

**Niggaz Wit Aesthetic: A Sociological Conceptualization of Diasporic Hip-Hop Identities in the Era of
Mass Incarceration**

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

SOCIOLOGY

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February 6, 2019

Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: aesthetics, identity, incarceration, hip-hop, diaspora, racial oppression

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Abstract

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When mainstream institutions fail to provide adequate avenues for black Americans to develop humanizing understandings of their identities and exclude them from full citizenship, how do black Americans develop identity, belonging, and community within structures of oppression? Through ethnography and archival research this study documents how the aesthetic realm historically and contemporarily serves as a site of articulation where rural black Americans recast notions of black subjectivity and local belonging. To understand the process of rural black Americans using the aesthetic realm to reposition the importance of mainstream institutions, this research uses a ‘socio-diasporic’ framework to view the ways those socially positioned as black come to understand that positioning via the way institutions structure their day-to-day reality; and how through the forging of diasporic connections black people have been able to construct knowledge within, alongside, and independently of those institutions. Specifically, this ethnography situates the criminal justice system as a primary institutional apparatus in defining the societal significance of blackness in northeast North Carolina. Hip-hop has served as a performative avenue to engage negotiations of identity, and through this search for identity black centered epistemological and ontological understandings of black subjectivity have been created. To appreciate black Americans’ unique understandings of the world that I argue they construct, I advance the notion of “vibe” as a methodological tool to conceptualize the way specific aesthetic and cultural sensibilities are used to construct understandings of blackness, gendered identity, and local belonging.

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General Audience Abstract

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When America fails to provide black Americans spaces to develop dignity and excludes them from full citizenship, how do black Americans develop identity, belonging, and community living in an oppressive society? Through living with rural black Americans and exploring how they understand their lived experience this study documents how the aesthetic realm historically and contemporarily serves as a space where rural black Americans reshape notions of black identity and local belonging. To understand the process of rural black Americans using the aesthetic realm to challenge the taken-for-granted structure of American society, this research views the ways those socially positioned as black forge community with each other and develop new ways of understanding their selves and society in ways that don't squarely align with mainstream assumptions. Specifically, this ethnography situates the criminal justice system as a primary structure in America that shapes the significance of blackness in northeast North Carolina, linking what it means to be black to criminal. Hip-hop has served as a performative avenue to engage negotiations of identity, and through this search for identity black centered ways of understanding the world has been created that challenge American assumptions about humanity.

Acknowledgments

Foremost, I would like to thank the black women in my life who loved me in creative ways to spark my intellectual ambition. Specifically, my grandmother, mother, and sister Karizma, who all invested the best parts of their selves in me throughout my life. Secondly, I would like to thank the black men in my life who engaged me with a nurturing and gentle touch that society fails to realize black men have. Thank you to Wink, Elijah, Malcolm, Que, Mike, pops, Dr. Harrison, and countless others whose grace serves as a testament to the beautiful outcomes that come from black male love. Thirdly, I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Faulkner, Dr. Copeland, and Dr. Brunisma who were strategically chosen because of their passion for people and intellectual curiosity.

Thank you to the black people in the 2-5-2. First to those that were enslaved who sacrificed their life for those that would carry on their legacy. Secondly, for those black people who never left the 252 despite the racism and lack of economic opportunities. But, rather they found purpose in creating a home on the very land my great-great-great-grandma was enslaved on. Finally, thank you to the black people currently in the 252 whose creatively, vulnerability, generosity, and commitment to a brighter future made my research possible.

There are countless others I can acknowledge in these remaining spaces, but time restraints forbid. For those others who have guided me along my journey you carry on the tradition of those millions of black people who have radically changed the world for the better, but names go unheard. Even when those names go unspoken we feel your presence every time we thank God.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
What I'm taking to the Field.....	5
Notes on Methodology.....	9
Chapter Summary.....	11
Chapter 2: 'If I Told You a Flower Bloomed in a Dark Room Would You Trust it': Theorizing Blackness Within the Forging of Diasporic Aesthetic Sensibilities.....	15
African Diaspora Theory.....	17
Situating Hip-Hop in a Black Aesthetic Tradition.....	23
Mass Incarceration.....	33
Socio-diasporic Framework.....	39
Chapter 3: 'Know he a genius, he just can't claim it 'Cause they left him no platforms to explain it': The Vibe of Ethnography.....	41
What is this Ethnography Thing.....	46
Conceptual Methodological Framework.....	51
How I'm Living.....	54
Chapter 4: 'I want to buy the mall but it ain't shit in this small town': Hip-Hop in the 252 as an Epistemological and Ontological Tool.....	63
It's Always Been Cultural.....	65
The System is Rigged Against Us.....	71
Hip Hop in the 252.....	80
We all Have a Stake in This.....	95
Chapter 5: Niggaz think I'm too pretty to spit rhymes this gritty/F--k y'all thought? Be dancin' around in suits like I'm Diddy? The Style of Vibe and Construction of Gendered Identity.....	98

Masculinity and Vocal Style.....	101
Guns Ain't Masculine, The Way I Talk about Them Is.....	106
Invisibility of Black Women in 252 Hip-Hop.....	113
Reclaiming my Time by Bringing Wreck.....	115
Chapter 6: 'It didn't change me, I'm the same me 'Got shot at, did turkey drives on the same street': Forging Diaspora in Structures of Racial Oppression.....	123
Being Black in the 252.....	125
Struggle Rap as a Site of Diaspora.....	131
The Extreme Local as a Site of Diasporic Articulation.....	136
Epilogue.....	145
References.....	150

Introduction

The 252 (pronounced 2-5-2) area code in northeast North Carolina is home to many low-income black Americans. I attended Weldon High school in Weldon, North Carolina, which was around ninety-eight percent black and conversations about blackness never came up; it was just what and who we were. In 2008 a small proportion of the graduating class, around thirteen students, went off to four-year universities. Transitioning from a low-income black neighborhood to a university with only a four percent black student population, I wanted to distance myself from my past. I did not want to be “read” as coming from the 252. I did this primarily through dressing professionally on campus. At the time, I did not think the campus would be able to see my lack of cultural and academic experiences and money through my bow-ties. I assumed the white students and black students from middle class backgrounds were better prepared for college coursework than me. I assumed if I looked the part then my professors and classmates would welcome me into their spaces and I would be able to call campus home.

During those 4-years in undergrad I learned a lot, mainly that I *did* belong in college. Upon graduating, I felt ashamed that I constantly hid my past by rhetorically changing the conversation when people asked about my hometown, by not inviting friends to my home during breaks, and by dressing how I assumed middle class black people dressed. Even with the theoretical baggage that comes with the term *authenticity*, and its various conceptualizations, in that moment I knew I wasn't it. If Stuart Hall (1990) is correct in saying that we don't represent static identities, but rather identity is constituted from and within representation, then for those 4 years I was not solely making aesthetic shifts in my presentation. I was purposely constructing who I was as antithetical to where I was from. My hometown became a reference group for what

and who I should not be. After watching myself academically outperform my white and black middle class colleagues, and going back home to the community that in my mind I betrayed, modes of identification became important to me. The issue was not that I chose to dress differently than people from the 252 (everyone doesn't dress the same there), but that I used the conceptual space I called home as an understanding of how I should not be aesthetically. Moving forward I was conscious about my aesthetic presentation and how it related to specific spaces.

In August 2014 I relocated to the campus of Virginia Tech to enroll in a PhD program in Sociology. My first day on campus I attended the new student orientation that was aimed to socialize incoming graduate students into the academic culture there. It is also a space to meet and engage with new people as most of the graduate students were new to the area. As we broke for lunch a few of us grabbed the catered boxed lunches and sat around a table together. Our conversations centered on what departments everyone was in and what our research would be centered on. As I was unsure at the moment when it was my turn, I confidently said 'black male masculinity' in an effort not to appear lost or without direction—not knowing that moment would make it into my dissertation. When the conversation shifted to talking about families and hometowns, no one knew where the 252 was. I tried to give them the best description I knew but ended up indifferently saying, "It's just the hood". At that moment I began embracing where I was from. I had on Jordan's and a hip jean jacket. Most of my adjectives were slang terms that were socially identifiable as black, such as 'dope' or 'low-key'. In my mind my phenomenological experience and presentation of blackness was like that of black people in the 252. But, from the smiles, soft laughter, and inquisitive eyes I could tell my colleagues did not read me as someone from the hood.

The reasons I suggest they did not view me that way will serve as the theoretical and methodological underpinning of this dissertation. I contend that despite me wearing clothing that most people in the hood wear and reassembling the English language using slang native to my hometown, I was not viewed as *hood* because of my vibe and the way I styled my blackness. Mainstream institutions in America have created (mis)representations of black subjectivity. What it means to be hood in the societal imaginary is to be violent and dangerous. My vibe was that of someone compassionate and community orientated, and was constructed through my constant references to how my career was geared towards giving back. Even though I wore the same clothing as individuals from back home, I styled it differently. My Jordan's were paired with glasses and a messenger bag that only an academic would carry. My southern slang was contextualized with words like "epistemological" and "phenomenological." Those cultural artifacts that I associated with home were empty vessels only taking meaning in the way in which they were aesthetically presented, styled.

This research examines how the young black community in the 252 uses the aesthetic realm to construct their life-worlds within and outside the epistemological and ontological limitations of mainstream institutions. Specifically, it examines how hip-hop serves as a site of articulation that provides artists with a space to engage in modes of identification to construct an understanding of black subjectivity outside of dominant institutions. Stephen Steinburg in *Race Relations: A Critique* criticizes scholars such as Robert Park contending that sociology as a discipline has failed to confront American racism which led to its inability to anticipate the rise of black protest ideology. Sociology currently embraces structural conceptualizations of racism. Racism is viewed as being engineered within social norms and major societal institutions (Bonilla-Silva 1997). I contend that sociological literature on structural racism has

underemphasized the aesthetic realm and failed to adequately theorize how black people continuously choose the aesthetic and cultural realm to challenge structures of oppression, despite relative integration into formal societal institutions. To better equip sociology to conceptualize the way in which black identity is used as a cultural tool within racialized social structures, this research critically examines structural assumptions within dominant sociological literature to develop a sociological conceptualization of the term ‘diaspora’ that speaks meaningfully about the ways in which black aesthetics are used to challenge dominant hegemonic structures and discourses. This socio-diasporic framework suggests that we think about the structural positioning of blackness within institutions and how through the forging of diasporic connections black people have been able to construct knowledge within, alongside, and independently of those institutions.

Through ethnography and archival research in the 252 I explore the aesthetic and cultural importance of hip-hop for rural black Americans as it relates to structures of racial oppression. I document how the criminal justice system structures the day-to-day reality of the black community and influences the community’s understanding of black subjectivity. Incarceration is less about preventing crime and more about policing the ontological bounds of blackness. What has changed since Jim Crow is not the structure of society, but the language we have developed to justify institutions organized around racial oppression (Alexander 2012). Angela Davis (2003) contends that crime is one of the masquerades behind which race can mobilize old fears to shape social structures. In the 252 the criminal justice system is the primary institutional apparatus used to construct representations of blackness as antithetical to human. In viewing hip-hop as a site of articulation this ethnography records how hip-hop has allowed black artists in the 252 to engage in negotiations of identity in a humanizing manner that is not available from mainstream

institutions. In this process of negotiation, they have recast representations of both black subjectivity and the 252; forging diasporic belonging in a space where they have been historically excluded from full citizenship.

This project aims to reimagine the theoretical and methodological bounds of sociology. It uses the term *vibe* as a methodological and theoretical tool to describe the structural experiences of blackness through the terms that black communities use. Vibe has been theorized to describe emotional resonance (Kurtyka 2015) and thought of as a communicative tool used to transmit and perceive intuitive signals (Friedman 2014). Vibe here is employed as a theoretical and rhetorical tool that allows us to see, when we center a black-worldview, how aesthetic, affective, moral, and cultural understandings and judgements are made. As a methodological tool it engages with the way specific aesthetic and cultural sensibilities structure ethnographic interactions. This research shows that rather than solely understanding a person's identity through mainstream indicators (e.g. education level, job status), the black community repositioned the importance of dominant institutions and understood each other partly through aesthetic and affective markers that traditional life chance indicators don't capture. When I changed how I dressed when I went to college the underlying framework was that the aesthetic was in conversation with larger social practices and structures. This research examines how rural black hip-hop artists engage with institutions through aesthetic stylized statements.

What I'm taking to the field

The theoretical issues that dominated my academic coursework are crucial to my conceptualization of culture as it is organized within systems of oppression and, therefore,

essential to how I engage conversations centered on hip-hop aesthetics. The sociology department at Virginia Tech is an interdisciplinary one: housing the Women's and Gender Studies, Africana Studies, and American Indian Studies programs. Accordingly, I position myself as an interdisciplinary scholar. The structures of knowledge engrained in the sociological and Africana Studies tradition serve as one foundation of this project. African diaspora theory structures the way this project engages with how black subjectivity is (re)created in relation to carving out spaces of belonging in the American context. If blackness has been constructed outside the bounds of modernity and excluded from the human dignities that come with citizenship (Iton 2008), how do black Americans come to know themselves in a humanizing manner as a black diasporic body?

This project answers this question by showing how black people actively forge diaspora or engage in diaspora-making. Hall (1990) suggests that the diasporic experience relies on an articulation of the different discourses encompassed within the complex global black experience. Here diaspora-making is conceptualized as the ongoing political, social, and material articulations that are forged across different physical and conceptual boundaries by those socially positioned as black for material, cultural, and/or affective gain. In building on Brent Hayes Edwards (2009) notion of 'articulation' that documents how black people have created unity because of their difference, I contend that the universal signifier of 'black' does not highlight a homogenous experience. Rather I argue that what links black people throughout the diaspora as well as on the continent is the fact that being labeled 'black' positions you as such in a particular social structure. Race is organized differently within the organizational structures of different societies (Whyte 2012); however, the European imperialist movement has used white supremacy to shape our understanding of black subjectivity globally. Black people globally must contend

with white supremacy, but ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and nationally shape the structural texture of that experience.

My constant reference to structures and institutions in my engagement with diaspora theory is pulled from sociology of race scholars who view race as part of the structural organization of society. Joe Feagin's (2006) concept of 'systemic' racism refers to the foundational, large-scale, and inescapable hierarchical system of US racial oppression directed towards people of color. Racial oppression is a normal and necessary aspect of the organizational structure of society because it has material and/or affective benefits for whites (Bonilla-Silva 2010). I merge diaspora theory with structural theories of racism to build a 'socio-diasporic' framework. This framework asks us to think through the ways those socially positioned as black, through the forging of diaspora, construct their life-worlds within and outside the epistemological and ontological limitations of mainstream institutions.

To view this diasporic process in action I look specifically at the hip-hop tradition through a black aesthetic lens. The aesthetic realm has been seen as one that has allowed black people to be fantastic: destabilizing dominant notions of modernity by recasting black subjectivity in a modern humanizing manner because of the way blackness can operate from within, in conversations with and against mainstream institutions (Iton 2008). Black aesthetics validate the ontological importance of understanding the black body and black subjectivity as an epistemological agent (Miller 1971). My core contention is that mainstream institutions have not provided humanizing avenues for black people to construct adequate representations of self. Through the constant construction and negotiation of black subjectivity in the aesthetic realm, black people have developed black centered ways of knowing, understanding, and feeling that are different from the dominant notions being prescribed by mainstream institutions.

I chose hip-hop as my aesthetic venture for primarily two reasons. The first being, I'm from a rural town and I saw hip-hop daily; however, I have not encountered academic literature that reflects this experience. I wanted to understand how hip-hop structured rural black American lives in ways that differed from urban black Americans. Secondly, the massive number of black youth and adults engaging in hip-hop made it attractive. As Tina Campt (2012) has suggested, it is often not that something is rare or exceptional that makes it important, but the serial engagement and production of it. The fact that I could run into a hip-hop artist at any moment in the 252 excited me. It let me know that there is something to this hip-hop thing and I needed to find out what it was.

In thinking through how hip-hop is situated within the 252, I choose to situate the criminal justice system as my primary focus due to previous readings on race and the criminal justice system and my personal experiences in the 252. I had learned that mass incarceration is locking black people into a second-class position in society (Alexander 2012) and that this impact is so massive that it is impacting entire communities not just people physically locked away (Clear 2009). I did not know what this looked like empirically, on the ground level, in small rural black towns. I had always understood police involvement in the day-to-day lives of black people in the 252 as normal—something we structured our lives around. This research goes on to argue that the criminal justice system in the 252 in part defines the structural meaning of blackness. What it meant to be black was to be policed, guilty, and at the mercy of any person who completed the local police academy. Hip-hop provided a way to see yourself beyond how institutions organized your life.

