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I, ShaDawn D Battle, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English & Comparative Literature.

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"Moments of Clarity" and Sounds of Resistance: Veiled Literary Subversions and De-Colonial Dialectics in the Art of Jay Z and Kanye West

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“Moments of Clarity” and Sounds of Resistance: Veiled Literary Subversions and De-Colonial Dialectics in the Art of Jay Z and Kanye West

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Cincinnati in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of English Language and Comparative Literatures of the College of Arts and Sciences by

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Abstract

“Moments of Clarity’ and Sounds of Resistance: Veiled Literary Subversions and De-Colonial Dialectics in the Art of Jay Z and Kanye West” employs rap music as an object of inquiry into the question of contemporary manifestations of anti-Black oppression, demonstrating the ways in which the art of rappers Jay Z and Kanye West in particular, covertly elucidates the conditions and discursive and ideological mechanisms of power that make possible the exploitation, repression, and destruction of Black bodies in America. In the first two chapters, I argue that this illuminative potential is, in part, what attributes to the political utility of mainstream rap music. My first goal is therefore to make apparent mainstream rap music’s rightful place in Black liberation politics given its ability to unveil the functionality of age-old Eurocentric, white supremacist paradigms, such as rendering Black bodies incorrigibly animal, denying Black bodies access to subjectivity, or negating Black ontology. These ideologies give rise to exclusionary monolithic constructions of what it means to be human, pathological constructions of “blackness,” Black masculinity especially, and subsequently, the arbitrary conferral of power (to both state apparatuses and individuals racially coded as “superior”), which manifests in the form of systematic and institutional racism, and ultimately, Black male disembodiment.

The final chapter of the dissertation underscores how the subversive capacity of the art form also owes to its sites of covert contestation of oppressive forces. Through Kanye West’s art, my explications reveal the clandestine presence of colonial mimicry and
hybridity. These de-colonial strategies undermine discursive constructions of “blackness” that emanate from what I term the "white supremacist-colonial monster."

In short, visual and lyrical narratives of Jay Z’s and Kanye West’s art covertly illuminate how ideology justifies hegemony, given that epistemological inaccuracies where Black culture and male bodies are concerned, “rationalize” the relations of domination in America, with respect to (but not limited to) the white-Black racial divide. Yet, as I interpret Kanye West as demonstrating in his 2013 track (and accompanying video) “Black Skinhead,” one method of subverting white supremacist-colonialist “monsters” that produce misrepresentations of Black identity is by satirically assuming the identity of the white oppressor and consequently carving out a third, hybrid space of identity in the process. Doing so exposes the ambivalence of their discourses and de-authenticates their power, thereby enabling the reclamation of an internally, holistically defined Black male identity.

Literary texts—Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—serve as additional lenses through which to examine the subversive potential latent in the artistry of both Jay Z and West.

**Key words: De-Colonial Theory, Jay Z, Kanye West, Black Male Disembodiment, Colonial Mimicry, Hybridity**
To
“8335”
and my late father,
“Chip”
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“Moments of Clarity”¹ and Sounds of Resistance: Veiled Literary Subversion and De-Colonial Dialectics in the Art of Jay Z and Kanye West

Dissertation Introduction:

“[I]t is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment.”
Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 1984

I. Contesting Rap Music’s Bad Rep’: Layered Meanings and Sounds of Resistance

Rap music is the lens through which I make sense of the world and my place in it as a Black female body navigating a white superstructure. Rap music, at its elemental level, is poetic verse over a rhythmic beat, and is an evolved tenant of hip hop’s five pillars.² Born in the late 1970s in the South Bronx of New York, and a byproduct of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, hip hop is a culture that originated as a response to centuries of white hegemony in America, systemic racism, and structural violence³ experienced in poor, American, mostly Northern, urban cities by youth of color. Though many use the terms “hip hop” and “rap” interchangeably, others insist upon recognizing their distinction, insofar as the latter, they argue, is devoid of social and political consciousness. For instance, in *The Rap Anthology* (2010), editors, Adam Bradley and Andre DuBois argue that hip hop is “a more politically and socially conscious approach”; they reduce rap to “a gritty style” of *gangsta* “commercialized music” (xxix). Yet, they confirm that hip hop is an “umbrella term to describe a multifaceted culture of which rap is but a part” (xxix).

This dissertation, however, will demonstrate the fallacy of the view that rap is a politically impoverished discourse. Rap has served as the integral discursive space of hip-hop culture, adopting, in my opinion, many of the political imperatives that defined
the culture at its inception. If hip hop has achieved commercial dominance in popular culture, this success is largely attributed to the commercial viability of rap music. But the rapper, the MC as he was formally titled, was and is still the nucleus of the genre; he is what allowed rap to become a counter-discourse. In *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, the editors, Monica Miller, Anthony B Pinn, and Bernard “Bun B” Freeman elaborate on the significance of the MC:

> The MC is the heart of hip hop, the centripetal force that draws the varied elements of the culture to its rhetorical center. The MC’s story is hip hop’s story, and vice versa, since they came up together in the same hoods and either floundered or prospered under the same racial and economic forces. The MC carried the symbolic weight of hip hop in his throat from the start as the art form rode the golden throats and silver tongues of its greatest artists. (xvii-xviii)

The MC’s import, as they continue to explain, is such that he (and in a few instances “she”) is also a byproduct of “Ronald Reagan’s voodoo economics” (that impoverished communities of color), the rise of unemployment rates in which Black males suffered the most, and an “abysmal” public school system. Thus, the MC, they argue, “is the lightning rod and arbiter of hip hop’s meaning . . .” (xviii).

Just as hip hop has assumed a burgeoning presence in the academy as a formalized discipline (the 1990s marked the advent of the interdisciplinary “Hip Hop Studies”5), so, too, has rap music, since the discourse is born out of the rapper’s throat. Nevertheless, rap music has been judged as an insufficient and ineffectual hermeneutic lens through which to arrive at meaning, truth, and knowledge about subjects on which scholars and theorists have ruminated for eons, such as why Black bodies are regarded as
abject and expendable by the said dominant race, or how the lived experiences of Black people in America are oftentimes encumbered by the psychological dynamics of Negrophobia. If one considers the socio-political and economic factors that precipitated the birth of hip hop, and by extension, rap music, if the Aristotelian postulation that art imitates life has any merit still, and if art is propagandistic, as W.E.B. DuBois said it should be in 1926,⁶ then it is not farfetched to deem this mode of expression socio-political commentary that oftentimes (yet admittedly not always) critiques the condition of Black life in America, even if on the surface, it espouses hedonistic and violent themes.

If something more complex lurks beneath the shadows of rap music’s aesthetic expressions of violence and hedonism, then any hidden messages can only be decoded or unearthed if one abandons the notion of the fixity and singularity of language and meaning. The discipline of poststructuralism and semantics has theorized about the layered and unstable nature of language. For example, in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966), Jacques Derrida has insisted that we observe the “freeplay,” or the continuous substitution between the signified and the signifier. Derrida argues that there is not always a stable relationship between the two. Conceding his theory, materialistic lyrics, such as the famous 1999 anthem, “Big pimpin’ spending cheese” (“Big Pimpin’”), from the Marcy Projects hailing rapper Jay Z—notwithstanding the visual performance of materialistic indulgence depicted in the video—refuse any reductive interpretive analysis.

Perhaps, conferring on the language of rap discourse the same mutability that Derrida suggests would require that we avail ourselves of the layered meanings in rap
music. The lyrics constitute, to borrow from the late 20th century literary and race scholar James Baldwin, “the evidence of things not seen.” Just as Baldwin pointed out in the context of the Wayne Williams Atlanta child murders, we cannot divorce the visible evidence (in this case, the hyperviolent, materialistic, and misogynistic lyrics) from the political, economic, and social vicissitudes that give rise to the evidence. In line with Baldwin, I insist that such dissociation of the hedonistic lyrics and the socio-political and economic contextual “kilns” from which they are fired, is indicative of a deliberate “unseeing” or a willed negation of the history of American racism.

The other perspective to consider is that there is a tendency to refuse to categorize rap music as a rhythmically poetic discourse of resistance to white hegemony because it emanates from a people who have historically been judged as insensate, fungible objects. The African slave was considered an unfeeling brute that lacked the capacity for aptitude, and useful only as an instrument of production. Slave tears, wails, and sublime “rhythmic cries” were therefore ineffable, rather than considered as testaments of sorrow in the face of terror and brutalization. In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), literary scholar Saidiya Hartman argues that slave songs “became the emblem of oppression, and in these songs, sorrow was as palpable as the chains that bound the flesh, and yet it was ineffable too” (27). But, in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Douglass provides a first-person perspective on the fact that songs were narratives of resistance. He recalls that the “apparently incoherent songs” told “a tale of woe” and “complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery” (8; my emphasis). Today, is the widespread proclivity of turning a deaf ear to rap music’s implicit critique of white oppression revelatory of
conceiving of the Black rap body as an extension of the commoditized slave body? In my estimation, the rap Black body constitutes the commoditized and commodified “Other” whose layered, resistive utterances are similarly deemed ineffable (except for when they reinforce degraded stereotypes of “blackness” that sustain the racial hierarchy).

But since the Middle Ages, Western thought has been invested in finding meaning, knowledge, and expressive capacities in or about elements in the world that are not immediately visible, knowable, or comprehensible. Black studies scholar and performance theorist Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003) is a further demonstration. Moten sheds light on the fact that seemingly ineffable utterances are, in fact, oppositional (phonic) gestures—a kind of discourse of resistance. Challenging Karl Marx’s subjunctive inquiry into the question of talking commodities, Moten argues that the said inanimate slave-object did, in fact, speak. To demonstrate the expressive capacity of the slave commodity, Moten invokes the imagery of Aunt Hester (the aunt of Frederick Douglass) being whipped and emitting unintelligible shrieks⁹, which, he argues, signified her resistance to her master’s brutality (5-6).

Moten later applies this same argument to his analysis of the published photograph of the restaged spectacle of Emmett Till’s brutalized body propped up inside of his casket in 1955. He argues that the photograph of Emmett Till’s restaged death challenges the propensity to privilege the visual since inherent in the photo is “phonic substance” which materializes vis-à-vis “black mon’in’” (197). The photo invokes the auditory correspondent: not merely the affective reaction of moaning at the site of his
mutilated body, but also Till’s whistling at a white woman and his “‘crippled speech’” that set off the originary “moment of panic” (196, 195). Given the historical context of Till’s murder (the anxiety surrounding miscegenation in the South), the inherent phonic elements of the photograph, then, engender an ontological critique of “authoritarian modes of (false) differentiation and (false) universality . . .,” thereby interrogating the racist discourse that precipitated the events surrounding the murder (Moten 196). The point is that the polyphonetic elements inherent in the photograph render it an enunciatory site of resistance to the racist ideals of the then current episteme and its material forces.

Applying Moten’s framework, rap music experiences a double imposition. In the first place, as stated above, the Black male bodies that largely produce the music are “seen” through the “inner eyes” of white supremacy. Like the commoditized slave body, they are deemed aberrations of the human, instruments of production, incapable of feeling, and devoid of the faculty of reason. Thus, any noise that they emit registers as “nigh incomprehensible.” I borrow that phrase from an article entitled “Here are the Disgusting ‘Rap’ Lyrics that Michael Brown Wrote that the Media’s Ignoring,” by Wilmot Provisor, a writer for the conservative news outlet, Conservative Tribune.

Michael Brown was the 18-year-old Ferguson, Missouri teen who was murdered by then Officer Darren Wilson in 2014, after a violent confrontation between the two, following Wilson’s encroaching acts and racial profiling behavior. The media and the court testimonies depicted Michael Brown as a “Hulk,” and the fact that he wrote rap lyrics oddly confirmed his monstrous, animalistic “nature.” The “disgusting lyrics” that Provisor highlights are as follows: “I ain’t racist really / But I’m down with black and
brown / Those who are last shall be first, / Whites on the bottom now.” Provisor also
cites lyrics about “pistol toting,” which is a staple of rap thematics. But what is troubling
is that rather than interpreting the lyrics (which appear on Brown’s SoundCloud account)
as the evidence of a young hood “prophet’s”\(^\text{10}\) denouncement of an arbitrarily contrived
racial hierarchy that characterizes the social order in which he existed and as hope for
social retribution, they register to a presumably white supremacist listener as “mumbling”
that is “nigh incomprehensible.” In fact, he warns his readers against listening to the
entire track unless they are “tone-deaf.” This case illuminates the proclivity of linking
rap music and its “non-human” progenitors to ineffable expressions.

Secondly, because some cultural critics erroneously divorce rap from the socio-
political space of hip hop culture, like the published photograph of Emmett Till, a
mainstream rap track is also but a cultural artifact. However, the cultural artifact (and the
photograph), as well as the alleged “non-human” rap body, is a “speaking commodity.”
Its sonic accents (like gunshots) and its narratives that seemingly only valorize violence
and materialism are typically judged as cacophony, banter, or, as utterly
incomprehensible to others. The article cited above judged Brown’s lyrics as “crippled
speech”; “I doubt you’d be able to tell,” it posits, in reference to deciphering meaning in
the rest of the song’s lyrics. Yet inherent in the “unintelligible” or “decadent” “phonic
substance” of rap music is a cultural language of resistance to “authoritarian modes of
(false) differentiation,” to echo Moten. One can trace the controversial “phonic
substance” of rap music to arbitrary constructions of identity and “Man” (hence Brown’s
animalistic depiction), and to the sociopolitical processes that govern racist practices
(hence the state-sponsored criminalization of young Black males, which occurs through
discriminatory practices employed by domestic police, not unlike what occurs in the case of Michael Brown).

The art of the controversial Chicago native, rapper Kanye West should be considered here as a contemporary manifestation of this paradigm. West is dismissed by most cultural critics as an artist whose musical content is counter-productive to the Black liberation agenda given his lyrics mostly center conspicuous consumption (amongst other troubling values). For instance, in “All Falls Down” (2004), Kanye West highlights both the extent and root of his materialistic cravings. He can hardly leave his home for the grocery store, he tells listeners, without “one of [his watches]” or brand name clothing. He even admits the absurdity of his frivolous spending: “I can’t even pronounce nothing, pass that Ver-say-shee / Then I spent 400 bucks on this / Just to be like, ‘Nigga, you ain’t up on this’.” Such lyrics might also register to class-conscious listeners as nonsense, as counter-revolutionary to the fight against class oppression.

However, the seemingly meaningless, self-denigrating “phonic substance” masks a socio-economic critique. The art actually mirrors the reality of Black masculine identity positioned at the intersection of race and class oppression in America, and the latter lines quoted are reflections of the innate competitive spirit of Western capitalism. Later in the verse, West discloses how his preoccupation with “Rollies and Pashes” disguises a resistance to white America’s refusal to recognize Black ontology. His material consumption is, for him, the antidote to the racist dynamics of American race relations and the failed economic promises of Reconstruction: “We shine ‘cause they hate us, floss ‘cause they degrade us / We tryin’ buy back our 40 acres.” In this sense, it can be argued that these lyrics are actually imbued with political utility. As Moten argues in
In the Break, the “political imperative” is rarely dissociated from “an aesthetic one” (196). The same is true in much of rap music.

Thus, though my goal is not to expose the redemptive and resistive capacities of rap music through a focused analysis of its narrated capitalist sensibilities, critical to this dissertation is mining rap lyrics and visual aesthetics for the critiques of racist ideologies and practices that they conceal rather than contending with the trivialities that they ostensibly reveal. I join hip-hop scholar Adam Krims who also insists that rap music is the evolved “rhythmic cries of the slaves” that, according to DuBois, were once sublime and incomprehensible yet “articulate message[s] of an “unhappy people” that [told] of death and suffering” in an unjust world, and a “longing toward a truer world” (760), similar to what we witness in Brown’s lyrics. It is the post-modern version of Aunt Hester’s ghastly shrieks, the “crippled speech of Emmett Till,” and the “black mon’in’” in the photograph of his mutilated body. This means that similar to the speaking “commoditized /commodified slave body,” its utterances also bear the trace of resistance to the racist, taxonomic logic of the contemporary episteme, which has inherited the racist ideals of epistemes past, such as the hierarchal classification of human beings.

Thesis

In this dissertation, I employ rap music as an object of inquiry into the question of contemporary manifestations of anti-Black oppression, demonstrating the ways in which the art of rappers Jay Z and Kanye West in particular, covertly elucidates the conditions and discursive and ideological mechanisms of power that make possible the exploitation, repression, and destruction of Black bodies in America. I argue that this illuminative
potential is, in part, what attributes to the political utility of mainstream rap music. My first goal is therefore to make apparent mainstream rap music’s rightful place in Black liberation politics given its ability to unveil the functionality of age-old Eurocentric, white supremacist paradigms, such as rendering Black bodies incorrigibly animal, denying Black bodies access to subjectivity, or negating Black ontology. These ideologies give rise to exclusionary monolithic constructions of what it means to be human, pathological constructions of “blackness,” Black masculinity especially, and subsequently, the arbitrary conferral of power (to both state apparatuses and individuals racially coded as “superior”), which manifests in the form of systematic and institutional racism, and structural and physical violence.

The latter part of the dissertation underscores how the subversive capacity of the art form also owes to its sites of covert contestation of oppressive forces. Through Kanye West’s art, my explication reveals the clandestine presence of a de-colonial method of undermining discursive constructions of “blackness,” which emanate from white supremacist and colonial discourses. Interrogating the validity and authoritative power of such discourses enables the reclamation of an internally, holistically defined Black male identity, and exposes the injustice of exclusionary practices and the exercise of gratuitous violence on Black males.

In short, visual and lyrical narratives of Jay Z’s and Kanye West’s art covertly illuminate how ideology justifies hegemony, given that epistemological inaccuracies where Black culture and male bodies are concerned, “rationalize” the relations of domination in America, with respect to (but not limited to) the white-Black racial divide. Yet, as I interpret Kanye West as demonstrating, one method of subverting white
supremacist-colonialist “monsters” that produce misrepresentations of Black identity is by satirically assuming the identity of the white oppressor and carving out a third, hybrid space of identity in the process. Doing so exposes the ambivalence of their discourses, and by extension, de-authenticates their power.

II: Explanation of Literature: The Dialectics of the Black Literary Tradition, Rap Culture, and Jay Z and Kanye West

Resistive Discourse and “Signifying”

Throughout the dissertation, I also incorporate literary explications that serve not merely as litmus tests to demonstrate further the cogency of my arguments and their trans-genre applicability. Additionally, providing literary explications evinces the bridge that exists between two expressive cultures of Black American identity: contemporary rap music and the Black American literary tradition. The literature includes Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952), James Baldwin’s Blues for Mister Charlie (1964), and Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987). These particular texts are chosen due to the thematic parallels that exist between their fictive content and Jay Z’s and Kanye West’s verbal and visual narratives, and the parallels between their literary ethos and rap culture in general.

There are two elements that bridge the Black literary tradition and rap music. In the first place, both are, in my opinion, inherently discourses of protest. The earliest examples of Black voices in printed form existed to challenge the provincial belief that Negroes were inhuman, as well as to indict the institution of slavery. In The Signifying Monkey (1988), the African American literary theorist Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains the arbitrary inscription of “humanness” on the category of literacy. His etymological
analysis reveals that “letters” denoted “polite and humane learning” (127). This was a belief upheld by 18th century Enlightenment thinkers and slave owners, and harnessed as justification for hegemony. Yet white supremacist factors that led to the birth of the counter-hegemonic discourse (rap music) are not altogether different from such white racist ideals that inaugurated slave literature and the emergent Black literature thereafter. As the lyrics of Michael Brown (and racist responses to them) demonstrate, Black bodies are still considered “the wretched of the earth,”¹² and rappers are utilizing their expressive capacities to challenge this epistemological fallacy. The trans-historical Black expressive tradition is hinged upon giving voice to the marginalized, the excluded, and the oppressed, documenting the ugly truths of American history and racial hegemony, and substantiating Black identity and aesthetic sensibilities.

Second, the foundation of the Black literary tradition and rap music is a Black vernacular tradition that has at its core the practice of “Signifying,” a concept Gates popularized in The Signifying Monkey. To elaborate, rap music is evidence of the Black vernacular tradition coming full circle. As Gates and literary scholar Nellie McKay remind readers in the introduction of their second edition of The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (204), Black, oral, vernacular literature “preceded the tradition of written letters among African Americans. In fact, as they enlighten, “all of the world’s literatures have developed from an oral base” (xlvi). Rap music is therefore a postmodern form of Black oral expression, bearing the traces of the early, pre-modern oral culture, given its preoccupation with mythical narratives of Black heroism, for instance, community, and storytelling.
Furthermore, the editors insist that today’s contemporary vernacular tradition, “rap poetry,” continues to “nurture,” “comment upon,” and “criticize” the written Black literary tradition “in a dialectical, reciprocal relation . . .” (xlvi-xlvii). Contemporary Black vernacular culture thus “Signifies” upon its written literary antecedent. Gates confirms rap’s “Signifying” capacity in his Foreword to The Anthology of Rap:

“Signifying is the grandparent of rap; and Rap is signifying in a postmodern way” (xxii).

In The Signifying Monkey, Gates defines “Signifying” as a rhetorical, intertextual trope in African American literature, whereby texts and writers speak to one another. Signifying, he argues, is repetition with difference; it is the re-casting and configuring of encoded tropes (xxii-xxiii). The Signifying Monkey abounds in explications of literary writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Ishmael Reed “Signifying” upon their literary ancestors (and upon white Western literary traditions).

Like Maya Angelou’s “Signifying” upon the Poet Laureate Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Sympathy” (1899) and Harlem Renaissance poet Counte Cullen’s “Yet Do I Marvel” (1925) with her employment of the “caged bird” trope in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) to signify the metaphoric imprisonment of the Black artist, many rappers “Signify” upon the tropes of their literary predecessors. If the first Black poet, Phillis Wheatley, euphemistically (arguably) scorned the terrors of the Middle Passage and African slavery through disguised rhetoric, manifested in the title of her poem “On Being Brought from African to America” (1773), it can be inferred that the contemporary Mississippi rapper, Big K.R.I.T. “Signifies” upon this trope in his song, “Praying Man.”

He does so by removing Wheatley’s satirical veil of indictment of the Slave Trade. Through a first-person narration voice that paradoxically reflects a collective experience,
infused with contemporary Southern dialect, he conspicuously recounts the horrors of the Middle Passage: how Africans were *ripped* from their native lands, how their feet were shackled in the process, and how the manipulative ploys of white slave traders resulted in Africans selling other Africans into slavery. K.R.I.T. provides the imagery that Wheatley does and cannot, (given, of course, the context in which she was writing\(^{14}\)), such as that of the bodies stacked like cargo in the ships’ hulls, and the reality that some Africans “jumped ship” to avoid the torturous fate awaiting them in Europe and the Americas.

Moreover, the title and content of conscious Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar’s “The Blacker the Berry”\(^{15}\) “Signifies” upon Harlem Renaissance writer Wallace Thurman’s 1929 novel, *The Blacker the Berry*. Like Thurman, Lamar examines the issue of colorism and fissures within the Black community, which is often fueled and abetted by white supremacist ideology and practices. The song, “The Mask,” by the politically conscious group The Fugees, consisting of artists Lauren Hill, Pras, and Wyclef Jean, “Signifies” upon the Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” (185). Both muse on the notion of concealing one’s true emotions as a survival mechanism in a racist social order. Yet the Fugees extend their commentary on contemporary “masking” to working class struggles in the labor force and complex gender relations—“repetition with difference.”

Additionally, the most obvious and recurring example lies in rap culture’s “Signifying” upon the trope of the early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century folkloric “badman” figure “Stackolee.” This witty, violent, defiant, uber-masculine figure that “[didn’t]t mind dying” (Gates and McKay 26) was an aesthetic response to the history of Black male repression and oppression in America. Rap culture’s characteristic “badman” ethos is a replica of the personality of the mythical “Stackolee.” The quintessential example of the his
reemergence can be found in Canadian-born rapper Drake’s song “Worst Behavior.” In the hook, Drake reminds listeners (implicitly) that the hyper-exaggerated performance of masculinity, the “flexin’,” braggadocio, and “worst behavior” are counter-reactions to a history of Black male disempowerment and Negrophobia, given his lamentation, “muh-fuckas never loved us.”

Yet, the rappers examined in this dissertation, Shawn Carter, known in the rap industry as Jay Z, and Kanye West or “Yeezy,” through their art, can be perceived to “Signify” upon the written Black literary tradition, and specifically as “repeating with difference,” tropes explored by Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison. I have chosen Jay Z and his progeny Kanye West as subjects of study because they are perhaps two of the most commercially successful and influential figures in rap music to date. However, these two rap moguls are also arguably the most controversial figures in rap history as well. Jay Z’s unapologetic admission of crack selling which permeates the content of his music catalogue, and both of their capitalist, violent, and misogynistic narratives have rendered them bull’s eyes for rap music detractors and fodder for conversations concerning the genre’s said promotion of bad social values. Kanye West has even gone so far as to declare them both the “un-American idols” (“Clique”).

Nevertheless, their music is replete with echoes of their literary antecedents who were also, in one way or another, “black sheep” at some point in their literary careers, notwithstanding their colossal achievements. Ralph Ellison was chided, vilified even, for “evading” what many of his contemporaries saw as the mission of Black intellectuals at the time: “to foreground and protest victimization, to avoid taking comfort from the promises of Western civilization” (Gates and McKay 1537). Ellison was also subjected
to hostility from the Black masses because it was alleged that he was no formidable presence during the Civil Rights Movement. Yet he saw his art integral and commensurate to the ground-level work underway during the Movement. Likewise, though Jay Z’s and West are not exactly hypervisible presences (physically) during the Black Lives Matter protests, I deem their art extensions of the picket signs and bullhorns. Moreover, the hostility James Baldwin faced during his writing tenure was a result of his championing of an alternative, more fluid image of Black masculinity. He was barred from the community of militant Black male intellectuals like Richard Wright, Eldridge Cleaver, and Amiri Barka. Cleaver, Black feminist Michele Wallace reports in Black Macho (1978), charged Baldwin for waging “a war . . . against black masculinity” (61), with his literary representations of Black male homosexuality, which Cleaver deemed a pathological state of being. But Baldwin’s national literary prominence is almost unmatched, and he remains one of the most insightful voices on the racial dynamics in America of his time.

Finally, though awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, Toni Morrison has been taken to task by some literary critics, first, for what many perceived as provincial depictions of “blackness” in her first novel, The Bluest Eye (1970). Critical reviews of Playing in the Dark (1992) were also unforgiving in what appeared to be Morrison’s over-investment with the white literary canon. Some of her contemporaries saw this as unwarranted confirmation of the white canon being the center of the American literary stage. Literary critic Stanley Crouch, for instance, derided her multiple creations of worlds wherein there exists “endless black victims.”19
Ellison, Baldwin, and Morrison were each held accountable for what others perceived to be artistic limitations or moral dilemmas within their art. Yet the utility of their aesthetic contributions to the never-ending struggle for race equality was observed and harnessed still. For instance, in *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (2003), African American literary scholar Kenneth Warren reports that the cultural critic Harold Cruse once said of Ralph Ellison that “even if Ellison did express the view that literature and art are not racial . . . the evidence remains that all of Ellison’s work as exemplified in *Invisible Man* and *Shadow and Act* is definitely racial” (qtd. in Warren 17; Cruse 509). In fact, one can infer that *Invisible Man* remained on the “radars” of the Black radical thinkers of the 60s, as Warren discloses, precisely because its “crippled speech,” as it were, of alleged “transracialism” concealed the “evidence of things not seen.” That is, Ellison’s description of the invisible Black man who moves under the weight of the world’s expectations is a meditation on Black bodies experiencing the nightmarish realities of American racism. For American values and prescriptive social expectations are premised upon white supremacist ideals.

To this end, there is still liberatory potential in Jay Z’s and West’s art. The troubling social values that these artists verisimilarly promote bear the traces of “the evidence of things not seen,” or things strategically concealed, such as racist practices that underpinned the 1980s “war on drugs,” or those seemingly imperceptible ruses of power that only permit the manifestation of a visible Black identity if it is “seen” through a racialized scopic lens of social constructions, which only yields Black *invisibility*.

*Ralph Ellison*
The trope of “Black male invisibility,” which aptly defines the nameless protagonist of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, positions the novel in a dialectical relationship with rap music and with many of the narratives spun by the two artists in question, Jay Z especially. The widely circulated caricatured images of Black masculinity proliferated in rap music to which the predominantly white label owners demand rappers to conform, and to which the Black artists themselves internalize and subscribe, only culminate in a monolithic “invisible man.” Black popular culture scholar Mark Anthony Neal, in *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (2013), describes this paradigm as “legible masculinity.”21 Ellison’s nameless narrator descends into the manhole at the novel’s conclusion to evade the burden of interpellating social constructions that have instigated his self-alienation and reproachable, puppeteer behavior. Like Invisible Man (the character), Jay Z’s narratives reveal the fact that his hypervisible presence, which was, in his case, marked by a hypermasculine performance of Black male identity, indicated his concession to an “legible” and ironically invisible image that is institutionally and systematically engineered by the dominant forces around him. However, the “repetition with difference” lies in the fact that his “moment of clarity,” triggered his ascent into an enlightened world wherein he could self-define, unlike Invisible Man’s inverted trajectory.

Moreover, early on in his rap career, Kanye West divulged his own perpetual search for recognition and an understanding of white America’s refusal to “see” Black men in accordance with their self-defined conceptions of self. For instance, then as now, West seemed dead set against placing his real face on his album covers. The avatars for his first three albums reflect his early frustration with the prescriptive scripting of Black
masculinity. *The College Dropout* (2004) features a dejected (given his slumped posture) mascot that resembles a bear, yet who presumably represents the burgeoning rap artist: Kanye West. The bear appears again a year later on the cover of *Late Registration* (2005), but in a more sinister presentation. Then it recurs in *Graduation* (2007), except this time within an extraterrestrial, outer space setting, depicted through cartoonist graphics. West’s recurring trope of masking Black male identity can be read as an implicit critique of fantastical constructions of Black masculinity which render Black men invisible. The logic runs identical to Invisible Man’s: *I mask my identity or descend into a space of dark alienation so as to evade consequential misrepresentations of our identity.* Moreover, the quintessential lyrical example of his musings on the trope of Black male invisibility can be found in the song “All Falls Down.” He suggests that acceding stereotypes of Black masculinity—such as the Black man who defines himself vis-à-vis the acquisition of property—does not afford the Black body true visibility because “[e]ven if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe” (“All Falls Down”).

Further, Ellison—who, for the record, was an inspiring musician prior to pursuing a literary career (discussed further in chapter one)—used his art to criticize the failures of American Democracy in post-War America, specifically its exclusion of Negro realities in the defining of the American identity. In *Shadow and Act* (1964), the chapter “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Ellison argues “when the white American” points to a work of fiction and exclaims, “‘This is American reality’”; yet the Negro responds, “‘Perhaps, but you have left out this and this . . .’” (25). Further, in his essay, “Ralph Ellison’s American Democratic Individualism” (2004), literary critic and Professor of Politics, Lucas Morel delves deeper into this very investment in
interrogating mythical, monolithic narratives of American history and the exclusionary nature of American Democracy that was present in *Invisible Man*. Morel intuits, “He became a writer [rather than a Blues or Jazz composer like his musical idols Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong] in hopes of offering a corrective to the written record of American history . . .” (61). He later maintains, “Ellison wanted to take the Negro American experience and make it a part of the American literary tradition before it was forgotten” (62). Morel reminds readers that Ellison’s preoccupation with revisionist history plays out in the novel when IM advocates on behalf of the underrepresented people of Harlem, declaring that they were “outside of the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them” (Morel 62).

Likewise, Jay Z and Kanye West appear to “Signify” upon the tradition of Black American writers who, like Ellison, deemed it of necessity to wrestle with America’s selective memory and to expose its sham of Democracy. In “Made in America,” a track on Jay Z and Kanye West’s 2011 compilation album, *Watch the Throne* (2011), the artists ruminate on the precariousness of Black life chances and the division of social classes in America. Jay Z’s verse is of particular interest because he affirms Ellison’s contention that the Negro identifies with American ideals, but that his sense of these ideals has been informed by an American experience that is altogether different from that of the white American’s (“Twentieth-Century Fiction” 25). Jay Z does not renounce American ideals, yet he exposes how the Black man, who has been “made in America” must revise the criteria if he wants to attain the always elusive American Dream. Jay Z’s revisionist patriotism is such that he “pledge[s] allegiance to [his] grandma” in lieu of the flag. His piece of the metaphoric “American apple pie” was “supplied through Arm & Hammer”
(the product most often used to cut dope) because the “scales were lopsided” (i.e. the uneven distribution of wealth), so his socially destructive behavior was merely a means of “restoring order” in the failed American Democracy. In short, whether it can be proven that Jay Z read *Invisible Man*, the intertextuality here is undeniable.

*James Baldwin*

The foremost reason for my inclusion of James Baldwin in this dissertation is his brooding obsession with Black masculine politics in America. He philosophized on what it meant to be a Black man in America. Rap music has taken up the same topic. Most notably, in “New National Anthem,” Atlanta rapper T.I. literally and forcefully poses the questions to his listeners: “What the fuck you know about being a Black man in America?” He poses this rhetorical question after having provided a lyrical index of social injustices that Black men face, such as hate from the police and systematic racism that targets Black men. One poignant line that bridges rap discourse with Baldwin’s agenda is “He ain’t a killer but he will if you make him do it.” T.I. is calling attention to the social construction of Black masculinity, and how Black men often internalize dehumanizing constructions of Black maleness—an omnipresent subject in Baldwin’s prose.

Rap is a predominantly Black male arena wherein decade after decade, by and large, it breeds and gives birth to litters upon litters of a static, cookie-cutter form of Black masculinity. I am always reminded of Jay Z’s description of his Black masculine persona in “Public Service Announcement,” a track on *The Black Album* (2003). He tries to convince himself of the nature and biological essence of his “hustla spirit” flowing through his veins, but the lines “No matter where you go, you are who you are player /
And you can try to change but that’s just the top layer / Man, you was who you was ‘fore you got here’—leaves listeners to interpret the performance of Black hypermasculinity as described by Jay Z, through a constructivist lens. That is, if one understands the homogenous, commercialized Black masculine persona in the rap industry, then one deduces that he performs an image of normative Black masculinity that has been predetermined, not by God, but by a white male imaginary that, at once, lives out its fantasies and nightmares through the “legible,” ironically invisible Black rap body, while he also cashes out on it.

James Baldwin frequently examined this imposition, which he considered, in the words of Michele Wallace, the Black man’s “double reality of being black” (Wallace 56). He understood “the white man’s vision of the black man and the man the black man had to be for himself” (Wallace 56). Baldwin knew and contested in his essay “Many Thousands Gone,” for instance, the fact that white America had “condemned [the Negro] to death” since he was “compelled to accept the fact that this dark and dangerous and unloved stranger is part of himself forever” (qtd. in Wallace 57).22 When Kanye West raps, “Everybody knows I’m a motherfuckin’ monster” on his song “Monster,” accompanied by the visual aesthetics of West performing the identity of a sadistic, necrophiliac Black male “monster” who presumably23 kills and hangs women from chains, one wonders if it is a sardonic, hyper-exaggerated critique of accepting his mythological construction as the “dark and dangerous” monstrosity that white America claimed him to be in the aftermath of slavery. Moreover, though he eventually has a “moment of clarity” whereby he abandons the prescriptive hypermasculine persona, in
the lyrics quoted above from “Public Service Announcement,” Jay Z has also consigned himself to the futility of challenging this persona.

Thus, Baldwin’s import in this dissertation can be summed up in the statement, “. . . what it means to be a Negro in America can perhaps be suggested by an examination of the myths we perpetuate about him” (“Many Thousands Gone” 21). Jay Z and Kanye West “Signify” upon Baldwin with their similar ruminations on the Black male’s mythological experience. Their musings provide fictive and sometimes autobiographical narratives that are luminous in their capacity to examine these myths, the forces that sustain and perpetuate them, and the consequences of their existence. The subversive potential in these narratives is such that one can only wrest power from the authoritative discourses and agents that propagate misrepresentations of “blackness” if they are stripped bare, studied, destabilized, and then unlearned.

More specifically, Jay Z’s and West’s narratives are oftentimes “moments of clarity” insofar as it becomes clear that dehumanizing constructions of “blackness” are the foundation for the violence (domestic and political) routinely inflicted upon Black male bodies in America. The national racial crisis of Black male disembodiment has assumed the form of conflict between police and Black communities—specifically Black men. From the advent of “gangsta rap” in the late 1980s hitherto, rap music has explicitly voiced resistance to this national epidemic. In 1988, the notorious Compton rap group, N.W.A., hovered a heat lamp over the issue of police brutality in Black communities with their release of the controversial song “Fuck the Police,” which resulted in a number of media spectacles directly related to the song’s subsequent censorship. Then rap pioneer Ice T’s “Cop Killer” (recorded in 1991) was a foreboding
revenge fantasy track, wherein Ice T expresses desire to avenge the murders and beatings of Black men at the hands of racist police on the East Coast. Its 1992 recorded version actually mentions the historic, videotaped 1991 LAPD beating of an unarmed Los Angeles native, Rodney King.

King’s case only exacerbated tension between police forces and Black communities nationwide, and continued to be a recurring subject in rap lyrics. The second verse of Jay Z’s “99 problems” (2003), for instance, “Signifies” upon the Rodney King case in that he ponders taking the police on a high speed case, but unlike King, Jay Z (the persona) decides against doing so because he knows his rights; plus “he [has] a few dollars” to fight the case. Though Jay Z assumes he is pulled over because he is “young and [he’s] black and [his] hat’s real low,” the cop claims to have pulled him over for doing “55 in a 54,” which still evinces the epidemic of racial profiling, and bears resemblance (loosely) to the 2014 Michael Brown murder case. Brown was also accosted because he was “young and black,” and perhaps his red Cardinals “hat [was] real low.” Though a crime had previously taken place in the vicinity in which he was accosted, it remains to be true that like Jay Z had, Brown “fit the description” of Black male invisibility and “legible masculinity.”

Brown’s murder case in Ferguson, Missouri is only one of thousands, but it is the one I am most attentive to in this dissertation for a number of reasons—one being its relationship to Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*.

Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*—which is itself a dramatized restaging of the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till who in 1955 was brutally murdered and mutilated by two white men, who were acquitted of the murder, for allegedly whistling at a white woman—is the quintessential literary explication of this epidemic. It is
thematically linked to the Michael Brown murder case given its plotline of a young Black male murdered by a white male autocrat whose impunity is unsurprising given the historic precedence of such murders. In fact, Baldwin’s re-staging of this national crisis via *Blues* has, itself, been re-staged over time, precisely in response to the onslaught of violent confrontations between police and Black men (discussed further in chapter 2). The restagings are premised upon the storyline of *Blues*, yet they approximate the contexts of respective contemporary like occurrences. Michael Brown’s murder case has, in fact, been inserted into this tradition of restaging *Blues*.

However, the play’s import also lies in its underscoring of the discursive constructions of “blackness” and Black masculinity that underwrite the epidemic of the destruction of Black male bodies. The protagonist, Richard Henry, an aspiring artist like Brown, and who is murdered by a white townsman, is classified through the lens of “legible masculinity,” but in such a way that he is relegated to the realm of the “non-human / deviant animal” in the white imaginary—an all-too-common construction of Black masculinity then as now.

Though Kanye West has overtly criticized the perversity of this epidemic, in lyrics like “Hands up, like the cops taught us / Hands up, hands up then the cops shot us,” I link my discussion of the play and the Michael Brown murder case to West’s track “Black Skinhead,” which does not overtly memorialize the destruction of Black male bodies at the hands of police or laymen white supremacists. The track’s transgressive capacity lies in what I interpret as its instructive nature. Its lyrics and accompanying visual aesthetics, as my extrapolations demonstrate, conceal “the evidence of things not seen.” I illuminate how it can be read as a satirical critique of the
mythological construction of the Black male body (the only “human” body present in the video), which Baldwin also deemed essential to understand if the Black man in America would be set “in any wise free” (“Many Thousands Gone” 32-33). In line with Baldwin’s hypothesis, “Black Skinhead” sheds light on the various ways that Richard Henry and Michael Brown are constructed as subhuman, which licenses their murders and confers impunity to their murderers.

*Toni Morrison*

Finally, there are thematic and structural contiguities between rap culture and Toni Morrison’s art, rap culture and *Beloved*, and the novel and “Black Skinhead.” Despite its mixed critical reception, *Playing in the Dark* was useful for its commentary on stereotypical representations of “blackness” in Western literature, and how these misrepresentations have been “circulated as ‘knowledge’” (4). As I have discussed, rap music is another vehicle through which to disseminate images of problematic, hypermasculine depictions of Black masculinity. But in so doing, as Morrison (and Baldwin) makes clear, misrepresentations of “blackness” only stabilize the racial hierarchy governing the social order. Morrison’s careful observations of the “Africanist” presence in the Western literary tradition, though in no way novel, provide insight into the creation of an alleged transcendent, superior white identity in American literature. The “Africanist presence” in literature actuates “a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (Morrison, *Playing* 7). It has enabled meditations on ethics, heroism and innocence in white Western literary writings. But Morrison suggests that one is
compelled to ask, “What are Americans always so innocent of?”—to which her rejoinder is “African savagery” (45).

Rap music / hip-hop culture is the discursive grounds on which we can make similar observations. In “Imperial Whiteness Meets Hip Hop Blackness: A Spiritual Phenomenology of the Hegemonic Body in Twenty-Century USA,” Social Ethics Professor and hip-hop critic James Perkinson explains the existence in hip hop of a counter-hegemonic male ontology. Inscribed on the Black male “hip hop body” is an encoded set of assumptions that allows hegemonic white male ontology to sustain its “superiority.” The Black male “hip hop body” incarnates deviance, an “outlaw” spirit, and so is “othered” in the face of the white male normative body type (111-14). Moreover, read dialectically, Perkinson argues that both signify “imperial correlates” if one considers the paradoxical commercial viability of this body (115). By extension, adding to Perkinson’s arguments, given the corporatization and commodification of this “othered” body, its existence enables the recasting of white identity through the lens of heroism, and, echoing Morrison, through the lens of a romanticized conquering of “African savagery” (a paradigm I explore in chapter two).

Thus, her reaffirmation of “Africanism” as having “shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of [Western, particularly American] culture” (4) runs paradigmatically identical to the centrality and import of rap culture in global popular culture /American cultural identity. The centrality of rap music to American cultural heritage, however, lends to a discussion of the transgressive capacity of both. If DuBois has branded upon the American conscience the reality that the Negro has “gifted” America with soul, music, and spirit, then through rap music and culture, this remains
to be so, as Black vernacular culture, in its contemporary manifestation, is still a centrifugal force that continues to take America by storm. But like Morrison, I believe that part of the utility of acknowledging the centrality of the extant “Africanist” / Black expressive cultural presence that encircles and is arguably the nucleus of Euro-American cultural identity, lies in what that reality conceals about the arbitrary constructions of race. The more we learn about how “whiteness” and “blackness” are dialectically constructed, the better our chances are of demystifying those very constructions which impede upon Black liberation.

Rap discourse, like Morrison, appears to be more engaged in this illuminative process than some critics would like to admit. Consider, for instance, West’s interrogation of root of “Black inferiority,” which calls to mind what Martinician postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), has defined as the Negro’s “inferiority complex”: “They made us hate ourselves and love their wealth,” because “the people highest up got the lowest self esteem” (“All Falls Down”). Thus, in this case, Black self-hatred is symptomatic of and indivisible from white self-hatred.

Additionally, taking stock of rap music’s significance and what Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* refers to as the “countercultural” presence in American cultural tradition means that the memory of slavery is forever interwoven into the American cultural heritage. African American identity, since the beginning of the 19th century, has been by and large constituted through the memory of slavery. Even the Tribe Called Quest rapper Q-Tip, in a fairly recent twitter hip-hop history lesson targeting a misinformed white rapper, enlightens, “Well once you are born black your existence I believe is joined with socio-political epitah and philos [sic] based on the tangled and treacherous history of
slavery.” In his song “Oceans,” from his 2013 *Magna Carta Holy Grail* album, Jay Z corroborates Q-Tip’s claims. The song paints a picture of how Jay Z’s high-class experience of sailing the Ivory Coast aboard a yacht filled with champagne and other luxuries is disrupted by the memory of slavery. The champagne that he pours into the Ocean, consistent with the materialistic vanity of rap culture, is transposed into commemorative act. The pouring of champagne constitutes the ritualistic act of offering libations for the memory of his ancestors, many of whose bodies and spirits were dispersed throughout the bed of the Atlantic.

This memory is somewhat debilitating in the sense that all of his energies are redirected to this act of “rememory.” Dirtying his “white tuxedo before the Basquiat Show” matters not because, as Frank Ocean croons on the hook, “This water drown my family, this water mix my blood / This water tells my story, this water knows it all.” But this memory, which compels Jay Z to redefine his identity, is North American history, and not the sole memory of Blacks or Jay Z. In his cultural references in both of the verses, Jay Z tethers the song and the memory of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to an *American* cultural heritage.

Yet, Jay Z’s performance of “rememory” “Signifies” upon an entire canon of African American literary texts that also take up the theme of revisiting the ghosts of slavery’s past as a method of reconstructing identity, most notably Morrison’s *Beloved*. In fact, the term “re-memory” is distinctly associated with the novel, given Morrison incorporates the actual term and employs its thematic connotation to structure the narrative. *Beloved* is premised upon the continued presence of the past revisiting and re-shaping the present, which enables the redefining of identity. But Morrison can only
unravel the story of her protagonist, Sethe, through the return of Beloved, who is the literal “ghost of slavery’s past. She is the incarnated memory of Sethe’s (the novel’s protagonist) child who has returned from the dead—from slavery’s irrepressible past—to enable Sethe and the other characters to unearth the buried memories of their traumatic experiences in slavery (which had occurred twenty years prior). As Sethe explains to her other daughter, Denver, “. . . Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory . . . Some things you forget. Other things you never do . . .. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the picture of it-stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (43). Likewise, Beloved, or the memory of slavery in the novel proved to be irrepressible, and Q-Tip attempts to persuade white Aussie rapper Iggy Azalea, whose controversial “runaway slave master” line rightfully made her a subject of contempt, that rap culture can never dissociate itself from slavery because “it never leaves our conversation” or our quotidian experiences.

But as Morrison demonstrates, tethering one’s identity to the memory of slavery is transformative and liberating. Beloved’s return allows Sethe to reconsider her “unethical” act of infanticide as a politicized act of violence against the institution of slavery, and as a mother’s rational decision to protect her child. Equally, Jay Z is able to see that his subjection to what Fanon calls a “epidermal racial schema”32 (Ocean sings, “I hope my Black skin don’t dirt this white tuxedo”) is symptomatic of the vile institution of slavery (“But if so, fuck it” because this “water tells [his] story”), which was irrationally governed by terror and brutality (“this watered drowned my family / this water mixed my blood”). Nevertheless, he comes to the realization that the blood of his ancestors flows through his veins, and those who critically consume his “text” can see that his capitalist
ventures are not only made possible by the root of modern capitalism (i.e. slave labor). His conspicuous consumption must also be read as retribution for the repressed desires of his slave ancestors, to whom he realizes his identity is inextricably tethered. For Kanye West, contending with the legacy of slavery is also advantageous because it enables the recognition of its immortal presence in contemporary society. West’s “New Slaves” track exposes neo-enslavement systems and institutions, namely private prisons that exploit Black and brown labor (discussed further in the Introduction Appendix A).

Finally, *Beloved*’s specific importance to the dissertation lies in its intertextual connections with West’s “Black Skinhead.” As implicated by the title, identities are often conceptualized through binary modes of construction. Black identity is oftentimes pigeonholed by essentialist constructions of “blackness,” or it is forced to assume or assimilate whiteness. But as the title intimates, subversion is perhaps possible by mimicking the dominant identity, which produces a hybrid figure. *Beloved* is also premised upon and destabilizes binaries, such as the past and present, the private / domestic and the public, and as postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* (1994), home (the novel’s setting: 124 Blue Stone Road) and world (Beloved) (19). However, as Morrison makes clear through Beloved (the character), the past / world (memory of slavery) invades the present / home in a bridging way that carves out, what Bhabha terms as a transformative, more productive third space, which, in the case of *Beloved*, he terms the “unhomely.” This subversive, transformative, “hybrid” space entails, according to Bhabha a “radical revision” (16) of fixed polarities and identities, and exposes the ambivalence of dominant discourses.
The “unhomely” space in *Beloved* is 124 Blue Stone Road, the haunted home of Sethe’s, Baby Suggs (her mother-in-law), and Denver. Through Beloved’s return, 124 bridges the traumatic memories of slavery and the haunted present in such a way that redefines “home” and “world,” and false constructions of identity (Sethe’s especially), thus exposing the ambivalence of the dominant discourse. Beloved’s return compels Sethe to reconsider the basis of murdering her daughter, and to deem it a rational, justified act, which means that “the very basis of our ethical judgment [of slaver mother infanticide] undergoes a radical revision” (Bhabha 16). But this “radical revision” of an epistemological fallacy exposes the ambivalence of the dominant discourse.

“Black Skinhead,” like *Beloved*, destabilizes misrepresentations of “blackness” through its carving of a transformative, subversive “third space.” But unlike the novel, I demonstrate how this is first made possible vis-à-vis a mimetic performance of identity (hence a “Black skinhead”). Further, the lyrics and visuals bridge stereotypes of “blackness” and the narcissistic demands of “whiteness” in such a way that “radically revises” misrepresentations of both, thereby confirming the ambivalence of white supremacist-colonial discourses. But the visuals can be read as “Signifying” on Morrison’s preoccupation with the trope of chains, which enables a “radical revision” of the “othered” Black rap body. The Black rap body is wearing a chain in the video, which is part of why it is encoded as an “other,” “deviant,” materialistic presence. But given the chain is a “speaking commodity,” Morrison gives voice to the revisionist story that it tells, which endows it (and by extension, the Black rap body) with new, liberatory meaning.
III: Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One

In the first chapter on Jay Z and *Invisible Man*, I discuss the divisive consequences of Plato’s delineation of an “all-knowing Philosopher King” (who can discern “Truths”) and the “ignorant peons” who inhabit the cave (but who know nothing but “shadows”) in his *Allegory of the Cave*, providing a genealogical reading of the Allegory. Part of the “moment of clarity” lies in illuminating how the Allegory spills over into later Western traditions of oppression and arbitrary racial divides. I discuss how the divisive logic that the allegory depicts resulted in not merely the division of society but in the conquest, domination, exploitation, extermination of Black bodies, and how the contemporary socio-political American atmosphere (or “Republic”) exhibits Platonic ideologies, to the exclusion and detriment of Black bodies.

Jay Z’s transformation and trajectory “from the bottom to the top of the globe” (“Oh My God”) charted throughout his catalogue of music, and *Invisible Man’s* adventures from the South, to Harlem, to his descent into the manhole, expose the folly of and need to detach from Platonic ideologies. Through a Fanonian postcolonial theoretical lens, I show that the stereotypical identities that Jay Z and *Invisible Man* perform evince the fact that the American, white supremacist autocrats are merely gazing upon a different set of shadows. In other words, what they promulgate as “Absolute Truths,” such as the said animal-like nature of Black masculinity, from their “enlightened” positionality, is merely another “true belief” or a construction that abets the irrational hierarchization of the races. The “shadows” that characterize Jay Z’s previous lifestyle and hyper-aggressive identity, as well as the various “invisible” identities that
Invisible Man performs, are created by the institutional practices of the dominant world and are not reflections of an innate inferior substance within him (in the case of Jay Z).

Further, if Jay Z can be considered a “postmodern Philosopher King,” it is because like Invisible Man, his “moments of clarity” manifest themselves when he learns to name “the shadows” or the “things not seen” that have, by and large, occasioned his destructive behavior. His presence in this upper domain outside of the cave also constitutes a “moment of clarity” in that he forces American capitalist enterprises to expand their rubric used to evaluate (artistic) excellence and cultural and political relevance. Invisible Man’s descent marks his “moment of clarity” (or the epiphanies he experience just before it do rather). His descent enables him to fend off interpelling constructions of identity so as to self-define.

Chapter Two

Chapter two continues the discussion of misrepresentations of Black masculinity. Through Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead,” James Baldwin’s Blues for Mister Charlie, the 2014 murder case of Michael Brown, and through a postcolonial theoretical lens, I examine how the denial of Black ontology and subjectivity culminates in the destruction and mindless disposal of Black male bodies. This chapter is my attempt to penetrate the root causes of Black male disembodiment in America. The exponential number of spectacles of Black male death at the hands of white male supremacists, casually and widely circulated in the media, is evidence that this issue is a national epidemic. But it is my belief that rectification and amelioration does not lie in the enactment of corrective legislation only. One must conceptualize of the multiple paradigms that enable white supremacist discourse to construct Black bodies through various configurations of “non-
human” designation, since “nonhuman” entities do not require preservation or protection.

I employ what theorist Diana Fuss describes as Fanon’s critique of the “alternative theory of (non)-alterity”\textsuperscript{35} to demonstrate how the Black male body is positioned outside of “otherness,” and by extension, subjectivity and humanity in multiple ways.

As such, Baldwin’s *Blues* elucidates, vis-à-vis his Black male protagonist, Richard Henry, and his white male antagonist, Lyle Britten, one the one hand, the historically precedential epidemic of Black male disembodiment at the hands of the racist white male and his accomplice, the white racist community. On the other hand, Baldwin provides a “moment of clarity” by illuminating the psycho-social dynamics of the white imaginary—namely, its willed “epistemological ignorance,” to borrow a phrase from Charles Mills, which enables and legitimatizes this violence. This “ignorance,” Mills argues, is “socially functional” (18).\textsuperscript{36} In this case, it permits the white imaginary to ideologically and discursively construct Black male ontology as either “disposable animal,” “predatory brute,” or to altogether negate his existence.

Moreover, “Black Skinhead” is also illuminative in this respect. The lyrics to some extent, but mostly visual portrayals of the Black male body, predatory animals, Klan hoods, and the Black-white schematic contrast imply satirical critiques of the psychic and social immobilization of the Black male body within the racist white psyche. That is, the video visually animates the cognitive dysfunction that underwrites epistemic violence. Also, through my application of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, I insist that the track lends to a discussion of and animates the multiple paradigms of discursively fabricating a “knowledge” of “the Other.”

*Chapter Three*
Finally, if chapters one and two are liberatory in their capacity to illuminate the “things not seen”—the structural and ideological forces that establish the conditions that give birth to a “deviant” Black male persona in need of policing / regulating, and the manner in which the Black body is relegated to the realm of “non-alterity” by way of guile and willed ignorance—then chapter three is subversive insofar as it proposes a de-colonial strategy of resistance that extricates Black masculinity from “the cave of shadows,” so to speak, or from beneath the rubble of dehumanizing constructions.

 Deploying postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha’s de-colonial theory of colonial mimicry and the emergence of the transformative colonial hybrid, I return to Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead” as evidence of mimetic a performance of Black identity that yields a subversive, hybrid, third space of identification, wherein stereotypes are turned on their heads. Hybridity, through a Bhabhian de-colonial invocation, marks the site of an ambivalent dominant discourse. Beloved’s “unhomely,” third spaces encapsulate “insurgent interrogations” (Bhabha 167) of the dominant discourse through the return of the novel’s namesake, thereby undermining the discursive power of the time. Further, I demonstrate how “Black Skinhead” can be perceived as animating, through the visuals and the lyrics, the unpredictability of white-supremacist discursive power responsible for the epistemological interment of Black male bodies. Thus, unearthing Black bodies via colonial mimicry and hybridity enables a redefining of Black male ontology and subjectivity.

IV: Situating the Dissertation in the Hip-Hop Discourse: Mapping the Discursive Terrain
The content of this dissertation appends a number of pre-existing and ongoing conversations regarding the socio-political relevance of rap music. As I briefly mentioned earlier, cultural critics have contested what they perceive as the essentialist notion of defining rap music exclusively by its expressive political forays. Such critics have also challenged those who have subsequently denounced contemporary mainstream rap music’s characteristic vain commerciality, suggesting that it has ventured too far away from its roots. For instance, Tricia Rose acknowledges the polyvocality of rap music in her groundbreaking _Black Noise_ (1994), when she claims that from the outset, rap music “has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America” (2). In _Prophets of the Hood_ (2006), Imani Perry, “working from and against the premise that [rap music] has been undervalued as an art” (3), concurs with Rose. She insists that rap is not an inherently liberatory art form: “There are particular artists with liberatory agendas, who by their words protest racism, sexism, classism and thereby enlighten.” Perry maintains, “But hip hop is not ‘liberation music’” (7). Perry argues that recognizing rap’s political framework only obscures an understanding of its more expansive discursive space carved by rappers over the years. Hence, Perry advises hip-hop critics to acknowledge the “ideological democracy” and holism of rap music. Rap, she argues, reflects “the beauty and the beast” of Black American culture (2).

This dissertation goes a “piece of the way” with both Rose and Perry. I do not deny the Dionysian and poetic character of rap music. Yet, through its poetic expressions of pleasure, one can glean the neatly tucked racial problems of America—the “things [deliberately] not seen.” Intentionality aside, acknowledging the “democratic holism” of the art form, as Perry advocates, is, in many instances, liberatory. In the case of
Stackolee, for instance, the nihilism expressed in rap music is oftentimes symptomatic of a history of oppression. Moreover, my framework of unveiling or demystifying the functionality of racism is also similar to the work of cultural and popular studies critic Gilbert Rodman. In his essay, “Race . . . And Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity” (2012), Rodman exonerates the iconic white rapper Eminem from the question of cultural appropriation in rap culture, by contending with the “silences” in contemporary discourses on race (181). According to Rodman, Eminem’s controversial presence in a predominantly Black space reveals more about the racial prejudices to which rap culture and its artists are subjected, as well as the fiction of hegemonic, refined “whiteness” that Eminem’s “White Trash” and “crudely misogynistic” persona divulges. Thus, we are both invested in the “things [deliberately] not seen” in problematic rap personas and lyrics that expose the myth of white supremacy and essentialist contractions of race. These “silences” point to the ambivalence of racist discourses on identity construction.

Further, the dissertation echoes the latest work of hip-hop scholar and Africana Studies Professor James Braxton Peterson, who in The Hip-Hop Underground (2014) explores the motif of the “underground” of hip hop—the “not visible.” He does so, by and large, through an examination of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, as well as other African American literary works, in order to arrive at the complex cultural relevance of the genre. I have also demonstrated how my work intersects neatly with the insights of Mark Anthony Neal given that Looking for Leroy also examines the invisibility, or according to Neal, “legibility” of Black masculinity in popular culture, rap culture especially. We both argue that the popular cultural imagination constructs the Black
male body in a manner that reinforces racist historical fictions and fantasies, and that there is a need to reclaim a truer, “illegible” image of Black masculinity—one not always already “legible.”

Since mimetic performances of identity as a de-colonial strategy of subversion necessitates resisting within what sociologist and race theorist Howard Winant calls “the halls power” (113), I can also say that I follow in the footsteps of hip-hop scholars who examine sites of contestation located within the oppressive structures. For example, in her essay “The God of the New Slaves or Slave To a New Religion and a God” (2014), Professor of Religion and Africana Studies, Monica Miller, extrapolates the paradigm of rap artists rejecting oppressive societal structures and institutions by employing the repressive autocracy inherent in Christianity as a metaphor. She uses Jay Z and Kanye West’s “No Church in the Wild” (2011) as a case in point. They appropriate and reconfigure Christian language and paradigms in order to make a claim about their prowess and hedonistic pleasures (171). Jay Z, she reminds readers, “likens the work of Jesus as a metaphoric carpenter building a kingdom and a following to Yeezy’s laying of beats, building knowledge through art, and reminding his listeners that Hova’s lyrical flow is ‘Holy Ghost’, that is, life changing, transformational, and powerful” (171).

In this sense, just as Kanye West does not affirm but rather contests the “superiority” of an agent of white supremacy in his co-optation of the skinhead in “Black Skinhead,” through “god talk,” in this song, the artists deviate from “hegemonic regimes,” Christian precepts (because Christianity deems sex an instrument for reproduction only, yet Kanye West heralds carnal desires and sexual deviance, given his
endorsement of a threesome), and constricting structures by “carry[ing] forth” and operating “through ideas of religion” (171).

