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DA' ART OF STORYTELLIN': BLACK MASCULINE  
LITERACIES AND A RHETORIC OF SELF MAKING

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DA' ART OF STORYTELLIN': BLACK MASCULINE LITERACIES AND A  
RHETORIC OF SELF-MAKING

By

Collin Craig

A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

### DA' ART OF STORYTELLIN': BLACK MASCULINE LITERACIES AND A RHETORIC OF SELF-MAKING

By

Collin Craig

My research examines African American literacy practices that demonstrate in multiple contexts how black males are making rhetorical choices with language and other modalities that constitute their black masculine identities. In my dissertation, *Da Art of Story Tellin': Black Masculine Literacies and Rhetorics of Self Making* I define these literacy practices historically to the present. I explore three rhetorical moments of black subject formation: the slave narrative tradition, hip-hop culture, and the everyday literacy lives of three black college males. These moments work as vignettes that demonstrate both the continuities and differences across a spectrum of black males using language and other modalities to compose their way into their identities while actively navigating through dominant discourses. My work finds that black males historically up to the present are defining and determining a conception of literacy based on their rhetorical situations. These situations also inform their definitions of black masculinity and what it means to be a black male language user in culturally homogenous and public contexts. The black males in this study learn how to adapt to their situations in ways that implicate the meaning and importance of literacy as a survival strategy, as a means of making adjustments, and as a way of identifying as black and male. Furthermore, how they respond to their struggles and learn to connect with others socially, culturally, and academically becomes

inextricably connected to how they imagine, construct, and affirm their masculinities. Thus, this project signatures black masculine literacy as a typology of how black males manage everyday life, the discourse that comes with their bodies and how they manage being marked socially and culturally at different rhetorical moments.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Writing Our Legacies: Looking Back for The Present**

*Within your communities you have children who not only differ in race but come from different social circles. The kid next door may be more or less fortunate than the kid up the block but neither were better than the other. Growing up poor you learn so much more about yourself that a book cannot teach you. I was the kid next door, from what I had learned at home and "my hood" prepared me to become better at school. At school they use books as tools to acquire knowledge which in return you would be labeled as literate. While average second graders were out having fun I was growing up helping to take care of my first nephew, a responsibility many eight year olds did not have. Instead of learning strategic moves in connect four on checkers I was learning the basics in changing diapers and making bottles. Anthony, "Hard Knock Times: The Life of Anthony"*

Anthony, a native of Muskegon, MI is one of the first in his family to go to college. As I sit in a chair in his dorm room, he glances between his cell phone text pad and his laptop while he talks to me about how high he feels the stakes are for getting a college degree. Anthony and his twin brother are the first in his family to go to college. He wants to manage a hotel one day. "I really need to pass this Math course," he interjects, as he talks to me about how his grandmother brags about him being a college student when he goes home. On academic probation and frustrated, he is retaking a math course that he failed the previous semester. I'm frustrated for

him. He's also worried about his composition course. He does not understand the feedback he gets from his instructor. She tells him he writes too much like he talks. He's still working on how to fix it. I give him encouragement; tell him to hold his head. He is no stranger to struggles though. In fact, struggle provokes him to be reflective and to draw on history and taught wisdom for strength.

I guess so far the situation I been through, just learning to not put yo head down first...to keep going 'cause you don't know how its gon' turn our the end of the day 'cause it may change out of the blue for you so just basically you gotta just...all the values my grandmother and my momma instill in me growing up you put them to work here.

Anthony's sense making of his adverse experiences with education in our conversation was also reflected in his narrative writing voice. The level of complexity and insight I saw in his thinking and writing reflected a past peppered with the vicissitudes of growing up poor as a young black male. In the narrative excerpt that I use at the beginning of this chapter Anthony's past contextualizes a history of struggle and everyday experiences of a young black male. It is a history that he uses to define his conception of what it means to be literate. Anthony tells those who place political and social value on conventional learning how his path to literacy begins in his "hood" and not in a classroom. Locating what Shirley Brice Heath calls "literacy events" beyond the use of alphabetic text and beyond the borders of textbook learning, Anthony was making new connections to growing up poor and



taking care of his nephew. Stories like this hold true for many black males from the inner city whose experiences with literacy are connected to experiences of growing up young black and male, learning how to manage and mediate racial, economic and social struggles. These are the men of the hip hop generation, those whom cultural critic Nelson George suggest that we acknowledge for their experiences living and existing in the marginal spaces who become narrators of what it means to be young, black and male in America.

As demonstrated in Anthony's narrative, their potential to reflect on race politics in America cuts across social, racial and economic groups in ways that admonish us to look at their worldview as an "argumentative voice" within a collective American commentary (Kitwana 110). This also holds true for black males in our long past who have used storytelling as a framework for making and telling history, a history identified by Malcolm X as "a people's memory". This is a history of black male identity formation and reclamation that has a lineage to a pastime of slavery. It is in fact the complex afterlife of slavery reflected in the present performances of black male identity. Within this history and its afterlife, storytelling is the inhabitable space of black male subject formation. It is a site to contest history, construct black identity, and understand black male invention within a context of discursive practices that link masculine and racial identity to literacy practices. In this project I identify storytelling as a rhetorical practice of black male identity formation and a site that unveils how black males across historical, popular, and academic contexts, through language and embodied performances, characterize black masculine literacy as a practice of identity formation and social mobility.

In this introduction, I first want to explain what brought me to research black masculine literacy as both rhetorical and shaped by rhetoric and why we should consider a cross disciplinary approach to explore its dimensions. Next I identify storytelling as a site that I build both theory and methodology. Being that these storytelling moments are across differing yet mutually informing traditions I will explain my rationale for a non traditional mixed methods approach that is both qualitative empirical and textual/hermeneutical. I then will foreground how this project frames a new relationship between literacy and rhetoric and the importance of a broad understanding of black masculine literacy's relationship to the African American rhetoric tradition. This project performs a large undertaking of black male rhetorical practices. However, it narrows this investigation using three important moments of black male identity construction that can provide a clearer (although not absolute) understanding of black masculinity as rhetorical and informed by language practices.

I opened this chapter with a narrative excerpt from a young black male's story because it invokes both a historical and present narrative of freedom struggle of how a black male prepares himself to take on the responsibilities of a larger world by learning how to respond to the local challenges in his everyday life. It further invokes themes that have become staples in many black communities: poverty, social exclusion, illegitimate child rearing, the proverbial "block", and the struggle. All of these concepts work rhetorically in shaping Anthony's understanding of literacy and further asks us to consider the relationship between literacy and rhetoric. In other words, these concepts are working rhetorically to shape Anthony's identity as a black

male and also determine how he decides to speak back to or exist in these contexts. Thus dialectical relationships between racial, economic and social conditions and how Anthony decides to respond to those conditions is created and established. I found this dialectical relationship to be common across the traditions that I choose for this project.

Thus, central questions for this project are: how are black males responding in rhetorical moments that shape their identities as black males? How are black males using language to define their manhood? And lastly, how is Eurocentric language and culture appropriated to shape black masculine discourses, identities, and social practices? Rhetoric becomes the dependent variable in how black males develop literacy strategies to navigate multiple contexts and situations. The ability to and how black males learn the conventions of navigability through linguistic, cultural, and embodied practices gives us an understanding of how they are defining their masculinities and what it means to be a black male. In this project I explore how black males learn these conventions across three contexts: slave narratives, Hip Hop gangsta rap, and the literacy autobiography of three black college males. I stretch across genres, histories and traditions to demonstrate that regardless of the context, black males through their writing, thinking, and speaking are responding in distinctive yet similar ways to structures of power that create conditions for how they are to exist in the world. I look at these different traditions as vignettes, as brief evocative descriptions that have continuity and difference, yet demonstrate a continuum of black male subject formation through specific rhetorical practices that



characterize black masculine literacy as survival strategy and as a phenomena shaped by the experiences black males encounter in their everyday lives.

### **An “Odd” Approach: Rethinking Mixed Methods to Build Alternative Methodologies**

Although mixed methods has traditionally been defined within education research as “an approach to knowledge (theory and practice) that attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions and standpoints” (Johnson et al. 112), it usually is defined within the context of practicing qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell, Green and Caracelli, Miles and Huberman). I create an alternative approach by blending textual/rhetorical analysis of slave narratives and hip hop lyrics/images with qualitative empirical study of discursive moves black males writers make in their writing practices. These methods work to create a methodology for studying black production as a phenomena shaped by past traditions and present realities that impact the literacy lives of young black males.

I first collect data from three different storytelling traditions and analyze them according to their rhetorical situations. I then look for continuity and difference across three storytelling moments. How I make the data sets speak to each other formulates a methodology for my dissertation. Scholarship on the effectiveness of mixed methods has suggested that it does not always bring its findings together and that differing methodological approaches are often treated as exclusive domains (Bryman 9). This suggests, as Bryman states, that there can be barriers to integrating findings. Storytelling is the interpretive framework in which I: 1) analyze black masculine literacy textually, aurally, and as embodied 2) analyze black male language practice as discourse 3) build a theory of black male invention.

## **Storytelling as Methodological and a Space for Theory Building: Locating Story Across Disciplines and Time**

I structure this study as interdisciplinary (1) in order to understand how literacy, rhetoric and black masculinity might be understood and defined across different traditions and (2) to show that continuities and differences in rhetorical choices black males are using to construct their realities are significant for understanding the ingenuity of black male production. Studying cross-disciplinarily the nature and function of storytelling as a space of knowledge production and literacy practice provides a broader knowledge base to answer the question of black masculine identity formation. It makes the case that this identity formation happens both in real time and in the imagined and romanticized spaces of history, literary traditions, and mainstream culture. Thus, this project defines and explores literacy with an understanding of rhetoric as a social construction of ideologies, things, events, and moments in time that are shaping behavior, values, beliefs, and identities. Ralph Cintron's characterizing of rhetoric as a combination of language practice, artifacts and body gestures that structure and organize a community or culture, (x) formulates how I look at black male discursive space as being shaped by more than just language, but alternative practices of composing that spotlight black male literacy and rhetoric as both interconnected and mutually informing. Elaine Richardson's approach to African American English as discourse guides how I treat language practices across these traditions. This framing enables black masculinity to be engaged intellectually as a recursive process of identity formation influenced by "ways of being and communicating that derive from particular histories, geographies

and social locations” (Richardson 4). This position allows me to look at a range of texts to explore the dimensions and contexts of literacy as a practice shaped by time, history, and situations. I choose to look at language use as part of a body of discursive practices that define black masculine literacy and black male subject formation.

The story is the framework that shapes interpretation of culture and the self for black males in my dissertation. Barbara Christianson states that folks of color have always theorized “but in forms quite different from the Western form of logic”. Christianson locates theory “in narrative forms, in the stories we create”. Theory in this form enables people of color who do not have access to resources “to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, our very humanity” (Christianson 52). Storytelling allows for the use of self-referentiality as strategy against what Jacqueline Jones-Royster calls “the primacy of officialized narratives” (563). Thus, story is more than just evidence. It has a more prominent role in the written, visual and aural text constructed by black males who do the work of challenging hegemony and creating spaces for the black male voice to connect with its audience. The story also works as a vulnerable space. In her deliberate intersecting of story in academic prose, critical race scholar Patricia Williams states “I deliberately sacrifice myself in my writing. I leave no part of myself out, for that is how much I want readers to connect with me. I want them to wonder about the things I wonder about, and to think about some of the things that trouble me” (92). Williams’s notion that narrative must not be dispelled in the making of knowledge, but rather prioritized as a valid tool for making sense of things aligns with native



scholar Jill Cruikshank notion that story “invites different interpretations,” and “challenges the authority of institutions like archives or courts without conceding complete relativism (23). Both Williams and Cruikshank build an interpretive framework that characterizes the rhetorical validity and power in storytelling as a space of reflection and theory building.

How representation historically works as strategy for mobility for black male writers constructing textual identities formulates a conception of literacy predicated on a rhetoric of struggle defined by place and space. The place of struggle becomes a space of production in the slave narrative. It is where black males make new meanings about themselves and the types of black men that they want to be. Struggle as it is defined within the context of the slave narrative tradition becomes a co-constructor of black masculine identity. W.E.B. Du Bois was the first American scholar to thoroughly analyze the African American slave experience. His dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* set a precedence for scientific studies on the impact of slavery in America (Marable 41). Du Bois’s work also demonstrated a much needed black perspective on the conditions of the slave. Both his sociological and historical undertakings of African American slave culture set precedence for black cultural critique that was grounded in empirical work that represented slave culture accurately. Literary scholar Henry Louis Gates’s material/textual hermeneutical approach in looking at slave literary traditions would further bring historical representations of slave identities and slave life from the shadows and into public discussion.

Acknowledging the African American perspective in slave narratives as “richly textured and layered” and defined by culturally constructed “levels of meaning and expression” (xx), Gates’s encomium and reviving of the black literary tradition is an exegesis for my analysis of the African American perspective in slave narrative writing *not* as a linguistic characterization but as an interpretive framework for constructing masculinity. How Frederick Douglas, Nat Turner and Olaudah Equiano think through their identities as slaves and construct possible selves beyond a slave subjectivity is demonstrated in looking rhetorically at how they navigate and interrogate slave discourse through their lived experiences. Looking at the choices they make to attain freedom such as gaining literacy by stealth, repurposing literacy learned through religion to then repurpose religion, or appropriating Eurocentric ideologies of individualism crystallizes their paths towards black male identity formation. Thus, the story becomes the cultural event in which the black self is reconstituted through language and models of hegemonic masculinity embodied by white slave masters are refigured. For Douglas, Equiano and Turner I explore how they make sense of their struggle as slaves and how they look to modeled concepts of manhood such as autonomy, mercantilism, and individuality as an alternative. This approach sequentially spotlights the aftermath of their enlightenment, one that explains how they construct masculinities characterized by dogged individualism, self-making, and activism.

Michael Eric Dyson's notion of "oppositional African American cultural critique"<sup>1</sup> as a heuristic for creating alternative strategies for analyzing black life aligns with urban literacy scholar Ernest Morrell's critical alternative approach of knowledge making that exist in non-traditional spaces. They both speak to how intellectual work is produced in urban black life as well as other alternative, non traditional places where we might find it. Hip Hop is "...a site of struggle against hegemony; a place of contestation between the forces of resistance of subordinate groups in society and the forces of incorporation of dominant groups of society" (Morrell 287). Critical theory and postmodern approaches to interrogating grand narratives both offer a useful theoretical lens to understand the recovery work of in hip hop music and culture. These approaches are in line with "new century literacy practices that feature popular texts," epistemologies, and alternative methods of knowledge making (Morrell 293).

These two critical approaches allow me to read gangsta rap music as aural texts and within these texts to study African American male language practices as discourse (Dimitriadis16, Richardson 14). Within this discourse I read how black males are drawing on African American rhetorical practices of resistance to invent identities as black gangstas, street kings, and outlaws to mainstream culture. I look at these language practices as mediated by the public space of popular culture that

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<sup>1</sup> Dyson's employment of a "rhetoric of racial unity" is founded on his definition of oppositional African American cultural criticism that: 1) resist narrow views of black life and are open to discovering the truth about black culture wherever it may be found 2) stands on an idea that "identity is socially and culturally constructed from the raw materials of the individual and social, the private and public, and the domestic and civic" and 3) acknowledges the wide range of experiences in America that shape its approach, articulation, and existence ( ). The

enables a different reading of how language practices of black males are shaped by the capitalism and commercial interests.

Theodore Adorno's argument that major "cultural industries" employ popular culture to perpetuate dominant ideologies is central to understanding hip hop as an artifact embedded with hegemonic meanings of black masculinity. His theoretical work is also useful for understanding the mass distribution of controlled images of black male representation in mainstream culture. It spotlights the controlling corporate forces that dictate how these representations come to characterize capitalism that "standardizes" the image of sociopathic black masculinity as commodity in rap culture. However, Stuart Hall suggest that "black popular culture is a contradictory space...a site of strategic contestation" that has "enabled the surfacing...of elements of a discourse that is different – other forms of life, other traditions of representation" (Hall). Thus, I identify the black male gangsta rapper/rhetorician as constantly negotiating the conditions for his subjectivity yet ever resistant to being contained by those conditions. For this reason I frame storytelling in hop hop gangsta rap as the space where both negotiation and resistance happen. Storytelling is a where young black male rappers co-construct each other within a black discourse where image and language work both individually and together to generate multiple meanings (Gee 14, 15).

I read the constructed and romanticized images of black male invincibility through mobster life and impenetrable black bodies as enactments of the learned fluidity of black masculine identity as a way of speaking back to historical accounts of colonial containment of black male bodies reflected both in the slave narrative

tradition and popular culture. The story in gangsta rap is as lyrically constructed as it is embodied. Thus I read the black body as the material manifestation of the black urban narrative being co constructed by a discourse of black male gangsta rappers. This creates an ongoing social dialogue between language participants in the invention of textual and material representations of black masculinity. Spotlighting this social dialogue as an inventive space speaks to the ongoing conversation in rhetoric studies about invention as a social act that is predicated on symbiotic relationships between the individual and culture. Within this social dialogue I read aural and image texts together in order to understand how visual, textual and cultural literacies are working in synergy. Since words carry a certain rhetorical power in gangsta rap music I read how cultural knowledge and rappers' awareness of their bodies work towards black production of rhetoric, language practices, and black masculinity. Storytelling's flexibility to exist along a continuum of the romanticized and the real works as heuristic for understanding how gangsta rappers use language to creatively construct multiple selves and ways of identifying with each other in the co construction of black masculine discourse.

### **What is the Substance of Black Male Writing?: Black College Males Writing Autobiography, Writing their Lives**

There is much to learn in the existing research on gender and literacy in school-based settings that seeks to identify themes that boys draw upon to construct their identities. These themes tell us about texts that boys are consuming and producing and how they are using language to define their masculine identities. Trisha Maynard argues that males use language in particular ways to indicate their membership as part of a

particular gender group. In school settings boys need to establish themselves as tough or as members of a powerful group. In their literacy practices of writing, Maynard's studies have found that boys write stories primarily about authority and control, "confronting and triumphing over an evil aggressor" (33, 39-40). In *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture*, Newkirk's analysis of boy narratives argues that autobiography is a revealing space into the lives of boy writers and crystallizes the relationship between what they read and write. Gilbert and Gilbert have suggested that the gendered lives of boys must be taken into account in teaching them literacy because the things that they value are connected to their everyday socialization into gendered beings (200), and thus connected to what they write.

However, in much of the literature, certain cultural influences on masculinity are often ignored or understudied. As stated by literacy educators Trisha Maynard and Alfred Tatum, race and class are often understated in studies about gender and literacy. Tatum states that focusing on gender alone can overlook the implications of race, ethnicity and other complex constructions that shape the lives of boys (12). The ethnographic work by Kirkland and Jackson makes race a central concept of study in seeking to find out what motivates urban adolescent black males to practice literacy. Their research found that adolescent black males "operate within multiple symbolic systems" to invent their literate identities in ways that were intricately tied to their cultures. Kirkland and Jackson and Tatum have defined black masculine literacy as the ability to navigate multiple settings using a repertoire of practices that enable young black males to achieve success while maintaining their cultural and masculine identities.

Much of the work done in defining the relationships between masculinity and literacy has been done in primary and secondary education (Gilbert and Gilbert 113). More specifically, the study of how race, literacy, and masculinity are interconnected has been located more visibly in the literate lives of adolescent black males. The function of gender in the lives of black male college writers has been explored minimally in the field of rhetoric and composition. “Real Niggas Don’t Die: African Americans Speaking Themselves in Their Writing” (Cambell); *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Gender, and Masculinity* (Young); *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* are seminal works in the field that use autobiography to explore, more or less, constructions of black masculine identities through language and literacy. These works identify African American interpretive practices as important agents in affirming social and cultural identities of black male college writers (Cambell 76). Young locates the African American perspective and academic literacy practices within the context of racial gendered performances of black masculinity. He argues that the “burden of racial performance” can place black males in a conundrum of racial, linguistic and academic expectations in the academy and in black communities. My investigation into the autobiographical lives of three black males builds on the research of how black college males are inventing their masculinities within the context of the academy and more specifically within the context of writing.

In building on Tatum, Kirkland and Jackson, Young, and Cambell’s studies of the literate lives of black males, I spotlight how black college males reference situational struggle and models of masculinity in their literacy narratives to formulate

connections between literacy and successful black masculinity. I define struggle in these autobiographies as the referential material of experience, a substance of and for their writing. Through identifying themes and culprits of struggle and how black college males use coolness as an adaptive tactic to struggle, black masculinity is characterized in the storied lives of black male writers through their definitions of literacy and literate aims. Documenting how these black males think about revision as challenging or changing an idea about masculinity, literacy, race or racism, spotlights processes of thinking that are shaped by social happenings outside of the classroom. These processes are mediated by stories about family life, how they characterize themselves as black males in relation to the world around them, and the value the literacy plays in shaping their identities.

### **Situating Black Masculine Literacy in African American Rhetoric Studies**

African American rhetorical traditions and African American literacy traditions are joined at the hip, mutually informing one another. Historically, black writers have always had to learn the language of the colonizer in or to establish a collective voice of resistance against racism. As Henry Louis Gates has eloquently stated in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, writing became what slaves used to barter for their humanity. Writing as a practice became the condition for black folks to prove to white audiences that they had a history and that they could reason and think logically. Furthermore, writing became a rhetorical practice in making black humanity and blackness visible textually. It further made public the life of the mind of the black writer and thinker as intellectual. I present this as a small disclaimer because very



few conversations about literacy are invoked when we talk about rhetoric. John Duffey and Ralph Cintron<sup>2</sup> have done much of this work, but more needs to be done in spotlighting more directly the relationship between black and gendered literacy practices and black rhetorical traditions of freedom struggle and identity formation<sup>3</sup>.

Engaging the layered meanings of black masculine literacies, the ability to navigate multiple settings in order to make manageable meanings (Kirkland and Jackson), asks us as educators to explore more directly what Ralph Cintron calls the rhetorics of public culture. These rhetorics consist of cultural artifacts, how black men position themselves socially, culturally and politically, and the language they use to constitute their realities in this public sphere. These public spheres for my project are shaped by circumstantial events in time where black male identity is constructed by place, space and social and economic constraints. Rhetoric by this definition asks us to “view literacy development as ideological, as the product of discourse, and as an expression of historical change (Duffey 40). It also asks us to pay attention to how black men learn to position themselves – their cultural, racial, and gendered selves - in these situations. It asks us as teachers, mentors, and administrators, to decipher the

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<sup>2</sup> See Cintron’s *Angels Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday* and Duffey’s “Other Gods and Countries: The Rhetorics of Literacy” in *Towards a Rhetoric of Everyday Life: New Directions in Research on Writing, Text, and Discourse*.

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Jones-Royster’s *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change*, Elaine Richardson’s *African American Literacies*, Shirley Logan’s *Liberating Language: Sites of Rhetorical Education in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Black America*, and Keith Gilyard *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* are important pieces that indirectly engage this idea. However, the relationship between literacy and rhetoric in black male life is still an understudied topic.

role of the African American perspective as a heuristic for how black males negotiate identity in unfamiliar settings.

