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To Hip Hop, with Love

Casandra Belizaire


Candidate for the degree

Bachelor of Arts

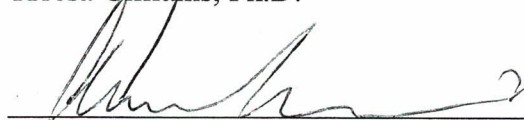
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

College Honors

Departmental Distinction in English



Teresa Gilliams, Ph.D.



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Kristen Woodward, M.F.A

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Introduction

African American art operates on a continuum. Until the condition of black people in America changes, this truth will remain self-evident. The creation of black art within this country traces back to the institution of slavery when the enslaved sung, memorized and passed on spirituals. These hymns survived the emancipation of black bodies as commodity and continued to carry in their lyrics the weight of racial oppression and the desire for salvation. Black art, however, has ceased to be solely spiritual in the sense of divine salvation; the breadth and depth of the art form has evolved. Yet, the subject matter—what was contested, what was contended with, what was lamented—birthed a tradition of self-expression that is uniquely black. As one generation of black thinkers and creators passed, another generation—willing to continue the ancestral investigation started by its predecessors—arose. In the absence of the elder, each new generation of African Americans produced art rooted in an exploration of racial and national identity; the Negro endeavored to amass, for himself, the answers to the questions that plagued his tragic existence in America. With that exploration came unique expressions of artistry, varying in language and medium, that reflected personal experiences, challenged social constructs and measured the progression of the race. The compilation consists of prose, visual art, and music that is undoubtedly in conversation with one another. Without remaining stagnant or monotonous, black art reflects the most pressing matters of black life. Parallel to the measured social and political advances allotted to the African American throughout his inhabitation of this country, black art, dating from bondage through the 1920s, complements the black artistic movements that succeed it. Through similar subject matter, voice, and intended audience, Hip Hop demonstrates the extent to which the ancestral influences of black art in America create an intergenerational conversation between artists of past and present.

My discovery of the interconnectivity of black artistry began with a literary comparison of Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival" and Tupac Shakur's "Keep Ya Head Up." Hip Hop has always held a prominent place in my mind and heart. It possesses the ability to voice feelings of inferiority or prowess, it can serve as a soundtrack of celebration or melancholy, and it personifies places, emotions, and characters in just three or four minutes. It is storytelling in its purest form. Introducing fresh perspectives within the compilation of black life, black Hip Hop artists offer stories of their own experiences to magnify the diversity within black existence in America. Hip Hop encapsulates all of my favorite elements of literature and authorship—intrigue, risk-taking, dueling perspectives, and full, dynamic characters—and delivers it with a beat and a melody. My first encounter with Lorde's litany, too, embodies these elements, but more than that, uses identical phrasing to express her vulnerability and fears. Audre Lorde's "A Litany of Survival," published in 1978, speaks to the less than desirable conditions that plague blacks in America. Lorde writes in the second stanza:

We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid

it might not remain

when the sun sets we are afraid

it might not rise in the morning

when our stomachs are full we are afraid

of indigestion

when our stomachs are empty we are afraid

we may never eat again

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when we are loved we are afraid

love will vanish

when we are alone we are afraid

love will never return

and when we speak we are afraid

our words will not be heard

nor welcomed

but when we are silent

we are still afraid

So it is better to speak

remembering

we were never meant to survive (“Audre Lorde – A Litany,” emphasis mine).

Within her litany of fears, Lorde reiterates her belief that “we”—people of African origin, condition, and race—were never intended to survive in this America. Lorde, a civil rights activist and Black Arts Movement poet, saw the expression of truth as her obligation. She stated, “I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and to share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often unmitigating pain” (“Audre Lorde.”). The pain that she expresses in “Litany” is one emanating from a fear of extinction. This pain is sparked by the uncertainty that being black in America can ignite, the festering fear of annihilation that comes from occupying a body that is devalued. Fifteen years later, in 1993, Tupac Shakur penned words that echoed these same fears. Speaking of the uncertainty of his upbringing, his mother’s drug addiction and the violence that plagued his neighborhood, Shakur states:

Ayo, I remember Marvin Gaye used to sing to me
He had me feelin' like black was the thing to be
And suddenly the ghetto didn't seem so tough
And though we had it rough, we always had enough
I huffed and puffed about my curfew and broke the rules
Ran with a local crew and had a smoke or two
And I realize Mama really paid the price
She nearly gave her life to raise me right
And all I had to give her was my pipe dream
Of how I'd rock the mic and make it to the bright screen
I'm tryin' to make a dollar out of fifteen cents
It's hard to be legit and still pay the rent
And in the end it seems I'm headin' for the pen
I try to find my friends, but they're blowin' in the wind
Last night my buddy lost his whole family
It's gonna take the man in me to conquer this insanity
It seems the rain'll never let up
I try to keep my head up and still keep from gettin' wet up
You know, it's funny, when it rains it pours
They got money for wars but can't feed the poor
Say there ain't no hope for the youth
And the truth is it ain't no hope for the future
And then they wonder why we crazy

I blame my mother for turnin' my brother into a crack baby

We ain't meant to survive, 'cause it's a set-up

And even though you're fed up, huh, you got to keep ya head up (Shakur, *Greatest Hits*, emphasis mine).

Shakur's fears are evident. Though entreating others to be optimistic, he recognizes that his present condition breeds uncertainty. His perspective that "it seems the rain'll never let up" aligns with Lorde's fear that "[the sun] might not rise in the morning." The doubt that conditions will improve coupled with the admonition to persevere despite the harsh realities borne of racism and the structural inequalities it begets, frames the message of Lorde's and Shakur's respective texts. Both reiterate a variation of the phrase "we ain't meant to survive" and this parallel—the repetition of a phrase so deliberate—signaled to me the idea of interconnection within black art. Before the black artist can simply create, he must wrestle with the notion of *being*. His existence in America breeds uncertainty, causing him to take pause, ask questions and examine the extent to which he can coexist in a nation that has demonstrated through years of systemic injustice and institutional racism that he is hated—not for anything that he has done, but simply for the body that he inhabits. The idea of interconnection, or an intergenerational conversation occurring between black artists of the past and present, demonstrates the inequity that, since the institution of slavery, the black man—and by extension—the black artist, must overcome.