In addition to the aforementioned conversations on rap / hip hop to which this project enriches, the dissertation adds to the textual and oral scholarship emanating from pioneering rap culture theoreticians and philosophers like Toni Blackman (hip hop’s ambassador), Robin D.G. Kelly, Michael Eric Dyson, Houston Baker, Cornel West, Bakari Kitwana, Byron Hurt, Joan Morgan, and more recently, Jared Ball, Julius Bailey, Treva Lindsey, Brittany Cooper and Tommy Curry. It is because of their intellectual labor on racial and gender politics in hip hop / rap music that the discursive terrain exists and is still being mapped.

V: Methodology

In addition to Hip Hop Studies and performance theory as critical lenses employed, the heart of my methodology is Afro-diasporic studies. My approach is reflective and deferential in that I re-deploy anti-colonial and anti-white supremacist methods of inquiry propagated by Afro-diasporic scholars over time, some of whose theories are explicitly employed throughout the dissertation, while others implicitly inform my thinking. The novelty of this project lies in my demonstration of their concepts being coterminous with and applicable to the submerged sites of resistance in the art of Kanye West and Jay Z. This dissertation takes its cue from Afro-diasporic scholarship that directly and indirectly assumes an anti-Enlightenment posture, given the preservation of most oppressive Enlightenment ideals, such as narrow interpretations of
rationality and monolithic constructions of the “Human,” or those skewed narratives that constitute “History.”

The first chapter is heavily indebted to the first Black Anthropologist, Haitian Antènor Firmin. His 19th century substantive study The Equality of the Human Races, is instrumental to philosophical and scientific mediations on race construction, specifically the said inferiority of the Black race. If chapter one contests, for instance, absolutists claims to “Truth” with respect to Black inaptitude, then Firmin is useful insofar as he proves the equality of the human races, in part, by providing concrete evidence of the intellectual capacities of the Black race. Firmin is thus employed to instantiate Jay Z’s rationalizing “moment of clarity” in the contemporary “upper world” as a postmodern, Black “Philosopher King.” Notwithstanding that Firmin was writing during a time when the belief in the “inequality” of the races and the “sub-humanity” of Blacks was expressly apparent in the prose of the era, his insights have transhistorical relevance in a time when the same racist sensibilities have not waned but have instead assumed a “neo-liberal” disguise. Just as Firmin “clarifies” how social scientists fabricated the premise of white supremacy, his framework becomes a revised paradigm given that Jay Z has a similar “moment of clarity,” evidenced by his detection of the socially engineered “shadows” that defined his former “cave-like” existence.

The same can be said of Firmin’s significance to chapter two. I demonstrate how that which underpins contemporary spectacles of Black male disembodiment (denying Blacks ontological intelligibility) is symptomatic of age-old, “empirically proven,” white supremacist theories that have denied “Negroes” equal standing in the race of “Man,” which therefore renders them ripe for exploitation and/or destruction. To this end,
chapter two is also indebted to the work of critical race theorist Alexander Weheliye, whose arguments in *Habeas Viscus* (2014) build on Firmin’s resolve to challenge and expand the rubric used to determine totalizing and exclusionary conception of ontology and Man. Weheliye’s focus of determining how those “racial assemblages” positioned outside of the domain of “liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject” might be imagined as dictating the terms of humanity, is inextricably tied to the politics of the flesh and political violence / domination of certain bodies.

Likewise, “Black Skinhead’s” visual zone of an “assemblage” of seemingly “animalistic” (given what I interpret as West’s critique of the conflation of the Black male and a predatory animal in a racist white filed of vision) Black male bodies whose flesh is hypervisible lends to a discussion of the arbitrary means by which hierarchized “racialized assemblages” are oftentimes determined vis-à-vis biological traits, and how Black subjects “must bear the burden of representing the final frontier of speciesism (Weheliye 11). But Weheliye elucidates the reality that “a set of socio-political processes” is responsible for disciplining “humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (4).

Political violence depicted in *Blues for Mister Charlie* is a direct result of a socio-political process underway. That is, applying Afro-diasporic theorist Sylvia Wynter’s arguments in her seminal essay, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” the racist classifying logic of the current episteme that, in this fictional case, enables “WHITETOWN’S” construction of Richard as “animalistic,” legally justifies Lyle Britten’s murder of Richard. Hence, Baldwin’s dramatization of the concerted effort of ideological discursive constructions and a corrupt justice system reinforce
Weheliye’s theory of the centrality of socio-political processes in the formation of hierarchical “racialized assemblages.” Therefore, Weheliye and Wynter both influence my thinking about how, what Wynter identifies as the category of “young, poor, Black males” (to which Michael Brown beloved), is assigned a “non-human” connotation, and how doing so legitimates the destruction of these bodies.

If Weheliye and Wynter are crucial given their critical commentary on the hierarchizing and discursive categorizing of human beings (respectively), Hortense Spillers’s groundbreaking “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), highlights the importance of inventing a new language through which to contest the manners in which Black bodies are coded and scripted as that which they are not. She begins her essay examining the notion of white supremacy’s “naming” or “misnaming” of Black bodies—Black female bodies and the Black family structure in particular. Of immense importance is her hypothesis that Black bodies (and the Black family) are buried so far beneath mythical markers that they must put forth an assiduous effort to exhume themselves. She does this in part by invoking the history of African enslavement—namely how perverse gender and race constructions are implicated in its system of knowledge—as a means to demystify normative and oppressive constructions of race and gender in the present. The framework of unearthing Black bodies buried beneath discursive constructions which emanate from hegemonic regimes (slavery, and, as I argue, colonization), informs the framework for chapter three. Like Spillers, I insist upon reclaiming the “agents buried beneath” constricting discursive constructions by exposing the ambivalence of the dominant discourse responsible for the misnaming, vis-à-vis colonial mimicry and the carving of a third space.
Furthermore, just as Spillers’s recourse lies in her invocation of the repressed history of African slavery, the Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in *Silencing the Past* (1995), is useful for his exploration of the tropes of power the West has utilized in its de-historicization of the material experiences of Black bodies and narratives such as the Haitian Revolution, to legitimate the autonomy of or privilege white Western narratives. His framework informs my thinking about the manner in which the grievances of the Black underclass, like the Black folks residing in the Marcy Projects or the Black inhabitants of the Harlem world described in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, are largely ignored to make possible institutional racism, or in the case of the novel, because they undermine the narrowly “humanist” agenda of the Brotherhood. The historical omission of Black bodies has served as an important tool of colonial and white supremacist forces.

Then there is Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. The import of these texts lies in their thematic similarity: a recuperation and reappraisal of “the disregarded.” So their work is similar to Trouillot’s in this respect, in that all four explore the negated value of Black bodies and provide revisionist cultural-historical perspectives. Gilroy’s work, for instance, explores the contributions of Blacks across the Atlantic to the formation of Western thought and traditions. He argues that the “Black Atlantic” has constituted a “counterculture” of modernity, and he uses hip hop to dismantle ethno-historic perspectives that emanate from Enlightenment and modernity, which are white, Western, and racist in scope, and all but repress Black cultural expressions (6). To this end, the intellectual contributions of these scholars to the subject of an instrumental African
presence, could assist my readers in conceptualizing how Jay Z’s and Kanye West’s narratives offer a more holistic understanding of the American psychology / identity—particularly in the face of exclusionary structures and cultural histories.

Moreover, my anti-Enlightenment approach is also influenced by the African, postcolonial, philosophical perspectives of Emmanuel Eze in *On Reason* (2008). He rejects homogenous and empirical interpretations of reason, arguing instead that reason is diverse and must be approached and understood from multiple points of view. Eze’s rejection of totalizing conceptions of reason places him in opposition to Enlightenment philosophical traditions that racialized reason with the purpose of excluding certain bodies (usually Black and brown ones) from its domain, thereby licensing the domination of these bodies. Eze thus aids in my defining of rap music as a resistive intellectual discourse, and with the reconceptualization of the Platonic Allegory, specifically my thinking through the issue of Plato’s polemic of “Truths” and “true beliefs.” So like Firmin, Eze helps justify my conferral of “Philosopher King-status” upon Jay Z.

Jay Z’s “moment of clarity,” would, according to Eze, constitute ordinary reason (9). In fact, in a broader sense, Eze’s championing of ordinary reason and his rejection of “politics-as-the-extraordinary”—that is, political thought that is messianic, totalizing, and spectacularly-revolutionary (252)—sheds light on my preference of subtle and submerged sites of subversion. Despite both Jay Z’s and Kanye West’s self-apotheosizing personas (Jay Z has re-named himself “Hova” and Kanye “Yezus”), as Eze would have it, the world would have to cease in its patronizing expectations for both artists to conform to a messianic model of leadership. Jay Z’s ability to “cast down his bucket,” to echo Booker T. Washington, and fill it with hustler predispositions in order to
overturn his impoverished existence and morally impoverished vision is not pari passu with effecting a socialist transformation. However, at the very least, the contagion it causes (i.e. encouraging others to also hone previously acquired “know-how” and innate Black aesthetic sensibilities to redirect their corrupted vision) coheres with Eze’s “ordinary,” neo-pragmatic, political philosophy which promotes a more inclusive society.

Finally, post / de-colonial theory is the most recurring theoretical perspective employed throughout the dissertation. I use it to demonstrate the ways in which the history of Western powers’ domination of non-Western geographical spaces and people is reproduced as a paradigm in the social sphere and relations of subjection in America. Achilles Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony* (2001), for instance, enables me to draw parallels between the organizational and governing structures of a colony and post-colony and the construction of Black citizenship in America (which I demonstrate in chapter two), as well as between the operative function of the rap industry. The arguments in chapters one and two are largely premised upon Frantz Fanon’s philosophical and psychological examination of the pathologizing of Black bodies in colonial regimes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, specifically the manner in which Black bodies are interpolated, or severed / relegated to a sphere of objects in a white imaginary, and the reaction of the Black colonized to the denial of his ontology.

Further, Homi Bhabha picks up where Fanon leaves off in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Fanon theorizes on one’s awareness of being misread and of mimicking, while Bhabha provides a strategy of conscious subversion vis-à-vis mimicry, as means by which to carve a more productive, third space, to escape the interpolating white gaze. In the same structural sense, chapter three reads as a sequel to chapter two. Kanye West’s
mimetic performance of a “Black skinhead,” which also constitutes the emergence of a hybrid identity, is a way to thwart the “amputated” perceptions of Black embodiment discussed in chapters one and two, and instead engage performatively in identity negotiations.

Black feminist scholar Shirley Anne Tate appears in chapter three in that in Black Skins, Black Masks (2005), she pivots from Bhabha in her theorizations of hybridity as a “third space” of identification, suggesting, like Bhabha that it is carved performatively. Yet she departs from Bhabha in that she focuses on hybridity emerging through the performance of Black female “interactants,” and because she argues for the recuperation of an essentialist “blackness” in the hybrid performance, which I see as consistent with Kanye West’s mimetic performances in his “Black Skinhead.”

In addition, in chapter two, Kanye West’s “King Kong” reference in “Black Skinhead” invites a discussion of Edward Said’s study of fabricated cultural representations of Oriental subjects by Western travellers and anthropologists in Orientalism (1978), as well as V.Y. Mudimbe’s theorizations of how Africa has been ideologically and discursively invented, in The Invention of Africa (1988). The comparison is drawn between the inventive and “citational” paradigms that Said and Mudimbe highlight and epistemological fabrications of the American “Negro,” implicated in West’s art and manifesting in real world examples, such as the case of Michael Brown.

Even though in her groundbreaking essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988), Gayatri Spivak argues that Postcolonial Theory, a discourse born in Western institutions, is complicit with the dominating forces in which they critique and attempt to undermine,
the thematic scope of this project builds upon her argument that “the subaltern” indeed “speaks,” but those inhabiting (institutional) spaces of privilege are unwilling to listen. Likewise, the conservative world is unwilling to hear the “rhythmic cries” bellowing from throats of Black American rap artists, given their “othered,” counter-hegemonic ontology. Yet the artists are articulating their grievances through their own unconventional idioms and narratives. And just as Spivak makes clear that the subaltern subjects of the East are not homogenous and do not project a unitary cultural identity, as Imani Perry warns, rap music is a democratic discourse. This means the voices cannot be homogenized. But this would also suggest that its resistive narratives vary in character and do not all ascribe to conventional, conspicuous modes of subversion.

Finally, Dianna Fuss’s foundational essay, “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification” (1994), is extremely important to my methodology. In this essay, Fuss engages a discussion of Black identification politics, unpacking Frantz Fanon’s “‘alternative theory of (non) alterity’ elaborated on in Black Skin, White Masks” to do so (20). Fuss is careful to note that the genealogy of identification politics is in colonial history (20). While Fanon builds upon Sartrean and Freudian theories of otherness, she informs that they derive from Hegel (23). But it is Robert Young, Fuss reminds, who insists that Hegel modeled his master-slave dialectic on Enlightenment history (23). And later, Susan Buck-Morss underscores the influence of Hegel’s paradigm in her essay (turned book), “Hegel and Haiti.” She notes that Hegel’s theory that the slave must risk his life for his subjective, conscious identity derived from the ongoing slave rebellions existing within the colonies, especially San Domingue. Buck-Morss writes that this is the moment when the “dialectical logic of recognition becomes
visible as the thematics of world history . . .” (55). It stands to reason then that discourses on recognition and Black identification politics must engage colonial history.

Alexander Weheliye also calls for the recuperation of colonial events in *Habeas Viscus*, when he argues that discourses on political violence, biopolitics, bare life and the process of racialization often neglectfully relegate the history of colonialism to the narrative margins (58-59). Hence, as each chapter of this dissertation engages a study of identification politics, specifically with respect to the “othering” of Black masculinity, I deemed it necessary to adjoin Critical Race theoretical perspectives and colonial history and anti-colonial dialectics.  

**VI: Conclusion**

In short, it is rumored that Harriet Tubman once said, “I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves.” Whether or not it can be proven that Tubman uttered these exact words, the verity of the statement is undeniable. One must possess a conscious awareness of the exact manner in which she or he is oppressed, if she or he should endeavor to reverse the structures of oppression. Where bodies of color are concerned, arriving at an understanding of the psychological and social functionality of white supremacy is imperative. This also requires seeing the oppression of Blacks across the Diaspora as interlocked, and tethered to the history of slavery and colonization, as the driving force of both was white supremacy. This does not necessitate homogenizing oppression, but instead varies our artillery for combat and diversifies strategies of resistance.
What follows in the first two chapters are “moments of clarity” observed through the artistry of Jay Z and Kanye West, and through the aforementioned literary texts. One must understand the inanity and arbitrariness of white supremacist logic where Black bodies are concerned: the Black body is allegedly inferior, animal-like, or innately criminal; these fictions, though manufactured by white supremacist-colonialist practices, are normalized, internalized (by whites and Blacks alike), and then manifest themselves in the performed behaviors of Blacks; consequently, the said supremacy of whiteness is affirmed and sustained, and because of which the civilized, human white “Master-Subject” is self-endowed with the sovereign right to discipline or destroy this “inferior, savage Black body” at will.

Thus, the “moments of clarity” in chapters two and three reveal themselves as this circular logic is unveiled vis-à-vis the application of post-/colonial dialectics. But chapter three subdues and deposes the white supremacist-colonial monster (along with its agents) by interrogating its “authoritative” discursive power through a mimetic performance of identity, which yields a subversive hybrid. It therefore becomes apparent that the “Absolute Truths,” established and perpetuated by this white supremacist-colonial “monster” that hovers over Black bodies with his shovel in hand, over time are not so “Absolute,” especially as they pertain to race constructions in America. Exhuming ourselves from beneath the debris of misrepresentations simultaneously exposes the fiction of “white supremacy.” The late Black Feminist Audre Lorde’s warning in Sister Outsider (1984) that “... if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment (45), is essential to Black liberation politics. Without the right to self-define, the ubiquitous presence of “strange fruit” in America and
beyond might forever be an ugly reality. This means we must destroy the “monster” before it destroys us.
“Moment of Clarity” is a song on rapper Jay Z’s 2003 album, *The Black Album*. In the song, he claims to now understand the generational curses to which Black men are subjected in America, and how they are a product of white supremacist conspiratorial forces. For this, he can forgive his late father who, like himself, his uncle, his big brothers, and so many other Black men, fought but still could not evade their grips. This verse, to a large extent, sets the tone of this dissertation. Moreover, “moments of clarity” is also a reference to Western Enlightenment principles, which culminated in the enslavement, colonialism, and genocide of those of African descent (as well as others). Essentially, that which constitutes “enlightenment” from a white supremacist perspective is, in all actuality darkness and ignorance. But one can experience a “moment of clarity” in her or his ability to recognize this historical irony, and its extant legacies, which Jay Z, in my estimation, has. This dissertation examines how the artistry of Jay Z and Kanye West is imbued with such didactic potential.

Hip Hop has five tenants: emceeing, deejaying, break dancing, graffiti art, and knowledge. Given the world is ever evolving, each of these tenants has evolved. Rap is the evolved form of emceeing. Throughout the dissertation, I privilege the term “rap music” as “hip hop” is understood as an umbrella term, denoting an entire culture, or all five pillars rather. I also do so because rap music is regarded pejoratively by the dominant culture given its commercialization, which has led to its said promotion of bad social values. But, the very premise of this dissertation challenges this myopic perception of the art form / counter-discourse.

Additionally, it should be noted that some hip-hop critics do not agree with the conflation of the two terms. In a 2013 interview with *Gigwise* (a British online music news site), two hip-hop pioneers from the renowned group Public Enemy, Flavor Flav and Chuck D, provided their opinions on hip hop’s current state. *Ebony.com* writer Shaka Shaw recounts Flavor Flav’s statements in her article, “The Difference Between Rap & Hip-Hop”: “I think the element of hip hop left when rap music started being created on a slow tempo.” He suggests that rap music has lost the aesthetic technicalities that characterized hip hop in its early days. However, half of the genre’s compound title (the “hop”), defined by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five’s Keith Cowboy, connotes movement. Given this, one can reasonably argue that, like anything else, the genre’s aesthetic character was bound to evolve and change with the times. Movement is hardly a mere reference to embodied, rhythmic expression or the global proliferation of the art form. As such, in my estimation, contemporary rap music should still exist under the banner of hip hop, even if it is perceived as a subgenre / culture of that umbrella. In fact, Shaw reminds readers that it is not uncommon to judge rap as belonging to the culture of hip hop, as one of its core tenants. I explore these arguments further in this section.

In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), Africana Studies Professor and hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose is among the first scholars to examine how rap music came to exist. She highlights the structural agents that created rap music, and how the formations of group and individual identities were responses to the transformations of the “postindustrial” inner cities, which affected and targeted
inhabitants of color. Further, in Byron Hurt’s acclaimed Independent Len documentary, *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Hurts provides insight into the structural developments in the Bronx in New York, which is allegedly the birthplace of hip hop. He reports, “Beginning in 1946 and ending in 1963, the construction of the cross-Bronx expressway ripped the Bronx in half.” He continues narrating, “Urban planners and developers, led by [the city-planner known as the “master-builder,”] Robert Moses, showed little concern for the people who lived in the borough and displaced thousands of residents and small business owners, leaving in its wake a poor devastated community with little outside help from politicians.” One interviewee, hip hop scholar and English Professor James Peterson argues that hip hop was a “willed response to systematic violence in the community.” He instructs listeners to “[i]magine someone putting a highway through your neighborhood.” “Then you can begin to understand hip hop,” he declares.

4 Adam Bradley and Andre DuBois, in *The Anthology of Rap*, argue that rap gained commercial success beginning with The Golden Age, which began in the mid 80s (119)

5 Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise* (1994) is often cited as the first critical text on hip hop in the academy. However, literary critic Houston Baker’s substantive essay, “Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy” (1993), does predate it by one year.

6 See W.E.B DuBois’s “Criteria For Negro Art” (1926).

7 This is the title of Baldwin’s 1985 critical commentary on the Atlanta Child Murders, which occurred between 1979-1981. The title of this book is a Biblical appropriation from the Book of Hebrews. Traditional modern interpretations of Hebrews hold that St. Paul the Apostle penned an epistle to the Hebrews, and in chapter 11 verse 1, he suggested that “Faith is the substance hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

8 In the chapter “The Sorrow Songs,” of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. DuBois insisted that the “sorrow songs” were the “rhythmic cries of the slaves.”

9 As relayed by Douglass in the opening chapter of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845).


12 In *The Wretched of the Earth*, the de-colonial political manifesto of the 1960s, Frantz Fanon insists that Negroes are “the wretched of the earth,” and his focus is the revolutionary class, not the bourgeois population—for it is they who “have nothing to lose and everything to gain” (Fanon 61). I employ this term to emphasize the past and
Currently reality that Blacks are considered the “bottom of the barrel” in the “Chain of Beings.”

This song appears on his 2012 album, *Live From the Underground*.

Wheatley is writing during the end of the 18th century, which was a time when a literate slave was an anomaly, let alone a slave demonstrating the mastery of the English language. Further, Wheatley could not openly condemn the institution of slavery without facing dire consequences. Her master, John Wheatley, provided Wheatley the platform to display her talents in verse, as well as the monetary wherewithal, and would not have tolerated or endorsed content that openly denounced the very institution of which he was a beneficiary.

This song appears on his 2015 album, *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

In 2010, on *The Blue Print 3*, Jay Z reminds his cynics of his earning power by pointing out his “10 #1 albums in a row” (now 13), and how no one in the history of music had transcended his level of success save for The Beatles (“Reminder”). The oft-quoted line, “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man” (“Diamonds from Sierra Leone” remix), is another “reminder,” couched in his characteristic semantic “play,” of the degree to which he has also penetrated corporate America. With thirteen number one albums, twelve of which being solo projects, 21 Grammy Awards, his own entertainment company (Roc Nation), ownership of a music streaming company (Tidal), among other achievements, Jay-Z is arguably the “poster child” of rap music and culture. If album sales and entrepreneurial ventures indicate an artist’s influence on both popular and global culture, then indisputably, Jay Z is one of the most influential mainstream rappers to date, and his protégé, the egotistical often misogynistic, Kanye West, is not lagging far behind. Kanye West’s eight consecutive platinum solo albums, 21 Grammys, G.O.O.D Music Record Label, creative company DONDA, and lucrative deals in the fashion world, has led to his being a formidable force in the rap industry as well. In his words, he is “Top 5 MCs” and “you ain’t gotta remind [him]” (“Barry Bonds” (feat. Lil Wayne)). Also, West and Jay Z’s collaborative project, *Watch the Throne* (2011) earned a number of accolades, reaching number one on the *Billboard*’s Top Rap Albums and Hip Hop charts, selling $436,000 in its first week, and topping iTunes sales for that year (Kaufman, “Kanye West, Jay-Z’s *Watch the Throne* Scores Huge on Billboard”).

A track on the *Cruel Summer* (2012) album, which is an album featuring West as well as his signees on his G.O.O.D. Music label.


He argues that fictive representations of Black masculinity that are widely-circulated in popular culture are ironically legible, which means that any performance of Black masculinity that belies “legible masculinity”—as defined by the white public imagination—is rendered “illegible.” However, Neal is committed to inverting the perverse connotations of “legible” and “illegible” masculinity.

“Monster” is on his 2010 *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* album, which features verses by a number of rappers, one of whom being Jay Z.

Because there is no evidence in the video of West (the persona) actually killing the women. The lyrics, however, do imply that he is the culprit, since he raps about dismembering female genitalia.

Even if there had not been a call of a convenient store “robbery,” arguably, Brown would have still “fit the description.”

These lyrics are from his song “Feedback,” a track on his most recent album, *The Life of Pablo* (2016).

“Black Skinhead” appears on West’s 2013 album, *Yeezus*.

Because her voice adds to other Afro Diasporic voices who were and had already concerned themselves with this very subject. Other Afro Diasporic thinkers who had postulated theories on the dialectical relationship between the “Africanist” presence and the Western literary tradition, political economy, or cultural identity include but are not limited to Leslie Fielder (*Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960)); Walter Rodney (*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972)); and V.Y. Mudime (whom she mentions) (*The Invention of Africa* (1988)).

He makes this argument in *Souls*, in the chapter “The Sorrow Songs,” and in *The Gift of Black Folks* (1924).

A term that emanates from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

Some include his reference to Christopher Columbus’s infamous “discovery” of the “New World” in the line “only Christopher we acknowledge is Wallace” (he is referring to Christopher Wallace, the late East Coast rap icon known as the Notorious B.I.G.); he alludes to the controversial Black American boxing icon, Muhammad Ali in the lines “Muhammad Hovi,” which is a metaphor for his “heavyweight champion-like” influence on rap culture; and though he once again highlights his outsider status within American Democracy, America is implicated in the lines “Democrat? Nope. I sold dope.” The point is that his conscious effort to underscore an Anti-American spirit paradoxically situates the song’s overarching theme of the memory of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, squarely within a context of an American cultural heritage and identity.

In *Black Skin*, Fanon discusses how the white gaze phenotypically imprisons the Negro, which is considers an “epidermal racial schema.”

I explore the interconnectedness of contemporary materialism in rap culture, capitalism, and slavery in depth in chapter three, through the visual representations in Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead.”

This track appears on his 2013 album, *Yeezus*.


She also makes this observation later in *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008). p. 5.

Here I am borrowing a phrase from Afro-Caribbean feminist and postcolonial theorist Carole Boyce-Davies, who in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) employs the phrase to propose a model for borrowing concepts from a
range of discourses or theoretical perspectives that appear antithetical to the Black Diasporic Feminist framework from which she works.


40 See Appendix A for in-depth of analysis of the relationship between rap culture and colonial politics.
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Chapter 1:  
A “Moment of Clarity”: A Genealogical Interpretation of Plato’s Allegory, Through the Lens of Jay Z as Artist and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man

“Perhaps the truth was always a lie.” Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man
“But even a broken clock is right at least two times a day.” Jay Z, “Guns and Roses”

Introduction:

There is subversive potential latent in the artistic production of Shawn Carter, known in the rap world as Jay Z. This chapter compels a reappraisal of Jay Z’s lyrical commentary, with respect to the liberatory potential of his art. My aim is to uncover covert methods of resisting oppressive structures couched within the lyrics and performances of mainstream rappers. To do so, in this chapter I examine how Jay Z’s corpus of work and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) challenge and ultimately decenter Platonic ideals which have far-reaching resonance in the modern and postmodern worlds, as well as material consequences for those who are not wealthy white males. As such, a genealogical interpretation of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave—more specifically, with regard to the Philosopher Kings’ and guardian class’s wielding of “Truth” and pure “Knowledge” in the arbitrary division of the social classes1—inform the argument.

Jay Z’s lyrical content, as well as Ellison’s seminal text, actually substantiates the notion that “truth [is] always a lie.”2 Both expose the power mechanisms that fasten Blacks to ideological constructions (or cave shadows), subsequently subjecting them to systematic and institutional exclusionary practices of white America. Unveiling these constructions propagated as “Truths,” as well as the forces of power that enable and cement them, is useful inasmuch as doing so can engender a reversal of the myths,
“Black inferiority” and “white supremacy,” thereby proving the instability of these “truth-hoods.” Such illuminations constitute “moments of clarity.”

I draw upon the *Allegory of the Cave* because the contemporary social world and the social world depicted in *Invisible Man*, are afflicted by Plato’s shadows, true beliefs, and an autocratic governing system based upon exclusive claims to power. The arbitrary division of society that still characterizes the contemporary social world can be traced to Platonic ideologies, best dramatized in the *Allegory*. The influence of the Platonic model has yet to wane. Situating the *Allegory* in its cultural and political context is necessary to understand this point, as well as to illuminate further the structural intersections between the *Allegory*, Jay Z’s trajectory as an artist, and *Invisible Man*.

Plato’s *Republic* is a Socratic dialogue that ponders the role of justice and knowledge in the erection of an ideal Republic. Book VII of *The Republic* includes Plato’s foundational, oft-debated and cited *Allegory of the Cave*, an allegorical dialogue narrated by Plato’s mentor, Socrates. Socrates insists that the Republic must comprise the ruling of “enlightened” figures of society who have ascertained “Truth,” namely “Philosopher Kings.” Their role is to maintain the social good of the city-state. Other members of the city-state exist in a state of perpetual illusion. “Enlightenment” eludes these members; therefore, they allegedly threaten the “moral” character of the “just” Republic, and according to Plato’s narrative, cannot dwell in the upper-realm with the ruling Philosopher Kings. The maintenance of a “just” State necessitates this structural class-divide inherent in the cave metaphor.

Modern Western philosophical theories have inherited many ideals from classical predecessors like Plato, such as exclusive claims to “absolute Truth,” pure “Knowledge,”
and separatist structures described above. Enlightenment thinkers, for instance, appear to have accepted the Platonic ideology of hierarchal relations, relying instead on racial difference to indiscriminately classify the human species and further divide societies. Racial typology and the notion that some men (European) were superior to others (non-white Europeans), dominated the discourse of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and contributed to the mass obliteration and domination of peoples of African, Asian, and Indian descent. Systems of classifying humanity, concretized by scientific racism, also produced theories of “black inferiority” in all realms of human endeavor. Arthur de Gobineau’s nineteenth century work, *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853) is a case in point. He set out to “scientifically” prove the anatomical differences between the human races, and ergo the “superiority” of the Aryan race. Needless to say, these discourses were beyond injurious given they “affirmed” and “rationalized” slavery, and intensified exploitative colonial practices. Ironically, modernity was thus governed by illogical, discriminatory yet indiscriminate “Enlightenment” philosophies disseminated by a group of self-empowered syndicates. These falsified claims perpetuated the division of the human species, resulting in oppressive and arbitrary power relations similar to those outlined in Plato’s *Allegory*.

Many Afro-diasporic scholars have interrogated Eurocentric philosophies, attentive to how European continental theories and discourses on “black inferiority” led to epistemological fabrications and the harnessing of biopolitical power. Even today, with repressive apparatuses such as the police force determining who gets to live and thrive and who gets to die or be exploited, it is evident that vestiges of the Platonic ideology and modern Enlightenment ontological classifying systems influence current
power relations among white and non-white peoples. To this end, it is no wonder that Antènor Firmin, the first Black anthropologist, would contest de Gobineau’s theory of white supremacy and innate racial difference in his nineteenth-century tome, *The Equality of the Human Races*. Neither is it surprising that Martinican theorist and philosopher, Frantz Fanon would devote his intellectual energies to grappling with the perversity of pathological racial constructions and their psychological effect on the Negro in *Black Skin, White Masks*, or that Haitian historian, Michel-Rolph Trouillot would unearth the tropes of power responsible for the exclusion of certain actors and events from historical narratives in *Silencing the Past*. Each of these scholars inform my analysis of the ways in which Jay Z’s and Ellison’s narratives offer instructive commentary on the manufacturing of “darkness” and absolute “Truth,” and the possibility of attaining liberation vis-à-vis the recognition and transcendence of various constructions.

While Firmin, Fanon, Trouillot and a myriad of others have contributed appreciably to the discourse on Black liberation politics, working explicitly from an Afro-diasporic framework to challenge Eurocentric philosophies, I do not hesitate to insert the artistic production of Ralph Ellison and Jay Z into the lineage of these thinkers and their respective works. While Ellison’s artistic reputation does not require reiterating, Jay Z, on the other hand, is arguably the most gifted and respected rapper to date. However, Jay Z should be considered in the same arena as Ellison given that his raps are narratives with critical and fictive commentary similar to that of Ellison’s. I see both artists interrogating and invalidating Western philosophical theories responsible for the continued subjugation and repression of Black Americans. Though not always
matter-of-factly and not in its entirety, as I will prove, their art lends to critiques of epistemic and ontological limitations that enable the establishment of hegemonic power structures, affecting those living within the margins of their respective social worlds. The construction of “Black masculinity” as villainous and hyperaggressive, or servile and primitive, oftentimes results in Black men internalizing and performing such constructions of “blackness” and “Black masculinity,” as Jay Z personifies most poignantly in his earlier work, namely *Reasonable Doubt*.

Evidence of his destructive ethos lies his incessant valorizations of the “gangster, dope man” persona, in lyrics like, “I’ll make your block infrared hot: I’m like Satan” (“Politics as Usual”), or “Transactions illegitimate ‘cause life is still a bitch” (“Feelin’ It”). Subsequently, systematic practices and institutional apparatuses—such as the surveilling interventions of the State, or in the case of the novel, an insane asylum that reinforces the myth of “Black inferiority” and “Black inaptitude”—are accorded legitimacy, as racist repressive ploys aimed at “imprisoned,” “expendable” members of society. Thus, what can be detected in their art are the destructive capabilities of Western ontological classifications that continue to reinforce stereotypes and the devaluation of Black bodies and culture. These classifications are solidified through invisible forces of power. Yet Jay Z and Ellison’s nameless narrator undergo a “moment of clarity” with regard to the shackles that once bound them to these shadows (stereotypes) projected onto the metaphoric “cave wall.”

In short, Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* takes on new meaning in a Black American hip-hop tradition, as well as through the lens of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. I will demonstrate that the major conundrum with the cave metaphor, however, which
influences current American relations of subjection, is that white society claims to have escaped the cave of darkness to embrace “Truth” and “Knowledge,” which justifies their “superiority” and consequently, the literal and symbolic division of the social classes. However, a deeper look into Jay Z’s lyrical content and into *Invisible Man*, reveals the manner in which the truths of white supremacists are premised upon epistemological falsehoods, such as social constructions of Black ontology, and sustained by social engineering and systematic practices. These oppressive instruments of the power structure keep Jay Z and several of Ellison’s characters—i.e. Invisible Man (IM), Jim Trueblood, and the veterans—bound to the wall of the cave facing “shadows” which they regard as truths. But that is only until they can eventually name the shadows in their true Form. This “moment of clarity” translates in their respective contexts, vis-à-vis their apprehension of a truer conceptualization of their subjectivities, as well as the imperceptible faces and forces of power that condition their imprisonment. It stands to reason, then, that what white society has erroneously presumed to be “Truth” and sunlight is merely a different set of shadows. Therefore, the concepts of “Truth” and “Knowledge” must be uprooted from the Platonic or modern tradition and reconstituted through the perspectives of a Black folk and musical/hip-hop tradition of artistic production. Such a genealogical interpretation of the *Allegory* divulges a major truth lurking beneath the shadows: that many self-proclaimed “Philosopher Kings” are but foolish, dubious mortals.

There are thematic similarities that illuminate my linking of the two narratives, as well as Ellison and Jay Z. Ellison employs allegories within the novel, such as
Trueblood’s story, which is a narrative symbolic of systematic ostracism of Blacks who demonstrate “non-normative” behavior. Trueblood is kept out of the post-war “Southern Republic,” as it were, which is demarcated by literal white lines, and is kept at bay through monetary and social incentives—a structural divide consistent with *The Allegory*. Likewise, Jay Z’s complete catalogue of music abounds with allegories, such as “Meet the Parents” a figurative representation of the “delicate tapestry of modern black archetypes and the flaws with the African-American family structure.” Moreover, like Plato, Ellison is *philosophizing* about the nature of a “Just” society, namely, as Charles “Pete” Banner-Haley puts it, an “ideal [American] democracy” constituting both “the highly placed and the lowly . . .” (159). Jay Z, on the other hand, not only overtly takes up Platonic and Socratic concerns such as the central impetus behind piety, as Plato pontificates in his dialogue, *Euthypro*, in songs like “No Church in the Wild.” In addition, he is a self-defined Plato. During a Princeton University visit, after hearing Dr. Cornel West discuss Plato’s immortalization of Socrates, Jay Z responded, “Well, I have been playing Plato to Biggie’s ‘Socrates,’” reports Jozen Cummings, contributor to *The Wall Street Journal*’s *Speakeasy* column. Therefore, the three-way dialogue within this essay is conceptually warranted. Also, the genealogical interpretation of *The Allegory* within an Afro-diasporic literary/intellectual tradition is not at all unusual, given similar works by writers like Richard Wright, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Thomas Fick. There is also ample evidence that Ellison was preoccupied with the Black musical tradition. Many scholars have even identified the novel’s prologue as proof of Ellison’s foreshadowing of hip-hop culture. It describes IM with a radio-phonograph, listening to Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?” He intends to play not
one record, but five, as he smokes his reefer (7), a current and past pastime of many artists. Literary, Africana Studies, and hip-hop scholar James Braxton Peterson, in his recent work *The Hip-Hop Underground* (2014), refers to this scene as a “prophetic glimpse of the act of hip-hop Dj-ing” (89). In fact, the cover of his book portrays a sketch of a contemporary Black male in a hole amidst a host of light bulbs (probably not 1,369, but enough to span the width of the front cover), illuminating his underground space as he scratches on a turntable. Peterson also reads the final six lines of the novel wherein IM attempts to justify his choice of content and non-linear narrative form as poetic rhyme. The “disembodied voice” to which IM refers to himself in these lines, as Peterson notes, is akin to an emcee/rapper (89). Hence, this scene foreshadows the evolution of Blues in a contemporary hip-hop context.

Moreover, Ellison, himself was a musician with an affinity for Blues and Jazz music, and had dreams of becoming a composer prior to Richard Wright’s “prodding and encouragement” of him to pursue a writing career (Watts 1994: 43; Gines 2011: 45). In his essay, “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ellison lauds the Blues tradition, and contemplates its relationship to literature, specifically Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945). So the appearance of Blues and Jazz in the novel is no coincidence, and neither is the novel’s connection to hip hop. It is also interesting to note that Ellison dies in 1994, at the dawn of Jay Z’s rap career. And given that African American music exists on a historical continuum, rap music’s origins are located within the traditions of Blues and Jazz, and by extension, *Invisible Man*.

Further, *Invisible Man* discloses the protagonist’s desire to locate himself within an African American folk and oral tradition from which rap music derives. When he
meets a homeless man carrying “blueprints” upon his arrival in Harlem, IM is struck by the Blues tune the man is droning, and his use of the Black vernacular, which according to Henry Louis Gates, is an encoded, African American communal cultural ritual signifying difference (xxi). He is so intrigued by the esoteric language system. The man calls him “daddy-o,” and then relays his backstory to IM through a string of riddles, not much unlike contemporary rap: “My name’s Blue and I’m coming at you with a pitchfork. Fe Fi Fo Fum. Who wants to shoot the Devil one . . .” (134). The man’s encoded dialect eventually pacifies him. “He had me grinning despite myself,” IM admits to himself (134). Furthermore, the man’s bluesy verbiage makes IM nostalgic. It transports him to his childhood (131), a time of his life of safety and familiarity. When he tries to reply to the homeless man, he recounts, “I tried to think of some saying about bears . . . but remembered only Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear . . . who were both long forgotten and now brought a wave of homesickness” (133). Thus, this scene underscores IM’s yearning for and seemingly hardwired connection to the African American oral and folk tradition—the kilns from which rap music was fired.

Finally, there are useful structural intersections between the Platonic parable, Invisible Man, and the narratives that capture Jay Z’s trajectory. This essay will loosely parallel the narrative structure of Plato’s Allegory. Socrates’s admonishment for the Philosopher King to descend again amongst the cave inhabitants to demystify their “true beliefs” and to rule them is a pivotal moment in the allegory. Yet, this essay’s primary focal points are the preceding events: cave entrapment and the initial “moment of clarity.” Like Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground,” which influenced Ellison’s writings, Invisible Man is an inversion of the cave metaphor in that IM’s descent marks
his illuminating moment, while Jay Z’s upward trajectory constitutes his “moment of clarity.” Further, just as the prisoners exist in oblivion and amidst illusions, Jay Z’s life prior to his “moment of clarity,” and IM’s identity quest and blindness before his descent, are emblematic of the Philosopher King’s initial circumstances. The difference, however, is that their delusion is largely a consequence of the mechanisms of white oppression. According to Plato, the prisoner is beseeched to exit the cave. Reluctantly, he does, and his ascent toward the Sun marks his membership in the Republic with its “enlightened” oligarchs. Jay Z’s ascent from Marcy Projects, or “[f]rom the bottom to the top of the globe” (“Oh My God”), as well as his initial reluctance to leave “the dark side” in the past and to turn his entire being toward the Sun as Plato (by way of Socrates) proposes—further illustrates structural contiguities.

However, my conception of “enlightenment” departs from the Platonic model and must be understood within a Black American context, wherein “enlightenment” involves incredulity concerning that which is established as “Truth” by the dominant racial group, such as when IM asks himself, “What is real anyway?” (376). As so many giants before me have already postulated, what is “real” is typically subjective and therefore unknowable. Given this formula, that which is elusive should not be an instrument used to imprison or oppress.

I: Unmasking “Truths” Behind the Shadows

*Black Criminality and Illicit Behavior*

As allegories reveal hidden meaning, Plato intimates the delusion of sensory and empirical knowledge in the imprisoning world we inhabit, compared to the “Truth” our
souls must apprehend after ascension toward the Sun. Existing within the cave of shadows/“true beliefs” prohibits one from becoming a Philosopher King, a distinction reserved for a select few. But as this section examines, “Truth,” “Knowledge,” and “true Forms” are themselves inherently unstable given that their privileging is contingent upon systematic practices (employed by the dominant group) that circumscribe the full potential of certain human beings, thereby stabilizing their confinement to shadows/“true beliefs,” and by extension, “legitimizing” an arbitrary division of society. To prove the instability of “Truth” and pure forms of “Knowledge” in the upper world, I rely upon the conflation of Black American experiences to darkness, suggesting that these experiences, as well as inferior conceptualizations of Black subjectivity, are not self-induced or inherent (respectively). Rather, owing to attendant power mechanisms, epistemic inaccuracies are postulated by the dominant racial group as “Truths,” and in effect, forbid the fluidity of Black subjectivity (masculinity especially) and experience. That is, as articulated most notably by Firmin in The Equality of the Human Races (1885), Western discourses propagate contrived theories of “black inferiority” and subsequently rationalize operative modes of repression and subjugation, based on their previous discursive fabrications that have solidified as “Truths.”

These falsified “Truths” that have infiltrated the narratives of both Invisible Man and Jay Z’s music are hinged upon the deceptive practices of the dominant class. Jay Z, the artist, existed within the metaphoric cave of illusions, and, from a Platonic perspective, is dissociated from “true Forms,” given his earlier depictions of criminal and hyperaggressive behavior. Ellison’s depiction of blindness in a racialized society is also consistent with the Platonic model of misapprehension. However, departure from Plato’s
allegory depends upon a reconceptualization of the static nature of “Truth” as, borrowing from Paul Gilroy, “closed,” “final,” and “antithetical” (122) to the experiences of Blacks dwelling within a metaphoric cave of darkness in a racialized American political and social economy. I will examine Jay Z’s initial inability to discern a truer, more fluid conceptualization of his subjectivity and of Black life, as expressed in his earlier music, IM’s blindness prior to his descent, as well as other depictions of blindness in the novel. Yet, the depiction of a lack of discernment in Jay Z’s earlier work and in Invisible Man, was not an inherent defect or inability to name the shadows in their true Form, but was rather the result of institutional and structural racist practices licensed by a fabricated circular logic emanating from those in the upper world. To put the matter succinctly, the not-so-enlightened gatekeepers of “true Forms” and “Knowledge” create the conditions of false realities by socially constructing Black ontology. Jay Z’s and Ellison’s dramatizations of false impressions of reality, therefore, must be understood in relation to socially constructed identities.

Life within the contemporary social world, or Marcy projects, (as lyricized by Jay Z), is an example of cave-like dwelling comprising of shadows created from above. But the narrative details of Plato’s allegory must be recounted to lend clarity to the analogy. After explaining the constituents of an ideal society in the previous Books, such as the members of the society (guardians /Philosopher Kings, auxiliaries, and producers), the four virtues of the good society (wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice), the division of the soul, and the fixed role of each member, in Book VII of The Republic, Socrates instructs Glaucon to imagine men dwelling in a dark cave since childhood, facing the wall of the cave in restrictive shackles that prohibit their ability to turn away from the
wall of the cave. There is a blazing fire behind them that casts their shadows and shadows of objects onto the wall they are facing. They cannot describe the objects in their true essence because they know nothing but the shadows created by the fire. In Book VI, Socrates informs his listeners that those members of society who are not guardians or Philosopher Kings have true beliefs, which have the potential to become pure knowledge, but are not yet so. Their beliefs are illusive, inconsistent, and they “wander amid the multiplicities of multifarious things” (3-5). But in Book VII, readers learn that those other than the Philosopher King cannot apprehend objects (the shadows in the cave) in their true Form, because they are restricted by “leaden weights” (137). Socrates rhetorically questions, “[F]or, to begin with, tell me do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave that fronted them?” (121). To this inquisition, Glaucon affirms the logic of their obstructed vision by pointing to their “fettered necks.” I see the metaphor of “fettered necks” as consistent with the outlooks and material conditions of Jay Z and Invisible Man, who eventually remove their neck chains.

Jay Z’s and IM’s metaphoric “fettered necks” can be traced back to a long history of ideological practices deployed in the exploitation of Black bodies. According to Firmin, European and American scientists advanced the artificial ranking of the human races to promote and perpetuate the nefarious crime of slavery. Blacks, the “inferior” race, had been marked with the “stamp of stupidity” (Firmin 140). In addition, Firmin argues that the system of slavery resolved to extinguish moral character and aptitude from the soul of the Negro, and had reduced him to a brute (331). The brute is animalistic, violent, and savage, and so the Euro-American enslavers were “justified” in
enslaving the caricature form of “blackness” that they had created. This circular reasoning continued in the post-Emancipation era. For instance, the myth of the Black man as violent and the personified threat to pure white womanhood and white male authority, argues Michele Wallace, justified public lynchings and a legalized Jim Crow system (24-25).

Today, these very stereotypes and this logic persist, but there is also an intense criminalization of the Black body (the Black male body especially) so as to establish and maintain the myth of “Black inferiority” as well as a racialized repressive regime. In the introduction of Abolition Democracy, philosopher and interviewer Eduardo Mendieta clarifies Angela Davis’s theory of ritual violence employed in the maintenance of the penal system: “The prison system naturalizes the violence that is enacted against racial minorities by institutionalizing a viciously circular logic: blacks are in prison because they are criminals; they are criminals because they are black . . . (15). However, building upon her earlier work Are Prisons Obsolete?, Davis argues that punishment is not, in every case, a consequence of crime (40). Instead, Davis posits, “the punishment industry is on the radar of countless numbers of corporations in the manufacturing and service industries” (39). In other words, Black and Latino bodies are targeted to populate prisons given that prison production is lucrative within the global economy. As such, there is always a veiled political or economic agenda behind the presence of a repressive regime. Michelle Alexander refers to this contemporary system of domination as “the New Jim Crow.” Subsequently, “Truth” and pure knowledge forms concerning such “offenders” owes to this “power-knowledge” dynamic.6
Unfortunately, many times there exists rebellious backlash to repressive regimes, which manifests in the form of quiescence on the part of the victims of the regime. That is, victims of the regime see no other alternative to remedy the economic inequalities they face save for consenting to criminating conduct that the regime stamps as “wrong.” Jay Z’s former criminal behavior—a central trope in his earlier music—strips bare the existence of U.S. structural violence. But it can also be conceptualized in the context of the Platonic cave allegory. Jay Z’s glorification of “outlaw” behavior is a parallel display of the prisoner’s inability to name the “shadows” in their true nature. In this case, Jay Z’s view of narcotic distribution in the late 80s and 90s as the only means by which to attain material success illustrates an inability to visualize and mobilize his full potential. There is ample evidence confirming that Jay Z’s rap social identity was initially predicated on his former lifestyle of selling drugs, thus accepting the shadow of “Black criminality” as an innate characteristic of Black male ontology.

In “U Don’t Know,” a song on his 2001 *Blueprint* album, Jay Z recounts in detail the conditions of the cave from which he emerged. The first verse expounds upon the corruption of this underworld: “I’m from the streets where the / Hood could swallow ‘em and, bullets’ll follow ‘em and / There’s so much coke that you could run the slalom . . . / They say that we are prone to violence, but it’s home sweet home.” In these lines, Jay Z highlights the internalization of this dark, prescriptive reality of Black life in ““the cave of the urban ghetto. In the final verse, he announces that which fortifies his rap ethos: “I came into this motherfucker [the rap industry] a hundred grand strong / nine to be exact, from grindin’ G-packs”7 (“U Don’t Know”).
A further example can be found in, “Coming of Age,” a track on his first album, *Reasonable Doubt* (1996), consisting of a dialogue between Jay Z and his friend, Memphis Bleek, who is presumed to be an adolescent aspiring drug dealer. In the song, Jay Z goes so far as to counsel Bleek, who dreams of shadowing Jay Z’s lifestyle, on how to “make hard white into cold green.” He provides a “blueprint” comprised of “street codes,” which in his estimation, constitute truths needed to even out the lopsided scales (“Made in America”). Such a lifestyle, he informs the youth, is a “natural cycle,” and with Bleek under his tutelage, Jay Z can “relive [his] days of youth which is [sic] gone” (“Coming of Age”). So then within the cave of shadows is a generational cycle whereby this illusive mentality is reproduced at the hands of the hood veterans. However, how are the shadows of urban communities the handiwork of the systematic practices of the “guardians” outside of the cave?

A life of cocaine distribution and violence was an inevitable fate for most Black youth in the 1980s under Reagan’s exacerbation of the “war on drugs,” which was politicized and implemented to incarcerate a disproportionate percentage of minorities for non-violent drug offenses. Criminal Law scholar Kenneth B. Nunn refers to the egregious “war on drugs” as a “war on Blacks” in his extensive article, “Crime and the Pool of Surplus Criminality.” Blacks in urban ghettos were not exposed to an alternative way of living, given the theory that the Reagan administration “funneled” drugs into Black ghettos in order to finance the C.I.A.’s involvement in the trafficking of cocaine in Central America during the Contra War battle. Nunn explains how Reagan’s anti-drug war policy required military strategies and an enemy, the latter being people of color, primarily Black Americans and Hispanics (390). He also explains how
Reagan exploited the political atmosphere of the era so as to reaffirm the white public’s anxiety regarding the culpability of minorities where crime and other forms of illicit behavior were concerned (390-91). Drugs were, therefore, planted in urban Black communities so as to reinforce the arbitrary construction of “Black criminality,” and to aid U.S. domestic policies and international exploits. Hence, one cannot divorce Jay Z’s depictions of criminal and illicit behavior from the economy of top-down enacted power.

Likewise, Ellison dramatizes the notion of truths and power mechanisms lurking beneath the shadows in the story of Jim Trueblood. Trueblood’s illicit behavior—his incestuous actions—also signifies underlying structural and ideological racist practices. Trueblood’s story represents the separation of social classes, and he epitomizes the cave inhabitant relegated to the margins of the white controlled and elite society. Trueblood is a peasant, the narrator informs readers, who has “done everything it seemed to pull us down” (37). These sentiments echo Platonic anxieties concerning the ideal Republic’s vitiation at the hands of the deluded prisoners. Moreover, although the poor sharecropper fathers his daughter’s child, it is a result of cramped post-war living conditions in the South. It is a well-known fact that the sharecropping system fostered indebtedness and was a tactic of coercive labor (Dubois 1903, 1935; Whayne 1996; Hartman 1997—to name a few). At the conclusion of a crop year, historian Jeannie M. Whayne instructs that after settling their debts with landlords, tenants barely had residual income to purchase necessities (55). Thus, as Trueblood informs the white philanthropist, Mr. Norton, he could not find work and was forced to share a bed with his maturing daughter on one side and his wife on the other, so as to generate heat. His family could barely afford to eat, much less buy coal (Ellison 42).
Though his justification of the incest lies in the fact that he was dreaming, literary scholar Anne Anlin Cheng looks beyond this “true belief” postulated by Trueblood: “Trueblood’s seemingly barbaric story, however, turns out to be itself a painful reflection of the historic conditions produced by white civil society” (128). To expound, Trueblood’s story exposes the goal of the white superstructure—the legislature—to procure what Saidiya Hartman divulges as the “reimposition of slavery in all its guises” (170) and the “tenuousness of equality” (175), by consigning Blacks to the realm of the biological in post-emancipation America. There was indifference, Hartman observes, following Hannah Arendt, to Black misery and the material needs of the newly freed unless cohabitation of the races was of issue, ergo emphasizing the primacy of the biological—the obsession with Black male sexuality (169). In this case, the state abandons its efforts to intercede on behalf of subpar social conditions of Blacks until illicit sexual behavior is of concern. Trueblood’s “criminal” act is a consequence of this policy failure. However, he is coerced into believing that his incestuous behavior is of his own volition, thereby justifying his ostracism. Further, not only does his story disclose the truth of systemic racist practices in the post-war South; additionally, Trueblood enables Mr. Norton to engage, however vicariously, with the incestuous fantasies he has of his own late daughter. Cheng sees Trueblood as a “primitive enactment of what Norton can only fantasize” (128). Trueblood then conforms to white discourses and ideologies that construct Black masculinity and Black male sexuality as animalistic and criminally liable, solidifying the “truth” of racial difference and warranting the division of society.
It is therefore not a coincidence that Mr. Norton rewards Trueblood with a one hundred-dollar incentive (under the auspice of white philanthropy). For Trueblood solidifies the racialized mind-body dichotomy, thus advancing the myth of “white supremacy,” makes possible the institutionalization of debt peonage, and he enables a “civilized” white male to engage, albeit, psychosocially, in taboo conduct, which is a socially criminal offense for Trueblood. He is also rewarded for his “otherness” in being allowed to showcase his musical gift. He is invited to sing “primitive spirituals” at the University each time white guests come to town (Ellison 37). Jay Z is also awarded a monetary incentive for acquiescing to the social construction of “Black criminality.” This incentive was also a music deal, which suggests that the engineering of “Black criminality”—vis-à-vis an incentive in the form of music—in both its social and legal manifestations, is a politically viable tool and means to maintain the division of the races.

But today, the incentive is now the patrolling space for penal control. As I mentioned in the dissertation introduction, conscious rapper Killer Mike has been vocal in songs and commentary on the criminalization of rap music and the ways in which prosecutors turn to rap music, a predominantly Black musical form, to incriminate and then criminalize Black men.⁸ Music, then, is the materialization of ideological weapons used to fasten in place repressive regimes and racial hierarchies. Black music is also a valuable variable employed in the execution of a circular logic rooted in “Black male criminality” (Black males are incentivized for acquiescing to a criminalizing stereotype; the music then becomes the justification to imprison them; and certainly, they are imprisoned because they are “criminals”). The overall point, though, is that lurking
beneath the shadows is the reality that “true beliefs” are the systematic deceptive achievements of the “Truth-possessing” class.

Although Jay Z eventually acknowledges how his culpability was, essentially, a consequence of the venal policies of the Reagan administration (“Blame Reagan for making me into a monster . . . / I ran contraband that they sponsored” (“Blue Magic”)); nevertheless, his career was based on grindin’ G-packs” (“U Don’t Know”) and encouraging the youth to do the same. Thus, one can make a strong case that he was a prisoner indoctrinated in “true beliefs” that inaccurately defined him. Yet, one must also accede the real truths concealed by the shadows. Through his art, Ellison reveals the truth behind the shadows of illusion in the post-war South, and Jay Z’s musical commentary has contributed to the intellectual discourse on the relationship between racism and penal control, even as he confirms his participation in this repressive governmental operation. Informing his listeners that “cops comb this shit top to bottom,” for instance, and “[hop] out the back ‘a van” (“U Don’t Know”), exposed the manner in which state-sanctioned forces exercise power through furtive measures and utilize their omnipresence and mobility in order to regulate and remove “deviant” behavior from the ideal “Republic.” In fact, Jay Z contributes to an ongoing discussion. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, insists that the normalizing gaze of disciplinary control is a line of vision that legitimates punishment (184). Surveillance or “examination” is a ritualized process whereby “[i]n it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth” (Foucault 184). Likewise, Angela Davis judges increased surveillance as a decisive tactic of enacting punishment: “Those communities that are more subject to police surveillance are much
more likely to produce more bodies for the punishment industry” (40). Not surprisingly, what follows is the construction of Black criminalization, not acknowledged as a consequence of misused modern power, but rather as the establishment of the truth of Black subjectivity.

Hence, Jay Z’s lyrics dramatize and invite a conversation of the ways in which the “cave inhabitants” within contemporary ghettos are subjected to militarized repressive forces (and their voyeuristic tendencies), which are state-sanctioned rituals used to exercise political and social control. This system of power is a truth-hood (rather than a shadow) that compromises the moral character of the larger society. Further, despite the socio-historical contexts separating the two, both artists divulge the sham of justice which manifests vis-a-vis the realistic social conditions that inner-city Black youth faced and Black sharecroppers confronted, provoked by white supremacist ideologies and a political economy put in place to benefit the wealthy, white class. As Jay Z’s and Ellison’s depictions of deviant behavior illumine, Plato’s unmediated depictions of deluded reality must be reconceived in the context of a broader dialectical relationship with the “enlightened” figures of the upper world and their subtle forms of coercive power.

Hyperaggressive Ethos: Fanonian Third Person Consciousness and Irrationality

Jay Z’s earlier music also abounds with a hypermasculine/hyperaggressive ethos. Listeners learn from his verse in “Renegade” that living in a ghetto requires youth to tote iron under their clothing as a necessary precaution while living amidst fratricide and the reality of imminent death. He also raps, “Do not step to me—I’m awkward, I box lefty
often / My pops left me, an orphan, my mama wasn’t home” (“Renegade”). One would thus deduce that the depiction of a violent disposition emanates from growing up in a broken home, from being a social anomaly, and from existing in a crime-infested environment. Jay Z personifies what has been referred to as the “badman” trickster figure—an accepted performative ethos and motif in hip hop, dating back to the literary trickster figure, “Stackolee” (Roberts 1989; Rose 1994; Kelley 1994; Perry 2004; Gates and McKay 2004; Quinn 2005; Ogbar 2007). Hip hop scholar Tricia Rose enlightens, “[T]he ghetto badman posture-performance is a protective shell against real unyielding and harsh social policies and physical environments” (12). In the same vein, echoing Robin D.G. Kelley’s description of the “badman” trickster figure,” hip hop scholar Jeffrey Ogbar adds that the tradition of the “badman” in rap culture is a reaction to suppressed Black rage from being called “boy,” political disenfranchisement, and to overall disempowerment (76). While both theories are similar and undeniably plausible, the hyper-masculine, violent disposition can also be traced to the history of pathologizing the Black body during colonialism.

In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon, pivoting from a postcolonial perspective, offers his theory of the Black man’s oblivion during the moment “his inferiority is determined by the Other,” on “his home territory” (90). Comparatively, Jay Z and artists alike believe they are merely adopting an image necessary to establish “authenticity” in the rap industry. But, as Rose and Ogbar indicate, the issue of identity construction vis-à-vis the “badman” performance in the rap industry, is much more complex than artists understand it to be. There is the old rap adage, “the streets is watching”; but then there is also the reality that the Black body exists in a white-owned
market subjected to a white gaze at every turn. But what, exactly, are the ramifications of being held captive by a white gaze? On the one hand, it gives rise to first-person narratives embodying the “badman” trickster in hip hop. On the other, this abstract, disembodied mechanism of power enables the compartmentalization of society, which, again, bears traces of the Platonic ideal Republic. In both instances, societal division is the consequence of cultural/political hegemony, which owes to the arbitrary monopolization of “Truth” and “Knowledge.” In my application of Fanon here, I am suggesting that there are contiguities between colonial and postcolonial forces and white supremacist factions in America (to which the “badman” trickster figure is a reaction), and that the white gaze is a ubiquitous, imprisoning presence on both sides of the Atlantic.

Fanon recognizes the cause and import of what he refers to as “third person consciousness”—that is, a being that exists in triple in the face of a white gaze (92). He enlightens that in a colonial context, there is the initial perception the Black man has of his self. He has an objective view of his own subjectivity, as well as his “customs” and “agencies” (90). His second person consciousness is such that he understands himself as a subject of examination to himself. Fanon refers readers to Blacks conversing with one another in the Antilles about “the black problem” and the class stratifications of Blacks in the Caribbean as a case in point (90). But when confronting the white gaze, the second person consciousness is transposed. There is a third person consciousness wherein the Black man only knows himself as “an object among objects” (89). That is, “[t]he image of his body is solely negating. It’s an image in third person” where “[a]ll around the body reigns an atmosphere of uncertainty” (Fanon 90).
The line, “They say that we are prone to violence, but it’s home sweet home” (“U Don’t Know”), on the one hand, exemplifies cave imprisonment insofar as the prisoners know only the shadows (in this case a reductive, imposed behavior characteristic) in their line of vision, and given Socrates’s insistence that the prisoners do not object to their imposition because they have never known “True Forms.” However, this line also typifies third person consciousness given “we” implies the collective inability to self-determine and to act as agents and sentient subjects in the shaping of their life chances—the denial of tenants constituting “Enlightenment’s” humanist goals of Universal freedom for mankind and human liberty. Jay Z becomes an object amidst other objects in the Marcy Projects in which he grew up. Therefore, the Marcy Projects inhabitants and those alike referenced in this line have acceded their object-construction. They accept their realties as objects fastened to the ideological strings of white supremacists, and objects whose fates and behaviors are calculated by the dominant group. Jay Z, more directly, sheds light on the “objecthood of Blacks in slums, as it were, in “Do You Wanna Ride”: “You know why they call The Projects a project, because it’s a project! / An experiment, we’re in it, only as objects.” Hence, the objectifying and quarantining of particular racial groups are intertwined.