Notes on Methodology

“I think this [ethnography] is just another way to call me a nigger”, John Gwaltney (1980) was told by a black factory worker during his research. Gwaltney and his informant point us to the issue of black misrepresentation in research partly due to the fact researchers maintain frameworks of race and class more than they have analyzed them. Researchers engage race critically for a short part of their life, but they *do race* every moment of their lives. While Chapter 3 goes into detail about the methodological framework of this project, for me, it is important to position myself as a researcher early into the project. While during this project no one expressed that they felt I had intentions to misrepresent them, I did encounter statements of, “what’s the catch”. Most people were extremely happy to sit down and work with me, but often that excitement was underpinned with wanting to know why I chose the 252 as my site and why I wanted to work with them specifically.

The reason I chose to engage in ethnography in the 252 is because participant-observation can be used to access the interior spaces of cultural production and modes of activity that may be so normalized that actors themselves are not aware of, nor can they see their importance (Spradley 2016). As a native researcher I went into the field with a feeling that there was something special to be found in the hip-hop scene in the 252, that I wasn’t able to grasp when I was just a community member. In suggesting that I am a native researcher I am not contending that I have a natural affinity with the field nor that I am better suited to engage in research here, but rather to take seriously the ‘many strands of identification’ I have because I was born and raised in the 252 (Narayan 1993). It allows me to think through how at different points in my field work I constantly moved positions on the spectrum of being a researcher and just being at home; how I was received was also constantly negotiated on this spectrum.

This ethnography should be understood as a reflexive project. Ethnography is an interactive process that is constructed along dialogical lines between the researcher and interlocutor (Lassiter 2001). While in the 252 I spent a lot of time having interviews in living rooms, local bars, and recording rooms discussing themes centered on the black experience and hip-hop. A lot of the insights I gained were gathered through ethnographic experiences that at times did not feel like research, but simply connecting with community members. The goal of this project wasn't to tell *the* story, but to explore what story could be told by taking seriously the language, ideals, and values of the community in which I worked with. This is done primarily by employing the term *vibe* to organize the theoretical and methodological structure of this project. While in the 252 individuals made assessments of my project and me by its affective and cultural relevance to them, through engaging with my *vibe*. *Vibe* has been theorized as a communicative tool used to transmit and perceive intuitive signals (Friedman 2014). *Vibe* here is employed as a theoretical and methodological tool that allows us to see when we center a black-worldview how aesthetic, affective, moral, and cultural understandings and judgments are made. When marginalized groups take control over their representation they engage in cultural politics by defining the value and meaning of acts and events, and restructure the way their cultures and histories are understood (Mahon 1990). *Vibe* is used as a metalanguage to discuss black-centered ways cultural, aesthetic, and affective sensibilities are used to understand people, events, and institutions in ways that work within, around, and often alongside dominant institutional understandings.

Centering the assessment tool of the black 252 community is my way of taking seriously Gwaltney's (1980) assertion that black people are constantly engaging in theory building. My methodology embraced the *vibe* of the people I worked with and places I went. My purpose of

privileging vibe is to suggest that if we reposition the importance of simply understanding black people and communities and engage their aesthetic, affective, and human sensibilities in a meaningful way, we have a smaller chance of calling them a nigger in our work.

Chapter Summary

“What you going to be doing here”, my fourteen-year-old sister asked me as I brought a suitcase full of clothes into my mom’s place. “I’m here working on research, so I can get my degree”, I tell her as I was trying to put my bag down and relax. My sister has no memories of me not being in college because I started when she was three and have been pursuing academia consistently since. “What’s your research on she asks”, in a voice excited because I was home. “Hip-hop and mass incarceration”, I say vaguely because even at the moment I was unsure how my ethnographic process was going to go. In an academically inquisitive voice she asks, “Do they go together or something?” In that moment my sister just wanted to understand my project and bond with me. But, when she asked, ‘Do they go together or something’, underpinning her question was her wanting me to explain the ways I thought hip-hop and mass incarceration were meaningful together. She wanted a narrative that brought these two large ideas together in a way that made sense to her. I don’t remember the exact way I phrased my answer, but it was roughly, “The criminal justice system treats us [black people] in a particular way and that treatment shapes how we think about our self, but maybe hip-hop can give us a new way to be who we truly feel we are?” The simplicity of that response runs through my entire project. I may dress it up by grounding it in theory and contextualizing it with scholarly discourse, but the idea of the imaginative possibility of hip-hop allowing black people to be more than the limited vision of mainstream institutions runs through each chapter.

Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical framework that this project rests on. In reading African diaspora theory, hip-hop and aesthetics, and mass incarceration as three interconnected bodies of literature I build a socio-diasporic framework that views the way those socially positioned as black forge diasporic linkages for political, cultural, and social gain. This chapter lays the theoretical grounding for viewing the way the criminal justice system places existentialist limits on black subjectivity and how black people have engaged in diaspora-making in the aesthetic realm. It lays a foundation for us to think through the stories we can tell if we center institutional interactions in African diasporic conversations. It contends that black people in part understand the black experience through recognition of their structural position and argues they have challenged this position through the forging of group identities outside of oppressive institutions.

Chapter 3 examines the methodological framework that was utilized for this project. The term *vibe* is developed as a methodological and theoretical tool to structure the ethnographic project around the language employed by the black community in the 252. By centering on black worldviews, *vibe* allows us to see how aesthetic and affective judgments of people, behaviors, and institutions are made. As a methodological tool *vibe* engages with how aesthetic and cultural sensibilities structure ethnographic interactions. The black community grew to understand me partly through my *vibe*. Through appropriating the term, I stopped seeking to simply understand their experiences, but strove to ‘feel’ them. Understanding something or someone is understood as a surface level form of engagement, but in privileging *vibe* my methodological framework takes seriously the cultural and affective sensibilities that structure the day-to-day lives of black hip-hop artists in the 252.

Chapter 4 situates the 252 as an area that is home to primarily low-income black rural Americans whose economic systems were historically structured around slavery, and who have

since been disinvested in. It explores how cultural resistance has historically been part of the liberation tool-kit for black people in the 252. Liberation through rap in the 252 is not solely centered on restructuring black people's economic position, but about bringing rural black experiences into dominant discourses centered on hip-hop and local belonging. What I term 'struggle rap', has allowed the black 252 hip-hop community to articulate their experiences and simultaneously construct understandings of their experiences and their selves in ways that don't always square with the way in which dominant society understands them.

Chapter 5 explores how hip-hop in the 252 has served as a performative site to construct gendered identity. I contend that in analyzing the importance of any hip-hop artifact we must take serious the style of the performance and not solely the content. I suggest that in not centering the style of hip-hop presentation we have missed the ways in which black masculinity and black femininity are negotiated. I suggest that by being excluded from mainstream ways in which to develop humanizing notions of masculinity, black men have used style to construct and perform masculinity. Furthermore, I contend that songs about guns and drugs, to the artist that perform them are not signs of masculinity, but rather masculinity is negotiated through the ways in which those songs are styled. Black women, being both marginalized in dominant institutions and in hip-hop, have used style to carve out spaces of visibility to destabilize the patriarchal organization of hip-hop. I view the way in which black women artist style songs about guns and drugs with gendered references to disrupt the masculine undertones of the genre.

Chapter 6 examines how black hip-hop artists have forged a diasporic sense of community and belonging in the 252 despite being excluded from full participation in citizenship. It illustrates the ways in which black people in the 252 experience blackness through interactions with institutions. In viewing hip-hop as a site of articulation, I suggest that hip-hop

allowed black artists to construct a vision of themselves and the 252 that did not square with how they were popularly perceived. Through engagement with the ‘extreme local’ (Forman 2002) black artists were able to recast black subjectivity, as necessary, to the social processes of the 252. This chapter maps out how diaspora is not always about movement, but can also be found in our analysis of how people strategically choose to stay put.

The Epilogue is a (re)imaginative vision of sociology. Beyond notions of social justice, on a personal level, what is our obligation to the communities in which we work? It explores how most of us are not equipped to solve the issues and social processes we problematize. We may feel we need to because of the inherent value we perceive to reside within academia, even if the communities we work with do not conceptualize academia as such space. I call for us to reevaluate our relationships to communities, people, and ourselves.

2. 'If I Told You a Flower Bloomed in a Dark Room Would You Trust it': Theorizing Blackness Within the Forging of Diasporic Aesthetic Sensibilities

On my ride from Virginia to Raleigh North Carolina for the preliminary stages of my fieldwork, I felt the excitement of being able to take on the role of a researcher. As I drove down the highway I thought about all the connections I would make, all the stories that I would hear, and how I would tell a nuanced narrative of hip-hop in the 252. While driving and simultaneously preparing myself for the first major research project of my career, my GPS indicated there was an accident ahead with stop and go traffic and redirected me to drive through a town called Fancy Gap. As I coasted through this town in a span of 10 minutes I pass over 30 confederate flags waving honorably and effortlessly in the wind. Maybe if I hadn't attended both the Ku Klux Klan and Alt Right counter protests rallies in Charlottesville Virginia a few months prior I would have understood these flags to be symbols and relics of the past that uninformed Americans clung to in search of an authentic identity. Maybe if this wasn't Trump's America I would have conceptualized these flags as part of the social processes that organize a small southern town and not representative of the way in which we symbolically construct the United States as a whole. After all, I'm a sociologist and we believe that racism is located within institutions and has become largely covert and even polite. But, I did attend those counter rallies and Donald Trump was the president in 2018, so those answers were not enough. Could it be that race has been normalized and maintained within societal institutions and upheld by racialized ideologies and language to the degree that society has developed rhetorical scripts to justify overt racism as it did in the past? Maybe overt racism never left and contemporary sociologists are blinded by the eyes of presentism in such a way that even anti-racists can't see what chooses not to hide? Out of all the questions this experience created "*why hip-hop?*" was the most pervasive.

At a time where black and brown people exist in a structure of surveillance alongside a resurgence of overt racism, why am I studying hip-hop? As a self-identified activist why was it important for me at this historical juncture to examine a musical tradition that has its fair share of researchers engaging with it already? During that car drive I did not have the answer to those questions, but I hoped the stories I would eventually hear would.

The question why hip-hop is not simply asking “why is hip-hop important to study”, but from a sociological perspective seeking to understand how black cultural aesthetics are situated within structures of racial oppression. This chapter’s epigraphs, African diaspora theory, hip-hop and black aesthetics, and mass incarceration, urge us to think about blackness on the one hand as a white supremacist imposition that organizes the way in which we understand those who are socially defined as black, and on the other as a way in which to deal with the structural and material ramifications of white supremacy – a diasporic process that is most vividly seen in the aesthetic realm. The first epigraph points to how race, specifically blackness, developed as part of a European imperialist project to justify the legal structural marginalization of black people, but has been appropriated by those socially defined as black as a form of identity which allows us to see blackness not simply as a product of historical structural forces but also as produced by black agency simultaneously shaping the social contexts which shape it. I argue that given the varied historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, gendered, and class differences amongst those socially defined as black, it is still meaningful to think about diasporic communities in racial terms. The second epigraph charts how the struggle for black freedom has always been a search for authentic identity (Marable 1992) and largely pursued in the aesthetic realm. Hip-hop is part of the black aesthetic tradition and provides a contemporary lens to view the way in which black aesthetics have served as a critique and negation of the epistemological, ontological, social,

and cultural assumptions of dominant society. The third epigraph situates mass incarceration as the contemporary institutional apparatus that in part structures the meaning of blackness in society. The disproportionate impact mass incarceration has on black bodies paired with the massive systemic reach of the criminal justice system shapes American society's understanding of who black people are, regardless of if they have ever been incarcerated. In juxtaposing these epigraphs, I am marking the way in which hip-hop's diasporic aesthetic sensibilities have been used to construct a black identity and self-understanding outside of the epistemological and ontological limitations of a society structured on surveillance and incarcerating black bodies.

African Diaspora Theory

For many black Americans, particularly the ones whose experiences and narratives construct this research, the question "where are you from" is a political one. On the surface it seeks to understand a geographical space in which one is historically situated. For black Americans, and many other diasporic people, their answer is filled with ambivalence because their skin tone suggests that where they are historically situated is not necessarily where they are from. When someone self-identifies as from north-east North Carolina, but is simultaneously denied the rights of American-ness, many begin to think of themselves in a larger black diasporic community.

In conceptualizing the black diasporic experience scholars have documented diaspora in action, specifically thinking about diaspora as a relationship that is continuously forged and (re)negotiated between those socially defined as black (Matory 2005; Edwards 2009; Guridy 2010). Given there is no biological basis to race, scholars of the African diasporic experience have grappled with what constitutes the essence of 'blackness' that makes speaking in terms of a

transnational black experience meaningful without reproducing notions of European essentialism. If race, thus blackness, is not a natural fact rather a social manifestation of a European imperialist project (Smedly 2007), what constitutes a black identity?

Richard Iton in *Searching for the Black Fantastic* contends that modernity is more than just a flat trope, but rather a racialized project predicated on the otherizing of black people. Within this project blackness developed as a political, social, and cultural ideology to justify colonialism, slavery, and other racialized institutions of domination as morally, economically, and religiously just. If the European imperialist project did in fact move the world from primitive to modern, then blackness arose as antithetical to modernity and consequentially humanity. Similarly, Hesse (2007) develops 'racialized modernity' as a discursive tool to recognize race as more than just a tool to signify difference between European and non-European peoples, but a foundational component of our conceptualization of what/whom can be modern. Iton and Hesse suggest that in the clarifying process in which blackness developed meaning, blackness was constructed as the alterity to humanity.

Blackness in part developed as an imposition by characterizing some people as outside the ontological bounds of humanity not only to rationalize and justify the economic, political, and social marginalization of African people, but also to suggest that it would be unhuman not to do so. However, African people never idly sat back and let the white imagination have complete control over the contours of blackness, they have always asserted their right to humanity within these conversations. Manning Marable contends that when African Americans think about blackness, they generally have a dual understanding of the term and can speak referring to one or both definitions simultaneously – a category Europeans created and imposed on us for

domination and black cultural identity, which black Americans constantly reinvent and construct for ourselves (1992).

What is this black identity that black people have reinvented and constructed for themselves? Can we meaningfully think about black people in racial terms given the varied ethnic and nationality differences that are composed within the framework of “black”? For this project this line of questioning underscores a larger question - how can we understand black Americans search for identity as part of larger black diasporic process? In searching for an answer to this question I examine scholars who conceptualize black identity and diaspora as not fixed, but forged through the experiences of black people.

Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* argues there is no African essence that links all black bodies—suggesting that black identity should be seen as a process of movement, rather than something to be found in an African rootedness. Gilroy uses the image of ships in motion across the Atlantic symbolically to suggest that the specificity of blackness is not grounded in an imagined African past, but rather through the continuous experiences and articulations of black people. Similarly, George-Graves (2014) suggests that diaspora does not deny the past but cannot be reduced to or locked within it, contending that black identity is in part a contemporary performance. Using performance as a discursive tool in which to conceptualize black identity provides the theoretical ability to see it not simply as a product of historical structural forces nor a fixed essence to be retrieved from an African past, but a product of black agency simultaneously shaping the social context that shapes it. This conceptual lens is to move towards a conceptualization of black identity and diaspora that allows black people to be viewed as agents and humans with cognitive capabilities, who have always been active in the construction of the modern world (Gilroy 1993).

Stuart Hall has suggested that identity is not a social fact that cultural practices represent, but rather should be viewed more as an ongoing production constituted within, not outside representation (1990). For Hall (1997) representation does not capture an identity or process, but representation is constitutive of them. My contention, in this case regarding black people in the 252, is that there is no static identity or cultural understanding that links everyone, but rather through a performative process of creating self-representations people socially positioned as black come to understand ourselves. These identities do not live in isolation, but rather they are contested as they exist within a structure of anti-blackness that itself also creates its own representations of blackness. Michelle Wright (2003) has conceptualized this duality by suggesting that black identity has been produced in contradiction.

W.E.B. DuBois describes this contradiction as double consciousness: “One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (1903: 2). DuBois highlights a contradictory conceptual space in which black Americans are forced to construct a black-American identity, while a vast veil simultaneously cast them outside of American-ness. Similarly, Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* states: “As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro” (153). Fanon is suggesting that the psychological violence of colonialism forces the Martinican in a dialectic where black subjectivity is cast outside the realm of personhood and the language and culture of your oppressor seems the only route to humanity. To understand black Americans’ search for a humanizing black identity and ultimately how that identity is situated within a larger black diasporic experience we must be cognizant of the complexity of striving for personhood in a

global white supremacist society that functions, not despite of, but, because of representations of blackness as inhuman.