Despite the fifteen years that separated the publication of their works, both Lorde and Shakur endured hardships that caused them to entertain the same belief that survival—as a black person in America—was not purposed for or available to them. Both artists clearly identify the intended audience of their plight in the naming of their larger collections. Lorde's collection *The Black Unicorn* and Tupac's album *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z* demonstrate that the primary

audience—those intended to feel the weight of the words linked to attack, annihilation, and the woes of survival—are disenfranchised blacks. Twenty-five years after Shakur’s lyrics and forty years after Lorde’s poem, within the black community remains the feeling of trepidation linked to the ongoing violation and devaluation of black lives. Similar themes remain omnipresent throughout the expanse of black artistry. This parallel between Lorde and Shakur is not a singular occurrence. Throughout the history of black art, parallels between the historic words of Frederick Douglass, the visual art of Kara Walker and Kehinde Wiley, and the contemporary lyrics of rappers like Tupac and Kendrick Lamar demonstrate that intergenerational communication occurs between black prose writers, black visual artists, and black Hip Hop artists. Central to my study is an exploration of how Hip Hop, a young art form, finds its origins in early African American literature and other forms of black expression. The study begins with the Harlem Renaissance, but places Hip Hop at the center of understanding the way that African American life is experienced, internalized, and documented.

Hip Hop as Escapism

Hip Hop is a movement of black art that finds its origins in the black artistic movements that precede it, namely the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro Movement. This period in American history was as a celebration of blackness that found its focus in the elevation and evolution of black artistry, production, and reception. The Harlem Renaissance was a “dramatic upsurge of creativity in literature, music, and art within black America that reached its zenith in the second half of the 1920s” (Rampersad ix). Blacks migrated to Harlem, New York, commonly referred to as “the great Mecca,” to engage in this cultural revolution. Much like the religious pilgrimage to Mecca, these artists came to do obeisance and offer sacrifice with like-minded fellow believers (Weldon Johnson 301). In many ways, the New Negro movement was an

underdog story. A microcosm of African Americans, a group that Langston Hughes regards as the “darker brother” of the American family—dismissed from the dinner table, excluded from family portraits, denied in public, and mistreated in private— “grew strong” from their mistreatment and crafted a love letter, a body of work created for the black community, by the black artist (Hughes 256-7). This letter, in short, reaffirmed the worth of the black individual and simultaneously categorized his struggle. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests, the task of the black artist is “to redefine—against already received racist stereotypes—who and what a black person was, and how unlike the racist stereotype the black original indeed actually could be” (qtd in Rabaka 53). That each individual crafted his *own* letter to the community lends to the fact that each message was different. Some wrote in the voice of their people, the black vernacular, as if they were speaking to a trusted friend. Some demonstrated their learnedness and wrote about subjects that would only uplift the race, deliberately denying any ties to the past. Still others, unable to break free from the ideal of whiteness, directed their letters to the mainstream society, penning supplications and pleas for humanity. The breadth and depth of the movement continued to evolve and embody a life of its own, yet regardless of the mindset that fueled these Negro writers, one thing proved true: “if various Western cultures constructed blackness as an *absence*, then various generations of black authors have attempted to reconstruct blackness as a *presence*” (Gates quoted in Rabaka 53, emphasis mine). This New Negro would no longer stand in the shadows; rather, he would become the lead in his own narrative. While each author agreed that the idea of blackness needed to change, redefining what the race would become did not yield a singular answer. Each author celebrated a different aspect of blackness while simultaneously rejecting what other black authors had established as the ideal. The collective redefining became an individual endeavor, as much as it served the groups’ interest.

This dichotomy—inhabiting the same movement or working toward the same goal while producing starkly contrasting works—remains in the wake of Hip Hop. As the notion of blackness evolves, so, too, the art form serves different purposes within the community. Like all good art, Hip Hop is not stagnant. Rather, it becomes what its audience needs during any given time; each generation dictates the sound and complexity of the music produced. What distinguishes the wave of Hip Hop from a structured movement like the Harlem Renaissance was the conscious decision, on the part of the New Negro artists, to redefine black life in America. Despite differing opinions, W.E.B Du Bois and other pillars of the New Negro movement knew what they were creating. Contributors like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay knew what their contributions would mean for the movement as a whole. Hip Hop, however, began before any of its founders or contributors could realize its magnitude. The genre was born out of a place of poverty and desperation. Fifty years after the Great Migration, city life was not romantic. Apartment complexes were distressed or abandoned, and rather than the influx of people moving into Harlem in the 1920s, people were now afraid to go into the city. It was predominantly black and predominantly poor, yet “out of oppression and out of depression is creativity” and that is what took place at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx on the day that Hip Hop was born (Dye).