Thusly, third person consciousness, in a Fanonian sense, is the abandonment of the initial objective perception of the self as a conscious being, and the acceptance of the Other’s dehumanizing construction of one’s subjectivity. It serves as a viable instrument employed to relegate Blacks and other people of color to the cave of darkness and disorientation. It stands to reason then that the “badman,” hyperaggressive persona is, in part, the performance of an illusive subjectivity, but the interpolated self is the
achievement of the white gaze. The Form of the true self is unknowable in a racist social body, and there is a seemingly unbridgeable distance between one’s self-defined subjectivity and that which the external (white) world creates. Ellison parodies this notion of self-alienation and third person consciousness vis-à-vis the grandfather’s declaration to “Keep that nigger-boy running.” IM is always running away from an objectified identity that the external world has determined he should accept, such as the “public self that spoke for the Brotherhood” (287) or from existing as a clog in the machine tied to the fate of a white trustee like Mr. Norton. He juggles so many identities that he “seemed to run a foot race against [him]self” (287). As it were, he runs from his first person consciousness, only to be cornered by his third person consciousness, which incites his descent. In fact, his identity is always unknowable until his descent.

But as Fanon enlightens, this disorientation is created by “the white man who had no scruples about imprisoning” the Negro (92). Because of which, the Negro “transported [him]self . . . far, very far, from his self, and gave [him]self up as an object” (92). “I wear a G on my chest,” Jay Z informs (“U Don’t Know”), as if he is the materialized and objectified manifestation of a fabricated “Black superhero” who has not defined himself for himself. Consequently, he becomes a dissenting ‘object’ in the American social imaginary. This gangster façade is a hallmark of the dark ghettos, which Robert Staples argues, is but a mere colony of presumed malefactors exploited for its labor and for political control (39-40). Staples’s theory is not farfetched given the natives existing in the imperial machine within the colony, Achille Mbembe enlightens, are but “raw material,” objects to be disposed of (33), or experimented on, which was the case, as Jay Z informs listeners in “Do You Wanna Ride?” And, as Jay Z attests, this
persona is deeply entrenched in the psyches of Black men dwelling in these “colony-slums.”

However, it is the result of the white gaze fixing the Negro as “animal,” “wicked,” and “bad” (Fanon 92), and the Negro consenting to this fabrication for survival purposes. Is not the contemporary “compartmentalization of societies,” evinced by modern gentrifying practices, warranted then, to protect white “civility” from this “animal?” The little white boy trembles when he encounters the enragéd Negro (Fanon 93). But as Fanon reminds readers, the white man had “woven” the black man out of “a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (91). And the “violent, explosive animal” is only one of many fables. But it is not until his seventh solo album, Blue Print 2, that Jay Z recognizes the import of this construction. Take, for instance, his verse in “Diamond is Forever”: “It’s true how society don’t want me to move / Into the penthouse suit with spectacular views / They’re like uhh, ‘He’s a menace, he can never be a tenant’ / I’m like ooh—what’s a young nigga to do?” In the first place, this separation of the races reverberates the separation of social classes in Plato’s ideal Republic, but now in a racialized economy. Further, just as the little white boy who encounters the Negro and presumes him to be a raging animal, those in high society presume Jay Z to be a perilous threat to civilization or to the elites of the contemporary city-state. To no surprise, Jay Z is perturbed at the epistemic violence committed by these members: “Oh lady don’t blow my high/’specially if you don’t know my life.” Two lines later, he returns to second person consciousness by enlightening the members of the upper-world about the social factors precipitating his deviant habits and customs and those like him: “Imma / Victim of a single-parent household, born in a mousehole/ Mousetrap, niggas wanna know / How
so? How Jay get up out that, here, yeah / I snatched purses, I per-se-vered, yeah / I had work, fiends purchased.” Nonetheless, the deviant behavior is a reaction to misrecognition and is symptomatic of third person consciousness.

The Negro reacts to misrecognition and objectification, always feeling as if he will lose his temper. “I explode,” Fanon writes (89). In “Trouble,” Jay Z raps, “These young’uns crossed the line with Hov, I’m letting it blow . . . / I know it’s just a matter of time before the steady hate / Starts to overflow, then the levee breaks.” The broken levee is of course a metaphor for Jay Z’s erupting temper, and he is referring to his altercation with the R&B legend, R. Kelly, which erupted during the “Best of Both Worlds” tour in 2004. R. Kelly alleged that Jay Z and his entourage had provoked violence and that he felt his life was in danger while performing at Madison Square Garden. R. Kelly’s lawsuit, according to a 2004 Billboard article, “marked the latest example of how Jay-Z and his associates turned what had been an “historic and highly anticipated tour ... into a nightmare . . .” Once again, Jay Z’s “violent nature” threatens a peaceful operation.

Though this confrontation is one that exists between two Black men, as Fanon argues in The Wretched of the Earth, the colonized wields the very violence used to establish and maintain his subordination. However, initially, he turns his rage against his colonized brother. Fanon deems it “fratricidal bloodbath” (17) and misdirected anger.

Moreover, Jay Z recognizes in “Trouble,” this sort of drama and violence effected in the rise of R. Kelly’s album sales, and logically so. One can reasonably deduce that their confrontation—which, according to the 2004 Billboard article, amounted to a cross-fire of allegations where violence is concerned—gives credence to the fabricated construction of “Black masculinity” as hyperaggressive, in the face of the white gaze. If
cultural critic Bakari Kitwana has proven that a significant consumer group of hip-hop music is whites males, then it is this group as well as label owners that is still “dissecting” and “fixing” (Fanon 95) Black masculinity as aggressive and violent by commercializing the image. Still, Jay Z’s lyrical response, indicative of “cave mentality,” is to forewarn those plotting against him and watching the spectacle unfold, such as the heads of the labels involved (two of the three being white males) about his boiling temper. Implied in the statement “it’s just a matter of time” is the inherent “nature” of Black aggressivity, but, in fact, it is a reaction to social forces and what Fanon deems being “locked in a suffocating reification” of third person consciousness (89). In “Hola Hovito,” Jay Z admits to his temper, and in “Jay Z Blue,” Jay Z declares that his temper is a hereditary trait. While this may be the case, it is not an exhaustive explanation. It negates the notion of the Black male body as the misrecognized, condemned, and accursed protagonist of tales spun by white supremacists and then consciously and unconsciously perpetuated by white and non-white persons.

Likewise, IM often finds himself battling to suppress his anger in the face of misrecognition, or when discovering his “invisibility” rather. After his encounters with Bledsoe and young Emerson, IM becomes obsessed with determining his identity. They had not seen him, and one voice within yearned for “revengeful action” as “a spot of black anger glowed” within (197). As he passes a storefront window plastered with advertisements of products to lighten the skin to guarantee happiness, he informs, “I hurried on, suppressing a savage urge to push my fist through the pane” (199). Ellison thus reaffirms the Fanonian logic (emanating from Hegel) that the Negro’s anger and his resolve to “make [him]self known,” is a consequence of misrecognition (95). Third
person consciousness, then, is a psychological instrument employed in the maintenance of shadows and true beliefs, as it first reduces the Negro to an object, which then precipitates aggressive behavior that serves as justification for repression.

Further, the historical fabrication that the Black man is innately aggressive, violent, will defile the “Republic,” and represents a “biological danger” (143) is not only an ontological and epistemological negation, but is also what Fanon terms an irrational construction of race. Irrationality, according to Fanon, is the perversity of the racially constructed hierarchy between whites and Blacks, in which superiority is monopolized by the white race only. The constructions are irrational, but so too are the strategies of maintenance. According to Fanon, the Negro may rationalize the world for himself, but when he is rejected, he resorts to irrationality, or accepting an “irrational,” inferior subject position (102), or “true beliefs” in a Platonic sense. “For the sake of the cause” [in our examples, surviving in a racist world order, a white-owned rap industry],” Fanon declares, “I had adopted the process of regression . . . I am made of the irrational; I wade in the irrational. Irrational up to my neck” (102). A pivotal function of an irrational construction is the systematic and institutional normalization of an inferior depiction of the Negro. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, insists that normalization is one of three primary methods of modern disciplinary power (184), which aids in the maintenance of the status quo. In this case, broadly speaking, the status quo being the myth of white supremacy. The normalization of irrational constructions manifests itself in the Battle Royal and “Golden Day” scenes in *Invisible Man*, as well as throughout Jay Z’s earlier music.
In the case of the former, according to an Ellison biographer, Emory College Professor Lawrence Patrick Jackson, “The Battle Royal” is actually a short story that Ellison published in 1948, which appears as the first chapter in the novel four years later. In a rejoinder publication in 48: Magazine of the Year 2, Ellison explains the impetus behind the short story, “Battle Royal,” which he claims was an “‘imaginative recreation’” in the form of an “allegory, or an extended metaphor” (qtd. in Jackson 370). Accepting his irrationally-conceived inferiority, Ellison’s protagonist is under the impression that his high school valedictorian speech has won him the prestige of speaking in the presence of white dignitaries whom he all but deifies and thinks will offer him a college scholarship. Upon his arrival, he is thrust into a ring blindfolded, along with other blindfolded young Black boys. (His blindness during this scene supports my argument that IM navigates the world amidst illusions, as does the early Jay Z). The “most lily-white men of the town” (Ellison 14) who sit as voyeurs watching unfold a spectacle of entranced “drunken dancers weaving to the rapid drum-like thuds of blows” (Ellison 19) have orchestrated this theatrical scene of mass confusion and violence. The Black boys’ description as “drunken dancers” buttresses the Fanonian logic of irrational racial construction and third person consciousness. The entranced “drunken dancers” invoke Fanon’s description of “wading in the irrational” (102), uncritically accepting their subject constitution as mere conscripted, embodied objects. There are “no human[s] involved,”10 which elucidates the “rationale” behind one of the white spectators yelling, “Kill him! Kill that big boy!” (19). There is no moral obligation to preserve human life, as Afro-diasporic scholar Sylvia Wynter would argue, following historical sociologist Helen Fein, because the white gaze has irrationally construed the boys as objects deemed
anathema to a “civilized” society. Unlike Plato’s prisoner’s, they are allowed to transcend their imprisoning spaces and enter the upper world, but only insofar as they are paraded as objects and “visiting entertainers” who must not overstay their “welcome.” Their animalistic performance legitimizes the social order of racial hegemony. So, as entertainment, like Trueblood, they are both totem and taboo.

But as mentioned earlier, consenting to normalizing practices that solidify “Black inferiority” is a chief part of what constitutes irrationality. The boys, themselves, “wade in the irrational,” participating, rather fervently, in the normalization of an arbitrary construction of Black masculinity as innately aggressive and inferior, vis-à-vis the normalization of brutality. They accept the absurdity, fighting with blood curling tenacity at this “urbane,” social occasion that is ironically prearranged for a performance of brutality: “Everyone fought hysterically. . . Everybody fought everybody else” (19). They all attempt to land fatal blows “below the belt and in the kidney,” and to the head (19), even IM, despite his reservations. When he is pitted against the larger Tatlock, IM tries to bribe him to stage their fight-off, but Tatlock’s response is “Go to hell!” and “Give it [the seven-dollar bribe] to your ma” (20). Then finally, IM accepts this “idealized” behavior. “I began fighting carefully now,” he recounts, with “hopeless desperation” (20). These boys are pitted against one another successfully because they are under the impression the victor will receive a monetary reward. However, the coins thrown onto the electrified carpet are plated, reinforcing the notion of living amongst illusions. Nevertheless, similar to the case of Jay Z and Trueblood, an incentive is employed to condition their acceptance of the pathology that Black men are brutes. Incentives have historically enforced social control—rewarding those who accept
behavior that adheres to social norms determined by the dominant group, thereby normalizing the behavior.\textsuperscript{11} Normalization then is employed as a tool of domination, as it solidifies the perversity of “white supremacy.”

This scene proves that both the oppressed and the oppressor are deluded. The boys are the rejected dregs of the American social body. In order to survive in this racist social body, and to survive the match, the boys accede the perverse construction of Black embodiment as animalistic, while the white elites supposedly maintain their “civility.” But the construction of “white supremacy” is made apparent given the fact that “[t]he harder [the boys] fought the more threatening the men became” (19), proving that they, too, are deluded by “true beliefs” and are irrational. They are no more holders of “truth” than are the boys. And Ellison exacerbates his parody of the delusion in that IM’s only reservation is that fighting would ruin his chances of delivering a speech (which bears similarities to Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist Atlanta Exposition speech) that merely blots out his humanity, in the presence of those he aspires to become. His reservations have nothing to do with apprehending his first person consciousness and a truer sense of Black subjectivity. Rather, he accepts his “inferiority” as a convention of their social system. “The Battle Royal” is therefore a completely irrational and nonsensical “show down” of the imprisoning power of the white male gaze and the normalization of its constructions. It unmasks the fiction of white supremacy. It is also a dramatization of the ways in which the prisoners’ are perpetually bound by their “neck fetters.” But to much dismay, one’s delusional state can be so deleterious as to impel behavior that only makes the “fetters” more constricting.
Jay Z proved his participation in an irrational racial construction by singing about and performing the shadow of the uber-violent, hypermasculine persona, used to validate his “inferiority.” In his *Reasonable Doubt* track, “D’evils,” Jay Z recounts feeling compelled to rob a man: “The Exorcist, got me doing sticks like ‘homie / You don’t know me but the whole world owe me, strip’!” Yet, he insists that he is not to blame for his wayward lifestyle of violence. Rather, he has been conscripted by “d’evils”: “I can’t be held accountable, D’evils beating me down, boo.” He is thus similar to Ellison’s “drunken fighters” in that he, too, “wades in the irrational,” held captive by the “D’evils.” However, “D’evils” are undoubtedly the perverse constructions and desires of a white racist imaginary and the reification of Euro-American discourses that have ideologically constructed Blacks as vicious (non) beings, ergo stabilizing the racial hierarchy. His accepted powerlessness suggests he “wades” in this irrational fabrication. It also signals his establishment of the “badman” image as a normative form of masculinity. He does not challenge the “wickedness” to which he has been forced to conform and perform. Rather, he avows, “That’s right, it’s wicked, that’s life I live it” (“D’evils”).

The maintenance of irrational constructions, vis-à-vis accepted powerlessness and / or Black dehumanization, in “D’evils,” could also be understood through the lens of political sociologist John Gaventa’s conception of power, powerlessness, quiescence, and rebellion. In his elucidation of the mechanisms of power, Gaventa underscores three dimensions. He intuits that oppressed persons’ conceptions of powerlessness are the result of continual defeat (first dimension). If B recognizes that he can never wage a conflict against the dominant A and emerge the victor because A employs sanctions against B through the “mobilization of bias,”¹² which induces B’s withdrawal (second
—then B will suffer an unconscious psychological adoption of defeat (third dimension). That is, B eventually falls into an unconscious pattern of withdrawal, which is maintained by fear of his perpetual powerlessness. Here “d’evils” engineer an objectified version of Black manhood through what Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz consider the systematic manipulation of certain symbols—ironically, one being that of a “troublemaker” (qtd. in Gaventa 262). As they put it: “A set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures . . . that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others” (qtd. in Gaventa 262).

Hence, the “mobilization of bias”—as a power mechanism—functions based on the normalization of accepted beliefs and social myths, which as Jay Z depicts, suppresses and precludes one’s challenge of the given construction. In other words, normalizing the image of the “badman” through widely disseminated discourses and omnipresent media depictions culminates in constant internalization and defeat. In the song, the character’s quiescence to this irrational construction of Black manhood as deviant and criminal is a reflection of powerlessness. Gaventa confirms this logic: “A sense of powerlessness may manifest itself as extensive fatalism, self-deprecation, or undue apathy about one’s condition” (265). But it is again a cyclical process because as Gaventa observes, following Paulo Freire, the more one feels powerless, the more she or he is susceptible to internalizing social norms created by the dominant group (265). Gaventa is useful here in aiding in the conceptualization of the ways in which the shadows are maintained by power mechanisms (one being normalizing techniques) that
lay behind the social construction of meaning. In this case, the power mechanisms produce a sense of powerlessness regarding Black male ontological construction.

Moreover, no different than the way in which the prizefighters are baited with counterfeit coins, Jay Z’s incentive is just as elusive. “It gets dangerous,” he admits, followed with “money and power is changing us.” (“D’evils”). But herein lies the conundrum: historically, Black men are endowed a semblance of power in American culture. That they have never been granted full entrance in the institution of patriarchy, residing in the corridors of its “kingdom” instead, or that the conferral of leadership roles has always served to establish them as pawns in the maintenance of the status quo—is evidence of a political structure that attempts to divest Black men of all real forms of power. To this end, rappers are deceived in their belief that their million-dollar rap contracts amount to real wealth or unbridled power. Record labels offer Black artists a verisimilar portrait of power. Rappers’ value is to swell the bellies of the label owners while they simultaneously reinscribe a static, destructive image of Black masculinity upon the American psyche. Thus, Jay Z’s earlier “badman” persona had satisfied the social codes and commercial demands of the rap industry, which, not surprisingly, corroborates the white supremacist constitution of Black male ontology as violent. The implied social norm is this: this is what you are and how we expect you to behave, and, we will compensate you for conforming to this normalized conduct, which allows us to crystallize your second-class citizenship. Therefore, the industry is instrumental in normalizing the creation of “Black masculinity.” Irrationality is predicated on Jay Z’s concession, and therefore on the ways in which both Blacks and whites work in concert to normalize certain myths, in this case, the myth of the “Black macho.”

14
Jay Z also accepts the image of “Black macho”/the “bad man,” normalizing this perverse construction vis-à-vis his commoditization of this persona. In doing so, he tightens his own “neck fetters,” locking himself more securely in the cave. He is motivated by the commercial demands of the rap industry, which establishes the performance of “the violent Black male” persona as convention. In his book *Decoded*, Jay Z recounts his stabbing of the record producer Lance “Un” Rivera. Rivera did not pose a physical threat to Jay Z—on the contrary. Jay Z was infuriated with the fact that his current album, *Vol. 3.*, leaked prior to its official release date, and he suspected it was an “inside job.” When Jay Z confronted Rivera at a club, Rivera was taken aback and responded, in his own opinion, commensurately. Jay Z recounts: “[Rivera] got real loud with me right there in the middle of the club . . .” (110). “[I]n a state of shock” after reflecting upon Rivera’s verbal retaliatory attack, Jay Z approached him once more, “but this time I was blacking out with anger,” he remembers (110). Jay Z stabbed “Un,” pleaded guilty on charges of assault, and was sentenced to three years probation (111). Jay Z’s disorientation was such that he was convinced there was no other way to deal with the confrontation that erupted between Lance Rivera and himself, outside of wielding violence. In addition, this display of hyperaggression led to a profitable outcome. During the ensuing litigations, Jay Z explains, “The hilarious thing . . . is that the Rocawear bubble coat I was wearing when they paraded me in front of the cameras started flying off the shelves . . .” (111). Hence, it is thus difficult to depart from the shadows when the dominant group allows them to gratify material desires.

But Jay Z, too, normalizes the violence by exploiting the commercial viability of the violent debacle with Rivera (also known as “Un”) himself, in several tracks. One
example is “Dear Summer”: “I pick the gun up / Niggas back up; they know I’m not no fronta / I don’t talk shit, I just flip it Un ya / Sorry Lance I’m just trying to advance my quotes by making you the butt of my joke.” His violent confrontation with “Un” gives his lyrics semantic depth, given the phonetic and homophonic play on words with “Un,” his former enemy’s pseudonym, and the prepositional phrase “On you.” Thusly, rather than acknowledge the gravity of the confrontation and its potentially deadly outcome, it is reduced to a musical trope, becoming an opportunist yet pivotal moment in his construction of the “badman” persona, and a display of lyrical dexterity. Both meet the criteria for selling power in the rap industry and so are enticements for consumption. As cultural sociology scholar Roberta Sassatelli proposes, consumption has a normalizing function. She insists that the consumption of certain commodities signal societal progress in that one consumes “commendable” things, thereby “promot[ing] certain lifestyles as ‘normal’” (153). In the same way, Jay Z supplies, rather wittily, a perverse subject constitution of Black men as an image to be consumed in a society wherein that which is perverse is disgustingly “commendable,” so to speak, according to those consumers who either consciously or unconsciously uphold the myth of white supremacy. He thus promotes a normative construction of Black masculinity. But normalization only abets the irrationality of what Fanon refers to as the “historical-racial schema” (91), which in this case involves Black masculinity as hyper-aggressive.

In the novel, Ellison dramatizes the normalization of falsified and irrational theories of “blackness” via routinized and institutionalized practices. This is evinced during the “Golden Day” scene wherein IM takes the fatigued Mr. Norton to a whorehouse frequented by war veterans said to be insane. For the sake of my argument,
the case of the war veterans represents the mystification of one’s subjectivity—the means by which prisoners are kept prisoners facing the wall of the cave. The “Golden Day” scene also dramatizes the victim’s role in perpetuating an irrational construction, or their figurative (and in this case literal) imprisonment. In Harold Bloom’s *Ralph Ellison*, contributor James M. Albrecht argues that given the “Golden Day” is a brothel for “disenfranchised black soldiers,” Ellison parodies Lewis Mumford’s idealized interpretation of the years spanning 1830-1860 in American history in his 1924 text *The Golden Day*, implying that it was certainly no “golden day” for blacks, and that slavery and the Civil War deserved more than a “passing reference” (69). Through allegory, Ellison thus employs the veterans as well as the “Golden Day,” to highlight the means by which they are dismissed, repressed, and consigned to oblivion in American society. As patients in an insane asylum near the college in which IM attends, these veterans, in part, signify the irrational and whimsical notion that “white supremacy” is predicated on the mental “incapacity” of Black people.

But even if they *are* insane, their insanity is reaction to an engineered pathology. Literary and psychoanalytic critic Badia Sahar Ahad interprets their performed cognitive instability as a recasting of the Freudian conceptualization of hysteria in a racialized context. According to Ahad, “Ellison reframes the classical psychoanalytic interpretation of hysteria to suggest that perceived psychological disorders among African Americans mask deeper intellectual energies that are repressed due to southern law” (98). Ahad’s application of Freudian theories of hysteria allows us to interpret the role of one veteran who was at one point a renowned neurosurgeon. Gaventa’s dimensions of power are easily discernible in his case. He was compelled to abort his practice (dimension 2) when
he realized that his unprecedented work would not gain him any modicum of intrinsic value or recognition in American society (dimension 3) (Ellison 70-71). According to Freud, the repression of desires culminates in a neurotic condition. But this man is cognizant of the current racialized society’s desire to create and institutionalize his “neurosis,” through systematic and irrational means. He had returned from duty to save lives, “and I was refused” he recounts. Instead, he was whipped for his ability to save lives and thrown into an insane asylum. He is thus prohibited from participating in any form of humanitarian welfare, as it would prove his humanity and aptitude, and thus disprove the irrational myth of white supremacy. But as previously explained, misrecognition oftentimes yields a violent reaction. He informs IM and Mr. Norton, “[t]hese hands so lovingly trained to master a scalpel yearn to caress a trigger” (73).

Ultimately, Ellison illustrates how the accepted repressive regime has a vital need to repress Black men who possess the cognitive abilities and social stature of the veteran, as their intellectual capacities threaten nineteenth-century scientific discourse on “black inferiority” that bases its pathologized theories on the alleged intellectual ineptitude of people of African descent. If Blacks defied this construction, they were said to be aberrations, which was normalized in various manners. Such epistemic and structural violence sustained the myth of white supremacy, and as Ellison proves, was still alive in the twentieth century. One method of preservation, evinced by the “Golden Day,” is to naturalize the veterans’ hysteria and insanity through routine and institutionalization, so as to mask the underling agenda of the ruling racial group. In a 1944 letter to Richard Wright, Ellison had alluded to the process of naturalizing epistemic falsehoods: “If you can’t control a nigger, call him crazy” (qtd. in Ahad 98). And as he depicts, once it is
established that the Negro is crazy, it is imperative to establish a routine that confirms his insanity. What Ellison describes is a normative function of irrationality. The veterans are taken to the “Golden Day,” accompanied by an attendant, on the same day of every week as a therapeutic “cure” (62). Applying Gaventa again, the established powerlessness of deprived groups affects their awareness of their condition. Gaventa argues that “things as routines, internalization of roles or false consensus lead to acceptance of the status quo by the dominated” (259).

The “Golden Day” scene also illustrates the ways in which self-pathologizing occurs through the acceptance and performance of a manufactured social identity. The other veterans have blindly accepted their irrational constitution and have participated in the normalization of their subject position, evinced by their unconscious role-playing, and their aggressive, irate behavior. The most salient example is of one man who even refers to himself as hysterical. After punching Mr. Norton, Ahad observes that this particular veteran “diagnoses his act as ‘a case of hysteria . . . [a] mere mild case of hysteria’” (98; Ellison 61). Their internalized insanity and confusion, however, is a consequence of crude, systematic stupefaction. In other words, their shadows and true beliefs are thus stabilized by the guile of the “Truth possessors.” But why would one with access to absolute “Truth” resort to such cunning practices?

On the other hand, Jay Z consciously participates in his own construction. In “Moment of Clarity,” he conveys an epiphany regarding the ways in which his listeners, many of whom are Black, request lyrics that are less generative and intellectually stimulating: “I dumbed down for my audience to double my dollars / They criticized me for it yet they all yell “holla’!” His listeners feigned their rejection of accessible,
elementary lyrics, but in all actuality, their affective reaction to his “dumbed down”
content connotes their endorsement. Jay Z, however, recognizes his ability to produce
thought-provoking content akin to that of conscious rappers such as Talib Kweli and
Common Sense. However, when he did offer his listeners complex lyrics, he noticed a
significant decline in album sales. As a result, Jay Z reasons, “I ain’t been rhymin’ like
Common, since.” What Jay Z describes here, through his usual craft and phonetic
ambiguity, cannot be reduced to a narrative outlining the economic model of “supply and
demand”—that is, the qualitative demands of the buyers. Instead, one can also interpret
the demands of the buyers as a reflection of their acceptance and expectation of the myth
of Black simplicity and ineptitude. They refuse to consume content that necessitates
acuity or the ability to rationalize; and sadly, Jay Z grants their request. Such Black folk,
then, participate in the irrational construction of “blackness” and the putative judgment
that Black male rappers hailing from a place like Marcy Projects should put out “sing-a-
long,” incantatory lyrics which only aid in the zombification of their listeners. They also
give credence to theories that suggest Blacks are endowed with intellectually inferior
dispositions, and so belong in a cave wherein they reaffirm these true beliefs.

In short, the “Golden Day” dramatizes the institutionalization of oppressive
structures and a circular logic that stabilizes the oppression of those dismissed as pariahs
judged to be beyond the possibility of becoming citizens in an ideal “Republic,” in a
Platonic context. The veterans are in an insane asylum because they are “insane” and
“aggressive.” They are insane because they are Negroes who were former doctors,
lawyers, and members of professions of which IM aspired (Ellison 57), hence his
“invisibility.” Their professions reveal the truth behind the shadows: implicit in their
intellectual capacities is the “equality of the human races,” the myth of white supremacy, and the unwarranted division of society. This circular logic is irrational in a Fanonian sense, and so, too, is Jay Z’s initial, dehumanizing gangster presentation. In “U Don’t Know,” Jay Z declares that the “badman” persona—the “G” on his chest—is “authentic” (“This ain’t a sewn outfit homes, homes is about it”); yet, it only “authentically” defines “third-person consciousness,” reifies the normalization of racial irrationality, and fuels the demonization of Black men. The veterans are symbolically blind, and this image that Jay Z initially portrayed in his music, his life, and his public presentation as an artist in the 1990s and the mid-to-early 2000s, is performative blindness. But if Jay Z, IM, Trueblood, and the veterans exist within a metaphoric cave of shadows, Ellison’s and Jay Z’s art unmask the ways in which the illusions are fastened by objectification, and an irrational racial order, enforced via normalizing strategies and incentives. The strategies do not openly reveal a racist agenda, but nevertheless are in place to keep oppressed beings in a state of perpetual stupefaction and “inferiority.” Thus, in a racialized political economy, Plato’s allegory must be exposed for its epistemic limitations. The guardians of the upper realm are only possessors of absolute “Truth” and “Knowledge” of Black subjectivity because of the discourses they create and proliferate, the ideologies they disseminate, the structures they establish to sustain the shadows, and the subtle and coercive power mechanisms they wield.

Finally, the true beliefs and knowledge of many cave inhabitants are of value, notwithstanding that their manifold truths and knowledge claims are byproducts of experiential modes of knowing. The physician is the only veteran who is not blind, even though he, too, exists within a metaphoric cave of shadows. In his own words, he knows
things—“[t]hings about life. Such things as most peasants and folk peoples almost always know through experience, though seldom through conscious thought . . .” (70). The Platonic cave metaphor trivializes this mode of truth and knowledge, equating it with darkness. But the veteran destabilizes hierarchical orders of knowledge and reconstructs the Platonic valorization of pure reason or “Truth,” as an absolute phenomenon monopolized by the rulers of society, to which all members must ascribe. If the said enlightened figures (of the regime) have emerged from the cave and have returned with pure “Knowledge” and “Truths,” Mr. Norton undermines this “reality,” in that he appears to still be peering at the shadows. Furthermore, sensory modes of truth, for the veteran, are of value insofar as they foster discernment of the ways in which the “Truth-hoods” of the “enlightened” are constituted through systems of power that keep people like Jay Z, the veterans, and IM in a cave of darkness. Ironically, it is the “insane,” imprisoned veteran who sees that IM is a mere “walking zombie!” (72)—that he is locked in a “suffocating reification” of third person consciousness (Fanon 89). He cleverly informs Mr. Norton that IM is “the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!” (72). IM is thus reduced to an object but is oblivious to this irrational reconstitution as ‘object’. The veteran avails them both of their blindness regarding Black subjectivity, however.

The point here is two-fold. The veteran signifies the instability of truth, or that no one faction monopolizes truth. Also implied is that the life experiences of the underclass and the modes of knowledges produced within the cave, cannot be dismissed entirely as constitutive of ignorance and shadows. They, too, in many instances, contribute to the erecting of a socially just city-state as they expose its social and political dysfunctions
and deceptions. Jay-Z implores society in “Moment of Clarity,” to “feel my truths”—because they, too, are real; they, too, are socially and even politically consequential.

II: The “Moment of Clarity”: Deserting the Shadows

The turning point in the Allegory is the prisoner’s emancipation and subsequent indoctrination into an “enlightened” society as a Philosopher King. Socrates questions, “[W]hat do you suppose would be [the prisoner’s] answer if someone told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw more truly?” (123, 125). Socrates thus orders the chosen prisoner to turn away from the wall of shadows (i.e. true beliefs, corrupted vision, third person consciousness, irrationality, hyperaggression etc.) that have served as mere semblances of truth. Just as the veteran is able to name the objects in their true Form, IM and Jay Z eventually reach this point of illumination and transcendence. However, the conferral of “Philosopher King” status is guided by a revisionist logic insofar as it does not constitute adherence to absolute “Truth” or closed Eurocentric orders of knowledge. Jay Z and IM do not become PKs because they have acquired the habits and single-sightedness of the elite and ruling class. Instead, their metaphoric ascension is predicated on their fortune of disabusing themselves of and dissociating with those socio-political forces that create the conditions for the shadows: social engineering practices that criminalize members of poor and Black communities, normalizing state and white supremacist efforts that reinforce the myth of “Black inferiority,” and inherited colonializing apparatuses that, to borrow a phrase from Black feminist scholar Sikivu Hutchinson, “min[e] the psychic space of . . . black masculinity.”15
The focal point of this section is therefore the process of demystification. It is an examination of the initial “moment of clarity” and escape from darkness, rather than an illumination of the PK’s customs and life experiences once he dwells in the upper world. There are two reasons why the process of demystification is important in the context of *Invisible Man* and Jay Z. In the case of the former, a disillusioned IM realizes his role in the ways in which systems of power and the production of historical narratives work in tandem with one another to cement the shadows and widen the racial chasm. Where Jay Z is concerned, demystification is the antidote to irrational racial constructions and reductionist views of Blacks and their capacity for learning, and as I will demonstrate, abets the decriminalization of Black masculinity. It thus fosters the possibility for self-autonomy/determinism.

*Invisible Man’s “Moment of Clarity”: No Longer Political Instrument*

IM begins to interrogate the absurdities of his social realities in several instances before his descent into darkness. One example of IM’s “moment of clarity” can be found in the operations of the Brotherhood and his complicity with its exclusionary practices prior to plummeting into the manhole. The Brotherhood signifies Ellison’s preoccupation with rejecting the said autonomy of white Western narratives contrived to blot out those bodies and social realities deemed “invaluable” and “outside of history.” The Brotherhood anchors the shadows to the walls of the Harlem “cave” through its deployment of what Haitian historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot terms the “sociohistorical process.” In most instances, there is a noticeable gulf between the facts of a narrative, as well as our knowledge of that narrative, or our subjective
interpretation of a narrative (Trouillot 2). In this case, the Brotherhood members deliberately contrive narratives that exclude the facts of Black materiality, in their attempts to erase Black material experiences from their historical record. In so doing, similar to what is outlined in the Platonic model, the poor Black masses of the Harlem community who are “outside of history” are at once relegated to the margins of the Brotherhood’s “ideal Republic.” Historical omission thus solidifies the illusion that Black bodies and Black misery are inconsequential unless they serve exploitable purposes. IM is initially an agent and extension of the organization’s power—that is, until he “smartens up,” as Jay Z has quipped (“U Don’t Know”).

The Brotherhood is a predominantly white political group led by the symbolically blind Brother Jack, committed to the maintenance of white Western historic worldviews. Its members are curators of history, and their historical production reflects “only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important . . . those lies his keepers keep their powers by” (Ellison 332). So those functioning outside of the Brotherhood’s machinery, namely the masses of poor Black Harlemites, are faceless non-entities, much like those dwelling in the Marcy Project Housing Complex from which Jay Z emerged. Moreover, the Brotherhood’s reliance on a “scientific” framework locates it, according to Trouillot, within a positivist framework of historical hermeneutics, whereby there is a clear delineation between historical process and knowledge (5). This system results in a “scientifically”—contrived historical narrative of distorted facts and silences. For Trouillot, “the positivist view hides the tropes of power behind a naïve epistemology” (6). With this in mind, suffice it to say that Ellison
uses the Brotherhood to enshroud his critique of the dialectical relationship between history and power, with IM initially serving as its political conduit.

Take its interpretation of the eviction as an example. When IM arrives on the scene of an old, evicted couple whose belongings are sprawled across the curbside, he is incited to action. He delivers a moving oration on their behalf amidst all of the angry spectators. Afterwards, Brother Jack, the presiding figure of the Brotherhood, admonishes IM to avoid wasting his emotions on individuals, the husband and wife in particular, because “they don’t count” (220). He avers that “[h]istory has passed them by” and that the old couple are like dead limbs to be removed from a tree so that more can blossom (221). Applying Gaventa, Brother Jack constructs a political arena wherein there exists an absence of certain grievances (an effective form of power), notwithstanding the fact that there is an “observable conflict” (259). In this case, that conflict can be summed up as unequal distribution of wealth and discriminatory practices in the housing sector in post-war poor communities of color. In attempting to suppress the emergence of their grievance, Brother Jack erases them from history. He justifies his wielding of power vis-à-vis his negation of the old couple, stating, “All they have left is their religion. . . . They’re dead, you see, because they’re incapable of rising to the necessity of the historical situation” (221). But according to Trouillot’s analysis of embedded silences in the socio-historical process, erasing the couple from history is equivalent to an arbitrary claim to archival power in the production of historical narratives, so as to benefit the interest of a particular group (48-49). It is apparent that they must be erased from historical archives because they signify a distinct African
American past, with their own set of cultural and spiritual codes and belief systems that are inconsistent with the “historical situation” as determined by the Brotherhood.

Many have interpreted the Brotherhood as partly resembling “a white-dominated Marxian humanism” (Reed 74). Supplementing this depiction, literature and American Studies scholar T.V. Reed, insists that the Brotherhood should “stand as a critique of the monovision . . .and sometimes blindness of all abstract humanist languages . . .” (81). Reed’s monological interpretation is spot on considering Brother Hambro reaffirms such abstract humanism when he informs IM that its gains are based upon “scientific necessity” and sacrificing the individual for the sake of the whole (379). Such totalizing logic presumes the homogenization of oppressed realities, and therefore reflects the dangers of (white) liberalism. White liberalist ideologies oftentimes nullify ameliorative strategies designed to improve the conditions of people of color, in their insidious attempts to preserve what George Lipsitz coins as the “possessive investment in whiteness.” Such laws affirmed “a commitment to nondiscriminatory practices in the abstract while doing nothing to challenge the reality” (Lipsitz 39). In short, the Brotherhood neglects the uniqueness of the Black experience in America. Its “rhetorics,” in Reed’s estimation, “mistake their blueprints for the world” (81). Consequently, Reed reasons, “Caught in the web of their own historical dialectics, the leaders dismiss huge chunks of life from the archives, entire forms of being, that don’t fit their blueprint” (81) [my emphasis].

Calling attention to the Brotherhood’s aim to dismiss materiality in the face of abstractions, Ellison undergoes the painstaking task of providing readers an inventory of all of their cultural possessions that are strewn about the curb during their eviction. Some
of these objects include “a set of tarnished cuff links,” a card bearing the picture of a
white man in “black face” playing a banjo while singing the lyrics ‘Goin back to my old
cabin home’, a photo of Marcus Garvey, and most memorably, their manumission papers
(206). Given these items, this couple signifies historical, racialized specificity. They are
the flesh-and-blood representations of a Negro American past: the irrepressible history of
slavery, a failed sharecropping system, minstrelsy, and the failures of Reconstruction. As
a result, they challenge the Brotherhood’s preoccupation with political abstractions.
They personify “silencing the past” and manufacturing the political present. Thus, the
Brotherhood determines that they must be removed from the historical narrative as actors,
and that IM must play a role in their erasure. All that is remembered from the eviction is
the narrator’s speech because it solidifies his soon-to-be role of “Black messiah,” which
serves the interest of the Brotherhood. Hence, there is a chasm between the historical
process (i.e. the Brotherhood strategically determines the conditions for the existence of
facts and sources) and knowledge of the truth of the event (the inclusion of all actors in
the eviction, and the fact that the eviction is symptomatic of the failures of
Reconstruction).

Fortunately, IM awakens from his slumber. He begins to challenge their
monovision and repressive humanism. In an emergency meeting to which he has been
summonsed, he defends himself against the Brotherhood’s charges that he has begun
acting like an traitorous individual, espousing beliefs and ideas not a part of the
organization’s apparatus (355). For instance, he informs them that Todd Clifton’s death
was a conspicuous matter of race: “He was shot because he was black and because he
resisted. Mainly because he was black,” he posits (354). To which, Brother Jack accuses
him of pulling the “race card” once more, while Brother Tobitt chides him for his “racist
nonsense” (354), further proving their commitment to political abstractions. But IM
stands firm: “If he’d been white, he’d be alive” (354). Yet the members attribute Todd
Clifton’s death to the selling of obscene dolls (353), rendering “the shooting of an
unarmed black man” politically inconsequential (353), and ergo, outside of the current
historical moment. But IM rejects their inanities with his insistence that neither he nor
the Harlem community thinks in “abstract terms” (353). IM is disheartened because the
members do not acknowledge the sensibilities of the Harlem community, as its
grievances are related to race oppression. He finally begins to understand the repressive
aims of political organizations—particularly, echoing the Allegory, its eschewing of
sensory experiences and knowledge. These organizations, “like all organizations,”
Gaventa illumines, “develop a ‘mobilization of bias . . . in favour of the exploitation of
certain kinds of conflict and the suppression of others” (257). Not surprisingly then, IM
is rebuked for attempting to allow to surface, the actual conflict and facts related to
Clifton’s death. Yet he desires to tell them “what’s real,” lamenting the fact that his
membership in the Brotherhood precludes his expressing the political consciousness of
Harlem—“a thing [he knows] something about” (355).

The Brotherhood thus “opened up a new section of reality” for IM (377). He now
understands his role as its political instrument, and in relegating the Harlem community
to abstractions by suppressing its definitive racist grievances. “Outside the
Brotherhood,” IM finally discovers, “we were outside history” . . .” (377). Todd Clifton
is ousted because he ventures from underneath the Brotherhood’s canopy of political
abstractions. In short, IM’s departure from the Brotherhood connotes his eventual
detection of the power mechanisms at play in its system, and the way in which it reproduces a singular ideology, subsequently excluding from historical recognition, those who refuse to submit to its “monovision.”

Just before he slays Ras the Destroyer, the Black Nationalist figure of Caribbean descent in the novel, Ras corners IM in preparation to hang him. But it is at this moment that IM finally considers himself, in my estimation, a Philosopher King: “. . . and I no hero . . . saw them, recognized them at last as those whom I had failed and of whom I was now, just now, a leader, though leading them, running ahead of them, only in the stripping away of my illusionment” (422). He had failed them by neglecting to expose the artifices employed by the dominant society in the construction of their identities and his, before now. IM thus lifts himself from the trenches of ignorance when he is no longer literally and figuratively running away from first person consciousness and can finally self-define: “. . . and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and the Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine” (422). He underscores the absurdity defining the social relations of the time: that the dominant society is blind given its members’ misrecognition of him, yet his acceptance and performance of their constructions had enabled their willful ignorance. Moreover, his “moment of clarity” even extends to his understanding of the imprisonment of others. IM reasons that Ras’s “hatred and confusion over the nature of [] reality” was controlled by “white men whom [IM] knew to be as blind and confused as he” (432; emphasis added). This reasoning is thus pivotal because it interprets the shadows and illusions in a racialized context, thereby
elucidating that which sustains them, as well as the likelihood that those who “escape the
cave of delusion” are very much still wallowing in darkness. So then, while IM’s descent
and immersion in “philosophical inquiry” verily marks his exit from the cave, literary
scholars must also concede that premature philosophical musings occur just before his
descent.

Jay Z “Smartens Up”

It is my opinion that Jay Z’s seventh solo album, The Blue Print 2: The Gift &
The Curse (2002), marks a change in his vision. He begins to acknowledge the
dialectical relationship between the prisoners, the shadows, and the upper world, which is
what enables his escape into the “world of enlightenment.” The song “I Did It My Way,”
appearing on The Blue Print 2, for instance, references his scuffle with “Un” Rivera. But
it is suggestive of a heightened consciousness and a rejection of self-pathologizing
behaviors that reinforce the normalization of irrational racial constructions and Fanonian
third-person consciousness. On the one hand, Jay Z begins to realize and articulate how
his altercation with Lance “Un” Rivera concretized the hypocrisies of the justice system:
“I caught smaller cases, but I had capital / Hypocrite system let me right back at you.” In
other words, drug money, as well as the capital earned from rhyming—the very modes of
production that white America simultaneously renounces and licenses—had enabled his
freedom. The last line is thus a double entendre, and echoes Fanon’s logic that Black
subjectivity is always wedged in interplay between individuals and disparate structures
(xv). The “you” in the final line can be read as specific, as referring to “Un” Rivera: that
is, the hypocritical system dismisses his violent offense only to release him back into “the
wild” to conduct “unfinished business” with “Un.” Yet, it also connotes an ideal, monolithic, collective American social body comprising white life and enterprises that are “susceptible” to “contamination” by Black criminal behavior.

On the other hand, Jay Z realizes the contingency and ambivalence of “justice” when both victim and perpetrator are Black, and the “accused just happen to rap” (“You better hope a rich rapper never attacks you / Not even that scratches you, ‘specially if you black dude / They don’t give a shit . . .”), but when the perpetrator is Black and the face of wealth and enterprise is a mythical white presence, “justice” must be firmly enacted, so that “they [the legal faces of white supremacy] can look good by paintin’ him as bad news” (“I Did It My Way”). But more significantly, Jay Z comes to recognize the destructive consequences of exploiting and commoditizing Black-on-Black crime portrayed in rap music. He is “disturbed” at the reality that Black crime is commercially viable, and that it enables the irrational construction of the races. If Black rappers are judged to portray the “essence” of Black manhood and masculinity, it is no small wonder that rappers are targeted by the penal system. Their narratives of hyperaggressive and criminal behavior (although typically a persona), and the possible ensuing punitive consequences warrant the perpetuation of reductionist myths about “blackness” and Black masculinity (i.e. Black men are violent, unruly, and in need of taming). In this light, Jay Z begins to trivialize and decenter his confrontation with “Un” Rivera:

So imagine how disturbed I was / When I seen how big they made my fight scene at the club / Let me explain how this shit was / This nigga Un yo I scratched him, he went home without an aspirin / But it’s cool ‘cause we back friends, it
happened and it’s over / It’s in the past and I’m glad, now I’m back to bein’ Hova.

(“I Did It My Way”)

Thus, Jay Z reframes the “Un” Rivera narrative. He recounts the confrontation dismissively and euphemistically (“stabbed” is replaced with “scratched”), and underscores a more civilized, amicable ending, unlike the sinister, hyperaggressive narrative that the media and he himself had constructed while facing shadows projected onto the wall of the cave. He therefore exhibits signs of returning to first person consciousness, or apprehending a truer, self-defined form of subjectivity. This time, his audience is compelled to consume a “less palatable” (according to perverse white supremacist expectations of “Black masculinity”) or acceptable, rather, image of Black masculinity, which is to the advantage of the subordinated group, as it challenges the irrational construction. One also witnesses this very eschewing of a compulsory hypermasculine persona one year later on his sixth solo album, *The Black Album,* particularly in songs like “What More Can I Say,” “Moment of Clarity,” and “December 4th.” In “What More Can I Say,” for instance, he spits, “No I didn’t get shot up a whole bunch of times / Or make up shit in a whole bunch of rhymes.” The former line alludes to artists like 50 Cent whose rap careers and image were inextricably tied to the “gangster” persona (i.e. being shot nine times by revivals and surviving). This determination to self-actualize, self-define and apprehend a true Form of self by decentering essentialist representations of Black masculinity, materializes more and more definitively in his later work.
Additionally, Jay Z begins to wrestle with his corrupted vision by reflecting upon the socially consequentially outcomes of capitalizing on drug distribution in his community. He provides listeners with a deeper understanding of the degree to which he, inasmuch as his lyrics reveal, contributed to the literal and social death of his community. 

His awareness of this reality begins to germinate in “Can I Live,” a track on his first album, evinced by the lines, “My pain, wish it was quick to see / From selling ‘caine ‘til brains was fried to a fricassee / Can’t lie, at the time it never bothered me.” And on the next album, In My Lifetime, Vol. I, listeners witness the convergence of the artist and the person, as Jay Z laments having sold a woman, presumably his mother, crack, in her vulnerable state:

    . . .I turned around and I sold you crack / I was a bastard for that, still I’m drowning in shame / Just remember one thing now you’re not to blame. / You was newly separated, tryin’ to escape ya world / And through my thirst I didn’t help you, I just made things worse. / I hated me and everybody that created crack. / Had me thinking the newest kicks and the latest gat / Still haven’t apologized so please play this back / While I try to come to terms for such a heinous act. (“You Must Love Me”)

This brewing self-hatred was the result of being awakened to the inestimable destruction that he had authored within his own home. “How can you ever destroy the beauty from which one came?” he asks himself. Here, he is not only a subject of inquiry unto himself; more importantly, he is able to scrutinize the objectified self into which he had transformed, evinced by the answer to that question revealed in the next line: “That’s a savage . . .” However, given it was only his second album, this level of consciousness
was transient at this point in that the voiceover on the introduction of this album, “A Million and One Questions / Rhyme No more,” informs, “I ain’t no rapper, I’m a hustler / It just so happens that I know how to rap.” This valorization of “the hustler” would become a recurring motif in Jay Z’s earlier music.

In “U Don’t Know,” a song on his sixth album, The Blue Print, he declares the need to have “smartened up” because he wasn’t “in [his] right mind” while being immersed in the drug business. Or one might reason that his enlightenment is the aftereffect of recognizing how he had been deluded by the shadows of the cave. But still, there are songs on this album that glorify drug distribution, not to mention his promise to his listeners that he would “never change” (“Never Change”). Jay Z’s moral oscillation is consistent with Socrates’s insistence that the former prisoner’s cave emergence and ascent is a gradual process in that his eyes must become accustomed to the blinding light of the Sun. But by the next album, his “moment of clarity,” ironically, lasts more than “a moment.” He consigns himself to his new vision and sense of self, as I proved with “I Did It My Way.” His ascendancy is consistent with another essential aspect of Plato’s allegory: that the capacity of learning exists within the soul already. One does not implant enlightenment in the minds of others. Instead, Socrates informs Glaucon that the “indwelling power” of learning is actuated by turning the whole body away from darkness (Book VII, 185). Jay Z thus decides to recalibrate his corrupted vision by honing the business acumen deployed in drug distribution, in order to re-direct his vision more squarely toward a less injurious yet still serviceable end. In “What More Can I Say,” a track on The Black Album (his eighth album), he acknowledges how he embodied “the soul of a hustler” in that he “really ran the street,” but that the labor power and
business acumen lodged within his soul, which made his hustling successful, translated in
the business world, producing a “CEO’s mind” and a viable marketing plan (“What More
Can I Say”). He recognizes that the same forty thousand dollar return from selling
cocaine would eventuate from substituting his illegal product for rhymes (“Could make
40 off a brick but one rhyme could be that” (“U Don’t Know’’)). As a result, he declares
that he “opene[d] the market up,” and because of which, is “one smart black boy (“U
Don’t Know’’). Surely, such a self-description confounds arbitrary constructions of
Black ontology and the ensuing criminalizing ramifications.

The final example is the song “Dope Man,” appearing on his 1999 album, Vol. 3:
Life and Times of S. Carter. It appears earlier than BP2, but is poignant evidence of Jay
Z’s early meditation of turning his entire soul away from an egregious mode of
production. In the song, Jay Z describes a scenario of being indicted on criminal charges
of flooding neighborhoods with “crack,’’ which is a prevailing metaphor for the social
meaning and influence of his music. He states, “Evidence stemmin’ from ninety-six [the
year his first album, Reasonable Doubt was released] / They say the world ain’t
recovered from his fix.” As the song progresses, prosecutors attempt to compile the
evidence, which serves as his music catalogue at this particular time. In verse two,
narrating through the voice of the prosecutor, the speaker inquires, “How come, you label
your brand of dope / Volume 1 [his second album] and spread it through the slums? . . . /
And how come you, turn right around / And release a lethal dosage called Volume 2?’’
And then the prosecutor proceeds to question him about his “criminal enterprise,” Roc-A-
Fella Records, which is “responsible for the demise / of [presumably white] record
exec[utives].” Finally, the prosecutor names Def Jam Records as his “connect” that
enables his return of “5 million,” and a host of his accomplices. Thus, Jay Z employs his knowledge of his involvement in the drug industry (distributing a product; creating a loyal clientele that returns for more *Volumes* and dosages of the product, in order to be a competitor within the market; removing exploitative middlemen, and instead seeking an intermediary that furnishes the conditions for the wide scale distribution of a product; enlisting the help of acquaintances; and finally, creating an enterprise that essentially dominates the market) to create an analogy that symbolizes his emergence from the shadows of engaging in mischief and contributing to the decomposition of the Black community.

It is therefore not merely his indoctrination into a core capitalist class that constitutes his “moment of clarity” and evidence of having crawled out of the cave, but is rather his demystification, the silences it unearths, and the socio-political potential of his art. In expanding the market, and in essence, “smartening up,” in a very Gramscian, anti-Platonic sense, Jay Z calls into question the arbitrary ranking of the human races based on their theories of “innate” aptitudes, by substantiating his capacity to reason, thereby proving that certain aptitudes are not a distinct feature of a particular race only. Certainly, this is not a new discussion, but it also is not a tautology. Such formulaic epistemological perceptions of “blackness” that classify Black persons as lacking the intelligence endowed white men are today a nuisance still for Black male rappers. Implicit in the perpetuated congressional/legal attacks on hip hop and gangsta rap began by four white female politicians in the 1980s\(^\text{16}\), can be understood not merely as a response to “harmful lyrics produced by idiots.” The continued targeting of mainstream Black rappers can also be conceived as an unconscious admission that the artists are
actually “Gramscian organic intellectuals” who wield the capacity to subvert the
dominant order. It is a silent admission that Jay Z and rappers alike are not clogs and
objects bound forever to the wall of their respective “caves.” These artists promote a
mode of knowledge that is beginning to ease its way to the center of knowledge
production, dethroning white, Western modes of “knowing.” As Firmin probed, “Do
Negroes have the same nature as whites, that is, notwithstanding their skin color, do they
have the same organic constitution, the same intellectual abilities, and the same moral
aptitudes?” (37). Informing listeners that he “wasn’t in [his] right mind” and illustrating
the transferability of his “street acumen” in the ingenious manner that he has, Jay Z is
demonstrating that “latent genius” is an innate attribute of all races, and that his moral
arch is present and is in the “recalibration process,” as it bends farther and farther away
from destruction and decadence. Like Firmin did one hundred and thirty score years
prior, he is proving that the human races are equal, notwithstanding the variations in their
modes of expression, or their initial resting place of darkness. Thusly, as are the
enlightened IM and the conscious veteran, Jay Z is proof of the insufficient, misguided
epistemological claims regarding “Black intellectual inferiority,” and by extension
undermines the notion of “pure Knowledge” and “Truth” in the upper-world. In fact,
\textit{have} its “enlightened” citizens \textit{truly} transcended their “dark caves” as they have led us to
believe for centuries?

\textbf{Conclusion:}

I have demonstrated the influence of the Platonic cave metaphor on contemporary
America, as depicted by Jay Z and the generation of rap culture, and I have used Ralph
Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as a litmus test, as it were, to demonstrate its influence on twentieth-century American society. The poor Black members of the Harlem community, the prizefighters, Jim Trueblood, and the veterans, are all deemed expendable, exploitable objects that are “roped off,” literally and figuratively, unable to attain “Truth” or “enlightenment. Jay Z’s earlier music depicts similar social predicaments, with respect to those living within a compartmentalized “colony” like Marcy Projects. They are bound by their “true beliefs,” which manifests vis-à-vis the internalization of pathological constructions. The shadows that encircle them are maintained systematically and psychosocially, through the handiwork of the dominant racial group: its employment of circular logic (*X tells me I am animal. I thus commit animalistic acts and am reprimanded for it, both legally and socially, and my “animalistic nature” is substantiated by my imprisonment*), enabled by irrational racial constructions and attendant normalizing interventions, such as varying incentives and institutions; the emergence of third person consciousness actuated by a white gaze; and the wielding of other abstract forms of power, such as historical omission, political negation, and subsequent devaluation. All of these strategies combine to fortify the lie that white supremacy is the natural order of things.

However, exercising the ability to name the objects in their “true Form” and the socio-political forces that engineer the illusions—in other words, demystifying our current reality—can be liberatory for Black people and other oppressed groups. This ability changes the way we conceptualize the nature of truth and knowledge production. Absolute forms of “Truth” and “Knowledge” production are still oppressive in that they still generate systems of power predicated upon hierarchies, which, as I have shown,
creates the conditions for the shadows. “Even a broken clock is right at least two times a
day,” Jay Z reminds his listeners (“Guns and Roses”). This line is applicable here
because the implication is that there is always truth lurking amidst the shadows (and to
this end, “perhaps the truth was always a lie”). The truths of the degraded and exploited
lay in the revelatory critiques they harbor. One being that the re-appropriation of the
Platonic paradigm is such that the “upper realm” (white society) lays claim to fixed
representations of truth and knowledge. It is thus self-endowed with the power to
ideologically construct the constitution of the “Other”—that is, at a whim, it reduces
Black male ontology as innately criminal and vicious, or primitive and insane. But
demystifying such reductionist perceptions by unmasking pathologies, as well as
systematic and institutional practices that produce these myths, is a means by which to
disprove the upper world’s knowledge claims as unalterable “Truths.”

As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the work of James Baldwin and Kanye
West achieve this feat, in that both of their respective works of art examined highlight
further, the Platonic paradigm (if interpreted via the genealogical reading provided here)
of dissimulation used in the service of irrationally constructing the identity of non-white
bodies as expendable objects and animals. Recognizing the racist functionality of
dominant discourses—that is, their wielding of social constructions of Black identity as
“Truths”—makes possible a return to first person consciousness and the apprehension of
a truer, self-defined subjectivity.
Endnotes

1 Plato explains the class stratification of the Republic as consisting of Philosopher Kings or guardians, axillaries, and producers.
2 Ellison’s nameless narrator arrives at this conclusion at the end of the novel while ruminating upon the slipperiness of the trickster figure, Rinehart; 376
3 Described by hip-hop critic and Canadian rapper, Rollie Pemberton, in his 2003 Blueprint 2 write-up for Pitchfork News.
4 Richard Wright applied the cave metaphor to his short story, “The Man Who Loved Underground.” Ayi Kwei Armah also incorporates a genealogical interpretation of the cave allegory in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, to highlight how the Platonic logic applied to a post-colonial context. He argues that Western “illumination” is synonymous with colonial operations of supplanting indigenous economic and social systems with Westernized systems. Further, literary scholar Thomas Fick has used The Allegory to underscore the “legacies of Western civilization” (10) in his reading of Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye.
5 This essay appeared in The Antioch Review in 1945 and then resurfaced again in 1964 in Ellison’s Shadow and Act.
6 In The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction, Michel Foucault examines the ways in which power can be understood in relation to and within knowledge production disseminated through discourses. The interplay between the power-knowledge-discourse dynamic, as explained by Foucault, is useful in the conceptualization of systems and relationships of power in societies.
7 The grindin’ G-packs” line refers to the surplus value (one-thousand dollars) of selling heroin or crack cocaine, in many cases, wholesale. Thus, it was close to one hundred thousand dollars of drug money that led to the birth of his rap career.
8 In the Black Voices section of the Huffington Post, Lilly Workneh writes about the intensified criminalization of rappers vis-à-vis the rendering of incriminating rap lyrics admissible in a court of law. She quotes from the conscious rapper, Killer Mike, who has been vocal on the issue, suggesting that it is a tactic of the modern Jim Crow system, which targets Black boys. “It is wrong,” Killer Mike insists, “it is evil, it is vicious, it is maniacal, and it is systematic.”
9 In Why White Kids Love Hip Hop, Bakari Kitwana engages the subject of white youth participation in the predominantly Black populated space of hip-hop culture. While he is careful not to oversimplify the matter as emblematizing the notion that white boys want to Black (10), he does, however, make it known that white male youth culture represents a significant (but not the largest) percentage of sales in hip-hop music. However, Kitwana insists that Black buying power is still prevalent and that Black consumers are an underestimated presence in the hip-hop market (93). Nevertheless, his overall project, as well as hip-hop’s growing national and global presence, is proof that the Black body is subjected the interpellating white gaze.
10 In her widely read 1992 article, “No Human Involved: A Letter to My Colleagues,” Afro-Caribbean scholar, Sylvia Wynter elucidates the ways in which discursive practices perpetuate racially motivated violence by reproducing Western epistemological orders of
being, wherein white bodies are the locus of humanity, and those of African descent are perpetually negated and pathologized.


12 A phrase Gaventa borrows from Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz’s *Power and Poverty*. In this text they expound upon the power processes of decision-making in various political spheres. They explain how challenges are suppressed through biased, furtive means; 43.


14 “Black Macho” derives from Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. In it, Wallace describes the constraining effects of the Black quasi-patriarchal culture. The “Black Macho,” as Wallace explains in the introduction of the second edition in 1990, is the reification of a mythology, a pathology: “a reversal of a white stereotype about black inferiority.” Black men, she argues had defined their masculinity in accordance with “superficial masculine characteristics,” one of which being physical prowess (Wallace xix-xx; 1990). Given this, the hyperaggressive persona Jay Z fed to the listening public was one that preserved this myth.