Adding to the complexity of the unsettled black experience is the fact that black people in the diaspora have an array of varied historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, gendered, and class differences, thus any meaningful conceptualization of a black diasporic identity must simultaneously account for the diversity of black identities, and meaningfully link those identities in a manner that constitutes a diaspora and not simply disconnected groups of people solely connected by name (Wright 2003). In other words, a conceptualization of diaspora must deal with the complex heterogeneity of the black experience, while accompanied with a theoretical linkage that shows why it is possible and necessary to talk about people of African descent not only in ethnic terms, but racial.

For Stuart Hall (1990), the diasporic experience relies on an articulation of the different discourses encompassed within the complex global black experience. The process of diaspora-making can be viewed as the ongoing political, social, and cultural articulations and interactions that are forged across different physical and conceptual boundaries by black peoples. It becomes clear that Hall is suggesting that accounting for racialized difference doesn't make the global black experience any less meaningful but constitutes the essence of diaspora when he states, "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite difference" (235). In building on Hall, Brent Hayes Edwards (2009) defines articulation as a concept-metaphor that allows us to consider relations of difference within unity, thus black people become related through their differences just as much as they are through their likeness. Pierre (2012) suggests that forced migration and slavery have

taken primacy in intellectual engagements on transnational blackness, disconnecting European colonialism on the African continent from modern black identity. Thus, any meaningful conceptualization of diaspora must link postcolonial African societies' experiences of global white supremacy with those of blacks in the Atlantic.

I define diaspora as an ideological, cultural, and material project that manifests in the ways in which blacks in the diaspora and on the continent with varied historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, gendered, and class differences forge links to legitimize black subjectivity for cultural, political, social, and economic gains. Diaspora can be forged anywhere from within local communities to transnationally. This dissertation's contention is that if global configurations of race in some way structure local racial social processes, then examinations of the local can inform the way in which we understand race at the global level.

Pierre (2012) argues that global racial configurations of identity, culture, economics, and politics structure local realities; suggesting that local discourses on race resonate with a transnational diasporic identity. Similarly, Jacqueline Nassy Brown's *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail* looks at black diasporic experiences in Liverpool and argues that through reification of the local, black identity in Liverpool was constructed. Pierre (2012), Brown (2009), and Iton (2008) highlight how race at the local site is structured through global white hegemonic and material configurations. Negotiations about the meaning of blackness play out more often than not in local sites such as barbershops, dancefloors, music studios, and living rooms and can provide insight into the larger understandings of blackness. Examining the local racial processes provides the ability to explore the way in which the broader ideological and material configurations of white supremacy become mapped onto everyday spaces influencing renegotiations and dialogues on Black identity (Pierre 2012). Searching for diaspora in local scenes is a search for the macro

in the micro, the grand in the mundane, and the general in the specific. This is not to suggest that the local can tell the complete story of the global, but that the local tells a piece of it. This project then examines how those socially positioned as black in the 252-area code in North Carolina transgress across difference to forge black identity within and outside of institutions organized around systemic racism.

Situating Hip-Hop in a Black Aesthetic Tradition

Scholars have rejected biological and essentialist notions of race, viewing race as existing in the “structural imaginary of society” (Castoriadis 1997) and thus adding to the complexity of understanding what it is we mean when we speak about being black. When asking black people to define black music, black culture, or black aesthetics I am always given a variety of answers. Some suggest black music is music performed by black people, while others contend that the race of the performer is less important if black people appreciate the music. Others give answers that situate black culture as something that speaks to the black experience, while others expand black culture beyond the limits of the black experience arguing all culture has remnants of the black experience in it. A central theme that seems to occur when discussing what this “black” means is that there is a humanizing component to it. Black, for black people, serves as a qualifier that is used to signify a particular type of experience, understanding, and positionality that inherently tells us something that we could not get from another racialized understanding.

In thinking through black cultural politics, the fact that these questions receive a variety of answers speaks to a larger point that Stuart Hall has consistently made as he argues that:

“the end of the essential black subject is something which people are increasingly debating, but they may not have fully reckoned with its political consequences. What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category “black” (1996: 443).

Here Hall contends that identity is not foundational nor guaranteed by nature, but socially constructed within social and historical circumstances, which in part helps in understanding the different lines of arguments used to describe black when used as a qualifier. Thus, to employ ‘black’ to meaningfully frame any cultural aesthetic (e.g. black arts) is to be cognizant of the historical and social situatedness of the term without sliding into what Hall calls a “discursive liberal-pluralism” that reifies the same essentialist rhetoric that constructs black bodies outside of modernity’s ontological bounds.

In thinking through ways to conceptualize blackness rather than searching for the historical moment in which it developed, we should examine the processes which made blackness important enough to warrant our attention. As stated earlier, blackness arose out of an imperialist movement to signify those who were neither human nor modern. As Freeburg (2012) contends if the modern world was made possible via slavery and colonialism, then blackness signifies the destruction of subjects’ social viability and violence of limiting a subject’s humanity. If the construction of blackness was due to the European imperialist project to impose existentialist limits on certain subjects to rationalize and legitimize massive amounts of physical, political, epistemological, economic, and cultural violence for the pursuit of capital, then blackness and black identity must in part deal with the ways in which individuals socially constructed as black resist these forms of violence.

In conceptualizing blackness as a form of resistance, the black aesthetic tradition has been used as a theoretical framework through which to understand this conceptual battle. Black aesthetics can in part be thought of as an epistemological critique of aesthetics as simply the contemplation of the beautiful. Rather black aesthetics validate the ontological importance of understanding the black body and black subjectivity as instruments of knowing, perception, and feeling (Miller 1971). Paul Taylor begins *Black is Beautiful* by quoting at length a story featured in Richard Price and Sidney Mintz's *The Birth of African American Culture*. The story takes place in 1790 at a seaport in South America. A ship just arrived from the Dutch Gold Coast and is unloading its cargo. As these dark-skinned slender men exit the ship they have stars carved into their hair and we later find that these black individuals carved the stars themselves. For Price and Mintz the significance is that the cultural blending of these different African ethnicities into an unstable African-American culture used to juxtapose themselves against whites was fashioned before these newly black subjects even reached America. For Taylor, the larger point is that this story speaks about the birth of a black aesthetic, stating:

Having been stripped as much as was possible of their preexisting cultural armament, they had to replace it with something, put some stylized barrier between themselves and the new social forces with which they would be forced to contend. Instead of entering the new world in the manner of animals they were thought to be, unadorned, unmarked by the self-conscious creation of meaning, they found common cause in the essentially human act of aesthetic self-fashioning (2016: 2).

Here Taylor's contention is that black aesthetics grew out of the desire and process of the black subject to actively humanize herself in the face of Western imperialist violence. Black aesthetics

manifested as a critique, negation, and contradiction of the veil (Dubois 1903) that cast black subjectivity as inconsequential to humanity. It is about asserting that the black subject has meaning and beauty, while being both within and outside-of modernity. This tradition is seen in Toni Morrison's works, specifically *The Bluest Eye*, where the black subject (specifically black woman) has the ability to self-define her aesthetic and human value outside of the hegemonic ideology prescribed by modernity.

This conceptualization of black aesthetics moves us closer to answering "why hip-hop"? Black aesthetic self-fashioning was one of the first forms of resistance engaged in by black diasporic people, specifically stylistic performative resistance. Scholars have argued that the aesthetic realm is where blacks invested a major amount of energy because they were excluded from dominant societal institutions. I do not contest this point, but I do not believe black aesthetic self-fashioning preference can be reduced simply to exclusion, in part due to the increasing efforts black bodies place on the cultural realm even with relative integration into mainstream institutions. Rather I view black people as agents who actively sought out the aesthetic world because of its humanizing and performative capabilities. Fred Moten (2003) suggests that blackness marks performance, a performance of humanity which serves as resistance to objectification. For Moten blackness and black performance is an improvised epistemological, social, and cultural intervention into the way in which black people and black subjectivity are constructed by the modern world. Black performative aesthetics was less about black people being resourceful and working within the only sphere of society open to them, and more about having the epistemological creativity to understand that cultural politics are intricately tied into the way in which we construct the world.

Hip-Hop

The question “why hip-hop”, situates hip-hop as a choice, similar to the way in which I contend that black cultural politics was actively chosen as an important site to fight for black humanity. Black aesthetics can at least partly be conceptualized as performative visual, phonetic, and acoustic strategies employed by black people to resist Western objectification. As Taylor (2016) suggests, black aesthetic refers to when individuals socially positioned as black use art and performance (I employ performance in the broadest sense possible) to actively construct their life worlds. Given these parameters of black aesthetic, the hip-hop traditions of djing, rap, breaking, graffiti, language, and style can be situated within our understanding as a form of black aesthetic used to fashion a black identity that resists the existentialist limits used to circumvent black humanity.

There are multiple narratives about the birth of hip-hop. There is no authentically true narrative about what hip-hop is or isn't, but these different historical constructions provide hip-hop enthusiasts with multiple lines of arguments to make claims about our understandings of hip-hop and the way in which it is situated within society (Harrison 2009). These genesis stories, given their social constructedness, give us insights into the ways hip-hop is positioned in the social imaginaries of its allegiants and the historical relations they perceive hip-hop having with dominant social structures. I am aware of the four primary components of hip hop: rap, djing, breaking, and graffiti. However, when the term hip-hop is employed throughout this dissertation it will be in reference to the rap genre both as an acknowledgement of rap's musical preeminence and as consistent with how the term is used in most everyday conversations.

I view the genesis of hip-hop through a sociological lens starting in 1929 when the New York Regional Plan Association decided to restructure Manhattan as the center of New York, displacing poor African American, Puerto Rican, and Jewish families to specific parts of the

Bronx and Brooklyn (Chang 2007). In a highly racialized New York we see poor people of color hyper-concentrated in specific areas and a complete moral and economic disinvestment in those neighborhoods. Tricia Rose in *Black Noise* cites Willis (1989) when he associates jazz with de facto racial segregation and R&B with the nagging inequality of Jim Crow—suggesting that these black expressive forms are a reaction to the structural, social, and political realities of the black community. Rose critiques Willis for purporting hip-hop as a contradictory genre that is simply a product of a postmodern condition. Rather Rose continues Willis’s historical narrative while contending that hip-hop is also a community’s reaction to their social and political context, specifically deindustrialization. Hip-hop was developed within, alongside, and often times as a critique of the structural conditions of living under the oppressive configurations of a racialized society, residential segregation, unemployment, localized poverty, over policing, and a moral disinvestment in the neighborhoods of poor people of color by the government (Chang 2007; Perry 2004; Kitwana 2002; Rose 1994). Hip-hop’s black aesthetic sensibilities were in part forged through diasporic connections by those who were socially positioned similarly within the state structure.

Alongside the social and political context that helped give birth to hip-hop was technological innovation. Rose (1994) contends that black oral traditions and technology gave rap its sonic power, allowing afrodiasporic people to organize sound in a manner that spoke to their social reality. Rose powerfully states,

“Bringing together sound elements from a wide range of sources and styles and relying heavily on rich afrodiasporic music, rap musicians technological in(ter)ventions are not ends in and of themselves, they are means to cultural ends, new contexts in which priorities are shaped and expressed” (1994: 95).

The larger point Rose is making is that hip-hop is a hybrid of black diasporic traditions working alongside Western technological musical configurations, which speaks to a larger diasporic process. Black diasporic traditions are not black because they embody a black essence, but rather because people socially positioned as black use their subjectivity and patterns of being within a Western context that produces a product that is not rooted in any one tradition but is socially recognizable as black. Through black aesthetic sensibilities black people have appropriated and rechanneled music technologies and inscribed new meanings for cultural, economic, social, and political gains.

Iton (2008) defines 'black fantastic' as the minor key sensibilities that define notions of being created from the experience of living socially positioned as black and operating from within, in conversation with, against, and outside the boundaries of the modern. Iton's black fantastic alludes to the idea that since blackness was constructed within a modern western ideological framework, but simultaneously positioned those who were labeled as black outside of the ontological bounds of modernity, black people operate from a unique conceptual space. From this conceptual space black people perform within, against, and in dialogue with the dominant western framework and simultaneously critique it. Furthermore, Iton suggests that if there is a conceptual place where blacks can operate relatively autonomously and critique modernity, then that place is black popular culture. For Iton black popular culture may be the site least inhibited by dominant western culture, thus it can serve as an ideological assault on the hegemonic assumptions of modernity. Iton places hip-hop into this tradition of the black fantastic.

This is not to suggest that hip-hop does not reproduce dominant notions of black criminality, heteronormativity, and misogynoir within its content. In analyzing hip-hop we must deal with how these marginalizing representations are disseminated at times uncritically,

however the democratic contours of hip-hop have also allowed it to displace dominant hegemonic discourses on blackness. The goal is not to reproduce discourses that use hip-hop as a scapegoat for societal ills, nor to treat hip hop as an egalitarian savor of all black identities. But, rather to approach hip-hop from a Derridean (1978) framework of 'différance' suggesting that hip-hop is a polysemic cultural tool that can be utilized in an array of ways for various political, social, economic, and cultural outcomes.

Hip-hop has served as a site where black men who are excluded from the traditional avenues of constructing masculinity can embrace a hypermasculinity that is toxic, but also reproduces notions of sexism, homophobia, and heteronormativity (Dyson & Hurt 2014). Hip-hop has also served as a site where women have used performance to actively take control over their bodies and images (Morgan 2014) and challenge hegemonic notions of black womanhood (Pough 2004), while simultaneously preserving the logic of female sexual objectification (Rose 1994). More times than not it is women of color who are the targets of sexist discourses and objectified at best as the girlfriend of a baller and at minimum as an object of sexual fantasy within hip-hop (Rivera 2014). This is not to suggest that hip-hop has infected an otherwise sexist free society, but hip-hop's sexism is indicative of larger patriarchal social processes engrained within the structure of society (Rose 1994). To understand the way in which hip-hop is situated within the black aesthetic tradition we must be cognizant of the way in which it reproduces inequality, while we seek to examine its fantastic sensibilities that allows black people to deconstruct imposed representations of blackness, while creating a space to humanize black subjectivity. How then does a hip-hop aesthetic identity do the cultural work of resisting and critiquing dominant hegemonic assumptions in the process of humanizing the black subject?

Imani Perry (2004) acknowledges that hip-hop has sociopolitical ramifications and addresses a lot of social issues, but argues that it is irresponsible to think of hip-hop as solely a response to social, economic, and political conditions. Perry describes hip-hop as a musical democracy, where various narratives, political stances, and stories are shared. She continues to argue that hip-hop nourishes the black community by making black cultural knowledge a requirement for participation, thus serving as an epistemological critique of dominant discourses. Also, Perry contends that hip-hop, “offers a counter-hegemonic authority and subjectivity to the force of white supremacy in American culture in the form of the MC” (2004: 44). Here the rapper, through their discursive employment of African American vernacular English (AAVE) within a racialized society, offers alternative discourses to those structured within dominant society. Similarly, James Scott (1990) argues that oppressed groups utilize hidden transcripts which are strategies of resistance that go unnoticed by oppressors. Subordinated groups create forms of resistance that cannot be properly understood by dominant society. While counter-discourses are effective means of challenging dominant discourses about the black subject, they are at minimum partially compromised because they operate within the parameters of the dominant discourse (Wright 2003). Similarly, Perry (2004) suggests that because of the political location of hip-hop it can serve as a scapegoat for the social problems within the black community, thus the underlying social and political importance of the music is often veiled outside the bounds of legitimate knowledge.