Given the conditions that much of the black population, in New York and throughout the United States, found themselves living in, Hip Hop enters the narrative at a moment of financial, cultural and emotional need. A regression was taking place. The same city that gave birth to the riveting works of the 1920s now housed the very state of disenfranchisement that writers like W.E.B Du Bois and Langston Hughes seek to expose as operating within from the American landscape. However, decades later, poverty characterized the condition of African Americans. Thus, the relative social position of blacks fueled within the people a need to forget, if only

temporarily, the hardships of black life in America. Teenage kids—too poor and too young to get into clubs—held parties in parks and in the streets as a communal means to interact, laugh, dance, and rap. While both the Harlem Renaissance and Hip Hop became reactions to the inequality and injustice of the present society, early Hip Hop sought to distract the youth and the artists from the problems that plagued them. It was “anything but political” (Blair). In fact, Wonder Mike of the Sugarhill Gang—the rap trio that first received commercial success for the Hip Hop record “Rapper’s Delight”—states regarding the incentive behind his sound, “It wasn’t too heavy. It wasn’t the message that it became later. It wasn’t ‘F the Police,’ that was used after that. It was three guys having fun” (Blair). Rap, Hip Hop and the culture of the poor gathering in streets when they could not afford the admission to Motown nightclubs, served as a form of self-medication, a deliberate forgetting and substituting of pain with music. The majority of blacks were living in conditions that they would rather forget, if only for a moment. Hence, “Rapper’s Delight’s” catchy beat and repetition of “I said-a hip, hop, the hippie, the hippie / to the hip hip hop-a you don’t stop the rock / it to the bang-bang boogie” was transfixing (“Rappers Delight”). It was the lightheartedness that was missing from everyday life, the ease and simplicity that those rapping and dancing in the audience did not encounter often. The people needed something that transported them to a different place—a calmer place—not riddled with the hardships of black life. The listeners allowed the beat and hook to drown out their problems and wash away their anxieties. Coupled with early Hip Hop records was dance. The movement that the music induced was as important—arguably more important—than the words themselves. It was a full-body experience, a phenomenon unlike any the preceded it, functioning as a response to the call the music initiated.

As the Hip Hop movement began to carry weight, so did its message. It was no longer solely a means of having fun, nor was it a genre that *had* to provoke dance. Rather, Hip Hop like the essays and novels of the Harlem Renaissance provoked thought, deepened reflections, and motivated change. What was simply regarded as a forgetting mechanism was more powerful than Kurtis Blow or the members of the Sugarhill Gang imagined because it gave “people who are usually locked out of telling [an opportunity] to tell” (Blair). This privilege of authorship and authentic expression established by the Harlem Renaissance took a different form, yet the initial goal remained the same: the artist could pen an open letter to his community and state, “We're not trash, we're not rubble” (Dye). Thus, the sentiment and self-claim found in W.E.B Du Bois' essay, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” and Countee Cullen's “Heritage,” can, too, be located in the work of hip-hop artists, past and present.

This form of oral communication set to a beat that carries messages between the black artist and the black community is an intergenerational conversation that continues today. The black artists of the Harlem Renaissance faced racism and prejudice in an America that was still subject to the mentality of slavery and the belief that the black individual was inferior. Nearly one hundred years later, contemporary black artists and individuals face the same difficulties. As a counteraction to this strife, Harlem Renaissance artists birthed a movement that celebrated black creativity and authenticity. Such is the history of black artists: creating for themselves a means of expression within a society that hates their innovation as much as it hates their skin. The spirit of redefinition continues today because the problems of the 1920s and prior also persist; black artists must continually reaffirm their presence in a society that demands their silence. Thus, the New Negro movement and the birth and transformation of Hip Hop reflect an embracing of the very identity that African Americans were conditioned to hate.

Hip Hop tied to Remembrance

Intergenerational communication continues in response to the plight of the African American. The members of the Harlem Renaissance sought to build from what black leaders and activists of the 1800s discussed regarding slavery. W.E.B Du Bois' "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" continued the conversation of the Negro's place in America that Frederick Douglass began decades prior in his speech, "The Meaning of July Fourth to the Negro." Both texts endeavor to explain and enlighten the readers of the inner turmoil of being black in America. Douglass commented on the very tangible social inadequacies of a celebration of national freedom while an entire race was enslaved in a system that sought to "make [black] men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work them without wages, to keep them ignorant of their relations to their fellow men, to beat them with sticks, to flay their flesh with the lash, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to sunder their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obedience and submission to their masters" (Douglass). In turn, Du Bois addressed the emotional enslavement of black people that continued long after the Emancipation Proclamation. He wrote, as Douglass did, of the "disparity between [the Negro and the American]" (Douglass). Douglass and Du Bois assert that this independence, this freedom to *be* is a luxury of whiteness. It is a privilege not given to the black man. Yes, while society grants the Negro possession of his own body, in theory, it simultaneously enacts systems and practices aimed at enslaving black people both mentally and emotionally. Informed by the institution of slavery is the extent to which the Negro endeavors to possess his own flesh. A residual construct instructs the Negro that his body is one to be owned. Thus, even when free, the Negro looks at his hands and thinks "with a clarity as simple as it [is] dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands' (Morrison 166). His past robs him of the aforementioned luxury of simply

existing. He, in an effort of self-preservation, claims ownership of self and subsequently engages in the psychological discourse tied to enslavement. The Negro, then, is plagued with the torment of “measuring [his] soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois). He is at war within himself as he battles “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois). What began as a physical battle became a battle against consciousness. Had the black experience greatly improved after Douglass delivered his pointed speech in 1852, Du Bois would have had no real basis to explore further the dichotomy of blackness and whiteness in 1903. Likewise, if the Harlem Renaissance had actually solved the problems associated with black Americans being disregarded, undermined, and outcasted in society, Tupac Shakur would not have written the compelling lyrics of the early 1990s, or the poetry that preceded the period. The black artists’ voice will continue to be in communication with artists of the past and the present. It will not cease—cannot cease—until African American identity is no longer subject to the prejudices and injustices of an oppressive society.