These settings, whether they be in the classroom, composing in a specific genre, or acculturating oneself to a community, can reveal forms that black production take in black male life and what black males make in these rhetorical moments to achieve literate and social aims. Extending the definition of rhetoric as ideologically constructing literacy practices characterizes black masculine literacies – story telling, signifying, toasting, recognizing, appropriating, cool posing, styling through dress, and wearing the newest Air Force Ones – as “rhetorical acts” used to “reconstitute themselves” (51). So what might it mean to teach rhetoric as a process of constructing and imagining alternative literacies – alternative ways that people construct reality through language, embodied performances, and material artifacts and manage those realities in relation to and in resistance to others?

### **All The Things You Are, Are Me: When and Where I Enter(ed)**

This project is motivated by my own story, one that found me a college freshman, on the campus of an east Texas state university. I remember going into the counselor’s office of my high school to look at college applications. They were all neatly packaged in packets with all of them having a list of questions that I had to answer. I remember each packet asking for an application fee that I could neither afford nor wanted to pay. I would end up applying to the one college with no application fee and six months later I arrived on the campus of Stephen F. Austin State University, a school in the piney woods of Nacogdoches, Texas. I didn’t really know what I was

doing there or what I would do. I somewhat saw this move as a way to relieve some of economic strains we had come to know all too well after the divorce, living in a single parent home, trying to make ends meet. The child support checks had stopped coming years ago when my dad skipped town without letting the agency know of the new whereabouts of his out of state job. Thus, I had become a so-called man of the house at an early age, buying dinner with money I had made from mowing lawns in the neighborhood. Mom had bought me a lawn mower to make summer money so that I could buy school clothes, but sometimes I know she needed it to help keep food on our plates. Mowing lawns had become my trade until my high school years when I got a job at the local super market. We seemed to be the typical black family in our neighborhood: single mom, church going, struggling to make ends meet. It was the common denominator that linked me to all of my friends. Dads would visit occasionally and we would wonder who the random guy was driving up in the driveway while we were out playing basketball or football. We were all poor and fatherless but didn't realize this to be a tragedy as much as a way of life. School and sports was our getaway from the realities beset upon us. So by the time college came around I felt somewhat prepared to deal with the struggles of making sacrifices. I was independent almost to a fault. I was the man that life had taught me how to be, which meant I was scared, deeply insecure, hateful of my dad, and overprotective of my struggling momma, yet hopeful. I made decent grades in high school so I was excited to learn who I'd become in college, and what I would learn about myself.

As an undergraduate I would spend four and a half years figuring out what black male college life meant, whether it was in the dorm room of my first sexual

encounter with a white girl, the remedial math course that I flunked three times, or the seemingly common course in which I was the only black person enrolled. I always had a lot to say in those classes. I knew that there were some fucked up things in the world, and being the only black person in my classes seemed to be one of them. My composition classes allowed me to write about this. I never considered myself that good of a writer, but I knew that writing enabled me to feel empowered in ways that I hadn't before. Writing provided the stage for me to perform, to act out and vent. Writing made me think about how my momma would always correct my "ain'ts". "What did you say!? Ain't?" Ma' would look at me sternly until I said, "umm...is not?" as to correct myself. Writing made me think about my pops and him walking around the house singing military cadences that he practiced regularly on base. They call these songs jodies. These songs were weird to me. He never really explained what they meant or why he would sing them out loud. I was always left to wonder, as with everything else about him. Those chants reminded me of the distance that separated him and me, he being away all the time on an army base or coming home unannounced in a violent drunken rage.

Writing became that secret space where I would wrestle with what type of black man that I wanted to be in light of this history, who I presently was, and who I would turn out to be in the afterlife of my experiences growing up in different worlds and communities as a young black male. I wrote secretly about my sexuality and being confused in my attractions at a young age and wrote publicly about how my experiences with the power of language were connected to a black family raised by single moms and praying grandmothers. Until now I had not realized how much my

sense of masculine identity mattered in these ruminations over language and identity and how I lived in the world. My sense of success as a college student was caught up in what type of black man I wanted to be and being what my father was and wasn't. Being in a historically black fraternity, listening to writing profs who had vested interests in my development as an intellectual, and reading the works of intellectuals such as Cornel West, Andrew Hacker, and Geneva Smitherman enabled me to see that how I navigated the world as a black male was something that I could talk about with other black males. How I managed my identities in multiple academic and social spaces on a white college campus and in everyday life was determined by what I knew about my history and how that history shaped my current reality as a young black male.

My research on black male life is a project that is connected to a past, present and future that is my own. The storied lives of black males in my study are reflected in mine and mine in theirs. I come to this project to give voice to these stories and interpret them from multiple points of view and locations. I speak with them, I listen, and I try to make sense of their storied pasts, present and futures that they learn to manage and become empowered to change.

Chapter two investigates a slave narrative tradition of black male slavery characterized by the freedom struggles of Frederick Douglas, Nathaniel Turner, and Olaudah Equiano. I spotlight emergent literacy practices that were used to define a conception of black masculinity and were characteristic of a black vernacular reality. This chapter plays close attention to how enslaved black males used the African American perspective as a rhetorical strategy to appropriate Eurocentric models of

masculinity defined by self-making, mercantilism, and religion. I argue that the slave narrative is a blueprint for black male subject formation defined by African American rhetorical practices of appropriation, mimicry, and self-making through linguistic practices. These prominent black figures use race and African American masculinities as intervention into hegemonic discourses to enact difference through black masculine literacy practices.

Chapter three links this history of black male rhetorical practices to the male dominated space of hip hop culture. In investigating the range of modalities that black males in hip hop are now using to define their masculinities, I trace the African American practices between slave narratives and contemporary rap in order to spotlight continuities and differences of language and literacy patterns that occur in public spaces. The creative art form of rap music is a discursive space for black males to engage in black self-invention. But it also is a critical and controversial space of masculine identity performance. This chapter explores how black men extend black rhetorical traditions of knowledge making and black invention using multimodal literacies that construct images and metaphors of masculinity. It also investigates the black body as an urban artifact for “self-authoring” that works as rhetoric for black subject-formation. Black males in hip-hop extend conceptions of African American literacies through multimodal communicative practices used to make sense of their social and political positions in the world around them.

Through a qualitative empirical study, chapter four investigate how black males use autobiography to define literacy. This chapter reveals that the literacy habits of these males are distinctively associated with their racial and gendered

identities and connected to a legacy of black male knowledge production. In their stories they draw on cultural resources and “cool posing” strategies to challenge structural inequalities in ways that allow them to approach their education more critically and with agency. The data from my case studies also reveals how black masculine literacies defined by textual, oral, and embodied practices are linked to conditioned responses that characterize “coolness” as resistance while enabling black males to be malleable in homogenous social and academic contexts. Their use of language, symbolic meaning systems associated with hip hop, and work ethic codes, in which they label as “grindin’” (working diligently), spotlight how they are defining their success and ambitions as black college males. This becomes significant for them as they deal with the challenges of being new fathers, family death, finding cultural solidarity, and navigating the academy.

Chapter five concludes by drawing collectively on chapters two, three, and four to develop a typology of black invention. It characterizes black male invention as a rhetorical practice that we might understand across genres. Black invention within a black male literacy tradition adds to the discussion of what forms black production has taken and further iterates invention as a social act between individuals and culture. Teaching black culture as rhetoric offers strategies for how we might situate alternative language practices of resistance in our conversations about critical thinking, reading, and writing practices. Learning about the literacy lives of black males moves us beyond the writing classroom and into their everyday lives. Finally, chapter five gives implications for mentoring black as writing teachers and the value

of bridging the gaps between contexts and spaces that they occupy on a college campus.

**Chapter 2**  
**Roots of Soul: Framing Masculinity in Origins of Black Male**  
**Literacies of Freedom Struggle**



In African American male slave traditions of identity formation, one's ability to be effectively transgressive against hegemonic slavery was defined by the ability to speak oneself into existence. Henry Louis Gates in *Race, Writing and Difference* further asserts that writing was an critical apparatus that justified humanity for slaves (9). W.E.B. Du Bois echoes this notion in his manifesto on Negro education. He insisted that blacks needed to be educated to ensure their place as citizens amidst the malaise of US apartheid and the afterlife of slavery. Much of his intellectual labor was about proving to a white audience that black folks were capable of functioning beyond the plantation. The slave narrative would lay the blueprint for the intellectual labor of Dubois, one that first demonstrated the formulation of a black literacy tradition of rewriting Anglo European conceptions of black people (Richardson 38). In this chapter I will spotlight how the literacy practices by black male slave writers demonstrated that subject formation was a social act of learning how to transition the black self out of a slave identity and into a self-invented black manhood. I demonstrate the emergence of the black man in the slave narrative as a story of the self-made man who wills himself to be both visually and textually present in dominant discourses. Literacy becomes the inevitability of the black male slave's attempt to change their situation as a slave. A nascent masculinity formed through black rhetorical practices is a critical American trope that is produced.

In studying the slave narratives of three important figures, I take my understanding of black rhetorical practices beyond the classical Greek understanding of rhetoric so that I might understand the intimate relationship between black rhetoric and African American masculine literacies. Ralph Cintron's definition of rhetoric as

“the ways that individuals and groups use language to constitute their social realities, and as a medium for creating, managing, or resisting ideological meanings” allows me understand how the literacy practices demonstrated in black male slave narratives were shaped by the rhetorical situations of their times (Cintron ix, Duffey 51). Early black self-made rhetors such as Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and Olaudah Equiano were significant black male figures whose ability to enter dominant discourse was predicated on how they negotiated their identities as slaves. This was crucial for inventing black masculinity through African American practices of coloring a colonial language with the slave experience.

I begin this chapter by tracing the rhetorical practices in the written slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, and Olaudah Equiano, and the written accounts of Nat Turner’s final confession after he is captured and awaits conviction. I first explore how Douglass’s sense of manhood was predicated on his ability to free himself from slavery. Literacy by “stealth” becomes the pivotal means for Douglass’s self-made manhood and is a crucial component in how he understands his right to American citizenship. I then engage Turner as a prophetic visionary of messianic masculinity, a subject position actualized through the learning of religious literacy. Turner’s rebellion is ignited through appropriating religious discourse for social activism. His leadership image constructs a conception of black masculinity actualized through mimicry of religious figures and rewriting a hegemonic Christian discourse. I then take up Equiano’s evolution from slave to Anglo-African as a social act of acculturation and identification with Eurocentric ideologies of individualism. Equiano’s learned literacies in Europe and on navy ships argue for a black

masculinity that is neither fully African or Anglo. His cosmopolitanism becomes the portrait for a black masculinity that is not fixed but fluid.

I choose their stories as exemplar models of black male rhetors who demonstrate how the social climate of their times determined how they chose to develop their identities as literate black males. The “rhetorics,”<sup>4</sup> that defined their realities (the language of racism, lynching, government sanctioned discrimination, white supremacy, white ownership of black bodies) play a critical role in how they choose to construct a black consciousness, value literacy, and participated in public discourse. It also presented an argument for how black life needed to be represented and embodied through textual practices. African American slave narratives, for example, demonstrated an alternative way to think about rhetoric, a way that recognized the symbolic representation of culture through the practice of storytelling. These narratives dignify black storytelling, as it would become a space where ones knowledge of the pained black body would be crucial in developing a black voice and creating catalyst for a black literacy tradition. Barbara Christianson acknowledges the rich theoretical texture found in black narratives and marks these spaces as sites of resistance against assaults on black bodies (52). Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey* also elucidates how “richly textured and layered...black literary artistry indeed is” by “identifying levels of meaning and expression” found in black

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<sup>4</sup> I later define this term on page nine. These rhetorics “refers to the ways that individuals and groups use language to constitute their realities, and as a medium for creating, managing, or resisting ideological meanings” (Cintrón ix). The languages of slave economies, racism, and activist movements during slavery are rhetoric’s that “provide the frameworks in which individual acts of reading and writing take place (Duffey 42). Rhetorics determined the African American strategies of linguistic appropriation, and black masculine construction through writing – two important black masculine literacy practices of subject formation.

vernacular traditions of writing (xx). Their work argues that when black folk are able to tell their own stories and speak their minds we often see a richer, more complex representation of black reality; one that is anchored in black language practices that respond to rhetorical situations of racism and the conditions of slavery. Their analytical work makes it possible to also locate theories of black masculine literacy “in narrative forms”.

### **In Search of the Black Self: The Rhetoric of Opportunity and the Cultivation of Consciousness through Literacy in the Narrative of Frederick Douglass**

The introduction to the English language for slaves in America occurred in their first interactions with European slavetraders in 1554. As Richardson states, the first Africans to learn English were originally for the purposes of negotiation and trade. Yet it was not until 1619 that 20 Africans were sold by a “Dutch man-o-war” in Jamestown, Virginia, thus marking the beginning of African American English (Berlin 29, Richardson 37). When color became the determining factor for enslavement, a system of control was developed that ultimately worked as a form of psychic and social control over the lives and bodies of slaves. Religion became a primary form of control by slave masters that was intended to spiritualize slavery as a divine will of God. Thus the first institutionalized education of Negro slaves began first through religion, with the goal that it would prove conducive to cultivating a consciousness that work on the plantation was a moral obligation. Religion would become crucial for the subject formation of slaves. It offered a moment for spiritual rejuvenation and provided a linguistic space that would function as “a mechanism for forming identity, the freedom to become a person” (Cornelius 2). It would be in

these moments of engaging religious texts and doctrines that African slaves would learn how to survive and adjust to being stripped of their freedom by building solidarity through the black perspective, a critical interpretive space that appropriated hegemonic Christian doctrine.

Gender roles were also an important part of how slaves would learn to respond to the realities of plantation life. Historians of slave culture have understudied the history of subject formation of black males and masculinity. Much of this history has been written with the assumption that the black male experience was the norm without attentive study on the politics of identity formation for black males. While women historians and black feminists have done much work to recover the black female slave, the particular role of black male slaves as fathers, teachers, and community leaders is overlooked. Through the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, and Nat Turner, we come to understand a conception of manhood linked to literacy, social autonomy, and one's physical ability (often through violence) to obtain freedom. Through their narrative accounts, a conception of black manhood was rooted in a slave experience and influenced by Eurocentric and African culture.

Although African men and women's roles were not specifically taught, it is my contention that they were implicated through the social construction of identity that began with their "cash value" and subsequently occurred through distribution of labor. Eva Bosenberg states that,

When slaves were sold, a male slave would be advertised for his capacity to work, either his sheer physical strength or a particular manual skill, while a woman's ability to bear children, 'to reproduce the master's property without the cost,' functioned as a major economic asset in addition to her value as a

worker. Slave prices suggest interesting differences in the valuation of gender between African and American slave markets. While female slaves brought consistently higher prices in Africa, they would usually be sold for less money than their male counterparts on the American continent. (119)

The sovereignty of slave owners would permit them to disrupt gender roles at any moment. Thus black women were forced to perform traditionally masculine labor, and black males performed traditionally feminine labor such as tilling the field with a hoe, a job that was seen as women's work in African culture (Johnson 55). However, the slave economy was ideologically driven by patriarchy; thus black male slaves were usually not given duties figured to be those suited as women's work, such as sewing, cooking, and babysitting<sup>5</sup>. For black males, the acclimation to slave culture involved learning one's role in a slave economy consisting of cultural norms of slave identity. This involved learning the fundamental differences between the role of the chattel and that of slave owners. For example, a slave master was a model of manhood in his slave community. He symbolized leadership, masculine behavior, and a sense of individual autonomy. For slaves he also represented the physic and physical control white masters had over black male bodies. Much has been written about the power relations within slave systems (Davis and Gates, Davis, Carretta and Gould). Frederick Douglass's autobiographical account as a writer crystalizes the gender relations of power that he learns as a slave owned by multiple masters.

Through a series of enlightenments it was the interrogating of the physic and physical control of slavery that Frederick Douglass would use as an instrument to

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<sup>5</sup> Although, it is important to note that black male slaves were required to hoe crops. In African culture, this was considered a woman's job. Hoeing was solely the work of African women and would be considered emasculating for African men to perform.

“demonstrate the manliness of enslaved men” (Dorsey 193). In Douglass’s writing we find a conception of black masculinity born out of viable moments of searching for the self. These events are connected to learned literacies that are defined by acquired and learned practices of how a slave could be free. For Douglass, knowledge as a slave was “acquired by stealth”, which makes his unlikely path towards literacy reflected in the lives of many contemporary black urban youth who find themselves on alternative paths to obtaining knowledge that liberates them as they learn how to be black men.

Learning about Frederick Douglass as a young black boy in an urban middle school was never a pastime experience. Quite frankly I didn’t know whom he was save that he was a slave who took his own freedom. His life and legacy was a story, as most of my history courses and their books seemed to suggest, that only needed to be recognized one month out of the year or within a few pages that were complimented by visual. In history books he always looked the same, posed the same way in pictures, and sported the same puffy afro combed back. Born in Maryland, the son of an enslaved black mother and white master whom he never knew, I learned that Douglass would experience the violence of slavery until his escape to New York in September 1888 (French 77). I also learned that Douglass had fortunate opportunities that many other slaves hadn’t received. But through my own cultural lens, I saw Douglass as one who had learned the culture of his community or the “knowledge of the streets” in order to figure out how to deal with the seriousness of his enslaved situation. He knew how to fraternize with “the white boys” and made

deals in exchange for literacy lessons<sup>6</sup>. And sure now, as I knew then, much had been written about his “bondage and his freedom.” But in those adolescent moments of my black boyhood when I engaged his abbreviated life story, and gazed at his suspended, timeless image, I imagined a slave past irreconcilable to my own. Later on, tracing uncertain and often ill-informed paths to black manhood as a young college kid found me reminded by Douglass’s evolution from slavery, to literacy, and triumphantly to self-made manhood. As traditional, controversial, and patriarchal this manhood seemed to be oftentimes, there was an immediate freedom that I saw in its articulation on the page. I saw in it a modeled ability to define the black self against the voices, images and ideological languages that did violence to black identities and attempted to speak on the behalf of those who could not to speak. For me these agents of social control were symbolic of the slave masters and racial bigots on Douglass’s path towards freedom. They represented significant rhetorical moments that were pivotal in understanding a black consciousness of manhood defined by salient moments of survival and literacy. For example, in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* his physical encounter of being flogged by Mr. Covey, who was considered as a “negro-breaker”, gives insight into Douglass’s critical turn into self-made manhood, one that would be defined by “making individualism and literacy ones own, and African American” (Zafar 95). Douglass’s encounter with Mr. Covey was a moment

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<sup>6</sup> In *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass remarks of how useful his white “playmates” whom he met in the streets were as teachers, “I used to carry, almost constantly, a copy of Webster’s spelling book in my pocket; and, when sent of errands, or when play time was allowed me, I would step, with my young friends, aside, and take a lesson in spelling. I generally paid my *tuition fee* to the boys, with bread, which I also carried in my pocket. For a single biscuit, any of my hungry little comrades would give me a lesson more valuable to me than bread” (155).



of gravity that challenges an immutable destiny as slave and invokes a vision of freedom:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full death itself...It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. (80-81)

This moment also proved to be a radical turn for Douglass's sense of agency in asserting a manhood defined by a resistance to violence. It was a symbolic enactment of speaking back to the proverbial whip. In Douglass's *Narrative* this response to Mr. Covey was a rhetorical move for his white abolitionist readers that intended to fragment the sovereign abstract control of systematic slavery that controlled black bodies. Douglass's "turning point" works as an important rhetorical moment in the becoming of black manhood - a manhood that pushes the epistemological boundaries of gender as solely a white construct in slave societies. Being that Douglass was born into bondage, his definition of manhood was based on a cultural and patriarchal notion of autonomy and self-sufficiency, one that he learned through observing the cultural practices of free white men. This definition developed through what Douglass defines as "knowledge acquired by stealth" suggests that he acquired a cultural literacy of manhood and masculinity, of how men defined themselves through initiative acts of self-preservation and human progression, through learning literacy secretly. The dialogue that he participates in with "play fellows" and in reading the *Columbian Orator* gives him a language to speak to his oppression. Upon earning enough money to buy his first schoolbook, the *Columbian Orator*, he finds vindication in the texts:

These were all choice documents to me, and I read them, over and over again, with an interest that was ever increasing, because it was ever gaining in intelligence; for the more I read them, the better I understood them. The reading of these speeches added much to my limited stock of language, and enabled me to give tongue to many interesting thoughts which had frequently flashed through my soul, and died away for want of utterance...I got a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression, and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man. (158)

Here Douglass, in speaking of “the rights of man” iterates himself and other black male slaves in a white, gendered discourse and complicates what a man who is owed the right of freedom looks like. In this passage, language acquisition is linked to the ability to resurrect and articulate resistance to colonial power. Douglass’s position as black and as one who defines manhood from a slave’s experience signifies an ontological undoing of normative cultural truths of what defined male identity in a patriarchal slave society. For Douglass his sense of manhood is tied to freedom, and this threatened the colonial sovereign control over his psychic condition as slave. His relationship with Mrs. Covey, a woman who teaches him his A,B,Cs then renounces his further attempts at literacy, was effected by Douglass’s enlightened state, once he realizes that “knowledge unfits a child to be a slave” (146),

...*Nature* had made us friends; slavery made us *enemies*. My interests were in a direction opposite to hers, and we both had our private thoughts and plans. She aimed to keep me ignorant; and I resolved to know, although knowledge only increased my discontent...Once awakened by the silver trump of knowledge, my spirit was roused to eternal wakefulness. Liberty! The inestimable birth-right of every man, had, for me, converted every object into an asserter of this great right. (160,161)

Douglass’s heightened consciousness conjures a sense of masculine identity that greatly effects how he sees himself thereafter as one more deserving of just good clothing and ample food, but liberty, and economic independence as an inalienable

right of black men. Bosenberg points to the work of Frederick Douglass's narrative to understand how male slaves might have thought about the relationship between a sense of affirmed manhood and social autonomy in the afterlife of slavery.