15 Sikivu Hutchinson is the author of the timely *Huffington Post* article, “Straight Outta Rape Culture.” After the release of F. Gary Gray’s biopic on the infamous rap group N.W.A., *Straight Outta Compton*, Hutchinson penned her follow-up article to address the convenient omissions in the film. In the article, she describes N.W.A. as playing a pivotal role in rape culture, using their rap careers to be voices of “truth” for the youth, and “mining the psychic space of young urban black masculinity.” I thought Hutchinson’s coined phrase befittingly applicable to the notion of excavating a’priori, self-defined perceptions of Self once tucked away within the Black male mind. Colonizing the mind was instrumental during colonialist exploits, and has found contemporary resonance in America. Thus, the act of “mining psychic spaces” of black masculinity is in reference to the function of the white gaze in its creation of third person consciousness and the methods that enable the internalization of the myth of white supremacy discussed in the previous section.

16 In 1985, Tipper Gore and the wife of George Bush’s campaign manager, Susan Baker, along with two other white wives of politicians, formed Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). They requested and were granted a Congressional hearing regarding music considered “obscene.” Not surprisingly, every song flagged belonged to a Black artist (From Derek Ide’s “How Capitalism Underdeveloped Hip Hop: A People’s History of Political Rap”). Notwithstanding the fact that a Black woman would eventually become the voice of the “war on gangster rap,” the fact remains that white America commenced and continues to spearhead attacks on Black cultural production in its aim for cultural hegemony, the “anti-hip-hop campaigns” serving as only one such example.
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Chapter 2:
“Blues” for the Black Body: Fanonian “Non-Alterity” and the Discursive Politics of Black Male Disembodiment, as Seen Through the Lenses of James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie* and Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead”

“I been a menace for the longest . . ..” Kanye West, “Black Skinhead,” 2013

“By classifying this category as [No Human Involved], these public officials would have given the police of Los Angeles the green light to deal with its members in any way they pleased.” Sylvia Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” 1992

“And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—face down in the weeds!” James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, 1964

**Introduction:**

Singing “blues” for Black male bodies would be an apposite response to “the condition of Black [male] life” in America, since its imminent extinction marks its condition as “one of mourning.”¹ The recent killings of Black men like Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Laquan McDonald, Alton Sterling, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Terence Crutcher, and an infinitely long list of others, are testaments to this fact. These men were killed because they were said to be that which they were not: animals and menaces to society. The first epigraph, which are lyrics from rapper Kanye West’s song “Black Skinhead,” appearing on his 2013 album *Yeezus*, acknowledges an enduring stereotype of Black masculinity, which emanates from slavery and colonization. The Black male “menace,” “hypersexed brute,” or in the words of Senator Hillary Clinton, “Super-Predator,”² is but a “true belief,” in a Platonic sense. They are more pathological constructions propounded as Absolute Truths.
Yet these “Truths” are merely a different set of shadows—evidence that the white racist imaginary is currently and has always been, chained and unwilling to turn away from the wall of “the cave.” Nevertheless, these constructions are harnessed in America in such a way that license repressive apparatuses to destroy Black bodies. At the heart of this chapter is Black male disembodiment, specifically the discursive constructions that underlie this epidemic. Though Kanye West offers the word “menace” to describe the epistemic violence committed by white supremacists where Black male bodies are concerned, this chapter attributes the destruction of the Black male body to the various manners in which it is dehumanized during psychical and social transactions between the Black body and a racist white gaze. That is to say that the denial of Black male personhood enables the powers that be (even if they are not legally endowed with the right to subdue such “Super-Predators”) to pillage, beat, chain, whip, and shoot Black bodies. This logic sheds light on the second epigraph that begins this chapter.

In 1992, Afro-Caribbean essayist, literary critic, and postcolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter penned an essay entitled, “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” wherein she arrives at the conclusion that the social grouping of young Black males is designated as a “non-human” category, and that the acronym “N.H.I.” (No Human Involved), employed by the “public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles” (42), is revelatory of the racist taxonomic classifications of the species. This discursive practice is reflective of the modern episteme, for which Black male (and female) bodies pay a perilous price. In fact, the impetus for her “Open Letter” was the 1992 videotaped beating of the twenty-six-year-old, Black male Los Angeles native, Rodney King, by four Los Angeles Police Officers. Their acquittals triggered public
outrage and led to a proliferation of and an obviously still-expanding body of scholarship on the predatory and dehumanizing construction of the Black male body.

The framework for this chapter is therefore informed by Wynter’s postulation in the second epigraph: “By classifying this category as [No Human Involved], these public officials would have given the police of Los Angeles the green light to deal with its members in any way they pleased” (42). We are both suggesting that epistemological fabrications suffice as justification for hegemonic practices. While Wynter’s underlying agenda is to expose the institutional breeding space responsible for such epistemic violence, her highlighting of the neologism “N.H.I.” provides a point of departure from which to examine the shifting variations of the “N.H.I.” construction of Black males, which occasion and justify the physical acts of violence to which they are subjected. Black males are denied ontological and subjective identities in that they are reduced to mere phantasms or sociological statistics in a white racist imaginary. Or, they are relegated to objecthood (as they were during slavery), are animalized, or are inventively assigned monstrous constitutions like “the Incredible Hulk,” or to again borrow from Senator Clinton, “Super-Predator.” Black males bodies are also regarded as undifferentiated masses of disposable flesh, and as Kanye West’s song “New Slaves” intimates in the repeated lines, “I see the blood on the leaves” (a reference to “Billy Holiday’s “Strange Fruit””—they are reduced to immanent corporeality.4

To this end, the Black body is not merely “other” to the “transcendental” white subject. Employing what literary critic and identity politics theorist Diana Fuss interprets as Frantz Fanon’s “alternative theory of (non)-alterity”5 (20), the Black body is also paradoxically barred from the domain of “otherness,” as a mechanism that “securely” and
“indefinitely” denies its humanity and subjectivity. Each of the above “non-human” constitutions of the Black male reinforces the psychic formulation of Black maleness consigned to “non-alterity.” In efforts to make sense of the omnipresent reality of Black male disembodiment, this chapter elucidates the discursive practices that abet this very ontological imposition, as seen in the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri murder case of Michael Brown, in essayist, novelist, dramatist, and Civil Rights activist, James Baldwin’s 1964 drama, *Blues For Mister Charlie*, and as instructively parodied in the lyrics and visual aesthetics of Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead.”

**I. James Baldwin, Michael Brown, and Kanye West (“Black Skinhead”)**

Though James Baldwin published well into the 1980s, he is arguably the most influential Black literary voice of the 1950s and 60s. He struggled incessantly and relentlessly to grapple with the Negro’s mythological experience in a “Christian,” racist, Patriarchal, America. Born in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance in Harlem, the openly gay Black writer was literally birthed into a burgeoning Black expressive culture. Baldwin inherited the contestatory spirit and the aesthetic wherewithal of his literary predecessors, but most notably, his writings echoed the very Double Consciousness⁶ that many of these writers exhibited and depicted. Adding to his insightful commentary on the “twoness” felt by the American Negro, Baldwin’s writings oftentimes reflected a “Triple Consciousness,” insofar as he deemed the liberation of Black males inextricably linked to a sexual freedom as well. Both his literature and his essays, including but not limited to *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1962), *Notes on a Native Son* (1955), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963) reject stereotypical
representations of the Negro, refute hegemonic masculinity, and critique the failures of American Democracy, especially white America’s refusal to see “[t]he story of the Negro in America [as] the story of America . . .” He also excoriates the manipulations of Christianity and America’s desired tabula rasa needed to absolve itself of the crime enacted against its Black and brown citizens.

I have chosen Baldwin’s art as an object of inquiry into the question of Black masculine politics and racist constructions, particularly because of his preoccupation with the dehumanization of the Negro. The depiction of the Negro as sub-human was most prototypically personified in Native Son (1940), the work of his rival and mentor Richard Wright, through his notorious protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Bigger Thomas never feels alive until he commits monstrous acts. However, many of Wright’s contemporaries deemed Bigger’s actions as that of negation and not affirmation—a concession to the white supremacist belief of the animality and sub-humanity of the Negro. The most vociferous of these critics was James Baldwin. Baldwin, in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” lowers the gavel on the novel, charging it with an epistemological limitation. “Bigger’s tragedy” he posits, “is . . . that he has accepted the theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity . . .” (18). In Blues, Baldwin exhibits the existence of this construction, but in a way that exposes it fallaciousness.

I have also selected Baldwin because of his influence on hip-hop culture. Hip hop was birthed from the belly of an angry youth culture. Dejected inner-city Black and brown youth were infuriated with socio-economic injustices and with their perceived second-class status in America. Likewise, Baldwin’s commentary often centered the
palpable rage he felt as a young Black man toward the Negro’s exemption from the white American national community and the violent implications of this gulf. Fictional works like Go Tell It and Another Country personified Black male youth angst and anxieties. In fact, in “My Dungeon Shook—A Letter to My Nephew,” an epistle in The Fire Next Time (1955), Baldwin attempts to purge the hate that may have found its way to the heart of his fourteen-year-old nephew by reminding him of his endless potential to be, even in the face of his white brothers who had attempted to deny his being, and who had convinced themselves that they had done otherwise since they were (and are still) entrapped by their own misconceptions. It can be argued that hip hop is the discursive and cultural incarnation of Baldwin’s nephew.

He tells his namesake, “There is no reason for you to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you” (293). Hip hop seems to have heeded Baldwin’s loving admonishment, for it emerged as a cultural force of counter-identification, not necessarily asking for inclusion, but planting its flag of cultural identity in the seemingly homogenous white soil of the American cultural Earth. Further, linking Baldwin and hip hop is hardly farfetched, as Baldwin knew the influence of the Black musical tradition and attempted to mark his territory on its grounds a year before his death. His multi-generic, Jazz-inspired album entitled A Lover’s Question in 1986 was produced during a blossoming stage of hip hop culture. It is no wonder then that Mexican-American artist Bocafloja, recently declared, “Baldwin is my all time favorite ‘rap artist’,”11 or that “[a]rtists like Nas, Most Def and Talib Kweli have by name stated Baldwin’s influence on their writing and career.”12
Finally, Baldwin’s appearance in this chapter owes to the active role he assumed in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. He not only protested and did televised interviews and debates regarding the racial turmoil and the issue of segregation in America, but he also contributed his voice in prose-style socio-political commentary. Baldwin was utterly disturbed by the 1955 murder of Emmett Till and the impunity granted his two white murderers, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam. Thus, *Blues for Mister Charlie* is a loosely autobiographical restaging of Till’s murder and the political atmosphere of the South during that time. *Blues* illuminates and dramatizes several variations of the “non-human” discursive and ideological construction of the Black male body and the ensuing ramifications of its “non-alterity” designation: the execution of this body and the ruthless disposal of it. The latter sheds light on the third epigraph that begins this chapter. White racist townsman, Lyle Britten, executes Baldwin’s Black male protagonist, Richard Henry, whose body was, indeed, dumped in the weeds and left to rot.

It appears as if Lyle Britten’s presaging wish for other “niggers” like Richard Henry to share the same fate as Richard Henry comes to fruition. Britten’s words materialize in that many other “niggers” in succeeding decades are beaten or murdered by white supremacists. Some of whom are literally left “face down in the weeds,” such as Trayvon Martin, while the corpses of others are disposed of without conscience as one does wasteful matter, like Michael Brown, or are rendered ubiquitous spectacles for a voyersitic, apathetic nation, like Rodney King and thousands others whose beatings and deaths at the hands of a white power structure are caught on tape. It was the murder of Trayvon Martin—the teen gunned down by security guard George Zimmerman, who
presumed the hooded Martin to be a trespasser in the Sanford, Florida gated community—that commenced the Black Lives Matter Movement. Moreover, I was personally affected by the murder of the sixteen-year-old Chicago teen Laquan McDonald in 2014, who was shot 16 times by a Chicago Police Officer for displaying a pocketknife.

However, this chapter is extensively attentive to the case of Michael Brown, the eighteen-year-old Black teen gunned down in Ferguson, Missouri by then Officer Darren Wilson, notwithstanding that Brown allegedly had his hands in the air (just as Rodney King revealed his empty palms). The Michael Brown murder case is the quintessential point of reference throughout this chapter given to some extent, the manner in which the murder unfolds and the attendant legal discourse surrounding the case parallels both the violent struggle that leads to Richard Henry’s murder, as well as the construction of Henry as “Super-Predator” during court testimonies. Darren Wilson also refers to Brown as a rapacious, “Hulk-like monster” during his testimony. Additionally, while Richard Henry is left “face down in the weeds,” Mike Brown’s decomposing corpse is left exposed in the street for hours, signifying, in both instances, the lack of empathy for Black death. Both cases illuminate the reality that the destruction of young Black males owes to epistemic violence—to the relegation of these bodies to the realm of “non-alterity.”

Further, Baldwin’s reimagining of Emmett Till’s murder was, itself, restaged in later decades. The death of Black men at the hands of the white American power structure has proven to be a historical stasis. As such, dramatized restagings of conflicts between the police and black community—black men in particular—have emerged over
time, retaining the skeleton of *Blues* yet with interjecting references to contemporary occurrences of Black male disembodiment at the hands of white repressive entities.

The restagings of *Blues* include the 1993 Rodney king beating; the 2001 Timothy Thomas shooting; the 2015 slaying of Michael Brown in Ferguson; and the 2016 restaging which frames the murders of Mike Brown and Freddie Gray (murdered by police in Baltimore, Maryland in 2015), by the Black students at Yale University. Moreover, *the Source* writer Liam Otten reported that the St. Louis Repertory Company restaged *Blues* in St. Louis in 2015, directed by Ron Himes, which included echoes of the Mike Brown murder case in 2015. Himes stated the following of the play’s relationship to Brown’s murder case: “You hear lines in the play and just automatically want to add ‘hashtag Ferguson’.” While teaching the play in my African American Literature course only five months after Brown was murdered, I, myself, was transported back to the events that unfolded in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. The similarities are glaring and haunting, and speak, again, to the condition of Black (male) life in America.

Moreover, Trayvon Martin’s death may have occasioned the birth of the Black Lives Matter Movement, but Mike Brown’s murder led to the Movement’s appropriation of the “Don’t shoot!” mantra\(^\text{15}\) as well as the “hands up” gesture, so as to speak out against habituated and militarized modes of social control where Black and brown bodies are concerned. His murder also galvanized the hip-hop community. Rapper J. Cole actually visited Ferguson and spoke impassionedly to a crowd of mourners in the very place that Mike Brown was robbed of life. But other rappers used their music as a platform to acknowledge the inanity of Brown’s murder, and to add to the ensuing civil unrest. For instance, in the same year, Compton rapper The Game released a song called
“Don’t Shoot” to excoriate the epidemic of police brutality, particularly as it played out in Ferguson. He recruited a long list of reputable artists. Each featured verse either directly references Mike Brown’s murder, or alludes to it in the mentioning of Ferguson or the “hands up!” gesture.

While Kanye West does not appear on this track, his lyrics in “Feedback,” a song on his most recent album, *The Life of Pablo* (2016), adds to the emergent discourse surrounding the details of Brown’s murder in rap culture. “Hands up, hands up like the cops taught us, /” West raps, “Hands up, hands up, then the cops shot us.” Undoubtedly, West is highlighting a semiotic paradox that exists between repressive forces and Black bodies. He is suggesting that a non-threatening posture like Brown’s raised arms—a non-verbal signal for officers to de-escalate—did not impel the officer to withdraw his weapon and to instead consider preemptive measures that would result in the preservation of life. Instead, this gesture provided the officer with more justification to shoot and destroy. The underlying implication is as Wynter’s explains in the case of Rodney King: the “classifying logic of [N.H.I]” gave Officer Wilson “the green light to deal with [Brown] in any way [he] pleased” (41).

To be fair, Kanye West’s entire catalogue of music cannot be wielded in the service of socio-political justice. In fact, that entire song mentioned above could not serve that purpose. The unapologetic misogyny in his music accounts for what most critics judge to be a counter-revolutionary ethos. While Kanye West should not be the figurehead for Black liberation politics, (given the widely held belief that “a society cannot save itself politically or attain human justice if it neglects the fate of its women-folk” (Ogundipe-Leslie 97))—without absolving West of his misogyny, I will, however,
demonstrate that he is still an agitator and so useful in the movement. At the very least, through his music, he often stubs the toe of the very power structures in which he exists.

A fair portion of his music is imbued with political utility. In “Power,” for instance, he denounces institutional racism when he calls attention to the relationship between closed schools and revolving prison doors. In “Gorgeous,” he highlights the materialization of the what Fanon termed the “epidermal racial schema” when he raps, “Face it, Jerome gets more time than Brandon / and at the airport the cops check all through my bags / and tell me that it’s random.” West thus suggests racial profiling is “based off the way we was branded,” which he also articulates earlier on his second album, when he suggests that a Black man is labeled as a liability to a company because “his skin is blacker than licorice” (“Heard ‘Em Say”). Further, he reminds his listeners of the enduring vestiges of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and colonialist exploits in America in “New Slaves” (2013). But West’s political commentary oftentimes manifests in veiled critiques, and “Black Skinhead” is a case in point.

I was drawn to what I judged as “Black Skinhead’s” hermeneutic possibilities and the “moments of clarity” that it offers. Particularly, I was intrigued at how the lyrics and visuals render it didactic insofar as they provide an interpretive framework to critique why Black bodies like Emmett Till’s, Mike Brown’s, and Richard Henry’s are casually destroyed, and what their “disposability” indicates. The song and video taken together reify the vitriolic racial tension in America, implicated by the title, the lyrics, and visual aesthetics such as Klan hoods and the symbolic contrast of white and Black imagery. Further, its preoccupation with predatory animal imagery, mythic narratives, and the Black male body lend to discussions regarding epistemological fabrications of Black
masculinity. Its aesthetic complexities enable conversations regarding the manifold discursive practices that dispossess Black bodies of their humanity, forcing them to “travel” between various configurations of “non-humanness.” Finally, its trangressive capacity lies in its veiled critique of the psychic confusion that underwrites the construction of the Black body as animal or “Super-Predator,” and the violence that flows from this. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2008), invoking Caribbean philosopher Charles Mill’s theory of the operative functionality of cognitive dysfunction, Black critical philosopher of race, George Yancy argues that white racist subjects “suffer[] from a structured blindness, a sociopsychologically reinforcing opacity that obstructs the process of ‘seeing’,” and that its said obstructed vision “continue[s] to reinforce and sustain white hegemony and mythos” (22). I demonstrate how “Black Skinhead” critiques this very psychical functionality of the white imaginary, which gives the “green light” to its material forces to deal with Black bodies “any way [they] please[].”

II. Fanonian “Non-Alterity,” the Hegelian Tradition, and Michael Brown

*Fanonian “Non-Alterity”*

Unpacking Fanonian theories of colonial psychopathlogy, Diana Fuss, in “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” rearticulates Frantz Fanon’s theories of identity and “racial othering” (20) that define the social relations of colonial regimes, expounded upon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fuss, however, extrapolates Fanon’s “alternative theory of (non) alterity” (21). She posits that the colonized African was simultaneously a racialized “Other,” and was, according to Fanon denied entry into otherness given the Lacanian theory that “‘I is an Other’,” which
presumes that otherness is a direct path into subjectivity (Fuss 21). Fuss paraphrases Fanon: “Denied entry into the alterity that underwrites subjectivity, the black man, Fanon implies, is sealed instead into a ‘crushing objecthood’” (Fuss 21). To illustrate the imposition of “non-alterity,” in his chapter “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” also translated as “The Fact of Blackness,” Fanon invokes the Sartrean conception of the “being-for-other” paradigm, and a poignant example of racial interpellation (and interpolation) in the context of a Black body encountering a white world, whereby a white child yells, “‘Dirty Nigger’!” or simply ‘Look! A Negro’!” at the site of a Black body (qtd. in Fuss 21; Fanon 89). At this moment, the objectification of the Negro manifests itself in the sense that he becomes a “being for other,” which implies “racial othering” (as he is the embodiment of racial difference read in opposition to whiteness) along with being “relegated to a position other than the Other”: non-alterity (Fuss 21).

For Sartre, one is made object to validate the subjectivity of the other person who never conceives of the opposite being as subject; “it” is only object. So in Fanon’s evocation, Fanon, or the semi-autobiographical persona, rather, is made the object of the white Other. The Negro is stripped of his subjectivity in the sense that for the white, French child to recognize himself as the antithesis of a “dirty Nigger,” the child can only exert his subjective identity if the “other Black body” is an object on which he exerts his subjectivity. So, to preserve hegemonic race relations, the Negro is neither the subject, nor is he “the Other.” The Negro becomes “‘neither an ‘I’ nor a ‘not-I’” (Fuss 21). Rather, he is outside of that polemic, and is “locked into a suffocating reification” of objecthood (Fanon 89). The interpellation and interpolation that occurs in the act of yelling “Dirty Nigger!,” discursively transfixes the Black body as a “stationary ‘object’”
(Fuss 21). In short, the white imaginary positions the Black body as a fixed (non-)entity denied ontological mobility, which means he is not permitted to transcend the status of objecthood and so is “disenfranchised of his very subjectivity” (Fuss 21).

In this strain of thought, the construction of Black citizenship in the United States—which is and has been premised upon dispossessing Black bodies of humanity and subjective identity—should be considered, as it highlights the historical contiguity between the relations of subjection in an African colonial context and those in the United States. Central to the construction of “Black citizenship” in America was and is still the consignment of Black bodies to “object status.” Many have traced this issue to the 1857 Dread Scott Decision. As Black American literary and historical scholar Saidiya Hartman reminds, Chief Justice Taney declared Negro rights and “citizenship” untenable on the basis of the Negro’s equivalence to that of property (Scenes of Subjection 164). However, this decree was not an inaugural moment in the history of “Blacks citizenry” in America, where Black bodies are deemed nonhuman. Actually, the Middle Passage, according to critical race and Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers, marked “a theft of the body—a willful and violent . . . severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire,” whereby the body is given up as “being for the captor.” Like Fanon, and earlier, Sartre, Spillers maintains that such an “existence” is synonymous with an “absence from subject-position” (“Mama’s Baby” 67). So from the moment of rupture, the Black body in the West signified not merely racial difference, but subjectivity was also denied, and I would argue ontology as well, given the conditionality of “being.”

Moreover, in 1885, The Century Magazine published George Washington Cable’s “The Freedman’s Case in Equity,” wherein he observed how the notion that those of
African descent were “by nature and unalterably an alien” (411) adhered to the disparaging discourse of the founding fathers and original slaveholders. Cable made clear that from the moment his blood stained American shores, the status of the African as “brutish, unclean, captive, pagan, savage” (Cable 410), was “natural” and “incorrigible.” These adjectives presume the existence of an (interpellated) “essence” of an African presence (in the racist white psyche), denoting fixity and so the impossibility of a protean identity. Thus, implicit is not only “racial othering” but also the denial of migration (“psychical and social”) into otherness, and so subjectivity or humanity (Fuss 21). Additionally, Cable’s description of six million “debased” African bodies being “grafted onto” the American social body (409) really elucidates the notion that Black “citizenship” is predicated, through calculative measures, on “alienism” and “objecthood.”25 The whole concept of grafting denotes appending something alien unto a living organism / body. But, even though that which is being appended is typically a living organism in biological scientific terms, in this case, it is not considered as so, as it is reduced to a passive receptacle subjected to the whims of an outside force.

To this end, “alien status,” according to the OED online denotes a “foreign nature or character”—something that is “strange,” “unfamiliar,” and “[f]ar removed from.” By this logic, the African body is not “I”; that is, it has no potential to be sovereign Subject. It is also “‘not-I’” if it is socially and legally encoded and “grafted” onto the American political body as property. The Black body’s existence and “citizenship” must always be understood dialectically, in terms of its use-value to the dominant group. This is so as the identity of the sovereign white subject is determined vis-à-vis ownership of property.26 As property, the Black body personifies the Sartrean “being for other” paradigm, which
means it is not merely “other than,” but is also object of ownership (so outside of alterity) because its “object-ness” enables its white oppressor to exert his subjectivity through proprietorship. If the captive is merely “different than” captor, the latter’s sovereign claim to ownership is precarious, which means his identity / “Subjectivity” hangs in the balance as well. If the slave is constructed only as “racial other,” reciprocating or inverting this dynamic would constitute the slave’s entry into subjectivity. The slave is therefore confined to the realm of “stationary ‘object’” (Fuss 21) within the American political body, divested of its own “motive will” and “active desire,” in Spillers’s words.\textsuperscript{27}

To put the matter more succinctly, the construction of Black citizenship in the U.S. is premised upon the dispossession of Black humanity and subjectivity. As anti-Enlightenment and humanist theorists have postulated, most recently, Alexander Weheliye, the “governing conception of humanity [is] synonymous with \textit{white} Western Man” (Weheliye 5; my emphasis). It follows then that citizenship was not conferred to any body barred from this monolithic domain. As per liberal humanist discourse, any corporeal entity outside of it was relegated not just to alienism, but also to a nonhuman, objectified designation, for the “tribe of the white Western Man” was tasked with guarding against the African’s ontological and cultural intelligibility, or its access to subjectivity and human recognition ultimately. The African’s “asphyxiation” was the result of material conditions (physical chains). Yet his “psychical and social” suffocation was a result of forced inhabitation of “the static ontological space of the timeless ‘primitive’” (Fuss 21). As such, it was erroneous to conceive of the auction block and the whipping post as inane or as spectacles deserving of national mourning, and,
unfortunately, this accounts for the historical stasis in America, with respect to Black bodies, over the course of the last 400 score years.

For this reason, it is no wonder that the site of Laquan McDonald’s body being torn asunder, bullet after bullet, in a white American psyche in Chicago, and in the psyches of those Black Americans who have internalized the theory of the Black body signifying an “object among other objects” (Fanon 89)—is underserving of national empathy. The undergirding logic is such that it is inane to mourn the brutality unleashed upon an object. Also, if Black bodies have been and are still denied personhood, why then should we bemoan the spectacle of Trayvon Martin’s “ravaged body” when he was a mere corporeal interloper, not just in the gated community in the Sanford, Florida, predominantly white subdivision in which he was visiting, but in the exclusionary community made up of the modern Western Man / “Master-Subject,” prior to his murder?

The Hegelian Tradition of Colonization

One way in which the colonized African was prohibited from entering the ranks of humanity and subjectivity was through his animalization, yet this plays out in an American, 21st-century context as well. This oscillation between nonbeing-object and animal-being speaks to the “shifting configurations of blackness,” emanating from a process of racialization whereby, according to interdisciplinary race theorist Alexander Weheliye, humanity is disciplined into “full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (3).28 In this case, the “animal-object” African subject is still dehumanized. This is implicated in what Cameroonian theorist Achilles Mbembe refers to as the “Hegelian tradition” in his defining of the organizational structure of the colony, whereby the native inhabitants are prototypically “animal” (26).29
Similar to Fanon’s earlier theorization of the colonized masses in the Western imaginary, according to Mbembe, animalization is constituted vis-à-vis an understanding of the colonized as nothing more than a “‘body-thing’” belonging to the “sphere of objects,” which means the relationship was governed by violence and domination (26-27). In a Hegelian evocation, the colonizer would declare that the “animal-body-thing,” “could in no way be another ‘myself’” (Mbembe 26). Hence, it is once again “incorrigibly alien,” and “reasonably so” given the faculties and very being of the colonized were purportedly akin to an animal in the white colonial imaginary. Mbembe thus reiterates its consignment to a static ontology: “In him/her, it was impossible to discern any power of transcendence. . . . At the heart of that relationship, the colonized could only be envisaged as the property and thing of power” (26). This “animal-thing” is also a “being for captor”: “He/she was a tool subordinated to the one who fashioned, and could now use and alter, him/her at will” (Mbembe 26-27)—presumably, if I may add, to satisfy the (economic) desires and wills of the colonizer. Given this animal-like construction, Mbembe points out that the colonized “can be destroyed, as one may kill an animal,” and that the manner and fact of death are inconsequential since the Black body is but disposable raw material (21, 33).

*The Murder of Michael Brown*

This description of the African as that which is relegated to a realm of “non-alterity” vis-à-vis his status as “disposable-animal-body-thing,” is eerily reverberated in the spectacles of Black disembodiment witnessed today in America. Take the post-mortem images and narrative surrounding the murder of Michael Brown as a case in point. Notwithstanding Leslie McSpadden’s desire for her son’s corpse to be removed
from the scorching Ferguson asphalt, he remained a spectacle for four hours, a mere hypervisible, yet invisible mass of disposable flesh. He was a “body-thing” that was also animal, and as an “animal-body-thing,” Mbembe argues that in the colony, the “corpse remained on the ground . . . a material mass and mere inert object, consigned to the role of that which is there for nothing” (21). The difference, however, is that in the Ferguson, Missouri-21st-century-context, Mike Brown’s cremating body served corrective purposes for the white power structure. While it is true that the site of Brown’s body triggered dissonant reactions (as much of the Ferguson community did mourn the death of Brown), for the repressive State apparatus on site, Brown’s body was reduced to a (black) mass of evidence needed to legitimize white impunity. To be sure, Brown’s body did not signify the materiality of suffering. Instead, he represented the disposability of an “animal-body-thing”—the immanently “thingly,” corporeal existence of the Black male body.

Although within the Hegelian tradition, the colonizer arbitrarily installs the Black body as “animal-body-thing” in the social order, which warrants its destruction—in this case, Brown’s disposability owes to a combination of factors, including this one. It might be argued that Brown also “answers the interpellating call,” affirming the behavior of an animal in the events that preceded his execution. But one might also conceive of his disposability as a consequence of interrupting the “being for other” paradigmatic requisite, which is here predicated on a system of indebtedness along with racialized identity politics. To elaborate, the abolition of slavery meant the white imperial body was no longer defined vis-à-vis the property (Black bodies) he owned, but following Karl Marx, Hartman reminds readers that modern forms of bondage, such as debt-peonage and indebted labor, reinstated the modern, captive, laboring Black body as “a medium of
[whites’] power and representation,” after slavery (120). It can be argued that this Sartrean structure persists in today’s political economy, especially in Ferguson, Missouri.

To understand how the Black body as the “‘sign and surrogate’ of the master’s body” and identity” (Hartman 120) resurfaces today, one must first consider the uneven distribution of wealth and resources in the environment in which Brown dwelled. According to senior editor for FiveThirtyEight,30 Ben Casselman, Ferguson, Missouri is a predominantly Black, economically impoverished suburb of St. Louis wherein its inhabitants—particularly in the Canfield Green neighborhood in which Mike Brown resided and was murdered—gross an average of $27,000, “making it the eighth poorest census track in the state.” Casselman also reports that in 2014, the year Brown was murdered, “Nationally, 36 percent of African-American adults under age 25 [were] employed, compared to 50 percent of young whites; even fewer [were] working full time.” Complicating this disparity is the fact that minimum wage in Missouri, at the time, was $7.50 per hour (Casselman “The Poorest Corner In Town”). I read the racialized economic crisis in Ferguson as a post-modern system of debt-peonage.

At the time of his murder, only months after his high school graduating, 18-year-old Mike Brown may not have been employed, but he was preparing to attend a trade school. Nevertheless, he was scripted (by white racist society) as deviant and quite possibly an unproductive citizens-subject to the nation state, especially to the consumer culture that is an integral element of the capitalist infrastructure. It was alleged that prior to his execution by Officer Darren Wilson, he was captured via store video camera in the act of a petty theft. After reputedly shoving a resistant store clerk (thereby behaving in the manner of “a beast”), he ran out of the convenient store without paying for cigarillos.
Evidently, if white autonomy, power, and “inviolable” subjectivity is consolidated vis-à-vis, in this context, indebtedness to the white-controlled (economic) power structure—the (temporarily) unemployed, “menace,” Brown had seemingly refused to enter into a debt-peonage, obligatory-labor-contract dialectic with his “captives,” which would have solidified, based on the logic of the Sartrean paradigm, the Black body as perpetual object.

Not only had he not entered into such a relationship of power that merely supplants a vexed history whereby white subjectivity is constituted through “property in the Black body” (Hartman 120). Additionally, he manifested himself as a “self-possessed,” “willful agent” (Hartman 120) who secured his own “material basis of . . . existence” (Wynter 49) by appropriating Western techniques of domination: violence and thievery (granting the store video indeed reveals Brown as the perpetrator). As an agential subject whose behavior mirrored the Imperial white Subject, and who was quite possibly, consciously reacting against the concentrated poverty in Ferguson that adversely affected (and still does) its 95-percent Black population, Brown displaced the “being for other” paradigm, which required of him, absolute objectivity. In so doing, white claims to exclusive humanity and subjectivity were questionable.

Hence, after having appropriated the violent disposition of the white supremacists, and after having revealed himself as an alleged threat (a “menace”) to the capitalist white-controlled productive forces (and by extension, one with a subjective identity), and paradoxically, as a “hulking creature” in need of subduing / repressing, Brown’s murder was seemingly inevitable. Therefore, in a colonial context, because he “belonged to the
“sphere of objects” (Mbembe 27) anyhow, he was dispensable. In fact, disposing of him was a necessity, and the manner of his destruction, according to Mbembe, mattered not.

Sylvia Wynter puts into perspective, further, the relationship between caste classification and white supremacist politics, as well as how this contributes to the relegation of Black bodies to “non-ality.” Applying Wynter, Mike Brown was destroyed because he was the reification of the racist taxonomic logic of the West which confers human status to those pre-determined bodies purportedly hardwired with the capacity to regulate their human behaviors toward “securing the material basis of their existence” (49). Unsurprisingly, in a post-Civil Rights America, these bodies are those of white, often middle-class, Euro-American culture and descent, while their “Conceptual Other,” as Wynter enlightens, can be defined according to the category of young, poor, Black males (43–45). They occupy the category of “No Human Involved.” Wynter reminds readers31 that such categorization is determined based on “narratively instituted . . . discursive programs” such as the current order’s “genetic status organizing principle” (50). This “biocentric paradigm” is predicated on “pre-selected degrees of biological value,” whereby pre-determined biological traits are “hierarchically allocated” to the “White/Black invariant differential” (Wynter 50). Mike Brown’s execution is a consequence of his being denied humanness based on this discursive paradigm. Brown was a product of concentrated poverty, was on the cusp of adulthood, and he had biological genetic traits (wooly hair and black skin) that have been historically and arbitrarily assigned inferior value. By this logic, in Wynter’s estimation, he lacked the capacity to orient his “human” behaviors toward the attainment of material sustenance—and I should add, in a socially acceptable manner. (Never mind the fact that like any other
recent high school graduate, Brown was awaiting the next phase of his life that would establish the conditions for him to regulate his behavior toward the attainment of material sustenance). He was therefore non-human and, accordingly, a target ripe for the infliction of brutality, gratuitous violence, and un-empathetic reactions.

However, I have exposed somewhat of an underlying contradiction in white supremacist logic if one juxtaposes Hartman’s theory of post-Emancipation debtpeonage and indebtedness where the laboring Black body is concerned, and Wynter’s postulation of the fallacy of the racialized hegemonic mode of economic organization. In the former, Black labor is necessary, as it is dialectically tied to white Subjectivity. But in the latter, the “biologized” Black body is deemed incapable of securing for itself, material well-being (the prevailing “discipline of economics,” with respect to “human behavior,” to which the current culture subscribes) (Wynter 48-49). The Black body, the male body particularly, thus finds itself in a burdened imposition: it is in a “lose-lose” and in both instances it is relegated to a static ontology. In other words, the “being for other” paradigm that undergirds the premise of the former is predicated, still, on this body as propertied object. The same can be said of the latter case since it culminates in “No Human Involved.” Taken together, one realizes the manner in which “freedom of movement,” into indisputable humanity and subjectivity, is a “white prerogative” (Fuss 21). Their—as in young, poor Black males’ (i.e. Mike Brown)—“non-transcendent, non-alterity” status might be psychical and social, but it materializes in deadly ways.

Discursive Constructions

Moreover, the denial of Black humanity and the disenfranchisement of Black subjective identity, which authorizes the destruction of Black bodies, is oftentimes
justified through the dissemination of discursive and ideological falsehoods. Borrowing from sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s theories of the genocide of European Jews, Wynter hypothesizes that young, poor, Black males (like Brown) are “made into” and consequently “behave towards” the “non-human” (43). Thus, if Mike Brown “behaved animalistically” in the convenient store and with Officer Wilson, in the words of Wynter, he “behaved towards” (43) the manner in which his identity oscillated between “body-thing” and “animal” in the “white racial phantasm” (Fuss 21). Rather than seeing Mike Brown’s alleged actions inside of the convenient store as a reaction to the impoverished conditions in which he lived, and rather than judging his scuffle with Officer Wilson as a result of Ferguson—the “things not seen”—Missouri having one of the most racist police forces in the country, the (white) public justified his destruction on the basis of Brown representing an aberration of humanity. Like Rodney King, he had already been constructed as animal, as is the case in the Hegelian tradition, and the mythic narrative surrounding his “death” in public discourse perpetuated such epistemic violence.

Officer Darren Wilson, the prosecutors, and the media were unrelenting in stripping bare Brown’s humanity to unveil what one op-ed writer, Dexter Thomas, refers to as “the monster within.” He was tall and big—and worse, “he made rap songs” (“Michael Brown Was Not A Boy”). Accordingly, Wilson was well within his rights to destroy this “rapping-monster-animal-thing” because as he informed the Grand Jury in his testimony, “it look[ed] like a demon” and, it “looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots.” Likewise, in Look, a Negro!: Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture, and Politics (2006), political scientist Robert Gooding-Williams recounts the testimonies of the perpetrators in King’s beating, which, not by coincidence, mirror
Wilson’s testimony in light of his fantastical description of Brown. Williams describes this act of “seeing” the overdetermined Black body in a white racist field of visibility: 

the defense attorney elicited testimony from King’s assailants that depicted King repeatedly as a bear, and as emitting bear-like groans. In the eyes of the police, and then again in the eyes of the jurors, King’s black body became that of a wild ‘Hulk-like’ and ‘wounded ‘ animal, whose every gesture threatened the existence of civilized society. (qtd. in Yancy 19; Williams 10)

In both cases, the reductive, phantasmagoric descriptions of Mike Brown and Rodney King as “Incredible Hulk-object-animals” animate the Hegelian tradition and the Fanonian “alternative theory of (non) alterity” insofar as Brown and King were “animalized” and were denied access to subjectivity and humanity through their said monstrous constitution; then, because “they were animals” their bodies were violable and disposable. So again I ask: How might the nation preserve the life of such a predator that resides outside of the monolithic ideal national body of human beings? The answer is simple: it does not, and this is why we must sing “blues” for Black bodies. But what did happen is that both the denial of ontology and an epistemological fabrication absolved Wilson and King’s assailants of their crimes. The same is true of the two white monsters who murdered Emmett Till.

III: Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*: The “Non-Human Animal”

Both Fanon’s theory of “non-alterity” and the Hegelian relations of subjection are manifest in James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*. According to Baldwin, the underlying agenda of reimagining the 1955 murder of Emmett Till was to paint a “valid
portrait of the murderer” (xiv)—presumably the murderer of Till, Baldwin’s fictional protagonist, Richard Henry. Yet his reimagining presages the deaths of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Laquan McDonald, and countless others to come. One can infer that Baldwin implicates a conflated Black male body across historical contexts and geographies since the play’s title also implicates an aggregate, antagonistic figure: “Mister Charlie.” This critique of the white supremacist American man is explicitly shown when Meridian Henry (who is the father of the murdered Black man, Richard Henry) informs Parnell James (the “well-intentioned” white “voice of reason” who is a self-declared friend of both the whites and Blacks of Plaguetown), “You’re Mister Charlie. All white men are Mister Charlie” (40). But Baldwin more than exceeds his goal of making known to his readers the American white man (in this case, Lyle Britten) who commits unspeakable crimes against the Black race and then protects himself from his own resulting madness by rehearsing these crimes in the comfort of his dark conscience and by outwardly slipping into an armor of self-righteousness (Baldwin xiv).

The play is also instructive inasmuch as Baldwin’s brush strokes yield a telling portrait of “the American Negro.” This mythologized figure that materializes on Baldwin’s “easel,” personified in the character of Richard Henry, exists in the racist psyche of “Mister Charlie,” as “non-human” and as the brutish, “prototype of the animal” (Mbembe 26).

Thus, if we are to weep or sing “blues for ‘Mister Charlie,’” we must also sing the blues to mourn in fact, those bodies held captive within his racist imaginary. While he, himself, is an American construction, the arbitrary, desperate, and dishonorable manner in which “Mister Charlie” has constructed himself and his “tribe” is nothing less than a
terrible pity. He has defiled the reputation of the “tribe,” of which he deems it his “sacred duty” to protect (Baldwin xv), by reducing the Black body to a violable, disposable animal or object to legitimate his own said “superiority,” humanity, and right to regulatory power and the exercise of all forms of violence.34

Moreover, there has been a dearth of critical attention where the play is concerned, and as African-American literary scholar Trudier Harris points out in Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self (2007) following Nicholas K. Davis’s “Got Tell It On The Stage: Blues For Mister Charlie as Dialectical Drama (2005), even fewer literary critics have focused in on the “protagonist” character of Richard Henry, save for Dwight McBride’s James Baldwin Now (1999), D. Quentin Miller’s Re-Visiting James Baldwin: Things Not Seen (2000), and Koritha Mitchell’s “James Baldwin, Performance Theorist, Sings the Blues for Mister Charlie” (2012). However, with the exception of the latter, even these texts offer summary treatments of Richard’s redeemable character (Harris 40; Davis 31-31). What follows then is an extrapolation of both theoretical paradigms in Blues, specially, through an analysis of Richard. That is, I elucidate how the factors that occasion Richard’s murder reveal how he is “relegated to a position that is other than the Other” (Fuss 21), as well as how he is discursively constructed as “animal,” by his assailant, the other “Mister Charlies,” and “WHITETOWN”35 in general.

Discursive Construction: Richard, “The Buck”

As is demonstrated in the case of Mike Brown (and in the beating of King), the murder of a young Black male is unveiled as a preemptive tactic precipitated by prevailing epistemological falsehoods. It is after the murder of Mike Brown that we learn
that in Wilson’s white racist psyche, Brown was a “‘Super-Predator’-animal-monster” with powers that transcended “human” capacities, thus warranting his destruction. Likewise, it is not until after the murder of Richard Henry, the dejected, insolent, former dope-fiend son of the Black Minister, Meridian Henry, that readers learn of his construction as a brutish non-human. Baldwin begins the play with Richard’s murder off stage. The opening lines of dialogue, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter—“And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—face down in the weeds!” (2)—belong to Lyle Britten. Britten utters these words after he has shot and killed Richard, who has returned from the North to start anew. The events, hereafter, unfold in a series of flashbacks that recount the details of Richard’s return to Plaguetown, USA, to the moment of his murder outside of a Black owned juke joint. The flashbacks disclose conversations held between the Black folks in “BLACKTOWN,” and their counterparts in “WHITETOWN.” Thus, it is through the flashbacks that readers are made privy to the character of Richard from multiple perspectives. The flashbacks also provide an opportunity to glean the epistemic violence that dissipates throughout “WHITETOWN” where Richard is concerned.

“WHITETOWN,” Lyle Britten especially, had seen Richard, who reifies the category of “N.H.I.,” which is metonymically “young Black males,” through their “‘inner eyes’”—a term Wynter invokes from Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (53, 44). According to Wynter, the “inner eyes” relegate Black and brown poor bodies to the outskirts of what historical sociologist Helen Fein calls the “‘universe of moral obligation’” (qtd. in Wynter 44). In Accounting for Genocide (1979), Helen Fein discusses how prior to the 1915 and 1930s and 40s genocide of the Armenians and Jews
by the Turkish pan-nationalists and the Pan-Aryan racialists (respectively), the respective
dominant groups decided both of the soon-to-be annihilated populations were “outside
the sanctified universe of obligation” – that circle of people with reciprocal obligations to
protect each other whose bonds arose from their relation to a deity or a sacred source of
authority” (qtd. in Wynter 44; Fein, 1979). Wynter thus concludes that the category of
“young Black males” and the annihilated groups to which Fein refers, are outside of the
“‘sanctified social order’” (qtd. in Wynter 45; Fein 4). Comparatively, this is precisely
what Mbembe describes in his analysis of the Hegelian psycho-social relations of
domination that account for the animalization of African “subjects” in a colonial society.
The “inner eyes” of the colonizer judge the colonized to be a “mere inert object,”
undeserving of the “moral obligation” of protection, and deserving instead of destruction,
“as one may kill an animal” (Mbembe 27). Wynter understands this conundrum to be a
consequence of a “discursive classification” that enables such misrecognition (45).

By comparison, Richard resides on the outskirts of “the universe of moral
obligation” given that he is “discursively classified” in accordance with the Hegelian
tradition as “incorrigibly animal,” as well as “N.H.I,” so inevitably and ultimately,
outside of alterity. Evidence of his “discursive classification” as “animal” can be
discerned in the dramatization of Richard as a predatory, disposable “buck”; and
evidence of his disembodied classification as “N.H.I.” lies in the manner in which he is
posthumously reduced to empirical evidence (similar to Mike Brown), through the “inner
eyes” of Parnell and Lyle. Though it is true that both paradigms are synonymous in that
the Black body is outside of otherness and subjectivity in both instances, such a
delineated analysis is impetrative since it illuminates the multiple ways that Black bodies
are only permitted to travel within the psychical and social confines of non-humanity, thus reminding readers of their stationary “object status.”

In Act I, through a flashback discussion between Lyle Britten and Parnell James, the editor of the local newspaper and “liberal friend” of both the whites and Blacks, readers learn that Lyle is unquestionably a bigot. He tells Parnell that he has nothing against “colored folks,” but in the same breath unequivocally declares, “I’ll be damned if I’ll mix with them.” His rationale: “I don’t want no big buck nigger lying up next to Josephine [his wife] and that’s where all this will lead to and you know it as well as I do!” (14). In fact, he assures Parnell that he will do anything to prevent miscegenation. Anti-miscegenation anxiety defined the political climate during the Civil Rights Era, in that the end of de jure racial segregation signaled the very “crisis” about which Lyle is apprehensive. The mixing and copulation of Black women with white men was less of a concern as was the phenomenon of white women being subjected to the mercies of the “Black male buck.” Thus, what is noteworthy here is that Lyle’s interpellating reference to Richard as “big buck” connotes an animal-like construction with deadly ramifications.

The trope of “the Black male buck” emanates from breeding narratives of slavery and was solidified in popular culture discourse thereafter, namely in D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film The Birth of a Nation, wherein the emancipated Black man is depicted as an animalistic predator of white society, ravaging and violating the mythic “pure white woman.” The buck is therefore a sexualized animal figure. In The Tragic Black Buck: Racial Masquerading in the American Literary Imagination (2004), Carlyle Van Thompson writes, “Linking black males to animals, white society literally considered
slaves subhuman, beasts. They were dangerous breeding animals who were never more
ccontent than when . . . they were rapists of white women” (2). Given that the term
“buck” literally denotes some variation of an “antlered animal” or a “vaulting horse”
(dictionary.com), and given the appropriation of the term in slave discourse in the context
of animal breeding, referring to Richard as “big buck nigger” is equivalent to consigning
the “young Black male” to the category of “predatory animal.”

This trope is overtly dramatized in Blues through other characters as well.
Richard’s reappearance in Plaguetown is cause for concern for the white townsfolk. But
Lyle Britten has fulfilled what the others perceived to be “his duties, both public and
private” (48), by ridding Plaguetown of this “menacing animal.” In Act II, we learn that
there is a precedence of racially motivated murders in this town38 and that white impunity
is to be expected. Friends of Lyle and Jo Britten gather in their home to expedite Lyle
and Jo’s anniversary celebration, given the forthcoming murder trial. After indulging in
bourbon and frivolities, they all lament the latest shift in racial dynamics in Plaguetown
since desegregation. The “niggers,” they all agree, are out of control; they have
overstepped the “God-intended” structure of racial hierarchies (48). But Ellis, a white
townsman, informs the group that the Negro’s alleged one and only interest is still
“below the button” (49), as if to quell any incredulity regarding the said sexual and
animalized “nature” of the Negro. He then informs Jo Britten that being raped by a
“Nigger” is akin to being “raped by an orang-outang out of the jungle or a stallion”—that
either “couldn’t do [her] no worse than a nigger” (50). Furthermore, to highlight and
critique the white supremacist theory of the Black body being equivalent to that of an
“animal-thing,” as a “natural,” “God-ordained” reality, Baldwin bestows upon the
Reverend of the white townspeople—the “ordained” vehicle through which Christian theology is transmitted—the role of concretizing this ideological fallacy. Though he is referring to a specific type of Negro, Reverend Phelps informs his peers that the Negro is a “mongrel” (which, by definition, is a dog or an unspecified breed of animal), and that it is “the lowest creation in the animal kingdom” (50).39

This particular flashback lends insight into the manner in which epistemic violence is more often than not inextricably tied to the exercise of physical violence. The scene recounted above also demonstrates how the home, traditionally perceived as a space of safety, nurturance, and domesticity, is here employed as a space employed to “house” the breeding and maintenance of discursive constructions. In fact, I would presume to say that it is a good chance that Officer Darren Wilson had been a participant in a similar informal “roundtable” on the “animalistic nature” of young Black men in the comforts of his own home, either before or after the “execution” of Mike Brown. In Black Women, Writing: Migrations of the Subject (1994), Carole Boyce-Davies describes the manner in which, in their literature, Black female writers have problematized the otherwise idealized space of the home, particularly Black homes, re-casting it as an oppressive, disorienting, and alienating space for young Black bodies subjected to and confined by hegemonic discourses of identity (15; 86-95). However, in Blues we see how earlier promulgated “scientific” discourses regarding the “inferiority” of the Black race become normalized in everyday conversations in the white home.

Baldwin is perhaps highlighting the fact that such totalizing conceptions of the Black body as animal did not merely emanate from and circulate amongst those “brightest and the best” minds, to borrow from Wynter (43). That is, “lynchers,” or in
in this case, “interpolaters” are produced inside of the classroom as well as within the intimate, convivial spaces inhabited by laymen and “spiritual leaders.” The end result is first and foremost, the dissociation of Black bodies from themselves, creating fragmented conceptions of the Self, if the Black victimized bodies must navigate the world through their third person consciousness, to echo Fanon, which negates an initial conception of a holistic, humane self. Subsequently, this leads to the normalization of anti-Black violence—specially, “routine ‘nigger breaking” of Black males,” and the positioning of the “animalized” Black body “outside of the sanctified universe of obligation” (Wynter 43,44).

Invoking Wynter, Richard has, therefore, been “made into” and “behaves towards” a pathology that ferments within the Brittens’ “house of lies.” This is evinced in his admission of carrying in his wallet pictures of white women with whom he had slept while up North. In Act I, while having a conversation with Juanita, his former girlfriend prior to his going North, Richard divulges, “I got a whole gang of white chicks in New York” (25). Excitedly, he shows Juanita and Pete, another Negro student, two pictures of white women (26). Then when Pete disappears, Richard informs Juanita that when he would wake up beside the white women, internally, he felt inclined to beat them and strangle them to death, yet “somehow” he had “managed” not to (29). One can thus infer that the hatred he harbored for these women was a conscious yet normalized reaction to the white woman being wielded as a medium through which white male power could be accessed, and through which the discursive and ideological pathologizing of Black males was possible. Yet, Richard’s behavior is climatological rather than “natural.”
Richard’s conditioned behavior is consistent with the Black masculine rhetoric of the 1950s and 60s, manifesting itself most poignantly in Eldridge Cleaver’s doctrinal manuscript *Soul on Ice* (1968), which was published only four years after *Blues*. In the chapter “On Becoming,” Cleaver recounts his stint in jail in 1954, the same year the Supreme Court outlawed U.S. segregation. The “separate-but-equal” mantra of the time had awakened him to his condition in white America as a Black man, since the legislation presumed imminent racial mixing (21). But such “liberating” legislation actually constituted what Saidiya Hartman terms the “burdened individuality of freedom” for Black males, in that integration was socially consequential if it re-positioned Black male bodies squarely within the racist psyches of whites, as the “predatory buck” against which they needed protect themselves. Thus, Cleaver realized that he desperately needed to “conquer The Ogre” in order to fully liberate himself (Likewise, Richard tells his grandmother that “the only way the black man’s going to get any power is to drive all the white men into the sea” (21)), and that one way to do so would be to sexually violate the white woman who was an extension of his power (25).

This epiphany impelled Cleaver to hang a picture in his cell of a white woman who was “a symbolic representative of the forbidden tribe of women” (26). He maintains, “All our lives we’ve had the white woman dangled before our eyes like a carrot on a stick before a donkey: look but don’t touch” (28). Similarly, Richard laments to Juanita, “They can rape and kill our women and we can’t do nothing. But if we tough one of their dried-up, pale-assed women, we get our nuts cut off” (25). But like Richard, staring at this white woman made Cleaver both angry and disgusted—for it was the white woman that occasioned the premature death of Emmett Till (29). As such, Cleaver
declares that it was of “paramount importance for [him] to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women” (31). Comparatively, Richard is an earlier personification of the persona and ideology that Cleaver and his contemporaries adopted.

It should therefore be inferred that the “animalistic behavior” of Black men towards white women, evinced in Cleaver’s recounting, depicted in Blues, and in many other African-American literary texts, is not a result of Black males belonging to the realm of animal species. It is a manufactured fallacy that dates back to slavery. In the same way that socio-economic factors in Ferguson, Missouri effected in the “animalization” of its “young, poor, Black male” inhabitants, the slaves were “induced to so perceive themselves” (Wynter 46) as animal given the savage and barbarous conditions of their breeding. The slaves were “made to behave towards” an animal constitution given that as Thompson points out, incest was a “by-product of the sexual violence and coercion” inherent in the system of breeding slaves for the reproduction of means of production (47). Nevertheless, their “animal-status” was propounded as “natural” and as a “God-given province.” Therefore, the exercise of gratuitous violence was in no means reproachable; in fact, it was perceived a necessity to subdue the “brutish animal,” as it is with Richard Henry. As was the case with slavery, Rodney King, and Mike Brown, in Blues, it is evident that seeing those who are other to us with “inner eyes” has self-serving purposes and results in human destruction.

Richard Henry: “‘Being for Other’, Disposable Animal”

The epistemological fabrication of Richard as “brutish animal” has a chain effect. The scuffle that unfolds which leads to Richard’s murder is a consequence of instantiating “white male dominance.” This means that the myth of the “supreme white
male” appropriates Richard as “being for other” and the white woman (Lyle’s wife, Jo), as the “carroted” teleos of Black male freedom. This power struggle and the paradigm of one’s identity being mediated through an external other is depicted in Act II, when Lyle discusses with Parnell the event that precipitates Richard’s murder. Because it is a flashback, the events are relayed through an omniscient narrative perspective. Richard and another Negro student, Lorenzo, are walking down the dirt road, when Richard decides to buy a Coke out of Lyle’s store, for no other reason than to “get [Lyle’s] face fixed in [his] mind” (71), for they had previously exchanged un-pleasantries in Papa D’s juke joint. Inside of the store, Richard insults the Brittens when they do not have enough money in their register to change out his bill. We are made privy of the fact that business is slow and that Lyle Britten lacks viable economic power as a struggling white merchant. Richard takes advantage of this reality. Though readers are aware of their equal footing in class (Richard is, himself, a working class musician—though he was doing well for himself prior to losing it all due to his drug addiction), Richard uses their financial instability to exacerbate the racial tension that is intrinsic to this scene: “You all got this big, fine store and all—and you ain’t got change for twenty dollars” (72). As Trudier Harris acknowledges in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Writers in the South* (2009), Richard then transposes economic lack into sexual lack (35): “Stud ain’t got nothing—you people been spoofing the public, man” (73). He later directly signifies upon Lyle’s alleged impotence, calling him a “ball-less peckerwood” (74).

Additionally, and decidedly more provoking, because Richard understands the symbolic constitution of the Black man in American race relations, he makes sexualized references to Jo, condescendingly “admiring” her “daintiness,” her “sweetness,” and how
“pretty” she is (72). Richard’s flippancy, his performance of “brutish” sexual deviance
(which is reminiscent of Emmett Till’s whistling at a white woman inside of a grocery
store), and his refusal to recognize the “dominance” of Lyle Britten induce violence.
Lyle raises a hammer to Richard and a struggle ensues. Richard is momentarily
victorious since the confrontation ends with Lyle “[o]n his ass” with “his woman
watching,” as Richard proclaims tauntingly (75).

Richard has, in this scene and prior to it (discussed later), displaced the “being for
other” paradigm, which Sartre derives from the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. The
prevailing episteme of this era and within “WHITETOWN,” as we have already
discovered, is the mythic representation of “the Black male buck.” Hence, applying
Mbembe’s “Hegelian tradition” theory, it can be argued that the relation of subjection is
premised upon the Hegelian “master-slave” ideology. If the Black male body is
“animal,” it can once again “only be envisaged as the property and thing of power”
(Mbembe 26), whereby the “colonizer” or “Master” is the ideal “Subject” / embodiment
of “Man,” who presides over and determines the fate of “the slave-animal.” So, the
“slave-animal” is the object through which the master’s identity is affirmed, which is
consistent with Sartre’s paradigm.

To explain the master-slaver dialectic further, in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*
(1807), G. W. F. Hegel philosophizes on how human development is constituted through
an awareness of the self as a conscious being. He argues, however, that this can only take
place through a struggle for recognition in that an object, or an “Other” who is external to
ourselves must validate our conscious awareness of ourselves. In Hegel’s words, “Self-
consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; it
exists only in being acknowledged” (111). In the context of the play, Richard must “validate” Lyle’s self-conscious awareness as “Master-Subject,” yet he refuses to do so.

In fact, Richard illuminates the fallacy of the white male as the only true incarnation of the human when he yells, “Now, who you think is the better man?” (75), to a defeated Lyle Britten. Richard also mocks the idea of the existence of a “superior” white race, or the said white male prerogative to preside over the “Black animal”: “Ha-Ha! The maser race! You let me in that tired white chick’s drawers, she’ll know who’s the master! Ha-ha-ha!” (75). So not only does Richard re-construct a social order wherein he is not an animal subjected to the whims of a “master,” but he deposes of the authoritative figure and substitutes himself in lieu of the “white master.” Conceding the belief that Jo is also an “enslaved” object upon which Lyle’s conscious awareness of self (as an autonomous, all-powerful male) is concretized, Richard’s sexual insult doubly calls into question Lyle’s “Subjective” identity as “Master.”

Thus, in a Hegelian invocation, their struggle signifies the need to dominate or “supersede” the slave “Other” in that he / she / it has the capacity to threaten one’s self-perception (Hegel 113-14). Hegel argues that the master’s conviction to dominate the slave owes to a desire to inhibit the slave “Other’s” recognition of him / her / itself as a conscious “being-for-itself,” which denotes human development / non-animality, thereby invalidating the master’s self-conscious awareness of himself as “master” (113-14). Put succinctly, white male “Lordship” is contingent on Black “animal status.” However, Richard deems himself a man—and in that moment, one who occupies superior standing to Britten. For instance, Richard had earlier divulged to Juanita that he was no longer going to run—that he “was going to stay and be a man—a man!—right here” (99). In
fact, he projects a self-image of an agential Black body that is both human and has an edge over the struggling merchant. The struggle that ensues is therefore inevitable, for Lyle must safeguard the myth of the “superior, white “Master-Subject,” of which he deems himself the ideal materialization. According to Hegel, “the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a “life-and-death struggle” (113-14).

Conceiving of the “Richard-Lyle” confrontation through the Hegelian dialectic as well as through the Sartrean “being for other” paradigm is necessary because Mbembe understands the animalization of the colonized through the Hegelian dialectic, but also because Sartre actually re-appropriates / re-writes this master-slave dialectic in the context of the struggle between the colonizer and the colonized. In *Ideologies of Theory: The Syntax of History* (1988), Fredric Jameson informs that Sartre’s revised conception of the subject / object relations inherent in the master-slave dialectic places primacy on the “Look.” Interpreting Sartre, Jameson argues that the white gaze is the Look of objectification (188)—hence Fanon’s famous explication “Look, A Negro!” By comparison, the “Richard-Lyle” struggle begins with a stare down in the juke joint (31). This is the first time Lyle lays eyes on Richard. The “Look! A Negro!” interpolating / interpelling moment is silently performed, except Richard returns the gaze, which suggests that Lyle is external “other” to him. So in this moment, Richard creates a symmetry where one is not expected to exist but does. This is precisely why it is essential for the colonized subject to remain “neither ‘I’ nor ‘not-I’” (Fuss 26), for, as Jameson reminds, the reversal of the Look constitutes a moment of self-affirmation for the colonized (188). This, by extension, implies the attainment of subjectivity.
Further, Richard again returns the gaze inside of Lyle’s store, after their confrontation, and in this case, destroys the symmetry by assuming a “being for itself” identity, which ends up being punishable by death. Once Lyle is disarmed and cowering on the ground, Richard’s very first words are “Look at the mighty peckerwood!” (75; my emphasis). As Jameson point out, the reversed Look is the “act of redemptive violence of Slave against Master” (188). In the same vein, Fanon argues that because human recognition is denied, “there is only one answer: to make myself known” (95).