Like Du Bois’ writing and the writing of other black artists that preceded him, Tupac’s music documents the unique duality that is being black and being American, namely being a resident of a society that did not want him. Tupac was convinced that the system of America excluded the black man and, by extension, the black artist. The system, he believed, did not only seek to cripple the opportunities of its black citizens, but also sought to stifle and trample the souls of all black folk. Shakur’s ideology is evident in his song, “Words of Wisdom,” the sixth track on his first album, *2Pacalypse Now*. He begins his work with the same sentiment Du Bois used to introduce the conflict of blackness in “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” when he declares:

BETWEEN me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (Du Bois)

In response to this conflict, Tupac does not shy away from the question as Du Bois does, nor does he “reduce [his] boiling to a simmer” in an effort to paint fancifully the picture of the conscious and unconscious tendency to categorize the black experience as negative. In “Words of Wisdom” Tupac begins, “In one way or another, America will find a way to eliminate the problem. . .the problem is the troublesome black youth of the ghettos” (Shakur). Du Bois poses the question and Tupac answers it. To be young and black in America is to be a threat to the present system while simultaneously being threatened by the present system, “and yet, they say this is the Home of the Free” (Shakur). The reality of black life that Shakur and Du Bois address reflects the same truth that Douglass presented in 1852: America’s “celebration [of freedom] is a sham... [its] shouts of liberty and equality, [a] hollow mockery” (Douglass). The notions of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that constitute the foundation of the country, in turn become the cause of the Negro’s turmoil. Tupac continues, “The American Dream / though it seems like it’s attainable / they’re pullin’ your sleeve / don’t believe / ‘cause it’ll strangle ya” (Shakur). America presents the Dream to the black man, packaged in wrapping paper that reads “freedom”

and “liberty,” but any attempt he takes to attain this Dream ultimately leads to his demise. This gift of his own freedom strangles him because he continues to live—as Du Bois asserts—behind “a vast veil” of humanity that separates his black self from the outside world, a veil that blurs his vision, chains his mind, causes him to war within himself, ultimately, making him an easy target (Du Bois).

Tupac’s ideology stems from his experience. One can best speak of what it means to be a problem when one’s very existence has been problematic. At odds with the law and the son of black activists, Tupac understood firsthand the extent of this turmoil. He wrote “for the masses, the lower classes” because he saw his face most clearly and his struggle more accurately personified through theirs (Shakur). It was growing up in these conditions that challenged him to question the world around him and the opportunities—or lack thereof—for the black man. In many ways, this is where Du Bois and Tupac separate in their aspirations for their art. Du Bois, and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote of his life’s torment to the extent that it affected the reception of his art. Tupac and the Hip Hop artists that followed, used art as a tool to communicate the torment he encounters as a man—not an artist—in everyday life. In “Trapped,” a retrospective analysis of how the black man occupies space within American society, Tupac questioned America’s founders and leaders, pleading, “Why did ya lie to me?” (Shakur). Tupac wanted to know why the promises—the inalienable rights of each human being—proved false in his case, why the black man was free from slavery, but habitually imprisoned, why “they never talk peace in the black community” (Shakur). He *lived* life as a problem; feeling trapped *was* his reality. Thus, he embodied and gave voice to Du Bois’ notion of being a problem while also investing in Hip Hop culture and rap music to become something that it had not been in the past:

a manifestation of *rememory*. Hip Hop became the very vehicle that could cause the black community to remember.

Toni Morrison coins the term *rememory* in her novel, *Beloved*, describing the process as actively remembering a memory. Remembrance, to Morrison, is imperative to black existence and persistence in a society in which the default setting is forgetting. To hide the pain, to shift blame, to absolve oneself of the burden of guilt, is human, perhaps, even American, but Morrison suggests that remembrance is tied to healing. *Rememory*, though, is central to the black experience because it links an individual's past with the collective's past. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy states, "rememories not only exists outside the agent's mind but are available to anyone who enters the sphere of the action" (303). Often, because his past is plagued with injustice and harsh treatment, the Negro seeks wholly to neglect his history in an effort to preserve his humanity or to ensure a semblance of a future uninformed by tragedies of the past. This thinking, however, is erroneous. To forget may temporarily ease the pain, but as Hip Hop artists soon realized, drowning out the hurt with rap and dance did not solve the problems on inequity, violence and injustice. With their music that responded to the issues of disparity addressed by minds like Frederick Douglass and W.E.B Du Bois, Hip Hop artists "enter[ed] the sphere of action" of the black visionaries who preceded them. They engaged in *rememory*—remembering the memories of enslavement, a social phenomenon not personally experienced—and experienced a "mental recollection...that is never only personal but interpersonal" (Rushdy 304). Morrison's *rememory* tasks the African American to identify the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of his past, and to use those things—that may, in and of themselves, be painful—to build a future.

Tupac's lyrics present the very conditions that music, at the inception of Hip Hop, sought to ignore. What Shakur, and other rappers of his generation, recognized, however, is that true

evolution—true change—will always elude a people if they seldom address matters of discontent. Tupac recognized that his duty as a rapper, with an audience of people living in less than desirable conditions, was not to shy away from the harsh realities of urban life but instead, to be direct, unafraid, and pointed in his assessments of the disparities he witnessed in his neighborhoods. He begins his song “Changes,” with the direct observation, “I see no changes” (Tupac). Speaking of a time when the “war on drugs” was set to correct and purify the black-occupied ghettos, and of the advances his mother and other activists sought to establish in their day, Shakur assesses correctly that little to nothing has changed. Progress for the black community, as well as black artists, remained limited. Tupac continues, “Wake up in the morning and I ask myself, / ‘Is life worth living, should I blast myself?’ / I’m tired of being poor, and even worse, I’m black / my stomach hurts, so I’m looking for a purse to snatch” (Tupac). Tupac highlights the toll that financial hardships take while simultaneously speaking openly about suicide—a permanent end to what feels to like a hopeless condition. Without glorifying the contemplation, he addresses the cause of such thinking, positioning his impoverished financial state as an easier burden to bear than his blackness. He later raps, “Can’t a brother get a little peace? / There’s war on the streets and war in the Middle East / Instead of war on poverty / They got a war on drugs so the police can bother me / And I ain’t never did a crime I ain’t have to do” (Tupac). Here, Shakur revisits the subject of poverty and its causing those whom it plagues to harm themselves or harm others in an effort at lessening the societal blow of institutional racism. Tupac’s assertion that he never committed a crime that he did not *need* to commit underscores the conditions of disenfranchisement that force blacks to navigate a social construct, not of their own creation, that enacts the inevitable choice to become either the offender or the offended. He begins this verse by questioning from where his peace of mind will emanate. He likens the ghetto

that he inhabits to the wars fought overseas—filled with violence, injustice, and an extensive police presence, commenting that there are larger, more pressing wars to fight in America’s neighborhoods. Rather than seeking to elevate the ghettos of America out of a state of poverty—an action that would ultimately lessen the extent to which drugs plagued the community—the “war on drugs” placed great emphasis on drugs, or rather the drug users that were victims of their environment. Tupac’s battle to uplift his community while simultaneously playing a role in its destruction became a major motif of his work and life. He recognized the complexity of his situation—a dealer questioning when the change in his community would begin—but he also accurately assessed that the situation of these “two warring ideals” was a consequence of disenfranchisement and economic disparity.