Douglass's first employment as a free man occurs on his third day in New Bedford, New York, an integrated city where "the black man's children... went to school side by side with the white children" (347). Douglass describes his new employment as,

...hard, and dirty work, even for a calker, but I went at it with a glad heart and a willing hand. I was now my own master – a tremendous fact – and the rapturous excitement with which I seized the job, may not easily be understood, except by some one with an experience like mine. The thoughts – "I can work! I can work for a living; I am not afraid to work; I have no Master Hugh to rob me of my earnings" – placed me in a state of independence, beyond seeking friendship or support of any man. (349)

Bosenberg asserts that "physical power, literacy, and the capacity to earn money form the triad of Douglass's freedom" (120). She further links Douglass's path from "a slave to a man" to his first wage labor job as an ex slave in which he finally sees himself as "his own master," who makes and keeps his own earnings for the benefit of himself and his newly married wife. Having such an opportunity, to be a wage laborer who supports a living for a family, and to be a fully functional citizen and worker in an economy as a black male, was rhetorically significant for the image of a black free male. Rhetorically it challenged the existing iconography of black identity ideologically connected to slavery. It demonstrates an opportunity for inclusion that Douglass would later fight for in the face of racial separation. Davis asserts that Douglass was resistant to any idea of black folks leaving the land that they had built

and tilled under the brutal control of slave masters (52). Later as a leading abolitionist he would state that,

I expect to see the colored people of this country enjoying the same freedom, voting at the same ballot-box,...going to the same schools, attending the same churches, traveling the same street cars, in the same railroads cars,...proud of the same country, fighting the same foe, and enjoying the same peace, and all its advantages. (Cone 6)

Douglass's ambition to assimilate into a culture of freedom begins at the level of language practices and progresses into the realm of social interaction with dominant culture. Participating in common culture through language practices affirmed his identity as more than just a slave. It meant that Douglass would be able to understand the architecture of colonial discourses and would be given the gift of knowledge that power was designated to black slaves who knew how to challenge or disrupt the hegemony of slavery. Therefore, whites as demonstrated by his master, saw black literacy as detestable. Douglass's rhetorical deconstruction of colonial discourse is through a African American perspective that articulates the psychic conditioning of the slave through denied literacy that keeps them in bondage. This African American perspective is defined in his ability to use English to write a black male perspective of slavery that challenges the traditional trope of black bodies as tools in white racist discourse. Through narrative discourse he sheds light on the inhumanity of white slave owners who, through their subscription of white supremacy, ironically justify their violent control over black bodies in part by designating them as inhumane. His ability to write allows him to descriptively recount moments as a young slave bearing witness to the barbarity of slavery. He embeds English words with the experience

and expression of pained black bodies. This can be seen in his ability to articulate the experience of watching family members beaten severely by whips,

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest...I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant...It struck me with an awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. (23)

Douglass not only embeds English with a black experience, through writing he breathes human life back into docile black bodies so that white listeners might see the complete humanity of black corporeality. He demonstrates what stories can do when imbued with the language and experiences of the individual. Rhetorically, Douglass's narrative functions to interrogate an ideology of slavery and fortifies the movement to abolish slavery. But more critically, it admonishes racist whites to see African Americans as human beings. Douglass was aware that the slave economy in America and the white racists who supported them needed black folks to signify in a certain way for systems of privilege to continue. This awareness is exemplified in Douglass's notion that "education [of the slave] and slavery are incompatible with each other" a conclusion he developed in reflection on living with his mistress, Mrs. Auld, who compromised her own integrity through her adamant devotion to preventing him from learning to read (154). One might ask what was at stake for white racist when asked to think about how to look at black bodies differently.

Douglass's descriptive experience of his bludgeoned aunt called for a divestment into the exploitation of black identities and admonished white racists to factor black bodies out of their ways of knowing how to exist in the world. To do this, the humanity of pained black bodies needed to be made visible in order to challenge the continual participation by whites in the oppression of black folks.

African American Literacy as demonstrated in the writings of Douglass is an act of coming to consciousness of the self and its relation and meaning to the world. For Douglass it was about discovering the necessary strategies to interrogate and change those relations and meanings that were the implicative result of how blackness as a trope was viewed in America during the time of slavery. The economy of slavery, white supremacy, and budding abolition movements were rhetorics that determined how slaves such as Douglass communicated how he read and was being read by the world. These rhetorics "refers to the ways that individuals and groups use language to constitute their realities, and as a medium for creating, managing, or resisting ideological meanings" (Cintron ix). The languages of slave economies, racism, and activist movements during slavery are rhetoric's that "provide the frameworks in which individual acts of reading and writing take place (Duffey 42). For Douglass, these rhetorics determined the African American strategies of linguistic appropriation, and black masculine construction through writing – two important black masculine literacy practices of subject formation. Barrett characterizes literacy in African American life as a viable tool for empowering African Americans to be self-defining through individual communicative practices. For black writers such as Douglass, literacy provided

...manifest testimony of the mind's ability to extend itself beyond the constricted limits and conditions of the body. To restrict African Americans to lives without literacy is seemingly to immure them in bodily existences having little or nothing to do with the life of the mind and its representation. Conversely, to enter into literacy is to gain important skills for extending oneself beyond the condition and geography of the body...in terms of the African slave narratives, the body and issues of literacy (and illiteracy) are to some extent indistinguishable (6?).

This description of literacy's function for black males such as Douglass call attention to a process of subject formation that occurred during his emancipation from a slave to a freed man. Douglass's black masculine literacy practices gave him skills that allowed him to think beyond a body that was geographically contained and exploited as a tool for production. If the rhetoric of plantation life symbolized economic production and sovereign control over black male bodies, the enlightened black mind represented the fragmentation of that power. Douglass's realization of this truth happens serendipitously in overhearing his master scold his wife for teaching Douglass the alphabet. Here Douglass happens to overhear his master after being denied the opportunity to learn how to read:

A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning will *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," he said, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain...From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. (47)

Here the symbolic preoccupation with preventing slaves access to education culminates into what the anthropologist Melville Herskovits calls the “deification of accident”, the opportunistic moment of black possibility that Douglass comes to imagine and later seek as he overhears his master’s insistence that “learning will *spoil* the best nigger in the world.” Through the accident of black possibility interpreted in the rhetoric of a slave master’s philosophy Douglass realizes the potential of literacy. This propels him to maximize learning moments and to take advantage of resources that worked pedagogically in his development as a literate individual. The contribution of the white young boys who befriend him, his consistent interaction with *The Columbian Orator*, and his observance of ship carpenters writing the labels of ship parts on pieces of timber demonstrates Douglass’s coming to literacy as intricately tied to everyday life. Interacting with or observing the social habits of literate white folks (most of which were documented as males), gave Douglass opportunities to model community related literacy practices.

Becoming a part of this knowledge making community required active interaction with its members. This was implicated in the rhetorical question Douglass asks the young white friends he converts as teachers, “Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?” (52). As a young black male slave he gradually establishes himself as a participant in a white discourse community by having writing contests with neighborhood friends and writing in the marginal spaces of his young master’s copy-books, and on board fences and community brick walls. His self-given right to literacy demonstrates a “vernacular view of reality,” (Richardson 33) one that signifies upon a worldview that semiotically ties black identity to bondage and



illiteracy. To be black and intellectually deficient was a normalized worldview for whites during the time, and as histories of racism and access have demonstrated, worldviews are hard to change. Yet Douglass's rhetorical savvy with others and his ability to strategically maximize the resources in his community culminates into an ability to effectively will himself to literacy and freedom, and ultimately provided an impetus for the Abolitionist movement.

### **The Black Moses: Rhetorical Appropriation and African American Hermeneutics in the Freedom Struggle of Nat Turner**

I first heard of Nat Turner on a PBS program right around black history month. I remember the interest that conjured in my innermost being when I stumbled upon a story about a band of black males who decided to take their freedom by force – even death. I was at a moment in my life when I was experiencing my own sense of rebellion. Black histories in grade school were grossly abbreviated and I longed for something more – that which would free my mind to think about what black liberation meant beyond the marginal spaces of my history textbook or a commemorative month. It needed to mean something in my own life as well. As a black male who had just transferred to a predominately white high school, Nat Turner was radical to me, even mythical. He represented racist fears and irrational thoughts I myself had harbored when I thought about what it meant to be truly rid of racism in my young age as a black boy. Looking back I now realize the sense of urgency that drove these black male revolutionaries. It was an urgency that echoed in the rhetoric of other black male activists I had known. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and even

Tupac. Nat Turner's rebellion was an exclamated postscript to slavery and systematic racism that power was given by consent and could be taken back by force. He symbolized those who, if denied the right to be affirmed in their humanity, would suffer violence to obtain freedoms taken from them. It was through this understanding that I found myself reflected in Turner's history, and his in mine. I spoke back in my own way through practiced critical thinking and questioning ideological language that narrowed how historical reflections of my black past were portrayed in my reduced history textbooks. Turner's revolution is a predecessor for how black males have used literacy practices to develop their voices and to imagine evolutionary perceptions of black masculinity identities of social action.

Born in South Hampton, Virginia in 1800, Nat Turner from his youth was precocious and uniquely gifted for his age. He had learned to read with such ease that he could not recollect exactly when he picked up the skill. He was a "man of considerable mental ability and wide information" (Drewry 27). At that time, getting an education was much easier than it had been for slaves that preceded Turner and slaves were more exposed to abolition literature (Woodson 163). In spite of legislature in place to sanction the education of slaves, literacy education had become a central part of religious practices when masters believed slaves' heathen minds needed to be saved by God. Thus the indoctrination to religious practices and literacy became inseparable since religious leaders believed that slaves needed to be hearers *and* readers of the God's word (Cornelius 15). Through the instruction of his young master J.C. Turner, Nat's parents and Sunday school attendance at church, Turner's

education shaped him into a trusted, religious man with tremendous leadership ability in his community.

This religious education is often overlooked by many historians, as how the congregating of the black church was a critical space for subject formation for black slaves. Due to the contradictory behavior of many white Christians who professed devotion to Christianity with one mind but performed immoral acts against their slaves with another, most slaves did not see themselves a part of white Christianity (Fountain 98). Nevertheless, the white churches attended by slaves when they went along with their overseers modeled the gender roles of slaves as they established their own religious congregations. Black males, upon gaining access to more scriptures of the bible, assumed preacher roles would preach from the point of view of the oppressed, shaping the religion of their people (Cornelius). Their roles indicated that they owned a patriarchal privilege of access and distribution of knowledge that characterized pastoral leadership in the church. This was designated as men's work. In the South, white Baptist evangelicals sought out black men to train and ordain as religious leaders to eventually take charge of the independent black church after the Civil War (Cornelius 29). Nat Turner was a Baptist preacher whose religious devotion and high intelligence moved him to see beyond the restrictive rhetoric of white religious fundamentalism grounded by hand picked scriptures that attempted to control the minds of slaves. His coming to literacy of religious texts during a time in the South when white Christians believed in the religious education of the slave also earmarks a mythical representation of the rebellious slave that has been critical for the evolving trope of black masculinity in America. Moses reveals that the myth of the

rebellious slave has often proved useful for African Americans in dignifying black violence as a political response to racism (56). In Turner's "Confession" his violent acts are ascribed to the Devine will of God, which implicates his assumptive positionality as black prophet. In recounting one of a series of visions, he speaks of combating white and black spirits and being divinely called to be the culprit of a race war between black slaves and whites,

...and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened – the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams – and I heard a voice saying, 'Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it.'" (291)

We can understand Turner's visions as a nominal space for composing the black self as a leader and initiator for freedom. The prophetic vision as a religious trope enables the slave turned black Moses to exist. Turner's second vision explicitly reveals his appropriation of religious texts by using the metaphor "children of darkness" as a rhetorical strategy to emancipate the slave from an identity of bondage and elevate them one highly favored by God.

"Behold me as I stand in the Heavens" – and I looked and saw the forms of men in different attitudes – and there were lights in the sky to which the children of darkness gave other names than what they really were – for they were the lights of the Savior's hands, stretched forth from east to west, even as they were extended on the cross on Calvary for the redemption of sinners. (292)

As Krodofer states, "this suggests a conflation of the redemptive outreach of Christ on Calvary's cross with the redemption of the enslaved" (86). It also represents a critical interpolation of the slave's identity. Turner not only names the new identity of

slaves as “lights of the Savior’s hands”, he along with his band of liberators would embody this characterization through actions of self-liberation. They became the “yoke” that the Savior would lay down for “the sins of men” (292). Understanding the biblical meaning of the texts, it’s cultural and rhetorical contexts, enables Turner to inflect the meanings of prophetic discourse in Christian texts. Black inflection becomes a rhetorical strategy of self-actualization<sup>7</sup> and ultimately plays an intricate role in self-formation.

Interactions with both white male evangelicals teaching religious literacy enabled the shaping of a new masculine identity, as black slaves in leadership positions would explore and appropriate Christian doctrine to gain a heightened consciousness of themselves and their conditions. Nat Turner’s short rebellious stint demonstrates a black patriarchal leadership enacted to overthrow colonial power. His masculine identity was shaped by the access to literacy and based on a biblical model of human salvation that is championed by the male figure Jesus. The masculinized undertones of violence as a means to salvation exemplified throughout the Christian bible coupled with modeled masculinities in Turner’s life are important contributing factors in his subject formation as a literate black male. Both cultural and alphabetic literacy shape his interpretations of biblical texts and his role as freedom fighter.

While in jail he recalls a vision regarding his destiny that speaks to this:

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<sup>7</sup> I draw on Abraham Maslow’s *A Theory of Human Motivation* to define self-actualization as one who realizes their full potential. Nat Turner’s vision lends itself to be interpreted as a critical moment when he realizes his destiny as the leader of a rebellion against slave owners and others white community members who endorse the slave’s condition. This destiny is revealed to him through a continuation of visions and how they are later understood to him through interpretations revealed by God.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, 1828, I heard a loud voice in the heavens and the spirit instantly appeared to me and said the serpent was loosed and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the serpent, for the time was fast coming when the first should be last and the last should be first (33)

Turner's prophetic account is another inflected interpretation that acknowledges a parable of Jesus. Its apocalyptic undertones reference the written scriptures of John in the book of Revelations. Here we see an example of scripture being interpreted through a slave hermeneutics that intersect rebellion and religion through a black perspective. Turner embeds these scriptures with cultural and contextual meaning and through their application to his immediate condition as slave informs his ability to make the transition from a slave to a community-organizing liberator<sup>8</sup>. Turner's sense of obligation to a call for freedom is rooted in his religious principals, but it is fundamentally tied to his ability to inflect words, metaphors, and meanings to conceptualize a plan for the freedom of slaves. Through the apprehension of literacy, Turner is given tools to rhetorically appropriate texts and their meanings in a way that enables him to unlearn a colonial mindset shaped by a lived life in bondage. Once he discovers his "greatness...perfected by Divine

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<sup>8</sup> Drewry states that Turner "often did the planning for negroes on plundering expeditions, as they trusted his superior generalship and ability" (28). Turner's leadership qualities influenced the participation of his confidants, Henry Porter, Hark Travis, Nelson Williams, and Sam Francis in the planning and execution of the insurrection (33). As a Baptist preacher one could imagine that Turner also had exceptional oratory skills and was seen as a community leader among black slaves. He implicates this in his ability to influence other servants: "Knowing the influence I had obtained over the minds of my fellow servants, (not by the means of conjuring and such like tricks – for to them I always spoke of such things with contempt) but by the communion of the Spirit whose revelations I often communicated to them, and they believed and said my wisdom came from God" (291).

inspiration” he implicates himself in the narrative tradition of the biblical prophets who dialogued with “the Spirit” and received revelations. When Turner receives similar revelations, “which fully confirmed [him] in the impression [he too] was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty”, he begins to reinterpret and construct a black self with the slave experience. It is here where an emergent grammar of rebellious black masculinity is actualized.

Turner’s interaction with biblical texts and conversion experience however, does not mean that developing a sense of identity is a byproduct of becoming literate. Neither does it mean that a slave’s ability to rationalize was made possible by Christian salvation, or learning to read and write English words. To make such a claim would imply that illiterate slaves did not have the propensity or wherewithal to be just as aware of the pain of the whip as slaves who could read and think fluently in English. Nat Turner uses his ability to read and think critically to interrogate the boundaries of meaning in religious rhetoric. He implicates himself in a religious discourse through redefining what salvation means for the current situation of the slave<sup>9</sup> and in asserting that “the first should be last and the last should be first”, invokes a cultural history of slavery in America and tells an alternative, prophetic story that charts a future path out of bondage for the slave.

### **The Function of Acculturation: Oluadah Equiano and a Grammar of Self-Made Black Male Subjectivity**

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<sup>9</sup> Speak on the role that salvation meant in the minds of slave owners for their slaves

Olaudah Equiano lived in two worlds, black and white, separate and unequal. He had an acute recognition of the affordances of white privilege and used learned literacies of European culture and seamanship to forge his freedom. Equiano was born in 1745 in Nigeria, where he would be eventually enslaved at the age of eleven and sold to English slave traders, who took him to the Middle Passage to the West Indies (Carretta xi). According to his autobiography, Equiano saved enough money to buy his own freedom in 1766. His willed freedom epitomized a definition of self-made manhood that established his legacy as a black storyteller. In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* the detailed recounting of his African heritage is the impetus that allows readers to understand the social and psychic transformation that Equiano undergoes. It crystallizes his subject formation from African to Anglo African to freeman as an effect of literacy, Eurocentric ambitions of male success, and cultural assimilation.

Douglass and Equiano both demonstrate in their narrative accounts the attainment of freedom using the “master’s tools,” which Zafar defines as the ability to select aspects of the dominating white culture for [their] own ends” (93). But Equiano’s personal encounters and experiences aboard slave ships and in various countries make him more cosmopolitan in European sensibility. Carretta states that “One of the opportunities the navy offered Equiano...was education, both formal and experiential...almost every experience, no matter how dangerous or disheartening, was an opportunity for learning” (77). Like Douglass, he sees opportunity in the moments of interaction with those who come into his life by chance, such as boat crewmembers and the Brits during his first trip to London who take interest in



teaching him the literacies of their culture. Equiano's desire to learn grew as he became more immersed as a crewmember on ships. Richard Baker, a Native American crewmember, becomes a teacher and interpreter for Equiano. His developing friendship with Dick provides opportunities for Equiano to learn, "for I could make free with him, and he always instructed me with pleasure" (63). Dick becomes a model of literacy as Equiano observes him reading and attempts to emulate this practice while aboard the ship:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (64)

For Equiano a construction of his identity through literacy acquisition and learned patterns of male behavior is gauged by a racial experience of learning to see himself as inferior to, and at critical moments of acculturation, likened to whites and those who are free, to be sure. But this inferiority complex becomes the catalyst for his ambition towards self-improvement from his slave condition. In time, Equiano learns to adapt as a student of culture as "[his] surprise begins to diminish as [his] knowledge increases" (65). His immersion into British culture is a notal moment of acculturation when he reaches London and by then knows English well enough to participate in discourse with whites:

I could now speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly understood everything that was said. I not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger

desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners. I therefore embraced every occasion for improvement, and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory (72).

Equiano's gradual fluency in speaking English affords him opportunities to be more socially mobile in dominant British culture as he learns Victorian values of self-propriety from Miss Guerin who, upon his baptism into the Christian faith, becomes his godmother. After his baptism, Equiano is given Thomas Wilson's *An Essay towards an Instruction for the Indians*, a book that authorizes Equiano's access to literacy (Carretta 81). Learning to read underscored his ambition to become more culturally integrated as a participant member of a mercantile culture – a culture in which his membership was that of a well-treated slave, but a slave nonetheless.

Equiano's developing literacy cultivated the desire to be a free man and able to financially support his own education, "I thought now of nothing but being freed, and working for myself, and thereby getting money to enable me to get a good education". Also, while aboard the *Aetna* as a steward, the captain's clerk taught him how to write "and gave [him] a smattering of arithmetic, as far as the rule of three" (Equiano 83). Carretta states that Equiano's years at sea "had given him a new sense of family and rendered him literate, acculturated to English society, and trained to make a living as a domestic servant, a hairdresser, or a professional seaman" (82). Equiano signifies what Falicity Nussbaum defines as a transculturated identity that shapes from being "in between geographical places and available identities" (97). This state of betweenness, of retaining a native identity while adapting to a slave reality, creates a double-consciousness, where Equiano looks at himself "through the eyes of the other" while attempting to merge multiple identities as slave and Anglo

African. Richardson acknowledges that this allows Equiano to perform a “double-voiced literacy practice...to express alternative or vernacular views of reality” (40). For example, offering the dismissal of his narrative accounts by his readers in his final words of *The Narrative* demonstrates awareness of the dominant cultural views of Africans as incompetent or arrogant for “talking too much”:

I have only therefore to request the reader’s indulgence and conclude. I am far from the vanity of thinking there is any merit in this narrative: I hope censure will be suspended, when it is considered that it was written by one who was as unwilling as unable to adorn the plainness of truth by the coloring of imagination. (195)

His decision to speak from personal experiences sustains his ethos as a humbled messenger who speaks about the effects of slavery on his life and others. This strategically allows him to demonstrate with acuity his knowledge of the barbarity of slavery and the redemptive potential he finds in religion. His education in Christianity ultimately gives him an opportunity to critique white imperialism and implicitly argue, through narration, for an alternative way of looking at black slaves in America. In recalling a particular experience in the vessel in which he was brought over from his native land, he recounts slave brothers who were sold in different lots. He appeals to those self-proclaimed Christians who bought slaves to hold themselves accountable to their Christian moral codes of “doing unto others and you would have them do unto you”:

O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you – Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends, to toil for your luxury and lust of gain?...Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely, this is a new

refinement of cruelty, which, it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery. (58)

Again, Equiano demonstrates a black rhetorical skill of double voice by employing a Christian discourse to spotlight the inhumanity of slavery. Appealing to a Christian ethics and family values of solidarity allows him to implicate the humanity of the slave. English metaphors of parenting, child rearing, siblinghood and marriage are expanded to include the slave. Equiano's social awareness of the culture of his readers is a result of his intense observation of the things around him, "I had a mind on which everything uncommon made its full impression" (78). Thus his cultural literacy of the social life of his readers was used to appeal to deeply held values of religion and morality – values that he himself would embrace in his subject formation as Anglo-African.

Equiano's endearing relationship with his first master Captain Pascal and later interactions with boat crew members such as the young Native American help to make more realistic an emergent identity as human and allows Equiano to imagine a subjectivity as an independent, self-learning individual. His close relations that subsequent with the young native Richard Baker, his friend Daniel Queen and Captain James Doran "suggest an intense male bonding which either ignores color or covets adoption by a male authority". In these interactions with other men Equiano learns and appropriates Eurocentric notions of manhood and mercantilism that encourage autonomy and self-making. It is the effect of "his adoption of...individualist attitudes current in Eurocentric countries" that strengthens his

ambition to be seen as a “full citizen, when the proper color of a citizen was unquestionably white” (Nussbaum 58, Nussbaum 199).

Yet, Equiano also shows pride in his Ethiopian heritage in labeling his native people as “warriors” and “descendents of Abraham”. As he becomes acculturated by British ideologies and language, and socialized in the discourse of Eurocentric masculinity on naval ships, he becomes Anglo by practice. Nevertheless, he retains an ethnic consciousness. This makes Equiano a model of nascent black masculine identity – one that is neither fully British nor fully African – that signifies upon an economy of imperialism that produces black males as non-subjects and deifies white masculinity as an absolute metaphor of economic power. His cultural fluency in religion, propriety, seamanship, coupled with his astute handle of English language makes his masculinity semantically slippery. European masculinity becomes rearticulated within the literacy autobiography of a male slave’s journey from chattel property to black self-made manhood. This signification upon Eurocentric masculinity extends the boundaries of the English language to articulate an alternative reality of masculinity, one that is “constructed sociolinguistically”. In defining this term, Smitherman describes the possible lives that are “filtered, apprehended, encoded, codified, and conveyed via some linguistic shape” that distinctively designates the racial and cultural significances of these realities (43). Equiano’s conversion experience earmarks a black male tradition of subject formation through participating in mainstream discourses shaped by “White American languages of commerce” (Richardson 32).