Smith (1997) argues that identity construction and performance is a productive component in the cultural creativity that lies within hip-hop. Rose (1994) similarly suggests that hip-hop served as a site for alternative identity formation and social status for youth whose community institutions were being destroyed. Identity in hip-hop is rooted within the local

(Mitchell 1996) and those localized hip-hop identities are interconnected with the larger hip-hop community. Given the strong pairing of criminality and localized black spaces (Kitwana 2002), embodying your community within hip-hop performativity gives a voice to what was once voiceless. Rose suggests that by putting on for your neighborhood or crew you have brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness outside of being on the five o'clock news. Hip-hop not only captures and documents the experiences, desires, and neighborhoods of black artists, but simultaneously constructs the very identities which are trying to be captured. nice

Often these cultivated hip-hop identities mirror the stereotypes prescribed by dominant society about black people. Perry (2004) contends that previous generations of black Americans employed self-definitions and identities that challenged blackness as being criminal, but the hip-hop generation has embodied, appropriated, and exploited the prescribed constructions linking blackness with criminality. To this point Smith (1997) suggests that by embracing the marginalized social constructions of blackness rappers construct a sense of intentional presence where prior there was only shame and a desire to hide. This criminal mimicry provides a voice to a population who is rarely humanized in society and is less about negating the stereotype, but rather giving that stereotyped identity a voice (Perry 2004). This embracing of the criminal within hip-hop performative discourse serves as an epistemological critique of dominant society by constructing the criminal as the knower. This is one way in which, using Trica Rose's words, rappers take dominant discursive fragments and displace them, destabilize hegemonic discourses, and try to make valid counterhegemonic discourses (1994). Hip-hop has allowed black people to take control of images of blackness, validated the epistemological sensibilities of black people, and provided an avenue for identity construction. I do not want to suggest that these can be thought of as victories or end goals in the process of black liberation. To be ideology trapped in

either total victory or total incorporation assumes cultural politics is a zero-sum game, but rather it is about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it (Hall 2006). The goal is then not to replace the dominant cultural model in society with a black cultural model, but rather to humanize all identities and ways of knowing. Hip-hop is used as a lens to view the way in which black aesthetics have been deployed in the pursuit of a more authentic identity, and subsequently the search for black humanity.

Mass Incarceration

Scholars of the sociology of race view race as part of the structural organization of society. To situate race in the social structure moves us away from conceptualizing race and racism as simply results of attitudes and beliefs, and locates race and racism in the very fabric of societal institutions and social processes. Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States* describes 'race' as a variable concept that is used to justify and explain European domination by marking human bodies and was constructed and maintained socio-historically through racial projects. Omi & Winant contend that race can be understood as a socially constructed political project that is constantly changing to meet the political and economic demands of a society.

Joe Feagin's (2006) concept of 'systemic racism' refers to the foundational, large-scale, and inescapable hierarchical system of US racial oppression that is primarily an elite, white project directed towards people of color. Feagin contends that white-on-black oppression is part of the core in which America was founded, forming a system of white privilege that is in every major institution as well as in the ideological consciousness of the country. Systemic racism is a material, social, and ideological reality that is foundational to and engineered within all major

institutions and organizations (Fegain 2006). Thus, racism and racial disparities are not failings or negative afflictions of a healthy social system, but are produced within the institutions, social processes, and ideologies of society. But how, then, does racism persist in liberal democracies that have repudiated racial discrimination and made it illegal?

For Eduardo Bonilla-Silva a racial social system is when economic, political, and ideological levels are organized by assigning individuals to racial categories (1997). Bonilla-Silva argues that after actors are placed into racial categories social relations become institutionalized and race operates within the social system even without any actor intentionally wanting it to. The racialized social structure is maintained by a racial ideology and colorblind discursive practices (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Within Bonilla-Silva's framework racial phenomena and racialized outcomes are a normal and necessary aspect of the organizational structure of society.

Even as white people purport to not 'see race', or at least not to let it affect their treatment of nonwhites, Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract* suggests that in a racialized society white Americans consent to white supremacy. Mills (1997) suggests that the racial contract is a set of formal/informal agreements between a subgroup of the population designated by racial criteria which bestows full citizenship upon whites and an inferior status to people of color. Whites can racialize others without developing an overt sense of white identity given the dominant position whites hold in the racialized social system (Lewis 2004). In America, whiteness takes on a hegemonic position as an unmarked universal category where whites receive privileges through their proximity to an unmarked, supposedly non-racial, social norm without any race-consciousness. For Mills "the significance of this contract is that it prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of

localized and global cognitive dysfunctions, producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (1997: 18). Thus, within America’s racialized social structure institutions are organized to reproduce racial inequality and white American’s can receive benefits without any intentionality, while completely disavowing the existence of white privilege.

Structural theories of race have often excluded the dynamic experiences of women of color. Many of the experiences black women face are not subsumed within the dominant understandings of race or gender discrimination, furthermore anti-racist and anti-sexist movements and theories have failed to address the lived reality of those who experience life at the intersections of these interconnected forms of oppression (Crenshaw 1995). Black feminist thought suggests that race and gender are both socially constructed and black women’s oppression resides at the intersections of gender, class, and racial oppression (Collins 2000). Black feminist thought allows us to view the ways in which social structures are both racialized and gendered, creating complex systems of domination.

The criminal justice system has been the principal institutional mechanism for the perpetuation of white dominance and black subjugation in the U.S. since the ending of formal slavery, which is still legal for incarcerated individuals. America, the land of the free, imprisons its citizens at higher rates than any other country in the world (Currie 2013). Until the mid-1970s the imprisonment rate of American citizens housed in federal and state prisons remained around 100 in 100,000 (Pettit 2012). In merely 20 years, the U.S. penal system exploded from around 300,000 American citizens being housed to over 2 million (Alexander 2012; Clear 2009). Scholars have continuously argued that this drastic increase is not due to an increase in crime,

but rather the way in which political discourse has shaped policy on crime and race (Pettit 2012; Alexander 2012; Pager 2010; Clear 2009).

Clear (2009) argues that the elimination of parole and related statutes in the 1970s, drug-law reform that began under Ronald Reagan, and “get tough” sentencing for violent crimes and recidivists are three of the primary policy changes that helped create what David Garland (2001) has called “mass incarceration”. America has disinvested in social welfare, education, and drug rehabilitation programs and invested in locking away our most disadvantaged citizens.

Given the racial disparities within the criminal justice system, mass incarceration is less about controlling crime and more about structuring racial social processes (Alexander 2012). Mass incarceration disproportionately targets poor African American men as they have been put behind bars at higher rates than any other segment of the population (Clear 2009). In many large urban cities, a majority of African American men have a criminal record (Alexander 2012). African Americans are incarcerated at rates 5.1 times that of whites and in many cities the ratio is 10 to:1 (Nellis 2016). The imprisonment rate of black women is twice as that of white women (Nellis 2016), with black women in the past 20 years being the fastest growing prison population (Davis 1998). With the massive explosion of America’s incarcerated population and its disproportionate impact on the black community, mass incarceration is a primary racialized social structure that serves to define the social meaning of blackness. Given the disproportionate impact of incarceration on black citizens its reach extends beyond those incarcerated to everyone socially positioned as black. Personal and familial interactions with the criminal justice system is a standardized aspect of being black in America, so much so that Bernstein (2010) has argued that America itself is the prison.

Angela Davis (2003) contends that crime or crime discourse are masquerades behind which race can mobilize old fears to shape social structures. The ideological otherizing of black people is grounded in a putatively colorblind fear of crime (Davis 2003). Pager (2010) similarly suggests that black as criminal is embedded within the social consciousness of society. Given the racialized nature of mass incarceration, scholars have made analogies between Jim Crow and mass incarceration. The Jim Crow analogy highlights how supposedly or formally race-neutral criminal justice policies disproportionately target black communities and condemn convicted criminals to second class citizenship by taking away their right to vote and serve on juries, barring them from public housing, making them ineligible for student loans, and legally discriminating against them for employment (Forman 2012). Alexander (2010) contends that what has changed with Jim Crow has less to do with the structure of society, but the discourse used to justify it. While there have been critiques of the Jim Crow analogy (e.g. Forman 2012), it provides us with a historical framework in which to understand the important role institutions play constructing the societal significance of blackness.

Given that, aside from wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented government initiative in contemporary America (Davis 1998), this dissertation contends that the strong rhetorical connection between black and criminal has positioned mass incarceration as a primary social structure that defines the meaning and significance of race in America.

“concentrated incarceration in those impoverished communities has broken families, weakened the social-control capacity of parents, eroded economic strength, soured attitudes toward society, and distorted politics; even, after reaching a certain level, it has increased rather than decreased crime” (Clear 2009: 5).

The pervasiveness of mass incarceration has dismantled communities that serve poor black Americans given this is where it receives its human capital. Mass incarceration is a scourge of racial tyranny.

Police brutality is one lens through which to view the way the criminal justice system as an institution, in part, structures society's understanding of blackness. Given the rhetorical link between blackness and criminality the officers who killed 12-year old Tamir Rice were supported by an institution that conceptualizes black youth as dangerous. When neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman profiled, followed, and killed 17-year old Trayvon Martin, we can understand how a judge could rule that as self-defense. We can understand why a father, by the name of Eric Garner—excluded from the formal economic market to the extent that he sold CDs outside of a store with the store owners permission—deserved to be choked to death by officers. Society has provided scripts for us to understand blackness, which have rendered black humanity illegible. Even when we get a glimpse of the humanness that lives within black people we can still kill them because they are nobody (Hill 2017; Smith 2016).

Mass incarceration serves as a social structure that shapes the meaning of blackness in ways that justify the exclusion of this population from full citizenship and their treatment as a dangerous criminal class to be policed, rather than protected or assisted. Given the widespread social, economic, political, and cultural impact of mass incarceration on black bodies (regardless if they have ever been incarcerated), incarceration serves as a primary social structure in defining the meaning and contemporary lived experiences of those socially positioned as black.

Socio-diasporic Framework

This project's review of African diaspora theory, hip-hop and aesthetics, and mass incarceration literature read alone represents different aspects of the black experience, but read in conjunction underscores a much larger theoretical understanding of black subjectivity. Mainstream social institutions have been used to marginalize and (de)humanize black bodies. Those who are socially positioned as black sit at a unique vantage point in relation to the modern world and dominant society. However, those who have been socially positioned as black have not sat idly, but rather have forged connections across and within their differences for economic, cultural, social, and political gains for all black people. Through this active diasporic experience, the aesthetic realm has been continuously chosen to intervene and disrupt dominant understandings of black subjectivity because of the intimate relationship between aesthetics and humanness. This project situates the criminal justice system, specifically mass incarceration, as a dominant institution that defines the societal meaning of blackness. Hip-hop is used as a lens to see the way in which diasporic aesthetic practices are forged to provide alternative ways of creating representations and understandings of blackness outside of the epistemological and ontological limitations of mainstream institutions.

Using these three epigraphs alongside ethnographic fieldwork this dissertation develops and utilizes a "socio-diasporic" framework to view the way in which those socially positioned as black, through the forging of diaspora, construct their life-worlds within and outside the epistemological and ontological limitations of mainstream institutions. This sociological conceptualization of the term 'diaspora' allows us to understand that part of conceptualizing yourself as a black body means understanding how you are structurally situated as such. This suggests that your interactions with society's institutions are in part shaped around notions of

blackness. Furthermore, it allows us to think through the ways in which the recognition of this structural position, and the marginalization that comes with it, has been consistently challenged by black people through the forming of humanizing group identities and ideologies outside of these racialized institutions. This framework is used to analyze the way in which black people in north-east North Carolina use hip-hop as an aesthetic tool in their search for identity as a way to construct their understanding of the world and the way they are situated within it. These aesthetic sensibilities contribute to creating knowledge sets that both challenge and uphold dominant understandings of what it means to be human. These sensibilities do not find their value in whether or not they challenge or uphold dominant knowledge, but in the fact that they constructed by black people.

3. Know he a genius, he just can't claim it 'Cause they left him no platforms to explain it:

The Vibe of Ethnography

A friend from the 252 recommended that I check out Premo Opana's (Hood Poet) music online. In what some have called the digital age every artist from rappers who record their music on their cell phone to ones who have multi-million-dollar record deals have their music on their social media accounts, so I decided to look at Premo's Facebook page. Premo is a 26-year-old black male from Farmville North Carolina who has a glow in his dark complexion and long dreads that matches his hood persona. This is exemplified most notably in the way his southern slang restructures the English language into a tone you can only find where black people are and in the way his dreads fall effortlessly onto his designer white-tee. Premo is very charismatic and has a vibe that draws people in and makes you want to hear what he has to say, which subsequently benefits his music career. Prior to first reaching out to Premo via Facebook I questioned how to introduce myself and my project in a way that represented me as a native researcher. Native researcher was the way I mentally understood the way in which I conceptualized myself as a person who researched and worked with the black 252 community, while still thinking about myself as a person who is historically, emotionally, and personally situated within future of this community (I'm not sure if Premo or anyone else saw me this way). I had previously reached out to rappers via Facebook and after personally introducing myself I would send over a copy of my IRB approval letter that indicated my project met the ethical criteria of my university and made them aware that the interviews would be confidential (the standard IRB procedure). With hip-hop artists prior to Premo after sending the IRB letter artists became less enthusiastic about the project. The project seemed to become a professional chore that needed legal structuring rather than an opportunity to "just help a brother" while talking hip-

hop. Some artists would not respond after the message about the IRB letter, however, most responded but the texture in their response read different, similar to when my mama is on the phone with the white landlord. The conversation is polite and honest, but you don't want to say the wrong thing. I decided not to send Premo the IRB acceptance letter or say anything about consent and just wait until we met, if he was interested in being interviewed. Through Facebook we talked about my project, him as a person, hip-hop, and decided it would be best to meet-up and for me to ask him questions in person.

Premo suggested that I meet him at a local bar in Greenville North Carolina that he was a regular at, which was about an hour and a half drive from me. I arrive shortly before Premo and as I waited, I thought about a cool way to introduce myself. A way that reflected that I am Ph.D. student, but I am also from the hood myself. As Premo entered we greeted each other with "what's up" and he recommended that we sit at the bar. I knew I wanted to audio record this interview, so I was thinking about a way to bring up consent as it is referred to in the IRB package. Before I could say anything Premo pulled out his iPhone and while he began to video record the interview asked me if it was cool. It was one of those questions where you know the answer is "yes," but you ask just as a technicality to show your politeness. He stated he wanted footage for his fan page and that a key to be a good artist and developing a fan base is to let people into as much of your life as possible. I said yes and as I asked could I record the audio of the interview I realized we both had a stake in this interview and hip-hop in the 252. He said sure I could record the interview as if my question was just a politic technicality also.

While I was getting my phone situated I realized that I got so caught up in the standard debates that occur in the academy about methodology, ethics, the power the researcher holds, and doing right by participants that I forgot that I'm working with people who have their own

standards about methods, ethics, vibes, and keeping it real. Premo engaged with me in a manner that suggested if my project was in fact about the 252 community and helping the community, why would we need a professional document stating that I have permission to audio record him or for him to video record me. If there was this possibility about either of us doing each other wrong, why would we agree to meet up with each other anyway? I came to that bar expecting to read Premo the informed consent script from my university, as if Premo was a participant who needed to be protected and engaged with within the ethical contours that were stated within my 2017 IRB application. But, Premo wasn't just a participant (as I was more than a native researcher). He was person who at that moment wanted to be heard and seen in a way that couldn't be understood by my university. I learned a lot about Premo and hip-hop in the 252 in the bar that night. We discussed the lack of opportunities for the youth, competition between artists, and physical and emotional violence within the black community and how he saw himself and myself as potential solutions to the problem. Premo's easy going demeanor suggested he knew that the information he provided me would not be used in any negative way (at least not purposely) and his suggesting that I could and would be a solution to some of the community's problems did not come from a blind faith in academics or the educational system. It speaks to a larger theme which will run through the entirety of this project. Black people in the 252 have constructed their own aesthetic, epistemological, ontological, and moral understandings of the world that often challenge, critique, and/or are in line with dominant societal discourses. There can be no adequate analysis or depiction of the black experience in the 252 without using the lens in which constructs the life-worlds of those we wish to understand (Holmes and Marcus 2008). Premo's conclusions about me were drawn from my "vibe".

Vibe, while it is under-theorized, has been used to describe emotional resonance (Kurtyka 2015) and thought of as a communicative tool used to transmit and perceive intuitive signals (Friedman 2014). Vibe here is employed as a theoretical and rhetorical tool that allows us to see when we center a black-worldview how aesthetic, affective, moral, and cultural understandings and judgments are made. Vibe works within, around, and often alongside dominant institutions organized around racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. As an epistemological tool vibe allows us to see the ways in which dominant understandings of race, gender, class, sexuality, love, success, and failure are repositioned to make room for the way in which black people come to understand different identities and subjectivities. As a methodological tool vibe deals with the way specific aesthetic and cultural sensibilities structure ethnographic interactions. A person's vibe at a basic level is understood as the type of energy a person gives off and the way it influences other people and/or the atmosphere. Through a critical lens vibe is viewed as a metalanguage; a way in which to discuss cultural, aesthetic, and affective sensibilities. My contention is that black people, specifically in the 252, have been excluded from developing humanizing identities through dominant institutions in society. They have used alternative mechanisms to understand their self and the world, particularly within the aesthetic realm. While the political, economic, and educational institutions have served to marginalize black people, their importance has been repositioned and black people have used alternative means to understand how a person is situated within society.

