaster Caz's lyrics.

²⁴³This new context, which I discuss as "institutionalizing," is categorized by methods in which artistic and literary productions are removed from their original and originating contexts to be institutionally studied, taught, and generally valued (and evaluated) as high art. Within their new institutional contexts, these works of art take on new life, but also suffer a type of generative or productive death. That is, in the ways that works of art are brought into the academy to be taught and studied certain aspects of the mystery (or mystic) in that art is stripped away, rendered inert, and parceled out into more assimilative bits of consumable knowledge.

²⁴⁴For more on the academy as an enabling infrastructure, see Andrew Belton. "Forum Letter: The Academic Department as Enabling Infrastructure," in *PMLA*, Vol. 133, Number 5. October 2017.

²⁴⁵During my time at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I quickly began to pick up on one of the many codes used when discussing the community of black people living in and around Chapel Hill. One such code often involved designating African Americans who dressed or spoke a certain way as from "Durham County" or Durhamites. This was not the Durham of Duke University, but the "Capital of the Black Middle Class" as the African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier once deemed the community. Of course, this coding occluded the large number of black people living in the Chapel Hill township itself, attempting to displace these black Chapel Hillians (at least discursively) to some other place, some other region, some other community. For more on the long history of Black Durham, however, see Leslie Brown's study, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

²⁴⁶For more on the effect of concert spaces on audience expectations, see Robert Kronenburg. *Live Architecture: Venues, Stages and Arenas for Popular Music*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

²⁴⁷I keep returning to the same question: What was it about this performance of hip hop curated by academic entities and staged within an academic institution that gave me such certainty about Williams's inevitable presence? As an undergraduate at Columbia University in New York City, I'd experienced previous instances of hip hop performers failing to appear for scheduled performances at academic institutions (namely, Lauryn Hill in 2002). But these instances were outdoor performances, arranged as year-end celebratory concerts. Perhaps the sheer cumulative promotion and formality of the performance, and the fact that Williams had been paired with a partial orchestra, gave me more of a sense of certainty about the likelihood of his being present. This is significant in that it helps illuminate the ways in which the physical space of the academy immediately alters many of the conventional codes, practices, and

techniques that hip hop fans and practitioners find themselves becoming accustomed to and accommodating for.

²⁴⁸ See *Shawshank Redemption*. Dir. Frank Darabont. Perf. Tim Robbins, Morgan Freeman, and William Sadler. Columbia Pictures, 1994.

²⁴⁹ See Black Star. “Respiration,” on *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus Records, 1998.

²⁵⁰ The ambiguity of hip hop lyrics as they are emceed, or vocalized, in connection with the certainty with which we attempt to fix them on the page, again, rubs up against many of my concerns in this project. To attempt to erase the self-conscious ambiguity of a moment like the one represented here in Mos Def’s lyrics where his distinct pronunciation makes it difficult for the listener to distinguish between the verb “can,” and its negation, “can’t,” is an important technique used for creating meaning throughout hip hop. While the novice, may simply feel this ambiguity a function of a lack of the scholar’s critical persistence (for we could, if we were thorough enough, get to the bottom of his usage here), it is however the ambiguity that I am highlighting as necessarily key to understanding the creation of meaning as necessarily distinct in hip hop. See Black Star. “Respiration,” on *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus Records, 1998.

²⁵¹ Interestingly, “prick” is also the term used by French literary theorist and semiotician, Roland Barthes, in his widely influential and slightly autobiographical treatment of photography and art, *Camera Lucida*. In this work, Barthes uses the verb “prick” to help distinguish between those aspects of art which can be communally appreciated, the “studium,” and those which affect us more individually, the “punctum.” That Barthes and Mos Def both focus on the wounding nature of these transformative aesthetic experiences is important to my project’s own discussion of aesthetics, especially as the aesthetic choices of the emcee affect her crowd of listeners moving them to action and codifying hip hop as a literary practice.

²⁵² I use the term “beautiful noise” here to play on the title of Tricia Rose’s seminal work on hip hop, “Black Noise.” The comparative treatment of the concert’s music as “beautiful” noise and Rose’s treatment of the invention of the form as “black” noise is insightful in that there is something about the transformation of black art in to “beautiful” art or, that is, art to be studied and preserved (as opposed to enjoyed), to be reflected upon versus engaged in, as a fruitful transformation to consider throughout the history of the incorporation of black expressive practices into mainstream and academic avenues. Additionally, Rose does great work to outline aesthetic difference between African and Western styles of music in her book, especially on p. 207.

²⁵³ The significance of “feeling” in hip hop, as a term of understanding or of the recognition of a particular truth and knowledge’s reception, is a widely perpetuated concept within the culture and of utmost interest to me here as a way of beginning to conceptualize a different language for the production of knowledge within a hip hop terrain. To say, “I feel you,” is to express a type of empathetic/sympathetic understanding that isn’t structured around an articulated logic as much as an emotional depth that can be tapped in and related to.

²⁵⁴ The idea of “ways of being” incorporates too many concepts to fully elucidate here. Suffice it to say that this includes ways of being at home in the world, ways of being human, ways of being a citizen or a political subject, ways of being a sexualized, gendered, or racialized subject, and so forth.

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