That Richard was impelled to and had resolved to struggle for the recognition of his manhood indicates his knowledge of being relegated to a “sphere of objects,” which is the crux of my argument. Albeit Richard does “behave towards” the manifestation of the post-slavery “buck” by sending insistent reminders of his potential to assume the fictional reincarnation of Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas character who ascertains power and a subjective existence by violating the white woman who has, herself, been reduced to “carroted instrument”—Richard Henry simultaneously refuses his said “object constitution” vis-à-vis the “objectifying reversal of the Look” (Jameson 188). The Look disrupts the “being for other” paradigm, demonstrated as Richard rejects his appropriation as the object onto which Lyle’s subjective identity (as locus of “white Western ‘Man’”) is enacted and instantiated. Just before Lyle shoots Richard, he informs Lyle, “You a man and I’m a man” (119), implying that he is a “being for itself.” Sadly, though, the preclusion of the “being for other” paradigm is a transient moment of triumph. Lyle Britten’s subsequent actions illuminate “Mister Charlie’s” unwavering conviction to maintain the “animal-object” status of the Negro since doing so necessitates the attainment of his own “exclusively human” and “superior” ontology.
This Hegelian-Sartrean struggle for identity also plays out in the case of Mike Brown’s scuffle with Officer Wilson. According to witness reports and the statements provided by Dorian Johnson (who was with travelling with Brown when they were accosted by Officer Wilson), Brown and Johnson were traveling in the street when Officer Wilson demanded that they “[g]et the fuck on the sidewalk.” Brown declined the officer’s hostile directive, explaining that they would exit the street when they reached their nearby destination. Brown thus refused to acknowledge Wilson’s conscious awareness of self as supreme Subject, which would have been validated by Wilson’s ability to regulate the movements and behaviors of those animals that are external to him—in this case, the spaces that those animals are permitted to occupy. Wilson responds aggressively, for he had to “supercede” Brown’s ability to threaten his “Lordship.” Brown, however, allegedly squares up with his opponent, returning not only the Look, but physical blows as well.\textsuperscript{46} In so doing, Brown substantiates his presence and his “being for itself” identity vis-à-vis purported “redemptive” blows to Wilson, which have deadly consequences.

It stands to reason that like Wilson, Lyle Britten “had to kill [Richard]” (120). Lyle was left no other choice but to destroy and dispose of the expendable “animal” that threatened the “natural” hierarchy of the races. He had to rid Plaguetown of the unsolicited force that interrupted the psychodrama wherein white solipsism is dialectically linked to objectifying the “other Black body.” Lyle justifies such classifying logic produced through his “inner eyes” in his final rant to Parnell: “I’m a white man! Can’t nobody talk that way to me! I had to go and get my pick-up truck and load him in
it—I had to carry him on my back—and carry him out to the high weeds. And I dumped him in the weeds, face down” (120; my italics).

These lines also authenticate what according to Mbembe is a distinctive feature of the “sovereign” colonial order. That is, they point to the belief in the said corporeal nature of “blackness” and the expendability of the “animal” Black body when it does or does not serve an exploitative end—hence the “unconditionality” of the regime (Mbembe 26). To reiterate, “[the colonized African] may be destroyed, as one may kill an animal, cut it up, cook it, and, if need be, eat it” (Mbembe 27). In fact, this method of disposing of the Black body without conscience, as if it were animal, an “inert” mass of materiality, is a systemic and normalized reality in Plaguetown given that the white townspeople are bewildered when they hear of a funeral underway in “BLACKTOWN.” Parnell insists that Black bodies typically receive proper burials when “the dogs leave enough to bury” (52). Thus, Baldwin not only belabors the point that the Black body is nothing more than an animal that is also “disposable raw material.” What is more is that it is also depicted as fodder for “other” animals. But this comes as no surprise since the non-white body, particularly the young Black male’s body, as Wynter posits, is defined as “the most atavistic non-evolved Lack of the human” (49). There is no “sanctified moral obligation” to preserve this body, and certainly there is no obligation to the “buck” after death, as there also was not in the case of Mike Brown.

**Black Disembodiment: The American “Shadow”**

Compounding the paradigm of the Black body as “disposable animal-object” is, conversely, the existence of the Black body as a nebulous, shadowy, sociological conundrum. Both are integral to the American psychology. James Baldwin tells us in
“Many Thousands Gone” that the Negro does not exist in America, “except in the
darkness of our minds” (19). He maintains, “[The Negro] is a social and not a personal
or a human problem; to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices,
remote violence . . .” (19). Baldwin is describing a denial of human recognition that
manifests itself in the form of ontological negation. To think of Richard and his murder
at the hands of Lyle Britten is to think of the perilous ramifications of the sociological
conundrum known as race-mixing. It is to conjure “rapes, injustices, remote violence,”
as well as bruised white male egos and dead “‘big buck niggers’.” Also, the ensuing
murder trial for Richard Henry exposes the ritualized behavior of the judicial apparatus,
whereby Richard is reduced to a controlled variable of a juridical proceeding. There is no
empathetic concern for the loss of human life. Rather, the criminal “justice” system re-
mythologizes his body after death by reducing him to an undifferentiated abstraction.
Thus, readers can once again glean, through Richard, the manner in which Black bodies
are relegated to “N.H.I.” / “non-alterity” vis-à-vis their disembodiment as a sociological
construct, as well as through the disembodiment that occurs in a juridical context.

Recounting the scene in Jo and Lyle Britten’s kitchen is crucial in that it sheds
light on how “the Negro” is consigned to a social arena. They are all aware that Lyle is
being accused of murdering Richard Henry, yet they engage in a generalized discussion
about no one “Nigger” in particular, but rather an amalgam figure and the collective
Black race. Parnell incites a debate on “social justice” and the relationship between the
Communist cause and the systemic and institutional practices that deny Blacks equal
opportunity to make a living: “It means that if I have a hundred dollars, and I’m black,
and you have a hundred dollars, and you’re white, I should be able to get as much value
for my hundred dollars . . . as you get for your white hundred dollars” (54). Additionally, they discuss the ill-tempered, uncontrollable “yellow Niggers” versus the more moderately tempered “black “Niggers,” as well as the legal integration of the schools. Susan assures her companions that school integration will prove futile since “Niggers can’t learn like white folks . . .” (49). Thus, “the Negro,” as Baldwin observes earlier in “Many Thousands Gone,” is a mere “social problem” and not a human one (19).

Baldwin also insists that meditating on this “social problem” is to “be confronted with an endless cataloguing of losses, gains, skirmishes . . .” (Baldwin 19). The death of Richard occasions a discussion of “losses” in terms of the social degeneracy of the current social order. For instance, the conversation centers “the Niggers of old,” who were allegedly content with the state of political affairs, as well as the current degenerate Negroes who give “Mister Charlie” the “blues.” Ellis rhetorically asks, “What happened to this town? It was peaceful here, we all got along, we didn’t have any trouble.” To which George quips, “Oh, we had a little trouble from time to time, but it didn’t amount to a hill of beans. Niggers was all right then . . .” (48). The point is that an embodied Black male presence does not exist. His material identity is reduced to sociological discourse.

The particulars of Richard’s murder are also suppressed, which further negates his ontological existence. “We heard that a nigger got killed,” Ellis informs Parnell, while George describes the mourning underway in “BLACKTOWN” as evidence of “the nigger funeral” (52). Not once is his name uttered, albeit the circumstances surrounding his death have been publicized. This can be inferred by the nature of their conversations and by Reverend Phillip’s declaration to Lyle, “[W]e only came by to let you know that
we’re with you and every white person in this town is with you” (55). A nebulous presence, Richard’s material identity is buried beneath the sociological “race problem” present in Plaguetown.

Moreover, in the final example, the trope of disembodiment manifests itself in the legal discourse regarding Richard’s murder. Parnell has welcomed opprobrious attitudes amongst the inhabitants of both “WHITE” and “BLACKTOWN.” In “BLACKTOWN,” the prevailing complaint against Parnell is that he is morally duplicitous, straddling the fence when it comes to ensuring the conviction of Lyle Britten. Richard’s father, Meridian Henry, criticizes Parnell’s latest equivocating behavior with the Police Chief, admonishing him for failing to advocate on behalf of “a man” since, for him, “it was just a black boy that was dead” (39). Meridian maintains, “[The Police Chief] saw the problem one way, you saw it another. But it wasn’t a man that was dead, not my son—you held yourselves away from that!” (39). Parnell’s riposte is that he adopted a tone necessary to accomplish being heard. Parnell’s retort indicates his knowledge of the functionality of the current historical episteme: the routinized manner of disembodying Black life by reducing the Black body to anonymity, or worse, evidentiary value in a court case. In Parnell’s estimation, the world did not lose a Blues musician with aspirations. Meridian Henry did not lose his only son. Juanita was not robbed of the opportunity to purge hate from a man’s heart with love and to raise a child with him. Richard Henry had no subjective identity.

For Parnell, Richard’s case is nothing more than an illusive enactment of justice. It is the performance of de facto judicial politics insofar as Lyle is issued an arrest warrant for procedural purposes. The case is no more than circumstantial evidence
involving lifeless Black flesh. It is as Parnell informs Lyle: “This case presents several particular circumstances and these circumstances force [the Police Chief] to arrest you” (12). Then as a parenthetical aside, Parnell mentions, “The charge is murder” (12). Although Parnell knows Lyle is guilty of cold-blooded murder, even prior to Lyle’s private confession to him, ensuring that a criminal trial is conducted owes to a determination to uphold an image of a “civilized, democratic ‘tribe,’” and a “liberal” white persona. As the editor of the local newspaper, Parnell is certainly privy of the historic precedent of anti-Black violence, as well as of the attendant legal precedent of white impunity. Thusly, the importance of the legal proceeding rests upon normalizing state tactics. “We have to operate the way justice always has to operate and give [Lyle] the benefit of the doubt,” Parnell tells Meridian (41). In this sense, Lyle is the central focus of the trial, while Richard remains subsidiary, annulled even. Richard is as Baldwin describes in “Many Thousands Gone”: “a series of shadows” in America’s national identity (19). He exists here only as evidence of a crime committed.

Richard’s loved ones, do, however, attempt to reclaim his ontological and subjective identity. Mother Henry humanizes her grandson when she recounts his childhood, specifically the time when he had his tonsils removed (100); Juanita restores his aliveness and corporeality when she describes his “chest, his belly, the rising and the falling, the moans,” as well as her tactile experiences with him, such as his touch, how he “clung to” her and “plunged into” her, along with his smell, his “teeth that gleamed” when he smiled, his spit, his spirit (94); Lorenzo conjures an image of a resilient man with a soul who was “just trying to live” and who “almost made it” (93). Despite these efforts, The State re-mythologizes Richard, reducing him again to a distant, “shadowy,”
nebulous non-entity by using his murder case as a pretext to advance a white supremacist agenda. I am referring to The State’s accusing Meridian Henry of misusing Christian precepts for “notions concerning social equality” (102). Moreover, The State only constructs Richard as an actionable human being when it attempts to render him culpable in his own murder by calling attention to his criminal behavior. The only other instance in which Richard is afforded a materialized identity is when Jo fabricates the events that unfolded in their store by informing the jury that Richard “was just like an animal, I could—smell him” (84).

In short, the subversive potential of Baldwin’s *Blues* lies in its didactic function. It lies in its ability to illuminate the precariousness of Black personhood. The very fact that Richard’s pursuit of manhood “undid him,” as Meridian testifies (103), is revelatory of the reality that “Mister Charlie” murdered Richard eons before Lyle Britten “put two slugs in his belly and dumped his body in the weeds” (12). We must impute responsibility on the racist discourse of the time for imprisoning and enslaving Richard within and to both “the ‘idea’ others have of ‘him’,” as well as to his appearance.”

For Richard was consigned to a psychical and social “field of symbolization” (Fuss 21) wherein he was denied both ontological and subjective intelligibility. He was either a “disposable predatory animal” that was also “an object” essential to the instantiation of “superior white subjectivity”; or, paradoxically, he was a discursively disembodied, sociological abstraction. This construction is perpetuated through systemic, normalizing strategies (as Ellison highlights in the case of the Black veterans). It is no wonder, then, that “[r]aising so much fuss about a nigger—and a northern nigger at that”—is disconcerting for Lyle Britten (13), as Richard’s “non-alterity”-animal-like construction
signifies his position “outside of the sanctified universe of obligation” and protection (qtd. in Wynter 44).

In her lyric poem, Citizen, while reflecting upon responses to the violence inflicted on two Black male bodies (Rodney King’s being one of them) in two contrasting spatiotemporal contexts, Claudia Rankine, in verse, suggests that “[g]rief comes out of relationships to subjects over time . . .” (117). We do not mourn for brutalized Black bodies because they are always already animal and deviant. George Yancy elucidates how the collective “inner eyes” of white America perpetuates this relationship to the Black body over time: “Whites ‘see’ the Black body through the medium of historically structured forms of ‘knowledge’ that regard it as an object of suspicion” (3). As such, to understand why destroyed Black bodies are destroyed and elicit apathetic reactions, one must examine the Black body politic existing on a historical continuum. That is, one must examine the Black body as a fixed and objectified signifier of white supremacist ideology, in tandem with the historical genealogies of its “object status.” The existing interpolating parallels in the cases of Emmett Till, depicted in Blues, and then observed in the case of Mike Brown, are not coincidental. They are paradigmatic of our past and current episteme, and will be the classifying logic of the future if we remain ignorant of them. This is why I am weary of the chorus of cultural critics who fall silent on the manner in which mainstream rap music exposes the epidemic of Black disembodiment. One rapper who has illuminated the discursive practices that relegate Black bodies to “non-alterity” is Kanye West.
IV: Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead”: Cognitive Dysfunction and Discursive Paradigms

I turn to the art of Kanye West to elucidate further the impetus behind the misfortune that befalls Black bodies in America. I have chosen “Black Skinhead” as an object of inquiry into the politics of Black disembodiment. Through its visuals and through what Fred Moten would term its “phonic substance,” it highlights the contiguity between colonial relations of domination and the relations of subjection and domination (invoking a Foucauldian analysis of power), where persons of African descent in America are concerned. West’s track also lends itself to a critique of Black ontology—more specifically, it lends clarity to its “non-existence” or the confinement of this body to the realm of “non-alterity.” Like *Blues*, it animates how the Black body is only protean within a white supremacist imaginary insofar as it oscillates between animal, monster, “body-thing,” and disposable raw material; and it demonstrates the ideologies and racist discourse that underwrite these pathologies.

Where the discursive constructions are concerned, the mechanically replicated image of the shirtless Black male in the video, which resembles a veiled Kanye West, has undecipherable facial features and is an elusive presence in the video, which opens up a discussion regarding the construction of Black bodies. There are other artists invested in this very conversation as well. For instance, in the summer of 2015, I visited an art exhibit at the Cincinnati Art Museum entitled *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) XI (2015)*. It is a chalk etching by artist Titus Kaphar of overlapping portraits of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice. Blurred, geometrical white chalk lines on a Black asphalt backdrop capture their overlain, distorted profiles. Trayvon Martin’s
iconic hoodie encloses the faces of all three murdered young men, and the contours of Brown’s graduation cap intersect with Martin’s hoodie. Their overlapping facial features effect in a single amorphous figure, typifying or critiquing the historical tautology of Black male corporeality: that all Black bodies are the same. Kaphar seems to imply that their social contexts are indistinguishable as well.

I recall Kaphar’s portrait here—to which we can add the contours of Richard Henry’s and Emmett Till’s faces—because of its socio-political implications and for its “critical relationality” where “Black Skinhead” is concerned. Of course, it signifies the violability of young Black male bodies that are mere materialized abstractions. But it also alludes to the racist, discursive underpinnings of this issue. That is, it personifies the issue of Black maleness being sketched into (non-)being, just as I have intimated that Mike Brown and Baldwin’s protagonist, Richard Henry were discursively invented. “Black Skinhead” is similar to Kaphar’s portrait, in all of its distorted representations of Black maleness, and to Baldwin’s depiction of white racist sociopaths’ invention of the predatory Black “buck.” It can also be interpreted as reproducing the paradigm of ontological negation, as Richard was reduced to absence, given he was the metonymic signifier of a social problem. That is, “Black Skinhead” is seemingly attentive to the construction (discursive and ideological) of the Black male body as disposable object, immanently corporeal, deviant and animalistic, or as symbolizing the disembodied category, “N.H.I.,” in a racist, “skinhead” imaginary, that is consequently ripe for destruction.

*Cognitive Dysfunction*
The “Black Skinhead” video, which West co-directs with Director Nick Knight, is an unsettling score of inverted semiotic representations of white supremacy (i.e. a Black skinhead and Black Klan hoods). The entire performance is an imbricated critique of static ontology conferred to Black male body, reverberating in the visual depictions of Black maleness, in the lyrics, and in its sonic accentuations. The graphics of the video—consisting mostly of different variations of a sometimes mechanized, shirtless, illusive, disgruntled Black male automaton, as well as silhouettes of a wolf or dog-like animal, and geometrical triangular shapes—are presented in a CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) form of animation, with rapidly changing frames. This form of animation is traditionally designed to produce an illusion of a continuous narrative from the viewers’ perspective, as opposed to disjointed frames strung together.

But in “Black Skinhead,” the accelerated sequence of frames is ironically presented in such a way that betrays this desired, realistic effect. Viewers are keenly aware of and troubled by the discontinuity of the frames, as well as the constant and abrupt oscillation between zoom-in and zoom-out shots, which hardly ever yield a legible subject. The barrage of frames, oftentimes involving blurred, indiscernible, morphing, sometimes boundary-lacking images, preclude the production of a stabilized image and inhibit the ability of viewers to focus. Perhaps, then, a critique of epistemology is underway. One could argue that the emphasized discontinuity of the frames and the sometimes amorphous, other times clearly digitized, “sketchy” image of the Black male body, compounded with the diametrical white-black visuals, especially the Black Klan hoods amidst a white backdrop, raise questions about the ability to “know” certain subjects (i.e. Black male subjects), and the violence inherent in inventing these subjects.
Thus, I argue that if the subject of “Black Skinhead” is the Black body (given its isolated, centered appearance), it can be inferred that the video does not display a seamless narrative in that it illuminates how the epistemic violence that this body incurs is a result of cognitive illusion underpinned by pathological, racist constructions.

Take for instance the line “I’m aware I’m a wolf / Soon as the moon hit.” The most discernible evidence of “non-alterity,” of course, lies in the verbal comparison to a wolf. Declaring verbally that he is a wolf after obscuring the faces of both the wolf-dog figures and the mechanical Black male figure enables a sort of psychic slippage, culminating in the collapse of Black ontology into bestiality. This occurs again toward the end of the song / video. Within the 3:01 and 3:04 marks, the automaton retreats to the background, decreasing in size as it does until it is barely visible. After a series of glitchy, undecipherable images, it storms forward again and morphs into the very menacing wolf-dog that appears at the beginning of the video, at the same time that West repeats the line, “I’m aware I’m a wolf.” It then resumes, as it were, its “automatonic” form, adding to the viewers’ confusion as to whether they should deem this figure an animal or a human. The video thus sheds light on the existence of racially motivated cognitive dysfunction.

This psychic convergence is also evinced in the scene comprising the simulated clones of the Black male automaton, all bearing striking resemblance to West’s body type. Though they are the only visible images at one point, their backs are facing the camera so that viewers are witnessing a homogenous, abstract amass of blackness (i.e. disposable raw material), similar to the overlain profiles of Rice, Martin, and Brown in Kaphar’s portrait. Chief editor of blog site, Flavorwire, Tom Hawking, describes the
scene as “an army of identical automatons, shorn of any personality or agency.” Adding to Hawking’s description is the fact that their backward facing position, underscoring the recurring trope of facelessness throughout the video, forecloses the discernment of any modicum of humanity if one’s countenance is the most visible and central signifier of identity and taxonomic classifications. (In Kaphar’s portrait, there are six pairs of eyes, three noses, and three mouths, yet they are all positioned in a disarray, resulting in one concomitant, illegible faceless figure).

It is also worth nothing that the camera lens angles in this scene reveal an objectified Black body. In its Depth of Field there is considerable distancing between several of the automaton subjects positioned farthest away from the camera and the focal lens of the camera, connoting the distancing of the “subject,” as well as close-up shots of the automatons. In the case of the former, in cinematography discourse, it is traditionally understood that the zoomed-out, distancing feature constitutes the objectification of the subject. In this case, the trope of facelessness and “non-human identity” is exacerbated through the use of the cinematographic distancing visual tool termed “extreme long shot,” which film critic, William H. Phillips defines as a shot wherein the distanced subject is visible but is noticeably small in the frame (84). So even if the automatons were facing frontwards, many of their faces would still be indiscernible. This distancing frame works to circumscribe the humanity of the automaton, which is again indistinguishable from the others, and so a metonymic representation of their objectified status as well. Moreover, in the case of the somewhat close-up positioning of the back row of automatons, typically zoom-in and close-up angles reveal facial features and are said to constitute the conferral of subjectivity. But in The Critical Practice of Film: An
Introduction (2011), Elspeth Kydd insists that close-up angles also objectify the human subject in that these shots disembodied the person by “only showing parts of the human body” (120). Applying Kydd’s theory, not even the automatons closest to the camera lens are conferred subjectivity. This is not merely because of their backward facing positions; it is also due to their disembodied figures. Only the heads, shoulders, and a fourth of the top half of the bodies are shown. The rest of their bodies, if existent, are enveloped by the fog of blackness.

As such, the personified trope of facelessness and the objectification of the Black male subject vis-à-vis the various distancing frames underscore the precariousness of personhood in the video. However, at the same time that Black humanity is called into question, animalistic sounds are heard. While the pack of wolf-dogs are no longer in frame (they were never fully legible in the first place), their simultaneous barking and howling intensifies during this scene depicting an assemblage of automatons, in such a way that the primeval, ominous sounds they emit appear to derive from the Black male figures. According to the Brooklyn College Film Department webpage, in film discourse, this is known as “asynchronism,” which is the emergence of a discrepancy between what is seen and what is heard; “the sound contrasts with the image.” The disparity and dissonance between the visual and the auditory in this scene arguably results in cognitive dysfunction.

There is, therefore, what I would consider ontological indeterminacy embedded in the performance, which yields such a disturbing conflation, uttered later as a parodic self-description (i.e. the lines, “I’m aware I’m a wolf”) and then confirmed in a racist psyche. That is, the wolf-dog figures and the mechanized images of the Black male are easily
rendered indistinguishable in a racist imaginary, relegating both entities to the realm of the “nonhuman,” to “non-alterity.” Charles Mills considers cognitive dysfunction, which West’s video animates, “psychologically and socially functional” (18) in the service of white supremacy’s “epistemological ignorance.” In other words, the mobilization of uncertainty, unknowingness—the confusion that this scene (and Kaphar’s etching) engenders—stabilizes racial hierarchies. For, in this case, if it is one’s willful confusion that allows “blackness” to be perceived as synonymous with animality, then white subjects do, in fact, rule supreme. In this light, like Darren Wilson’s fabricated narrative, Jo Britten’s testimony to the jury that Richard attacked her “like an animal,” suggests that she conveniently entered into an irrational, mentally incapacitated state that enabled her to see the Black body morph into a predatory animal. The same is true of King’s assailants and the jurors on the case.

Given that wolves are historically associated with predatory instincts, it can be inferred that implicit in West’s incorporation of the wolves (as opposed to some other animal known for its temperate nature) in this scene is the critique that, on the one hand, Black masculinity is judged as predatory, and on the other, such epistemic ignorance is socially consequential in a material world. In fact, the wolf has historically denoted a “predatory Black masculine identity” in racialized public discourse. The newspapers were sure to capture Emmitt’s impish, flirtatious gestures to a white woman as an ominous “wolf whistle.” The Black teens that allegedly beat and raped the Central Park Jogger, Trisha Meili, in 1989, were labeled as the notorious “Wolf Pack.” The cover of the Daily News read “Wolf Pack’s Prey: Female Jogger Near Death After Savage attack By Roving Gang.” But such a conflation, in this case, has potentially genocidal effects.
One is more likely to subdue and then slaughter a rapacious wolf, and to do so without remorse, given its associative destructive behavior.

To this end, what “Black Skinhead” metaphorically intimates—essentially, the material consequences of cognitive dysfunction caused by Negrophobia—runs parallel to that which Baldwin dramatizes in Blues. But there is a socio-political process underway that abets the teleological aim of “hunt[ing]” and “penn[ing] Black bodies like “[wolves] in an inglorious spot.”

In the first place, that “WHITETOWN” does not mourn Richard’s death is indicative of cognitive dysfunction existing as a collective epidemic, which is symptomatic of the dogmatic acceptance of the performance of epistemological ignorance. Rev. Phelps’s consoling statement to Lyle, “every white person in the town is with you” (55), implies that all of the white racists citizens affirmed the murder and mindless disposal of a Black male body, which also attests to the fact that they all had superimposed on Richard predatory qualities.

But this conspiring, inventive act legitimizes the white supremacist autocrat’s destruction of a Black body. Unsurprisingly, he earns a badge of honor for acting on his psychic conflation of the Black body and the animal, which sets a precedence for future recurrence. This is evidenced by the outpour of support for Darren Wilson following his execution of Brown, and in the way that “WHITETOWN” celebrates Lyle Britten’s “fulfillment of a duty” when they gather in his home singing “He’s a Jolly Good Fellow” (48). It should also be recounted that, as political scientist Robert Gooding-Williams states, defense attorneys [for Rodney King’s assailants] portrayed the white bodies which assailed King as guardians against the wild . . .” (qtd. in Yancy 19). This very inversion of moral reprehension sets a precedence, whereby there exists habituated modes of social
control and disciplining of “disposable Black bodies,” chief among them being the use of the Black male body as target practice. The perversity here is such that the metonymic representation of the “N.H.I” category pays the deathly price for “epistemological ignorance” and white self-deception since the eradication of Black ontology is the precondition of white safety.

Certainly, the cognitive confusion that “Black Skinhead” illuminates can be extended to the extrajudicial violence and killings underway in real inner cities, as West intimates in the line, “the Black kids in Chiraq, bitch” (“Black Skinhead”). Those who tote pocketknives find their bodies riddled with sixteen bullets. Here I am referring to the 2014 insensible murder of the 16-year-old Chicago teen, Laquan McDonald by a Chicago Police Officer. The “inner eyes” of an officer saw an “unruly, predatory pickaninny,” except the objective dash cam video captured McDonald walking away from a brigade of police officers with what appeared to be a pocketknife in hand, until he fell prey to the first bullet unleashed by then Officer Jason Van Dyke. He twirled in mid air, almost theatrically, until gravity and death inevitably claimed their crown. This was followed by a barrage of bullets—15 more to be exact. McDonald’s execution is an exemplary example of gratuitous violence motivated by cognitive dysfunction. An illusion in Van Dyke’s mind, McDonald’s body marked the site of a ravaging animal, which consequently enabled and induced him to deem 16 bullets commensurate to the site of the teen’s pocketknife. If willful ignorance, exemplified in this case, in “Black Skinhead,” and in the testimonies of Darren Wilson and Jo Britten, does not provoke consternation, then it is proof that within the American pathological (“skinhead”) psyche, Black bodies are not only “Other” but are also closed off to “otherness.”
Discursive Constructions

The conflation of Black masculinity and a predatory animal, enabled by cognitive
dysfunction, is an ideological and discursive construction. It can be argued that “Black
Skinhead’s” preoccupation with folkloric and mythological creatures is West’s attempt to
ridicule the white supremacist proclivity to produce discursive and ideological
fabrications of Black male subjectivity—as demonstrated in Darren Wilson’s testimony,
during the discussion that takes place in the quotidian space of the home in the play and
during the trial, as well as in Kaphar’s portrait—which makes possible and further
legitimates the relegation of Black ontology to “non-alterity.”

In two of his three self-references, West alludes to two popular Western fables,
the story of King Kong, and of course, as intimated above, werewolf folklore. With
respect to the former, West raps, “They see a black man with a white woman / At the top
floor they gon’ come to kill King Kong.” These lines are explicit references to the
history of white America’s psychic anxieties against integration, unequivocally exhibited
in Blues. This panic, as in the case of Emmett Till and Richard Henry, was racist in
nature, but was also sexualized reaction against miscegenation. Given West’s then
relationship with and now marriage to Kim Kardashian (who is Armenian but scripted as
white American in the popular culture imagination), it is clear that he understands himself
to signify (in the minds of white racists) an animalistic “Black buck,”—the flesh and
blood Richard Henry—symbolized in his self-comparison to King Kong.

King Kong, the objectified, abject ape, was an on-screen beastly icon. The film
King Kong (1933) depicts the predatory black ape ravaging through the streets of
Manhattan, carrying what seems to be a helpless, petite, white woman. It is a dramatized
version of the post-slavery myth of the demonized, hypersexualized Black male “buck” whose one and only agenda is to despoil white womanhood. According to cinema and television scholar Cynthia Marie Erb, he was a “cross-penetration of American notions of exoticism and monstrosity” (2). The “exotic” King Kong was therefore outside of normative white Western representations of masculinity, and so was a by-product of the psychological function of the white imaginary, which, as I mentioned in chapter one, weaves together “a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” regarding “blackness.” Thus, I argue that the King Kong line is a figurative treatment of American anxiety triggered by the site of the Black male, serving as a foray into the discursive construction of Black male subjectivity, which abets an age-old dehumanizing project underway in America.

However, there have been discrepancies in determining whether King Kong is an African or Orientalist depiction. Cynthia Erb insists that the “mysterious animal figure” signifies both “primitivist and Orientalist fantasy” given the geographical details of his capture (2, 101-02). Erb’s clarification of King Kong being taken from “the coast of an island in South East Asia” (Erb 102) does not unravel the historic conflation of King Kong and Black masculinity. Rather, it invokes a discussion of Edward Said’s groundbreaking postcolonial text Orientalism (1978), which is useful in understanding the ideological and discursive mechanisms that underpin the engineering of such a stereotype in the context of Black masculine politics.

“Visible Invisibility”: The Production of Absence

Said argues that the Asian “Orient” is but a discursive formulation conjured in an imaginative process of “knowledge manipulation by which the Orient was identified by
the West” (Said 40). “The Orient,” simply put, is created from a pen stroke, like the King Kong narrative, or in the case of Black men, as illustrated by Kaphar through chalk lines, and via the parochial tales positing that a Black teen of size is a “Hulk-like monster” or an “aping nonhuman.” But this discursive construction can be understood in two veins. The first involves the production of absence. As Said observes, when Western writers such as Gèrad de Nerval, encountered epistemological difficulties reproducing “the Orient” in a manner consistent with traditional canonical representations, they fabricated their accounts, producing epistemological tautologies in the process (Said 189).

V.Y. Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa* (1988) examines this very paradigm in an African continental context. Also invested in the manifestation of “the Other” in the white Western conscious, the Congolese philosopher opens his discussion by demonstrating the process of invention through a Foucauldian mode of analysis. In the same way that Michel Foucault begins *The Order of Things* (1966, 1970) with a discussion of Diego Velázquez’s difficulty with creating the painting *Las Meninas*, Mudimbe examines a 16th century German painter’s struggle to give form to the racialized “other” from the penned travel accounts of one of his Flemish contemporaries, who has voyaged to an exotic African land. Rather than illustrate an actual image of “blacks in ‘Gennea’,” Mudimbe argues that he often leaves the luminous space of the easel, retreats to a dark corner of the room, conjures an image from Western epistemological traditions, and reproduces absence (7). Mudimbe thus demonstrates that because the painter struggles to superimpose primitive African characteristics from his contemporary’s diary, he undertakes an imaginative process that culminates in a representation of “the other” as absent presence (7). “Black Skinhead” and *Blues* are deft
reminders that this very paradigm, articulated by both Said and Mudimbe, is broadly and loosely applicable, namely in the discourse pertaining to Black American masculine politics.⁶⁰

If “the Orient” became associated with absence (Said 184), the visual portrayals in “Black Skinhead” similarly dramatize the manner in which the racialized “other” is consigned to perpetual obscurity, which is consistent with the “invention of Africa” and the denial of ontological intelligibility witnessed in *Blues*. Whereas the Western travellers fabricated their narratives when “the Orient” countered pre-existing canonical representations, the video incorporates various vicissitudes that attribute to the reproduction of the automaton as a phantasm, which echoing George Yancy, is indicative of a state of phantasmagoria and what Judith Butler terms a “racially saturated field of visibility” (19, 13).⁶¹

At no point is the face of the Black male figure clearly perceptible. It is either obscured by an oval shaped mask of blackness, it is facing away from the camera, or it is ubiquitous in a way that occludes definitive legibility. The obscured identity, together with the disjointed frames and illusory effects undermine the white Western proclivity to unquestionably “know” and “see.” The video thus compels such a viewer to, in the words of Said, “entertain a mythology of creation” (202), in that he or she must superimpose on the automaton, his or her own perception of its identity, or the prescriptive, already “legible” identity invented by the racist episteme. However, while the dancing automation is animated in a way that commands the gaze of the viewer, West prevents this from happening; the viewer’s expectations are never fulfilled. After exerting what feels like maximal effort to weave together a stable ontological image in
the face of an elusive, obscure figure and the visual discontinuities, the viewer is never assured that what he or she has conjured is actually before him or her, or if anything is there for that matter.

For instance, in the zoom-in frames between the 40-58 second mark, some human characteristics are hypervisible on the sketchy version of the automaton, such as arms and the torso, which reveals a chest, nipples, a belly button, and stomach abs, and human breath or gasping sounds induce or confirm the belief that before the camera is some formulation of a legible human Black body. Yet this assumption quickly dissipates since the face of the automaton is both masked and cannot be pinned down. Between 40-58 seconds the automaton jumps up and down and shakes his head furiously from right to left, inhibiting the viewers’ focus and negating the afore perception of a “legible” presence. Additionally, during the first scene of the army of backward facing Black male bodies, there are fleeting, barely visible snapshots of a sketch of an amorphous, singular, presumably Black figure, which interrupt the stabilized image of the undifferentiated Black bodies. These transient images not only force viewers into a hallucinatory state, but also imply, satirically, that the stereotyped Black male figure (in this case, the idea that the Black masculinity is but a monolith—an undifferentiated mass of flesh) is but a figment of a racist imagination. Then later, the Black body is amputated by the pervasive blackness of the background so that only parts of a head and one of the shoulders are visible. But when the full body vaguely resurfaces during the 1:23 mark, viewers are disturbed by the constant replacement of the holistic, yet still obscured Black body with a massive, formless, masked, “glitchy” figure, beginning at the 1:47 mark.
Thus, the facelessness, the elusiveness, and the hallucinatory visual effects insinuate that there is nothing actually there, so that—like the Orientalists, viewers are deceived into thinking that they are witnessing some configuration of the human that they had psychically conjured. Comparatively, if as Kanye West believes, white America construes “the Black male,” himself included, as the “hypermasculine, ‘Bigger Thomas’ brute” that violates the sanctity of white womanhood, which the “King Kong” line intimates as well as the line, “I been a menace for the longest,” then the obscurity in the video is a tongue-in-cheek corrective metaphor that suggest that what white America has perpetually summoned from the depths of their imaginations has been absence. It has summoned an ideological and discursive construction that never really existed, save for its materialization in media representations such as King Kong. The “inner eyes” of the white American racist imaginary does not truly “see” the Black body. In fact, as George Yancy puts it, “Only through not seeing me am I visible . . .” (13).

_Grotesque Carnality and its Consequences_

In contrast to the reproduction of absence, even when Western writers, namely Gustave Flaubert, through an imaginative feat, attempted to re-present “the Orient” as “eminently corporeal,” as a carnal being, he superimposed upon it “extreme animality,” oftentimes envisioning its carnality as “grotesque nastiness” (Said 184-85). In this sense, Flaubert and travellers alike digressed from the purview and prevarications of writers like Nerval. But his superfluous, corporeal description of “the Orient” was no less injurious in that the “Orient” was still perversely subhuman and animalized. The visuals in “Black Skinheads,” reinforce the notion of the racially “othered” body represented as grotesque carnality through the varied manipulations of the flesh.
The faceless and shirtless backward facing automaton, especially in its replicated form, is simultaneously emblematic of an obsession with flesh, and by extension, the corporeality of “blackness.” But despite a “fleshly surplus” (Weheliye 2) exhibited in this scene, the human capacities of the “sketchy” version of the single automaton in the next scene (appearing at the 40 second mark) remain imperceptible given the disfigurement of the flesh. Hawking describes the skin as “crisscrossed with strange, scar-like textures.” Above I highlighted the human characteristics of this particular version of the automaton (the chest, abs, nipples). However, the parallel and intersecting lacerations to which Hawking refers, also create the illusion of a “mysterious animal figure,” effecting in the curtailment of human distinction (so that the muscular Black male figure is no more human than King Kong or the wolves).

It is also worth noting that the crisscrossed lines that disfigure the flesh, signifying the sketching into being of “Black maleness,” achieves the same effect as Kaphar’s etching, which produces an grotesque amalgam figure made up of Martin, Rice, and Brown, whose bodies we know, the “inner eyes” of the current episteme deemed an amass of monstrous carnality. Applying Alexander Weheliye’s theories of modern processes of racialization and “racialized assemblages,” Kaphar’s underscoring of detached facial features (noses, mouths, eyes) “illustrates the techniques by which bare life is affixed to the bodies of specific Homo sapiens so that their expulsion from humanity appears to spring from their biological inferiority and appears, therefore, warranted” (69). Likewise, the bare backed, muscular images of the replicated automatons, representing a “visually distinctive [racial] group” (Weheliye 69), also reinforces the theory that the Black body—via discursive practices—is subjected to
violence (implicated by the last frames of the video when West lies with his arms outstretched, in an iconic Christ-like posture, suggesting that he Black maleness has incurred the same state-sanctioned violence) since it is a “biological inferiority,” a carnally grotesque aberration of the ideal human. In this way, the automaton and Kaphar’s amorphous, yet biologized chalk-drawn figure(s) paradoxically personify the notion of Black maleness fixed in a discursive identity of grotesque, inferior (biological) corporeality, which has deadly consequences.

Moreover, in the lines “I ain’t finished,” which West raps just before the bridge toward the end of the song, he presents one more visual configuration of the Black male body that reinforces the critique of this body as an excessively, fleshly aberration of humanity. The automaton appears in an overdetermined, external composition that we have yet to see. The flesh is grotesquely distorted in the sense that it is decorated with small, rounded studs across the chest and shoulders, which are arguably revelatory of warrior-like armor. The middle of the chest, extending down to the groin area, however, depicts a smooth layer of skin decorated with undecipherable presumably African tribal markings. Protruding parallel lines that cover both sides of his face augment the portrayal of an African cultural expression—namely that of a tribal warrior. Finally, on his back are several deeply engraved crisscrossed lines that one can reasonably assume are symbolic of lacerated flesh.

Yet the visual representations of Black embodiment in “Black Skinhead” do more than reify the Orientalist paradigm of reproducing “the other” as “eminently corporeal.” In my estimation, the particular manner in which this body is materially marked as excessively and grotesquely carnal lends to a discussion of another mode through which
the Black male body becomes socially scripted as “N.H.I.” or as “animal-monster,” which legitimates the crimes committed against the flesh. Even if not intentionally done, the markings on the automaton’s flesh reveal a dialectical link between the racialized politics of the flesh and correlating social constructions.

The politics of the flesh and its susceptibility to dehumanizing impulses is in no way novel. In “Mama’s Baby,” Spillers examines the manner that slaves were “transformed into bare life/flesh” (67). She posits, “before the ‘body’ there is ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse . . .” (67). In other words, if legal personhood is constituted through the body, and the flesh is anterior to it, the captive Black body, a mass of flesh, was susceptible to social constructions that authenticated white sovereign rule over it. This means that prior to his murder, before Mike Brown’s body, there was first and foremost fleshy matter. And because he was “transformed into flesh” (Weheliye 39), Officer Darren Wilson’s concocted fantastical narrative typified the social process whereby the flesh marks a site of emergent narratives (i.e. “Mike Brown, the Hulk”).

Spillers’s hypothesis also provides insight into what I interpret as “Black Skinhead’s” symbolic linking of the Black body as an “eminently corporeal” site of exposed, distorted flesh and social constructions pertaining to “African savagery.” Given the inscriptions of tribal markings on the flesh, this Black body arguably assumes, in a white racist conscience, the anachronistic imago of the “primitive African savage” that had been perceived by enslavers and colonialists an insensate, fleshy monster that required subduing, and as an entity outside of Fein’s “sanctified universe of obligation.”

Though facial scarification in African countries has traditionally symbolized the mark of
cultural expression, a mode of differentiating between ethnic groups, and the evidence of dignified tribal hierarchy, in a white Western order of semiotic meaning, it was and is still a sign of savagery. Hence my deduction that the tribal markings on the automaton’s face and the lower torso exist as a critique of the young Black male body signifying barbarism and primitivism in a white racist imaginary. The same goes for the rounded studs that protrude from the skin on both arms and shoulders, and on the outer sections of the chest. Hawking interprets the embellished skin as a “suit of armor” and uses West’s reference to the Trojan War (“I keep it 300, like the Romans / 300 hundred bitches, where the Trojans”) to confirm his suspicion. I, however, insist that the flesh is not covered by but rather resembles a suit of armor. Nevertheless, the argument can be made that the “flesh of armor” is symbolic of tribal warfare, and, by extension, pre-modern, savage modes of life.

In Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual (2007), scholar Robert Reid-Pharr ruminates on Black male intellectuals who have themselves demonstrated a propensity to reclaim a lost African body in their writings. His point of reference is a letter that George Jackson wrote from his prison cell in Soledad, California in 1970, wherein he describes his own body through a romanticized image of a primitive African body. What Reid-Pharr comes to understand is that George Jackson “takes full advantage of his putatively black body” since its African biological traits “helps disestablish his status as a modern and culpable subject”—as one associated with the sins of the modern white subject (128). So Reid-Pharr, merely interpreting this line of thought, insists that while modern American racism continues to trap the Black body in a pre-modern state, one that is “by turns labeled ‘savage’, ‘infantile’, ‘tribal’,

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‘provincial’,” Jackson and intellectuals alike intuit that this body “might also rightly be given the title “innocent” (128). However, a ledger book containing the infinitely long list of “untamed, savage” Black bodies destroyed at the hands of the “protectors of the white tribe” speaks to the naiveté of such a theory. Those like Jackson who endeavor to reclaim the mythologized “African savage” unfortunately do themselves a disservice, for the site of the “African savage” does, in fact, “disestablish” the Black body from modern civility and idealistic conceptions of humanity. But just as the site of “African savagery” provided white enslavers and colonialists a license to subdue and destroy, as it was seen, in a figurative and literal sense, as a parasitic or ravaging animal-monster, this logic is appropriated across time. In fact, may George Jackson rest in power.

As another case in point, George Yancy recalls Fanon’s recounting of a Black male body’s exchange with a white woman and her son in *Black Skin, White Masks*, in a 1950s Western context: “. . . the handsome boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quavering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother’s arms: Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me” (qtd. in Yancy 71-72). Yancy rightly interprets this encounter comprising white male fear of Black male cannibalism as “[t]he white imagery of the Black as a savage beast, a primitive and uncivilized animal” (72). To ensure white safety, such an “animal” requires taming, unrestrained violence, or destruction. If this young boy perceives the Black male to be a cannibalistic savage such as that which existed in a pre-modern era, then one can reasonably deduce that the same social construction extends to a contemporary Black American context, which the version of the automaton in question seems to suggest. In fact, this interpretation is arguably supported by the fact that this version of the half-clothed automaton signifies the simultaneous
embodiment of a pre-modern and modern Black male subject, hence its tribal markings and its “leather Black jeans on” (as West lyrically points out) and chain.

In short, if the Orientalist approach to re-presenting “the Orient” vis-à-vis an obsession with carnality, paradoxically creates an enigmatic, animal figure of “carnal grossness” (Said 195), then in applying this mode of analysis in an African Diasporic construct, one could see that this version of the automaton critiques the pernicious outcomes of “seeing” the Black body excessively and grotesquely carnal. The fantastical construction of the Black male as “eminently corporeal” and as a site of grotesque flesh only yields other discursive constructions such as the Black male exemplifying the “animalistic, cultureless African savage,” as the automaton personifies. This primitive “being” is therefore relegated to the psychic zone of “non-alterity” and unintelligible subjectivity, as it resides outside of the community of modern, white Western subjects.

Consequently, if Spillers understands the laceration of black flesh to be the “calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet” (67), the automaton’s one hundred and eighty-degree turn, which reveals deeply engraved lacerations on the back, personifies Spillers’s postulation. The image is symptomatic of the physical violence and terror endemic to constructing the Black body as an amass of flesh, which emanates from slavery’s terroristic practices. However, according to Spillers, “undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (67). In other words, the facticity of dismembered flesh from generation to generation does not register to the powers that be because people of African descent are to them nothing more than “disposable raw material”—assemblages of bodies whose
“conceptual antecedent”\textsuperscript{65} (the flesh) marks it a site for emergent social constructions and the exercise of political violence. However, the video’s close-up shot of back lashes on the transhistorical embodied figure, is a deft reminder of the materialization of Black suffering, across historical contexts and geographical spaces, at the hands of the material forces of white racism, all because the Black body is inextricably tied to white racists’ “representations and regulation in discursive fields” (qtd. in Yancy 144).\textsuperscript{66}

However, Blacks across the diaspora have appropriated misrepresentations of “blackness” in such a way that deconstructs and re-constructs stereotypical images of Black males as “menace,” “monster,” “savage animal,” etc. Such a paradigm again calls to mind V.Y. Mudimbe’s \textit{The Invention of Africa}. He insists upon the understanding of an “African gnosis,” or the re-construction of “African knowledge” through a process by which African “concrete experiences are integrated into an order of concepts and discourses” (ix). He quotes Foucault’s statements in \textit{The Order of Things} (1966) in his efforts to conceive of the “bricolage\textsuperscript{67}” system of knowledge production: “all knowledge is rooted in a life, a society, and a language that have a history; and it is in that very history that knowledge finds the element enabling it to communicate with other forms of life, other types of society, other significations” (Mudimbe 29; Foucault 372). As such, Mudimbe endeavors to re-invent an image of Africa by recasting narratives of Africa involving its confrontation with Western discourse and systems of power. For instance, he discusses African societies’ confrontation with missionary discourse and their resolve to establish and maintain an “authentically African spiritual heritage,” which appropriated the Christian Gospel, by “indigenizing” it with Africanized spiritual traditions. Mudimbe recounts how African diasporic thinkers and clergyman of this time
(the 1950s and 60s) rejected missionary and anthropological discourse on African traditions and religion” (57), and instead installed their own theories of Negritude and indigenous African cultural expressions in traditional Christianity (58-59). Thus, Mudimbe elucidates the manner in which African clergymen contended with a dominant discourse that propagated misrepresentations of the African as “savage” and “pagan” and in need of cultural and spiritual regeneration (46) in a manner that offered a new narrative of African identity that might be syncretic, but that was also authentic and revealed African resistance to epistemological fabrications.

In a somewhat similar analysis, Alexander Weheliye, in *Habeas Viscus*, argues that Black artists have also utilized misrepresentations of “racialized assemblages” to further their own goals of creating a counter-discourse where identity politics are concerned. Weheliye analyzes the British and Sri Lankan Tamil artist M.I.A.’s song “Born Free” and the accompanying video to demonstrate the “destructive racializing assemblage at the heart of modern humanity” (65). He argues that M.I.A.’s use of an oppressed group (“gingers”) who are phenotypically identified by their red hair, underscores how modern racialized practices utilize “natal markers” to enforce racial subjugation, to veil the political processes that actually produce racial subjugation (68). In doing so, she is able to highlight the biopolitical theory that delineates between “human life worthy of protection and that which is not” (68). However, the identity of the executioners (a militarized SWAT team) is not biologized. They are seemingly white, with the exception of one officer, and they are unified by external signifiers (i.e. their uniform) and state-sanctioned genocide. They signify the construction of the ideal “Being,” yet they are not a biologized racial grouping (69). Ergo, Weheliye argues that
in employing the modern racializing and classificatory logic of the West, M.I.A actually exposes the arbitrary territorializing of Man (69). She hardly creates an “African gnosis,” as it were, yet she relies on misrepresentations of “racialized assemblages” to create a visual model through which to conceive of how oppressed identities are constituted via arbitrary sociopolitical hierarchies.

While he may not have been privy of Mudimbe’s and Weheliye’s resistive paradigms, there is evidence in “Black Skinhead” that suggests that West has begun the similar work of reconstructing the image of Black maleness—that is, through the “bricolage” process of envisioning Black identity as culturally autonomous and as antithetical to white supremacists stereotypes, but as still inextricably linked to the heritages of colonization and slavery. His juxtaposition of the two lines “I’m aware I’m a wolf, as soon as the moon hit / I’m aware I’m King, back out the tomb (bitch)” is a case in point. Though I will explore the more overtly resistive capacity of “Black Skinhead” more attentively in the next chapter, here West is here producing a symmetry insofar as he highlights the equally venerable subject constitution of Black masculinity, by locating his own Black American identity within the historical heritage of African dynasties and Kings—but not without recourse to the animalistic image of the Black body ensconced in the discursively classifying order of the West. He has refashioned a new modality of (Black male) being that affirms pride in Black identity through in an ironizing manner—in a manner that reveals a consciousness of Western stereotypes of “blackness.”

Conclusion:
The disproportionate destruction of Black male bodies, the gratuitous violence that they encounter in historically white spaces—even those culturally marked as quotidian spaces inhabited by Blacks, such as a juke joint or a Ferguson, Missouri neighborhood—is symptomatic of the precariousness of Black male personhood. From Emmett Till to the fictional Richard Henry, to Rodney King, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Eric Garner, and an infinitely long list of others—the “N.H.I” construction of the young Black male social grouping evidences the Black male body’s entrapment in a racial imaginary. This chapter has tried to elucidate further the delimited “freedom of movement (psychical and social),” to echo Fuss (21), conferred to Black bodies so as to make sense of their casual destruction, and the apathetic responses to their “disposable nature,” as evinced in Lyle Britten’s disturbing statement, “And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—face down in the weeds!”

We must sing “blues” for the young Black male, for he his body has been confiscated, argues Yancy (1-2). His identity has been returned to him as “non-alteirty,” as one relegated to a static ontology, in such a way that he is at once “incorrigibly animal”; he is a monstrous “body-thing” that is sometimes dumped in the weeds, left to cremate on an asphalt, or fed to other animals; he is a “perpetual object” in a racialized Self-Other dialectic; he is “a hypersexed, predatory buck”; he is a “sociological shadow” in the American psyche; like “the Orient,” he is a “‘seen absence’, . . . visible in . . . invisibility” (Yancy 25); he is an “‘eminently corporeal’ mass of flesh”; or he is a “postmodern incarnation of primitive African savagery.” Therefore, West’s line toward the end of the song, “But there’s no where to go (now),” can be conceived of as a “veiled” critique of the said discursive fixity and imprisonment of Black male ontology,
rather than merely serving as West’s hyperbolic metaphor of speeding through life (“I’m doing 500, I’m out of control now”), availing himself of hedonistic pleasures along the way. In fact, the automaton’s performed erraticism and aggression throughout the video, as well as the abrasive visual aesthetics, are all emblematic of the resulting neurosis associated with being alienated from Self—it is emblematic of being “a menace for the longest” (“Black Skinhead”) in the racist American psyche.

To reclaim a “first-person consciousness,” in a Fanonian sense, Yancy insists that I must figure out how to “cut through historical layers of white lies that have pre-identified me” (25). He is referring to the variegated, seemingly immortal discursive machine that underwrites cognitive dysfunction, which “Black Skinhead” and *Blues* both bring to life. America’s immoral, racist conscience must own up to its cognitive dysfunction, as it abets pathological constructions on both sides of the racial divide: in “WHITETOWN” and in “BLACKTOWN.” Correcting cognitive dysfunction, in part, according to George Yancy, requires a “cognitive shift” in the perspective of the white supremacist. He or she must undo the interpellation that his or her body has undergone in the popular white imaginary (5). Since the white supremacist’s “embodied comportment is entangled within a web of habituated lies and distortions” (Yancy 17), returning to a discussion of “Black Skinhead,” chapter three proposes one strategy for liberating the Black male subject who is buried beneath the rubble of discursive fantasies. I propose that liberation can occur through the wielding of colonial mimicry. After all, a “Black skinhead” is a mimetic performance of identity.
Endnotes

1 In her recent New York Times article entitled “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” Claudia Rankine argues that there is an absence of national mourning of spectacles of brutalized Black bodies, even Black child bodies. Rankine insists that national mourning is the antidote needed to engender political annoyance necessary for the recognition of Black humanity. She maintains that the site of the dead Black body—like those of Emmitt Till’s and Michael Brown’s—incites the type of mourning necessary to remedy white America’s devaluation of Black life. While I agree, of course, with the problem being indifference to Black suffering, I am more concerned with the social and psychological vicissitudes that even occasion the subjection of Black bodies to gratuitous violence. However, her article title and the underlying premise of her piece correlate to my plea to sing “blues” for Black male bodies, which is, itself, a riff on James Baldwin’s Blues for Mister Charlie.

2 In 1996, Hillary Clinton spoke at Keene State College in New Hampshire in support of then President Bill Clinton’s 1994 Violent Crime Control Act. In her speech, she called Black gang members “Super-Predators” with “no conscience” who must be “brought to heel.”

3 The song “Strange Fruit” was written by Abel Meeropol for Billie Holiday in 1939. But Nina Simone covered it on her 1965 album, Pastel Blues. “Strange fruit” is a metaphor for the grotesque scene of dangling bodies from Southern trees. The song was first written as an aesthetic contribution to the anti-lynching campaigns in America, beginning during Post-Reconstruction and ending (officially) in the 1930s.

4 In his Yeezus anthem, “New Slaves” (2013), Kanye West dramatizes the presumed reality that Black bodies are “new slaves,” and because of which, are perceived to have no subjective identities or human existence beneath their epidermal exterior, which accounts for the disproportionate rates at which they are destroyed. In the song, he proclaims unequivocally that Black bodies within a cotemporary American social body, irrespective of class distinction, are “new slaves” property of a white, racist and capitalist system of domination. Emphatically, he repeats four times throughout the track: “I know that we the new slaves.” In his essay “Pessimistic Themes In Kanye West’s Necrophobic Aesthetic: Moving Beyond Subjects of Perfection to Understand the New Slave as a Paradigm of Anti-Black Violence,” hip hop scholar and philosopher Tommy Curry insists that critical interpretations of the song are intellectually inept when they reduce the track to West’s delineations of postmodern slavery, rooted in capitalist, materialist consumption—that “Come in, please buy more”—and the corporatization of privately-owned prison systems that are pipelines for Black bodies which are reduced, further, to fungible convict laborers.

Rather, he rightfully argues that it is Kanye West’s observing of Black death, vis-à-vis the imagery that invokes the history of lynching, that serves as a constant reminder of the perpetual consignment of Black subjects to the status of “slaves,” given that West raps, “I see the blood on the leaves / I know that we the new slaves” (Curry 26). West is inviting his listeners to take stock of the omnipresent spectacles of Black corpses. They dangle from more than just Billy Holiday’s (and later Simone’s) “poplar trees.” Today, the blood spilling from Black corpses sully the manicured lawns of condominiums in Sanford, Florida (as in the case of Trayvon Martin); it stains the streets of Ferguson,
Missouri (as in the case of Michael Brown) and Chicago (as in the case of Laquan McDonald); these bodies suffer from deliberate asphyxiation in Stain Island, New York (as in the case of Eric Garner); they bleed out in public parks without the comfort of their mothers (as in the case of Tamir Rice). This list is infinitely extensive. Thus, “New Slaves” suggests that, echoing Curry’s summation of artist Jasiri X’s remix of Kanye West’s “Blood on the Leaves,” “Black life is only corporeal—the lifeless corpses, the chained prisoners, the wretched bodies suffering in America” (27).

5 The theory of “non-alterity” derives from Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks (1952).

6 “Double Consciousness” is a phrase that derives from the late 18th and 19th century Black diasporic scholar and activist, W. E. B. DuBois. In the chapter, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” of The Souls of Black Folks (1903), DuBois writes of an internal “twoness” that those of African descent in America feel in response to the racial degradation they experience, notwithstanding their indispensable role in erecting the American culture and civilization. He explains it as “this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (215). DuBois maintains, “One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (215).

7 In “Many Thousands Gone,” an essay in Notes of a Native Son (1955), Baldwin writes, “The story of the Negro in America is the story of America—or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans” (19).

8 Bigger Thomas murders two women, his Black girlfriend Bessie Mears and the daughter of his white employer, Mary Dalton. The narrator informs: “In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply . . .” (225). His communist, Jewish attorney Max reiterates the resuscitating effects of Bigger’s homicides: “It was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. He accepted it because it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight” (364).

9 Though Richard Henry is in search for his humanity, Baldwin provides textual evidence that Richard was already alive, but that the systemic practices of white America had labored to drain Richard of life.

10 In Notes of a Native Son (1955), in the work’s namesake chapter, Baldwin discusses the condition of being sick with rage at the Negro’s condition in America. The rage that consumed him was so palpable that it induced a violent reaction. After throwing a glass at a white waitress at a diner, he knew the weight of being Black in America at that time was too much to bear. In efforts to avoid killing and to avoid dying from hatred and bitterness as his father had, he fled the country to reflect upon his experiences with American racial tensions from a distance.

11 He said this 2014 while being interviewed by Marcos Hassan, staff writer for Remezcla, which is a grassroots organization that focuses on creative and writers. It is housed in Brooklyn is also based in Mexico City, Mexico and Los Angeles, California.

12 A quote by writer Kiah Fields’s 2016 The Source article, “Today in Hip Hop History: Celebrating the life of James Baldwin, Hip Hop’s Unsung Innovator.”

13 Emmett Till was the Black Chicago teen murdered in 1955 by two white men for his purported whistling at a white woman in a convenient store in Mississippi. He was
beaten until he was unrecognizable, shot in the head, and then dumped in the river, for which his murderers were acquitted.

14 The Black Lives Matter Movement was begun by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, after the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin. Inherent in the existence of the BLM Movement is the presumed non-existence of Black life. In fact, the three founders describe the organization/movement as “working for the validity of Black life” (blacklivesmatter.com). Trayvon Martin’s murder at the hands of George Zimmerman galvanized the movement. Zimmerman and Martin engaged in a violent confrontation before Zimmerman fatally shot Martin. The pictures of Martin laying face down on the lawn were widely circulated throughout the media. To much dismay, Martin was “post-humously placed on trial for his own murder” (blacklivesmatter.com). In concerning themselves with this matter, the BLM Movement hovers a heat lamp over the paradox of denying Black bodies human validity and rendering them culpable in their own murders.

15 Michael Brown purportedly raised his hands above his head in the symbolic gesture of surrender, only to still be destroyed by the bullets of Officer Darren Wilson.

16 Some include DJ Khaled, Rick Ross, P. Diddy, Fabolous, Swizz Beats, 2 Chainz, Wale and others.

17 From threatening to inject a Civil Rights fist inside of a woman whose sexual desires he re-orient to satisfy his sadistic cravings (“I’m In It”), to his retaliatory resolve to sexually violate the wives of white corporation owners of private prisons (“New Slaves”), to actually dramatizing necrophilia with female bodies while simultaneously singing about dismembering their genitalia (“Monster”)—whether these are fictional narratives or mere revenge fantasies, it must be conceded that Kanye West’s art is misogynistic—or that he is deeply influenced by misogynistic ideals.

18 This statement derives from the Nigerian theorist, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie’s *Recreating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*. She is writing within an African feminist (or “Stiwanist”) context, but it is a widely-held idea across diasporas. It is one of the recurring and enduring criticisms of the Black Power Movement in the United States.

19 Both “Power” and “Gorgeous” are tracks from Kanye West’s 2010 album, *My Beautiful, Dark, Twisted Fantasy*.

20 *Late Registration* (2005).