As marginalized groups take control over their identity and representation, they engage in a visible and frequently influential form of cultural politics by defining "the meaning and value of acts and events in the arena of inter-ethnic interaction and by taking control of the images and meanings through which their cultures and histories are represented in local, national, and

transnational locations” (Mahon 1990: 476). Vibe is a way to use black cultural and aesthetic sensibilities to name and construct understandings of other people and the world. In using vibe to describe the way in which black people in the 252 read the world is to build on anthropologist who have critiqued the Kantian notion of aesthetic as a mode of impartial judgement of beauty and art disconnected from the economic and moral, but have related aesthetics to the social world in which it is produced to highlight how it is situated within larger social processes (Mahon 2000). The following chapters in this dissertation implicitly and explicitly through narratives paint an image of how black people in the 252 in their search for identity within the black aesthetic and cultural realm develop a unique understanding of the world and from that understanding uses a person’s, institution’s, or place’s vibe to read who they are. I do not suggest that in every aspect black people view the world and institutions differently from other racial groups, but I do suggest that the way in which those who are socially positioned as black arrive to that understanding is shaped by blackness, thus different.

John L. Jackson Jr. (2010) in discussing the difference between anthropology and qualitative sociology locates the differences in the ways the two approach the ethnographic project itself, primarily the assumptions about methodological rigor and validity. As a sociologist conducting ethnography this distinction plays a role in the way I write this dissertation and the way in which it should be read. Jackson suggests that the differences can be read by the way the sociologist takes us through a step-by-step unfurling of her conceptual and methodological maneuvers, while the anthropologist privileges the textual offering which can complicate simply answering questions such as “the who” or “how many”. Jackson contends that a lot of differences between sociological and anthropological work arise because anthropology is a more hopeful discipline than sociology. Here hope is conceptualized using Crapanzano

(2003), not as wishful thinking, but the combining of realism with social change and revolution, as an analytical tool to reimagine ethnographic possibility.

This dissertation should be read as a sociological-ethnographic piece fused with hope. Hope that through the vibe of this project when it is read you don't simply understand how hip-hop is used as a way to develop an identity and sense of understanding while existing in a social structure organized around the policing of black bodies, but you can feel it. Through this continuous reimagining of ethnography, I aim to build on Paul Stoller's 'sensuous scholarship' that suggests that through smell, sensations, textures, and other feelings we learn about social processes, thus embodied experiences are forms of data collection (1997); to suggest that the incorporation of feeling into the ethnographic writing and reading better equips us to know those we wish to learn about. This feeling goes beyond sympathy or empathy because the community I worked with did not want me to feel sorry for them, but to see them as human. They did not need me to appropriate their emotions, but to position their emotions as valid enough to warrant my attention while constructing my understanding of them. This is to suggest that if we feel why, rather than understand why, a young man would spend his last dollar on studio time as opposed to using it for food for his family, we will know and conceptualize him in a different way.

What is this Ethnography Thing?

The 252 is my home, specifically Halifax county. Halifax county and Northampton county, where I lived and spent most of my time during the ethnographic project, has a combined population of 76,790 residents with 55% of the population being black. Data USA suggests that the average annual household income of these counties combined is \$31,337. This data suggests that these counties are home to primarily black working-class people, but people there don't think about the 252 using those terms. The 252 is thought of as home where people can live a

modest life and for those who can catch a football really well or are good with books generally leave to live a better life somewhere else, anywhere else.

At the beginning of my time conducting research in the 252, one typical day I was walking through Wal-Mart with my mom shopping, not thinking of myself as researcher, just shopping with my mom. One of her old friends walked up to her and greeted her in a manner that indicated they haven't spoken in a while and were feeling out whether the closeness of their friendship was still there. After the greetings the woman looked past my mom and asked, "Is that Corey?" My mom smiled and said, "Yes". "How long has he been in town and where is Elijah?" she asked, as if she knew this was no longer my home and that my brother was the one who was supposed to be with my mother. My mom said, "For a while, he is here working", with no indication of what I was here for because neither she nor her friend really would have understood ethnography at the moment. I didn't either to be honest. A few weeks later I was in Applebee's with my girlfriend who came to visit. I spotted my cousin across the room ordering his food to-go. He spotted me and came over to dap me up asking how long I am back in town and for. I replied, "I'm here for a while, just out here working". "Cool, what you doing?" he asked. I vaguely said, "I'm doing some research, what you been up to and how is your family" to quickly take the conversation off me. After many of these types of exchanges with people I knew from the past, I could feel that people thought that my extensive time in college would prohibit me from ever living in the 252 again. As if my presence their meant that the school thing didn't really work out. But, more importantly I noticed my lack of initiative to talk meaningfully about coming home to conduct ethnography. One reason is because I wanted to be seen as an everyday person, not someone walking around town looking at everyone and everything with eyes of inquiry and amusement. Also, I didn't know how to explain ethnography in a way that made

sense without using academic jargon. I wanted to avoid using words such as participate or observation. I would rather them think I failed than think I was some academic who walked around using white people words (Lassiter 2005). So, what is this ethnography and what does it mean for me to study my hometown?

First cultural anthropologists, now a range of different disciplinary researchers, have used participant-observation to access the interior spaces of cultural production and modes of activity that may be so normalized that actors themselves are not aware of them. Spradley (2016) describes participant observation as an ethnographic methodological technique that seeks to document the existence and reality of other cultures and to describe these realities in their own terms. Participant observation involves direct and continuous social contact with people and documenting, respecting, and representing the irreducibility of human experience (O'Reilly 2012). This methodological technique can be explained as moving into a community for an extended period to empirically understand cultural situations as well as to tell authentic stories from the perspective of local people so that outsiders can understand and see the cultural patterns and tacit knowledge of that community (Spradley 2016; Fetterman 2010; Taylor 2002).

Participant-observation as I intended it was not simply to view and take part in a particular culture, but to feel it and have it feel me. For Saidiya Hartman in her ethnographic journey in her book *Lose Your Mother*, being an African-American woman living in Ghana and being called 'obruni' (outsider) produced an unsettled feeling that could not have been gained without her participation in Ghanaian society. In her search for identity this sensation allowed her to reconceptualize her understanding of the African diaspora stating, "A black face didn't make me kin." If hip-hop, blackness, and identity are all performances, then I was searching for that performance that could only be felt live in concert and not experienced by watching T.V. or

listening to a studio recorded track. That feeling where being in the concert makes you feel as if you know the artist a little bit better, or differently than you did before. Hopefully, you make it backstage and have a short conversation and then you are allowed to tell everyone you met the artist. But, do you know them? Or do all the ideas and theories you have about them and music, fused with your reasoning for wanting to talk to them in the first place, only allow you to see and understand a certain part of them? When the ethnographic experience facilitates your interaction with a person or event, can you see them as more than ethnographic data? When I met Ivy at a nightclub in Raleigh after she performed in a concert held for the top local artists, I didn't think about how pretty she was. Or how her dark skin, long hair, and soft features had most guys staring at her across the room before knowing who she was or that she was performing. Before this project I would have read her that way in this space. I would have read her aesthetic in a different way. This night I saw her as a black woman rapper from the 252 and I knew I needed to speak with more. Not to suggest that she thinks of herself as the former, but how I knew her as and how I came about that conceptualization was organized around my researcher identity.

An underlying facet of this line of questioning is the constructed nature of ethnographic accounts (Mascia-Lees et al 1989). In discussing objectivity within the ethnographic process there has been a reflexive turn in anthropology because of the situated perspectives that every ethnographer holds, multiple agendas within the ethnographic field, and the political-ness of ethnographic writing (Harrison 2009; Tedlock 1991; Jordan 1991). This ethnographic account as it documents the way aesthetics are connected with the political, it is also written resting on the notion that aesthetics and the political are inseparable: that any scientific and/or scholarly endeavor is not above cultural and linguistic processes (Clifford 1986). This project not only documents cultural processes of those in the art-world in the 252, but is itself a literary and

aesthetic construction. In calling this ethnography an aesthetic construction is not to suggest that it is not a scientific endeavor, “it suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive” (Clifford 1986, 6). It is to be cognizant that the identities in which I aim to document are not static but are constantly on the move, and the literary tradition is incorporated into my scientific tool-kit to assist in capturing something that has already changed once it has been documented.

Given the reflexive nature of this research I place myself within the ethnographic accounts of this project. This ethnography is an interactive process that moves away from authoritative practices to constructing the research project along dialogical lines between the researcher and interlocutor (Lassiter 2001). This methodological shift is to engage in what Tedlock calls observation of participation, when researchers “both experience and observe their own and others' coparticipation within the research experience” (1991: 69).

Within this reflexive engagement my label as a native researcher complicated my relationship with the field. My label as a native researcher refers to me being historically, emotionally, and culturally situated within the black local hip-hop scene in the 252 prior to my decision to research this cultural domain. Put differently, my label is because I am black and was born and raised in the 252 and engaged with the hip-hop scene throughout my life. The hip-hop scene is conceptualized using Bennett & Peterson's (2004) notion that the local music scene is where the social processes of the type of music in question are entrenched within the established local cultures. The role of the native researcher is not simply to transform the unfamiliar to the familiar, but to use an academic lens to draw a richer understanding of your own culture (Swidler 2013). I employ the label native researcher not as antithetical to an outside researcher. Rather I operate from the assumptions of Narayan (1993) that “we should view each [ethnography] in

terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations” (671). I do not take on the role as native to suggest that the individuals in the hip-hop community in the 252 and myself share a natural affinity with each other, but I use it to take seriously the “many strands of identification” available and how I continuously weave in and out of these identities (Narayan 1993). My researcher status is not all that separates me from the 252 hip-hop community. My biggest part of departure is that majority of this community lives in the 252, while I was only there for a year of research. You feel and understand a place differently when it structures the physical reality and future for yourself and your children.

If I was asked today “What was I doing back home” I would say: “I’m here researching the 252 for my dissertation. I’m talking to people I never spoke to before, going to places I never even noticed were here, and thinking about home in a new way to try to tell a story about how young black people live around here”. I would attempt to situate ethnography as an academic enterprise and a personal one that allows us think through the ways in which we only know a piece of our home.

Conceptual Methodological Framework

My ability to see my home in a different light is partly due to the theoretical assumptions that underpin my methodological process. The methodological conceptual framework is influenced by scholars who view those socially positioned as black as active agents that use their black subjectivity to construct their life-worlds. There are many scholars who contribute to the conceptual approach of this field, but a few will be mentioned to provide a snapshot of the core assumptions that were taken into the field. Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) ‘black feminist epistemology’ is a foundational theoretical assumption of my methodological framework. Black feminist epistemology suggests that through black women and men’s unique positionality they

developed alternative forms of knowledge. Black women have created independent oppositional, yet subjugated knowledge's concerning their own subordination and black feminist epistemology privileges the voices of the marginalized (Collins 2000). This allows us to value the voices of those who exist in the margins of society and provides us with a new epistemological understanding on who has something that deserves to be heard.

John Gwaltney's (1980) 'core black culture' is instrumental as it allows us to view black people as fully capable of self-expression and understands black culture not simply as an adaption to mainstream culture, but as mainstream to black people. This is used to engage with black people in a way that doesn't view their cultural and aesthetic practices as part of a subculture, but to take seriously the way in which their cultural practices construct the lived reality in which they exist. In this epistemological critique of traditional positivist methods, the researcher is no longer the expert and black culture holds value even without a researcher's interpretation. The ethnographic process is not solely about learning and understanding black culture, but using the culture itself in which you seek to understand as a methodological tool to get a "thick description" (Geertz 2008). Similarly, Hunter (2018) calls for a racial recalibration and a reimagining of historical timelines while conducting qualitative research, specifically ethnography. This recalibration is to tend to the notion that "our conventional timelines for black histories and contemporary realities tend to calibrate against white notions of time and history" (Hunter 2018: 2007). Furthermore, Hunter contends that our normative assumptions about history and time can obscure what might be thought of as indigenous timelines and we must recalibrate our assumptions about conventional history to use how marginalized groups define time themselves as our epistemological starting point in research.

Finally, the socio-diasporic framework suggests that we think about the structural positioning of blackness within institutions and how through the forging of diasporic connections black people have been able to construct knowledge within, alongside, and independently of those institutions. It calls for us to view how blackness is organized politically within society and to view the forging of connections by black people as acts of love, community, and revolution. In the studying of black people normative institutional societal metrics of life experiences, such as education level, income, and occupation must be repositioned and the standards of black people in which you study must have a place. For this project a person's vibe is used to tell us something about a person that education, income, and political affiliation can't contextualize. These theoretical constructs taken together provides us with a framework to view the way in which black people are agents in constructing their life-worlds. This indigenous knowledge base must be our methodological starting point if we are able to conduct a humanizing ethnography of the black experience.

How I'm Living

Ethnography

"I'm working 10 hours a day and that's just on the clock, not including the fact people got stuff they are doing on the side too, you know what I'm saying. I try to do what I can as far as the music on my days off and when I get off work I try to get some studio time. I just basically try to work around my schedule. I will typically write late nights, I mean it may be like at 12, 1, or 2 in the morning or maybe while I'm at work doing nothing just walking around and jotting down a couple of ideas here and there." Redd explained all this to me to articulate why she needed support from the community in the form of management and promotion. Redd, like most local artists in the 252, works a full-time job to survive and fund her music. For these artists hip-hop

had to be organized around meeting financial needs. For half the duration of my field work I taught an online Africana Studies course and for the other half I didn't work at all. I found myself having more time to talk and live hip-hop than those who I was working with. I had huge chunks of time throughout my days where I could not find anything hip-hop related. The 252 being a rural area added to this lack of activity, making it even more difficult to step out into the ethnographic hip-hop world.

Going back home for research, especially because it is a small rural area, I had plenty of places I could choose to stay for free. I stayed at my mother's place and a close friend's apartment because of the comfortability and the quiet their homes afforded me. I had my own room and wifi at each, so they were ideal places to live and work. At my two homes I generally did all my fieldnote writing and occasionally discussed issues around music and black identity in non-academic ways. However, I made it a point not to discuss my work often. I wanted to discuss those things that people in the 252 generally discussed. I wanted to hear those stories about the fight at the local factory, whose baby daddy was cheating, and who got caught stealing from Wal-Mart. Those stories did not directly relate to hip-hop or black identity, but did help inculcate me into the local culture. They allowed me to become (re) familiarized with what events and social processes structured the day-to-day reality of those in the 252. My purpose here was about hip-hop, but the larger point was to see the way in which hip-hop is organized within the local culture. Home and free time became a space to learn what that culture was that I am attempting to situate hip-hop within.

While hip-hop artists were generally at work during the day and home for me was about living as a person in the 252, I had to actively search for hip-hop. Each week was different during the ethnographic process depending on what events were occurring, work schedules, and

who was releasing a new project. Prior to moving back to the 252 I was already connected with a lot of artists on Facebook from the 252. I used those online connections to recruit more hip-hop artists, videographers, and producers and to become involved in the online hip-hop scene. ‘Music scene’ has been used by academic researchers to reference physical and conceptual spaces where producers, artists, and fans share their musical tastes and collectively differentiate their selves from others (Bennett & Peterson 2004). Prior to physically being in the 252, I aimed to join the local online hip-hop community and to participate in those conceptual spaces by watching rap videos, engaging in hip-hop conversations, and checking out what types of events were occurring. The friends and acquaintances I made through Facebook played a foundational role during the ethnographic process.

Most hip-hop events where I conducted fieldwork were between Thursday night and Sunday. These events included concerts for local artists, artist club appearances, hip-hop showcases (open-mic), album release parties, bike shows, community parties, and cookouts. At these events I attempted to become the phenomenon (Jorgenson 1989). I did not jot notes or even bring anything to jot with. I had conversations with artists and djs, but rarely were they related to my research or my “true” reason for being there. In those conversations with artists I did know I wanted to have more in-depth conversations and interactions with them pertaining to the project, I would get their number or social media information and message them the next day. Those moments at the showcases and concerts were about authentically hearing the music, cheering, and singing along to the songs I knew. Throughout the ethnographic process I believe one of the most valuable things I ever gave those I worked with was them knowing I knew the lyrics to their songs.