Just as the problems of black identity did not end with Douglass and Du Bois, it also did not result in resolution in Tupac’s era. Shakur’s aforementioned works—released in 1991, ninety years after Du Bois’ essay—speak to the current state of blackness in America. Tupac was still provoked to pen, “I see no changes” (Shakur, “Changes”). Despite the leaps the Harlem Renaissance made for black artists and the strides the Civil Rights movement achieved in the name of black life, the tension between being free and being a problem for black people in America continued. To that end, contemporary visual artists, like Kara Walker, find themselves in constant conversation with artists of the past and present as they seek to reconcile this notion of “twoness” (Du Bois).

Kara Walker, like Tupac, recognized her problem status primarily as a black woman living in a highly racialized environment, and secondly as a black, woman artist occupying a position of creativity and “telling” that has been, historically speaking, white and male. Du Bois relates the moment of recognition as a turning point in black identity; noting it as the moment

that one begins, not simply to recognize difference, but internalize the difference that his or her race provokes in others. Walker speaks of a similar moment of understanding when she moves from California to Georgia at the age of thirteen years old. She states, “There is I suppose, historically, this seminal moment in the lives of African Americans where one *becomes* black...There is a moment when you go from subject to object” (qtd in Adams, emphasis mine). Walker recognized this turning point as a social mechanism designed to strip her of her agency. The shift from subject to object is a deliberate one; it is a direct deeming of inferiority and a reminder of status. Thus, throughout her art, Walker undoes the shift and sets black bodies, specifically black women, as the focus of her works.

Walker’s piece *Savant* embodies Du Bois’ notion that the Negro lives behind “a vast veil,” away from humanity. This veil, as previously mentioned, is both suffocating and blinding, thereby hiding the true identity of the one who wears it. Walker’s title details a life prior to the one depicted; a savant—a learned person, a distinguished scholar—has experienced life and values knowledge of self and others. The woman depicted is an intellectual, yet she is naked, stripped of all material possessions and living a stunted existence beneath a veil. The subject experiences the “peculiar feeling” that Du Bois references, knowing how she views herself and comparing that view to how others indubitably see her. She must reconcile these two selves, submitting to the former, in order to survive her present circumstance. Walker’s collection, *An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters*, allows the viewer to determine the cause of this strife. The subject is an object of slavery; she embodies, in the past, a similar “becoming” of black that Kara Walker details of her coming of age. This savant demonstrates the extent to which this intergenerational communication continues: without a word, she expresses the plight of African Americans centuries later—physically free but destined to live life encumbered by “a vast veil.”

Her sheer existence is a product of rememory; the savant's memory of her past enables her survival, though stifled by the institution of slavery.

In remembering the memory of moments un-lived and unexperienced by herself, Walker establishes how this savant's sacrifices enables a new generation of black women to achieve and amass, for themselves, understanding. So, too, Walker's catalog is self-described as being "subsumed by history," a fact that is evident in *A Subtlety*, a 35-foot tall sphinx sculpture created in the likeness of Aunt Jemima (art21.org). The process of creation was tied to the history of the medium as it relates to black servitude and bondage. Walker states, "Sugar comes from sugarcane, sugarcane is grown in tropical climates, sugarcane is, and has been, harvested by slaves, underpaid workers, and children" (art21.org). This history is used in the construction of a sugar sculpture that is unlike, in size and likeness, the ones "sculpted to portray royalty [that] could only be consumed by royalty, nobility, [and] clergy" (art21.org). Housed in a Domino Sugar plant, *A Subtlety*, is anything but a coy repurposing of history. It Walker uses rememory to "enter the sphere" of enslavement. *A Subtlety* presents a well-known figure of black woman domesticity and servitude and places her at the center of the factory that would receive payment for the very product that she harvested for free. Further highlighting that the harvesters of this crop were not the partakers of its bounty, are the "13 molasses-colored boys—underage blackamoors" surrounding the figure with baskets in their hands (Smith). These young men are the powerless responsible for supplying the powerful with tangible reminders of their social position. The fact, then, that this subtlety is created by a black woman and in the likeness of a black woman shifts the narrative to one in which the Negro is aligned with nobility, a history often hidden from the African American.

Hip Hop as Healing

Kendrick Lamar endeavors, through his music, to uncover the untaught history of African Americans and the truth of their heritage. Lamar's latest works, *To Pimp A Butterfly* and *DAMN*, were created in a state of unprecedented social unrest in the black community; no moment in recent history has caused the black community to question its place in America like consistent loss of black life and the subsequent birth of the Black Lives Matter movement. The deaths of young black men and women, often at the hands of law enforcement, fulfilled Tupac Shakur's forewarning, "America will find a way to eliminate the problem [of] the troublesome black youth of the ghettos" (Shakur, "Words of Wisdom"). Lamar comments on the conditions that have worsened since Tupac penned his words in 1991; he raps, "I feel like this gotta be the feelin' where 'Pac was / Feelin' of an apocalypse happenin', but nothin' is awkward / The feelin' won't prosper / The feelin' is toxic / I feel like I'm boxin' demons, monsters, false prophets, schemin' sponsors, industry promises" (Lamar, "Feel"). Lamar seeks to identify the feeling of trepidation that Tupac argued was inextricably linked to occupying a black body. In essence, he states that this feeling must be what Tupac wrestled with: the knowledge that something disastrous is taking place while the world around him could not recognize difference. The state of America coupled with Lamar's own demons as a black man and artist, parallel Shakur's pointed lyrics 26 years later.