21 This is, again, a song on his second to last album, *Yeezus* (2013).

22 Other theorists and philosophers have expounded upon Fanon’s conceptualization of non-alterity.” See George Yancy’s *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Lanham, Maryland. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008. p. 20. In his book, Yancy states that “Blacks have not only been conceptualized as divergent but that at times they have also been conceptualized as a different kind.” Black people he argues, “belong to a fundamentally different type (20). Also, see Lewis Gordon’s alluding to “non-alterity” in George Yancy, “Interview with Lewis Gordon,” in *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 1998), 107. In this interview, reinterpretating Fanon, Lewis declares, “But what the Black is, is the not-Other and not-self. To put it differently, in the Western framework the only way the Other can emerge is if there were some notion that the Other can be a human being. Racism . . . reduces Blacks below the human” (qtd. in *Black Bodies* 20).
The “being-for-captor” concept emanates from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

In the previous chapter, I have identified this as Fanonian third-person consciousness. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman also confirms Cable’s “grafting” metaphor as one defining the construction of Black citizenship, suggesting that Cable’s description “bespeaks the anxieties about amalgamation attendant to the enfranchisement of black bodies” (165).


As Hartman argues, the slave was only considered an agential, conscientious person in the context of “criminal liability” (82). This was to legitimate violence and domination, of course, but also to render the slave who “stole away” or engaged in self-maiming, culpable, in the sense that the master would have suffered a loss of the instruments of production (the limbs of the slaves). But even in this case, the liminality and contingency of personhood is still evident.

The humanity of Black slaves was eventually acceded. For instance, in his book, *Slavery and Freedom* (1982), historian Willie Lee Rose reports on legal scholar James Codman Hurd’s 1858 study of the manner which legal discourse regarding slaves implicated the life of the slave (23-24). However, Fanon argues “victory,” such as the recognition of the humanity of Black bodies, “was playing cat and mouse” with him, in a “now you see me now you don’t” kind of way (*BSWM* 99).

Mbembe relays to readers that his thoughts on the animalization of the native population derive from postcolonial theorist, Wambui Mwangi’s articles on “the animal,” which appear in the journal *Alter* 3 (1995), as well as in *Social Research* 3 (1995), “In the Company of Animals.”

*FiveThirtyEight* is an ESPN-owned sports and politics, online, poll-analysis website.

Of course, Wynter is not presenting a new idea here. As I illuminate in chapter one, the first Black Haitian anthropologist, Antènor Firmin, dedicates his 1885 tome, *The Equality of the Human Races*, to disproving this ideological premise, using positivist evidence.

In fact, Casselman points out that the decadent behavior of the Black youth in Ferguson is the result of idleness and poverty.

In the prefatory section of the play, “Notes on *Blues*,” Baldwin argues that the racial schema in America plays out in such a way that hoists the white man over his dark skinned brethren, to the extent that he deems it imperative and sacredly dutiful even, to “protect the honor and duty of his tribe,” by upholding the fallacy of the “inequality of the human races,” unless he shall find himself excluded from his tribe (xv).

In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe explains that there are three forms of violence: (1) “founding violence,” the “right of conquest” and the privileges that flow from such “right”; (2) violence that emerges in the form of arbiter of laws and “justice”; and (3) banality and conviviality, which consists of rituals and other coercive methods that ensure domination (25). We know that in American context, violence manifests itself in all three manners, but with regard to the latter, we use the language of “structural” and “institutional.”
The play’s setting consists of a literal and metaphoric divide between what Baldwin refers to as “WHITETOWN” and “BLACKTOWN,” thus exacerbating for his audience, the reality of segregation in southern cities.

Wynter explains that Ellison’s novel dramatizes the phenomenon of seeing “the other” through the “inner eyes,” or through a subjective lens of reasoning, which is then projected through “our physical eyes upon reality” (Wynter 44).

Later on in the play, Parnell admits to having been in love with a young Black girl, and even Lyle has committed adultery with the Willie Mae, the Black wife of Old Bill—a Black man whom he murders prior to Richard (62-66). Interestingly, we are told that Willie Mae was “real black” (25), which means Lyle had not mistaken her for a white woman. No different than his ancestors who were slave masters, the Black woman was both a site of availability and desirability for white men.

Lyle kills Old Bill who is also constructed as a Hulk-like, monstrous brute. Lyle tells Parnell in reference to his murder of Old Bill, “He looked crazy. Like he wanted to kill me. He did want to kill me. Crazy nigger” (69). Later he informs Papa D, the owner of the juke joint, that he shot Old Bill in self defense (87). In both instances, if it were true that Old Bill desired to take Lyle’s life, he conveniently omits the social factors that induce Old Bill to commit murder—namely, the fact that Lyle had slept with his wife. Instead, Old Bill is painted as an animal with unbridled rage.

Reverend Phelps’s acknowledgement of color variations amongst the Negroes might give pause to readers given that the identity construction of the Negro as animal and so directly opposed to the humanistic character of the white Western Man, is ideally hinged upon the purity of race. The mixed race of the “yellow Negro,” who is nevertheless, “the lowest in the animal Kingdom” would seemingly imply the displacement of oppositional “nature” of the relationship (or relations of domination) and identity construction. But for Reverend Phelps, the “Negro mongrel” is seemingly a metonymic representation of the Black race, and aids in fastening “blackness” to the realm of animality.

This is again a Fanonian term that I unpack and extrapolate in chapter one. It refers to existing in triple, or internalizing one’s said objecthood, and navigating white-controlled spaces through such an ontological imposition.

For more information regarding Hartman’s phrase “burdened individuality of freedom,” see Scenes of Subjection, the chapter “The Burdened Individuality of Freedom.” She highlights the limits in freedom—specifically, the manner in which freedom after slavery is intertwined with more subjection and confinement. Kanye West also highlights teh “burdened individuality of freedom.” In “Black Skinhead,” for instance, West tells his listeners that elite whites have invited him to “enter the Kingdom” and that “Middle America packed in” and they “Came to see [him] in [his] black skin,” but that his ascendency has been burdened with restrictions. Tommy Curry, in “Pessimistic Themes in Kanye West’s Necrophobic Aesthetic” confirms that the Yeezus anthem, “New Slaves” also captures “the paradoxical condition whereby Black freedom from enslavement only resulted in the capturing of Black people physically in the neo-liberal entanglements of poverty, servitude, and corporatism” (18).

It should be noted that Blues is much about tribalism as racism. In fact, the two are interconnected, as it is the “white tribe” that must be protected, as Baldwin critiques in his prefacing remarks.
Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Amiri Baraka’s play, *The Dutchman* (first performed in 1964) are two that immediately come to mind.  

A term Alexander Weheliye employs throughout *Habeas Viscus* (2014). In this text, Weheliye also looks at the way in which race and racism function in the arena of political violence. He is concerned with how theories of the flesh lend themselves to new constructions of what it means to be human.

The family as a white Western institution is the aftereffect of the classification of the sexes in a patriarchal order. Marxist and Materialist Feminists have pointed out that the establishment of male hegemony was “rationalized” by the division of labor, yet it is clear that sexist ideologies were arbitrarily employed in the formation of the Nuclear family. Because women were temporarily unable to contribute to the means of production during periods of pregnancy and nursing, men saw this physical limitation as an avenue through which to self-appoint themselves as breadwinner, and consequently, as the superior sex to the woman who is labeled as the “second sex,” to borrow a phrase from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949). In her essay “The Black Woman as a Woman,” anthologized in Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman: an Anthology* (1970), contributor Kay Lindsey, however, takes this justification for the division of the sexes a step further. She illumines, “The temporary incapacitation of women in pregnancy and childbirth offered men the opportunity to use women as their extensions” (104). Echoing Simone De Beauvoir decades earlier, Lindsey means to say that men conceive of women in a very exploitative, phenomenological sense: women become appendages to men, enabling their mobility, acquisition and maintenance of property, and the reproduction of heirs. Their procreative capacity, although regarded pathologically as an “incapacitation,” is used as a means to an end. As a result, Lindsey argues that men “devoured the consciousness of women, robbing them of their potential autonomy” (104).

*Cnn.com* writers Rachel Clarke and Christopher Lett disclose the witness accounts in the events that led to Michael Brown’s murder in their article, “What Happened When Michael Brown Met Officer Darren Wilson.”

Readers are told on four different occasions that Richard’s body was found “face down in the weeds” (2, 12, 75, 120); we also learn that Old Bill’s body had been left to rot on a road after Lyle killed him (67).

In *Black Skin*, Fanon argues that the racial body schema is such that the Black body is “overdetermined from the outside,” and that “I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance” (95).

A term I borrow from Fred Moten, which is applied to his analysis of the auditory components of the photograph of the restaged spectacle of the brutalized body of Emmett Till, in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), the chapter entitled, “Black mon’nin’ In the Sound of the Photograph.”

I use both “subjection” and “domination” in the contemporary American context to signify the paradox that Black bodies in America are up against as alleged autonomous “citizens-subjects” who are actually handled as inanimate pieces of property. In “The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault” (1984), Michel Foucault quips, “There cannot be relations of power [as opposed to domination] unless subjects are free. If one were completely at the disposition of the other and became his thing, an object on which he can exercise an infinite and unlimited
violence, there would not be relations of power. In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty” (qtd. in Hartman 55; originally quoted in The Final Foucault, edited by James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, 12).

51 The image I am describing is reminiscent of the cover of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*. The cover captures an image of a mutilated black hood that does not bear a face, as if to say that young Black male bodies in poor communities (the hood), who oftentimes wear hooded sweatshirts (like Trayvon Martin’s iconic image in a hooded shirt), are never really seen for their true identities. Here, Kaphar is also suggesting that the “inner eyes” of white racists never truly see those Black bodies in hoods, in the hood. Instead, as the detached, black hood intimates a scene of violence, these bodies are destroyed because they are constructed as “Super-Predators.”

52 I have re-appropriated Carol Boyce-Davies’s term, “critical relationality,” from *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, which connotes feminists theory “going a piece of the way” with Western theories, Postcolonial Theory especially. It involves ways to relate to difference and “visitors” per se. In her words, critical relationality thus means “negotiating, articulating and interrogating simultaneously a variety of resistant discourses relationally and depending on context, historical and political circumstances” (47). My use of the phrase, however, does not connote a relationship between oppositional discourses. Rather, my juxtaposing of Kaphar’s painting and West’s “Black Skinhead” is motivated by my attempt to underscore their inter-discursive/textual relationship. Both texts are, in a veiled manner, espousing similar critical commentary on Black ontology. In so doing, he highlights the “corporeal nature” of Black life.

53 The Brooklyn College Film Department webpage defines “Depth of Filed” as “[t]he range of distances from the camera within which the subject is in Focus when a given lens is used.”

54 References to the Afro-Caribbean Harlem Renaissance poet, Claude McKay’s 1919 poem, “If We Must Die.”

55 In fact, George Yancy argues that cognitive dysfunction and its attendant embodied reaction is “constructed ignorance” and so is “cultural,” rather than an “individual act” (22).

56 Here one should consider the 2007 video of the German army instructor who induces the imperative to kill by instructing the recruit to envision a van of three Black American men who had hurled insults about his mother (Yancy xx).

57 *Black Skins*, Fanon writes of the “lived experiences,” of Black men: The white gaze has “woven mea out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (91).

58 James Snead (1994) argues that King Kong is exclusively a signifier of “blackness,” examining Denham’s exploitative endeavors in relation to African slavery and European imperialism. Cynthia Erb, on the other hand, looks closely at the Ape and arrives at the conclusion that King Kong signifies not merely primitivist, but Orientalist fantasies as well, given he was found near or about the coast of South East Asia (*Tracking King Kong* 102).

59 Said examines Gérard de Nerval’s *Voyage en Orient* (1851) as a case in point, arguing that when his encounters with “the Orient” challenged the authoritative perspectives of his predecessors (Lamartine and Chateaubriand (176) and Edward Lane (184)), he
reproduced their versions, adding his own aesthetic possibilities. In Said’s words, because Nerval failed to discern a “stable Oriental reality,” his “failed narratives” (184) culminated in depictions of “the Orient” that connoted his “quintessential Oriental world of uncertain, fluid dreams infinitely multiplying themselves past resolution definiteness, materiality” (183).

This paradigm occurs in Blues in the sense that Lyle’s first encounter with Richard Henry betrays the normative epistemological framework to which he was accustomed. Richard is dancing with Juanita in Papa D’s juke joint, performing a “being-for-itself” identity rather than animalistic, uncivilized behavior. The narrator parenthetically discloses that “she is teaching him the ‘Fight’, or he is teaching her the ‘Pony’,” and that “they are enjoying each other” (31). Lyle is obviously taken aback since he stands there observing the pair, just before he laments to Lyle that he would never be able to mimic their style of dance. Though he is cordial with Papa D (their relationship is predicated on paternalism actually), Lyle is a foreigner in a strange place like many of the Orientalists. The unfettered agency that he witnesses belies the racist episteme into which he had been indoctrinated. Lyle witnesses Black cultural expression that is independent of white identity and cultural history. It is clear that Lyle is unnerved by Richard and Juanita’s disruption of the “being for other” logic, and the fact that they betray the construction of “the nigger” as “object” with no “motive will” and “active desires,” to echo Spillers, because he attempts to reassert his dominance on his way out when he interrupts them by “jostling Juanita” (Baldwin 31).

As I have already made apparent in the previous section, the events that follow the juke joint exchange evince Lyle’s attempt to re-mythologize Richard by re-positioning him squarely within the psychic and social space of “non-alterity,” as “animal-object.” But more noteworthy in the context of this argument is that the succeeding events also evince “WHITETOWN’S” attempt to dehumanize Richard by negating his corporeal human identity. In this vein, as Said argues, social constructions yield erasure. He argues that Nerval’s invented “Oriental world” was one of “uncertain, fluid dreams infinitely multiplying themselves past resolution, definiteness, materiality” (183).

Yancy quotes Judith Butler’s arguments in “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” the lead essay in Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising (1993). In this essay, Butler discusses how the narratives of anti-Black violence, namely in the digital age, and as witnessed during the video of the Rodney King beating, are reflective of hermeneutic distortion and phantasmagoric depictions. The Simi Valley jury came to “see” King’s Black body as, in Yancy’s paraphrase, “a dangerous and threatening object” that did not exist (18). Butler writes, “The kind of ‘seeing’ that the police enacted, and the kind of ‘seeing’ that the jury reenacted, is one in which a further violence is performed by the disavowal and projection of that violent beating” (qtd. in Yancy 18; Butler 19-20). Butler maintains that Rodney King “is the phantasm that [white racist violence] ritualistically produces at the site of the racialized other” (qtd. in Yancy 18; Butler 20-21).

One other Western writer in particular is Sir Richard Burton, a 19th century British explorer. Said argues that in Pilgrimage to Mecca (1855), it is clear that he actually immersed himself in the quotidian experiences of the Orientals. But even though he physically interacted with them, he paradoxically did not refrain from
overgeneralizations. His writings were, in fact, testimonies to his victory over the knowledge of their life. Consequently, “the Orient” never appeared to readers (195-196).

Yancy also points out that the protagonist in Invisible Man had paradoxically inhabited the status of “visible invisibility” (68). He is only seen when he answers to the “hailing” calls of the dominant world around him, notwithstanding that he “knows himself as embodied flesh and blood” (Yancy 75).

“Biologized” because the image depicts an array of anatomical facial features.

In Habeas Viscus, Weheliye interprets Spillers’s conceptualization of the politics of flesh, as discussed in “Mama’s Baby.” In his paraphrase of her theory of the flesh as the originary site of social conceptualization, he states that the flesh is the “conceptual antecedent to the body” (39).

Here Yancy quotes Black diasporic philosopher Emmanuel Chuckwude Eze’s statements in Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 997).

A concept that he borrows from Claude Lèvi-Strauss’s and Jacque Derrida’s The Savage Mind (1962, English Translation, 1966) and “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourses of Human Sciences” (1967) (respectively). Both are suggesting that the engineering of original thought or creative practices (in Derrida’s context, discourse) is a myth in that one is always borrowing from intellectual and discursive heritages.
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Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead”: Reclaiming the “[Black] Agents Buried Beneath”

Discursive Constructions Through Colonial Mimicry and Hybridity

Introduction:

Chapter two reveals the illuminative potential of Kanye West’s art insofar as it facilitates an understanding of white supremacy’s discursive and ideological stranglehold on Black ontology and subjectivity. But this chapter goes a step further by offering an anti-colonial framework to reclaim the agents resting beneath discursive confinements of “blackness” and Black maleness. Beneath the “brute,” the “Hulk,” and the “being for captor,” beneath “excess animality,” “disposable raw material,” “non-alterity,” and the “static primitive,” lies a truer self and a mobile, “migratory” subject to be exhumed.

The anti-colonial framework for this chapter is, in part, metaphorically informed by the Black feminist methodology deployed by Hortense Spillers in her groundbreaking essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (2003). In this essay, Spillers provides one of the most resonant theories for rescuing Black identities from the quagmire of denigrating stereotypes. She begins her essay by acknowledging the “overdetermined nominative properties” used to define Black women throughout history. Mythical markers such as “Sapphire,” “Mammie,” and “Earth Mother” are so fixed that it is no easy feat to unearth the “agents buried beneath” (Spillers 65). But Spillers offers a liberating hypothesis for the submerged Black female agent: “In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular
historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness” (65; my emphasis). The personal pronouns in that sentence, she posits, serve a “collective function” (65). They are not merely representative of a collective Black female identity, though it is the central focus of her essay. Instead, there also lies waiting rescue a Black male subject whose identity is fluid and the result of his own discursive or performative “inventiveness.”

This chapter proposes to exhume this subject by deposing the white supremacist-colonial authors of mythological constructions of “blackness” and Black culture, employing the art of Kanye West once again to do so. But in order to liberate the “buried agents” in question from mythical confines, it is imperative to locate and contend with the historical roots of this order of naming as Spillers has done. She makes apparent that such “overdetermined” nominative signifiers emanate from “originating metaphors of captivity . . .” (68). But in addition to the transatlantic slave trade, as I have elucidated throughout this project epistemic violence also draws its energies from the social organization of colonialism and neo-colonial regimes, and Black bodies in America bear the brunt of their legacies, too. Hence, while Spillers offers a “grammar” and a critical intervention for Black bodies to rid themselves of the overlay of discursive constructions emanating from captivity, I employ an anti-colonial approach in this chapter to disentangle Black bodies—specifically Black male bodies, such as the one depicted in Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead”—from reductive and constraining webs spun during post-Enlightenment colonialism. I thus undertake a mission similar to Spillers in that she provides a paradigm for “going beyond” the “terrain” of Black female identity politics to
disinter Black bodies from beneath the debris of mythical markers, hence the Black male presence in her text.³

More specifically, in the first half of the chapter, I demonstrate that reasserting a truer, autonomous conception of a Black male self can occur through colonial mimicry, formulated by Indian postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, in his seminal essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” (1987), in *The Location of Culture* (1994). This de-colonial strategy of resistance, predicated on the “discursive conditions of domination” (Bhabha 160), establishes the conditions that make possible the displacement of colonial and neo-colonial discourses that play a central role in constructing Black bodies as nonhuman objects and seek the interment of what I acknowledged in the first chapter (by way of Frantz Fanon) as first-person consciousness. Using Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead” (2013), which I read as a subversively mimetic performance of identity, I relate how Bhabha’s theory of mimicry constitutes the mockery of and the loss of “representational authority” (Bhabha 131), and how this transpires in the lyrics and video. In this case, the authoritative figure being mimicked is a “skinhead,” which, as textual evidence such as Klan hoods suggest, is a mere stand-in for white-supremacist-colonial authority self-endowed with the power to designate Black bodies as “inappropriate” representations of humanity and civility, and itself the quintessential manifestation of these categories. But to explain briefly here, the uncertainty of colonial command, exposed in the mimetic performance, mandates the relinquishment of such prerogatives and by extension a reversal of what is described by Aimé Césaire as “colonization-thingification”⁴ (implicated in the first chapter as third person consciousness and in the second chapter as the relegation of “Black bodies to
“non-alterity”). For the Black body cannot remain buried beneath mythical constructions such as “object” when colonial authority has suffered a loss of discursive power, which disarms it of its burying “shovel.” Bhabha’s goal is, therefore, to reclaim the agency divested of colonized bodies by exposing the limitations and ambivalence of “absolutist” colonial discourses and power through a mimetic performance.

Further, unearthing Black bodies from beneath the rubble of mythical markers, from “thinghood” especially, through colonial mimicry, also involves the carving of a third space of identity wherein a cultural hybrid emerges and which is an inevitable outcome of Bhabha’s theory of colonial mimicry. Within what Bhabha calls this “interstitial space,” Black subjects are not confined to “overdetermined,” essentialist identities. The reproduction of unchanged, indigenous identities of the past is far from a possibility as well. Additionally, this third space, of course, precludes the reproduction of a racist, European-inscribed version of humanism and culture. Rather, it is a space of identity negotiation, producing a new identity in the process, also yielding the manifestation of cultural differences devoid of hierarchies (Bhabha 3,5). Ultimately, the third space is a space of productivity—a space to subvert, undermine, and transform. Hybridity, as Bhabha elaborates in “Signs Taken for Wonders,” further denotes the recognition of the ambivalence of authoritative discourses, as well as what he phrases throughout The Location of Culture as a “radical revision” of fixed identities—both culminating in the “presencing” of newness (7). Thus, in the second half of this essay, the performative presence of hybridity in “Black Skinhead” is exposed through an analysis of what I interpret as West’s recognition of the ambivalence of white supremacist and colonial discourse, and by revealing hybridity’s capacity to reverse and
“revolutionize” stereotypes or “inappropriate” representations of “blackness” and Black culture (Black rap culture namely) in the text.

I demonstrate this latter function of hybridity by positioning “Black Skinhead” in conversation with two other artistic productions: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and West’s 2010 compilation song “Chain Heavy.” Exposing further the ambivalence of the dominant discourse and destabilizing and transforming fixed conceptions of identity, undermine the discursive power of the white supremacist-colonial “monster,” as it were, inhibiting it from regulating Black subjectivity and “burying” Black bodies beneath mythical markers. In short, through an in-depth textual analysis of “Black Skinhead,” I illustrate how Kanye West’s art makes possible the deposing of white supremacist-colonial authority vis-à-vis Bhabhian colonial mimicry and the production of a third, hybrid space of identification, facilitating the reclamation of Black humanity and subjectivity in the process.

*Kanye West, Mimicry, and the Third Space*

The shifting constructions of Kanye West’s complex rap persona over the past twelve years are suited to a discussion of Bhabha’s theorization of mimicry and hybridity. West has never been a rapper easily packaged or categorized. During his 2004 grand entrance into the rap arena, he was lauded for his anomic musical content and persona. On his debut album the *College Dropout* (2004), he ostensibly offered an alternative ethos to the prevailing “gangsta image” commoditized by corporations. Examples include his reminder of the poetic roots of rap music in “Never Let Me Down,” given his spoken word feature. Another example is his ability to bridge two seemingly antagonistic
discourses, rap music and Christianity—an instrumental tool of colonial domination and enslavement—in the Grammy-winning single “Jesus Walks.” West was also known as the backpack wearing, Polo donning rapper, which contrasted the “thuggish” clothing choices of his predecessors and contemporaries. It appeared as if West was a prototypical “authorized version of otherness” (Bhabha 126), or in the words of Frantz Fanon, “just the sort of nigga the white man wants you to be” (The Wretched, 221).

However, I argue that West emerged as an artist in need of “reforming” to fulfill the “civilizing mission” of the America neo-colonial world order. It was soon realized that West had actually ensconced himself in Black socio-political concerns, and had branded himself “the college dropout” who, despite his somewhat privileged upbringing, demonstrated an affinity for capturing the urban youth experience in Chicago through verse, 808s, and soulful samples, and through an ethnocentric cultural focus. According to Bhabha, a preoccupation with an indigenous, ethnocentric conception of self constitutes a “first space” of identity. Moreover, what was also novel was West’s ability to at once attract a Black middle class audience—vis-à-vis critiques of the spoils of higher education for folks of color in songs like “All Falls Down”—and the hood—through his tales about the visceral realities of its inhabitants, like “drug dealing just to get by” as a result of structural racism (“We Don’t Care”). His pro-Black themes solidified his presence as the total antithesis of the “colonial subject that is the effect of colonial power that is productive” (Bhabha 109). The underlying messages in College Dropout and Late Registration (2005), on the whole, refused the narcissistic identifications of the colonial Imaginary.
But that was all 2004 and 2005, and to some extent, continued into his third solo album, *Graduation* (2007). The characteristic obstinacy and to borrow a term from Bhabha, “inappropriateness,” of his rap persona, would appear to be short-lived. West’s condemnatory critiques of the white supremacist-colonial regime did not completely wane, however, but were no longer explicitly the centerpieces of his narratives and visual illustrations as they had been before. West allegedly began to don the “white mask,” and most would argue that this transpired in *Graduation* (2007) as the title itself suggests. This confounded his earlier seemingly impervious attitude toward Eurocentric / white American practices and influences. On the outset, West had “assimilated the culture of the occupying power” (Fanon, *The Wretched* 222), for no other deduction accounts for his self-description as a “Black skinhead” for instance. In my estimation, the white supremacist-colonizer had demanded the transformation of the colonized subject (West) who threatened the hierarchal structure and power of the “regime.” In a Bhabhian sense, this narcissistic desire for identification occurs in the “second space,” and it sheds light on West’s alleged assimilation or adoption of a skinhead “mask.”

However, what one might perceive as West’s said assimilative persona and performances, are, in my estimation, actually symptomatic of the third space, which, again, is a consequence of a subversive, mimetic performance of identity. In *Graduation*, as a case in point, in the song “Good Morning,” West, at once, reinforces the ruling society’s investment in achieving higher education, and derides the Western educational system used for the inculcation of white supremacist ideology. For West, composing a dissertation and graduating involves, in Bhabha’s terms, “inappropriateness” and “strategic failure” (123) within this system: “Looking at every ass, cheat[ing] on every
test.” If not, “[t]hey tell you read this / eat this, don’t look around / Okay look up now, they done stole yo’ streetness.” West thus mocks the identity of the “colonizer” given his imitative theme of the track and album, which turns out to be a distortion of the educational institution. West applauds himself for earning Ds: “By himself he’s so impressed / I mean did you even see the test? / You got Ds, muthafucka, Ds . . .” Hence, graduation takes on new meaning, and West’s appended perception is indicative of what Bhabha refers to as a “double articulation,” or the insertion of “another knowledge of [the educational institution’s] norms” (Bhabha 123), thereby exposing the ambivalence of the dominant discourse. Furthermore, the educational institution, an apparatus of white supremacy, has undergone a “radical revision,” as a borderline failing grade now connotes achievement. And West, the self-named character in the song (he refers to the “graduating” pupil as “Mr. West” throughout) is not a representation of an indigenous, “essential” cultural past. He has left this world behind, for, as he raps, “You graduate when you make it up out of the streets.” He does not counter-identify with the concept of graduation; rather, he appropriates it in a resistive capacity. This song is therefore a disidentifying lyrical performance, and provides evidence of the carving of a third, contestatory space wherein a new identity emerges. “Haters saying you changed,” West raps, demonstrating the emergence of new identity. Likewise, “Black Skinhead” is a Bhabhian mimetic performance, and is replete with evidence that reveals the carving of a third space / hybrid moment, culminating in the unsettling of white supremacist-colonial discursive power which piles mythical markers upon Black bodies.

I: Theoretical Overview
The Origins of Mimicry

Mimicry is a derivative of mimesis. There is no totalizing conception of mimesis, as it has been theorized across historical eras and disciplines—from psychoanalysis to feminist theory, to animal studies and beyond. Theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Theodore Adorno, Judith Butler among others, have devoted their intellectual energies to the concept of mimesis, thus confirming its trans-disciplinary application. I turn to performance and feminist theorist, Elin Diamond’s essay, “Mimesis, Mimicry, and the True-Real” wherein she unpacks the shifting meanings of mimesis in relation to art / theater and identity formation. She begins with ancient Greek interpretations, recounting Plato’s rejection of the “illusory mode-copy structure” of mimesis, or the imperfect representations of the model in book 10 of The Republic, and Aristotle’s endorsement of the ambiguity of action and “heuristic benefits of imitation for spectators” in Poetics (363). She then explains the Renaissance, Neoclassical theories, and how the Romantics placed primacy on the artist and not the imitative capacity of models. However, Diamond suggests that the undergirding axiology in each of these contexts is “the upholding of truth” (363).

To demonstrate the instability of “Truth,” she moves to psychoanalysis’s appropriation of mimesis in French feminist Luce Irigaray’s feminist critique, whereby she develops a connection between the phallus and mimesis in Speculum of the Other Woman (1974). Irigaray argues that the female who lacks the privileged phallus in a male symbolic order mimes the unrecognizable male referent, “thereby demonstrating the truth of his centrality” (Diamond 364). Irigaray, however, denounces this logic and reconfigures mimesis as mimicry in the chapter, “Plato’s Hystera” (Diamond 369). She
re-conceptualizes Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, where the dark cave is a metaphor for the maternal womb, using mimicry as a political tool to undermine “patriarchal Truth” (Diamond 369-71). Irigaray is thus credited for the theory of subversive mimicry in a postmodern feminist context (explicated more extensively in *The Sex Which Is Not One* (1977)), which predates Bhabha’s theorizations on the subversive capacity of mimicry popularized in a colonial context. But both are invested in destabilizing “the upholding of truth” which facilitates the subjugation of an “Other.”

Moreover, mimicry must not be confused with masquerade. In “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” Diana Fuss notes that both masquerade and mimicry are elements of mimesis given they are forms of imitation. But there are “levels” to imitation. In recent (as of 1994) feminist theory, masquerade stands in opposition to mimicry. Mimicry, she explains, is the “parodic hyperbolization” of a role, or the “deliberate or playful performance of a role, whereas masquerade denotes “the unconscious assumption of a role,” or “nonironic imitation” (24). Mimicry is thus subversive in its capacity to ironize dominant systems of representations (Fuss 24). This differentiation is applicable within a postcolonial context as well.

While colonial mimicry is indeed subversive in the discourse of postcolonial theory, it is also a viable method of colonial domination (Fuss 24; Bhabha 122-23). It occurs when a colonized subject assimilates and performs the politics, the psychology, the language, and all forms of cultural expression of the colonizer, to gain access to the political, socio-cultural, and economic privileges assigned to whiteness and the mother country only. As Fuss interprets it, the “Imperial Subject,” who lays exclusive claims to subjectivity and cultural intelligibility (through “the upholding of truth”), forces the
colonized population to “mime alterity” so as to enforce subjugation (24). It is therefore a “complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha 122). But ironically, Bhabha writes, “The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure . . .,” which means the ultimate goal is to produce a “reformed, recognizable Other” that is “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 122, 123). The oft-quoted Kanye West line that reiterates this concept is “Even if I’m in a Benz, I’m still a nigga in a coupe” (“All Falls Down”). In other words, even if the Black man assimilates the cultural and economic demands of the “Imperial Subject,” he can never fully attain the status of “Imperial Subject.” If he does, his domination is no longer an option. Instead, he remains a masquerading buffoon (unless his purchase of a German luxury vehicle constitutes “parodic hyperbolization”). The logic is to construct a colonial state that at once stabilizes cultural and racial hierarchies and reflects the regime’s civilizing mission.

But how does assuming the identity of the colonizer ever become an option? Bhabha pivots from Frantz Fanon’s theorizations of the colonial subject’s psychic identification with the white colonizer in Black Skins, White Masks. Fanon argues that the colonial power engenders a “dependency complex,” whereby the Negro surrenders an autonomous conception of self and must reflect back the socio-cultural codes of the colonial regime—hence the “white mask.” It is as West raps in “All Falls Down,” “They made us hate ourselves and love their wealth.” In Decolonizing the Mind (1986), Kenyan theorist and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong’o explains the conditions that precipitate cultural hegemony in a colonized society. He argues that the cultural annihilation of
indigenous belief systems was the most nefarious weapon of imperialism. He posits, “[The cultural bomb] makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves . . .” (3). Because the Black colonized man is convinced that he “has no culture, no civilization, and no ‘long historical past’” (Fanon, Black Skin 17), and is said to be impervious to these things, Fanon interprets masquerading as a method of survival in colonial societies, in that colonized subjects attempt to gain access to the world of the colonizer. It is the colonized subject’s will to hoist him or herself above his or her “animal status.”

Fanon offers no subversive mode of transcending the masquerading of the white power structure. But Bhabha recognizes the “ambivalence” (122) of colonial discourse, or the fact that the colonial subject, as “‘partial’ presence” and double inscription of colonial authority, fixes colonial discourse as uncertainty (123), thus undermining its authoritative representation that supposedly warrants its imitable capacity. Bhabha thus takes Fanon to task for his postulation of an indefinite, absolute masquerading of the white Western colonizer (86-87). Diana Fuss, however, illustrates that within a French colonial regime, masquerading was oftentimes a precondition for subversive mimicry given the material conditions of the regime, or that in some (revolutionary) contexts, mimicry “impersonates” masquerade if the colonized should live to tell his story (28). But in the spaces in which Kanye West navigates, I do not interpret his appropriation of the white world in “Black Skinhead,” in this case, of a “skinhead,” as “nonironic imitation” for survival purposes, bearing in mind Fuss’s logic. There is textual evidence that indicates otherwise, such as the manner in which West conspicuously confronts the
“colonial presence” with “threatening differences of its enunciative function” (Bhabha 171), as a mimicking “‘partial’ presence” of white supremacist-colonial authority. A difference in particular consists of the discursive construction of “blackness” and Black masculinity as animal. When West dons the white mask, he does not affirm its ideologies regarding Black ontology, and he instead inserts what are, according to Bhabha, “contradictory belief[s],” which are double articulations of colonial discourse’s “rules of recognition” (Bhabha 171,162). Bhabha argues that “these disavowed knowledges return to make the presence of colonial authority uncertain” (171). Thusly, the mask is worn subversively.

Kanye West does, however, in his media persona and personal choices mostly, begin to ask for inclusion and recognition in the ruling class and culture in the later stages of his artistry. West has received an honorary doctorate degree from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago in 2015, he has donned the insignia of the Confederate flag, and he has appropriated Eurocentric cultural practices strategies of domination (i.e. the tongue of the “Mother Country” and patriarchal ideals). Most insist that these “off-putting” gestures / decisions either contradict his earlier ethnocentric cultural narratives and anti-white supremacist rants and performances, or they appear to counteract the Black liberation agenda, confirming the “supremacy” of the white race in the process. In either case, many reasonably argue that they serve as evidence of “masquerading.” Perhaps West is masquerading “whiteness” in these instances—to avoid social death in the artistic spaces in which he dwells. However, this chapter challenges such interpretations by arguing that Kanye West’s assumed masquerading of “whiteness” in “Black Skinhead” at least, constitutes a tongue-in-cheek, parodic assumption of, not a
skinhead per se, but “whiteness” in general and its sign, and results in the production of an interstitial space wherein ambivalence is recognized and fixed identities (in this case, Black and white) are “revolutionized,” resulting in the manifestation of a new, negotiated identity.

Moreover, where hybridity is concerned, Bhabha argues against the hybrid’s recuperation of an essentialist, originary cultural identity. Yet, West’s mimetic performance discussed in this chapter demonstrates the mobilization of essentialist identifications of “blackness” in order to “revolutionize” both opposing identities, in the service of negotiating “an-other Black self,” a phrase I borrow from cultural sociologist and race theorist Shirley Anne Tate. In Black Skins, Black Masks: Hybridity, Dialogism, Performativity (2005), writing in a Black feminist context, Tate rejects Bhabha’s denial of an essentialist identity in the construction of a hybrid subject, in that the new identity—“an-other Black” subject—is erected upon what Paul Gilroy calls a “changing same” in The Black Atlantic (1997). For Tate, recuperating prescriptive, cultural and racist identities of “blackness”—a “Black same”—enables the “radical revision” of [Black] identity, which Bhabha argues occurs within the third space. However, Tate insists that the “revision” of such “essences” suggests the “impossibility of a once and for all definitive Black [. . .] identity” (33). I employ the chain worn on the automaton in the video as evidence of a “CHAINging same,” and I argue that the elusiveness of the automation in the “Black Skinhead” video dramatizes this impossibility. Thus, in my analysis of “Black Skinheads,” I will draw from both Bhabha’s and Tate’s conceptions of hybridity, which emanate from philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, to demonstrate how the production of this third space of identification is a viable strategy to
exhume the buried, overdetermined Black agents, given, as Bhabha argues, it is a space “where ‘presencing’ begins” (Bhabha 7) and where colonial authority is displaced.

II: Analysis of “Black Skinhead”: Subversive Mimicry

When Kanye West created “Black Skinhead,” one cannot know for sure if he was cognizant of the specific manner in which the skinhead culture devolved into an adherent of white supremacist power and Euro-(white) American colonial domination, or whether he was mindful of the way in which its nascent class-conscious anarchism ironically evolved into a racialized authoritarian posture. Nevertheless, the specifics of its transformation are indisputable. But what is clear is that West reveals a general awareness of how America’s organizational and political structures are erected upon a racial ideology of white supremacy, and how the Black male body is oppressed within this structure. The juxtaposition of replicated images of undifferentiated Black male bodies and Klan hoods are testaments to this inference. Additionally, given the song’s title, he obviously views the skinhead subculture as a complicit affiliate of America’s racist identity. What is also abundantly clear (as I will later demonstrate) is that “Black Skinhead” is a “deliberate and playful performance of a role” (Fuss 24). Ergo, the specifics of the skinhead subculture’s reinforcement of white supremacist and Euro-(white) American colonial ideology and authoritarianism, as well as its wide-ranging referential capacity have to be considered by those who critically interpret the mimetic performance, in both the lyrics and the visual text.

In “Overview of U.S. White Supremacist Groups,” journalist and research analyst John Foster “Chip” Berlet helps to put the subculture’s representational politics into
perspective. He reports that several sociological researchers (Blee 2002; Ferber 1999; Marks 1996) have identified the dominant diverse typologies of the modern American white supremacist movement as the “organizational affiliation,” the Klu Klux Klan; the political and ideological category, neo-Nazism; the political-religious instrument, Christian Identity; and, lo and behold, the youth subculture, the racist skinheads (18). Since white supremacy and colonial domination have historically worked in concert with one another, and scholars acknowledge the interrelatedness of both systems of power\textsuperscript{12}, it can be argued that each typology is conjoined by and is an extension of the undergirding authoritarian philosophies of a white supremacist-colonial “monster” (known to mystify Black male bodies, reducing them to “object status” and divesting them of their humanity), and that they enable its function.

Not only do white supremacy and colonialism demonstrate a concerted effort to dominate, but also, the same can be said of the “tentacles” of this composite “monster.” This explains the conflation of some of some of its typologies in public discourse, and in the visual illustrations in the video even (explained below). The fact that the skinhead is an extension of a white supremacist-colonial “monster,” and the reality that the subculture collaborates with other typologies, some of which are rooted in colonial ideology, such as Christian Identity\textsuperscript{13}, for instance, further demystifies my application of an anti-colonial methodology to a work of art that nominally appropriates a villain judged to be distinctly American. But more importantly, the skinhead, therefore, does not necessarily represent the actual authoritative figure that clutches the shovel, piling mythical constructions upon the Black male body. It is, rather, a metonymic presence of a larger, multifarious, discursive system of power, or “monster” that does.
For West, the skinhead is also proxy for a number of other oppressive entities: the rap industry and white corporations which ventriloquize rappers, forcing them, at once, to embody the physical manifestations of their racist fantasies and desires, as well as non-threatening representations of their brand / labels (“Enter the Kingdom, but watch who you bring home. / They see a Black man with a white woman at the top floor they gon’ come and kill King Kong”); Christian factions that target and demonize him (“If I don’t get ran out by Catholics, here come some conservative Baptists”); and a presumably white middle class America that simultaneously marginalizes the Black body while viewing it as an instrument of entertainment (“Middle America packed in / Came to see me in my Black skin”). Also, given his inclusion of Klan hood images, one can infer that he conflates skinheads and the white supremacist hate group, the Klu Klux Klan. That West titles the track “Black Skinhead” and makes reference to other oppressive instruments of white power is not cause for concern considering the (ideological) interrelatedness of each of “the monster’s” tentacles, which are apparently not limited to the four highlighted in the paragraph above. What follows is evidence of Kanye West’s conscious and parodic assumption of a skinhead, followed by an analysis of how West subverts the authority of this particular apparatus of the white supremacist-colonial system of domination, by recognizing the uncertainty of its power.

“Black Skinhead” abounds in evidence that indicates West’s imitation of a skinhead. Similar to the Jamaican Rude Boys’ initial appropriation of the performative elements of skinhead-punk rock culture in the 1960s\textsuperscript{14}, I interpret “Black Skinhead” as an appropriation of the punk rock-skinhead musical tradition. But unlike the post-Independence Jamaican Rude Boys who eventually divorced the racist skinheads and
found refuge in a conspicuously pro-Black, revolutionary tradition (Stratton 71), West, an economically privileged artist living within an American “Empire,” has chosen instead a mode of resistance made possible within the dominant culture. Chanting in the hook, for instance, is revelatory of the classic football chants heard in Oi!, a subgenre of British punk rock. West’s manic, thunderous delivery (In fact, he “[p]ardon[s]” himself for “getting [his] scream on!”) is somewhat consistent with punk rock’s verbal cadences—its shouting and accentuated, harsh, erratic vocals. The hardcore, bass-heavy beat consisting of simplistic yet defined, often fast-paced drums is not only an element of punk rock but is also a sample from the famous rock singer, Gary Glitter. Moreover, I argue that the muscular disposition of the automaton in the video reifies not merely stereotypical hypermasculinity historically associated with mythical Black masculinity, especially the “Black rap body,” but also the machismo, which is characteristic of both male and female skinheads—a point highlighted in Tiffini Travis and Perry Hardy’s Skinheads: A Guide to an American Subculture (2012). Additionally, during West’s first live performance of the track in 2013 on Saturday Night Live, he donned the distinctive punk / skinhead medal-studded motorcycle leather jacket and incorporated the dark, menacing ambiance of punk rock’s visual aesthetics. Finally, given the title and the automaton in the video that resembles West, listeners can infer that West substitutes himself and his own social context for an absent white skinhead, similar to the manner in which the Jamaican Rude Boys substituted themselves for the absent skinheads, when the punk-rock, skinhead subculture arrived in Jamaica in the 1960s.15

The Loss of “Representational Authority”
Kanye West’s mimetic performance in “Black Skinhead” undermines white supremacist-colonial representations. This occurs through what Bhabha phrases as a “loss of representational authority” (131). According to Bhabha, “Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire,” in that it also “raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations” (Bhabha 129). That is, who is to say that a white colonizer or a white supremacist (skinhead) is the incarnation of the “hegemonic Subject” / model to be copied—that the European version of humanism must be imitable? The white supremacist-colonizer is self-appointed as the “true referent” that “authoritatively” underwrites cultural and ontological intelligibility. But the colonizer’s loss of “representational authority” (concerning culture, humanness, subjectivity, etc.) is established in a number of ways. I here examine how this occurs through the ensuing consequences of the colonized subject’s displacement of the colonial gaze as s/he mocks the burdensome demand of identification (Bhabha 123).

The white supremacist-colonizer’s civilizing mission is mobilized vis-à-vis an anxious desire for the reproduction of a Self-Same. In other words, the colonizer demands the “narcissistic self-reflection” (Fuss 23) of everything white and all of its symbolic constitutions. But in desiring a mirror image of himself, in Fuss’s paraphrase of Bhabha, the “Imperial Subject inadvertently places himself in the perilous position of object—object of the Other’s aggressive, hostile, and rivalrous acts of incorporation” (Fuss 23). The white supremacist then relegates himself to the role of a fetish in the process, and by extension, object, which means Otherness and subjectivity can no longer be “claimed as a prerogative of the colonizer alone” (Fuss 23). This results in the loss of
“representational authority.” Additionally, it occurs by mocking the fetish, which distorts the signs of “whiteness” and white supremacy. Both instances of subversion operate in tandem with one another, because as the initial disciplinary gaze is displaced and returned, mockery occurs in the process, undermining the white supremacist-colonial “monster’s” “representational authority.”

But first, the impetus for Kanye West’s aggressive and “rivalrous act of incorporation” of whiteness must be briefly explored. West’s music is littered with songs or lyrics that reflect his awareness of and frustration with the objective for him (and bodies / artists alike) to assume the subjectivity of “almost the same [as the “true, white male referent’’] but not quite.” For instance, in “Gorgeous” (2010), West raps, “I thought I chose a field where they couldn’t sack me.” Given the quarterback sack constitutes the tackling of the quarterback to prevent the forward pass, he is using the implied homonym, “field” as in football field, and “field” as in career, to metaphorically make the case that his intention was to choose a space (rap music, arguably the center of Black expressive culture today) that would enable unfettered (i.e., the sack) Black visibility or “cultural signification” (Fuss 21). However, West’s epiphany is this: “As long as I’m in Polo smiling, they think they got me / But they would try to crack me if they ever see a black me.” In other words, as long as West is an “authorized version of [blackness]” (Bhabha 126; my italics), mobilizing the “narcissist demands of colonial authority” (Bhabha 126)—that is, reinforcing the “civilizing” tastes and affinities of the white supremacist-colonizer (such as donning a brand of clothing associated with an aristocratic sport), his ascendancy is uninhibited. But the very second his sartorial choices are too urban or his music exclusively contains meditations on an indigenous cultural past (Bhabha’s first
space) as was the case with his first two albums, and to a certain extent, the third, he is “cracked,” meaning he summons the surveillance and the repressive instruments of the prevailing disciplinary powers.

As such, returning to “Black Skinhead,” West’s appropriation of the skinhead must be read as an oppositional gesture (for which he prides himself) aimed at white supremacy. The direct address toward the Black community in “Black Skinhead” (“You niggas ain’t doing shit” and “You niggas ain’t breathin’ you gasping”) may suggest that West is taking other members of the Black community to task for launching empty complaints of a power structure. While this is true, I read it as a pretext or lyrical aside, rather, and not his main agenda. I argue that the hostility—demonstrated by his manic delivery (“Pardon I’m getting my scream on”), his admission of being a “menace,” the aggression of the automaton, and the sinister ambiance in the video—is unequivocally directed toward the white power structure to which he is compelled to “mime” and submit, thereby rendering the performance a “rivalrous act of incorporation” of the “skinhead.”

But West undermines its “representational authority” as his mimetic performance conceals “the displacing gaze of the disciplined,” which unseats the initial colonial “look of surveillance” (Bhabha 127) and exposes the colonizer’s self-objectification. He does this by titling the song after a skinhead and not a cultural figure or signifier of a distinctly Black cultural tradition. His model is not a Black cultural figure. Instead, West’s choice of referent, the skinhead, became one of many enforcers of white power, nationalism, supremacy, and autonomy. The implication is that West appears cognizant of the narcissistic demands for himself and other hypervisible Black male bodies to
reflect back white, racist formulations of identity. So, West is consciously invoking a prized and fetishized typology or “tentacle” of the white supremacist-colonial “monster”: a skinhead. Though he can only embody a “partial presence” of a skinhead, “the burden of identification” (Fuss 23) also involves adhering to and promoting the doctrinal beliefs of the entire “body” or “edifice” to which it is attached. The “supremacy” of whiteness / white skin privilege, and the naturalization of socially constituted hierarchies are of utmost importance.

Yet, as the halfway house established for the veterans in *Invisible Man*, and the convivial manner of discursively constructing the Black male body as animal depicted in *Blues* remind us, these umbrella principles are normalized and institutionalized. In this case, normalization and institutionalization, in part, occurs through the production of racially “pure” and homogenous societies, a fundamental ideology of each of the factions of white supremacy, as discussed in Berlet’s “Overview of U.S. White Supremacists Groups” (18). The Klan, for instance, was birthed out of a need to reverse the gains of Reconstruction—namely the integration of the Black “citizen” in the political sector as well as in the social body of America following the Civil War. Where the latter is concerned, during the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the Klan enforced Jim Crow laws through the lynching of Black men accompanied by genital mutilation. This brutal act of violence was symptomatic of white patriarchy’s psycho-sexual anxieties regarding the copulation of white women and Black men. The goal: for white males to fortify their proprietary relationship with white women, given the women’s semiotic roles in the establishment of racial “purity.”
Kanye West makes apparent “the burden of identification” through his invocation of white America’s obsession with the sexual dynamics of racial separatism and the resolve to prevent the “contamination” of the white race verbally when he raps, “Enter the kingdom / But watch who you bring home. / They see a Black man [Kanye West] with a white woman at the top floor they gon’ come and kill King Kong.” I refer to these lines to demonstrate how West is able to dispose of the skinhead as a stand-in for the white supremacist-colonizer responsible for the mythological construction of “blackness” and Black maleness, by undermining its authority through a feigned identification with the skinhead (or the white supremacist / Eurocentric / colonialist ideologies that it mobilizes rather) and by feigning his investment in the desired social order: he must “watch” whom he “bring[s] home.” Consider that he is “devoted,” he declares, to the assumed brutish nature of Black males, as purported by white supremacist discourse during post-Reconstruction: “I’ve been a menace for the longest / But I ain’t finished, I’m devoted / And you know it, you know it.” This also occurs through his employment of the very popular cultural myth that white America created as a symbolic enunciation of its psycho-sexual anxieties and repressed desires (i.e. the “King Kong” line). As Achilles Mbembe asserts in his analysis of the relations of power in a “postcolony” in On the Postcolony, “The signs, vocabulary, and narratives that the [state power] produces are . . . officially invested with a surplus of meanings that are not negotiable and that one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge” (103). West is thus exposing the discursive fetish of state power, reflecting back, not just the gaze of the “skinhead” and its co-conspirators (namely the KKK), but also what the gaze conceals. Because the gaze conceals fetishized ideology, the “Imperial Subject” that creates and
propagates the ideology and discourse, becomes “imperial subject” (rather than “Imperial Subject”), as Fuss explains it, and worse, object of imitation (23). As object, it compromises its “representational authority,” as it can no longer effectively monopolize humanness and subjectivity.

The “skinhead,” as the metonymic stand-in for the Klan, also relinquishes its representational authority in the manner in which West returns the disciplinary gaze: through mockery and distortion. If Klan hoods were (and still are) the characteristic regalia of the faction responsible for eradicating “animalistic” Black male bodies, West returns the gaze through a visual parody and distortion of this symbol. These are indeed Klan hoods and not mere aesthetic accentuations in the background, as they appear to be in the later frames, given that the first shot is a still, silent frame of three black Klan hoods revealing beady eyes underneath. This image expands and distorts as the frame shifts, and is transposed into two upside down white, triangular, geometrical shapes, which viewers now inevitably associate with Klan hoods. In fact, each time the Klan hoods appear they are either inverted or black as opposed to their typical upright and stark white appearance. When West raps the King Kong reference, two Klan hoods are symmetrically positioned on the left and right side of the elusive, performing automaton. They are white, yet they are inverted, indicating that West, as imitator, “inhabit[s] fully a performative role while still remaining outside of it” (Fuss 28). Even when they are upright, as they are in the first frame, they are black in color. If acceding to white supremacy’s ideology is an integral element of donning “the mask,” then in distorting the Klan hoods, West not only symbolically mocks the regalia of the physical enforcers of
white supremacy, but also undermines the “representational authority” of its discourse that constructs Black men as animalistic destroyers of “white purity.”

So then, distorting the signified image of white supremacist authority constitutes a site where mimicry is transposed into mockery, which according to Bhabha, threatens the “reforming, civilizing mission” (123). The colonial authority cannot achieve legitimation if parodied or reduced to a travesty. I have argued, following Fuss, that returning the narcissistic gaze of the white supremacist / “Imperial Subject” reduces him to a fetish / object. Mbembe, however, argues that the postcolonial autocrat and state power of the postcolony willingly defines his / itself as a fetish (111). Yet we both view the fetish through the lens of objectification. Mbembe takes this concept further by arguing that the fetish is an object “that aspires to be made sacred” (111). As such, ridiculing or parodying the “fetish,” as West does the Klan hoods is a transgressive act. This means the objectified image of the Klan hood as a symbol of white authority, in the words of Mbembe, “is brought down to earth” (112).

In “Signs Taken for Wonders,” Bhabha explains this in his discussion of the native Indians who used the Bible as an instrument of bartering, and worse, as “waste paper,” as reported by the dejected British missionary (174). This missionary’s report concerning the “inappropriate,” repetitious actions of the natives, “emerges as a question of colonial authority” in that Christianity, as the discourse of authority, forbade any adaptations of the Bible (Bhabha 172, 69), especially, the grotesque parody of using it as toilet paper. This disidentifying act was sacrilegious and so disrupted the authoritative origin of the discourse, exposing the Word’s “referential power,” or lack thereof. The same analysis applies to “Black Skinhead.” In mocking the original constitution of the
Klan hood, the agents of the white supremacist-colonizer (the skinhead, the symbolic Klansman—both oftentimes functioning in conjunction with one another) are stripped of their exemplary status. It can thus be argued that West destabilizes the hierarchy in place and mocks the white supremacist-colonizer’s power to be a “true referent.”

Another manner in which West’s mimetic performance illuminates the “observer becom[ing] the observed” (Bhabha 127), and, by extension, the “loss of representational authority,” is through incorporating symbolically, the “Manichaean” world order that white supremacy has worked tirelessly to engineer. This can be deduced from the white-black visual contrast throughout the video. Fanon helps us understand the symbolic constitutions of the white-black binaries in a colonial regime, which visually emerge in the video. In *Black Skin, White Masks* and in *The Wretched of the Earth*, he explicates these opposing binaries, which he argues constitutes the Manichaen, colonial world (27; 41 respectively). In *Black Skin*, in “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” he interprets this world, from the vantage point of a Black woman, as two Black and white “poles in perpetual conflict” (27). Fanon elaborates, “I am white; in other words, I embody beauty and virtue, which have never been black . . .” (27). In *The Wretched*, he returns to analyzing the mechanisms of the Manichaen colonial world, arguing that it is such that “the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil” (41). He maintains, “The ‘native’ is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is . . . the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil” (41).

Hence, in a Manichaen society, the sign for “whiteness” denotes, at once, a racial category, a color, as well as ideological correlatives (“beauty,” “virtue,” “ethics,” etc.);
the same goes for its obverse, “blackness.” The black mask that envelops the Black automaton’s face, and the fog of blackness in which West, as well as the “evil” wolves (which can “destroy all that comes near” as does the colonized subject supposedly (Fanon, *The Wretched* 41)) that Black bodies are said to reify, dwells, illustrate the associative stereotypes of “blackness” in a colonial world. Not once is the Black automaton positioned inside of a white backdrop, indicating his “distance” from superiority, beauty, aptitude, humanness, and every other correlative that “whiteness” has come to signify. The gaze is thus displaced and returned insofar as the only time there is a solid white backdrop is during the scene in which three distinct Klan hoods appear. (But as I have already argued, West mocks the authoritative power of the Klan hoods by altering their original constitution).

In short, West mimes the Manichaean construction of the colonial world, which, as Fanon posits is affirmed and “propounded as an absolute” (*The Wretched* 41). This means the colonized (Kanye West), as “narcissistic self-reflection” of the colonizer (Fuss 23), is burdened to identify with the construction of the colonial society—the manner in which, in the words of Mbembe, state power “seeks to institutionalize itself” (103), which West both exposes and feigns, symbolizing the displacement and return of the gaze. In the process, this Manichaean construction becomes a fetish. But as West demonstrates via the Klan hoods, as fetish, it is not merely object, but an “object of derision” (Mbembe 107). Hence, the subversive capacity of mimicry is such that the colonizer, as object of imitation, suffers a loss of “representational authority,” as the mimicking subject “mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable” (Bhabha 125).
West’s mimetic performance in “Black Skinhead” yields the presence of a subversive hybrid. According to Bhabha, the narcissistic demand for the colonized subject’s mimetic performance of identity “requires a theory of hybridization . . .” (156). As the disavowed, “inappropriate object” is obliged to mime the identity of the white colonizer (in this case, the skinhead), according to Bhabha, “the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different – a mutation, a hybrid” (159). But since this hybrid is the double inscription of colonial identity, it distorts and “disturbs the visibility and imitability of the colonial presence and makes the recognition of its authority problematic” (159; my emphasis). Therefore, given the overarching goal of this chapter is to depose the white supremacist-colonial discursive power responsible for burying Black bodies beneath mythical markers, and given hybridity’s capacity to achieve this ameliorative end, what follows are textual analyses that reveal the primary evidences of hybridity—one being the exposure and recognition of the ambivalence of colonial discourse.

Bhabha also expounds upon how the hybrid moment constitutes the revaluation of identities that are essences or fixed, social constructions of race and culture. Implicit in hybridization are binaries, which in the case of “Black Skinhead” are polemical racial and cultural identities. The binaries in “Black Skinhead” are symbolized by the white-black contrast discussed earlier as revelatory of the socio-political structure of the Manichean colonial world—and are implicated in the lyrics. The “Black skinhead” automaton is not a physical manifestation of “home,” in its originary, essential, stable constitutions. “First space” iterations of an essence of Black culture or race—such as a fetishized African
cultural past alluded to in West’s lines “Back out the tomb, bitch” (explained later)—ultimately undergo revision. Nor is the figure an imprisoned victim of its own essence (Fanon, *Black Skin* 18-19)—the visible appearance of derogatory signifiers of “blackness” and “Black masculinity” (discussed in chapter two as “excess animality,” objecthood, non-alterity, the Hulk, etc). Both identities are disavowed and deemed “inappropriate” in a white supremacist-colonial social world. Furthermore, the “Black skinhead” must also not be perceived as a masquerading presence of the dominating culture of “world”—of transcendental whiteness (Fuss 22) and its myriad of mythical markers connoting its fixed “superiority.”

In his “mask” as a “Black skinhead,” West mimics the white supremacist-colonizer in a manner that carves out a third, interstitial space of identity wherein a cultural hybrid emerges. Disrupting the binaries for the production of hybridization necessitates a “radical revision,” or a “rearticulation of the ‘sign’” of fixed, polarized identities (Bhabha 246). Visual evidence of West’s disrupting the white-black contrast manifests in the presence of the automaton that is illuminated to the extent that it appears grey in color in several frames. That is, the greyish color torso and chest of the automaton in several frames can be read as connoting a re-articulated identity or what Shirley Anne Tate calls “an-other Black” self: it is a cultural hybrid—something new. But to conceive of the “newness,” the “something else” (Bhabha 41) in its complexity, the grey coloring, which traditionally signifies the fusion of white and black, must be complicated. Hybridization in “Black Skinhead” does not merely signify the fusion of “whiteness” and “blackness,” or “home” and “world.” Rather, the implied hybridity in the song and video can also be interpreted through Bhabha’s theorization of hybridity that
invokes philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of “intentional hybridity.”

In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), Bakhtin differentiates between two modes of dialogic hybridization. He argues, as reiterated in cultural and postcolonial theorist Robert Young’s *Colonial Desire* (1995), that the two forms of hybridization are “organic hybridity,” which constitutes the fusion of two languages, and “intentional hybridity,” which “sets different points of view against each other in a conflictual structure . . .” (Young 19,20). According to Young, Bakhtin is invested in dialogical hybridity “that has been politicized and made contestatory” (20); Bhakhtin’s discussion of hybridity in language becomes ripe for “cultural interaction” (Young 20). Therefore, Bhabha, according to Young, redeployes and transforms “intentional hybridity,” which “enables a contestatory activity” that involves pitting cultural differences against each other in a colonial context (Young 20-21). Similar to Bakhtin’s employment of hybridity as a means to unsettle authority in language, in Bhabha’s interstitial, post- / colonial space, hybridization is also the site that enables the dethroning of colonial power through the recognition of the ambivalence of authoritative discourses.

Additionally, Bhabha, as well as Young, borrows Bakhtin’s notion that the “*intentional*” hybrid, contestatory space does not reveal an amalgam or a stable new form composed of essences or other identities in their original constitutions, but as Young explains, something closer to “restless[ness]” and “discontinuity,” or, “the permanent revolution of forms” (24). Therefore, I interpret the greyish color automaton / Black body as an “intentional” hybrid figure since evidence in the text suggests it is symbolic of a reevaluation of “unitary” and essentialist conceptions of race and culture (Bhabha 159).
Bhabha makes the point that hybridity is the “name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal,” which occurs through the construction of essentialist identifications necessary to “preserve the presence of [white supremacist-colonial] authority” (159). It stands to reason that essentialism must be “exceeded,” in the words of “Bhabha” to undermine colonial authority (159); and the necessary transcendence or the “strategic reversal” constitutes the “radical revision” of essentialist conceptions of “blackness” through a “permanent revolution of forms.” In short, displaying the manner in which transcending the binaries occurs by “revolutionizing” essentialist or socially produced identities is the other means to substantiate a subversive hybrid presence in the text, and to subsequently undermine colonial authority.