Like Seth Holmes in his ethnography, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* when he suggests that through his coparticipation as a migrant farm laborer, not only did his eyes and ears collect field observations, but also his sore knees, hip, and lower back. Through his participation his body became an instrument of data collection. While at club Entourage when the local rap group G50 performed one of their new songs that was filled with 252 references and the entire club danced proudly because it is one of the only times we heard our small area mentioned in a pop-cultural social context. When the song shouted-out P who had recently been murdered we all felt his pain and danced and drank to celebrate his life. While dancing and looking across the room, despite the dim club lights, seeing everyone celebrate a place that the world has never heard of gives you a vibe that can't be adequately written about. During my fieldwork I primarily listened to hip-hop, whether that was from local artists or mainstream artists. I noticed how my musical preference began to change. Southern trap music started to become clearer and make more sense now. My personality became a little edgier, in a cool way. I began wearing my Jordans more, as they came to symbolize a way to be both professional and causal. While driving around town with my windows down I took pride in the fact that pedestrians could hear the new local mixtapes coming through my car's sound system. I saw myself internalizing the aesthetic and vibe of the artists I was hanging around and listening to. This wasn't in a conscious manner to become an insider, but in a way, that felt like this is the person I always was, but didn't have the tools to be. Hip-hop in the 252 provided me an avenue to construct identity.

The ethnographer can not live like the native all the time and needs social and intellectual distance to engage in certain parts of the ethnographic experience (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Some nights after these events I would write up what at times were drunken fieldnotes. But, usually my fieldnotes were written weekdays in the morning when hip-hop artists seemed to

be working. My fieldnotes were sometimes written as stories, rap lyrics, or general summaries to find different expressive means in which to articulate what occurred. They always generally included all or some of the following: running description, forgotten episodes, ideas for further information use, personal impressions and feelings, and methodological notes (Singleton and Straits 2005). The practice of regularly writing up fieldnotes is one situation in which the researcher stops doing what other people are doing (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Towards the later stage of the research project while writing fieldnotes I didn't feel like I was doing anything different from everyone else. The artists were writing their life in their verses and I was writing mine in my fieldnotes. All of our experiences were used to fulfill a larger purpose, even when neither the artists nor myself fully understood what that purpose was.

Interviews

While Thursday nights through Sunday I was out experiencing hip-hop, Monday – Thursday evening was used to conduct interviews. Spradley (2016) creates a distinction between informal and formal ethnographic interviews. Spradley suggests that informal ethnographic interviews occur whenever you ask someone a question during participant observation and formal ethnographic interviews occur at an appointed time and location because of an interview request. Twenty-four formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with hip-hop artists, and beyond the art-world two interviews were conducted with individuals who are from the 252. These interviews were semi-structured in that they were guided by a list of questions, but the participants' responses would dictate what question was asked next, what questions would be discarded, and what questions would be added on the fly. In using vibe as a conceptual part of the methodology I noticed how participants responded with more passion to some questions than others. When participants smiled or used a passionate tone that let me know to follow this line of

questioning because something valuable may be at the end. Emotions and feeling served as an important methodological tool.

Given the impossibility of interviewing every person in the field researchers must decide who to choose to interview. At the start of my fieldwork I posted on my Facebook that I was looking to interview hip-hop artists from the 252. I used this open call as a methodological technique because I believed those who had something that they wanted to be heard would volunteer. Through these interviews other artists were recommended to me. Some artists I would interview and others I would follow online without having any formal interview.

As I became more entrenched in the field I began to interview those who I met at local events. This is an important distinction between interview-based qualitative research and ethnographic interviews. In interview-based qualitative research the interview may be the first time speaking face-to-face with the participant, however ethnographic interviews usually occur with people you have already met or know you because of your presence in the field (O'Reilly 2012). I noticed this when I reached out to Drop, a local rapper from Wilson North Carolina, via Facebook for an interview prior to meeting him. He happily agreed to the interview, but asked me what was the catch. He asked in a manner that suggested he was unsure as to why I reached out to him specifically. This is important during the interview process because interviews are structured around social relations (Myers & Newman 2007). After my interview with Drop I noticed that when the interview is the first interaction between the researcher and participant power is engrained not only in the interview itself, but in our understanding of interviews. When I interviewed individuals that I met organically in the field there was less ambiguity as to why I wanted to interview them, however when the interview is the first formal meeting, as it was with

Drop, the vibe of the interaction starts out a little unsettling until each person becomes comfortable sharing physical space with the other.

I audio recorded all interviews and I noticed the shift in posture, tone of voice, and overall vibe within the participant and myself after I indicated that I was turning off the audio recorder. While the audio recording was on I noticed participants would sit up straight and position themselves towards the audio recorder. They would also pronounce their words clearer to make sure the audio recorder accurately heard them. However, when the audio recorder was turned off we did not immediately say bye and go on with our day. We would continue to talk and have about 5 – 40-minute conversations depending on who the interviewee was. In these moments I felt myself being more open and sharing more because I didn't feel like I had to ask the right questions. My southern accent came out more because I felt like my researcher duty was done and now I could just chill. Subsequently, my interviewees told me more personal things after the recorder stopped, maybe because this moment was reserved for us and not my project. I was told secrets and confidential ideas that may have been verbalized for the first time ever. Those conversations will not be shared in this project not because the artists would not give me permission, but because I wouldn't want to share anything that I feel I would need to go back to get permission to share. Those moments will just serve as sites to think about how naming an interaction an interview provides both the researcher and participant with scripts of behavior. I do not suggest that this diminishes the quality of the data, but noting the unique social constructedness of interviews (all verbal interactions are socially constructed around societal norms and scripts).

Later in the process I began interviewing those artists who had a large local fan base. These artists were sought out because I believe to develop a fan base takes time, money, and

dedication. I wanted to hear stories from those who saw hip-hop as worth the sacrifice. There will always be more information to gather and more stories to hear when attempting to portray cultural processes. One way in determining if you can represent the range of voices in the field is when you reach a point of over-saturation. Fusch and Ness (2015) suggest that data saturation looks different for different research designs, but in ethnography can be viewed as when the same things are continuously heard while obtaining new data. There is much more to be learned about hip-hop in the 252 that is beyond the scope of my project. However, I focus on specific recurring themes that seemed to link my participants in the way they thought about identity and blackness. Through these themes I do not aim to tell *the* story, but *a* story about how hip-hop has been used as an aesthetic avenue to humanize black subjectivity. repetitive

Given the methodological critiques of interviews they still “allow for and encourage systematic attention to research design, especially comparison across contexts, situations, and kinds of people” (Lamont & Swidler 2014: 158) and can reveal emotional nuances of social experience that are not often reflected in behavior (Pugh 2013). These semi-structured interviews augment and speak to the larger insights gained through the full participatory experience. They provided me with the opportunity to think deeply about the verbal articulations of artists’ experiences who live in a society organized around them being criminalized and rendered voiceless.

Additional Data

Outside of the formal ethnographic interviews I had hundreds of informal ethnographic conversations. It is worth noting that conversations at the barbershop and grocery stores are important given that ethnography is about the collective immersive experience. The formal interviews and attending hip-hop related events were the highlights of the ethnographic

experience and these informal encounters are what structured my day-to-day experience.

Archival research was done at local county libraries and local historic museums within the 252 to get a foundational understanding of how the 252 is historically situated within the history of America. I analyzed local criminal justice statistics such as rates of incarceration and traffic stops. I read the local newspaper from the 1960s to recent. I had lunch with teachers, social service workers, and others who work with the public. I engage in these activities to develop a snapshot of the historical and contemporary racial social processes in the 252.

Fieldnotes, interview transcriptions, and archival data are used to triangulate my findings to paint a picture of the 252 and to understand the relationship between aesthetic self-fashioning and the criminal justice system. This local understanding will be situated within a larger conversation about the way in which black bodies resist hegemonic structures and ideologies of global white supremacy. It is my contention that understanding the way in which black people in the 252 exist, resist, and survive within structures sheds light on a larger understanding of blackness. It allows us to think more meaningfully about the way in which blackness is performative globally as it attempts to exist within a modern world that developed antithetical to it.

Anthropologists have long argued that ethnography combines indigenous understandings of the world with theories and the ideological positioning of the researcher (Page 1988). This research emphasizes this point contending that the way in which black Americans come to understand the world, subsequently allows them to develop new understandings of their selves in a society that marginalizes black subjectivity. The criminal justice system here is conceptualized as the institutional apparatus that racializes black bodies by rhetorically, materially, and politically linking criminality with blackness. Rural black women and men's cultural aesthetics

are centered to explore the ways in which diasporic connections forged through the construction and negotiation of identity. Hip-hop is the aesthetic avenue explored, that provides alternative epistemological and ontological frameworks to construct black life-worlds outside of dominant institutions. This process is not reserved simply for black Americans in the 252, but I suggest that aesthetic self-fashioning as resistance is a defining component of blackness globally.

4. I want to buy the mall but it ain't shit in this small town: Hip-Hop in the 252 as an Epistemological and Ontological Tool

This ethnography centers the aesthetic sensibilities of black women and men from the 252 to tell a larger story about black resistance. The 252-area code is in north-east North Carolina and is comprised of 30 small rural counties. Given the smallness and the relative closeness of these counties individuals who are from and/or live there generally discuss and think about the 252 as one conceptual space. Hip-hop's huge emphasis on the local as a site of articulation has allowed artists to create identity under various types of sociospatial monikers. Forman (2002) calls this the "extreme local", and argues that rappers not only draw inspiration from regional affiliation, but from streets, telephone area codes, and other regional specific identifiers. This research is aimed to be representative of the entire 252, but does not argue that the social processes highlighted are the same from county to county, nor that they are the same within counties. Using the 252 as a conceptual site is not to suggest that it is a homogenous space, but rather it is to use the local black hip hop vernacular, which represents the imagined connectedness of people who reside in the geography of the area code as they have constructed an imagined connectedness under the confines of this area code. The project has a specific focus on Halifax and Northampton counties, with the combined population being 76,790 residents and 55 percent of residents being black. Data USA suggests that the average annual household income of these counties combined is \$31,337 (DataUSA n.d.)—well below the national average. With a population that is disproportionately black, the 252 exemplifies how the social forces of capitalism and racism largely shape lived experience.

If this was not my home I doubt I would have ever conducted research in the 252. If you did not grow up here, then you likely would have never heard of the 252. Part of this project is to

bring rural black Americans into American hip-hop discourse, a conversation that is primarily dominated by research on black urban youth (e.g. Clay 2003; Kitwana 2003). Hip-hop has been documented globally as a cultural cite that has facilitated the making and moving of black diasporic identities (Perry 2008) and in some ways black rural American experiences' have been excluded from this narrative. I situate black rural Americans into this larger conversation on hip-hop serving as a conceptual avenue for forging a diasporic identity, while highlighting how their structural uniqueness shapes the complexity of the process. Engaging with rural black Americans from small invisible localities not only allows us to learn about new ways in which people engage, but forces us to rethink our spatial conceptualization of America. We are forced to see that black people do exist outside of the inner-city, that black identity is heavily constructed in rural spaces after the great migration, and that being unapologetically black occurs in a range of localities. These are some of the reasons that blacks invented the 252: to assert presence, identity, and relevance. Considering that rural black Americans are written out of the national dialogue on blackness and hip-hop aesthetics, they may focus more on the construction of blackness and identity than those in urban spaces, similar to the way middle class rappers have invested more energy into performing 'street' blackness than those from low-income neighborhoods (Toop 2000). To study small black rural localities is to bring to the forefront pieces of the contemporary black experience that the consistent pairing of hip-hop with urban has disarmed us from being able to see.

While researching in the 252, I wanted to know the history of these counties. As an ethnographer I wanted to situate what was going on today with the past. As a 252 native, the community members I worked with and I recognized that this part of North Carolina had no place in mainstream American historical discourses. The events, sites, and people that structure

dominant American history are never cited as occurring here. We rarely see the 252 represented in history books, in the national media, or outside of the 252. When residents were asked about the history of the area typically they would provide stories about plots of land families owned and what stores went out of business. Hunter (2018) contends that black indigenous timelines can often challenge hegemonic understandings of history. When it came to the 252, there was no dominant historical understanding for me to recalibrate. The brief historical snapshot of the 252 that I provide, then, is through information I learned through the thick histories embedded in the dynamic narratives that are continually (re)constructed by the community (Brand 2007) and from my engagement with historical documents through my native ethnographer lens. As this dissertation is not to provide a historical analysis of the 252, I do not claim that the information and events I discuss are representative of the ever-changing history of the 252, nor even the most important. Rather the key events cited were chosen because of the subjective and reflexive nature of the project. They provide one line of thinking about the 252 out of the many ways we can socially construct our historical understanding of it.

It's Always Been Cultural

With the economic basis of the south being agriculture, enslavers in North Carolina were at a disadvantage because the dangerous coast and lack of adequate harbors did not allow for those enslaved to be directly imported: thus, not allowing the state to ever develop the widespread slaveholding planter class as its neighbors Virginia and South Carolina (Crow 1977). However, to suggest that slavery did not flourish in North Carolina is to miss the ways in which it structured social, political, material, and economic relations of all black people, even those not enslaved. Slavery in North Carolina was more localized, most prominent in what we consider today the 252. Slavery is more directly tied to the economic historical foundation of the 252 than

any other part of North Carolina, historically positioning the black 252 experience as unique to those in other regions in the state. The black 252 experience is one of a diasporic identity, created in the spatial shadow of slavery.

One Monday morning I engage in a Google search to see what type of resources I could find about the history of the 252. I intended to dedicate these next few weeks to developing a foundation of key historical events and sites in the area. Google proved insufficient as I could only find a few articles written by the local newspaper and information about local libraries and museums. It felt as if the internet had not yet been adequately made aware that the 252, specifically Halifax County, existed. I decided to drive to the county Historic museum because it was only a 10-minute drive and I had reached the conclusion I wasn't going to learn anything meaningful through Google. I had ridden past the building hundreds of times with my mother as a child when she would go to the court house or pay the water bill. The building almost felt decorative, where it was there to make the city not look as rural, but had no real utility.¹

I drive to the museum and park adjacent to the building in a parking lot that had only two other vehicles. I assumed it would only be two workers and I in the museum. Then I thought who would come here on a Monday morning? Most people are working and everyone else probably has better things to do than to go to the random building by the water bill office. Walking into this building for the first time is the only time during the project where on the native and researcher spectrum I felt fully like a researcher. This is a building that only an ethnographer could see. The community here already knew the history of the 252 (at least the histories they needed to know) as it was reflected in the ways they embedded fragments of historical narratives

¹ In the 252 black people refer to rural towns as a city. In using the term city, the community is pulling this rural area into modernity through discursive practices. It also reflects the imagined desires of one day building these rural towns into a 'city' to be proud of.

into discussions about the present (Price 1983) through localized references and signifiers. I felt the main purpose of this museum was probably to offer employment to whoever owned the two vehicles in the parking lot. These local historic museums grew to gain importance in my work as they provided a formal historical narrative, which generally never aligned with the way the black community understood the 252.

As I walked in I was greeted with a warm welcome from the white guy at the front desk who seemed pleasantly surprised that someone interrupted whatever it was he was doing on his cell phone. The front desk attendant asked me what he could help me with, in a voice surprised to see me there. I couldn't tell if this surprise was because of my young black urban aesthetic or just surprised that anyone was there. As I wasn't fully sure what local historic museums offered I asked, "What is it that I can do here?" In a voice laced with pride and excitement about my interest, he hands me two papers (that I never read) and points to the room directly to my right and says, "We have a short film in here I could show you. After the film you can take a self-guided walk through the museum. I'm here to answer any questions and can help you in any way possible". I agree to watch what ended up being a 12-minute film offering a historical snapshot of key events that occurred in Halifax. Immediately after the film stops the attendant walks up to me and points down the hall and lets me know that I can browse the exhibit. It took around 15 minutes for me to look at every artifact and read its descriptions. The exhibit did not provide a lot of specific information on Halifax County, but it provided me with an understanding of how the county wanted to formally construct the history of Halifax, which was around ideals of patriotism and work-ethic. It highlighted how this region was once the economic epicenter of North Carolina (granted because of slavery), but suggested that Halifax could get back to that place (an economic epicenter not slavery). While local historic museums in

small rural counties may be a piece of culture that only an ethnographer's eye can see, they serve as an important site of articulation. They highlight what pieces of history local governments felt were important to preserve. They provide an imagined understanding of localities that have faded into mainstream society's peripherally. Just as they provide imagined accounts, so is the narrative that follows.