As Equiano becomes gradually immersed in British culture, his adopted English worldviews become symbolic of his belief in their superiority. His acculturation to British economic principles and “manners” of society was underscored by his conversion to Christianity. His willing embrace of Christianity both implicates an ethnic as well as a spiritual evolution into Anglican identity, “Now the Ethiopian was willing to be saved by Jesus Christ” (160). Equiano’s conversion narrative connects the sacred (religious) and the secular (literacy). His most documented moments of literacy in his *Narrative* are when he is engaged in reading Christian-themed texts<sup>10</sup> or engaging with Brits teaching him good manners and taste. The connection between church and politics that informed the British government implied that a criterion for upholding Christian principles was believing in the divine ruling by the Queen. Equiano’s devotion to Christianity was extended to the culture and government by which his religion thrived. Thus the value of literacy for Equiano was intricately tied to a desired citizenship through duty, religion, and faith in government. Upon returning from Africa as an appointed commissary of the British government, in a letter Equiano demonstrates not only his allegiance to the “gracious Queen” who bestows blessings and resources to the “wretched Africans”, but also his fluency in the formal language royal address.

I presume, therefore, gracious Queen, to implore your interposition with your royal consort, in favor of the wretched Africans; that, by your Majesty’s benevolent influence, a period may now be put to their misery – and that they may be raised from the condition of brutes, to which they are at present

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<sup>10</sup> After Equiano is baptized, Miss Guerins gives him a book called *A Guide to the Indians* written by Bishop of Sodor and Man. Later, in his quest to obtain salvation he is given *The Conversion of the Indian*, a pocket bible, and Allein’s *Alarm to the Unconverted*.

degraded...And may the all-bountiful Creator shower on your Majesty, and the Royal Family, every blessing that this world can afford, and every fullness of joy which divine revelation has promised us in the next. (192)

In Equiano's address to the Queen, the adoption of English discourse and culture further connotes the cultivation of a British consciousness. Perhaps for Equiano a complete immersion into colonial culture and language psychically registers as a way towards being more fully free, in every sense of the word. The desire and belief that he might attain an identity as something other than a slave is exemplified through his self-identification as "almost an Englishman" (71). A self-realization of his humanity is credited to his mercantilism learned on the ships while interacting with so called benevolent white masters. Houston A. Baker credits Equiano's "adept mercantilism" for making his condition better as a slave (38). Learning the commodity culture of "seamanship" mercantilism enables Equiano to learn Eurocentric traits of manhood: self-sufficiency, independence, leadership, and entitlement.

The application of these traits and employment of his skill sets enable him to strategize a plan to buy his freedom. Equiano uses the literacies that drive a slave economy and other early colonial commerce to construct and translate a culturally fluent, black self. He strategically uses a slave ethos of humility and servility to signify upon imperialist ideologies defining slave identities and black possibility. Ultimately, he wills himself into self-made manhood by challenging linguistic boundaries of what it means to be black and male. Thus, through appropriation of British cultural codes, a construction of black male selfhood is ciphered through the black perspective. This black perspective for Equiano is shaped by the semiotics of material conditions of slavery (Baker 3). Equiano demonstrates how language

becomes a tool black males use to construct masculinities. He demonstrates that cultural immersion does not always mean a forfeiture of identity, but can be an opportunity to challenge hegemonic holds on black male subjectivity.

I remember my transfer out of an elite white middle school into an urban all black institution on the south side. I was called an oreo (black on the outside but white inside) for “talking white”. Many assumed I was from the white suburbs, of which I was. But my roots were black, and I grew up watching my pops dance to the Funkadelics. And we ate cornbread, fried fish and collard greens on Sundays. True, we lived in the vanilla suburbs and my privileged education had given me access to language and particular cultural sensibilities that were seen as peculiar in the hood. My cultural and academic experiences allowed me to construct a black self that was fluid and malleable without compromising the symbolic integrity of the black perspective. In fact, within the black perspective existed a space of self-preservation, one that gave me access to an exterior world of language and culture.

These relationships between language, identity, and experience demonstrate how we might acknowledge and understand the continuity of the black perspective as a historical rhetorical strategy of black male subject formation. The “conversion narratives” of Douglass, Turner, and Equiano speak to a tradition of black male selfhood predicated on an adoption/acculturation paradigm of language acquisition not only as a means to freedom but as an apparatus for the formation of black male subjectivity. The slave narrative as genre has the rhetorical power of reflection which insists that its readers look back as a way to looking forward in thinking about black masculine literacy practices. Appropriating Eurocentric masculinities, selective



acculturation, and African American language practices of rearticulated black manhood become the calling cards of historical masculine literacies.

African American literacy practices push symbolic and textual boundaries of black male representation and consciousness and stake claim in a traditional of freedom struggle over the right to represent and be represented subjectively. For black men who have searched for personal freedom, the history changes but story often remains the same. As black males have learned to express themselves through letters the use of the African American rhetoric has evolved stylistically while remaining an intricate part of a rich black oral tradition. Over time black males have become fluent in the art of expression, creating public spaces to construct their own identities in unprecedented and often controversial ways. In the following chapter I will explore how we might understand the continuity of appropriation as a way of challenging the colonial narrative of absolute power over black male bodies and black agency. The burgeoning culture of hip-hop, specifically gangsta rap makes the practice of imagination a critical staple in a storytelling tradition of black male subject formation. This imagination functions as production in the construction of the urban black male as invincible underdog, rhetorical genius, and impenetrable. Chapter three examines how the urban black male uses language in the public space of popular culture in ways that ask us to acknowledge noetic relations between language and material culture and the mind and the body.

**“Distortion to Static”: Black Rhetorical Invention and Manifest Literacy in Rap  
Discourse  
Chapter 3**

Hip hop earmarks a worldview of marginalized youth culture who find their voices and identities in the spaces of spoken words, dramatic interpretations, and visual culture. Disenfranchised black and brown youth cultures have used hip-hop as a space to react and respond to their lived realities. But more than that, hip hoppers have demonstrated the language of poverty, urban pathology, and hopeful possibility in many creative forms. Initially a response to postindustrialism in the South Bronx, which brought gentrification projects to black ghettos during the Reagan-Bush era, hip hop came into existence through the utterances of disenchanted urban youth (Rose 33). These efforts of activism invented the metaphors and narrated stories that championed a new way that black males from poor black communities theorized and made sense of their realities. Through rap, black males have created their own black public discourse, one that entails poetic lyrics that can be political in sentiment, promotional of black self-love, or sexist, homophobic and celebratory of drug economies and violence. No doubt, hip hop has its identity issues; yet, identity has long been an issue for how black men have understood and worked to validate their place in America. Hip hop has been and is a domain for such self-discovery and creative self-making. It is a space where we might understand how the production and performance of black masculine literacy functions in the mainstream.

As a discursive space, hip hop is a social laboratory for black masculine construction that draws on oral traditions, creative remixing, and embodied performances that work as collective voice in articulating a black experience. This space is largely shaped by African American rhetorical practices that characterize “the collective consciousness and expression of Black African decent” (Richardson

1). Therefore, rap music is an extension of the rhetorical tradition and has represented a viable space of invention for black male subject formation through African American literacy practices. While self making took on the connotation of existing outside of the slave/master binary in the narrative traditions of Douglas, Turner, and Equiano, gangsta rappers function within another dialectical space that involves primarily other black men. Thus the stakes of masculinity and black male subject formation are predicated on a self-regulatory discourse of rappers who, for the purposes of this chapter, are young black men from the inner city. This chapter seeks to explore how black males in hip-hop have used multiple communicative practices to construct the black self. My goal is to spotlight how black males are engaging in multiple literacy practices in public spaces that construct representations and performances of black masculinity. I further explore how these practices might reveal the substance and reasons that black males in popular culture practice literacy in particular ways and across multiple rhetorical situations.

Walter Ong's influential work *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* challenges the "divide" between orality and literacy. He argues that orality cannot be separated from literacy (14). The New Literacy Studies (NLS) movement furthers Ong's progressive notion by promoting literacy broadly as ideological and socially constructed. For example, James Gee's argument that literacy, even as traditionally conceived to involve only print, is never a unitary thing, but a "multiple matter" implicates the values, norms of behavior, and ideologies that one must be knowledgeable of in order to participate effectively as a communicator in a discourse (14). Multidimodal literacy furthers Gee's progressive notion within this (NLS)

paradigm that speaks to the various dimensions of literacy, such as the visual and nonverbal elements of black communicative practices we find in hip hop. The urban black male narrative as a domain in hip hop relies on multiple apparatus for making meaning and constructing the black masculine self. In hip hop this narrative exists in a discursive space that “extends language practices beyond syntax, phonology, and vocabulary, etc. into (deep-level) speech acts, nonverbal behavior, and cultural production” (Richardson 4). This domain is important for understanding the lived literacies in urban black culture because it allows language practices to be read as discourse and ultimately as performances of black masculinity.

Elaine Richardson’s conceptual framework for analyzing African American English (AAE) and African American music (AAM) as both “part and parcel” of African American discourse (AAD) is useful in this chapter in understanding how black male subjectivity is tied to a domain of values, language practices, visual culture, and gendered readings of the world (4). Important also is James Gee’s definition of literacy as being multimodal, where language and image work both individually and together to generate multiple meanings that are connected to social practices (Gee 14,15). In order to explore how black males in hip hop are defining and determining a conception of literacy based on their rhetorical situations, I spotlight specific practices that inform a definition of black manhood. I use Richardson’s analytical strategy of reading African American language as discourse in order to fully understand how urban black males who dialogue with each other and tell stories about being from underprivileged areas through rap are outlining black masculine literacy practices by inventing multiple ways of communicating that

expand beyond the scope of language at the level of syntax or phonology. The relationship between masculinity, race, and literacy is an understudied topic, one that is explored minimally in the field of education (Tatum, Kirkland and Jackson, Maynard, Smith & Wilhelm). Alfred Tatum's defines black male literacy by the ability to navigate the everyday circumstances of being black and male while learning various knowledge making strategies for social and economic success. I build on this definition by spotlighting the literacy practices of young black males within popular culture who use multimodal strategies to define their masculinities in a highly visible discourse. Popular texts (aural, written, and visual) should be studied as rigorous and relevant pieces (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 293) that matter in the everyday lives of young males who are learning how to navigate various discourses and make meaning using textual, oral, and embodied practices. This chapter spotlights how black public culture informs how black males formulate a conception of literacy through rapping, artifacts, and cool posing.

This chapter first looks at strategies for black invention through the dialogic exchange of *beef*, a knowledge making practice that shapes a discursive space for black male interaction and subject formation. The disavowal for black life in *beef* discourse implicates black bodies as a material source for knowledge making strategies in black rhetoric, while creating a generative space in the context of gangsta rap for identity performance. Next, I demonstrate how the construction of black masculinity in gangsta rap is influenced by a death rhetoric that is used as heuristic to construct gendered language practices and embodied performances of masculinity. These masculine performances centralize the black body as an urban artifact of

complex, multilayered meanings, ones that are channeled in public spaces of representation. I further demonstrate how the black body is an important site for “self-authoring” and gives insight into how black males extend conceptions of African American literacy practices through nonverbal practices of black masculinity. I hope to demonstrate that language as symbolic action, through linguistic, rhetorical performances rooted in black discourse, constructs black masculine identity in hip hop culture and more generally urban youth culture. I investigate hip-hop as a self-contained, aural text of “stylistic continuities”, as “multilayered events in particular contexts of consumption and production” (Dimitriadis 16). But I also engage it as an embodied discourse of experiences, symbols, complexities, and controversies that become calling cards of urban black male identity expressed in a multitude of mediums within the domain of hip hop. To be clear, I recognize the complexities and controversies in gangsta rap music. This chapter is by no means an encomium of the controversial celebrations of violence, drug economies, homophobia and sexism that pervades and often symbolizes popular culture generally and gangsta rap music specifically. As Duncan-Andrade and Morrell assert, the complexities between popular culture and today’s young generation is too complex to advocate wholeheartedly for popular culture’s celebration *or* denigration. Nevertheless, I “also understand that the relationship is too far-reaching in depth and scope to ignore” (288). Therefore, this chapter recognizes the verbal and nonverbal language practices that represent an art form of black rhetoric to better understand holistically the range of communicative practices that comes to characterize a public contemporary language movement by black males.

## **“Do You Know What Beef Is?” Molotov Cocktail Polemics and the Epistemology of Beef in Gangsta Rap**

What's beef? Beef is when you make your enemies start your Jeep  
Beef is when you roll no less than thirty deep  
Beef is when I see you  
Guaranteed to be in I.C.U, check it (*Life After Death* The Notorious B.I.G)

As I write about the legacy of controversy surrounding hip hop music, specifically gangsta rap, I'm reminded of when I had to hide my very first gangsta rap album that I had borrowed from a school friend. I'd tuck Spice 1's controversial album *187 He Wrote* under my bed and pull it out to play on my jambox, with the volume low in the speakers for fear that my parents would hear it and take it from me, never to be able to hear again. Most if not all of the lyrics on this album were protruding with innuendos of violence and death, featuring those curse words that I secretly found liberation in reciting as a young, moderately tempered boy. "I'm the fuckin' murderer!" - I would rhyme in unison and on cue with the chorus of one CD track within the confines of my bedroom. Spice 1's lyrics were packed with a raw delivery that assuaged my internal desire to be a gangsta, as much as it was possible, within the confines of my black and Christian suburban home. Reciting the violent lyrics of "The Murder Show," I, a black, middle classed suburbanite, was always trying to invent an identity that, in the moment, connected psychically with the braggadocio of gangsta culture – street life. As a rhetorician, I now read these childhood experiences and Spice 1's lyrics with a critical and curious understanding for how they demonstrated the ability to reach me on that psychic level. Although I never possessed the wherewithal to bust a cap in someone's ass or "dump a nigga in a

ditch,” as Spice 1 would say, I ponder on how gangsta rappers such as he and his contemporaries use their symbiotic relationship with an urban space and to invent the self as a particular kind of strong black man that black male youth either aspire to be or portray.

Much has been written about invention as an important and viable canon of rhetoric, but from a very specific cultural location that is typically located in Eurocentric epistemologies. The debated controversy has centered on the Platonic notion that knowledge and science come from within the rhetor and thus furnishes the materials that form the body and substance of any valuable composition (Blair 32). As has been thoroughly argued, this theory narrows who can hold the “subject position of rhetor, and thus who can engage in rhetoric and hence in invention” (Lauer 45). Aristotle’s notion that knowledge exists “out there” to be discovered by the individual contested this argument and demonstrated that knowledge was located in communities (Clark 75). Karen LeFevre furthers this notion by taking a sophistic stance in *Invention as a Social Act*, by stating that the individual and the social are “dialectically connected, always codefining and interdependent,” thus making invention a socially epistemic enterprise (34-35). The notion that invention relies on a symbiotic relationship between the individual and culture is useful for introducing the relevancy of African American epistemologies regarding invention in rhetorical studies. More specifically, unpacking how black male urban youth invent discursive systems and strategies of rhetorical practice for their own purposes situates hip-hop discourse as a central knowledge making space where specific language practices become a marker of black male identity. We might understand the rules for how



rappers invent their identities through language use as a cultural literacy practice of how one participates within the discourse of rap culture.

Invention in rap discourse occurs through black rhetorical practices of toasting, defining, verbal jousting, recognizin', semantic inversion, representin', and playing the dozens. The epistemology of black male identity in hip hop involves the (re)clamation and (re)articulation of the black masculine self through language, image, and sounds. Therefore, the invention of rap discourse involves the making of an urban black male subjectivity predicated on visibility and the African American perspective. Hip hop popular culture, particularly gangsta rap, demonstrates the innovative black rhetoric by black males who have historically possessed very little abstract power. It also stands in as a generative space where "aggressive manifestations of identity" and "arrogant pride" are essential weapons against racist negativity (George 50-51). In the discursive move from the margins to the center in American public discourse in hip hop, the body becomes a site of power and works synergistically with black language practices to rhetorically construct urban black masculinities. Andre Lepecki asserts that embodied black performances in hip hop aesthetic culture "are constructed like verbal games of rhetoric such as toasting and signifying, which simultaneously celebrate and criticize" (65). For example, the interethnic identity appropriation practices of Jay -Z and Biggie Smalls's Italian gangster aesthetic and the strategic voyeuristic display of muscularity by 50 Cents and Lil Wayne demonstrate their acute self-awareness of the political anatomy of their bodies. In unison with black language practices historically appropriated from

European American English, rappers materialize the semantic inversion of the Mafioso gangster through the aesthetic performance of the gangsta.

Semantic inversion, or *flippin' the script*, is a common practice in African American rhetoric, where the semantic structure of European American language is manipulated to either reverse meanings or create an entirely different meaning (Smitherman 279)<sup>11</sup>. Black male rappers have taken *flippin' the script* a step further in their embodied practices of gangsta life. The use of “gangsta” in hip-hop represents a black semantic turn from the symbolic and historical meaning of the Italian gangster. It has become embedded with black experiences and rhetorical practices. Through nonverbal and linguistic performances, the gangsta functions as a trope of social deviancy and power, and embodies confident, urban masculine identity. Rappers have learned to appropriate the historic and controversial representations that come with their bodies by using the complex, multidimensional symbolic image of black masculinity in America as an invention strategy for knowledge making in gangsta discourse. This becomes evident in their lyrical and visual performances through rap music. Through these performances, invention strategies for self-making are not always driven merely by a will to discovering truths, or the will to knowledge as is the common definitive purpose in the Greek classical tradition. The demonstrative lyrics and images that embody rap texts are also characterized by the ambition to be visible and self-defining in public spaces. These

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<sup>11</sup> Keith Gilyard also offers a valuable definition of the phrase that suggest resisting “counterproductive language arts instruction” in *Let's Flip the Script: An African American Discourse on Language, Literature, and Learning*. *Flippin' the script* can also be seen as a way of, through shifting meanings of phrases, shifting discourses as well.

are two vital qualities that have defined the legacy of African American rhetorical practices.

One place that black invention happens is in what I call *beef* discourse. *Beef* in hip-hop can be defined as having a grudge with another rapper, an ongoing vendetta in which rap becomes the mediating method of verbal exchange. *Beef* transpires in a “rap-sodic competitiveness” when defending one’s authenticity or if one is challenged for being disloyal (Pittman 42). Black males taking verbal shots at each other becomes the calling card of hypermasculine posturing that is invoked at the moment when one’s social standing or street credibility is questioned. *Beef* also crystallizes the rhetorical choices that black males are making in demonstrating how to they manage control over the discourse of *beef* by maintaining their adversarial positions. The participation in *beef* can be likened to the Burkian metaphorical parlor<sup>12</sup>, defined by an unending and highly charged discussion amongst participants about a subject. When new emcees arrive or emerge as formidable lyricist, they often enter into the “interminable” discourse (111) kept alive by a legacy of male rappers who make their claim as the greatest emcee. As incoming rappers situate themselves in the discourse they learn and revise the rhetorical art form of verbal jousting with

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Burke’s parlor metaphor is defined as such: “Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress” (110-111).

other rappers (beefing) through appropriating modeled performances of those pioneering rappers who have preceded them<sup>13</sup>. This becomes a literacy strategy in that participating rappers are learning the discourse of a sub genre in the art of rap. What is learned in this sub genre is the ability to call and respond and the rules for how one uses language to manage and maintain their social position.

In *beef* discourse, the invention of identity is initiated by the creator of the verbal call to joust and completed by the intended audience upon their reception and interpretation of what is being said. LeFevre states that invention as a happening manifest through a continuum of interactions between the individual and a social collective (49). Thus, the sustainability of the inventive process is predicated on the dialogic relationship between the creator, the antagonist, and the larger peripheral audience<sup>14</sup>. This connection dispels an autonomy implied in much gangsta rap discourse. Even as one attempts to sustain a distance from *playa* haters<sup>15</sup>, rappers need haters in order to invent. Curtis (50 Cent) Jackson articulates this needed

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<sup>13</sup> KRS-1 created the first classic diss (dissing) rap song “The Bridge is Over” in 1987 that was aimed at MC Shan and Marley Marl’s rap track “The Bridge”. It characterized what would be called “The Bridge Wars” between these two rappers. This historical event in hip hop became the blueprint for how rappers who followed would handle *beef* with other rappers through lyrical art form. It also demonstrated how black males could use language in a public forum to, through braggadocio and toasting, construct their masculinities.

<sup>14</sup> This peripheral audience can consist of the media and fans that circulate the issues surrounding *beef* between two rap artists. *Beef* becomes maintained through a recursive process of information circulated between the rapper with *beef*, the media, and fans or listeners of hip hop.

<sup>15</sup> Geneva Smitherman defines the “*playa*” as a “person who is in control of his life, things, events, who is “large and in charge” (40). A *playa* hater would be someone who is envious and hates on the *playa* because they desire the characteristics of a *playa* but don’t have them.

relationship in “Hustler’s Ambition” as he frankly states, “Yeah I *need* you to hate/So I use you for your energy” (*Get Rich or Die Tryin’* 50 Cent).

Beef involves verbally exchanged assaults that usually are performed in a public forum in which black males demonstrate their expertise in language use (lyricism). Through symbolic verbal exchanges of braggadocio, masculinities are constructed in word performances that can be reckless and creative all at once. Braggadocio in rap discourse is part of an African American oral tradition of toasting; it exaggerates characteristics or one’s abilities in order to demonstrate superiority (Richardson 11). For example, the iconic diss<sup>16</sup> (dissing) song “Ether”, written by Nasir “Nas” Jones epitomizes *beef* as a trope and characterizes a type of black male posturing and subject formation that is defined through African American language practices of performed identity. “Ether” was made in response to the diss track “Takeover” written by Jay-Z who, by first premising his cultural capital, self identifies as the “god emcee”. Jay-Z then question’s Nas’s street credibility and longevity as a rap artists. Rhetorically “Ether” functions similarly to the “Takeover”<sup>17</sup> in its intention to establish and affirm Nas’s credibility as a lyricist. Nas, in response, constructs himself as a father figure to Jay Z. He counterclaims that Jay Z wants to follow in his footsteps as an artists but instead challenges his position as a rap icon, “My child, I’ve watched you grow up to be famous/And now I smile like a proud dad, watching his only son that made it...And now yall trying to take my spot fellas?”

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<sup>16</sup> A verbal put down or insult

<sup>17</sup> “The Takeover” was a diss track on Jay – Z’s sixth album, *The Blueprint* that directly takes verbal shots at Nas in response to his criticizing of Jay-Z on “We Will Survive”, a track that was made previously as noted in *Village Voice* (Hinds 2002).

(*Stillmatic* Nas). In this song, controversial rapper Nas raps a narrative that, in proper toasting fashion, speaks in third person and deifies his iconic position as a rap phenom in stating how Jay Z's path to fame was ornamented by his opportunity to "break bread with the god"(referring to himself). *Beef* allows Nas a space to be self-defining in constructing his masculinity. Shifting from a father to a god-like figure, Nas demonstrates how rappers see their identities as fluid in the making of creative metaphors of black power and strength.

The perpetuation of *beef* within the dialectical interaction between rappers and their antagonist characterizes Aristotle's "peirastike" dialectic, or "the art of making trial", which involves analyzing one's claim of knowing knowledge about a subject. Each participant refutes each other's claim of having knowledge about a topic until one can drive the other into a contradiction, thus proving the knowledge to be false ("Aristotle's Logic"). In hip hop verbal battles this translates into the realm of who has more lyrical skill, material wealth, and cultural capital in the urban black community. As these battles occur within the dialectical space of exchange, each rapper intends to persuade the other, as well as the peripheral hip hop listener, that their lyrical prowess and presence is greater. There is also a persuasive effort to convince that one's cultural wisdom or "knowledge of the game" is needed by the other in order to be sustainable as a lyricist. Nas articulates this notion as he states, "I am the truest/Name a rapper that I ain't influenced/Gave y'all chapters, but now I keep my eyes on the Judas". While each rapper puts the other to the test of proving their authenticity, each verbally composes a black masculine virility defined by wealth, underdog vitality and organic connections to urban street life.