Bhabha’s analysis of the “unhomely” condition parallels and extrapolates his theory of hybridization discussed above, as it reproduces the constituents of “intentional hybridity.” It is, in fact, among the first literary explications of The Location of Culture’s overall premise of hybridity emerging between the interstices of two polarities. Bhabha’s writes that the “unhomely” condition “does provide a ‘non-continuist’ problematic that dramatizes” the ambivalence of a dominant discourse, as well as takes stock of “paradoxical boundar[ies] between” two opposing binaries (Bhabha 14). The “unhomely” also yields a permanent transformation of new forms given Bhabha’s insistence that it constitutes the “relocation of the home and the world” (13). This means that both spaces are uprooted from their original, fixed constitutions, and their boundaries obfuscated, even as one envelops the other.

Thus far, the “unhomely” parallels the defining characteristics of Bhabha’s theory of hybridity (which is consistent with Bakhtin’s “intentional hybridity”) in that two
opposing forms / perspectives are set against one another, ambivalence is exposed, their boundaries are confused, and there is a re-mapping of forms. This is all dramatized in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, discussed in the introduction section of *The Location*, titled “The Unhomely Lives: The Literature of Recognition.” For my purposes, Bhabha’s application of the “unhomely” in *Beloved* helps to elucidate further his concept of hybridity to my application of it to “Black Skinhead.”

*The “Unhomely” Revealed: Ambivalence in Beloved*  

In the first place, the opposing binaries are “home” / “world,” public and private spaces, as well as two opposing discourses on black infanticide in the American slave South during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. But these opposing binaries are rendered visible through the exposure of discursive ambivalence. In *Beloved*, Bhabha underscores how “the continual eruption of ‘undecipherable languages’ of slave memory”—dramatized vis-à-vis the reemergence of Sethe’s “demonic child,” Beloved, from the dead / slave past—“obscures the historical narrative of “irrational, unethical” infanticide,” so as “to articulate the unspoken” (22; my emphasis). That is, the narrative of the “savage” act of infanticide undergoes disjuncture, losing its authority and salience to the emergence of a denied perspective: the “personal, psychic history” of “a child murdered by her own mother” (Bhabha 15) in a desperate act of protection from and resistance to a dehumanizing public institution. Thus, herein lie the three sets of opposing binaries: the public institution of slavery versus a private, domestic act committed by a slave mother; the invasion of the private domestic space of “home” by an outside world of a ghost that signifies the memory of the historical trauma of slavery; and, obviously, two contrasting discourses on black infanticide.
Moreover, Bhabha’s explanation of the ambivalence of hybridity is that an authoritative discourse, as Young interprets it, “loses its univocal grip on meaning and finds itself open to the trace of the language of the other” (Young 21). This is precisely what occurs in Beloved. The ambivalence is such that the historical narrative of black infanticide, propagated and critiqued by those “rational voices of Enlightenment,” finds itself in a crisis given it is now the representation of “double articulation” (Bhabha 162). Sethe’s recognition of the ambivalence of the dominant discourse on infanticide occurs through Beloved’s reemergence and conjuring of her own and collective, traumatic memories of a historical past, and in the way that Beloved also incites Sethe to tap into her repressed, traumatic memories while at Sweet Home. The exposure and recognition of ambivalence constitutes the presence of the hybrid / “unhomely.”

“Permanent Revolution of Forms”: “World” and “Home”

The “permanent revolution of forms” is underway in Beloved as well. 124 Bluestone Road represents the “unhomely,” interstitial space wherein Bhabha’s notion of an “overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (2) takes place. These domains of difference are “home” and “world.” Morrison “displaces” and “revolutionizes” both binaries in the novel, creating the possibility for their re-conceptualization / contextualization, and a third space of “newness.” Prior to Beloved’s arrival, 124 Bluestone is a dwelling occupied by Sethe and her youngest daughter, Denver. The narrative opens with, “124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of baby’s venom” (3). It is the place where Sethe saws the neck of her two-year-old nameless child upon the arrival of her former slaveholder, schoolteacher, who has come to re-enslave Sethe and her children. Therefore, everyone recognizes Sethe as a murderer. One of Denver’s classmates rattles
her world by asking, “Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder?” (123). As such, their home is condemned, and the family is ostracized and deemed pariahs of the community. Even Sethe’s sons “crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them” (3). Thus, to the Cincinnati black community and to the reader early on, 124 is originally no more than haunted grounds occupied by a deranged mother and her anti-social daughter. But Morrison reveals this “home” space permanently transformed as it is invaded by the outside “world” of historical memory reified by an embodied ghostly presence that is ironically, already a part of the home—hence the blurring of boundaries. But understanding the revaluation of “world” first makes visible how “home” is a “revolutionized” space.

Beloved is not merely a “demonic ghost” that haunts and disrupts the domestic, “unhomely” space of 124. Morrison enables the “permanent revolution” of “world” through Beloved. After reconstructing the narrative, it becomes clear that Beloved represents, “uncannily,” the “forgotten” cruelty and terror of slavery that led to “the violent history of black infant deaths” (Bhabha 15). During the height of Sethe and Beloved’s intoxicating moments together, in both of their desperate attempts to reclaim what death and time had stolen, the narrator informs readers that the dynamics of their relationship drastically changed. Beloved provokes Sethe to remember the traumatic events that occurred in the aftermath of fleeing Sweet Home, which inevitably compels the evocation of the events and conditions that led to her decision to escape in the first place. In his essay, “Putting ‘His Story Next to Hers’,” literary critic, Steven V. Daniels phrases it as Beloved “agitat[ing] memory, explicitly in Sethe . . .” (17). The narrator informs readers that Beloved “took the best of everything—first,” and that “the more she
took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered for her children . . .” (284). This “taking behavior” can be interpreted as leaving Sethe with nothing at her disposal—nothing to divert her attention from the traumas of her past. But when Beloved is unmoved by Sethe’s initial lighthearted responses, Daniels writes that “curious questions turn into serious accusations of abandonment” (17), to which Sethe impassionedly denounces. She pleads with Beloved to understand her intentions, but Beloved probes and “agitats memory” even more, slipping into a fragmented state of consciousness as she recounts the collective African experience during the Middle Passage. Beloved tells Sethe “[t]hat dead men lay on top of her. That she had nothing to eat. Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light” (284). Since Beloved blurs the boundaries between the public and private, the personal and the ancestral, Sethe must resituate her actions in a collective history of brutality and trans-generational trauma, as well as within the context of her own individual accounts. Beloved’s strategic “agitation” is effective because immediately, Sethe is transported back in time, begging for forgiveness and then “counting, listing again and again her reasons” (284). She mentions, for instance, the torture of having to leave Beloved on the ground unattended while she labored in the big house (284).

Beloved is therefore an instrument through which we learn that slavery is constructed upon a system that, according to Paul Gilroy and others, rationalizes terror (raping, starving and caging human beings, and denying African women their right to motherhood, for the sake of white domination), thereby calling into question the philosophical tenants of modernity (Gilroy 220-21), and situating the slave as the first rational being of modernity (DuBois 1935; James 1938; Gilroy 1993; Morrison 1993).
After all, Sethe’s maddening act is ironically a rational strategy of survival and motherly intuition. Her scars are reminders of the dehumanization to which her children would be subjected if recaptured and returned to Sweet Home. So ending Beloved’s young life meant she would never be denied the white prerogative of achieving the status of “liberal subject.” Thusly, Beloved is also “the daughter that returns to Sethe so that her mind will be homeless no more” (Bhabha 25). Sethe now realizes that infanticide was an act of resistance in that it destroyed the master’s property. But, as Bhabha argues, Beloved’s death and return constitute the slave mother’s reclamation of her own property (24).

In this sense, Beloved’s significance must be reconsidered. Beloved is more than the manifestation of an irrational act, a haunting presence or a ghostly voice of the outside world of the angry dead. Dis-possessed, Beloved compels the reconstruction of the ongoing historical narrative of slavery so that its ensuing trauma is conceived from an individualized, gendered, domestic perspective, and from the lens of a revisionist perspective of modernity. But she also enables the reclamation of the dignity of the maternal figure responsible for the blemished reputation of “home” / 124.

“Home” is, itself, revolutionized as well, since it must now be conceived as a space of nurturance and healing rather than a site of abandonment and murder. If before Sethe was a “neglectful mother” who allegedly failed to comfort and protect her children (Beloved laments the fact that no one was there when she cried and that Sethe never waved goodbye before “running away from her” (284)), 124 transforms into the space in which Sethe becomes not merely one who follows the Africanist tradition of honoring a wandering spirit, but also one who is overly hospitable to an embodied apparition whom she protects and nurtures, as she does her living daughter, Denver. She eventually
exceeds her typical motherly duties even, to the dismay of Denver. She feeds Beloved everything that her insatiable appetite desires. Beloved, we are told, “never got enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk. If the hen had two eggs, she got both” (282). When there is nothing tangibly left for Sethe to give Beloved, Sethe offers Beloved her company for hours, even if it means they engage in the most mundane, frivolous activity, which leads to Sethe losing her job and means of sustenance (283). Thus, while the Cincinnati black community may not have been privy to what was transpiring within the haunted dwelling, a filial relationship full of “sweetness” (as symbolized by the sugar Beloved craves) is being restored.

However, as Beloved whines for more sweets, consuming everything around her, and so growing more and more plump by the day, Sethe grows thinner and thinner. Denver notices that “[t]he flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk and there wasn’t a piece of clothing in the house that didn’t sag on her” (281). It is as if Beloved literally consumes Sethe: “Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes” (68). Some critics have read Beloved’s fattening frame juxtaposed to Sethe’s deflated figure cynically in the sense that Beloved’s literal consuming of Sethe is a metaphor for her consuming Sethe’s life and subjective identity. For Sethe proclaims to Paul D in the end that Beloved was her “best thing” (321). Or, some have deemed it an act of retaliation. Their deductions are informed by Denver, who reasons that in ravishing Sethe’s being, Beloved is making Sethe pay for what she did with the saw (295). However, most critics, like Daniels for instance, have interpreted Beloved’s “destructive” appetite as a gluttonous craving for stories from the past. For instance, literary critic, Carl Plasa, interprets this motif as Beloved’s ghostly frame unleashing “a
hunger for the voicing of the unspeakable” (76). Beloved, he argues, “feeds on a diet of Sethe’s past” (76). I also presume to rescue Beloved’s insatiable appetite from a destructive inference and instead recast it in a positive light, employing this argument to do so.

It is plausible to insist that Beloved’s feasting on the memories of Sethe’s past adversely affects Sethe physiologically, and that it does so psychologically as well. Sethe is wasting away and she discloses that “[e]very memory of her past life hurt,” and that “[e]verything in it was “painful and lost” (Morrison 69). But if Beloved’s overconsumption is destructive, it is because pain is a precondition for healing. In forcing Sethe to excavate repressed memories of her traumatic experiences, during which she reveals how much she suffered (Morrison 284), Sethe is exposing her pain while Beloved is, metaphorically eating away her burdens. Painfully, Beloved opens Sethe’s old wounds, which Daniels reminds is “the condition of healing” (17). Further, what is more is that we are reminded of the space in which this healing process takes place. Beloved reacts to Sethe’s memories by throwing plates and salt on the floor and breaking the windowpane in her own frustration, but then they “mended the plates, swept the salt . . .” (285). These details are crucial in that they are indicative of “home,” which for eighteen years had been deemed a haunted space harboring the memory of a murderous act. It now constitutes a space of remembrance, nurturance, and healing.

Finally, 124 can be re-conceptualized as an “unhomely,” interstitial space, which according to Bhabha, encapsulates the negotiation and emergence of identity. As Bhabha points out, a ghost desires recognition given Beloved’s request to Paul D: “I want you to touch me on my inside part and call me my name” (Morrison 137). When Paul D
refuses, Beloved offers him an ultimatum: “Please call it. I’ll go if you call it” (137). This is therefore an act of negotiation. But the identity that is realized is a more comprehensive memory of slavery, and the inherent “unspeakable” cruelties suffered by the enslaved. We learn that after Paul D says Beloved’s name, she does not depart, but rather the lid to his rusted tobacco tin gives (138). The tobacco tin is a materialized mechanism used to repress his traumatic memories of being enslaved at Sweet Home and imprisoned in Georgia in the chain gang. So the “blowing of the lid” is symbolic of the “presencing” of traumatic memories for Paul D related to slavery. Beloved also makes possible the same “presencing” through Sethe. According to Bhabha, Sethe is the “enunciatory site” through which “the inwardness of the slave world [is seen] from the outside”—from the signification of Beloved (Bhabha 23). As Alison Landsberg intuits in Prosthetic Memory (2004), “Beloved’s privileged position as a possessor of memory, despite her dislocation from the family, ultimately enables the abominations from slavery to be aired” (96). Therefore, the “unhomely” space of 124 (in Paul D’s case, its shed) is not merely a space wherein the identity of the ghost materializes, but is also a space wherein the historical violence of slavery in which Beloved personifies, does as well.

In short, hybridity is not a third term that neatly reconciles the tension between two antagonistic stable forms per se (Bhabha, “Signs” 162). Cultural differences or polemical forms are set against one another while developing still, an “interstitial intimacy” (Bhabha 19), in a way that precludes hierarchization and strips the former dominating culture or point of view from its authoritative “rights” in that its ambivalence is exposed. The “unhomely” interstitial space, in the case of Beloved, makes room for the possibility of indigenous, or, individualized, “unspeakable” narratives to become internal
to the perpetuated fictions of the “organic” historical memory of slavery. The birth of this new narrative, constitutes the bridge between “home” and “world,” and is symbolic of a third, discursive space of reality. Therefore, the “unhomely” does not yield the production of an amalgam or a fusion, but rather the “prescencing” of “newness” that is indeed an “insurgent” hybrid (Bhabha 10). Evidence of the hybrid moment in Beloved lies in the recognition and exposure of ambivalence as well as the refiguring or a reconstitution of the polemical forms, “home” and “world.” Moreover, although I have discussed Morrison’s recasting of “home” through the lens of a maternal, filial perspective, Paul D’s significance in the novel, as the embodiment of Black masculinity as a contested space, elucidates the manner in which the Black male body depicted via the automaton in “Black Skinhead” can be interpreted as the “battleground” for agitation and undermining dominant systems of representation and, essentially, the white supremacist-colonial “monster.”

*Hybridity in “Black Skinhead”*

Returning to “Black Skinhead,” the illuminated grey automaton, as well as West’s lyrical iterations, also dramatizes Bhabha’s “restless, uneasy, interstitial hybridity” (Young 24). The mimetic performance reifies antagonistic cultural differences (as signified by the Manichean socio-political order which the video illustrates), as well as the notion of blurred boundaries and identity negotiation. But my primary focal points are the recognition of ambivalence and the “permanent revolution of forms,” which are crucial defining elements of cultural hybridity. Where the former is concerned, I return to a discussion of ambivalence and “the loss of representational authority.” I examine the
manner in which West lyrically challenges and resists white supremacist-colonial stereotypes of “blackness” to expose the uncertainty of master narratives. Moreover, in my analysis of how polemical forms are disrupted and transformed in the construction of hybrid identifications, I depart from Bhabha (since Bhabha argues that “hybridity denies the essentialism of the original or of an original culture” (qtd. in Tate 5), agreeing, instead, with Shirley Anne Tate that essentialist representations of “blackness” and Black culture are ironically mobilized in the process. Whereas postcolonial theorists (led by Gayatri Spivak) have defined this as “strategic essentialism,” Tate insists that hybridity connotes the “presencing” of “an-other Black body,” which is often constituted by what Paul Gilroy has described as a “changing same” (9). Tate argues that in most instances, new identities are not asserted without a racial, cultured, or gendered same. She paraphrases Bhabha to clarify this further: “This is so as the construction of subjects in discourse and the exercise of power through discourse necessitates the articulation of racial and sexual difference” (102). She continues, informing that the oppressed is produced as a “visible” and “knowable” other, yet this identity is integral to the new identity of the oppressed (102). However, this essence of cultural and racial difference is transformed. To demonstrate how a “permanent revolution of new forms” transpires via the mobilization of a “changing same,” I first discuss, briefly, how West’s recuperation of a fixed African cultural identity is transformed, followed by an in-depth extrapolation of the grey automaton’s donning of rap culture’s characteristic “blinged out” chain.

*Ambivalence*
West’s performance exposes the menace of colonial mimicry—ambivalence inherent in “double articulation”—in that he reverses stereotypes of “blackness,” which, Bhabha argues, is an essential function of hybridity. In the chapter “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism,” Bhabha argues that stereotyping is an integral discursive instrument of colonial discourse (95). In other words, colonial domination operates through the production of fixed “constructions of otherness” (Bhabha 95), such as the Black male as “Hulk,” the Black body as a mass of undifferentiated flesh (depicted by the replicated shirtless automatons in the video), or “excess animality” (i.e. the King Kong or the werewolf self-references in the lyrics). In “Signs,” Bhabha reiterates how such constructions sustain colonial authority (155). (I insist that this is why The College Dropout was permissible and highly regarded as a debut album). Thus, when West raps, “I’m aware I’m a wolf, as soon as the moon hit / I’m aware I’m a King, back out the tomb, bitch,” I argue that he is disarming colonial discourse through his displacement of “discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority,” an achievement of hybridity (159).

First, it is no surprise that West appropriates the “discriminatory identity” of “blackness” (the Black body as animal) “authorized” by the colonizer in the first line and literally in the appearance of wolves throughout the video, not merely because it is satirically self-reflexive, but also because, as Bhabha argues, hybridity “reimplicates [colonial powers’] identifications in strategies of subversion . . .” (160-61)—hence the mimeticism of the performance. Moreover, West declares himself a King and associates himself with the empirically proven cultural achievements of African civilization (i.e. ancient African architecture such as Egyptian burial tombs), following his parodic
concession of “blackness” represented as a *mythological construction* in the first line. The Western, gothic, folkloric tradition of the human morphing into a werewolf during full moons is implicated in his punning employment of a synecdoche in the first line. The word “aware” has semantic importance for the sentence’s overall meaning: West is conscious of his alleged “animal-like” nature (here, again, mimicry results in the “observer becom[ing] the observed”). But its significance also lies in its representation of the whole of a part. West uses the word “aware” rather than “know,” for instance, because it encompasses part of the compound word “werewolf,” or at least phonetically. His wordplay here, in conjunction with the moon reference, solidifies his evocation of the popular werewolf mythology—used in this case, as a mis-representation of Black ontology. So the import of the chronological juxtaposition of both lines is such that the second line, “I’m aware I’m a King,” serves as a corrective—a “double articulation”—to the epistemological fabrication implicit in the first line. One could therefore infer that West displays hybridity, since, to reiterate, it is the “name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (Bhabha 159). He does this by denouncing a degraded stereotype of “blackness,” thereby exposing the ambivalence of racist discourse.

To further extrapolate hybridity’s potential to destabilize or overturn “discriminatory identities” and expose discursive ambivalence in the process, the significance of the tomb must be examined. Through his re-appraisal of self and the implication of the collective history of Black excellence (in his alluding to the African Kings and the Pharaohs’ tombs)—West once again demonstrates how hybridity exposes the uncertainty of colonial discursive power, given that the authority of colonial discourse
requires consensual recognition (vis-à-vis “immediate” and “intuitive” validation of its authoritative representations), which means the absence of conflictual judgments of its assumed authority (Bhabha, “Signs” 160). Turning again to the two aforementioned lines, “I’m aware I’m a wolf, as soon as the moon hit / I’m aware I’m a King, back out the tomb, bitch,” as described above, West denies the possibility of consensual recognition of the “discriminatory identity” of the Black body as animal or myth. But there is no verbal disjunctive transition between the two lines to highlight this contention. However, it is underscored by his metaphoric reference of the tomb used for the internment of African Pharaohs and Kings.

West locates himself within the tomb and so within strategically “buried” (as a process of disavowal by way of racist European scientific discourses of the 18th and 19th centuries) cultural heritage of African royalty, given that in ancient Egyptian tradition, only the noble classes (Kings and Pharaohs) were interred in tombs. West thus destabilizes the myth of “Black inferiority,” and consequently calls into question the authoritative narratives of “white superiority.” Further, for my purposes, this line can be interpreted more figuratively as West re-evaluating and then countering the conflation of Black bodies and animals, on the basis that Black bodies have been buried (as the tomb signifies) beneath the rubble of mythical markers. But like Hortense Spillers, West leads us to believe that their exhumation is possible and that he signifies the reincarnation of African royalty (“I’m back out the tomb, bitch”). He is therefore, to echo Bhabha, “inserting . . . insurgent interrogations” into the peremptory discourse (167). Moreover, the pithy enunciation of “bitch” at the end of the line exacerbates his revaluation of the said animalistic character of Black identity, serving as an exclamatory utterance of
discontent. The expletive is a hostile direct address to the implied Imperial Subject. It can be argued that West implicitly entreats the once interpellating white supremacist-colonial gaze (or the gaze of the skinhead), to raise the question of its authorization of colonial representations of “otherness,” thereby solidifying the hybrid presence in the text.

He does not, however, deny the possibility of a civil, refined, or “royal” white subject (unless this subject’s terroristic, irrational strategies of domination are taken into consideration, because acts of terror used to subdue and conquer are unequivocally tantamount to incivility and savagery), in the same way that the murder of an infant cannot be denied as a horrendous act. The logic is similar to Bhabha’s explanation of hybridity’s displacement of “the book” as the sign of colonial authority: “The book retains its presence, but it is no longer a representation of an essence” (163). Rather, through West’s presence as reemerged “African royalty” who is simultaneously a “skinhead,” West implicitly interrogates the Imperial Subject’s / colonial discourse’s monopolization of these categories of identification (in the same way that Morrison—through Beloved—involves yet obscures and disrupts the “historical narrative of infanticide”). In so doing, he refuses to recognize the authority of colonial discourse, how its fixed representations of “blackness” cannot be validated, and how hybridity enables “other ‘denied’ knowledges [to] enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition” (162). In short, because he inserts conflict and exposes the “unpredictability of [colonial discourse’s] authoritative’ presence” (163; my emphasis), he substantiates the presence of a hybrid in the text.

“Permanent Revolution of Forms”: The Chain and Dancing Automaton
All of the above analyses allude to the fact that “whiteness” must be reconceptualized after being forced to relinquish its “representational authority” and ultimately, its “superiority.” As evinced by “Black Skinhead” and Beloved, it is stripped bare of its “transcendental” status once measured against Black cultural productions and repressed, “unspeakable” material realities of Black bodies at the hands of white domination. The white supremacist-colonizer masquerading, here, as a “skinhead,” is no longer a god-like, “true referent.” He is a commoner who has been “brought down to earth.” Since this figure has already been assigned “transformational value” (Bhabha 41) through the exposure of the ambivalence of white supremacist-colonial authority, this section will focus on the opposing binary: the “inappropriate ‘object’.” Essentialist representations of “blackness” and / or normative constructions of “Black masculinity” and homogenized cultural histories of the pasts must undergo transformation as well. The end result is the permanent destabilization and redrawing of both polemical forms, which further substantiates the presence of (“intentional”) hybridity.

West’s invocation of African cultural heritage, via his alluding to ancient African architecture and African royalty, does not imply that he reveals an “essence of présence Africane” (Bhabha 126) per se. Bhabha outright objects to a recuperation of “organic” identifications or the “contiguous transmission of” fetishized, indigenous cultural traditions and identities. Yet he insists upon their “redefinition” (7). While I agree, following Tate, I must add that the notion of essences must be complicated in the sense that a “redefinition,” at times, hinges upon the very fixities or fetishized identity in question. So, in the process of disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse, what West does is pit a homogenized history of an African past against a constructed, fictional
present (where Black ontology, aptitude, and cultural production are concerned), blurring their boundaries in the process, to enable the “presencing” of a new narrative of Black being. But to do so, he utilizes a “changing same”: a fetishized historical tradition of an ancient Egyptian past. One must reconceive of the traditional narrative of “African royalty” (given, again, that West is “back out the tomb”) through the parodic, mimetic invention of a hybrid in the form of a “Black skinhead” who dons black leather jeans, the signature attire of the American Black Panthers during the Black Power era (“For my theme song / My leather black jeans on / My ‘by any means’ on”), and whose character and sexual predilections are explained away via satirical references to the said birthplaces of white, Western European civilizations—ancient Rome and Greece (“I keep it 300, like the Romans / 300 bitches, where the Trojans”). This hybrid figure, albeit disconcerting, is therefore, on the one hand, the result of what Bhabha refers to as the “complex interweavings of history” (7)—and I would add, racial and geographical boundaries. Moreover, West is “back out the tomb” in the form of a “Black skinhead” in “leather black jeans,” who satirically invokes the histories of ancient European societies as self-descriptors. This means the emergent hybrid figure also embodies and / or signifies the “permanent revolution” of a fetishized history of African royalty, and so a “changing same.” It is what “marvels of [West’s] own inventiveness” of self, to echo Hortense Spillers, therefore constituting identity negotiation.

“A Permanent Revolution” of a Chain: a CHAINging Same”

Furthermore, evidence of a hybrid figure in the song and video can be gleaned by “revolutionizing” an essentialist expressive practice of Black culture, such as the donning of a diamond necklace, as worn by the automaton in “Black Skinhead.” In certain
frames, the head of the automaton is completely obscured and hidden by the black background, impelling viewers to only concentrate on the focal point of these frames: the luminous, diamond-incrusted, presumably Cuban-link chain dangling from the neck of the Black body / automaton. Moreover, one could plausibly argue that West is highlighting antagonistic cultural forms or ideals in his inclusion of the chain, given the class-consciousness of the original working-class subculture of skinheads, in contrast to the chain’s traditional materialistic connotation in rap culture. Ironically, West has, himself, honored this tradition. Since the inception of his rap career, Kanye West has branded himself as the artist known for his diamond studded “Jesus pieces.” In “Diamonds from Sierra Leone (Remix)” (2005), he remarks, “It’s in a Black person’s soul to rock that gold / Spend your whole life trying to get that ice.” In fact, a year before, in the video for the track, “Through the Wire,” West portrays himself achieving this aspiration, as he stands before a roaring crowd introducing himself as the “newest member of the Rock-A-Fella team.” This is followed by Dame Dash, co-founder of Rock-A-Fella Records, gifting West with a Roc-A-Fella chain, serving almost as a “rites of passage ceremonial ritual.” Donning the chain is therefore a symbol of authenticity in rap culture. Yet this ostentations lifestyle rendered rap culture susceptible to many reductive critiques over the years.

The obsession with “bling” and flashiness, as rap naysayers and some rappers themselves have posited, cemented the culture (and its practitioners) as overly committed to destruction, materialism, and frivolity, estranging it from its political roots. In the section entitled “Black America Today,” in Atlas of African American History (2007), historian James Ciment reports on how critics have insisted that flashy jewelry in hip-hip
culture “plays to racist stereotypes—stereotypes suggesting that young blacks are only interested in material gain rather than moral uplift” (233). Chuck D makes similar arguments in his 2005 documentary, *Bling: Consequences and Repercussions*, except, like West does in “Diamonds from Sierra Leone (Remix),” he also tackles the issue of rappers’ obsession with “bling” in connection with the deadly diamond trade in African countries. Thus, albeit gaudy, diamond-encrusted, gold and platinum chains are worn by a host of popular culture public figures, not just rappers, this expressive practice is inextricably tied to the ghettoization and conspicuous consumption deemed endemic to rap culture. One could conclude that this is part of the reason why “the Black rap body” is “othered” and is judged as “disposable raw material.” But has West deconstructed and offered a revaluation of the conventional symbolism of the chain, and by extension “the Black rap body?”

As I interpret it, this chain is “revolutionized” and is emblematic of a “CHAINging same.” Ostensibly, West is mobilizing an essentialist representation of “the Black rap body” in rap culture by having the shirtless, “menacing” automaton don the chain. Yet, I see it as hybridity’s production of what Tate terms “an-other Black” self that is at once resistant to “and dependent on a contingent essentialism” (Tate 2). In adorning the automaton with an “iced out” Cuban-link chain, West recoups an essence of “blackness,” reclaiming the characteristic chain of rap culture from its mere capitalist, materialistic signification, and “revolutionizing” it instead.

This “reclaiming” paradigm is similar to the framework observed in Spillers’s and Morrison’s texts. Spillers recasts the Black family as a product of the perverse constructions of gender and subjectivity under captivity, rather than a site of “lack”
juxtaposed to the white Patriarchal family structure. Morrison redefines the historical narrative of Black infanticide by slave mothers in a manner that recontextualizes the act as a rational reaction to a dehumanizing system. Likewise, we can read “Black Skinhead” as a challenge to the “misnaming” of the “inappropriate,” “othered,” Black rap body in the sense that a space for a discussion on the reconfiguration of its renounced aesthetic expressive practice is carved. This is done so by situating the donning of the chain within the context of the repressive, exploitative history of slavery, thereby reclaiming this body in the process.

Hence, all three either reconfigure or “revolutionize” essentialist narratives and identifications, with the latter two permitting the emergence of a third space of hybridization as well, wherein enunciatory sites of self-definition / identity negotiation emerge. Because the significance of the chain is implicit in “Black Skinhead,” given West does not offer a lyrical explanation, I integrate other texts that incorporate, more conspicuously, the symbolic meaning of chains. The character most associated with chains in Beloved, Paul D, as well as lyrics from a song titled “Chain Heavy” on the G.O.O.D. Fridays (2010) compilation album, helps to elucidate the manner in which West permits one to interpret the “revolutionizing” of the worn chain in “Black Skinhead.”

In the first place, the video impels the historicization of the symbolic significance of chains in relation to Black bodies. In the previous chapter, I argued that the markings on the latter version of the automaton’s “flesh” are, in part, reminiscent of the lacerated captive body of slavery, and so unquestionably invoke the memory of slavery. The same can be said of the video’s reproduction of the self / other, subject / object dichotomies
established and maintained in the social structure of slavery (and colonization), via the white-black contrast, and its animation of the said animal-like character of Black bodies, as propounded during slavery (and colonization) to rationalize the inflicted torture underway. Thus, interpreting the chain worn on the Black body in “Black Skinhead” as a metaphoric, visual narration of the chained Black body of slavery, whose labor was exchanged for the acquirement of capital, is hardly farfetched. In fact, in *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangster’s God* (2012), Eboy Utley has recently underscored the relationship between the characteristic chain worn by rappers and slavery. She writes, “Consuming the Jesus piece as route to class privilege is reminiscent of selling black bodies as routes to capital” (67). Though her discussion is specific to the Jesus piece chain worn by rappers, the argument is applicable to the practice of wearing chains in rap culture in general. Further, if hip-hop culture is the arguably the epicenter of American capitalist enterprise, as Utley reminds readers (67), then surely, the legacy of slavery—the exploitation and commodification of Black bodies for capitalist expansion—is still in effect. Therefore, the donning of the chain in rap music summons the dark, brutal history of an *American* past and present, and is not merely a practice connoting materialism and frivolity.

However, West does not merely compel the historical re-contextualization of the expressive practice, but invites viewers to see the manner in which it is “revolutionized” as well. This can be discerned through a juxtaposed analysis of the actual chain in “Black Skinhead,” which, I argue, yields an implicit narrative of the history of chains on Black bodies, and the verbal use of chains as a metaphor in “Chain Heavy.” In the hook for “Chain Heavy,” which features verses by rappers Talib Kweli and Consequence, West
repeats the line, “My chain heavy.” It is “too heavy,” he insists. The “weight of chains” motif explored throughout the song points to the fact that “the Black rap body” is burdened with carrying the guilt of the actions committed by white supremacist-colonizers of the past. At the 3:43 mark in the video, the Black automaton that dons the chain is suspended in midair with his arms outstretched and his knees bent to one direction. His position invokes the iconic site of Jesus nailed to the cross, except the cross is implied in the video. The visual inference here reinforces the message conveyed in “Chain Heavy” (especially given that the chain glistens upon the “crucified” automaton): that the Black body oftentimes bears the sins of or is scapegoated for the sins of the Euro-American West. That is, the white supremacist-colonizer labels this body a site of abjection and otherness, too engrossed in conspicuous consumption, which, in many cases, perpetuates the system of slavery in America and the colonization of other Black bodies across the Atlantic. While this is true, there is also a denied narrative that when considered will estrange the dominant, advertised narrative above “from the basis of its authority,” as Bhabha argues (162), forcing it to lose its “univocal grip on meaning.” (Young 21).

The “double articulation” inscribed is such that the illuminated chain worn by the automaton, in many frames amidst a completely black backdrop save for two white inverted Klan hood-like symbols, reminds viewers of and exposes the culpability of the white supremacist-enslaver and colonizer. They are the faces and forces of power that have chained Black bodies to extract labor for capital; and they are the ones who commenced the pillaging of African countries to extract natural resources (like diamonds) for the expansion of the Western economy. West appears to confirm this logic
in “Chain Heavy” in the first lines of the first verse through metaphor when he remarks, “They try to tell me my chain broke the levee / Maybe ‘cause its flooded.” Presumably, he is alluding to the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, employing this historical disaster as a metaphor to make the case that the consequential materialism in which Black rappers are invested, and for which they are condemned, is merely an outcome of pre-existing systems of racial and economic oppression. But why carry or “consume,” rather, this history? Where slavery is concerned, in The Black Atlantic, Gilroy quotes an extract from an interview with Morrison, published as “Living Memory: Meeting Toni Morrison,” in which she explains why Black American novelists deem it necessary to continue narrating the terrors of plantation slavery: “‘We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future . . . where the slate is clean. The past is absent or it’s romanticized. This culture doesn’t encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past’” (222). The chain in “Black Skinhead,” therefore, can be interpreted as summoning the truth about the historical past, thereby refusing the possibility of white absolution.

But that analysis must be exhausted. The chain reveals more than the truth about the responsible party for the systems and institutions from which a materialistic, capitalistic American culture sprung. The chain is also imbued with the history of Blacks willing themselves to freedom, which Morrison’s character, Paul D, illustrates. Of course, the expressive practice of defining oneself through the chain locates “the Black rap body”—deemed “other” to the white, hegemonic Imperial Subject—within the domain of (post-) / modernity and (post-) / modern subjectivity. The reason is that this body symbolically dons the history of “capitalist, racial slavery,” which Gilroy (among
others) argues, is “internal to modernity and intrinsically modern” (220). But the chain signifies a humane, (post-) modern Black subject for reasons other than that of wearing an emblem that symbolizes a system that was “internal to modernity.” If read alongside Beloved, the chain also symbolizes strategies of survival and a desire for liberty, solidifying the Black slave as a modern subject. This means that just as the postmodern, “new slave” invents strategies of survival and resolves to struggle for his liberty in a manner commensurate to the current times, he, too, compels the acknowledgment of his humanity, challenging those who see him as object. Moreover, in a similar manner that Sethe reifies the theory that the slave is the first and model modern subject through her act of resistance, Paul D’s character is deserving of the same recognition.

In chapter ten, Paul D recounts his time spent on the chain gang after murdering the man schoolteacher sold him to. What resonates in this chapter is the emphasis Paul D places on his will to escape, as well as on the chain that binds him and 45 other prisoners. He provides a physical description of their reality: “The chain was threaded through forty-six loops of the best hand-forged iron in Georgia” (129). The chain is restrictive to the degree that the involuntary shaking of his hands and legs from which he suffered subsided when the “irons” are attached. Also, if one of the forty-six men, Paul D recounts, decided to run, they would all be “yanked” or even killed (128-29). But one day, the captives decide to use the very instrument that conditions their bondage to aid their escape: “and he took both hands and yanked the length of chain at his left, so the next man would know too” (130). This action flings them as one body into a mud ditch, enabling their unified escape. The rest of the chapter narrates how they struggle to
survive thereafter. Paul D trudged through unfamiliar geography heading North to freedom, with nothing but botanic theories guiding him.

This determination to ascertain freedom, even if it meant risking his life and the lives of his “co-convicts” (Morrison 132), given that any false move might have ended in a gunshot to the head (Morrison 129), is what facilitates a reimagining of the slave, in this case, Paul D and the prisoners, as personifying modern subjectivity as formulated by Enlightenment thinkers. In “Hegel and Haiti,” Susan Buck-Morss reiterates Hegel’s insistence that the slave must risk his life to obtain freedom and self-consciousness (848). She explains that the rebellion of slaves is what exemplifies the truth of a universal desire for freedom (845-46). But Hegel, she argues, realizes that the “dialectical logic of recognition” and universal freedom materializes during the Haitian slave rebellion (852).

Enlightenment thinkers, Buck-Morss reminds, judged human liberty to be “the highest political value of Enlightenment thought”—it is man’s “natural state” “inalienable right” (821). Therefore, Paul D’s recounting of his escape from the chain gang is paradigmatic of modernity’s central tenant, rendering him a modern subject.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight the role of the chain in their escape to further enumerate the ways in which it is “revolutionized” as a “changing same.” During their descent, what is interesting is that the prisoners never lose sight of the chain. Paul D recalls “feeling the confused pull of the chain,” how the “chain that held them would save all or none,” how they “talked through the chain,” and how once they reemerged, they did so “holding the chain in their hands” (130). Perhaps they do so out of a subconscious understanding that the chain actually facilitates their escape. The captives “chain-danced over the fields,” singing incomprehensibly, songs about their families and past lives—
songs that enabled them to withstand until they resisted. Following the lead of “Hi Man,” the first chained captive, “they got through” (Morrison 128). Morrison thus provides a revaluation of the chain in that the instrument to maintain servitude is transposed as a strategy of resistance. So if the chain in “Black Skinhead” can be read as embodying the truth of a historical past, it communicates the narrative of the Black slave’s will to freedom and the use of the chain as a mechanism that once helped to reveal Black bodies as agential, modern subjects. In a postmodern context, as this chapter proposes, mimicry and the carving of a third space is the subversive act, and therefore constitutes a metaphysical struggle for freedom—for the freedom to self-define.

The chain also signifies an interposing act. If one is hard pressed to anchor the chain to the reductive narrative of a desire for capital, one should, as Ebony Utley has, interpret this practice “as reparations—as an opportunity for African Americans to receive something in return for the unpaid labor of their slave ancestors” (Utley 67). In “All Falls Down,” Kanye West confirms the notion that Black people have not lost sight of this “failed promise”: “We trying to buy back our 40 acres / And for that paper look how low we a stoop.” But as Utley has suggested, the said demoralizing meaning of this act of consuming can be revaluated, serving, rather, as a reminder of the African ancestors who are no longer in chains (Utley 67). Utley’s analysis is useful in the sense that though donning the chain connotes capitalist indulgence, it is simultaneously a symbol of honoring and interceding on the behalf of the grieving spirits of the ancestors of the past (hence why I am considering the chain a “changing same”). Evidence that the paradigm of honoring and protecting an ancestral past is a recurring phenomenon of Black culture lies in *Beloved*. Sethe honors and desires to protect the spirit of Beloved,
who, herself embodies and transcribes the “unspoken” torturous experiences suffered by
the first generations of chained African ancestors during the Middle Passage. According
to Carl Plasa, in an interview, Morrison discloses that Beloved speaks “the language of
both experiences—[her own] death and the Middle Passage . . .” (76). Beloved’s return is
therefore a compensatory act, though not in a monetary sense, in that it signifies an
attempt to gain personal solace, as well as solace for those suffering souls chained, raped,
and starved in the hull of ships.

But in “Chain Heavy,” we see the manner in which the actual chain is used as a
sartorial mechanism of resistance to accomplish this—though in a different context.
Lyrically, West employs the chain, as an instrument used to attain restitution for a
disparaged Black diasporic culture. He quips, “They try to tell me that aliens built the
Pyramids . . . / For every inch they cut the nose off the Sphinx / I make my jewelers add a
few more links.” Referring to the statue of the Great Egyptian Sphinx of Giza whose
nose was mutilated to discredit “Negro” achievement, the chain is used to expose the
“artificial ranking of the human races,” thereby, echoing Bhabha once again, “inserting
. . . insurgent interrogations” into the dominant discourse (167)—but through a
nonverbal, performative act. Therefore, taking all of this into consideration, the chain in
“Black Skinhead” is a “speaking commodity” as it lends itself to a discussion of Black
culture’s preoccupation with avenging the theft, brutalization, and ideological imposition
of Black bodies, employing the chain to do so. The chain enables the reconceptualization
of the materialistic ethos of Black rappers, as discussed in Jay Z’s “Oceans” in the
Introductory chapter.
Additionally, chains are emblematic of community. Paul D’s individual memory of escaping the chain gang via the chains illustrates the notion of Black suffering as a collective, communal experience. The individual needs of each captive are suppressed for the greater good of the entire chain gang. Again, we are told that “if one pitched and ran—all, all forty-six would be yanked by the chain . . .” (128-29). So enduring the chain gang constitutes developing a collective conscious, and even an experience of being. Their bodies began to coalesce in their minds for instance: “Paul D thought he was screaming; his mouth was open and there was this loud throat-splitting sound—but it may have been somebody else” (129). Paul D’s narration of the escape also reveals the chain as a symbol of community and the result of a collective effort. As they plummet through the mud ditch, some lose their direction, but it matters not because the chains that bind them, again, “would save all or none” (130). Actually, Morrison’s goal in Beloved was to narrate the inseparability of the “racial self“ and the “racial community” (qtd. in Gilroy 219), and she does so vis-à-vis the symbolism of the chain.

Finally, the chain gang experience is not just about collective uplift and community as many critics have postulated. It can also serve as an allegory for the concomitant, interconnected nature of trans-historical suffering, similar to the presence of the transhistorical, Black male automaton discussed in chapter two. As I discussed in chapter two, the back lacerations again signify the interconnectedness of the practice of flogging during slavery and contemporary practices of gratuitous violence to which the postmodern Black body is subjected. Moreover, returning to the novel, even though the prisoners occupy the same space and time and must succumb to the same fate, they suffer in different capacities given the fluctuating lengths of time each has served, the fact that
different days hold different captives as targets of torture, and given that the material conditions of their respective positions and spaces within the chain differ. The “lead chain,” readers are told, is tasked with shouting “Hiiii!,” giving it “everything he had” (127). This means he has to exert more energy at dawn than the other captives because his job is to awaken and galvanize the others. It thus stands to reason that on any given day, one person’s eyes might communicate “Help me this mornin’; ‘s bad,” while others’ eyes might say “I’m a make it”; “New man”; “Steady now steady” (126-27). Yet and still, they are all prisoners within a white supremacist power system / racist power panopticon. I read the varying degrees of suffering within their respective chained spaces as a metaphor for the separation of different historical eras of Black suffering, and as the chain in the text indicates, this suffering occurs on a continuum. That is, Black suffering is heterogeneous, but it is “linked” across history and across spaces. This is why Kanye West feels that his “[c]hain [h]eavy.” He is compelled to intervene for his discredited Egyptian ancestors because he has suffered a similar fate, albeit in a different capacity, when it comes to the recognition of Black cultural achievements. It “[t]ake too long for Niggas to get they turn,” he raps, following it with “Probably be cremated before I get my earn.”

To summarize this section, after situating the chain within the historical context of slavery, employing the two outside texts to do so, the chain in “Black Skinhead,” an “essence” of Black rap culture is a “CHAINging same.” This is so as it is rescued from a closed circuit of meaning. It is reclaimed from its connotation as a static, materialistic essence of rap culture, and is instead seen for its dynamic, “revolutionized” character in five ways: it can be seen to expose a deliberately repressed past of historical violence that
facilitated plantation slavery and colonization necessary for the establishment and maintenance of a Western agrarian / pre-capitalist and capitalist economy (respectively); it serves as evidence of Black humanity and subjectivity; it becomes an interposing instrument through which Blacks ascertain reparations for the labor and suffering, and negated cultural achievements of past ancestors; it symbolizes community; and finally, it becomes a manner through which to see Black suffering as a multifaceted yet collective experience across time. “Revolutionizing” the chain in this manner is revelatory of the fact that colonial discourse is “faced with the hybridity of its object” (Bhabha 160). The chain is one example of many that demonstrates how “discriminatory identities” or an “inappropriate object” is constructed, rendering, in this case, the Black body, an “imprisoned victim of its own essence” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 18-19). But imbuing the chain with new meaning—demonstrating how it can be argued that it transcends its purported essentialist character—enables viewers and critics to envisage a “Black Skinhead” not merely as a mimetic performance but also as the subsequent emergence of a hybrid subject, in that, as Bhabha argues hybridity is the name for the reversal of discriminatory identities. Exposing the hybrid moment is productive for two reasons: hybridity’s transformative capacity is unveiled, which means “the presence of [white supremacist-colonial] power is revealed as something other than what its rules of recognition assert” (Bhabha 160); and, the hybrid moment marks a contestatory site wherein “buried,” Black male “agents” might be disinterred.

Further, if I had the space to do so, I would discuss how the dancing automaton / Black body that is perpetually “in motion,” also evinces a “permanent revolution of forms” through the mobilization of rhythmic dancing as a “changing same.” A brief
explanation is that the dancing Black body historically signifies the said corporeal “nature” of the Black existence. In the introduction of *EmBODYing Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance*, Alison Goeller, Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, and Dorota Janowska illuminate how race construction in the West has been based upon “natural,” hierarchal racial differentiation between whites and Blacks, and how the Black body in motion facilitated these theories (18). To white slave masters, the writers report that Black captive bodies “became immediately associated with exotic movements . . .” and that the “persistence of this nativist perception of black rhythm and excessive energy was furthermore consolidated by the so-called ‘scientific’ definition of race . . .” (18). As such, the mobile automaton in “Black Skinhead” that jumps up and down, flailing its arms in rhythmic gestures is performing a said essence of “blackness.” But just as Goeller, Fischer-Hornung, and Janowska, as well as Edouard Glissant and a host of others have argued that dance has served as a communicative gesture of resistance since slavery (Gilroy 75), in the video, the elusive, dancing Black body can be read as indicative of performing “on-going negotiation” (Bhabha 3) of identity that occurs between the interstices of essentialist “blackness” and hegemonic whiteness. The hybrid figure that is produced through a mimetic performance (i.e. a “Black skinhead”) is not a stable amalgam. Instead, the greyish color automaton / Black body, as a symbol of hybridization, performs a restlessness of Black identity and “revisionary energy” (Bhabha 6). The production of “an-other Black” self, to borrow from Tate, is continually reinventing itself, as the dancing arguably reifies. Therefore, the re-inscription of an expressive practice that consolidates racial difference becomes a “revolutionized” “changing same,” and by extension, a contestatory site not merely because it signifies
colonial hybridity. In addition, white supremacist-colonial authority is forced to relinquish its stranglehold on Black subjectivity because it has no stable subject to interpellate or “imprison.”

**Conclusion:**

In summation, despite the alternative image of Black masculine embodiment for which many cultural critics praised Kanye West upon his emergence as a rap artist, he simultaneously delivered an image of an “organic,” indigenous “blackness,” Black maleness and Black culture. Notwithstanding his middle-class upbringing, his lyrics recounted narratives of “home,” which Bhabha considers a first space of identification. Though he demonstrated a thematic range on his first two albums, his lyrics, more often than not, centered a demoralized urban Chicago youth culture that “looked up to the dope man” and solidified their “authenticity” by “flicking starter coats man” (“We Don’t Care”). West also lambasted the government for its conspiratorial operations, which oftentimes left people of color bereft and facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles to survive. But he also celebrated Black people’s ingenious, resilient spirit in lines like “Joke’s on you, we still alive” (“We Don’t Care”), “And Gran keep praying and keep believing” (“Heard ‘Em Say”). The consequence of West’s pro-Black, indigenous iterations of identity was subjection to the disciplinary gaze of the “colonizer”—the label owners. Notwithstanding his seismic cultural influence and monetary success, Kanye West threatened the civilizing mission and the desire for the reproduction of a “Self-Same”—a “reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the
same but not quite” (Bhabha 122). Rather than counter-identify with the narcissist demands of the “colonial state,” West seemingly obliges. The “college dropout decides to “register late” and eventually “graduates,” as a case in point. However, his mimetic performances reveal the menace of colonial mimicry. My explication of “Black Skinhead” demonstrates this theory.

“Black Skinhead” reappropriates Fanon’s “Black skin in white masks” paradigm, save for the fact that the implicit mimeticism in the song’s title, lyrics and visual illustrations, actually lend themselves to a discussion of the subversive capacity of colonial mimicry. While Kanye West does assume the identity of an agent of white supremacist-colonial authority, as well as mimes the discursive and ideological mandates of the composite “monster,” he does so subversively. The title of the track is “Black Skinhead” rather than “Skinhead.” West is therefore calling attention to the production of a “partial vision of the colonizer’s presence” (Bhabha 126). As “partial presence,” West both travesties colonial authority and exposes its narcissistic fantasy to create a mirror image of itself. In so doing, colonial authority must relinquish its “representational authority” in that the “observer becomes the observed” and so assumes the role of fetishized object, which implies that it can no longer hoist itself above the “subject of difference” in question (“the Black rap body”) as imitable, Imperial Subject. Also, mockery, as evinced by the inverted and / or black Klan hoods for instance, “problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority” (Bhabha 125), as it, in the words of Mbembe, reduces the autocratic power to a mere “tamed” laymen or unsacred artifact (109) that can no longer monopolize representational power. Both displacing and returning the initial colonial gaze, as well as ridiculing the sign(s) of white supremacist-
colonial authority, precipitate the recognition of the uncertainty of colonial command and its said imitability.

The ambivalent nature of white-supremacist colonial discourse is also made visible in the double inscription that is symptomatic of mimicry. According to Bhabha, mimicry “repeats rather than re-presents” (125). The repetition, however, manifests itself as “contradictory and threatening differences” (Bhabha 171), producing another knowledge of colonial discourse’s norms (Bhabha 123). West (and other Black rap bodies) is a revised version of African royalty rather than a wolf, yet this self-description is a denied version of the construction of “blackness” and Black masculinity. Beloved’s return and “agitation” of Sethe’s and her own memory of slavery’s institutionalizing of terror and dehumanizing practices to subdue constitutes a disavowed perspective of the narrative of Black infanticide. The problem, though, is that “disavowed knowledges return to make the presence of authority uncertain” (Bhabha 171). If disseminating and sustaining discriminatory identifications of the colonized “other” legitimates colonial authority, contesting stereotypes of “blackness” and Black masculinity means that “[t]he presence of colonialist authority is no longer visible” (Bhabha 163).

Further, recognizing the ambivalence of colonial discourse, as well as the reversal of stereotypes marks the hybrid moment and the carving of a third space. For Bhabha, the reversal of stereotypes involves a “radical revision” of discursive constructions of identity. However, as Tate argues (following Young and Gilroy), “revolutionizing” identities for the production of a hybrid requires mobilizing, in this case, a “Black same,” which, in “Black Skinhead,” I argued was the chain worn by the automaton (and the dancing). I did not undertake a separate discussion of the manner in which “whiteness”
or the identity of the “monster” can be redefined, since exposing its ambivalent representation, vis-à-vis West’s mimetic performance of identity, equates to its reconstitution. But where the “buried Black male agents” are concerned, revealing the chain as a “CHAINging same” is fruitful in the sense that “the Black rap body” is no longer tethered to a discriminatory identity, rendering it susceptible to the demand to assimilate whiteness. The hybrid subject—“an-other Black body”—does not rid itself of a repudiated cultural practice, nor does the chain retain its reductive, capitalist character. Rather, the “revolutionized” and recuperated chain (and the act of dancing) enables the carving of a third space that entertains “difference without an assumed hierarchy” (Bhabha 5). Moreover, while I argue that the greyish color torso of the automaton in the video is suggestive of a hybrid figure, I do not provide a definitive description of what that translates to in a real world context. For the third space is the performance of a fluid, “migratory” identity that is always influx, which West dramatizes vis-à-vis the dancing automaton’s elusiveness.

Finally, I have demonstrated that “Black Skinhead” can be interpreted as encapsulating “sounds” and “visuals” of resistance. The presence of colonial mimicry and hybridity unveiled in the lyrics and visual aesthetics are effective strategies for the displacement of the white-supremacist colonial “monster” responsible for burying Black bodies beneath those discursive constructions that render them susceptible to crude acts of violence and structural and institutional injustices. Spillers suggests the invention of a “new American grammar book” to reclaim the “agents buried beneath.” I am suggesting the removal of this “monster” by employing a de-colonial strategy of resistance that exposes the uncertainty and permeability of its discursive power. Dispossessing the
“monster” of the shovel permits Black bodies, and all other marginalized bodies, in the words of Spillers, “to speak a truer word concerning [ourselves],” or in the words of Bhabha, to “elaborate[e] strategies of self-hood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity” (Bhabha 2).
Endnotes

1 Here I borrow a phrase from Africana Studies and Black feminist scholar, Carole Boyce-Davies. In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, she defines “migratory” Black female subjectivity in terms of “slipperiness, elsewhereness” (36). The identity of “migratory subjects” is fluid and mobile, but, as Boyce-Davies argues, not in a “nomadic” way. The migratory subject moves “to specific places and for definite reasons”—particularly, to “pursue the path . . . outside of the terms of the dominant discourse” (36-37). Thus, I am proposing that the subject to be exhumed from his interment beneath overdetermined mythical markers will assume a mobile identity so as to preclude further interpellation, which yields his objectification and “thingification.” Also, the fluidity of subjectivity suggests that one’s identity does not settle at either point between fixed polarities of identification.

2 In fact, during a 2006 transcribed conversation held between Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley, and Jennifer Morgan, with regards to “Mama’s Baby,” titled “‘Watcha Gonna Do?’—Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’,” Spillers recounted that the text was a means to both address and propel Black women beyond the question of the distortion and denial of gender privileges. There is something “wider” beyond that terrain, which is why (Black) men are present in the essay, she reasoned (304).

3 Ibid., Endnote 2.


5 In the Preface for *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, the anthology editor, Julius Bailey, perceives West’s emergent rap persona in 2004 as a “college boy image” complemented by an “intellectual musical narrative” (xviii). Also in the anthology, in his essay “Now I Ain’t Saying He’s a Crate Digger: Kanye West ‘Community Theaters’ and the Soul Archive,” Mark Anthony Neal argues that West shows an affinity for the Black bohemian expressive culture of Chicago, given the layered modes of poetic expression and aesthetic choices on his first album (10).

6 A more exhaustive explanation of the manner in which West’s trajectory as an artist coheres with Bhabha theories of subversive mimicry and hybridity is provided in the appendix. I provide examples and in-depth analyses of the factors that led to West’s appropriation of the white world—that is, how West was too “inappropriate [of an] object,” and so in need of reformation. I also elaborate on Bhabha’s first, second, and third spaces—specifically how West’s transitions as an artist, briefly described above, align with the paradigms of each space, as articulated by Bhabha.

7 Here I am riffing off of the rapper, Meek Mill’s oft-quoted line, “It’s levels to this shit.” This line is from his 2013 song “Levels,” the single from his *Dreamchasers 3* mixtape. The phrase became a popular idiom of rap culture, denoting various degrees, positions, or meanings of a particular phenomenon. In this case, I am highlighting the denotational or semantic range of the “imitation.”
He also raises objections to Edward Said for his failure to acknowledge the ambivalence of Orientalist discourse, which discursively constructed the Asiatic “other,” in his groundbreaking text, *Orientalism.*

Many critics noticed a change in West’s dialect in 2013, arguing that during his appearance on the *Jimmy Kimmel Live* show, West was “talking white” since he no longer employed Black vernacular in his linguistic performance. The essentialism of the argument aside, seen through a colonial context, one could argue that West deliberatively eschews his “native” language in lieu of the tongue of the colonizer, aiding the goal of cultural hegemony.

In Appendix B, I provide a complete history of the origin of the skinheads, which initially emerged as a working-class, nonconformist subculture that eventually attracted the attention of and joined forces with, white nationalist hate groups. Though not all skinheads had undergone this transformation, by and large, this subculture adopted the ideals of Fascism and Neo-Nazism, as well as colonial ideology, thus accounting for the skinheads’ eventual authoritarian identity.

I later explain history of the violent, dialectal relationship between the Klu Klux Klan and Black males in America.

To explain further, of all the typologies listed, Christian Identity most directly reinforces colonial ideology in that it espouses the belief of a said chosen white race whose “God-ordained purpose” was, according to Sociology and Women’s and Ethnic Studies Professor, Abbey Ferber, “to dominate and colonize the world (57), and to subjugate non-white peoples, Jews and Blacks especially, to fulfill this decree. (See Abby Ferber’s *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999. p. 57). Unfortunately, many skinheads abandoned an initial vision of resisting the values of the middle class and hierarchal institutions, and instead armed themselves with this political-religious instrument, along with its racist, authoritarian beliefs, thereby justifying, further, my employment of a de-colonial strategy of resistance.

In *When Music Migrates: Crossing British and European Racial Faultlines* (2014), Jon Stratton explains that when the punk rock-skinhead culture arrived in Jamaica in the mid 1960s, Black Jamaican Reggae artists appropriated its aesthetic elements (70). See Appendix B for full history and explanation.

Jon Stratton explains that when Black Jamaican Reggae artists appropriated punk rock skinhead elements, “the absent English skinhead” was reincarnated as “the rude boy from whom the skinhead style partly derived” (70). This is expounded upon in Appendix B.

West model in “Black Skinhead” is not a griot, a West African storyteller known for disseminating African history and culture. Nor was it the Yoruba trickster figure, “Esu Elegbara,” who in African mythological traditions, according to Henry Louis Gates, “interprets the will of the gods to man” (6). His model was not a Black Panther, who enforced Black power and autonomy (but not by subjugating her/his racial counterparts as was the case with white supremacist groups like skinheads), among other things, in the face of the racist status quo during the Black Power Movement.

In the previous chapter, using Edward Said’s theories of the invention of an “Orient” in the West, I discussed how this line (which implicates West’s relationship with Kim
Kardashian, who is not white but is scripted as such in American popular culture) facilitates an understanding of how the visual portrayals in the video depict the various stratagems and power processes for sketching Black masculinity into (non)-being. 

18 The irony, however, is that this very “inappropriateness” is needed for the success of colonial mimicry, as it stabilizes racial and cultural hierarchies, which legitimizes domination.

19 Sethe is the fictional reincarnation of Margaret Garner, whose story upon which the novel is loosely based. Margaret Garner was a fugitive slave in the mid nineteenth century known for murdering her daughter to prevent her from returning to a life of slavery.

20 A similar argument can be made regarding the analysis of “All Falls Down” in Appendix A. The repressed perspective of the “other Black rap body” disrupts the dominant white male perspective, continually, throughout the video. West causes the “non-continuity” of prevailing perspectives of capitalism, institutional education, and navigating public spaces like an airport, through the inscription of the repressed material realities of “the other Black body.” The dominant Eurocentric epistemology is decentered and its ambivalence is consequently exposed as West makes visible, through a deliberate and exaggerated first-person narrated performance, that which has been purposefully “‘hidden from sight’” (qtd. in Bhabha 15).


23 See Appendix A for full explanation.

24 This cannot be read as an assimilationist identity, by the way, in that following Bhabha, Tate argues that hybridity, in part, constitutes “acknowledging the conflictually other within” (74). In “The Third Space – Interview with Homi Bhabha,” Bhabha posits, that hybridity is identification, “a process of identifying with and through another object, and object of otherness.” See J. Rutherford’s *Identity Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. pp. 207-221.

25 It is clear that West intends for viewers to focus on the chain, given its gleaming diamonds render it the only discernable object in some frames, and on the automaton / Black body’s person especially. But because he does not provide attending lyrics explaining its significance, he leaves it up to suspecting viewers and critics to do so. However, the other textual and lyrical evidence in the song / video invoke the memory of slavery, endowing the chain in “Black Skinhead” with new historical meaning. Beyond that, readers are compelled to summon other discourses and theories on chains and Black bodies (in the context of slavery or otherwise) to render the chain in “Black Skinhead” intelligible, since it is a recurring motif in Black expressive cultural productions. Carole Boyce-Davies identifies this academic practice as “critical relationality.” It is such that other discourses on the subject of chains and Black bodies “interact relationally in one’s critical conscious” (41)—hence my integration of *Beloved* and “Chain Heavy.”
According to Boyce-Davies, “critical relationality” allows “the situation of a text in its own context, but provides an ability to understand and relate it to a range of other dimensions of thought” (41). So in merging the critical perspectives of all three primary texts, I produced a “braid-like” (Boyce-Davis 41) discursive analysis, while still exposing the utility of the chain in “Black Skinhead” where hybridity is concerned.