As Kurtis Blow suggested, depression births creativity. Lamar's unrest caused him to pen "Alright," an anthem for those who feared that their dead bodies would be a final reminder of their misplacement. The song begins with a simple truth: "alls my life I had to fight" (Lamar). This is a personal examination of Lamar's upbringing in a crime-riddled community, but it also speaks to the black experience. Throughout the totality of black life, black individuals engage in

a never-ending fight. They fight the system that seeks a modern-day enslavement, as Tupac suggests, while also fighting their unreconciled inner-selves that Du Bois identifies. The very life of a black man is a battle and his survival is contingent on *recognizing* that a war is taking place. He must recognize that he is on the front lines and that his opponent—whether it be his oppressive society or his striving toward forgetting—has been victorious for centuries. His opponent is more experienced and more cunning, yet Lamar chants, “We gon’ be alright” and he invites a chorus of black voices to do the same (Lamar). What enables Lamar to make this bold claim is his knowledge of the history of black people in America as well as the history that predates their forced migration. Lamar raps, “Wouldn’t you know? / We been hurt, been down before / when our pride was low / Lookin’ at the world like, ‘Where do we go?’” (Lamar). Yet, despite the Negro’s past destitution, he endures; in response to societal blows, he stands victorious. Hip Hop transitions once again: at its start, it was a forgetting mechanism, then, it became a vehicle for remembering. Now, at a moment of destitution, when the community is in need of remedy, Lamar relies on his history, using his albums, *To Pimp A Butterfly* and *DAMN.*, respectively, to demonstrate the power the genre holds to *heal*.

Kendrick Lamar discerned that healing comes from knowing. It is a knowledge of his condition as well as the past conditions of black men that informs the contemporary male of his identity. Lamar builds from Countee Cullen's recognition that looking back enables the contemporary African American to move ahead. Cullen's 1925 poem, “Heritage,” begins to establish the black man’s identity outside of the societal confines of America and without the looming effects of the institution of slavery. “Heritage” highlights the modern African American's disconnect with a lineage from which he is “three centuries removed” (Cullen). Personifying Africa as a woman from which all derive, Cullen states:

Unremembered are her bats
 Circling through the night, her cats
 Crouching in the river reeds,
 Stalking gentle flesh that feeds
 By the river brink (245)

The limitations imposed on those with black skin in America distorts the picture of Africa to the contemporary African American. The idea of civilization governed by those whose ancestors were later shackled and enslaved seems to stray from the American view of blackness. The speaker of Cullen's poem is centuries removed by lineage, geography, and mentality; to envision an Africa in which he can occupy, after years of indoctrinated racial inferiority is to ask the Negro to revel in fantasy. Africa's likeness goes "unremembered" because the African American cannot recall what he has not learned. Yet, the speaker invites the reader to examine, if only for a moment, what Africa could mean to black Americans. He begins his investigation with a question: "What is Africa to me?" and, throughout his monologue, explores variations of what this continent could mean to a black man living during the 1920s in Harlem. Perhaps, the most powerful image that the speaker conjures is one directly related to ancestry and origin. In speaking of those from whom he emanates, he describes, "strong bronzed men [and] regal black women from whose loins [he] sprang" (244). Interwoven into the New Negroes identity is his ancestral relationship to African royalty. Cullen recognizes that the effort toward newness that he and his Harlem Renaissance counterparts were striving towards could not correctly be achieved, if they, as a collective, were unaware of—or unaccepting of—their pre-American history.

Kehinde Wiley, contemporary visual artist, reclaims the nobility of the black past by positioning everyday African Americans as the royal subjects of portraiture. The title of his

exhibition, *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic* is indicative of his goal. He places himself, an African American male, as the teller and constructor of this American narrative. In doing so, he presents his findings from an often-neglected perspective in America, namely, American art history. The notion that what is experienced are the markers or inhabitants of a new republic demonstrates the shift that Wiley intends to create with his work—both in perception and celebration. Wiley, in effect, creates a new normal, a society filled with brown and black faces that resemble his and those from within his community. His presentation of is a black existence that manifests outside of the realms on bondage. Like Kara Walker, Wiley actively engages in a reconfiguring of widely-accepted norms in art: blackness is often the object—the thing lurking in the background—but both endeavor to make it a subject, placing black bodies in centerstage, a position of authority that viewers cannot ignore. Wiley champions the ongoing debate over the value of representation, on all levels, in American society. By providing an alternate view in which black men and women are celebrate, even glorified, as patriarchs and matriarchs, Wiley rewrites a history that delivers from bondage the African American sense of self.

Wiley's oil painting, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, presents Napoleon as an African American male. The subject of the piece reflects Hip Hop culture: he has tattoos and he wears an over-sized shirt and pant set paired with a bandana and Timberland boots. He is, without question, the antithesis of what Jacques-Louis David portrayed of the historical leader. However, Wiley is not concerned with the old history; he is crafting a new republic. The new Napoleon is at conflict with tradition, an issue Wiley raises in juxtaposing a contemporary rendering of a black male with the traditional background used in European portraiture. In doing so, Wiley establishes that aspects of his portrayal are, indeed, historical. Tumelo Masaka, an independent curator, states, in describing this work:

In this painting, Kehinde Wiley boldly recasts Napoleon as a contemporary black warrior. In his reference to Jacques-Louis David's painting *Napoleon Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Great St. Bernard Pass*, Wiley creates a tension with traditional art history and its neglect of black subjects. His portrait symbolically reassigns value to the sitter, asking us to recall remarkable black leaders such as Toussaint L'Ouverture from Haiti, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, whose images appear far less frequently, if at all, in histories of art. ("Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic.")