By 1830 one-third of North Carolina's population were slaves, mostly living in today's 252 area. On August 1, 1776 Cornelius Harnett, president of the North Carolina Council of Safety, gave the state's first public reading of the Declaration of Independence in Halifax. We have this conundrum where the 252 is the slave epicenter of North Carolina, while the state consciously decided this is the location where North Carolina should first be introduced to the Declaration of Independence. The 252 is uniquely situated within the historical black American experience as simultaneously existing within/outside of a society organized around principles of freedom and democracy. In North Carolina it was those enslaved and slave owners who were actively sought out to be the first to participate in the ideological internalization of the principles within the Declaration of Independence.

Shortly after, in 1787 an act was passed to prohibit free blacks, which was estimated to be around one-fourth of the black population, from entertaining slaves on Sundays or during nights (Braswell 1989). Spaces of cultural production were regulated by institutional power to police the ontological experience of blackness in ways that served to uphold black inferiority. The 252, like many other localities in the south, legally attempted to restrict sites of black cultural production because of their humanizing potentials. Even with these regulations in place black aesthetics served a monumental role in the lives of black people in the 252, with George Moses Horton being one of the most notable to use aesthetics for humanizing purposes. Horton (1798-

1884) was born in Northampton County and is regarded as the first American slave to protest his bondage through poetry, the first African- American to publish a book in the South, and the only slave to earn a significant income by selling his poems (Horton 1997). Horton developed a large following on the campus of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, where he would recite his poems and was able to find students to write them for him. Horton being the only American to publish a book of poetry prior to developing the ability to write illustrates black people's ability to forge cultural forms of resistance within the structural confines of white supremacy. The fight for humanity has always in part been waged in the cultural realm in the 252.

The 252 is one of the most impoverished and under-developed regions in North Carolina. This is reflected in the constant out-migration to cities such as Raleigh, Greensboro, and Charlotte. In the past 20 years the 252 has had the fastest declining population in North Carolina, because the counties death and out-migration rates are currently exceeding the amount of births and people moving in (Bennet 2017). Because agricultural slavery was more prominent in 252 than any region in the state, the end of slavery killed the economic life blood and the identity of this region. Given the economic core of the 252 is organized around farming, during reconstruction black residents advocated for landownership. The federal government – through the New Deal – in the 1930s provided a structural avenue for black farmers to gain landownership. However, by the 1970s, “black landownership in the 252 was on decline due to the emergence of agribusiness and continued discriminatory practices by the Farm Homeowners Association within the USDA” (Strickland 2012, 91). Scholars have documented that starting in the 1960's a national narrative of white victimization developed as a response to black economic and social gains, leading to a hardened white identity (Hughey 2014). These effects have created an economic structure in the 252 where black residents have little land and homeownership,

despite the historical battle for it. The 252 since has suffered from outmigration of businesses and community members and has not recovered and is home to largely those who have chosen to stay here despite the lack of economic opportunities.

All the participants in this study say that part of the reason for them to remain here is that their parents and grandparents are from here. While the 252 may be thought of as one of those small invisible areas, to those who choose to stay here, despite the economic opportunities of leaving, they find other comforts. For those who internalize the 252 as home, whether they currently live there or not, the search for identity has been a large part of the experience because of the way in which this area is viewed as having no identity or history within mainstream conversations.

A trademark of E.T., a 252 rapper, is his slogan “I’m from nowhere.” E.T.’s words are not suggestive that he does not have a home or that his home is not meaningful to him. But, rather he is alluding to the way in which local black cultures in north-east North Carolina have been rendered invisible within mainstream society and his appropriation of that invisibility ironically brings these communities to the forefront of the public’s consciousness. Murray Forman (2002) analyzes the social processes of hip-hop and contends that local spaces, real and imaged, represent the cultural knowledge bases which define individual and collective identities. In understanding identity, particularly blackness, hip-hop is an important conceptual site because of its intimate rootedness within local social processes.

In understanding blackness and hip-hop aesthetics in the 252 my starting point is understanding the structural conditions in which they exist. In working under the core tenants of what some have called “Jim Crow scholars” (e.g. Alexander 2012; Glasser 1999)– scholars who highlight the way the basic organization of society upholds racial marginalization and can be

seen in our historical analysis of slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration – I view the black community in the 252 as living within a societal context that operates, not despite, but because of the criminalization of blackness. What has changed since Jim Crow has less to do with the spatial, cultural, material, and political governmental marginalization of black people, but the discourse and narrative around the way in which we justify it (Alexander 2012). The constant pairing of blackness with criminality allows society to theoretically buy into ideas of racial progress and equity, while simultaneously maintaining legalized racial inequality. The black community in the 252 must contend with these social forces. While the significance of race in the 252 was largely structured around slavery, these ideas have been reinvented in the form of policing and residential and school segregation.

The System is Rigged Against Us

The Community Policing Their Self

“I ain’t been stuck here but this is where I’m at though,” Bill tells me while we sit across from each other in his living room after I ask him where he is from. Bill is a 30-year-old short dark-skin black male. While smiling, as he always does, Bill was framing his presence in 252 as one of choice given the assumption that if someone had an option no one would choose to stay in the 252. Bill is a single father and for him the 252 is home. His family is here, these are the streets he walked as a kid, this is where his identity was formed, and those things are more important to him than living in a city with better economic opportunities. Bill and I are discussing the issues facing the 252, specifically the city of Rocky Mount, and Bill says, “Shit we bring each other down and the police, they hell.” In attempting to get him to go deeper I ask “how so?”

“They say my neighborhood real bad and I used to feel some type of way. You can’t be afraid of your own people. But, now I see why, because you could fall victim. But like my grandma house. My grandma use to clean up for the white folks her whole life, she was good to them. When the old white lady died she gave her house to my grandma, because her family didn’t like it because it was over this way (referring to where Bill lives now). Growing up my grandma house use to get broken into because we in the hood. My mom and all my aunts kept telling my grandma to move, but my grandma would always say ‘ain’t nobody running me nowhere, you don’t know how much I put up with from them white people and you think imma let my own people run me away’. Now I really see what she talking about, just because you here and those bad things happen to you doesn’t mean it was about you. You can be the little hope they need if you stay there.”

Bill, like the majority of the individuals I engaged with throughout this ethnographic experience cited black-on-black crime and law enforcement as being the primary issues in the 252. However, their conceptualization of these issues differs from when these issues are discussed in mainstream society, partly because these issues were organized around notions of identity. Bill’s grandmother’s stating that she will not let her own people run her away is much different than when black-on-black crime is used as a discursive political phrase to pathologize black subjectivity. Similarly, 252 rapper Drop, says “black people, we our own worst enemy, but I can’t blame us. We broke, no job, and stressing. So, when someone do rub you the wrong way you snap because we never let it out.” The notion of black-on-black crime in the 252 is not used to suggest that blacks are prone to criminality or to highlight patterns in black behavior. Black-on-black crime, I grew to understand, was used to show how black people are situated within a

structure of oppression and was used to describe when we (black people) didn't act as a collective. Blackness and criminality were not intimately linked in the cultural ideology of black people in the 252 because the community engaged in different ways of understanding outside mainstream norms. Thus, the notion of black-on-black crime was not heard or felt in the same way as when it was used on CNN. Black-on-black crime was employed as a commentary on the way in which black people respond to their condition. It situated white supremacy as the issue and highlights how black people fall victim to its structural conditions by failing to see the way in which social forces are connected. It is not suggestive of black criminality, but the opposite. It points to moments when black people allow white supremacy to pull them out of who they are. As Premo stated, "The system already rigged against us, we have to stop doing what they want us to do, they have us trying to be soldiers instead of kings."

The black community's constant critiques of black behavior in the 252, specifically by appropriating the phrase black-on-black crime, is not them falling victim to American hegemony (as I first thought), but rather an intervention. Stuart Hall has viewed an intervention as a discursive move in a continuous argument that aims to change the terms of debate (Scott 2017). While it may be seen as devaluing the race by speaking on black ills when used in white company, the appropriation of black-on-black crime in black company speaks to the black community's epistemological power to reconfigure oppressive tools to make humanizing critiques when they are warranted. These critiques have less to do with criminality, but more to do with notions of identification. Identification is the process of engaging with questions of identity, rather than becoming fixed into one. The black 252 community sees a shared social position and holding each other down is antithetical to their understanding of this connectedness. I'm not suggesting that this community is constrained by an artificial notion that all black people

must get along, but they understand that who they are and who they can be is tied to a larger black community. Their understanding and engagement with their structural conditions differs than the neoliberal notion meritocracy, primarily because of the way in which identity and culture are situated within their conceptions of who they are.

Blackness Constructed as Criminal

Sabrina, unaware of the state Supreme Court case *Silver et al vs. Halifax County Board of Commissioners* centered on racial inequality and school funding that is currently occurring, moves with her son Jon from the projects in Weldon to Roanoke Rapids. Sabrina's new home is in a mixed neighborhood both economically and racially. Every home has its own yard, but the homes are still close enough to have that neighbor *vibe*. Weldon is over 95 percent black; Roanoke Rapids is the whitest city in Halifax County. Sabrina says, "I had to get up out the projects." While Sabrina's income status did not go up much, her spatial capital is perceived to have increased because of the societal privileges of simply existing near white people. In Sabrina's mind this move to Roanoke Rapids will give Jon a better opportunity by getting him out of one of the poorest school districts in the state. During the time Virginia makes this move, there is a Supreme Court case going on examining the three school districts in Halifax County, addressing the funding disparities in the area. The plaintiffs in the case argue that having three school districts - two with majority Black enrollment and one with majority white enrollment—exacerbates funding inequalities in the relatively low-income county (Ball 2018). Virginia unaware of the court case, like most of the community, still knows that the "white school" always had better resources and now as a resident of Roanoke Rapids qualifies her son to go to the predominantly white school in the district. This was confirmed when the white school district recently had a new school built, while the other school districts were severely underfunded. A

trend that has remained since I was in high school here is that given the limited supply of books students are not allowed to take textbooks outside of the classroom and face disciplinary consequences if they do. For Sabrina, being able to rent a home in the white school district was her attempt to challenge the structural realities facing black children that live in rural low-income counties.

Sabrina has settled into her new home nicely. Jon, 5 years old, generally goes into the next-door neighbor's yard and plays basketball with the kids in the neighborhood. He doesn't need permission as the basketball goal has been transformed into a community spot. Jon's 6-year-old cousin comes over one weekend to visit. While his mom cooks Jon takes his cousin to explore his neighborhood. While only five and six-years-old Sabrina is comfortable allowing Jon and his cousin to play outside alone because of the welcoming environment and perceived safeness of the white neighborhood. Growing bored of the basketball hoop, Jon and his cousin go to the neighbor's house directly behind his and gets in the swimming pool to cool off. Shortly after being in the pool the police come racing down the street. The kids are escorted home and one of Sabrina's worst fears has come true: her son having contact with law enforcement. While Sabrina admitted her son was wrong, she did not feel having the police called on a 5-year old child was warranted. As Sabrina stated, "they are only kids." Residents of white and middle-class neighborhoods have built fences, cut off relationships with neighbors, and moved out as a response to black and low-income individuals moving into their neighborhoods (Low 2009). These segregation policies are also institutionalized given policing policies have criminalized nonconforming uses of neighborhoods with social ordinances that enforce middle-class rules of civility (Merry 1990).

This is occurring while a larger discourse on calling the police on black children is taking place nationally via social media with professor Marc Lamont Hill tweeting, “If you call the police on an 8-year-old Black child selling water, you're saying that you don't care if that child lives or dies.” With the killing of black children by law enforcement such as Tamir Rice and the systemic calling of police on black children, Jon’s situation is not unique but rather implicated within a much more fundamental social process. While white kids have historically been given the benefit of the doubt (Pattillo-McCoy 2013), issues pertaining to black children have been treated as criminal offenses. A 5-year-old black child swimming in your swimming pool evokes fear because of the way in which we understand blackness. In a society that has historically used policing to deal with the fears and anxiety provoked by blackness, calling the police on a 5-year-old black child is rational. The question is not whether Jon was wrong (he was), but how should we engage black children who make mistakes?

Current residential and school segregation in the 252 has been a societal tool to deal with Jon and the black community. Residential segregation is the structural linchpin in racial inequality (Massey and Denton 1993). It provides a spatial and conceptual area in which to wage marginalization. The very fact that black people are separated in part serves as justification for the conditions in which they exist. In the *Silver et al vs. Halifax County* Supreme Court case the plaintiffs have argued that the predominantly white school district has received millions more in local funding from tax revenue than the two black districts, but the lower courts ruled against integrating the districts. As the county has elected not to integrate the school districts, parents like Sabrina use moving into the white school district as a way to integrate the schools on the individual level. Calling the police on kids like Jon is a way to control and regulate black bodies that transgress normative social processes in these conceptual white spaces. The lived reality for

black people in the 252 is one where contact with law enforcement organizes the day-to-day experience of the black community. Black community members who live in the black areas of the 252 live under surveillance because we construct the hood and its inhabitants as dangerous in the structural imagery of society. Those black people who move to the white areas, in turn, are seen as threats to the good parts of the area code. In both cases black identity is illegible, and society is disarmed from seeing the humanness within black community members.

I heard several stories like Jon, but as a sociologist I wanted to see data. I understood Jon's case to be representative because I felt the *vibe* of moving through the 252 within a black body—the unspoken always guiltiness that existed within me. I saw the police check points that were stationed outside of hip-hop shows as similar to the laws that prohibit recreational contact between free blacks and slaves. Yet without statistics I wondered if a reader would value how a 5-year-old black child felt having the police called on him for playing in a pool. To have his idea of community crushed, because he is not welcome in every space. To learn that he was someone to be dealt with, not engaged with. That his mistakes could be his death sentence. Without the statistics I thought that Jon's experience may be read as anecdotal—as if all research in some way isn't about finding the general in anecdotes. In search of these statistics I went to the Halifax county library to speak with the head librarian as she was familiar with me and my interest in learning as much about Halifax as possible. She directed me to a state database that allows anyone to look at policing statistics for every county in the state of North Carolina. I wanted to look up the small day-to-day interactions that structured the reality of the citizens in the 252. I didn't want to look up the big grand murder, rape, or armed robbery statistics, but I wanted an indicator that would allow me to speak to who law enforcement was encountering on a day-to-day basis.

What follows are descriptive statistics I composed using data that is available to the public provided by the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation. One indicator of the normative day-to-day role law enforcement plays is in traffic stops. While black people make up a little over 50 percent of the residents in Halifax county, between 2015 and 2018 they account for 70 percent of citations issued during traffic stops. This is largely due to what areas are policed and the way in which the police understand their presence in those communities. Out of all violations given at check points black motorists account for around 87 percent of them. Residential segregation allows for law enforcement to strategically implement roadblocks and other forms of surveillance to police the ontological bounds of blackness (Dunn and Reed 2011). There is racial inequality in every aspect of traffic stops in Halifax County. Having the white neighbor call the police on Jon had less to do with if his actions were criminal, but more to do with society's understanding of what the police force is structured to do. It is my contention that black people in the 252 exist within a structure that places existentialist limits on blackness. This mirrors how slavery was not simply an economic enterprise, but was the mechanism that inculcated society into a particular understanding of blackness that was used in every other sphere of society, the criminal justice system prescribes use with a script to understand who black people are as they exist within all of society's institutions. The criminal justice system is constructing the dominant narrative on black identity, an identity that the black residents must resist.

Out of the top 10 most dangerous cities in North Carolina, cities from the 252 are overrepresented accounting for 33 percent (Bennett 2018). Crime rates are largely due to the structural conditions of living with inadequate school funding, little economic opportunities, and poor housing options (Reisig and Cancino 2004; Krivo and Peterson 1996), however crime rates

have been linked to the identities of those who inhabit areas with high occurrences of violent crimes. A running theme among the 252 artists is the lack of understanding and/or the misrepresentation of their local black identity within dominant societal institutions, which I suggest occurs to all black communities to varying degrees. Black feminist scholars have used the phrase hypervisible-invisibility to describe the ways in which black women's behaviors are hyper-visible and subjected to institutional control, while on the other hand black women are completely invisible because the causes of their structural position go unexplored (Mowatt et al 2013). This dialectical pattern also occurs to the identities of 252 artists and local black community in general.