26 Here I borrow a phrase from Anténor Firmin. “The Artificial Ranking of the Human Races” is the title of chapter six in Firmin’s The Equality of the Human Races.
28 The Starter brand sports jackets were a huge phenomenon in the urban communities of many cities—Chicago being one of them. One could earn “bragging rights” with the purchase of a Starter Jacket, which, I know from experience, was an outward expression of “authentic blackness” and gang affiliation.
29 Consider lines like, “How we stop the Black Panthers? / Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer / You hear that? What Gil Scott was hearing / When our heroes and heroines got hooked on heroin” (“Crack Music”).
Works Cited


Introduction

Appendix A

An Explication of Colonial Paradigms in a Black American Context

In *The Darker Side of Modernity* (2011), Modernity and de-colonial political scholar Walter D. Mignolo argues that colonial power structures that gained momentum during the Renaissance constitute the “darker side of Western modernity.” This theory is useful for conceptualizing of the application of de-colonial politics to my readings of the narratives that emanate from a Black vernacular art form (rap music) born during a postmodern era in the United States. Mignolo informs that since the 16th century, Western Europe has imprisoned non-Western spaces, subjecting these spaces to their narrow conceptions of time and history, ultimately. But its oppressive provincialism also included culture, politics, and humanity. Mingnolo insists that the hidden agenda of modernity—coloniality—is integral to modernity, and that contemporary global formulations or re-constitutions of modernity, likewise, reinvigorate coloniality, or the “colonial matrix of power” (3).1

Thus, since “there is no modernity without coloniality,” the presence of contemporary “global modernities” is also evidence of contemporary “global colonialities” (Mignolo3)—and hence the de-colonial methodology employed in this project, which is concerned with the oppressive realities of Black people in postmodern United States. Rap culture is arguably the center of popular culture, and according to Stuart Hall, popular culture is the dominant global culture (26)2, which is postmodern. This means the postmodern global culture, rap culture included, bears the traces of coloniality. As such, what follows is an analysis of how rap music and culture conceals
the hidden agenda of Western (post-)modernity: coloniality. But first, it is imperative to understand the broader transnational contiguities between the Black American condition within a white supremacist social order, and the Black African experiences in a colonial and post-colonial order.

Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton’s 1967 *Black Power* was a foundational manifesto of the Black Power Movement. It implored Blacks to unite against European Imperialist forces. But it is known for its framework of envisioning Black American experiences through the lens of the “colonial situation.” Here is how the authors justify their framework:

... there is no ‘American dilemma’ because black people in this country form a colony, and it is not in the interest of the colonial power to liberate them. Black people are legal citizens of the United States with, for the most part, the same legal rights as other citizens. Yet they stand as colonial subjects in relation to the white society. This institutional racism has another name: colonialism. (5)

Anticipating rebuttals to the conflation of institutional racism and colonialism, Carmichael and Hamilton admit that this it is not a neat analogy. Black people in America are a historically displaced populace, even though they have been nominally conferred citizenship status in America since the Emancipation Proclamation. Those of African descent in African colonies, however, inhabited their indigenous territory, albeit they were dispossessed of their rights to their own land vis-à-vis force and coercion on the part of invading Europeans. And, as Carmichael and Hamilton intimate, this is all made possible through the establishment of a filial relationship with a faraway domineering nation. Also, Blacks in America only export human labor (and not natural
resources), Carmichael and Hamilton inform (6)—and, I would, add, now rap culture. But in the colonies, natural resources were exported for Western capitalist expansion. Oftentimes, the colonized countries were resold their resources at inflated prices, which led to the underdevelopment of the colonized countries in the Continent (Carmichael and Hamilton 6). Thus, Carmichael and Hamilton argue that it is the “objective relationship” being considered in the analogy.

But justifying the comparison, the authors illumine the parallel exploitative operations underway in colonized African countries since the advent of colonization, and Black America: “Essentially, the African colony is selling its labor; the product itself does not belong to the ‘subjects’ because the land is not theirs. At the same time, let us look at black people in the South: cultivating cotton at $3.00 for a ten-hour day and from that buying cotton dresses (and food and other goods) from white manufacturers” (6). Of course, this economic structure has since transformed in both geographic locations with the rise of Independent African nations and subsequent “post-colonies,” and with the birth of Black businesses and the rise of a core capitalist class in America.

However, the analogy is still warranted. Black bodies in the American “post-colony” are still the “wretched of the earth” to echo Frantz Fanon. They are still perceived as mere fungible colonized and captive bodies that are indispensible to the capitalist mode of production. Though perhaps not transnationally, their labor is exported and the goods they produce are exploited. It is, however, an oversimplification to say that because Black poverty still exists in America that America is similar to a colonial order. Rather, one must take into consideration that entire political economy and the role
of the Black proletariat in the social relations of production and domination in order to truly understand the comparison.

In “New Slaves” (2013), for instance, Kanye West points to the Prison Industrial Complex as proof of the contemporary commoditization of Black bodies in the interest of capitalist exploits. His song implicates the phenomenon of exporting Black (and Brown) labor to fatten the pockets and bellies of white “corporation-colonizers.” He raps, “Meanwhile the DEA [the Drug Enforcement Administration] teamed up with the CCA [the Correction Corporation of America] / They tryin’ to lock niggas up / They tryin’ to make new slaves / See that’s that privately owned prison / Get your piece today.” The CCA is the largest private prison company in the nation, owning 60 prisons as of 2013 (the song’s release date). The exportation of Black labor facilitates its growth vis-à-vis the reinstatement of a convict-labor system. In The New Jim Crow (2010), Michelle Alexander, following Angela Davis’s examination of the Prison Industrial Complex in Are Prisons Obsolete (2003), notes that in the Jim Crow era, Black imprisoned bodies were leased out as laborers to “private bidders,” and alienated from their labor, given they were understood “quite literally,” as per the rhetoric of the Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, as “slaves of the state” (31). And today, she informs that “many inmates work in prison, typically earning far less than the minimum wage—often less than $3 per hour, sometimes as little as 25 cents” (157). The convict-leasing system is still in tact; it is simply under new management.

Further, not astonishingly, Alexander’s next iteration echoes Carmichael and Hamilton’s comparative analysis of the economic structure of colonization and the Black American condition in the post-war South: “[The Black and Brown prisoners’] accounts
are then ‘charged’ for various expenses related to their incarceration. . .” (157). In all three cases—that is, in “classic colonialism,” in the post-war South, and in the contemporary American prison system—African labor makes possible the accumulation of capital that is then reinvested in Western economies, explained by both Carmichael and Hamilton and later, Walter Rodney (1972), thereby proving the contiguity between colonialism and the economic crisis facing Blacks in America.

Moreover, Carmichael and Hamilton’s comparison can also be validated if one takes into consideration the ways in which the exploitation of the rap industry reflects the political economy and economic structures of colonization (and of neo-colonization): the conquest of territory and natural resources (in this case the Black American expressive culture is the territory being invaded, and rap music is the “natural resource-turned-commercial product); the implementation of an economic system that attempts to alienate the colonized (rapper) from her or his labor for the development of modern capitalism (rap music is mined and exploited for capital gain by white corporation owners, while the rappers themselves receive a disproportionate net profit from their own album sales); and the simultaneous domestication and “othering” of “the native” to stabilize racial hierarchies (the “native” rapper is “groomed,” but is at once compensated to reproduce dehumanizing, essentialist stereotypes of “blackness” vis-à-vis material incentives by “label-colonizers,” also culminating in the maintenance of racial hierarchies).

We can once again call upon Kanye West’s “New Slaves” to substantiate the comparison. His track insightfully indicts the Prison Industrial Complex as a de facto system of slavery in the song’s title and theme. This system, which Alexander terms “the new Jim Crow,” typifies institutional racism in the most blatant fashion. What is more is
that rappers appear to be the new targets of the “New Jim Crow” system, which is at once a postmodern apparatus of slavery (which I examine more closely in chapter two) and colonization, given that at the root of both is the denial of human and civil rights, and the exportation of human labor.

But West actually alludes (assumingly unintentionally) to the colonial-like character of the industry when he raps, “Y’all throwing contracts at me / Y’all know that niggas can’t read / Throw ‘em some Maybach keys / Fuck it, c’est la vie.” In African colonies, colonizers sustained what Francophone theorist Achilles Mbembe refers to as “Commandement” in On the Postcolony (2001), which is the governing structure of a colony or “post-colony” predicated on an “imaginary” conferral of sovereign power (25). It was needed because the colonial authorities had no justification other than their self-serving interests for invading and exploiting the natives and the resources born from their land. Commandement was itself maintained in both colonial and postcolonial regimes, and replicated vis-à-vis three modes of violence (25), one of which being “conviviality” (104). Conviviality was more so prevalent in a postcolonial social order given the displacement of the direct rule of the white colonizer, and made possible a social order of “zombified” postcolonial subjects. The postcolonial potentate’s “technology of domination” manifested itself in local forms of allocated material incentives that were forms of public coercion used to effect in submission and perpetuated exploitation (Mbembe 42-43). However, as Mbembe makes clear, the allocation of privileges and “means of livelihood,” like bank loans, permits, property titles, labor contracts, and salaries (43), “were not designed to reward a process of converting energy into wealth, but were helping shape a particular figure of submission and domination” (45). Thus, the
illegible rap contracts and the Maybachs used to entice today’s rappers can be perceived as “technolog[ies] of [postcolonial] domination” used to sustain a Black American colonial regime, or one might deem it a postcolonial regime given that it is spearheaded by a Black governing administration.9

Implicated in West’s contracts reference is the reality that many rappers oftentimes file for bankruptcy given the absurd terms of their slave contracts. Unable to decode the “foreign” legal jargon that involves exploitative royalty agreements, many rappers are alienated from the fruits of their labor, though they think otherwise given their “generous” pay advances. Most also fail to distinguish between the rights of the immediate label, the parent label, the production company, and the distributor. Consequently, the predominantly white syndicate of industry owners preys on the ignorance of these artists. On the one hand, they instantiate a “master-slave” relationship, and on the other, they reinscribe a neo-colonial order whereby the contracts represent public material incentives designed to produce stupefied subservient masses of rapper-puppets. “Obedience,” to a large degree, manifests in the form of acquiescence to a static image that corporations deem commercially viable. As hip-hop scholars Adam Bradley and DuBois put it, “A young Black man who is an anarchist, a hedonist, and nihilist all rolled in one” (125). Or more specifically, the hypermasculine persona consisted of “the gangster aesthetic, violence, and sexual bravado (Bradley and DuBois 326)—essentially, a postmodern “barbarous” figure that is “Other” than the refined “label-owner-colonizer.” Even when rappers did not see themselves authentically reflected in this hypermasculine persona, they were mere commodities to corporations, with little agency in their public presentations.
Their “obedience,” however, is legitimated through the legally binding agreements in which they eagerly enter, yet, their meager contracts, iced-out chains, and “Maybach keys” quell any dissidence, as the rappers, most of whom hailing from impoverished backgrounds, see the material “allocations of privileges” as a “means of livelihood,” to echo Mbembe, and as generous welcoming gestures. Ultimately, the salary (in this case, contract, which is a mere advance to create the tangible product to be sold and not payment for a production of the product) in the post-colony, Mbembe enlightens, “acted as a resource the state could use to buy obedience and gratitude and to break the population to habits of discipline” (45). For how loyal is a hungry dog? But it also made possible redistribution of capital, which solidified the dependent status of the salaried worker (Mbembe 45). In this case, the unsuspecting rappers are subjected to fees and taxation rules that they know very little about. Their financial (il)literacy / negligence oftentimes culminates in the re-circulation of the “wealth” they procured back into the hands of “colonizer-label owners.” The end result is exploited Black human labor and capitalist growth, no different than colonial and postcolonial regimes. It should thus be abundantly clear why my methodology is principally post/de-colonial theory.¹⁰
The author reminds readers of the three discernible (yet not necessarily successive) historical stages of modernity. There was first the “Iberian and Catholic phase, led by Spain and Portugal,” approximately from 1500-1750. Following the second phase, constituting the expropriation of space compounded by the enslavement of Africans, and led by Western European nations from 1700-1945, was the “U.S. American face, led by the United States,” from 1945-2000. What we have witnessed thereafter is a new world order that is, however, interconnected by a similar imperialistic economy (7).


He changed his name to Kwame Toure a year following the publication of Black Power.

The authors stress that this is “typically” the case but not always. They remind readers that in Rhodesia and South Africa, “black and white inhabit the same land—with blacks subordinated to whites . . .” (6).

In Prophets of the Hood, Imani Perry discusses the Black American consciousness of hip hop in relation to its global presence. Arguing against Paul Gilroy’s “Afro-Atlantic theory,” she insists that hip hop has a unilateral migratory pattern (18-19). That is, “Black American music,” Perry contends, as a commercial American product, is exported globally” (19). She maintains, “But the imperialist relationship of a flow of import and export does not work neatly with the black American [musical] experience” (19). While the Black American community (outside of the avant-garde) rarely ever consumes imported music according to Perry, the transnational exportation of “enormous amounts of black American music” is unquestionable (19). Though Perry accedes hip hop’s “politically unifying” viability in a transnational context, she regards hip hop’s appropriation of postcolonial theory dubiously. However, it is in part the very global exportation of the genre that, for me, locates it within a colonial tradition, as it is then commoditized for capitalist accumulation, stimulating a Western economy at the expense of its cultural laborers.

The late Walter Rodney in 1972 devoted his intellectual energies to this very subject as well in How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (1972).

See Keith Wagstaff’s “The Politics Behind Kanye West’s ‘New Slaves’”; but Wagstaff cites The Huffington Post as his source.

In the July 2015 issue of The Final Call, Assistant Editor Ashahed Muhammad penned an article titled, “Hip Hop Demonized, Rappers Under Surveillance and Targeted?” Muhammad discloses how rapper Young Jeezy, The Game, Rick Ross, had been jailed for “suspected legal activity and lyrics,” which, according to the Minister Louis Farrakhan, was also a consequence of their association with him. Muhammad quoted the Minister who stated: “It is no secret that member of the Hip Hop community . . . are kept under close surveillance by law enforcement officials (3). This “strategic implementation of increased surveillance” (Muhammad 3), however, ignores the fact that many rappers create fictional narratives that are oftentimes revenge fantasies. These narratives about dealing dope and killing an adversary also acquiesce to the commercial demands of white label owners who deem the hypermasculine disposition of Black rappers commercially viable. So fastening the prison pipeline to the rap industry appears to be less ironic than it is an instrument of exploitation and Black male erasure. Conscious rapper Killer Mike...
has also spearheaded national debates on the criminalization of Black rappers as the “New Jim Crow,” which I discuss further in chapter one.

9 But neither applies neatly or absolutely, which accounts for the vacillation in my analysis. Black Americans have never achieved full “Independence” or emancipation, rather, from white supremacist “colonizers,” yet the covert forms of State power, such as institutional racism, and the temporal and ideological continuity of white supremacy in America, can be likened to the thinly veiled nature of State power in a postcolonial regime that sustained *Commandement*. So though I am cognizant of the political stages/shifts in the histories of both America (with respect to the Black populace) and African countries formerly colonized by European powers, I see the relations of subjection and “technologies of power” in both colonial and postcolonial regimes mirroring the white supremacist economy of power in America, in the “Hip Hop Age” (1980 to the present) specifically. Besides, when Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths employ the term “post-colonial” in *The Empire Writes Back*, it denotes “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). Likewise, my application of “postcolonial theory” to rap culture encapsulates the power mechanisms of both regimes.

10 Though he is not the subject of the dissertation, I would be remiss if I did not at least parenthetically provide a verse of Kendrick Lamar’s *Untitled Unmastered* (2016) track three, as it directly examines this very conundrum:

“(What the white man say?)
A piece of mine’s
That’s what the white man wanted when I rhyme
Telling me that he selling me just for $10.99
If I go platinum from rapping, I do the company fine
What if I compromise? He said it don’t even matter
You make a million or more, you living better than average
You losing your core following, gaining it all
He put a price on my talent, I hit the bank and withdraw
Hit the bank and withdraw, hit the bank and withdraw
Put myself in the rocket ship and I shot for the stars
Look at what you accomplished and what he said to the boy
I’mma make you some promises that you just can’t ignore
Your profession anonymous as an artist
If I don’t target your market
If you ain’t signing your signature when I throw you my wallet
A lot of rappers are giving their demo all in the toilet
You work toward your master’s mortgage, I need a piece.”
Works Cited


Chapter 3

Appendix A

I: Kanye West, the “College Dropout” and “Inappropriate” Rap Subject

How, exactly, might colonial mimicry be appropriated in an American context—in the rap industry and in Kanye West’s artistry more specifically? In “Imperial Whiteness Meets Hip Hop Blackness,” Social Ethics Professor, James Perkinson explains the embodied rap icon as the Black archetypal “outlaw” who represents “an ‘other’ body” (114). Perkinson writes, “This is quintessentially the post-Black Power male body, carrying all of its white supremacist marking . . . (114). As I argued in chapter two, “Black Skinhead” is a satirical dramatization of the Black rap body, literally and figuratively embodying and projecting “white supremacist marking” to which Perkinson refers, and as implicated more generally by Spillers in “Mama’s Baby.” The muscular physique of the automaton and the domineering posture reifies the archetypal “badman” (discussed in the Introductory chapter,) or as Perkinson describes, the “post-Black Power male body.”

However, predominantly white-owned corporations authorize and employ this mythological, objectified figure, and according to Perkinson, he receives affirmation from the white adolescent community, notwithstanding his destructive lifestyle and messages (115). But the irony is such that while this commoditized, “othered” body and the lyrics it utters are continually “ramified in the collective eye, in sound byte soliloquies” (Perkinson 115) for “corporate profit-taking” (Perkinson 114), it has also become the primary target of colonial, white supremacist institutional power, subjected to the surveillance mechanisms of the state / (neo)-colonial regime.¹
In a Bhabhian, post- / colonial sense, this icon is an “inappropriate object,” meaning he is measured against the normative, hegemonic mode of embodiment, which is the white supremacist Imperial Subject and an “authorized version of [blackness]” (Bhabha 126). But it is true that mimicry requires “a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure” (Bhabha 123). (This is, in part, what accounts for the licensing of the objectified rap icon in the first place). However, paradoxically, the recalcitrance of the “inappropriate” colonized subject, according to Bhabha only “intensifies surveillance and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (123).

So, this repressive white gaze is designed to troll the body politic, disciplining those “other bodies” that fail to cohere with the civilizing mission. In the rap industry, cultural and ontological difference must emerge in the music and in the rap persona (respectively), but not in a manner that disturbs the civilizing mission. For the “benevolence,” the “civility,” and the “superiority” of the “regime” and “colonizer” must be upheld. That is, Universal Music Group (and its subsidiary labels like Def Jam, which has released all of West’s albums in conjunction with other labels) must maintain its “integrity” and “civil” character at the same time that it exploits what it perceives as the fungible, objectified Black rap body. Note, for instance, the thematic and chronological structure of West’s “trilogy,” his first three albums, The College Dropout (2004), Late Registration (2005), and Graduation (2007). While the College Dropout signifies a renouncement of formal education, and so a move away from what French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser refers to as an integral “floor” of the Ideological State Apparatus of domination (135)\(^2\), the three albums taken together, at least nominally,
reinforce the West’s mission of “post-Enlightenment civility” (Bhabha 123), with *Graduation* ostensibly signifying a successful reformation of a wayward “inappropriate [subject].”

However, in my estimation, Kanye West’s earlier music, to some extent, reflected the seductive, yet disavowed rap icon who according to Perkinson, does not ask for inclusion (114). He was not exactly the incarnation of the “big, bad Nigga,” in its entirety, however. In fact, as mentioned in the text, it has been argued that West’s 2004 grand entrance into the rap scene was received as a reprieve from the homogenized gangster image that preceded him (Bailey 2014; Neal 2014). While this is a valid argument, I contend that West was still an “inappropriate [subject],” in part, because he unequivocally challenged institutional power.

As the “college dropout,” he had branded himself as one not asking for and one who explicitly rejected inclusion into an institution essential to perpetuating the ideological indoctrination into the values of the ruling class.³ To elaborate, the (higher) educational institution legitimates epistemic violence and perpetuates the inculcation of “proper” decorum—“the rules of morality, civic, and professional conscience” (Althusser). “We Don’t Care” is an existentialist theme song on *College Dropout*, which reflects West’s disavowal of what Althusser explains as an integral institution of the Ideological State Apparatus of the superstructure, which, as West sees it, continues white supremacy’s reach into the lives of poor communities of color. When West raps, “Sittin’ in the hood like community colleges,” the idealistic, valorized ritual of leaving the hood to attend college is inverted and reduced to a semantic variable of a rhyme. That is, “community colleges” functions as a simile used to highlight, or even extol, the sedentary
realities of those Black folks who “don’t care what people say” when they remain in their urban communities that they regard as home, surviving and attaining sustenance through trickster-like methods and less than favorable (in the eyes of the ruling class) avenues. In other words, they hardly care to conform to the hegemonic social expectations of the (white) society.

Although, it can be argued that West’s aspirations to be a rapper and his early enunciations of materialistic cravings cannot be divorced from capitalist aims, which is the cornerstone of the dominant culture. Nevertheless, according to Althusser, the educational institution produces capitalist “know-how” (155)—or, in addition to the values described above, the rudiments of exploitation. Thus, in repudiating formal education, West subsequently and indirectly renounces that which makes possible capitalist indoctrination. Moreover, though West never advocated for the complete dismantling of the capitalist system, his earlier music, at the very least, also aimed, conspicuously, to disrupt the traditional “rules” and “righteousness” of the capitalist mode and means of production—in Bhabha’s words, its “rules of recognition” (162).

In “We Don’t Care,” for instance, West highlights the lifestyles of the “hood have-nots” who are uncivilly, “drug dealing just to get buy,” and “put[ting] other people’s kids on [their] income tax,” thereby deceiving the government (as opposed to contributing, in a socially acceptable manner, to the reproduction of the productive forces necessary for the maintenance of a capitalist regime). Also, West begins the first verse in “Spaceship” (another track on Graduation) with, “If my manager insults me again / I will be assaulting him. / After I fuck the manager up / Then I’m gonna shorten the register up.” Then later in the same verse he raps, “This fuckin’ job can’t help him / So I quit,
“y’all welcome,” which means he removes the principal chess piece (the laborer) in the division of labor. The video for the song depicts this very disavowal of the exploitative relations of production of capitalism, through West who poses as a disgruntled employee fed up with a racist commercial retailer. Hence, West threatens to disrupt and challenges the conventions of the economic base, as well as outright rejects an instrumental “floor”/institution of the superstructure, thereby solidifying an early “inappropriate” rap persona that would eventually be subjected to surveillance, repression, and the pressure of assimilation.

II: Bhabha’s First, Second, and Third Spaces

First Space:

Furthermore, West’s trajectory as an artist is by and large coterminous with Homi Bhabha’s first, second, and third spaces of identification as articulated in The Location of Culture. His earlier music also encompasses an indigenous cultural history, which, according to Bhabha, constitutes a first space of identification. Bhabha argues (invoking Frantz Fanon) that the first space of indigenous cultural traditions is the “celebratory romance of the past” (13). More importantly, Bhabha insists that this space is emblematic of “home.” West’s earlier music was steeped in narratives of “home”—be it geographical or familial. College Dropout and Late Registration include tracks that are nostalgic meditations on his upbringing and Black cultural traditions. His first verses in “Two Words” and the song “Drive Slow” center the urban youth experience of growing up on the Southside of Chicago. “Drive Slow” is a coming-of-age narrative about the lessons learned from “one of [his] best friends from back in the day.” Mali, from 79th and
May, decided to nickname West “K-Rock” in efforts to feign West’s affiliation with the local gang. West also recounts his admiration for Mali’s “Bulls Jacket with the hat broke way off,” both being sartorial choices bearing symbolic relevance to the gang culture. West continues narrating, with sentimentality, his time under Mali’s tutelage, about their Saturdays spent at the mall flirting with girls, and Mali’s instruction for West to “pump [his] breaks and drive slow.” The particularisms of the memories conjured in this song perhaps evince the retrieval of a fetishized homeplace. His verse on “Two Words,” however, more so commemorates and personifies Chicago, as he insists that the city was instrumental in his identity formation (“Two words, Chi-Town raised me, crazy / So I live by two words: “Fuck you, pay me!”). “Family Business” explores just what the title intimates. He recalls the family cookouts, as well as the feuds and moments of reminiscing during these gatherings. I also argue that the track is a musing on Black cultural practices/representations deemed essentialist and stereotypical, such as his reference to soul food considered a staple of Black culture and a necessity during holiday celebrations; the incarcerated Black male young adult of the family; the “one auntie” with convenient amnesia whose food no one cares for; the ubiquitous, popular Black American line dance, the Electric Slide; and the overpopulated home of a family elder, filled with cousins and roaches. The song, according to West, is dedicated to the “ancestors” within, further cementing its culturally indigenous signification. “Roses” presages and laments the imminent passing of the family matriarch, his grandmother. When the nurse asks him to autograph her T-shirt while his grandmother fights for her life, he verbally assaults her, signifying his demarcation of West, “the heartbroken grandson affected by the possible severing of the
root of his family tree,” and “West, the unfeeling, narcissistic celebrity whose customs and ideals reflect those validated by the dominant culture at large.” He overemphasizes the former and deliberately omits the latter.

Also, “Hey Mama” is not merely an endearing ode to his now late mother, Donda West. Rather, he mentions the “harsh winters” in Chicago and the indelible memories spent with his mother that are tied to memories of “home,” such as the years she “worked late nights just to keep on the lights,” or when she made him her “famous homemade chicken soup,” or when they “knelt on the kitchen floor” while he consoled her after a breakup. It thus bears the markings of a filial bond, as well as memories of the home, which are fraught with some sadness, but are more so romanticized articulations of a space of origin.

But the video for “Through the Wire” (Graduation) is the quintessential visual representation of a first space, “homey” identification conveyed vis-à-vis an “of the people” rhetorical focus. It features home-video clips of West inside of a popular chicken shack engaging with everyday members of the community. It includes frames of the footwork dance style germane to urban Chicago youth culture, which takes place inside of an urban clothing store located inside of a mall (the former Evergreen Plaza) often populated then with Black youth from hoods all over the Southside. Most importantly, it includes actual visual footage of West inside and outside of his childhood home. Thus, the song’s lyrics center his close brush with death after a tragic car crash, but the video literally dramatizes Bhabha’s conception of “home.”

West’s earlier music, then, resembles the Black oral tradition of storytelling, which preserved (African) cultural traditions. Like the Black oral tradition, West’s
narratives are about genealogy, the importance of community, survival, and heroism, communal and familial cultural traditions and indigenous practices. Some are allegorical, like “Drive Slow,” in that the glimpses of his own childhood are designed to convey a moral message. These early vignettes are verbal retellings of “home” and therefore situate his early music within a distinctly Black cultural heritage.

*Second Space:*

But in a colonial regime, “home” / first space cannot be preserved; it does not sustain an autonomous, unfettered presence as the colonized subject encounters the cultural invasions and narcissistic demands of the colonizer. Bhabha confirms Fanon’s warning against the “fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures” (13). Thus, in the second space, Bhabha argues that “home” and “world” collide. In a colonial context, world constitutes the mandates of the colonial regime. West’s earlier persona and music summoned colonial discourse and its disciplinary, reformative objectives. West’s emergence as the “inappropriate ‘college dropout’” who often fetishized an indigenous past, aided the white supremacist-colonizers in construing him as a degenerate in need of reformation, which means he stabilized racial hierarchies and justified the need for establishing the “dominant strategic function of colonial power” (Bhabha 123), while simultaneously enabling “corporate profit-taking.” Given the ultimate exploitative aim of colonization, the latter objective had to sustain, but the “sign of the inappropriate” (Bhabha 122) could not. Had West’s narratives maintained the appearance of an essentialist Black cultural history, and had they continued to parallel an African oral tradition, they / he would have countervailed the “‘Anglocization’ of colonies,” metaphorically speaking. Yet it appeared as if West would challenge the
hoped for ephemerality of his perilous brand. In the last track on *College Dropout*, “Last Call,” West raps lines like, “Ain’t nobody expect for Kanye to end up on top / They expected *College Dropout* to drop and then flop,” and “Now was Kanye the most overlooked? Yes sir. / And now is Kanye the most overbooked? Yes sir.” Thus, certainly West abetted the white-owned corporations’ / labels’ execution of the “corporate profit-taking” mission, but the “inappropriate object,” along with his anti-academia messages and “home”/first space iterations, also became hypervisible and culturally relevant, threatening the destabilization of a monocultural, Eurocentric system of domination.

West also posed a threat to “‘normalizng’ the colonial state” (Bhabha 123) achieved through quelling the performance of an “excess Black identity,” given his frequent articulations of pro-Black, anti-white supremacist sensibilities. This is especially true after he declared on national television, “George Bush does not care about Black people,” divulging the racist mentality of the white supremacist-colonizer spearheading the “American regime.” But such “indictments” of “the system” were also present in his music before and after this outburst. Consider, for instance, his reminder of the exploitation of children forced to mine blood diamonds in African countries like Sierra Leone, which are then exported to Western capitalist markets (“Diamonds from Sierra Leone Remix,” *Late Registration*); his meditations on racial profiling and racial tokenism in “Spaceship” (*The College Dropout*); and his exposure of structural racist practices in “We Don’t Care,” such as terminating afterschool programs so that “kids [can] act a fool” (*The College Dropout*). Consider, also, when he informs, “I basically know now, we get racially profiled / cuffed up, hosed down . . .” (“Two Words,” *Graduation*); or, when he lambasts the government for “administer[ing] aids” to the
Black community and exposes the structural violence leading to a disproportionate number of Black men behind bars because they were too “niggerish” to employ and their skin was “blacker than licorice” (“Heard ‘Em Say,” Late Registration). These indictments were so unambiguous and damming that the white supremacist-colonial world in which he existed (and still does) had to guard against them / him as he once again threatened the colonial mission and the subjugation / exploitation of Black bodies.

West also evokes the colonial power and discourse of “world” because he undermines the authority of the dominant episteme—its authoritative representations and discriminatory conceptualizations of “the order of things.”6 A prime example can be found in the video for one of his most successful songs on the College Dropout, “All Falls Down.” This song, with its first-person narration, point-of-view frames of West travelling through an airport, works to displace the hegemonic white supremacist-colonial gaze and system of “knowing,” by setting it against its obverse: West’s point-of-view.7

In his essay, “‘Can’t Tell Me Nothing’: Symbolic Violence, Education, and Kanye West,” media studies scholar, Chris Richardson argues that West achieves this through his “series of point-of-view shots” (99), a hyperbolic utilization of Black vernacular, and through other symbolic, self-aggrandizing gestures. With respect to the former, as West travels through the airport escorting his significant other (played by Stacey Dash) to her terminal, as I see it, viewers are made privy to the experiences of a Black man no longer located within the confines of “home,” but who, rather, encounters the public space of “world” consisting of prescribed values and modes of “knowing”/seeing. But as Richardson argues, the video works to subvert the “single, dominant perspective” that the media often naturalizes, suggesting, then, that West challenges the “‘natural’ way of
seeing the world through the white male gaze” (99-100). West steps inside of the restroom, gazes into the mirror, and the camera lens shifts to an opaque view briefly. But then West rubs his eyes until his eyesight is clear. The now lucid reflection of his self-image is symbolic of decentering of the white gaze, which is later personified by one white “ruling” security guard at the security checkpoint.

In the video, the authority of the “natural” epistemological perspective is called into question by the experiences of “an other body,” which is both individual and collective. Invoking the lyrics helps to situate the experiences of this body within the airport and within the world at large. In the case of the latter, this “other body” articulates a conflicting relationship with college (“The concept of school seems so secure / A sophomore, three years ain’t picked a career / She like ‘Fuck it! I’ll just stay down here and do hair”) and materialism (“We shine ‘cause they hate us / floss ‘cause they degrade us”), as well as admits its insecurities (“Man I promise, I’m so self-conscious / That’s why you always see me with at least one of my watches”). Here, West is again satirizing a heralded educational institution that is not always rewarding for bodies of color, and is inducing viewers and listeners to conceive of capitalist desires from the vantage point of Black folks who internalize and endeavor to reverse the repudiation and negation of their bodies through conspicuous consumption.

With respect to the visual representations in the video, Richardson reasons, “Even when [West] is turned away at security and X-rayed, the viewer, after having walked the length of the airport in West’s shoes, is likely to identify with West.” He maintains that the viewer is likely to “feel belittled and dehumanized by this act of surveillance, rather than
identifying with the white security guard who represents the ‘legitimate’ authority figure” (100).

So, surveillance practices inside of an airport must be conceptualized from those bodies that are inherently demonized and repressed. West thus disturbs absolutist, Eurocentric perceptions of navigating (white) public spaces (the airport) and white supremacist institutions (college and capitalism), and instead integrates new ways of knowing and seeing through the lens of a Black epistemological locus of experience. This, according to Bhabha, constitutes the hybrid moment, as it discloses the ambivalence of the domineering Eurocentric perspectives, given they are susceptible to the interruption of another “disavowed” line of thought. That is, that which was hidden (knowledge of experience emanating from “an other body,” is made visible, and must enter upon the dominant discourse, estranging it from its authority and its essence (Bhabha 15, 162). This means that the dominant conception of such public spaces and their racialized systems of governance, must “undergo a radical revision,” to echo Bhabha (16). What I have described is a function of subversive hybridity, and is expounded upon in chapter three.

West also undermines the dominant mode of seeing through his incorporation of an alternative dialect. In The Wretched, Fanon posits, “To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture” (21). But here West has decided against appropriating a European-derived dialect, and by extension, its culture. He replaces the “Queen’s English” with Black vernacular that Richardson argues, is “likely to be heard on street corners in certain Chicago communities,” rather than on college campuses (100). According to Richardson, West’s exaggerated mispronunciation of “secure” as “skur,”
for instance, or “Versace” as “ver-say-she,” is not merely a verbal performance of an alternative dialect. Additionally, it “highlights a different way of seeing the world” (100), which, as I argue, also raises the question of the legitimacy of the dominant manner of conceiving of the world and the racist, hierarchal order of its chain of beings. Richardson quotes sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984) insists, “The capacity to see (voir) is a function of knowledge (savior)” (qtd. in Richardson 2; Bourdieu 2). Therefore, West’s semantic play contests dominant perspectives as well as white supremacist-colonial logocentric practices. It challenges the “primacy” and “arbitrariness” of a system of language employed as an instrument of oppression in colonial regimes, used for the establishment of epistemological “truths” regarding “Black inferiority.” The ability to speak the Queen’s English (or French) in place of an “inferior” indigenous dialect was the sign of “civilization.” As such, “All Falls Down” alone, which garnered national attention from both the MTV and BET fan base (Richardson 99), aptly demonstrates a need to reproduce a “reformed, recognizable Other” (Bhabha 122) who does not challenge the authority of the prevailing episteme, which according to West, “make[s] us hate ourselves . . ..”

_Evidence of Alleged Conformity:_

Therefore, West’s “home” iterations were too ensconced in “blackness” and cultural specificity, his verbal attacks against the racist regime were too inimical, and his art often contested the authority, “superiority,” and epistemological “Truths” of the colonial sign. He was subsequently confronted with the narcissistic, conformist demands of the white supremacist, colonial order in the second space. Thus, he encountered more ultimatums and closed doors, and certainly more pressure to consent to the project of
“white washing.” The fact that he began using his platforms and music to lament fashion designers’ rejection of the urbanization of his early brand evinces the exclusionary practices he faced. Also, mainstream media and other critics began seeking methods of repression. They began to infantilize and label West as an erratic, insane artist, which I argue served to invalidate any of his attacks against the racist character of the dominant group. This issue became the main subject and pretext of many of West’s lyrics. “‘He crazy!’ I know what you thinking,” raps West, in his guest appearance on singer Estelle’s “American Boy” (2010). And in his verse in “Otis,” the duet single on the Watch the Throne (2011) album with Jay Z, West sarcastically declares, “They say I’m crazy, but I’m ‘bout to go dumb again!”

The thematic evolution of his first three albums (the “college dropout” metaphorically and belatedly re-enrolled in college (Late Registration), and eventually graduated (Graduation)) is therefore no coincidence in my estimation. For the second space of identification necessitated an “authorized” representation of “blackness” and cultural difference. There was more pressure for West to reify “the same but not quite” colonial objective. For instance, more and more of West’s narratives were steeped in the defining foundation of the West: the acquisition of property. But West’s materialistic narratives were not expressed in the same self-conscious and circumspect manner as before. In “Monster,” a track on My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy (2010), he brags about having “bought the chain that gives him back pain,” rather than explaining his material acquirement as a reaction to ontological negation, as he had done so often in the past. His unapologetic, excessive spending is also underscored in his verse in the Cruel Summer (2012) hit single, “Clique” wherein he brags about buying a home in an affluent
neighborhood and becoming neighbors with Tom Cruise, as well as “buy[ing] eighty gold chains and go[ing] ign’ant [ignorant].” “Blame it on the pigment,” he proclaims, “we living with no limits.” Moreover, after his first three albums, there is also a shift in his attitude toward women. Whereas “All Falls Down” depicts him withstanding dehumanizing surveillance practices, presumably for the sake of preserving love, *My Beautiful* also exposes his vulnerability to women, but there are more visuals of and lyrics about inflicting physical harm upon women, such as his decapitation and lynching of the women in the “Monster” video, or his threatening to forcefully inject a “Civil Rights fist” inside of a woman in “I’m In It” (*Yeezus* 2013).

But West is not performing a phenomenon endemic to Afro-diasporic culture. In *We Real Cool* (2004), bell hooks argues that patriarchal masculinity is not an inherent dynamic of the Black community. She argues that “[t]ransplanted African men . . . had to be taught to equate their higher status as men . . .. They had to be taught that it was acceptable to use violence to establish patriarchal power” (2-3). To add, misogyny is also not an inherent province of Black American/African culture. The violation of Black women’s bodies emanates from white slaver owners, and according to hooks, Black men, following slavery’s end, sought to “reclaim their manhood” by using the white slave owner’s violent, sexualized modes of domination as a model: “When slavery ended, these black men often used violence to dominate black women, which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slave masters used” (4). Some even beat their women behind barns, hooks reports, as the white slave owner had done (4). Of course, white masters had done much worse, as the dismemberment of flesh, which West sings about in
“Monster,” is also endemic to the politics of slavery. Therefore, West’s misogynist fantasies can be read as imitative performances of white masculinity.

He appeared to desire “a seat at the table,” not merely by co-opting the practices of patriarchal domination, but in the European fashion world, in the world of “creatives,” and within those institutions that he had once castigated. It can be argued that West wanted to be counted as an essential thread in the white American social fabric—in a white supremacist social world that has not exactly shown itself hospitable to Black bodies. Seemingly, West has been behaving less in accordance with the “‘inappropriate’, post-Black Power” male not seeking inclusion, and more like “the man.” Oftentimes, he appears to place himself within a lineage of white male patriarchs, such as Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, Michelangelo, Leonardo Di Vinci, and Howard Hughes. He is also a self-proclaimed “Shakespeare in the flesh.” In “Roses,” he extols the strength of his grandmother and admits, “. . . that’s where I get my confidence from.” The trope of his grandmother serving as his muse recurred in both his debut and sophomore albums. But whereas before he had drawn his energies from the indigenous cultural traditions of “home,” since 2010, his inspiration appeared to no longer be ancestral. In The Wretched, Fanon argues that such behavior characterizes the first phase of the native intellectual’s assimilatory evolution (222). “His inspiration is European . . .,” warns Fanon (222). On West’s latest album The Life of Pablo (2016), as the title suggests, West identifies with the late Spanish artist, Pablo Picasso. The album cover (physically designed by Belgian visual artist Peter de Potter), may display his roots in a throwback family portrait, but according to critics, it is Andy Warhol-inspired given the repetition of the overlapping of the album title, and Pablo Picasso-inspired, given, of course, its title, as well as its
collage-like visuality (two photos are imperfectly positioned, one of his parents’ wedding and the other of a “back shot” of a white, half-naked super model, on top of overlapping bolded black texts). Though Picasso was not white and Warhol was known for illustrating marginalized identities, the point is that West’s muses and cultural/artistic springboards are no longer entirely Black matriarchal figures, family, or idols in the hood, like Mali. On TLOP, he envisions himself and his creative potential as an amalgamation of Steve Jobs and the wrestler, Steve Austin (“Feedback). He also conjures fantasies of sexual escapades at Vogue parties (“Freestyle 4”) rather than recalling realistic encounters at family barbecues. Judging by the shift in the content of his music alone, one could surmise that Kanye West has yielded to the pressures of imitation within the second space.

Third Space

Even though West ostensibly transformed into an assimilated subject, his pro-Black consciousness and first-space iterations did not completely wane. For instance, Graduation (2007), as I argued earlier, implied a reconsideration of his initial anti-institutional education posture and brand. However, the first track, “Good Morning,” actually satirically inveighs against the futility of Black folks prevailing in academia, as it yields very few pragmatic results in West’s opinion: “Look at the valedictorian . . . / Scared to face the world, complacent, career student / Some people graduate but be still stupid.” He warns against the historically distorting, interpelling, and disarming instruction of institutional education: “They tell you read this, eat this, don’t look around / Just peep this . . . / Okay look up now, they don’t stole yo’ streetness.” As I explain in the text, he also mocks the prestige associated with the mastery of one’s discipline and
graduating college, and redefines the concept of graduation so that it reflects the lived experiences of those in the hood: “Homie this shit is basic, this is my dissertation / Welcome to ‘graduation’” and “But you graduate when you make it up out of the streets.”

With regard to first-space iterations, “Real Friends,” on *TLOP*, is evidence of an ontogenetic meditation, or the idea that his personhood is constituted through / by his communal existence, of which he admits to having lost sight. Essentially, the song is about how his identity has been mediated through his kinship networks, his family and the Black community—through his “real friends,” and how his social ascendency has caused his estrangement from both groups. It is a meditation on “home,” as he has forgotten facts about his friends’ children, yet he remembers the grudge he holds against a cousin who once stole his laptop. Kanye West is demonstrating how “blackness,” like “whiteness” has, can be a “transcendental signifier” (Fuss 22), insofar as the existence of Black identity and cultural representations are independent of what has been historically considered the “autonomous white referent.” Therefore, I see the liminal space in which West had begun to find himself (given his “hood” fan base began to deem him a sellout while he was still not completely accepted in the dominant culture) through a more complex lens. West is not a “mimic man,” nor is he an “inappropriate object.” He is instead a cultural hybrid who has carved a third space of existence vis-à-vis his mimetic performances of identity.

According to Bhabha, the third space is a “bridge, where ‘presencing’ begins” (13), because neither the fetishized cultural identity of the past, including an “inappropriate” disposition—the Black body covered in mythical markers—nor a complete assimilation of whiteness, can be apprehended/attained (respectively). So this
is a space wherein the boundaries of “home” and “world” are muddled, (Bhabha 13), and a new identity is negotiated. Bhabha calls this space the “unhomeliness” since it embodies “the relocation of the home and the world” (13). Ultimately, it constitutes “cross-cultural initiations” (13). But it is the mimetic performance that gives way to this third space.
Endnotes:

1 That is, as of late, rappers are the primary targets of the carceral instrument of repression. In fact, a March 2014 issue of *The Source Magazine* (the most popular hip hop magazine) read, “Hip-Hop Behind Bars,” which was a testament to the ongoing crisis of the persecution and intended prosecution of rappers. David Mays, the CEO of *The Source*, had this to say about the issue: “The mere existence of these so-called 'Hip-Hop Task Forces' [sic] proves that there are serious consequences to the misleading and damaging stereotypes that exist in mainstream society regarding Hip-Hop music . . ..” Mays is referring to the FBI’s reported Hip Hop Task Force called the “Rap Intelligence Unit” (which critics have likened to COINTELPRO of the1960s and 70s), mobilized for the extrajudicial trolling of Black rappers. The point, however, is that the mythical markers that have come to enshroud the bodies of Black rappers have proven consequential; however, this conundrum highlights the present paradox within rap culture.


3 In fact, West actually attended The American Academy of Art after high school and transferred to Chicago State University, where he dropped out in the late 1990s.


5 This occurred during a 2005 telethon event to raise money for the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

6 *The Order of Things: The Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970) is the title of Michel Foucault’s critical investigation of the notion of epistemes and the origin of the sciences. Essentially, he argues that every historical era is governed by production of epistemic “truths” or forms of knowledge.

7 Later, as well as in chapter 3, I explain how through the lens of hybridity and interstitial space, Bhabha argues against an inversion, which implies that there is a truth to provide. Instead, he argues that there is a repositioning or redrawing of the master narrative or perspective in that it is informed by the disavowed narrative or perspective (162).

8 In fact, Richardson quotes Stuart Hall, who in “Universities, Intellectuals, and Multitude” (2007) states that “the idea of the university as an ‘open’ institution, ‘freely’ in pursuit of knowledge, was, of course, never quite the case. It has always been a bit of a myth” (Richardson 104; Hall 110). Hall later argues that “the people who come into the learning process, come into it already placed hierarchal system” (Richardson 104; Hall 118).

9 The best example of this occurred on a 2013 segment of *Jimmy Kimmel Live* whereon Kimmel uses what newsnmusic.com. refers to as “milkshake sippin’ surrogates”—two little kids, one Black and one white—to recreate Kanye West’s 2013 BBC Zane Lowe interview where West lashes out about his ideas being disregarded in the world of “creatives” (“Jimmy Kimmel’s Kid (re)Kreation of Kanye West’s BBC 1 Interview”). This spoof reduces West’s critiques of white supremacy in artistic spaces to a “cartoonish tirade.”

10 Explained in the section “Theoretical Overview” in chapter three.
According Spin.com writer Chris Martins, during his visit on The Sway in the Morning show in 2013, West tells the host, Sway, that he is “Shakespeare in the flesh,” in efforts to shed light on the magnitude of his artistic influence.
Works Cited


Chapter 3

Appendix B

Historical Context of a Skinhead: White Supremacy, Colonialism, and Authoritarianism

Cultural critic Shane McNamee\(^1\) explains that the skinhead subculture originated in the UK in the 1960s and was predominantly led by working-class, nonconformist white youth who sought separation from the middle-class values of the dominant society. They demonstrated an affinity for a certain type of music and fashion, and not long after, advocated violence to enforce their autonomous existence. They were eventually associated with machismo, aggression, racist attitudes, and outright deviance. By the 70s and 80s, the skinhead subculture and the emergent punk subculture joined forces (McNamee, “Skinheads”). But as Tiffini A. Travis and Perry Hardy, authors of *Skinheads: A Guide to an American Subculture* (2012), note, the punks were “seen as nonviolent, often unclean anarchists with leftist leanings . . . ,” which was the exact opposite of the skinhead cult (43). However, the authors observe that the early anarchist ideals of the punk subculture attracted the interest of the skinheads in the 1970s and 80s, accounting for the overlap of both social groups (55).

It was at this moment that the skinhead subculture began attracting white Nationalist groups. By the mid 1980s, McNamee posits that the “white ultranationalist skinhead” became the brand of the subculture; this era consisted of skinheads who were more extremist and politicized. It was also around this time that the subculture and its influences were exported outside of the UK. In fact, by the mid 1980s, the neo-Nazi
subculture in Germany appropriated the skinhead subculture, and the same is true of the American white nationalists. The white power hate group, the Klu Klux Klan, for instance, adopted elements of the skinhead subculture, merely exacerbating its already-existing “white supremacist” ideology. Most white supremacists began adopting the skinhead name, style, and ethnocentric politics. The conflation of skinheads, neo-Nazism, and white supremacy has persisted ever since (McNamee, “Skinheads”). In America, their racial hatred is targeted at non-whites, but at Jews and at Blacks especially (Travis and Perry 133).

According to Travis and Perry, it is, however, true that there were Black skinheads in both the first and second generations of the subculture (77). At one point Afro-Caribbean cultural forms such as dance hall and reggae defined the skinhead subculture in the UK (Travis and Perry xiii, 27), given the wave of Afro-Caribbean immigration to the UK during the 1960s, which culminated in its early syncretic character: working class Afro-Caribbean immigrants called (“Rude Boys”) merged with the working class British skinheads (McNamee, “Skinheads”). Nevertheless, contemporary skinheads are either unaware of or intentionally ignore the Afro-Caribbean roots of the subculture, given their “white power”/ “white supremacy” indoctrination. But it is its racist character—which has gained international currency and notoriety—that Kanye West is parodying.

To apply an anti-colonial reading to West’s performance of a “Black skinhead” in the track and video, I must first establish a connection between the history and culture of skinheads, white supremacy, and European colonialism. The skinhead subculture is an extension of white supremacy. According to scholar, journalist, and research analyst,
John Foster “Chip” Berlet, several sociological researchers (Blee 2002; Ferber 1999; Marks 1996) have identified the dominant diverse typologies of the modern American white supremacist movement as the “organizational affiliation,” the Klu Klux Klan; the political and ideological category, neo-Nazism; the youth subculture, the racist skinheads; and the political-religious instrument, Christian Identity (18). But because the skinheads eventually developed affinities with each of the other typologies, I see the skinhead typifying a globalized white supremacist ideology and movement and not merely in its manifestation in the form of race-hatred factions in the United States.

But the skinhead subculture is also connected to the history of European colonialism if white supremacy, is itself, rooted in colonialist origins. In a broader context, white supremacy emerged as the ideological instrument harnessed for the fortification and maintenance of Empire during European colonialism. Berlet elsewhere confirms this argument in his description of the broader conceptualization of “white supremacy,” which refers to “the entire superstructure of oppression erected during European colonialism to justify the domination of so-called inferior peoples who were identified and made ‘the other’ by assigning the idea of race to skin color.”

However, in Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race (1998), race theorist and political philosopher Charles Mills explains his preference for the term “white supremacy” as a political system of global European domination in lieu of “imperialism” or “colonial capitalism” because the latter terms, he argues, are historically and geographically restrictive in that they “aren’t usually taken to apply . . . to the internal politics of white settler states such as the United states” (99). Nevertheless, Frantz Fanon’s succinct definition of colonialism as nothing more than “the entire
conquest of land and people” (Toward the African Revolution 81) calls into question Mill’s delimiting semantic preference, because what white supremacy denotes for Mills (even in a North American geo-political context) is almost synonymous to the fundamental denotation of colonialism for Fanon (who was arguably the most prominent colonial scholar with knowledge on the subject that was to a large extent experiential). So in effect, Berlet, Fanon, and Mills highlight the interrelatedness of white supremacy and European colonialism, and I argue that the skinhead subculture is positioned ideologically at the intersection of both.

I am not, however, employing this broader idea of “global white supremacy” (Mills 98) to suggest that white racist skinheads were/are quite literally upholders of formal colonial rule, given that most skinheads endorsed a white separatist ideology and sought and sometimes sough the obliteration of nonwhite peoples, while French and English colonial regimes were premised upon capitalist expansion vis-à-vis the subjugation of the native population through cohabitation, interdependency, and domestication. Rather, this broader theory of white supremacy that I invoke in my analysis of “Black Skinhead” enables a conceptualization of a skinhead subculture as an outgrowth of the ideological legacy of a global system of European domination (of bodies of color—Black bodies especially) and colonialism, which was predicated on the authoritarian enforcement of white power, white nationalism, and ultimately, the “supremacy” of the white race.

Despite its early anarchist, class-conscious philosophy, the skinhead subculture has reinscribed authoritarian ideologies of white supremacy. The multi-dimensionality of the subculture is important to note. The existence of Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice
(S.H.A.R.P) and the former West Indian poor skinheads, as well as the subculture’s alleged endorsement of non-authoritarianism/anarchism, as a reaction to its assertion of what Cultural Studies scholar Jon Stratton calls a “lost semi-mythical working-class culture” (71), challenge reductionist critical interpretations of the subculture as a purely racist, mob-like counterculture. While its anti-racist factions have endured, its evolved political orientation, by and large, mirrors this essentialist perception. As Berlet reports in his essay, “Overview of U.S. White Supremacist Groups,” the decline of Jamaican influences, as well as the influence of “Punk rock nihilism, . . . opened the door for the British neo-Nazi National Front to look to the skinhead subculture as a source of potential recruit” (31). The subculture thus achieved the height of its notoriety after many of its members were conscripted by and then incorporated neo-Nazism/fascism and Aryan nationalism, and Christian Identity. But inculcating the ideologies of these white supremacist instruments of domination re-positioned it squarely within the realm of authoritative ideals.

The fascist movement of the neo-Nazi ideology, for instance, Berlet informs, is unequivocally authoritarian (20). Unlike the anarchist character of the skinheads, fascism, he reminds readers, endorses political leadership whereby dictatorial leadership is conceded and regarded as natural (Berlet 20). But fascism was most likely appealing to the white supremacist and machismo character of the skinhead cult, as well as their terrorist impulses toward the same oppressed groups. This can be seen (respectively), given fascism’s espousal of a “superior” racial identity of a dominant group (Berlet 20, 21); given the fascists’ propensity of demonstrating political superiority through conflict, violence, war, and “the pursuit of power for its own sake” (Berlet 21), not unlike the
skinheads’ machismo disposition; and, given the fascists target and intimidate the same social groups and communities as skinheads (i.e. Jewish communities and communities of color—particular people of African descent). It stands to reason, then, that the skinheads’ collusion with the younger generation of fascists, who were more sympathetic to and enticed by their decadence, undermined the subculture’s initial vision of an autonomous, reinvigorated working class.

Further, in the 1990s, many racist skinheads accepted the invitation of Christian Identity, the religious sector of white supremacy (Ferber 1999; Gallagher and Ashcraft 2006; Berlet 2006; Larson 2009). Its doctrinal ideology recasts God’s chosen people as the white Aryan Christians (Berlet 27), and Jews as the descendants of Satan (Berlet 28). Berlet maintains that Identity also despises Jews because they “install racially inferior (and subhuman) Black people and other non-Aryan people of color in positions of power” (28). Sociology and Women’s and Ethnic Studies Professor, Abbey Ferber, claims that Identity doctrine holds Jews accountable for race mixing, for producing “‘mud people’” who are other people of color devoid of souls (56).

Yet, this racialization of biblical doctrine, which attracted skinheads, Ferber argues, “provides the Identity movement with a racial destiny.” She continues, “According to this doctrine, it is the destiny of the Anglo-Saxons to establish God’s kingdom on earth, and the United States and Great Britain are considered their birthright . . .” (57). Moreover, she quotes human rights activist and author Leonard Zeskind who states, “‘Their birthright is to be the wealthiest, most powerful nations on earth . . . able, by divine right, to dominate and colonize the world’” (57).
Thus, the skinhead subculture adopted a sector of white supremacy that wielded the bible for its mission of territorial conquest and the expansion of white power and domination, similar to the authoritative missionary discourse that gained prominence during the nineteenth century colonial “scramble for Africa.” That is, the skinheads aligned themselves with a discourse that signifies an authority of truth, which Postcolonial theorist V.Y. Mudimbe suggests was the “best symbol of colonial enterprise” (47), an integral “part of the political process of creating and extending the right of European sovereignty . . .” (45). He argues that Christian discourse of the colonial regime presents five features, three of which, I argue are upheld by Christian Identity: a language of derision and refutation (which reveals itself in Identity’s anti-Semitic / Black rhetoric) and “the rule of Christian orthodoxy which relates Faith to knowledge of the only Truth” (51). In the case of the latter, there are indeed narrative variations between the “orthodox,” proselytizing Christianity presented by white colonizers and the version of Christian Identity. However, Identity doctrine still propagates its polygenetic, anti-Semitic reading of British Israelism as a theology of “Truth,” given it is exercised to justify its “divinely ordained” manifest destiny mission. In short, though they initially espoused anti-authoritarian practices in their separation from a conservative, exclusionary political order, the skinheads who endorsed the ideals of Christian Identity paradoxically reinforced authoritarianism, a central precept of European colonialism.

Sociologist Phil Cohen explores this very contradictory paradigm in a localized communal context, in his essay, which appears in *The Subcultures Reader*, entitled, “Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community” (1972). Cohen highlights the
contradictions of emergent subcultural identities such as skinheads by first detailing how
the economic changes in the new consumer British societies of the 1950s and 60s left
youth estranged from the “parent culture” and from social mobility and economic
ascendancy, resulting in the emergence of youth subcultures (mods, skinheads, etc.).
Cohen deemed this a “reaction against the contamination of parent culture by middle-
class values” (90). He reports that the skinheads endeavored to reinsert the traditional
values of the working class, and that ultimately subcultures, skinheads especially, sought
the expression of “autonomy and difference from the parents, and by extension, their
culture” (91). However, they did so through an unconscious adoption of “machismo” and
“chauvinism” (Cohen 91)—and as I have demonstrated, paradoxically through the
endorsement of authoritarian ideals (These dominative modalities, by the way, endured
and were only exacerbated during the influx of the racist skinhead emergence in America
in the 1980s). As such, Cohen argues that subculture “cannot break out of the
contradiction derived from the parent culture; it merely transcribes its terms at a
microsocial level and inscribes them in an imaginary set of relations” (91). Skinheads
may have reacted against their marginalized presences within their respective national
locales, but their rebellion against what they deemed a distorted, demoralized parent
culture had an adverse effect on bodies of color within a macrosocial context. The
authoritarianism that the subculture reinscribed to cement its autonomous existence,
culminated in its transposed identity, whereby an appetite for globalized white power
eclipsed the anti-middle-class consciousness. Subsequently, the skinhead became an
agent of white supremacy, and by extension, a repository of the ideological legacies of
European colonial domination.
Finally, we can also examine more closely the subculture’s split from Afro-Caribbean influences to demonstrate that it was (and is still) ensconced in and a byproduct of the legacy of white supremacy and colonialism. In *When Music Migrates: Crossing British and European Racial Faultlines*, Jon Stratton discusses the influence of Jamaican musical culture on punk rock-skinhead culture. When the punk rock-skinhead culture arrived in Jamaica in the mid 1960s, Black Jamaican Reggae artists appropriated its elements, but “the absent English skinhead” was reincarnated as “the rude boy from whom the skinhead style partly derived” (Stratton 70). Rude Boys, however, Stratton makes clear, “had a colonial heritage” (71). To elaborate, he quotes literary critic Erin Mackie who explains their association with frontier expansion narratives of “the outlaw,” which she argues was the result of nostalgic, masculine fantasies of a dispossessed (colonized) populace (Stratton 71; Mackie 24-25). Stratton thus deduces that “[t]his rude boy background points up a continuity of colonial and post-Independence power” (71). That is, post-Independence Jamaica witnessed a sham of liberty and no real “transfer of power” (Stratton 71). Therefore, the music gravitated more toward racialized revolutionary concerns, which puts into perspective the decline of the skinhead influences in Jamaica and vice versa in the UK. In the words of cultural critic and author Dick Hebdige, “As the music became more openly committed to racial themes and Rastafarianism, the basic contradictions began to explode onto the surfaces of life, to burst into the arena of aesthetics and style where the original truce between the two groups had been signed” (qtd. in Stratton 71). Berlet confirms this rationale for the skinheads’ loss of interest in Jamaican traditions in the UK, insisting that the infiltration
of Rastafarianism and Jamaican youth culture resulted in the rupture of the interracial identity of the subculture, whereby the skinheads became a “white phenomenon” (31).

Hence, one can conclude, as does Stratton that the “racism of skinheads, then, can be read as an expression of their dominant position in the colonial, and indeed postcolonial, order (71). To this end, demonstrating the skinhead subculture’s enforcement of white supremacy and colonial ideology sheds light on the evolved authoritarian posture of the skinhead. This is important to highlight because it is this very authoritarianism that supposedly legitimates discursive constructions of “blackness” that emanate from white supremacist discourse during slavery and colonialism.
Endnotes

1 McNamee pens a comprehensive article on the history and evolution of skinheads on his popular culture blog site called The Undisciplined, titled, “Skinhead: The Evolution of a Subculture and Society’s View Thereof.”


4 Berlet does, however argue that many sociologists have overgeneralized the typologies of white supremacy—an example being that there were white supremacists who rejected Christian Identity (16-17). However, there exists an abundance of research that connects skinheads to the Christian Identity movement: Abbey Ferber’s White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy (1999; 57); Chip Berlet’s “Overview of U.S. White Supremacists Groups” (2006; 31); Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcraft’s Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America: African Diaspora Traditions and Other American Innovations (2006; 187); Viola Larson’s “Christian Identity: A ‘Christian’ Religion for White Racists” (2009).


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