The contemporary subject of this work may at first be off-putting. The viewer might find the rendering offensive or attribute it as "low art." However, Wiley is subconsciously asking the viewer to examine why images like this are not normative given the rich history of heroism found in the black community. The modern African American is, in a manner of speaking, "three centuries removed" from the black heroes and leaders of his ancestry. Thus, to present a black male as Napoleon, in essence, assigning him the power and reverence that the historical name yields, Wiley aligns the everyday African American with nobility and regality.

A common theme in Kendrick Lamar's songs is this dueling perspective—the kings and queens of Africa versus the expendable black bodies of America and the African American's ancestral connection to strength and regality. During the studio rendition of Lamar's "i," a song about self-love from his album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, the rapper speaks to his audience about the term the black mans' miseducation regarding his own efforts to craft an identity. Erroneously, the African American modifies the oppressors term for inferiority—turning *nigger* to *nigga*; Lamar suggests that the black man's effort at self-definition is "No better than a white man with slave boats" (Lamar). Lamar, by doing "[his] homework," discerns that the word that generations of black men have been searching for is *negus*, an Ethiopian term that "history books

overlooked” when describing the black man, and thus, by extension, an accurate depiction of life in Africa that eluded the contemporary African American. Lamar comments that “the homies don't recognize we been using it wrong” because they are instructed, not of their regality, but of their inferiority. The term *negus* speaks to the position black men held in Africa prior to slavery. Before colonizers shackled, enslaved, and governed black men, black men did the governing. The black man was an "N-E-G-U-S / Definition? / Royalty, king... [He was an] N-E-G-U-S / Description? / Black emperor, king, ruler" (Lamar). Stripped of power and forcibly removed from his land, the once Ethiopian patriarch became a subject. By extension, an emotional stripping continues today as African Americans lack the knowledge of their lineage as it relates to African royalty. The African American is robbed of the ability to heal the wounds of his past, because he relegates himself to the imposed identity of the lesser. Fittingly, tied to Kendrick Lamar's examination of the real n-word, is an admonition towards self-love.

Kendrick Lamar's single-version of “i,” that predated the album release, examines, more plainly, the implications of love within the black community. While the aforementioned studio-version examines the importance of naming and accurate phrasing as an act of self and community-love, the latter, looks at the state of blackness in America and presents a counternarrative. The single, “i,” in essence, admonishes that if the present society views black skin as ugly, see the beauty; if the present society hates blackness, love it. Lamar commissions his audience, asking listeners, as he does in “Alright,” to join in on his choral procession of “I love myself,” in spite of the hatred and violence that threatens African Americans daily. Lamar begins his supplication, again, with a statement of fact: “I done been through a whole lot / Trial, tribulation,” (Lamar, “i”). To position love as an easy quality to demonstrate, given the current state of black life in America, would be to ignore the genuine fears and emotions felt within the

community. Yet, despite the tribulation, Lamar continues, “but I know God” (Lamar). To know God, is to experience, not a passive love, but a love that manifests in evident demonstrations, a loyal love that is omnipresent, even when the object of that love feels undeserving. Thus, Lamar can state, with conviction that while “the world is a ghetto with big guns and picket signs,” he still possesses a love of self that surpasses the turmoil taking place throughout the world; it is a love not contingent on surrounding or others interpretation of deservedness.

The love that Lamar supplicates listeners to gain is one that strips the power from the outside world and returns it to the individual. W.E.B Du Bois commented that the Negro is tormented by a world “that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois). In response to that truth, Lamar raps:

Everybody lookin' at you crazy

What you gonna do?

Lift up your head and keep moving

Or let the paranoia haunt you?

While not dismissing Du Bois’ assertion that the Negro must navigate life in America with a double consciousness, Lamar suggests that what the African American chooses to do with that information is a choice entirely his own. He can allow the thoughts of others to paralyze and stifle him or he can acquire a love of self that mutes the world’s contempt. His healing hinges on his ability to look at his black skin with pride regardless of how the world views it. Lamar continues his counsel to acquire self-love that is not situational when he raps, “The sky could fall down, the wind could cry now / The strong in me, I still smile” (Lamar). Here, Lamar mentions some of the same fears that Audre Lorde and Tupac address in “A Litany for Survival” and “Keep Ya Head Up,” respectively; however, Lamar follows his sentiments, with a reminder of

his strength to endure the trials of life. Central to healing years of systemic abuse is education: education of a past untethered to enslavement and an education of self that manifests in love.

Both Countee Cullen and Kendrick Lamar's quest for heritage serves as a healing as it instructs the contemporary African American of his potential. Lamar's reminders always seem to come at a time when the black community is most in need. Each seems to say, "*You may be down. You may feel worthless, but your ancestors were kings. Look at what you can achieve! You have that same spirit in your DNA.*" Lamar's love letter to the black community mirrors Kurtis Blow's sentiments that while the black man's temporary condition may be trash and rubble, his black soul is nothing of the sort. With anthems like "Alright," proclamations of self-love like "i,"—steeped in the call-and-response traditional of the spirituals of the past—and the reminder that the contemporary black individual has "loyalty and royalty inside [his] DNA," Lamar categorizes the *new* New Negro as one who owes his very existence to the Negroes of times past (Lamar, "DNA.").

Conclusion: Hip Hop as Collective

In like manner, Hip Hop owes its very existence to the Harlem Renaissance. The magnitude of the Great Migration, the influx of black talent, and the desire to create individual, unique voices while crafting an authentic collective identity, allowed for Hip Hop artists within the black community to emulate a similar ideal. The Harlem Renaissance became the big brother to Hip Hop, one who trained and encouraged his younger sibling to fill his role. While the genre of hip hop has its foundations in disco, the sentiments and emotions delivered behind the microphone are the parallel to the sentiments and emotions found on the written page. While many things in society evolved from the 1920s to present day, much has not. Thus, while the

name, locale, and style of delivery of the art form may change, the foundation built on racial unrest, the search for an authentic identity, and the message of solidarity remains the same.