Within *beef* discourse ways of becoming and sustaining visibility is insistent upon you *recognizin' who you dealin' with*. Both Nas and Jay Z admonish each other to *recognize*, a common hip-hop literacy practice of acknowledging or coming to terms with reality (Smitherman 23). In verbal jousting, *recognizin'* or the failure to do so by antagonists is a call and response practice in sustaining or perpetuating *beef*. It suggests that you *educate yo' self on who I be*. John Pittman states that a demand for recognition is to be understood as a "self consciousness". It is,

...a demand that I am seen, and recognized, as purely self-determining. Nothing, and no one, can dictate to me. For that to be true, I must be able To eliminate, or dominate, anyone or anything that threatens my self-determination, my control over my situation. In relation to you, from whom I demand recognition, I can only become self-determining if I can impose my terms on you, gain domination over you. For you are in a position to determine *my existence*...(46)

The act of *recognizin'* is a rhetorical gesture that invokes a dialectic of acknowledgement. It is fundamentally grounded in the historical importance among black folks of affirming one's place as visible and capable. Hip hop historian Jelani Cobb insists that,

At the core of hip hop's being, its rationale for existence, is this refusal to exist as unseen and unseeable. Thus the fact that the word *recognize* – meaning to "identify as previously known, take notice of, acknowledge, especially with appreciation" according to the books – takes a whole 'nother level of connotation within this culture. On this street, to be told to *recognize* is to be issued an injunction, given a warning, schooled to the fact that there are consequences and repercussions for whatever has been said, done, or forgotten. (109)

Specifically for black males, to recognize is to see another for their strength, credibility, and ability to be effective at whatever they do. To disregard them and

their ability to have agency is a threat to their sense of rhetorical potency, potential, and visibility as a black male.

As briefly stated earlier, the irony in much gangsta rap texts is the deliberate insistence of social autonomy and self-isolation; no one can be fully trusted and vulnerability is a weakness, even with close companions. However, close bonds with neighborhoods are prevalent in many rap texts and are valued as affirming spaces where rappers, in *representin'* their hoods, create public identities that reflect a devout connection between friends, enemies, and geography. As Rose states “Male rappers often speak from the perspective of a young man who wants social status in a locally meaningful way” (2). The ghetto becomes a metaphor of the everyday interactions with community social participants and family members “not just in language but in thought and action” (Lakoff and Johnson 4). So it is ironic that gangsta rappers, in their professed acts of independence and individuality, find themselves relying on social participants (other rappers) that they initially mean to create distance and distinction from. The connection with the social becomes the material means of invention. The East Coast/West Coast rap wars personified by the late Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. typifies how *beef* works as rhetorical production in the socially defined spaces of black invention. These controversial interactions allow black males to construct their identities as black men through verbal performances symbiotically connected to rap antagonist or remembered neighborhood enemies. This by no means intends to romanticize violent lyrics that polarize and alienate black males from one another. Yet, rap battles are rich in linguistic texture and employ call and response practices, invoke symbolic metaphors,



and use signifying as strategies for inventing black masculinities. Thus, the relationship between cultural literacies and the making of black masculinity becomes visible in the dialectical exchange of *beef* discourse.

### **“Welcome to the Killin’ Fields”: Death as Rhetoric and Heuristic in Gangsta Rap**

As a rhetorical strategy in *beef* discourse, rappers’ death premonition demonstrates how black males oscillate between fear and bravery in their rap texts, having a recognizable respect for the power of death (as implicated in their paranoia) while professing their ability to elude death’s grip. Tupac Shakur best exemplifies the paranoia of being dealt the death card by a close friend in “Death Around the Corner”, I see death around the- corner, any day/Trying to keep it together, no one lives forever anyway/Strugglin’ and strivin’, my destiny’s to die/Keep my finger on the trigger, no mercy in my eyes. Wu Tang Clan demonstrates a similar preoccupation with death in “Stick Me for My Riches” that explains how the price of money and fame can often be paid with one’s life in black urban street culture,

Now with success I've become a target  
They wanna set me up, take me hostage  
Or take me down some notches  
They wanna hit me, wanna stick me, get me for my riches  
They wanna diss me, wanna clip me, leave me stiff in ditches  
(8 *Diagrams* Wu Tang Clan)

While representing a masculine response of strength and survival, paranoia fuels the nihilistic behavior of an “outlaw’s” persona, the cynical mentality coined by Tupac Shakur that defines a black male apathy towards a life that has given him few

opportunities. In the aftermath of Shakur's death, paranoia as a reoccurring experience continues to shape much of the terrain of rap lyrics that have gangsta themes and celebrate violence and drug economies. As demonstrated in both examples, the enemy or taker of life is often an ambiguous community foe (other black males) or what Eric Neilson defines as institutionalized hip hop surveillance by government that works as a panoptic force in controlling and containing the hip hop community (*Pop Matters*). The ability for black males to threaten another with death is apparatus for the self-positioning of oneself as powerful not only in relation to the gaze of a public mainstream audience of consumers and "hip hop cops", but to other black males who pose a threat to this visibility. We only have to look at the lyrical content of most gangsta rap to find out that the proverbial enemy to which rappers often refer tends to be other black males perceived as either competition or who pose a threat to their way of life<sup>18</sup>.

Thus, death becomes a heuristic in making sense of how black males perform their masculinity in various rhetorical situations. Death as rhetorical – as persuasive in influencing how black males position themselves as "real men" - crystallizes the semiotic connection of black bodies to gun use, drug economies, and nihilistic behavior, all of which are popular outlets by which black males from inner-city poor communities have used as survival strategies. James Gee's definition of semiotic domains is useful for understanding the multimodal articulations of black masculinity

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<sup>18</sup> Ironically this tension is often directed towards other black males before it is towards more abstract forces that represent governing containment and control, such as policeman or senators who vote for legislature that directly affect the socio-economic conditions of urban black communities. Chuck D in *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, a documentary on hip hop's masculinity crisis speaks clearly to this issue.

in relationship to lived or imagined experiences of urban street life. “By semiotic domain I mean any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts) to communicate distinctive types of meanings” (18).

Death as rhetoric exists within a semiotic domain of urban black masculinity that consists of multiple communicative expressions of black male subject formation. I characterize the expressions within this domain as black masculine practices defined by language use<sup>19</sup>, cultural artifacts, and nonverbal behavior – all of which give us metaphors of the urban black male. The gun, for example, becomes the paraphernalia of black masculine aggression, an artifact that symbolizes a social response and rhetorical approach to obstacles in one’s path to establish power. A rhetoric of death contributes to defining the social practices, modalities, values, and ways of existing in a discourse. Its semiotic connection with black male subjectivity involves things that often stand in for language, such as images, sounds, gestures, and urban backdrops. Semiotics is important for understanding death as connected to the experience, history, and cultural context of black masculine performance. For example, the phrase “ride or die,” in urban black masculine discourse is part of the domain of activism that references black historical movements of strong group solidarity against political and colonial fragmentation of black life. As an extended metaphor of violence, it defines the extent of loyalty that one is willing to go for a friend to protect their collective sense of security and wellbeing in matters of life and death. The ride

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<sup>19</sup> Here I draw on Richardson and Asante’s notion of extending language beyond grammatical functions and broadening its potential to function as discourse. Understanding language practices as symbolic action allows us to understand its ability to shape identities and social locations.

or die trope is articulated in the titles of many rap texts. Mobb Deep's "Eye for an Eye" (Your Beef is Mine) and Tupac's "Never Had a Friend Like Me" are emblematic examples of black men who suggests that they are ready to pay the price of their lives to maintain loyalties to one another. Death becomes an symbol of loyalty in rap narratives and often a condition for gaining respect.

Death also generates a panoptic force in rap discourse. Logics of survival and self empowerment are cultivated in professed accounts of fleeing death or professing the ability to take one's life without a second thought. 50 Cent, the multi-platinum selling rapper from South Jamaica, Queens is known for the raw, hyperviolent content in his rap lyrics. His financial success has largely come from making death a commodity, but moreso through his lyrics we can understand death as a lens through which he reads the world around him. "In My Hood" narrates a knowledge about the desperation born out of poverty stricken streets and how community members are driven to sociopathic behavior, "...niggas'll come to your place/Put a gun to ya face, tell ya open the safe/As your heart starts to race, 'cause a robbery could turn into a homo<sup>20</sup>-case" (50 Cent). 50 Cent responds to these socially constructed obstacles by matching aggression with a language of counter violence of his own, one that often reoccurs in much of his rap narratives about violence and drug economies. In "Many Men" his response to directed threats on his well-being and sense of security implicates what values are being reinforced in black male discourses about how one deals with conflict. In regards to the "many men" who wish death on him, his counter response, "I put a hole in a nigga for fuckin' with me/My back on the wall now you

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<sup>20</sup> Homicide

gon' see/Better watch how you talk when you talk about me/'Cause I'll come and take your life away" becomes a proverbial calling card of strategic survival in narratives of black on black violence. Such black hypermasculine performances, which become linguistic performance manifested in *beef*, symbolize a conventional, urban situated masculinity that is authenticated through a reactionary and violent language of self-preservation. This discursive space of performance reflects a sociopathic black male consciousness of how one needs to know how to respond to the obstacle of physical death, or at least demonstrate in hypothetical situations how one responds to threats. I acknowledge the hypothetical here because recounted stories in narrations of violence and death in rap music is part romantic and part real. As Cobb states is the case for rappers who speak for and about "the invisible masses" of folks that make up their hoods, they tell stories that are true – "even if they never actually happened" (112-13).

### **The Black Body as Cultural Artifact: Literacy in Flesh and Style in Gangsta Rap**

As previously stated, streetlife discourse in hip hop is a creative space where black males demonstrate their understanding of the world and develop collectively accepted practices of black masculinity through various modalities. The "inherent ideology" of authenticity in this discourse constructs positions from which to speak that act "as standpoints taken up by the discourse in its relation to other, ultimately opposing, discourses" (Gee 4). The performed image of the "thug", the multiple tattooed body, flaunted and exposed muscularity, baggy jeans hanging below the waistline, and excessive jewelry is a black masculine literacy practice of "redefining

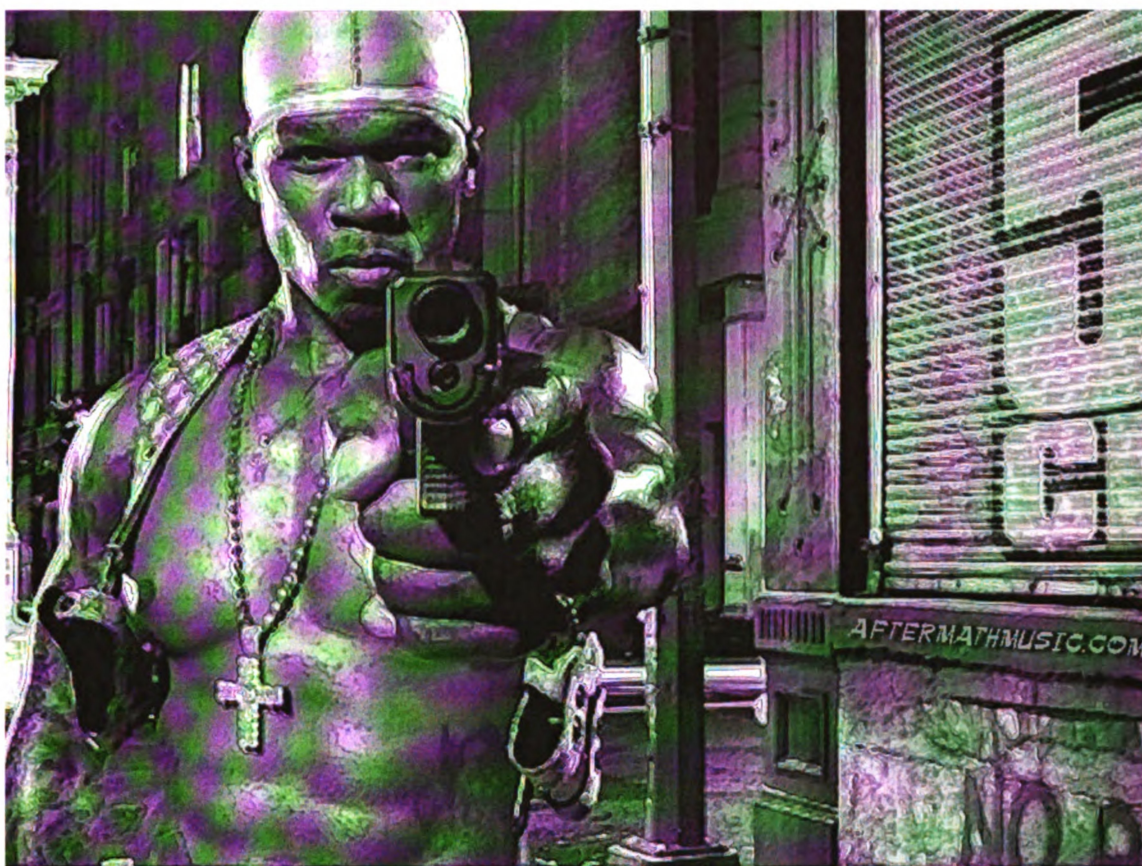
the self” through confronting dominant ideological language” that enacts a resistance and transformation through representation (Morrell 14). The image of black masculinity semiotically connected to the thug narrative in hip-hop is a constructed response to the history of white racist disdain towards “strutting and signifying black flesh” (Dyson 104). The black body continues to be a site of contestation in public spaces in American. And hip hop becomes a discursive space where black males use their bodies as texts to compose the self. The tattoo, for example, becomes an artifact of black masculinity that is “self authored”, but more specifically it is a communicative practice that attempts to reclaim a black self “which involves stolen, lost and sometimes distorted bodies” (Kirkland 140).

In my search for black rappers who promoted the thug image through their lyrics and persona, I remember stumbling upon a visual of 50 Cent that seemed to be the epitome of how black men in hip hop traffic their bodies in public spaces. Ironically I found it being used as a referenced picture for an article that was discussing *Minstrel and Blackface Historical Posters* and how contemporary images of black representation in hip hop are “modern blackface” (*Bamboozled*). This particular image of 50 Cent suspended me. His muscular and almost beastly torso is centered against the backdrop of a dark, urban street corner. With the stoned look of anger and intimidation, his eyes peered into mine. I felt uneasy, almost fearful, as I switched my gaze from his piercing eyes to the gun he points towards the viewer that seems to jump through the picture (see Figure 1). He wears a diamond studded cross that lays over his bulging chest and rippled abs. He embodies both white fear of mythical black violence and material wealth trapped in a carceral city. His black body

stands in for a narrative about life and death, one that echoes a theme of 50 Cent's highly acclaimed body of rap music, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. But in this image narrative is also a story of how young black males have viewed their bodies as "creative opportunity" to narrate their own histories, realities, and interpretations of how blackness can be represented in public spaces. Kirkland describes the self authoring of the body as a literacy practice in which black males wrestle with the challenges of rearticulating or "inflecting" versions of history through alternative expressions that, through their own voices and representations, reflect the narrative of their own experiences (65). Since stumbling upon this striking image of 50 Cent, I have wrestled with the political and material motives of public black male performances of identity in gangsta rap culture. Where in the stream of these deliberate representations of black masculinity does resistance to co-optation begin and subjection to corporate commercial control end, since thug life and death have now become commodity items, packaged and sold at your nearest music store? Such a negotiation between one's community and economic loyalties to corporate forces would seem to require a balancing act of shifting and compromising power over how and when one is able to represent themselves.

Figure 1. 50 Cent





Yet, the image of 50 Cent holding a gun at his viewer, while wearing a diamond studded cross and a Luis Vuitton gun holster seems to riff on a rhetoric of fear associated with urban black masculinity. It creates a semiotic relationship between thug life and access to material wealth. Symbols of high culture (Luis Vuitton gun holsters and diamonds) become co-opted as artifacts of black masculine discourse. Urban black men marketing their masculinity for mainstream cultural capital exemplifies a black self awareness of the body as embedded with beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community (Prown 11). Thelma Golden's bold statement that black males are one of the greatest inventions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gives testament to American born fears and anxieties that shape the black body as "an American icon, a metaphor in Western culture" (Hopkinson and



Moore 33). Rappers such as the late Tupac Shakur and more presently 50 Cent, Lil Wayne, Rick Ross, and LL Cool J represent a culture of corporeality that dignifies publicly performed cool posing as a rhetorical strategy of taking back the black body. Majors and Billson define coolposing as “a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (4).

Coolposing as performance of self-representation represents a style system of black interpretive practices of resistance. It is a characteristic of black street consciousness that spotlights how black males react and respond to the pressures of white mainstream propriety and social control over black bodies. Cool posing, as a public black masculine literacy practices black males maintaining their positions in street discourse, while navigating public spaces, is in direct relation to hegemonic discourses of representation, viewpoints, and beliefs about black male identity and possibility. The flaunting of black flesh in public domains is experimentation with the power of visibility. It is a performed “rhetoric of recovery”, in which black males take back their bodies and negotiate how its meaning and message as an artifact of black life is circulated in the public domain of popular culture. Aaron David Gresson III defines rhetoric of recovery as a black rhetorical practice of one’s “right to name, to define, and to self-validate choices affecting others as well as oneself”<sup>21</sup> (5). Gresson notes the postmodern agenda of black male recovery that grew out of the Civil Rights

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<sup>21</sup> Aaron David Gresson III defines a rhetoric of recovery as; (1) a motive to recover something perceived as lost through violation, failure, or betrayal; (2) the use of narrative to describe a discovery with inferred relevance for both one’s own and the Other’s ability to deal better with duplicity and uncertainty; and (3) an implicit invitation to identity with and accept the liberative power of that discovery.

movement and Black Power struggles, and the gradual progression and evolution of how “recovery” would eventually be defined through the acquisition of material wealth. His notion of a “personal-choice rhetoric,” which he argues fragmented the driving force in the project of recovery in the black struggle, is where we find a self-driven autonomy to define black male identity in hip hop.

### **“A Thug Dressed Like a Gentleman”: Interethnic Appropriation and Representin’ as a Strategy in Self-Making**

Black semantics and male identity inform the inventive potential of rap discourse, but more critically allows black males to construct a space to grapple with and interrogate the ideological language of co-optation that has often spoken for urban African American life. Beef discourse calls for the participation of black bodies to stand in as counter language to hegemonic discourse. Black bodies become the expendable currency in the dialogical exchange that defines and sustains beef discourse. However, the black body is also used to create agency for rappers in claiming authority to take away the body’s ability exist and thrive in material culture. In gangsta rap, the symbolic meaning of the black body becomes material to create new interpretations of language and meaning. Bryant Keith Alexander states that black male identity in America is often constrained by ideological borders that are neither fluid nor flexible. However, gangster rap artists, through appropriated identities as mobsters, culturally “pass as an adaptive tactic” to create narratives of street credibility and mythical black invincibility (62). These black males who perform in cultural drag, call into question the discursive possibilities of the black body by embodying and parodying the pop cultural representation of the Italian

gangster (see Figure 2) (Taylor 4, Baldwin 167). The gangsta in hip hop embodies an inflected meaning of social deviancy and power that is situated in a black experience. The fixation of gansta rappers with Italian mobsters not only furthers blackness as a romanticized trope of strength and opposition, as stated by Davarion Baldwin, it highlights what John Gennari describes as an “interethnic identification” that indexes the rhetorical possibilities of black male bodies in rap discourse (36). This rhetorical performance is another strategy for survival, a strategy of resistance to limited representations of black identity in mainstream popular culture.

Socially constructed by experiences of ghetto life and violence, the black mobster in gangsta rap becomes a performative symbol, “one that is in defiance of the dominant society,” while accentuating an identity that is stylistically and metaphorically representing upward mobility (Baldwin 165, 168). Appropriation shapes the black gangsta image through decontextualizing an identity politic closely tied to an Italian Mafioso power structure. This structural power is bound to a very specific sense of Sicilian ethos of ethnic participation. Therefore, the specificity of racial identity becomes an important signifying marker in establishing cultural autonomy. The Italian gangster in which many gangsta rap artists cite, indexes an Italian aesthetic of power during the early 1940’s and 1960s, a time period where racial and ethnic identity were very important markers for how Italians sustained cultural solidarity in America. This characterized a period of racial apartheid when racial identity and solidarity were essential in preserving a sense of collective community in the wake of an American ideology of disavowal towards Otherness. Therefore, through decontextualizing an Italian Mafioso aesthetic and reinscribing it

into urban Black culture, the gangsta life becomes a mythic repetition of an interconnected world of drug dealing, violence, self – indulgence, and hypermasculine posturing.

Figure 2. Jay-Z



Ironically, Italian gangsters are known in hip-hop culture as role models because they are respected, have money, and demonstrate the ability to challenge state power, such as city police. Rappers seem willing to dismiss a history of racial tensions between Italians and African Americans. In an interview with *Hip Hop News*, Jay Z is questioned about the pervasive racism in mafia themed movies that are valorized by many rappers. When asked why members of the hip hop community are willing to overlook racial bigotry, he states

There are certain things the audience hooks on to. Yes, the character might be racist, but he's still against the odds as he struggles against the world. However brief

his rein might be, he's living the good life and that's what Black kids hone in on. They don't pay attention to the racism, because racism is everywhere. We've learned to look past that. (Jay Z)

Popular culture movies such as *Scarface*, *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas* and *Carlito's Way* showcase hypermasculine, self-made character figures that manipulate cops and define their own realities through wealth and material gain. But they have also demonstrated racist attitudes towards the black community<sup>22</sup>. Popular rappers and rap groups who go by alias Italian ganster identities such as Scarface, Biggie Smalls, NAS Escobar, The Doggfather, and Noreaga, to name a few, are examples of the constructed infamy of black gangsta life. They invent black male caricatures of ghetto Supermen and rely on street credibility and their facility to navigate beyond the ghetto by mixing urban and mainstream culture. The language of the black gangsta creates a generative space for black patriarchal power that contextualizes black male subjectivity in a mobster culture of strong group solidarity, wealth, and black patriarchy. In defining the draw of rappers to the mobster figure, Greg Dimitriadis characterizes the gangster's image,

Part of the gangster's wide cultural currency comes from the universally extractable nature of his narrative. The violent outlaw, living his life outside dominant cultural constraints, solving his problems through brute power and domination, is a character type with roots deep in popular American lore. Indeed, the gangster holds a very special place in popular American imagination. He embodies such capitalist values as rugged individualism, rampant materialism, strength through physical force, and male domination, while he rejects the very legal structures defining that culture. (29)

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<sup>22</sup> See HBO's *The Sopranos*, *Goodfellas*, and *Carlito's Way*

The markers of mobster life: money, power, and respect, are the captivating and seductive tropes that create the romanticized figure of the black gangsta. These three tropes construct an image narrative of black masculinity that symbolizes the ability and agency to *represent* black male identity through the lifestyle of a public enemy figure. Urban black youth translate the Italian gangster figure and the markers of mobster life through the black rhetorical practice of mimicry. Mimicry is a way of signifying, which refers to an indirect way of stating how representations of power are not exclusively owned by one group. Thus the imitation of Italian gangsters by rappers implicates a self-authoring of identity and the ability to market oneself as powerful – as gangsta.