However, the Harlem Renaissance's goal to redefine or take claim of a New Negro identity was one that invited difference in opinion and exploration. While black art operates on a continuum, the African American experience is boundless. Some writers during the Harlem Renaissance were born into slavery as was Booker T. Washington, while others were born free as was the case with W.E.B. Du Bois. The difference in background of these men yield different solutions to what they perceived to be Negroes problem-status. However, these two realms of thinking simultaneously coexisted, despite the difference in opinion. The same can be said of the shifts or realms of thinking within the Hip Hop genre. While the Sugarhill Gang, Tupac, and Kendrick Lamar differ in sound and aesthetic, the goals and ideals of these men coexist within Hip Hop.

While evolving into, and becoming so much more than, the dance-inducing "bang, bang boogie" that it once was, Hip Hop did not lose the initial freeness that was birthed with the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight." The power behind this art form is that it can be all things at once—silly and serious, light and heavy, soft and loud, busy and still. There are songs that make the listener move and others that leave him fixed in the moment. There are songs that the listener shouts along to, loudly and with conviction, and others that can only be accompanied with a slow nod of the head and the occasional exclamation in recognition of profound word play and artistry. Hip Hop has evolved concurrently rather than consecutively. It never stopped being a form of escapism; it ceased to serve *only* as a coping mechanism. One project did not discredit what preceded it, but, rather, gave birth to a different facet of the genre. Black culture, the defining of blackness, and what is deemed necessary for the time period, has never had a singular

answer; it was always open for interpretation and variation. This notion stems back to the Harlem Renaissance when key-players of the movement wrestled with defining precisely who this New Negro would be. Hip Hop continues the conversation of defining, and rests with the answer that the definition differs from individual to individual while speaking authentically of the collective experience.

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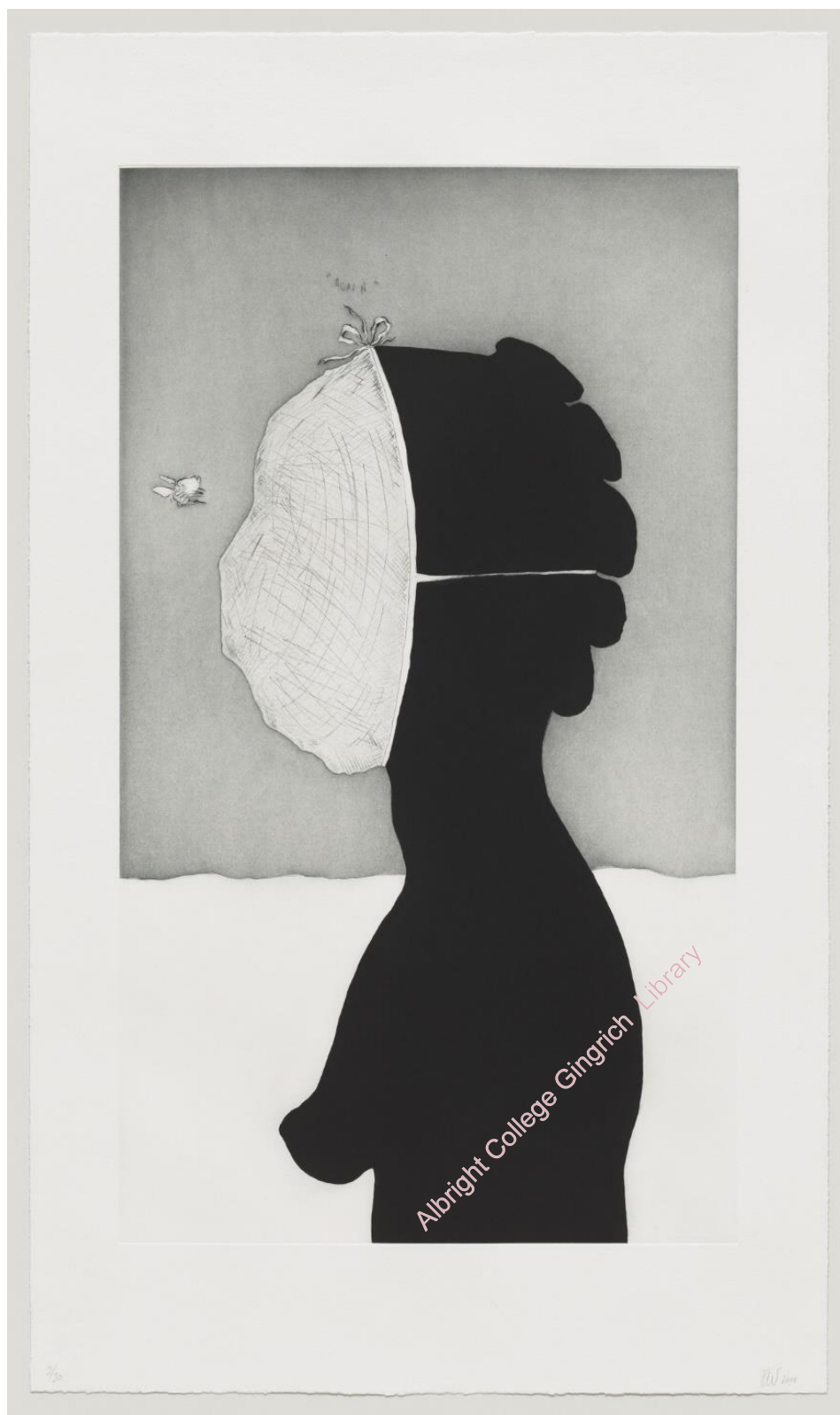
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