For black folks, language is a salvation space for (re)presentation. Thus, the rhetorical gesture of *representin'* becomes a symbolic strategy of black male invention and performance in a public sphere that involves language use, codes of behavior, style of dress, cultural knowledge, and rules for social interaction. *Representin'* in rap discourse is a fully embodied literacy practice that characterizes what Signithia Fordham calls “a collective Black Self” (75). Specifically for urban black males, it affirms the value of a black subjectivity partially defined by black culture and community and part defined by corporate forces that market urban black life to consumers. Rappers play intricate roles in inventing their identities in the wake of corporate executives looking to commodify on image narratives of the black and poor.

This is why *representin'*, as a verbal and embodied communicative and survival strategy, becomes a vital component of black male subject formation and

authenticity. Representin' gives rappers the opportunity to showcase their ability to be visible and demonstrate their manhood through language and nonverbal modalities that represent constructed power, such as the urban gangsta. In the American mainstream, representation is a vital instrument for agency for black males, especially those who have traded turns in the margins of black poverty. The agency to represent echoes a narrative of black salvation in American history, one that cultivated in a culture of animosity towards the limited ranges that black men have been given to represent themselves. The ability to represent is crucial in the continuum of black subjectivity in hip hop, especially as black urban street life is continually commodified and the image and language of the anti social black thug becomes the rule rather than the exception for black visibility in public spheres. Yet, Michael Eric Dyson states that black males find ways to "shape self understanding and mediate self-revelation racially" through multimodal communication practices that are not always acknowledged for their rhetorical and symbolic value (Dobrin 83). Thug life as an activist political strategy for resistance and subject formation has now found its place in consumer culture as co-opted entertainment, where young middle class white males are generally the primary audience. Nevertheless, the popularity and public space given to hip-hop crystallizes a black masculine domain of language practices, representations, and self-authoring strategies of resistance that call for new theories of literacy practices that occur in public spaces.

Beef discourse is one of those creative spaces for black invention. Black males are using style systems and drawing on a black lexicon to compose themselves. Beef indicates that this black composition is indeed a social process, involving the

collaborative effort of other black males and imagined audiences who stand in for historical metaphors of control over black bodies and black possibility. How black males position themselves through language and embodied practices of self authoring in rap discourse spotlights black masculine literacies of self-invention and knowledge making. It further iterates how these invention strategies change when the audience changes. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, slave narrative writers were writing primarily for a white audience. Thus a primary objective was to prove that they could signify as something different than a slave. Furthermore, they wanted to identify as men who could embody a Eurocentric ethic of hard work, individuality and self made manhood. They wanted to prove that they could exist as citizens and have citizenship. The apprehension of literacy was a condition to achieving a masculinity that was translatable to a white audience, even if this literacy was embodied in black and bruised flesh. Black gangsta rappers in hip-hop demonstrate a similar iteration of transferability of identity in their appropriations of Italian gangster ideologies and aesthetic. But they also demonstrate a deviation from the historical appeal to white audiences in their anti-establishment rhetoric and “fuck the world” mentality. Although this is negotiated and often controlled by the language of commerce and capitalism (i.e. white record corporate executives) gangsta rap’s global influence and mass market appeal to white audiences insist that gangsta rap exist on its own terms. The language of hip hop and popular gangsta rap specifically as a movement of black masculinity characterized by language, black style and coolness, and black bodies reflects a broader experience of rhetorical practices by black males in America as a whole.



For example, at the predominantly white institution where I teach I occasionally see groups of young black men grouped together, all uniformly dressed in baggy jeans, Timberlands, sporting a clean, all white pair of Air Force Ones, or an urban brand Tee shirt. I think about how this uniformity is rhetorically significant for them as they maintain a sense of cultural solidarity and black consciousness while dealing with the special problems that being on a predominantly white campus presents. Sorting out the meaning of their presence on campus - to themselves and to whites - requires that they make crucial choices about how to rhetorically construct identities through their words, symbolic actions, learning practices, and gendered identities in a context that has oftentimes already constructed them. Much work still needs to be done that spotlights their public literacy lives as complex and intricately connected to their identities as black males. A cadre of black male writers have done much work to create a space in the academy that addresses black male urban culture as a space of knowledge production and social performance. To better understand how we might approach urban black male cultural and social literacies as phenomena of our racial past, as a response to American hegemony, and as intellectual possibility, black male writers have done the work of recovery of the urban black male through critically “listening” to their lives.

By spotlighting the complex contradictions of urban black public figures such as Tupac, and forefronting the conscious emcee as a type of organic intellectual, “post soul” intellectuals are vying for the urban alternative voice in crucial conversations about what counts as knowledge in the black intelligentsia. This is vital in revising black intellectual traditions because it makes rhetorical practice in urban spaces an

important contribution to the knowledge canon of black critique in America. It also gives preliminary insight into how young underprivileged black males in general are managing their identities across multiple discourses. In this respect these black male writers also offer a space that teachers of writing and rhetoric might critically approach black masculine literacies cross-disciplinarily. This is especially significant as we continue to research the relationships between what urban black male college students read and the types of writing they produce.

## Chapter 4

### “On My Grind, All the Time”: The Literacy Narratives of Black College Boys

*Well since you out here on your own...you gotta have some kinda confidence in yourself...compassion, some commitment, just keep going...challenges you will face, you know what I'm sayin'?*

Anthony

*I'm on my grind all the time. 'Cause I have goals and like the first day...like my grind started on the...not even on the first day. Like the day I got here, I put my goals, all my goals I wanted for my classes...Put 'em right there on the side of my bed and said I'ma get 'em.*

Jabari

*I gotta study first, that's what I'm here to do. Like...grind...I gotta connect with people...I got to get out and know people. Whatever I don't know they can show me like...how it is.*

Carlas

Sitting in a small chair in a dormitory on the west side of campus, I listen as Anthony talks to me about what it feels like finding out that he is a father. Barely 20, Anthony seems fairly collected as he realizes the sudden life change. He speaks with youthful ambition to be there for his child and to be the presence in her life that his father was not in his. From Muskegon, a small city in eastern Michigan with a moderately sized working class black community, Anthony was raised in a family household by a mother, aunt, and a strong grandmother. He wants to be a hotel manager. While we talk about classes that he needs to take for his major he intermits to talk about maternity tests and child support. He has determination about himself as he speaks about his goals. Anthony had not done so well academically in the fall and had been working hard all semester to raise his grades. Finding himself on academic probation forced him to revise his approach to college life. “I just know that you

gotta separate yourself from certain things,” Anthony says while he finishes up a homework assignment. “If you know what’s best for you just take the steps to do what you can to keep you there.” Anthony’s lessons learned could be likened to any typical college student navigating their way into the university. Yet, Anthony’s story is somewhat particular. He and his twin brother are the first to attend college in his family, so the stakes are high for him.

As Anthony’s writing tutor I learned that the content of his writing across essays often reflected themes that reoccurred in our conversations about his life experiences as a black college male. Struggle, overcoming adversity, and one’s ability to adjust to new environments were calling cards that characterized much of his life. These were themes found in the narrative writings he constructed that called for him to either chart a literate past connected to his identity or to narrate his experiences as a racial being. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, black males have relied on experience as criteria for meaning making and self-invention. Across these contexts black males have drawn on language, the imagination of possible selves, and the mental conditioning of struggle to invent their identities. In both the slave literacy narrative and in hip hop gangsta rap, black males appropriate models of masculinity that are often outside of their culture while using rhetorical practices of appropriation, embodiment, and language play to construct a discursive space that allows them to be self defining. Similarly, in my observations into the writing lives of three black college males they mimic modeled masculinities in their lives while employing adaptive tactics to navigate multiple contexts in their academic experiences as college males.

In this chapter, I will spotlight how black male college writers define literacy through the histories they narrate autobiographically. First I explain why I decided to explore the relationship between literacy and black masculinity with my case participants and how I came to notice similar practices of self making in their writing. These were all in one way or another framed around situational struggles and familial values of personal responsibility and determination. I then describe how I came to know my case participants, how I collected my data collection and the different ways that I identified with them during our interactions. Finally I analyze their writing as instantiations of black masculine literacy behaviors that they define and reflect upon through their storytelling practices.

The black males in my case study construct a reflective space in which to define who they want to be as black males and how this identity aligns with their literate aims for success as college students. Seeing this in their writing led me to inquire about the relationships between black male writing practices, how they were “reading” the world around them, and the construction of masculinity in their writing. In collecting the stories of Anthony and other black male college students Jabari and Carlos, whom I had also taught and tutored, there was similar evidence that each developed their own strategies of self-making through learned principles of self determination cultivated in situational struggles and “turmoil”. As Tatum states, turmoil in a troubled past does not always lead to stunted literacy for black boys (19). These situational struggles often referenced the absence or presence of black male figures in their lives who shaped in one way or another how they bridged connections between literacy aims to achieve in school and black manhood. William Brozo would

label these figures “male archetypes” that these black male writers are using to shape their own identities (2). These archetypes becomes models of what they want to either emulate or deidentify with as they follow through on ambitions of being successful in college as students and defining success as black men. Writing is one space that they use to define this success. Drawing on past experiences with education, these black males situate their literacy histories in home life, interactions with fathers and early failures in special education courses. Writing becomes a place where we can understand how these young black males are using critical thinking to make connections between literacy and black masculinity.

This premise guides my investigation in to the writing lives of young black males. What is the substance of black male writing? How is self-making and self-determination tied to a sense of manhood as black men? How do these two concepts motivate them towards literate aims of being successful writers? Investigating the relationship between their writing practices and how they saw themselves as black male achievers crystallized connections between the rhetorical situations in which these black males found themselves and the literate strategies they developed to navigate those situations. For Anthony, Jabari, and Carlas, navigating the academy at the level of writing involved drawing on values and learning strategies developed outside of the classroom and located in their everyday lives and social interactions with family members.

### **Data Collection**

For the third site of study in this project, I came to my case studies as a participant observer who taught first year writing and tutored in an enrichment

program called The Zone, a weekly student-led tutorial for college students. Over the course of my interaction with my case participants, I met them either during tutorials or interacted with them when they took my writing course. Over the course of these interactions, I taught two themed writing courses, Men In American: “Changing the Metaphor: Masculinity, Cultural Literacies and the Mainstream” and The Evolution of American Thought: “Literacy in Three Metaphors: Reading Race, Class, and Gender ”. The theme of each course centered on issues of literacy and identity. One course ran for twelve weeks during the fall semester and the other ran for six weeks as a summer session. Using a similar sequence of major writing assignments for each course, I assigned a literacy autobiography as the first major writing assignment. Students began with their own literacy histories as a way into broader academic conversations about the function, value and culture of literacy. As a tutor at The Zone, I worked with my case participants either weekly or bi-weekly on various writing projects. My interaction with them was more consistent in this context with some than it was with others.

I chose three freshman African American college males who were from predominately black urban communities and were taking freshman college writing. I engaged in two interviews with each participant. However, my constant interaction with them as teacher in class or tutor at The Zone allowed for an ongoing dialogue that was not always formal or interview based. The first interviews focused on their backgrounds and ambitions for coming to college, and the second on the steps they were making to adjust to college such as how to study and their long and short term academic goals. The second interview focused on how their literate aims were

shaped by these goals. Both interviews paid attention to how they were managing their identities as black males while navigating multiple contexts and their referential practices. I collected a total of nine drafts of their writing for analysis. These drafts were literacy narratives they had written over the course of taking writing courses with me and other freshman writing courses they had taken. Of the nine drafts, six were gender themed literacy narratives. In their narratives, for analysis, I focused generally on what resources the young men were drawing on to write their stories. I followed Richardson's approach to studying black language as discourse, as "dynamic and reflexive systems of 'behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles...by specific groups of...people". Within this "vernacular" discourse Richardson states that there are "ways of being and communicating that derive from particular histories, geographies, and social locations" (3-4). I read their language practices this way in order to situate their identities as black males within a system of values, beliefs, and ways of being and communicating that are shaped by particular experiences they have growing up. Studying particular phrases and words as representing ideologies located and shaped by a particular environment enables an understanding of the meaning of these language practices as culturally informed. In their narratives I sought to locate how the African American male perspective situated three themes used to help construct their narrated paths towards literacy: self-determination, self-making, and a success that was associated with their sense of achieved masculinity. I paid close attention to the relationship they were making between successful masculinity and the achievement of academic, and personal goals.



Through collected essays, audio transcripts, post interview and class time reflections I compiled data collected over a course of two academic years.

My role with varied with each of my case participants across contexts and levels of interaction. As a black male somewhat closer to them in age, I was able to establish rapport with them quickly. We shared a lot of the same interests in music and black culture. As a black male who grew up in a single parent home in a black community, this gave me a more connected insight into their worlds. The stories that they told in their narratives were reflected in my own experiences of being a young black male wanting to go to college and be somebody. So for these reasons and realities my relationships with them were sustained by a cultural and racial familiarity. As a teacher and tutor, I helped them with their papers, offered advice on how to study and in exchange they allowed me into their worlds through their writing and social lives. Thus, as a teacher who would give them their grade, I was often part of their audience when writing their essays for class. For one of them, I became the mentor who hauled tv's and microwaves in the trunk of my car to their dorms, while for another, I became one who shared similar tastes in collecting sneakers and fitted hats. As a researcher, navigating their worlds on a college campus allowed them to also have insight into my world as a black male graduate student.

In *Boys and Literacy* Trisha Maynard states “gender influences attitudes towards literacy, the development of literacy skills as well as preferences in reading and writing” (36). The literacy practices of the black males that I mentored, tutored and taught over the course of two years are referential in how they point back to a social past with parental figures, poverty, and situational struggles. In this section I

present findings of what three black males are writing about in their literacy histories in order to crystallize the relationships between literacy and gender formation. In order to understand how black male identity is shaped in narrative form I spotlight the content in literacy autobiographies that are consistent with themes of self making, struggle, and self determination as markers of masculinity. These themes are connected to their understanding of and construction of their own masculinities. I define masculinity within this chapter as qualities or characteristics associated with black male identities culturally constructed and located in black communities. I build this definition on how my case participants are defining black masculinity through their narratives. Thus, the rhetorical choices these college males make in their texts offer insight into how their literate aims are shaped by the rhetorical situations that frame their stories. Their textual identities can be traced back to their understandings of a gendered racial identity that is informed by what it means to be a black male using various literacies as adaptive strategies to respond in different situations. The data gleaned from their essays here also intend to spotlight the essence of black male college writing in terms of the types of texts that these black college males are consuming and furthermore how their “readings” of the world inform their writing practices.

### **“On My Grind, All the Time”: A Story about Perseverance**

*In looking at my father as an example he taught me how to redefine what a man is in this patriarchal society...he taught me how to be patient humble and understanding*

*Jabari*

Jabari, a freshman majoring in chemical engineering, could define his path to college as a narrative of pulling himself up by his own bootstraps. A native of the west side of Detroit, he took my first year writing course, Men in America, his first year at Michigan State University. When asked what motivated him to come to college, Jabari stated frankly “I think I always wanted to come to college so...I really don’t need [outside] motivation...I’m like my own motivator”. His answer and self-assured demeanor indicated a sense of self-independence and seriousness about him. Tatum suggest that black males who steer clear of danger through the “four critical years” – those after middle school and before college – are self determined and focused on their future (43). Jabari’s attentiveness in class, frequent visits to my office with paper drafts, and frequent updates of his progress towards making the deans list reflected these characteristics. They also, as I would learn through his writing, pointed to a past that involved mixed academic success, learned lessons about discipline, and growing up in a poor black community. As an initial writing assignment, our class wrote a gendered literacy autobiography that explored the ways that gendered forms of literacy affected their ideas about themselves, others, and how they know what they know. Jabari’s narrative was characterized much by his early relationship with his father who teaches him patience and perseverance after receiving a “Big fat F” on his report card while in grade school:

I really did try my best to pass the class. I am not as bright as the other kids in my class I guess It my fault that I can’t comprehend as wells as the others. I was place in special Ed classes. I often was called stupid, Dum and slow boy. However that did not stop me from passing the first grade the second time. The day I fail the first grade my dad looked me dead in the eye and made my keep a promise, one that I will never forget. He made me vow that no matter what happens, don’t let no one, not even himself tell me what I could or could not accomplish. My confidence since then seem to perpetuate me

academically until I was getting all A's in my classes and I overcame my need for special Ed. My dad was a big factor in this.

Jabari sites his father as a prominent male figure in his life who gave him motivation to not only pursue literacy in the wake of failing grades and social persecution by peers but to succeed with “humility” and “patience”. Between Jabari’s narrative and my discussions with him, these were two concepts that he learned from his dad while growing up on the west side of Detroit. Jabari’s narrative demonstrated his ability to make connections in his own past between attaining literacy, managing social and academic adversity, and being successful in school. This ability fell within the context of Jabari coming into an identity of masculinity that is influenced by his father. In speaking about the invaluable lessons learned in modeling a close male figure who “even though he didn’t go to school...knew a lot” Jabari crystallizes important cultural literacies learned in his interactions with his father. They provide Jabari strategies for orienting himself to challenging situations both in and outside of the academic space. As Jabari writes about the life struggles of a young black male who grows up poor on the west side he learns to read his experiences critically and with an understanding of the relationship between economic wealth and access to popular culture fashion. Urban black youth, as Dyson states, can often rely on style and self-expression when they feel powerless to effect the world around them (104). Dyson further states that fashion becomes crucial for young black youth inventing their identities in that it enables them to become creative composers of the self. Jabari demonstrates an acute awareness of his lack of access to the material goods that were part of the social norms of urban youth culture. In his telling experiences of growing

up and his father not being able to provide for him in the aftermath of his mother's death he recalls,

As long as I could remember we had been living on welfare for the longest. I was not the kid in school with the new kicks or the nice one hundred dollars jeans on. I was the kid with the off brand named clothes and dingy white shirt that had soap scum on it from the repetitive time putting it in the washer. However, I'm glad that I was this boy...My environment of poverty taught me to be grateful for what I have and this concept has carried me through to now as a man.

As a participant, and at times a felt outsider of popular urban black youth aesthetic culture, Jabari situates the composition of his manhood within a context in which he does not have equal access to material goods that would afford him the agency that comes with being visibly present as a cool kid. The ability to construct a meaning of manhood in settings where he does not have full access to the artifacts that indicate one's participation in the "social networks" of popular school culture demonstrates the social malleability that Jabari develops as a coping strategy. Jabari's reflexive storyteller/interpreter insight demonstrates how the "functional significance of literacy" was "based on [his] successful negotiation in educational, economic, family, and social contexts" (Qualls 3). But more specifically it clarifies the personal impact of a masculine influence that informs his hindsight understanding of how he deals with not growing up with monetary wealth. In moments where Jabari makes interpretive observations about his masculine identity in his writing he demonstrates how he, in the moment of not fitting in, learns to identify in alternative ways as a black male.

Furthermore, his understanding of the norming effects of patriarchy – of social rules that determine and shape male behavior in society - enables him towards a reflective voice of self-awareness that he finds possible through writing. He demonstrates this in his cover letter entry for his final writing assignment for his writing course. Jabari's final writing assignment for the course required him to return to his gender literacy narrative with a broader perspective about gender and literacy. Over the term of the course we had covered concepts and interpretive frameworks useful for unpacking gender as a social construct. I had also met with him multiple times about essay drafts to discuss how he was adjusting in his first year of college. Jabari's transition as a college writer had required that he learn how to align the principles he had developed outside of the academy.

The course of Men in America has leaded me on a journey of finding myself...In this patriarchal society often times the idea of masculinity becomes so invisible that men in society fail to realize what they have become...I am more aware of the things that is going on in this patriarchal society and that in order to change one must first become aware and understand and have the courage to make change. I myself have the courage and one way to make change is by writing about it.

Patience was a learned concept that Jabari revisits in coming back to his narrative at the end of the semester, one that he associates with learning experiences with his father. "...patience was the key for learning; and that being so would lessen the mistakes that would be made...Now as an older individual I understand the concept in a more precise way and my view on things have changed because of it." Patience would be manifested in the diligence Jabari portrayed in improving his writing over the semester. From multiple office visits and frequent appointments to the writing

center, Jabari embodied these principles through practice. Through learned principles of preservation cultivated by experiences of struggle and an understanding of masculinity influenced by a positive male presence, Jabari uses writing to invent a black masculine identity that is self-reflective.

### **“Too Cool for School”: Revising the Black Masculine Cool in Autobiography**

*My dad taught me ways that evolved me into a man, such as being a leader, a protector, being responsible, and being a hard worker. I must say that he has done a good job at it. I look up to him because he always tries to do stuff the right way.*

*Carlas*

Majors and Billson have defined a type of cool behavior among black males that demonstrates a creative style reflected in a sense of pride, strength and self-control (4). However, they also see the performance of cool as a self-destructive mindset that forces black males to adopt hypermasculine postures. Connors defines coolness as the ability to manage stress cause by social oppression, rejection, and racism. Kirkland and Jackson assert that “it may also furnish black males with a sense of control, strength, confidence, and stability that could help them handle the closed doors and negative messages pervading modern culture (280). Coolness appeared to be a way that Carlas connected with others around him. His coolness became somewhat affectious on the other students in our class. He channeled our classroom discussion within his own witty discourse, often translating interpretations from readings with metaphors and delivering them in his deep baritone voice. “Too cool for school” was how Carlas described himself in his autobiography. A 19 yr old freshman taking my Men in America course, Carlas reflected this performed demeanor in his literacy autobiography. A black idiom that suggests one is superior

in one's ability to maximize their potential with confidence, "too cool for school" for Carlas was a masculine metaphor that stood for black swagger and belief in oneself in any situation. For Carlas it defined a masculinity that he embodied that associated with female acceptance, leadership, and the ability to escape consequences for socially deviant behavior. In line with Kirkland and Jackson's defining of coolness, I understood Carlas's characterization of coolness as a "unique performative act, an attitude...or way of being characterized through verbal [and textual] presentation" (280). His sense of self-awareness was complimented by an awareness of how he impacted those around him. In reflecting on his high school pastlife Carlas recalls how "People just like to be around me because they saw me as someone who was too cool for school. I was sort of the jock. I played all the sports, became captain, ladies surrounded me, and I never got in trouble for doing wrong." Carlas further describes himself as "the laid back dude who like broke up problems and solved them." He attributes his social molding and how he learns how to be "the man" from his older male cousins, whom he looks to for advice on girls, "style, looks, and conversation". Carlas demonstrates coolness as rhetorical in how it constructs a social identity that invokes adulation from his peers. In locating how black males perform their identities through their writing practices Carlas's autobiographical construction of coolness is demonstrated in his literacy narrative as a rhetorical practice of identity invention.

In both the meanings composed in his writing and in my interactions with him in class and during interviews, Carlas used coolness as an adaptive strategy into new settings. While visibly performing coolness through urban wear, he embodied



coolness through communicative symbols of expression. For example, joke telling was a way to introduce himself into new settings and people and to establish an amenability that extended the cool as a tactic for shaping social environments. When asked how he usually adjusted to new learning environments, Carlas states “I crack jokes a lot...that’s how I get focused, doing that...that’s how I get familiar with the surroundings.” Telling jokes was part of his cool persona. In this sense coolness rendered Carlas visible (Majors and Billison 5) amongst his peers, who always laughed at his humorous perspective during our in-class discussions. Yet coolness in Carlas’s writing appeared to be cultivated by multiple influences and experiences. In his gender literacy autobiography, coolness could also be understood as a “conditioned strength” that happens over time and experiences with struggle and not showing signs of weakness. A preservation of the self in the form of practicing emotional discretion was one way of navigating situations effectively without others having mental control over you. Thus Carlas demonstrates self preservation in social situations that might call for him to be vulnerable,

A habit that I got from my dad was to not give people too much information about me. People ask me, “Why I don’t like to have conversations”? Personal conversations that are discussed are touchy to me because they can show a softer side to me...How my family brought me up was to never show a sign of weakness. People tend to take advantage of you when you’re down

Carlas demonstrates a practice common in the black community of not airing one’s dirty laundry and sees maintaining a level of discretion as a way of protecting oneself from social stigma. He also follows the conventions of hegemonic masculine practice that men should avoid anything that will emasculate them. Emotionally availability

for Carlas signifies transference of control, a high-risk investment of the self that is more detrimental than beneficial. If his cousins and high school social experiences shape the coolness that is funny, charming and collected, his father becomes the extended, symbolic embodiment of the cool defined by personal accountability and responsibility, "My dad taught me ways that evolved me into a man, such as being a leader, a protector, being responsible, and being a hard worker. I must say that he has done a good job at doing it." Carlas draws on common themes of patriarchal masculinity, such as performing leadership and being a protector to characterize the ethical dimensions that contribute in the maturation of his coolness. The influence of a paternal presence that he finds beneficial in his construction of black manhood keeps his coolness grounded in an ethic of black male responsibility and accountability.

Carlas draws on the self serving practices that he learns from cousins of how to interact with women and his father's experiences losing his job and subsequently unable to provide for their family in order to construct a complex masculine identity defined by the contradictions of masculine egocentrism and selflessness. Both of these concepts signify a black patriarchal masculinity that at different moments in Carlas's narrative resist both negative and progressive masculinity. He demonstrates his acquiesce to hegemonic masculinity as he characterizes his disregard for others, specifically women, and sees female conquest as masculine competition,

Learning from my cousins going into middle school I sort of became like 'the man'...I really began to not care about anybody but myself...I kind of played with girls to see how many more I could get than my friends...It was like I was girl hunting, and I was just waiting to feast on women.

Yet later on in his autobiography, Carlas experiences struggle in his life that shakes the normalcy of his family's economic security when his father loses his job. How he reads the situational struggle in his personal life allows him to revisit his learned conceptions about masculinity in his life. He recognizes alternative representations through his father that spotlights the shift in focus the autobiography takes to portraying an alternative masculine identity,

While in my ninth grade year of high school my dad made me realize that certain things that were beliefs about men were wrong. All men had a different side to them... When my pops lost his job due to a job related injury I saw a different side to him... After he lost his job, in order to do his manly duties he had [to] do something that he wasn't used to... Watching my dad like that made me work pretty hard my junior year of high school...

Humility, transparency, and hardwork are reoccurring themes that shape Carlas's layered understanding of masculinity as his narrative unfolds. These themes occur in association with how he constructs his father and how his father constructs him through how he responds to his own struggles of maintaining a job to provide for Carlas. Within the context of developing goals for working hard in school, Carlas draws on the struggles of his father losing his job, which renders him unable to provide for his family, in order to revise his own masculine identity. In the aftermath, Carlas's sense of successful manhood is now predicated on an academic achievement that he attributes to a work ethic and perseverance through struggle learned from his father. When I asked him about the roles that men played in his ability and ambitions coming to college he stated, "My daddy he showed me the ropes... he showed me how to be a positive [influence]... he looked out for me you know". This would also be echoed in his narrative in acknowledging when he "crossed that graduation stage".

Reflecting on his accomplishment of graduating from high school he references the values his father teaches him that implicate masculine responsibility as synonymous with academic achievement, “I...had to use what I acquired, and learned about being a man and put it to use.” Carlas’s experiences intrigued me because his understanding of masculinity, though influenced by learned sexist male patterns of behavior, are kept in check by the modeled masculinity and gendered life instructions of his father.

There is a self-accountability that emerges in the narrative text and in our discussions that suggests an evolving process of self-reflection that is leading to revision and ultimately an invention of alternative identity. In referencing literature that we had read in class, Carlas alludes to how his interactions with in-class readings lead him to a process of self-revision. Carlas revises the black masculine cool that he has come to embody. Students in the class were required to write a reflective narrative about an idea or concept that they were attempting to revise in their essay. As a teacher I saw revision as an opportunity for my students to challenge, change, or complicate an existing idea. Our writing course was grounded on the idea that inquiry based writing involved the opportunity to offer new perspective in our investigations of ideas in our own histories as well as in the academic texts that we engaged as readers. As Carlas explains the choices he made in his writing, he saw revision as first aligning multiple ideas about masculinity in his past and then discovering “another masculine side.” Carlas demonstrates below how he uses the knowledge he gains from readings to practice self revision in a way that heightens self awareness and accountability

Gradually I'm coming along with expressing myself better because after reading some articles from our...book I understand that not expressing your feelings and emotions can allow you to build them all up inside...Reading certain passages made me realize that mistreating women isn't cute...I tried to bring out different ideas from different perspectives. I put in some personal experiences to try and connect with the reader. My conclusion sums up the stereotypes about men and how I [may be] one of the ones who have found out that I have another masculine side.

What it seems that Carlas attempts to discover in his autobiography is a progressive understanding of his identity as a black male. His coolness exists in a matrix of contradicting symbolic meanings in which Carlas sorts through and interrogates through personal reflection and storytelling. The other "masculine side" he mentions above and discovers through reflection, situational struggles, and paternal influences is often caught in a conundrum of social expectations, peer pressure, and the struggle to preserve the self across contexts. In Carlas's case, as a black college male at a predominantly white university, employing multiple facets of the cool enables him to construct a critical space within his writing to interpret, interrogate, and revise masculine coolness in ways that make him more aware of self and his surroundings.

### **"Hard Knock Times": The Life of Anthony James**

*I am in many eyes not just a man but an unordinary man. The color of my skin makes me different, the way I walk the way I talk is special.*

*From my mother I learned how to be myself and that knowledge is power.*

*Anthony*

Anthony, a 19-year old Freshman brings me a graded essay that he has the opportunity to revise. He is taking a freshman-writing course entitled "Racial and

Ethnic Experience” with a black female instructor. His first writing assignment, one awkwardly loaded with assumptions, asked him to write a narrative about how he has experienced racism in America. Anthony received a grade of zero on this assignment. I tried to make sense of the grade. It was, after all, a completed draft that made an attempt to meet the assignment objectives. “Well did you ask your teacher what you needed to do to get a better grade on your essay?” I ask him after reading his narrative. “Yeah, she said I talk too much in my writing and that I need to write like a white person”. Anthony’s teacher was a graduate student in the African American studies program. I knew her from our graduate mentor meetings; her teaching assistantship was sourced through our writing program. Needless to say, based on her area of study, I felt it a little ironic that this was her solution for Anthony in crafting a strategy for revision. But as stated by bell hooks, black male learners often face the reality that black unenlightened teachers stereotype them or force them to jump the same racial hurdles that white teachers do (37). Anthony was in a serious dilemma. The instructor’s statement suggested that writing as practice in the university was couched in an ideologically specific notion of academic access (and success) that had both racial and racist implications. And though there has been much research that tackles this issue dealing with student’s rights to their own language (Cambell, Smitherman, Troutman, Gilyard, Delpit) such a blatant comment from a teacher to a young and impressionable freshman writer could have future implications for how a black male is supposed to see himself at a predominantly white university. Furthermore it acknowledges larger institutional concerns of how

black men at large land grand universities must overcome obstacles in curricular approaches to the teaching of writing.

For Anthony it communicated that he needed write to write white to write right, or in a Duboisian sense, to see himself as two selves, and be non-black in his writing, whatever that meant. In this moment I was more interested in what Anthony was doing in his writing that warranted the grade that he received. On a social and psychological level I also wondered how Anthony would make sense of the statement and decide what this meant for him as an African American male, a student writer, and as a member of an academic community. Interesting enough, the content of his writing answered how would and has responded, directly or indirectly, to these questions. How he framed overcoming struggle as a common occurrence and at times a necessity to his academic success as a black male spoke to this current dilemma because it was indeed a racist one. Over the course of my interactions with Anthony as tutor and teacher, Anthony's writing had referenced how he overcame situational struggles as a black male that called for him to invent multiple identities. These identities were fundamentally connected to how Anthony saw himself embodying these characteristics while navigating multiple situations that would call for him to negotiate or compromise who he was as a black male.

Anthony's initial draft was riddled with comments, some vague, others at their worst implicative of a diffusion of responsibility to teach linguistic difference. At this point, the only personal stake Anthony seemed to have in the assignment and thus in the process of revising his essay was to "make sure it sounded right." In looking at Anthony's personal narrative, his introduction acknowledges his subject position as a

black male. He also performs a general awareness of how black male identity signifies in a general sense as he know it,

As a child and maybe forever I as a Black male will be first thought of as a drug dealer not a C.E.O, a thug and not a college student. In this paper I will give my trials and tribulations I overcame to become a college student not a thug, a future C.E.O and not a drug dealer.

His introduction to his audience comes with a rhetorical agenda of inventing an identity that counters stereotypical black masculinity and challenges hegemonic narratives of black male anti-social behavior. Anthony's textual awareness of how specific identity makers that he embodies (black and male) function within a larger social context of black male identity speaks to a larger history of struggle for agency to interrogate a colonial narrative of black containment that semiotically connects black male bodies to sociopathic behavior. But what is most intriguing is that in Anthony's thesis statement he sets out to also complicate discourses of power that have regulated how black male identities can signify in places he feels are not traditionally associated with black male life. Therefore, in setting out to let readers know how he overcomes racial narratives that precede him, he also implicitly challenges the regulatory conditions for subjectivity that are given him by a writing instructor who suggests that he linguistically and racially pass in his writing. Anthony acknowledges this in the passage that follows in which he further invents the identity of a writer who's racial makeup and past constructs him as a unique individual who is given rigidly defined paths to choose from in life, "I am in many eyes not just a man



but an unordinary man. The color of my skin makes me different, the way I walk the way I talk is special”.

Anthony’s couches these experiences in an understanding of literacy, or in what he calls his own “homemade education”. In referencing a chapter of Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Anthony sees his literacy history as primarily situated within the everyday experiences of his home life. “What I felt was most important was that literacy does not only come from school it comes from a variety of learning experiences and areas... Whether you are reading, writing, and speaking you developed those skills before you went to school, specifically in your home”. How Anthony reads his experiences growing up in a poor black single parent home frames his understanding of literacy as “being able to gain from whatever [experiences] you come across”. As an example he references particular values boys in his position might stand to learn from paternal parenting, “You can grow up without a father [and] learn to be a man on your own but when you have a father there to guide you then what you pick up on your [own] is an added bonus”. This reference implies that within the context of writing about learning literacy, Anthony locates his experiences within rhetorical situations that call for him to be functionally literate<sup>23</sup> in ones role as a gendered being in society. For Anthony the value of literacy is connected to acquiring the knowledge needed to be a male provider for a family. He demonstrates this when he narrates the value of his literacy as connected to experiences that enable him to mature fast as a young black male,

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<sup>23</sup> See “Functional Literacy in a Developmental Perspective” in *Precursors of Functional Literacy*.

At school they use books as tools to acquire knowledge which in return you would be labeled as literate. While average second graders were out having fun I was growing up helping to take care of my first nephew, a responsibility many eight year olds did not have. Instead of learning strategic moves in connect four or checkers I was learning the basics in changing diapers and making bottles...At that point in my life I did not think of what I was learning as literacy, but what I have acquired in knowledge since then has shown me otherwise. I was taking part in gaining knowledge so that one day I can take care of my own child.

Anthony narrates these experiences within the context of an absent father that he references often in both of his narratives. A reoccurring theme that connects Anthony's understanding of his racial, gendered, and literate past is the consistent presence of a female figure, his mother and the absent presence of a forsaking father. Determination, humility, and will power function as heuristics Anthony for inventing his identity as a black male in his writing, one's that he primarily attributes to a mother raising four kids on her own.

Mom taught me a lot which helped me get this far. I learned a woman's worth and dedication by watching my mother struggle to put food on the table and [clothes] on our backs...My mom is the lady I give the credit to for molding me just right and leading me down the right way...Like my mother I also bring a positive attitude about rough situations in life.

Anthony's construction of his black male identity is based on concepts of self-determination and perseverance. These concepts are aligned with a feminine narrative of black womanhood in which he draws from in order to invent his own identity and who he wants to be as a black man. Evident across both narratives about race, identity, literacy and gender is a consistent female presence that Anthony uses to revise a black masculinity that interrogates a present narrative in his life of black male absenteeism and nihilism. Anthony draws on a black feminine narrative in order to

chart a genealogy of black male socialization influenced by a trope of black female strength to understand a literate past shaped by situational struggles, the ability to adapt to adversity in multiple contexts, and family ties. In this genealogy Anthony initially positions himself at a crossroads of two possible selves, and demonstrates how he responds to situational struggles as learning moments:

As a Black man I have many pathways to choose from, such as me being the next father to abandon his family or working hard to become a lawyer to protect the innocent...Like most children of my color I grew up in a fatherless household which made my siblings and I mature rather quickly. Having to look out for mom when things would put a burden on her was a regular routine. Having to look after my nephew when I was in elementary showed me what a man was supposed to be doing opposed to my father's decision not to take care of his.

Here Anthony takes the subject position of testifier, truth telling through narrated experiences in order to make the point that the effect of absent male figures in his life played a critical role in the types of male responsibilities given to him at an early age. As an African American language practice, Anthony's testimony can be located within a larger narrative of freedom struggle in which members of black communities use testimony as a reflective space of interpretation and meaning making. In explaining black manhood and masculine behavior, Anthony uses historical experiences with absentee fatherhood in his life to create a persuasive understanding of his own sense of what type of black male he wants to be. In this excerpt, Anthony demonstrates learning masculinity as a circumstantial act in which he finds himself having to make adjustments to unwarranted social conditions. What's telling about this excerpt are the multiple references he makes to his gendered racial identity as shaped by the rhetorical situations of parenting and poverty.

Anthony's sense of racial pride is cultivated in his ability to manage and endure these experiences. Yet his sense of pride as a male is in connected to his ability to mimic perseverance and determination as demonstrated by his black mother. Thus, Anthony's narrative writing invents both black and male as progressive concepts that are located in the recounted memories of a black mother who teaches him how these constructs can work within a functional system of "communication", "teamwork", "determination", and "will power". Anthony locates and constructs functional masculinity within a narrative of black single parent familyhood - one that is often stereotyped as dysfunctional. His narrated experience of his family "coming together as a team" to clean the house best exemplifies this functionality predicated on how a mother teaches him how to communicate, read, and work collaboratively – all of which are requirements that he later states are concepts that he employs as a student:

Teamwork was first taught in my home not football practice. We were soldiers while my mother was the general. When it was time to clean the house, we would gather around whoever was in charge, then the commander would call out the duties. A few of our senses came into play when we did the chores, we needed to know what was being used through seeing, and by smelling we knew if someone had wrongly mixed chemicals... Teamwork involved literacy because it takes communication at the highest levels to get the job done. Before I ever took a speech class I began understanding tone of voice through my mom hollering at us or simply being frustrated. I knew what she looked like when she was mad and sound like when she was mad. When it came to cleaning up we were mainly on separate ends of the house so I needed to know how to tell the difference between which brothers was yelling and which sister was hollering.

Anthony's narrated histories of literacy, racism, and black manhood were all linked to the presence of a black mother who occupied and modeled a leadership role in ways

that challenge patriarchal masculinity roles of men as the head of the household. He redefines literacy as non-conventional and circumstantial.

What seems to be at the source of Anthony's story is the belief that there is always an obstacle to overcome. Within Anthony's narratives these obstacles are couched in a history of circumstantial struggles that Anthony associates with specific themes: absentee fathers, economic hardships, resilience, and strong motherhood. How Anthony responds to these struggles becomes reflective in his approach in how he responds to getting a zero on his essay for his writing course on Racial and Ethnic experiences in America. After Anthony tells me the advice that his writing instructor gives him for receiving a better grade I ask him, "so did you decide to try to write like a white person?" "No!", Anthony says emphatically. "Well what did you do then?" I ask him. "I just took my time writing my sentences out". Anthony did more than this. He incorporated his present struggle with writing his essay as a thematic anecdote that implied the struggles of racism he was asked to write about. Yet he left it up to readers to interpret the final message in a way that allowed for multiple interpretations.

When I received a zero on my first writing assignment, I knew that I had a chance at rewriting it. What stood out the most when I was writing the paper was that how I grew as [a] young man. It was a challenging process to begin and to end. I got through the challenging process with faith, determination, and humility. To better yourself you have to always face adversity...Through determination I was able to show my focus knowing I can be a better writer...What I took from this experience the most was that adversity challenges you to make you more grounded than you were at first, so that you become a better person.

How Anthony decides to (re) invent himself afterwards is not through an out-of-body racial experience where he channels an imagined approach to writing white. In fact, Anthony remembers just sitting down and combing through his draft, reading and rereading sentences to “make sure they sounded right”. And so when he brought drafts to me, this is what he asked me to make sure of as well. Throughout the course of the semester we had conversations about the relationship between audience and writing style and I give him brief lessons on characteristics of African American English and how to locate their patterns in his writing.

Caleb Corkery states that the narrative allows the student to interpret or translate their experience to suit their position as a student (51). For Jabari, Carlas, and Anthony the literacy narrative allowed them the opportunity to engage the meaning of literacy in their lives and reflect on the role social participants played that made literacy meaningful to them. The nature of the writing assignments required that they draw upon their personal experiences in ways that would give them opportunities to reflect on significant rhetorical moments that shaped their literacies. How they understood their gender as related to their literacy lives was a significant discovery for me as a researcher. When they related literacy to their lives, gender was a major social influence in what motivated them to achieve literate aims, such as going to college and pursuing careers. The influences of father figures and social literacies learned at home carried over into their academic lives. This becomes clear in how Anthony learns how to be a part of a new learning community, “When I would go to school and we would gather in a circle during class reading time I used my discipline skills that I gathered at home to become a better reader...”. Yet what

becomes even more clear is how they frame their masculinities within a definition of literacy that is anchored in an ability to overcome situational struggle, to be self – determined, and to manage multiple contexts (academic and social) in order to achieve success.

It is here where their stories invoke the slave narrative tradition explored in chapter two that makes synonymous the attainment of masculinity with the apprehension of literacy. Literacy was a necessity to be cultural participants in a culture that had no place slave subjects. Yet they forge a space to be visible and to signify in a different way. Similar to the male writers in my case studies, literacy becomes the tool that black male writers associate with challenging existing public images and narratives about black male life. Spotlighting the language practices of everyday life, conditioned responses of coolness, and gender influences characterize literacy learning as a circumstantial event that involved either how to get through life or how to survive. This literacy as survival trope echoes a past where one's existence as that other than slave was predicated on one's ability to be aware of alternatives. Frederick Douglas, Olaudah Equiano and Nat Turner speak to this in what can be described as individual moments of consciousness raising in which they learn how to use for their own ends. The connecting thread between these traditions is that while these black college males engage stereotypical themes of the black male as thug, economically disempowered, or hypersexual – all that have been used rhetorically by dominant culture to keep black men situated in the social margins -they explore, challenge and revise these tropes through reflective and reflexive writing. They imagine and construct alternatives.

Similarly to rappers in their narrated tales, they also use storytelling to both acknowledge and rewrite the script of the black male within the larger American narrative of black life. Although, in a different way, they do this by demonstrating alternative possibilities of black male identities as engineers, present fathers, and interrogators of sexist thinking. Both traditions make the claim that black males can use imagination in any way that they choose, whether it be romanticized notions of gangster life or to fuel ambitions of managing one's own hotel one day. The practice of imagining is a rhetorical statement against a colonial history that one can be whomever he wants. It speaks to hip hop's public statement that we look at black male identity as fluid, self aware and reflexive. As black male college writers learn to see revision as a rhetorical practice of creating new meanings of both literacy and masculinity in their own lives, writing becomes a space of invention of their literate and gendered identities. It becomes a space in which these identities are merging and informing one another.

In the last chapter I make the case for how we might understand black masculine literacies in New Literacy discussions and the value of thinking about literacy broadly for writing course themed around gender. The narrative space has proven in this chapter to be an important space for heightened consciousness, knowledge making, and revision. How might storytelling function as a space of black production? Furthermore, how might forms of black production as they are identified across genres and time useful for how we teach invention as a social act in the writing classroom? Chapter five explores how we might use the space of storytelling as production in discussions about gender in the composition course.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Where Do We Go From (T)here: Stortellin' and New Conversations for Black Invention**

At a university job talk presentation a rush of anxiety overcomes me. I am standing in front of faces gathered around a large table in a small room. The department chair that introduces me has mispronounced the title of my dissertation. I smile and nod. I become even more anxious for what I'm about to say first: "My project looks at how black masculine literacy functions across three traditions: slave literacy narratives, gangsta rap, and in the literacy narratives of three black males on a college campus." I look up to see some eyes in the crowd squint as if puzzled. Then I continue, "An idea that I use to frame this investigation is that there is a direct relationship between the rhetorical contexts that black males find themselves in and the literacy practices that are developed in order to make manageable meanings in these contexts". Knowing the density of these statements, I knew they warranted questions that would follow, especially by the literature scholars in the audience who seemed to squirm in anticipation to ask, "So what do slave narratives have to do with hip hop or black college male literacy practices, for that matter?"

Great question. I was indeed stretching across different traditions and time periods, defining appropriated white masculinity in Olaudah Equiano's *Narrative* as a rhetorical practice that could speak to Jay – Z's (re) invention of the Italian gangster. I stood on claims that the literacy narratives of black college males from working class black communities are a reflection of historical moments found in Frederick Douglass's *Autobiography* that linked black manhood to literacy. As far as "mixed

methods” has been defined in research about methodology I, as one dissertation committee member stated, was doing something rather “odd”. I had a lot of explaining to do. In this chapter I will spotlight some key themes that connected these traditions and why it matters to read them alongside each other in order to understand black male identity kaleidoscopically, along a spectrum of traditions, disciplines, literacies and rhetorical practices that speak to each other. I then explain how each concept works to inform teaching practices and assignments in a gender themed writing course. Analyzing black male life across genres and disciplines, using both qualitative and textual hermeneutics has implications for designing courses that take an interdisciplinary approach in studying gender, rhetoric and literacy. Finally I will explain how studying literacy empirically can enhance mentorship of black college males in their everyday lives.

### **Story as Production in the Academy**

These seemingly disjointed moments are all connected by a practice of imagining possible selves and possible lives. The practice of storytelling, a staple of the African American oral tradition, is a connecting thread between these different contexts. It is one of many approaches that these black male writers, orators, and rappers commonly take in doing rhetoric. It seems to me that story telling becomes a way of doing black culture, a way of working through and overcoming struggles. But this is nothing new. It is through looking at their stories they tell that we can come to typify black masculine literacy as a way of self making that exist on a continuum framed by histories, complicated by the constant evolution of culture, and embodied

in the lives of young black college males who use writing as a space to “overcome cultural obstacles” (Corkery 48). Furthermore, the story becomes an enabling space for black males to imagine and construct possible selves through first through language and then invokes alternative acts of composing. Reading how struggle as a theme functions with the space of story across genres is where we can broadly locate and define the invention of the black voice, rhetorical strategies of self making, and tactics of resistance to colonial representations of black bodies and black male life. Struggle becomes the nascent space of black masculine rhetorical practices. As we come to understand these spaces of struggle as meaningful for black male students we can identify them as rhetorical situations that call on multiple literacies, multiple ways of responding and situating oneself that are often connected to how black males are gendered socially, politically, and racially. It is in this space that we can understand how rhetorical situations in the academy work similarly in that they call for us to negotiate our identities in ways that are not always conducive to our cultures. “Keeping it real” can go wrong when attempts to forge connections between one’s culture and the expectations of the academy to signify a certain way as an academic do not align. Language movements and the work of compositionists and cultural rhetoric scholars have made the case that what actually happens in the “contact zones” of a liberal arts learning environment does not always reflect the openness to difference and the reciprocity of respect to that difference that the term “liberal” should signify.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See “Students Rights to Their Own Language”, Smitherman et al, and “When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own” by Jacqueline Jones-Royster.

## **Gender, Language, and Autobiography – Telling Our Stories to Each Other**

At the intersections of multiple perspectives is the space where listening and respecting difference creates the opportunity to complicate, interrogate and make knowledge. The classroom initially comes to mind when I think about these intersections as learning spaces, but these spaces can and must exist beyond the classroom as well. They also must be located where ideas and ideologies are lived out and normalized. These aren't necessarily "contact zones" as Marie Louis Pratt would define them. These spaces are more interstitial in how they allow ideas to be generated in between moments of dialectical exchange, those mundane everyday moments in which we experience and get to know each other in different ways. These are moments when interacting in our differences often call for reflexivity that asks individuals to consider the possibilities of the other and to complicate one's own responses and feelings about difference with each other. I have found this space as having the greatest potential in a course that teaches gender, race, and popular culture as constructs where we can locate multiple differences constantly competing for validity, visibility and access to power.

As a scholar who has taught gender studies courses, I have found multiple critical perspectives as useful for engaging the ideas of the other. Critical thinking practices shaped by black feminist thought, queer theory, black male feminism, and critical theory work towards constructing a way of listening and function as a important too within the learning space of the interstitial. This is especially useful when we talk and teach about a progressive masculinity that puts words into action and is always in a reflective state of revision.

In, “Process This: Undergraduate Writing in Composition Studies” Nancy DeJoy defines revision beyond the process of peer reviewed responses to student texts, in order that students might understand revision as also changing existing ideas, definitions, or concepts that exist in the world. This approach to revision invites opportunities for students using critical thinking as a practice of continual development as thinker and writer. As a teacher it gives me a pedagogical approach to introducing various critical thinking approaches to thinking about gender in the context of writing and rhetoric.

This becomes useful when I ask students to think and write autobiographical narratives about themes such as gender as shaped within domains of literacy – ways that we use language to think about and communicate gender in everyday life. As John Alexander states in *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies*, students learn about these themes in multiple discourses, not all of which are developed in school settings. Many are part of students’ “underlife, the often-rich milieus in which students socialize, work, and learn from one another, as well as popular culture” (64). It is in these spaces where students aren’t always asked to pay close attention to the idiosyncrasies of dominant culture that have implications for how they shape their perspectives about race and gender. Revision within the context of critical thinking can mean enacting resistance and transformation of ideologies about how men should be and alternative ways they might see themselves that challenge hegemonic masculinity.

The gender autobiography that I assign asks students to write a short essay that reflects on how gender has influenced the way they think or how gender has

impacted their everyday lives. They usually focus on experiences they have faced or those observed in their home or community. As they make these decisions, they have to do more than tell a story or strive for self-expression. They also reflect on the significance of the gender issues implied by the narrative. For my courses in which I have had all men, I have learned that this essay has been an opportunity for them to not only work through their histories of being socialized by the examples of male behavior they have around them, but it also generates a transparency of their life stories that often does not align with their in class responses of how boys are to express themselves. Students talk about their fathers being alcoholics, strict disciplinarians and physical abusers. Others discuss how they grew up without fathers and absentee dads who are always at work. One student from rural Michigan narrates the value of having a stay at home dad and a mom who works. He talks about how this allowed him to approach more critically the stereotypical narratives of gender roles in the household. As stated in the previous chapter Jabari recalls a father who took care of his mother after she had lung cancer and struggled to take care of him and his two older brothers. Yet in the aftermath of her death, and later his father's he remembers the value of humility and hard work that his dad taught him. He writes about using the memory of his father as a motivator to become a chemical engineer. In both cases, storytelling became a beginning place for these young college males to begin to not only think critically about their histories but through writing, to engage in a revision process that implicates feminist thinking as an analytical strategy to engage and complicate histories of masculinity. They were able to see revision as looking beyond merely making changes in their text but also revising the choices they

made in which examples of masculinity they had chosen to follow. Many of their narrated examples were revisionist narratives in and of themselves.

Revision along with writing can become a social act in the writing course, especially as we think about how we can approach and read about cultural differences in language practice and knowledge making. Peer review sessions function as a space of possibility for this occurrence. After reading and grading students' gender autobiographies, I always wonder what the peer review experience was like for them. Most of them appreciate the time to get writerly feedback. But I am aware that many who write essays reveal deeply personal and sensitive issues about their lives and are relatively transparent about the men in their lives. Peer review sessions become a place that asks them to develop a language to discuss these issues with other writers within an academic context. This time of exchange generates more than a space that invites other writers and readers to engage and interact with each other through dialog. It also is a space where male students can begin to challenge hegemonic masculinities, a space where they can discuss gender norms critically and how they might be revised first through textual practices. As their teacher I see these as moments of intervention for me in getting them to make connections between their dialogues and critical/feminist practices of taking a stance against sexism, and how these discussion can be seen as identifying with larger struggles of marginalized groups from the locality of their peer review sessions.

In my gender studies courses writing is a space where these young freshman males can work through deeply personal issues about their masculinity. In their reflections on the writing process of these essays, one writer writes, "Sometimes you

know things about yourself, but when you put those things into a situation where you're looking at them through another perspective (as a writer), you learn even more about yourself". Another writer wanted "people to stop and think of their own experiences and how they can relate them to stereotypes so that they can do their best to try and eliminate stereotypes from their thinking". Through their narratives I see such comments as attempts of reflexive thinking through their stories and using revision to invent practical steps towards developing their thinking processes. Revision can be a useful method for introducing critical thinking practices for students when complicating metaphors of masculinity. It can be a beginning place to not only unpack preconceived notions behind feminism, queer perspectives, or racially mediated realities, but to see these as frameworks for inventing new metaphors of masculinity in ways that can be relevant to their own lives.

### **(Re)Imagining Black Invention**

Throughout the chapters black invention in its various manifestations is a concept for understanding what black males are using for doing history, constructing black masculinity in popular black culture, and as a way black college males are constructing definitions of literacy in ways that forge connections to their racial-gendered subject positions. While the rhetorical practices that define freedom struggle for slave figures, Douglas, Turner, and Equiano involve appropriating white male subject positions of leadership, mercantilism, and Christian masculinity to construct black masculinity, they also lay a foundational context for building taxonomies of black invention. For example, appropriation in the slave narrative theme as an adaptive tactic of self-making functions as a heuristic for African



American rhetorical production of multiple selves and meanings for contemporary black male identity and masculinity that push ideological boundaries of black representation. In other words, understanding the black male as an American construct implicates the rhetoric of ideological language practices reflected in the beliefs and values in communities during slavery.

For black males in this project, learning how to be in the world and how to respond to the discourse that comes with being black and male typifies a rhetoric of freedom struggle that is situated in everyday life. It is here where we can understand how literacy functions as a condition for access into dominant discourses and thus how specific literacy practices work as invention and ultimately functions as counter hegemonic practice. Black invention in this sense is the rhetorical strategy of troubling the boundaries of colonial discourse that determine how black males can exist in the world. It is both the product and production of double consciousness. Historicizing appropriation as an invention strategy in slave narratives - doing history as a counter hegemonic practice – enables a broader representation of black masculine resistant strategies to be studied within the canon of African American rhetoric. By this I mean that historicizing black invention enables us to theorize how black male identities have existed on a continuum of both conditional and contesting subjectivity. It further demonstrates how black male writers have historically worked towards constructing an authentic black male voice through Eurocentric writing practices while drawing on an Afrocentric oral tradition of story telling. This conditional/contesting continuum is where we can build theories of language practice,

representation, and black male identity performance in writing - all which have implications for how we might study the complexities of black production.

This continuum further allows us to problematize the conditions of form, style, and the delivery of knowledge on urban black life. That hip hop culture as a black domain and space of rhetorical production does not always sift out its moral shortcomings, but rather uses them as apparatus and as political and economical strategy, often keeps it at the cusp of inclusion into academic discussions in our field. The problem with hip-hop is that it depicts and often celebrates many of the deeply troubling problems of sexism, homophobia, capitalism and misogyny. While it acts as a space of resistance, it also concedes to its conditions for visibility, which is to reproduce and romanticize these tropes. That hip-hop is and has been a perennial space for the black male voice aligns it on the conditional/contesting continuum of black male identity in which black males are constantly negotiating how they can exist in the public sphere. They are constantly bargaining with capitalizing corporate forces for visibility and for the full rights to their bodies. How this negotiation continues to play itself out is where we might continue our investigation of how black male invention strategies continue to evolve as the culture of capitalism evolves. But black male rappers who remain docile to being typecast to narrow images of black pathology must be more resistant in their invention practices. Until then the fundamental problem in hip-hop will continue to be that it is considered for little more than its stylistic characteristics and word play and not for what it embodies as an expression of human experience and resistance. And because of this we run risk of losing sight of what figures into what types of production are available for urban

black males who contribute to the larger work of recovery of the urban black male voice as writer, rapper, activist and academic.

### **Using Black Male Invention Practices as a Strategy for Thinking Critically about our Interactions with Black Culture**

Urban black male youth culture is broadly represented and spreads from popular culture to the academy. It has been introduced in the academy by cultural studies scholars such as Tricia Rose, Michael Eric Dyson, and Harold Cruse, and by literacy scholars such as Ernest Morrell and Jabari Mahiri, Kermitt Campbell, and Gwendolyn Pough. But we must be more active in acknowledging that the conversation on urban black culture is a site of rhetoric and alternative ways of learning. This conversation needs to mature and expand, just like the culture itself continues to do so. For example, making the discussion of urban black male youth culture and literacy practice relative in my writing course is as much a political agenda as it is a pedagogical one. Teaching rhetoric and writing courses at a predominately white institution finds me constantly introjecting what I think my white students are thinking about me as their teacher. For many of them, I'm the first black and male teacher they have ever had. With me being darker skinned and athletic, and relatively close to them in age, I am aware that my body is marked differently than theirs'. Thus, the temptation to typecast me as Other manifest itself when they ask me did I play college football or do I have 50 Cent's latest album.

These courses are usually themed around literacy. We explore the relationships between literacy events that occur beyond the book and are situated in

our personal lives, thus being reflected in how we construct our various identities. We come to an understanding that literacy is more than just the ability to read and write and that it extends far into the dimensions of the social and cultural. We grapple with the notion that the ability to “read the world” also means that the world is reading us. Therefore we define literacy broadly and with complexity. Mike Rose helps us recognize the politics of canons of knowledge, while Ernest Morrell points out for us the differences between dominant literacies and those marginalized on the street corners of inner city Detroit that are learned in non-school settings. And although I take issues with Paulo Freire’s missionary approach with peasants and pedagogy and his failure to adequately acknowledge women in his work, he gives us insight on how literacy practices are tied to power relations. Combining these critical approaches is useful for building a collective understanding of literacy, one that would allow us to “redefine the self” through “confronting dominant ideological language” and, through critical thinking, enacting resistance and transformation through textually based practices (7). Black urban youth culture, whose foundation is built on ongoing resistance and (re) identification, is as good a place as any to engage my students to think beyond the traditional “canon” of knowledge and what forms knowledge can take. What’s more, I want my students to discover for themselves that beyond much of the popular iterations of black life, beyond its commercial representations, urban black culture can function as an intellectual space of black production.

This notion informs a way to talk about the relations between black urban youth culture and rhetoric in a way that considers how they are intimately linked to

language practices. Furthermore it engages the question of how we might rhetorically study how the word becomes materialized in everyday life through embodied practices of black masculinity and representation. We explore the significance of the visual image of the hip-hop rap artist and the role of visibility for black males in popular media. Making connections between the body, cultural identity, and black masculinity as performance for specific rap artists, invokes questions about literacy as a culturally situated practice and how the meaning of these practices change in public spaces. We brainstorm on the board names of rap artists that come to mind when we consider images that are the most memorable, resonating or popular. As an invention strategy, this enables students to draw on their own experiences with hip hop culture - be it through the media, as experts on hip hop, or from popular knowledge. Upon choosing a list of names we are able to do a Google image search in class and project the images on the front screen and list the first thing that comes to mind upon looking at the image. We also list the symbolic markers of these images and how they are working rhetorically not just within popular culture, but also in other contexts in which they are a part of in their own lives and home communities. In creating a list of metaphors for each image we are then able to discuss where these metaphors came from, how they are (re) produced and what role we might play individually in this (re) production.

This move is important because it allows students not only to recognize their often passive processes of consuming images in popular culture, but how their often passive compliance with narrow images of black culture implicates their participation in the continual production of these images as well. When asking where specific

metaphors and meanings attached to images come from, resisting clichéd answers such as “they come from society” is a matter of choosing to diffuse responsibility on the part of the viewer/consumer and to critically engage our roles as participants in the dominant culture. Diffusing responsibility often does not admonish us to take personal responsibility and accountability in how we read the world and more specifically how we read race and gender. Even if we say that we have no relations with oppressive or stereotypical images and play no role in their circulation, our apathy or refusal to challenge them gives consent to their purpose and power to influence and misrepresent. Students must see how their language practices of identification can contribute to hegemonic discourses of representation, and how these identification practices can be symbiotically connected to larger controversial interpretations of reality.

As an assignment for one course, the sequence that follows brainstorming famous rap artists and metaphors they conjure, we pay closer attention to how the body functions rhetorically as a message in context. In focusing on gangsta rap images we hone in on the common narrative of how black and brown men are constituted by the desire for power and visibility and how their bodies become a constructed manifestation of these tropes. This notion allows us to understand how bodies can stand in as cultural artifacts: as products of a particular culture embedded and canvassed with cultural meaning. As a class we engage the public displays of the body by rap artists as a performed practice of self authoring, but more specifically a critical literacy practice that attempts to reclaim an identity, “which involves stolen, lost, and sometimes distorted bodies” (Kirkland 140). As we see in the pictures by

rap artists 50 Cent and Jay Z in chapter two, the body becomes a landscape for creative art form. It is a site where the rhetorical performances about black male identity, history, and ambition are narrated and contextualized. Gangster rappers Lil' Wayne and 50 Cent for example have been on the covers of magazines showcasing their muscular physiques marked with ink that showcase metaphorical phrases and images that narrate histories and social dimensions of urban black male life. For example, the late Tupac's most visible tattoo "Thug Life" that was situated across his stomach symbolized the stream of consciousness that threads much of his rap lyrics about the social pathology of neglect and racial marginality that permeates black communities and consequentially defines the life of a thug. Kirkland describes this type of self-authoring as a literacy practice in which black males wrestle with the challenges of rearticulating or "inflecting" versions of history through alternative expressions that, through their own voices, reflect the narratives of their own experiences.

As an inquiry based exercise, students are asked to investigate bodies in hip-hop culture as cultural artifacts. They need to demonstrate how hip-hop artists traffic their bodies in public spaces in a way that reflected a cultural dimension of American masculinity. They are asked to demonstrate how the body as an artifact shared common themes with other artifacts in hip-hop culture, such as a gun, jewelry, or clothing. The overall objective is for them to understand that when they are confronted with various images, or points of view, we have to do more than just decide whether or not we identify with these things. We have to also make decisions

about where we stand on political, ethical, or commercial interests that represent or misrepresent groups of people.

### **Teaching Hip Hop as Rhetoric**

Hip Hops' local and global impact as a counter hegemonic culture insist that we acknowledge its language and multiple forms of expression for more than what it offers us stylistically. We must see the instantiations of black production in hip hop music, lifestyle and activism as culturally situated rhetoric that is always in a nascent state, always evolving in the event of circumstance. Thus how we teach African American rhetoric using hip hop culture begins with its practitioners and learning how their knowledge of culture, community, freedom struggle, and "making a way out of no way" informs how they construct a unique history of language practice that is more than just some inflection or appropriation of an Anglo experience. Thus, how we learn about this extension of the African American literacy tradition becomes fundamentally connected to how black rhetoric is disseminated in its multiple forms - as "black noise", black talk, or black coolness as resistance.

Engaging the meaning of black production in classroom discussions, as it functions within this complex contradiction of identity performance, insist that we look at how acts of composing can have consequences that reinforce traditions. And we know that tradition can function as maintenance of oppression. In other words, rhetorical situations in which we attempt to produce knowledge are always political because they call for us to communicate in a certain way for visibility or acceptance. For example, when we teach research writing one thing we are teaching is the investigation of a discourse, how that discourse functions and what that discourse



values. But when we often ask students to investigate this discourse or “find a gap” that has not been addressed this is not without engaging with and complying to the rules of the discourse – rules that have political implications in terms of how and who can speak on a subject matter. These rules may be implicated in citation practices, or in the rhetorical moves that one has to make to maintain credibility. As a teacher of writing, I am often faced with the dilemma of the place of narrative in “research” writing and the role of the infamous “I” as a subject position. I’ve been getting a lot of personal narrative in research papers lately, whether it’s to build context, an exigency, or to make sense of an idea. When students find their personal stories as integral to how they research or connect with an idea, how do I teach maintaining an “objective” stance (if there is such a thing) while not compromising my principles of the value and vitality of being fully embodied as a writer? What constitutes research writing and how it often involves us writing ourselves out of our work reinforces hegemonic academic practices of dualism between body and mind, and that credible knowledge only comes from objective stances or interpretations. It is in these moments where we as writers and rhetors are often faced with the dilemma of betraying our stories and ourselves in order to be validated. This is what I often see reflected in popular rappers who sell their souls to the devil of commerce in order to make some money. These are those who confront a public “that requires and rewards black men for acting like brutal psychopaths, that rewards them for their will to do horrific violence” (hooks 49). My point is that these rules do not exist within an ideological or cultural vacuum. They are reflected in the larger mainstream and popular public culture of information exchange. They have consequences and reveal

the sustainability of dominant forms of expression and communication that are masked as effective and productive strategies of becoming part of privileged communities, such as the academy or mainstream culture.

### **Teaching and Mentoring Black Males as an Everyday Practice**

Walking into each course that I teach I always have a sense of urgency and anxiety about me in wondering whose going to be there. I wonder what they will think of me and if I'm wearing the right clothes. I usually glance around first, looking for black and brown faces, looking for female students, hoping that if either of them are absent from the group that they are just straggling in late. I remember what it was like as a student of color at a predominately white university to have a black teacher, or a teacher of color for that matter. There was always this feeling of assurance when seeing them because it spoke to the different ways I could exist on campus.

Now as a graduate student teaching at a university and at the cusp of being in the position of professor, I sometimes wonder where are the black males on campus. On random days I see some on their way somewhere and wonder where they are going and what are their ambitions. Sometimes I stop to talk to them and they look at me strange. They make me think of Anthony or Carlas. I feel inclined to impart some nugget of wisdom or advice to them. Doing the work of educating underrepresented black males in the composition classroom necessitates creating a sense of openness to being interested in their lives *outside* of that space. It means paying attention to how

they are adjusting to the cultural and academic demands of college life. As a researcher, being also an active participant in non classroom spaces of my case participants has allowed me to build teacher-student-mentor-relationships and think about the function and value of what Alfred Tatum calls “nesting grounds”: created learning environments that incorporate, cognitive, emotional, affective and social development strategies that give students skills that help them to effectively develop as participants in academic and broader college life (27).

Building mentoring relationships with black male students through coursework, and while Co-directing The Zone, a university enrichment tutor program has given me opportunities to brainstorm and develop approaches to creating nesting grounds as useful environments that help in the teaching of writing and aid black males in making transitions from high school into college – both socially and academically. What I’ve learned in these spaces about teaching and mentoring black males in becoming more integrated academically in class and socially on campus informs how writing program administrators can teach and talk about teacher-student relationships with students from different cultural backgrounds. The nesting grounds concept enable us to find solutions that can best speak to teaching assistants who want to develop strategies for responding to black males in college.

Teacher student interactions in discussions about writing can be important moments for getting to know the underlife of black males and how these experiences shape their approaches to education. Talking with Anthony, Carlas, and Jabari about their literacy histories in the process of them writing their literacy autobiographies exemplified the difference between reading an academic essay about black male

learning practices from a library database and the immediacy and materiality of human interaction. Learning their idiosyncrasies, hearing about praying grandmothers, and absent fathers, proud fathers, and becoming new fathers created a learning environment that did not make their everyday lives so far removed from their academic life. Teaching black men that their everyday lives and what they aspire to be as college students do not have to be two different worlds implies the value of remaining organically connected to a community and further implies the necessity that students remain connected to their cultural communities. For black males from underrepresented black communities, finding and maintaining cultural solidarity at a culturally homogenous university is the equivalent of remaining rooted in their culture, values and beliefs as black students. Whether it is the local black church in the community or a black fraternity, or the ability to relate culturally to their teachers, these become moments where cultural knowledge and familiarity are learned and used as adaptive strategies to navigate multiple environments – to perform the literacies of their everyday lives as black men.

What can we continue to learn about black male life through their literacy lives? Furthermore how might this knowledge teach us about forms that black production take in circumstances that call for black males to imagine and construct possible selves as an act of resistance and possibility? There is much to learn in the places this occurs. For example, the substance of black male writing will continue to be a concept to investigate in order to better understand the literate lives of black college males. How might we glean from their writing what stakes they hold in literacy? And for what aims do they actually use what they learn in the writing

course to navigate the university as black male communicators, readers and researchers? The aims of literacy for black males in my investigations have varied according to contexts but also have been influenced by a sense of purpose and meaning in what is at stake for them as black men at different rhetorical moments. This is why it was important for me as a young black male in college to read Frederick Douglas, Olaudah Equiano, and Nat Turner as narrative representations of my own rebel mind, as black male voices that were irreconcilable to my own. Their voices mattered for how I thought about myself as a young black male who had found little purpose in an academic education beyond getting a job to pay off government loans. There was greater purpose in their stories, a purpose that spoke to the role that literacy played in the development of black male identity, power, and resilience. The power of story in reclaiming black male identity that I found in their histories illuminated new possibilities for how I understood storytelling as a staple in hip hop for identity reclamation, black production, and linguistic creativity. What we continue to learn in the everyday lives of black males on a college campus is evidence of the living water that both history and the imaginative and creative space of hip hop give us as strategies for black production and the ability to evolve across context and time as black men.

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