On one hand these artists and their communities must deal with the hyper visibility of being constructed as criminal and under constant surveillance, while also dealing with the invisibility of what local artist Premo calls the "struggle." Premo used "struggle" as a discursive tool to describe the structural hurdles faced by those who experience life as both poor and black. The structural disadvantages endured by the black community go unnoticed, but the individual reactions to these conditions become magnified when they transgress normative standards of legality. Those in search for a humanizing identity in the 252 face another form of invisibility because rural black neighborhoods are rendered invisible to the entire larger American society. These communities are written out of the American narrative of blackness as black has become synonymous with urban. We have no dominant scripts to read those black people who live on the same land in which their grandparents were enslaved and who never went through urbanization (at least not in the way that hip-hop sensibilities are situated in the urban).

For kids like Jon, contact with law enforcement not only stamps them within the criminal justice system, but constructs them in a manner where their transgressions are the only part of

their identity that is legible. I situate my conversation on hip-hop aesthetics in the 252 within the dialectic of, on one hand, being thought of as criminal and, on the other, being thought of as nobody. Hip-hop provides kids like Jon with an avenue to engage in discourses of identification, to reimagine who they are and who they could be. Engaging with notions of identification while contesting identity impositions, the black community develops an understanding of the world and subsequently themselves in relation to dominant institutions that is indigenous to them. In search of a more authentic identity, hip-hop is one of the avenues used to get there.

Hip Hop in the 252

Voices of Struggle Rap

I interviewed Premo the Hood Poet early in the project and we kept in contact throughout. He would share his new music with me and I would provide feedback, for whatever it was worth. I chose to interview Premo for a second time because he stood out to me. He embodied the dopeness of a rapper, the vision of an activist, and he aesthetically altered any space in which he was situated. I picked up Premo from his home and we drove to a nearby bar, East Coast Wings. Upon entering he pulled out his cell phone to record our interview as he did in our first meeting. He lets me know he has to continually give his fans access to his life because they appreciate his music in a more nuanced way if they understand who he is and what he is up to. Premo highlighted for me how identity isn't simply tied into music making, but reception. Michel Foucault (2001) does not view the author of literary texts as simply someone who produces writing, but authorship is a function of writing itself. Books are not about authors intentions, according to Foucault, but what they do, how they circulate as discourses, their impacts. Foucault argues that "a text points to an author who is outside of it and is an interplay of signs regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier" (2001, 115-116). For

Premo and Foucault we engage and feel music based on how we understand the producer. This is highlighted in the linguistic style of the black community within and outside of the 252. When I interacted with people and they make a compelling argument they finish it by asking, “You feel me?” This shift from understanding to feeling highlights a different way of knowing, an epistemological intervention on imperialist modes of acquiring information.

For Premo, and many other artists I worked with, he felt his fan base appreciated his music because they felt where he was coming from, not that they necessarily understood him. In this second meeting with Premo I wanted to *feel* his story; put another way, I wanted to hear him in a humanizing manner while understanding his structural position and emotional sensibilities. In talking about his upbringing Premo recalls:

“Growing up I was a typical kid, I played sports, went to school, was kinda popular, and had my occasional run ins with the law. I can’t say I was poor, my mom she worked all day and then came home and slept. I feel like she missed out on life because all she did was work and take care of us. I started rapping at 13 and my mom would listen to my music, but I don’t think she thought I would still be doing it this long. When I became an adult, it started causing problems when I was living with her. I would come home at late hours because I was in the studio. She was struggling, and it was hard for me to help because I was investing in my music. When I spent my last forty dollars on studio time she kicked me out. But that’s the past part of the journey and I’m cool with it.”

Premo suggests that his struggles serve as the foundational context of his music, like many other 252 artists. For him the point isn’t to understand that he was kicked out, but rather for us to imagine the feeling of damaging familial relationships and becoming homeless because of

investing in your dreams and having the outlet that you love most to become another source of your structural deprivation. This feeling, as I intend here, is not synonymous with sympathy or empathy. For Premo the fact that he survived those tough times is a sign he is meant for more. To 'feel me,' then, means to recognize I'm human. To feel someone is not to appropriate their emotions, but to position those emotions as valid enough to warrant your attention in constructing your understanding of who someone is.

In the geographic imaginary of the hip-hopers in the 252, New York is home to the lyricists, Atlanta is home to *trap*, New Orleans has *bounce*, and they have "struggle rap." Trap music in its development was rap songs whose content centered on dealing drugs, that was accompanied by triple-time sub-divided hi-hats, heavy sub-bass, and layered kick drums. Struggle rap can broadly be viewed as a form of southern trap music where the lyrics are composed of narratives of daily challenges. While all 252 artists' music do not fit neatly within this conceptualization, nor is every song from an artist the same, still narrating the hardship of being black in low-income rural neighborhoods over hi-hats and heavy sub-bass layered kick drums is a defining feature of hip-hop in the 252. I do not suggest that this style of hip-hop does not occur nation-wide, but rather suggest that this style structures this area's musical social processes.

Similarly, Streetz a 30-year father of two defines his music as pain and suffering music. Streetz is a tall slender light skin male with long dreads, he has the vibe of Bob Marley aesthetically and in how he conveys his values. Streetz was one of those self-taught activist thinkers whom I always admired. He learned about the criminal justice system, the local political system, and the black experience not to fulfill a degree requirement, but to better understand the experiences of himself and his family. In the Gramscian sense Streetz can be conceptualized as

an organic intellectual in that his interests are not tied to a particular institution, but his intellectual interests are organic to those of the black lower class (Gramsci 1979). His experiences with the formal educational system were difficult and dehumanizing. At 16 years old Streetz dropped out of high school because he felt there was no material reason to go. After a year or so in the underground economic market and being branded by the criminal justice system, Streetz went back to high school and received his diploma. Streetz enrolled in a local community college immediately after graduating from high school. He enrolled because it was what was expected of high school graduates, but he subsequently dropped out. Streetz says his mind wasn't right when he enrolled in school, so it didn't benefit him. I read this as meaning that the educational system and Streetz were operating under different understandings of what constitutes valid knowledge and success. The educational system wasn't conducive to his lived experience nor to how he envisioned moving forward. However, as Streetz got older he began to realize that he would have to find economic stability through taking the institutionalized route, regardless of how oppressive those structures are. He was 27 with two kids and wanted to provide them with as much as he could. Through listening to the tone of Streetz voice, attempting to hear him in the way DuBois wanted us to hear the sorrow songs, I learned that at times when black people set out to get degrees or participate in politics, it is not because we buy into the American narrative that these institutions are keys to liberation, but rather a sign of the faith we have in ourselves to transform these oppressive institutions into something meaningful for ourselves and family.

In 2014 when Streetz re-enrolled in community college he experienced the structural flaws within the educational system. He was going back to study computer information technology, but consistently met roadblocks. He was on financial probation because he dropped

out of the college when he was younger. Streetz set-up a meeting with the Dean of the college and explained his situation. He was successful in receiving financial support for the upcoming term, however, he was responsible for purchasing his own books. Streetz says his books totaled to more than \$600 and that there was no way for him to come up with the money. Rather than dedicate time and resources to hopefully gather up \$600 so that he might one day be able to better support his family, he chose to take what he considers a dead-end job to support his family now, with him saying, “If I had money just laying around I wouldn’t need school”. Streetz, like many of those who I worked with, made his share of individual mistakes that exacerbated the intensity of the structural marginalization he experienced. However, neither his mistakes nor the way in which he is structurally positioned defined him. Rather Streetz identity was attached to his ability to convey his situation in a humanizing manner. As he explained:

“A lot of people tell me I make pain music, like struggle music. But that’s what we come from. In this era everybody making turn-up music, turn-up songs, and party songs, so they put me in the category as pain music. When I make music, I want people that know me to feel it and if you don’t know me I want you to know my story”.

Streetz is positioning himself as an artist whose purpose is to convey his struggles in a manner that provokes an emotional response. Later in the interview he made value judgements about himself as both an artist and a person by discussing his ability to live up to his personal positioning. Streetz, when asked about his identity and career as an artist told me, “I know my music has power, I seen my mama cry. I done seen my girl cry because they know what I’m saying in my music is real, you hear something and you can feel it.” In thinking through who he was, Streetz didn’t lock himself into mainstream evaluations of how much money he made from

his music or how many viewers he has. Rather he repositioned and broadened the conversation to emphasize that the vibes he gave his family were what made him successful. In rarely being able to express himself fully in other domains of life, he felt that as an artist he was able to have his family truly know him. In Streetz song *Tell Em* he says, “Flashing lights, shoot-outs, we had to adapt to violence”. His family didn’t listen to this song and take his lyrics about violence as a way of celebrating or promoting that activity. His songs contextualized the mistakes of his past for them. Having the ability to transgress the stoicism of society’s mainstream understanding of masculinity and being felt as a human through his music is how Streetz engaged in the process of identification with his family.

When 252 artists engage in the production of struggle rap they are not pulling from a static identity and lived experience to create representations of it. Rather, this music-making process constructs the very identities in question. While Drop and I were in a local bar having a drink discussing his artistry, he found it difficult to describe who he was and what type of music he made. Drop is a 26-year-old black male who is short in stature, but compensates for it with his big welcoming personality. When we walked into the bar Drop greeted the workers, partly because of his kind spirit and partly because in his eyes he is a celebrity in his town. While I was asking him questions about the type of artist he is and the content of his music, he consistently directed me to watch his music videos on YouTube. At moments I thought maybe the way I was asking the questions were making it difficult for him to convey answers to me verbally. However, it began making sense to me when I noticed the way Drop continuously recorded pieces of our conversation and the way he talked about the importance of his videos to his identity as an artist. I grew to learn that both his video recordings of us and his music videos were not simply ways to archive specific moments. Through these artifacts he came to know

himself. Drop couldn't simply tell me who he was: he needed me to see it, hear it, and feel it because that's how he knew himself. Many artists in the 252 explain that when listening to their own music or watching their videos they learn things about themselves that they didn't know prior. I argue this is partly because mainstream institutions do not provide a language nor performative avenue for them to engage in a humanizing process of identification. Through their artistry these rappers are not solely trying to tell you a story about their struggle, but rather hip-hop provides the linguistic, aesthetic, and conceptual tools to discuss their struggle in a way they have never been able to. In turn, they learn about their resilience, values, and identity when they play these artifacts back.

For me, TDot's remarks highlight the intimate relationship between music and learning who you are. TDot is a rapper and videographer who values the interconnectedness between sound and vision. In response to my questions about how he got involved in hip-hop he stated, "I like noise. Music is more than a beat and lyrics, it is a way of life. It lets you know the character of an artist by the pitch in their voice, the way they ride the beat, and how they say things." As TDot continued to explain his involvement in hip-hop he began talking about the process of learning about yourself:

"I feel like when I don't have anyone to talk to I put it in music. When I listen to it later, I be like 'yo I was really feeling like that, what was I going through? Damn I really let that get to me like that' (laughing). Or when listening to my music I be like, 'I did this shit a year ago, I was really turnt, I was really on some shit'. Then I go listen to another song and be like, 'shorty really did break my heart'. I be like 'damn I done went through all that'. You really don't recognize you went through all these things until you go back and listen to it. Sometimes

you can feel it while you recording it, but after you play it back and you hear yourself you begin to understand yourself, so it's basically like I'm talking to myself and I can really hear my own voice and it makes a difference in how I think about things".

I read TDot's statement about not having anyone to talk to as both a literal reference to not having an individual person to engage in dialogue with about life struggles and a reference to not having a structural avenue to convey intimate details about yourself. TDot's lyrics are not always literal recollections of his person experiences, but are a way to use real feelings to narrate potential and imagined behaviors. If Stuart Hall (1990) is correct in that identification is a process of negotiating who I am and not trapping oneself in a static identity, then hip-hop is the conceptual space for these negotiations to occur. Rapping about the struggle isn't simply an expression of a condition, but an intellectual exercise aimed to define that condition outside of the epistemological limitations of mainstream institutions. While these artists are still trapped within the confines of the American English language, this exercise allows them to make discursive shifts in their usage of that language. Some scholars note this as slang or African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). Henry Louis Gates (2014) suggests that black Americans engage with the English language from a black socio-historical perspective and the contemporary experience of double-consciousness by African Americans have created differences in how they use language. This discursive shift cites the way in which the black community is pulling from different epistemological and ontological understandings of their experience. Their rhetorical style for me alludes to Richard Iton's (2008) 'black fantastic' – spaces of black cultural production that destabilize and fragment modernity. This is seen in the way the community employs the phrase black-on-black crime. This was not them adding a new phrase or simply

adding new meaning to an already established phrase, but rather they employed it in a manner that reflected their different epistemological and ontological starting point about their understanding of black subjectivity in dominant society. The way the black community in the 252 used it was different than the mainstream usage because they had already destabilized prevailing hegemonic understandings of blackness. Hip-hop is one of the conceptual spaces that allows for this destabilization. It allows the artists to be fantastic.

It Ain't About the Money or the Fame

Paul Mullins (2008) in describing popular culture once said, “Popular culture illuminates how we are all ordinary yet desire to be extra ordinary or can at least envision extraordinary possibilities within ourselves.” Hip-hop as it is narrated in the mainstream has been thought of as upholding capitalist ideals by uncritically disseminating representations of swaggy cars, taking photos with large stacks of money, and arguing that you should get money by any means necessary. It would seem that the extraordinary for hip-hop artists would then mean to transgress the structural economic bounds of the hood and to climb the economic ladder. However, in the artists’ discussions of their ideal goals (which I am referring to as the extraordinary) they don’t simply critique capitalism, “they offer a counter-formation that takes up capitalism’s gaps and contradictions and creates a whole new mode of economics” (Potter1995, 111). I suggest that the images of the big houses and conspicuous spending that takes place in hip-hop videos are understood differently by the mainstream and the black community who creates them partly because they are situated at different epistemological starting points.

To analyze hip-hop without first using hip-hop to help construct your understanding of the world will leave you incapable of understanding the nuance in the message. As Shell told me, “They don’t see what we do as art, if I was robbing and shooting everybody wouldn’t I be in

jail?” Shell is a 252 rapper who is short in stature and holds a very humble demeanor. Shell’s glasses add an eclectic feel to his black urban style of dress that incorporates cut up jeans and Timberland boots. The black hip-hop community in the 252 conceptualizes rappers as artists, creatives, and epistemological agents, thus when they listen to hip-hop they seek a larger message within the music. While in the mainstream hip-hop is viewed as void of artistic creativity, with Donald Trump stating, “The language is so bad and as they were singing --- singing right? Was it talking or sing,” during his presidential campaign (Diamond 2016). The issue is less about hip-hop artists uncritically disseminating capitalist ideals, and has more to do with America not viewing those artists as epistemological agents, thus not seeing the message in the music.

Kris, one of the only artist I worked with who has a college degree, documented his history with hip-hop. He is from Kinston, North Carolina, one of the larger cities in the 252. Kris’s life was similar to mine in that we grew up in what most would call bad neighborhoods, but we had a natural affinity with education. I do not suggest that we valued education any more than our peers, but school work generally came easy to us. Kris has a bachelor’s degree in history which is probably why he historicized most of his responses. But what most connected him to every other 252 artist was his conceptualization of extraordinary. In an inquiring voice I ask Kris, “How did growing up in Kinston influence the way you approach music?”

“The thing about growing up in Kinston is it don’t matter whatever you into, you might find yourself in a situation where you are running from bullets when you are at the grocery store or something, you never know. So being from here you already thought of as a marginal low-income hip-hop artist. I just think that as far as the way I approach my music, I think that Kinston will be the most integral part

because the goal was to get up out of Kinston and have enough money to come back and rebuild or build up. Fix the broken-down neighborhoods where they may not have allocated funds, because it don't seem like they allocating any funds in Kinston and the state of North Carolina isn't giving relief to these hurricane hit parts of my city."

Hearing him say goal I pry a little deeper and ask Kris, "What's your ultimate goal for your music?"

My long-term goals are to leave behind something that inspires people to keep this thing going. If I never become famous or any of that when I pass away or perish, I want people to listen to my music and be like that inspired me to keep doing music. I just want to be an inspiration to somebody like how Kanye or J Cole was an inspiration to me. That's all I want to get out of it. If I can just inspire one person. If I can inspire 10,000 people then it becomes a self-accomplishing goal, because they are going to start influencing others and the sphere of influence grows, and that's the goal. I don't really have a goal as far as money or fame or any of those things. I want influence because when you have influence that's how you can affect change. Yea of course it would be nice to have a nice car that I bought with money from my music. Those things are nice and I'm not saying they are outside the goal, but at the same time I would say the ultimate goal is to create a sphere of influence to influence others to do this work, to do this art, to tell this message".

Kris, like most artists I worked with, saw music as a way to build up different parts of the 252 whether that was through spreading humanizing stories or through community development.

For these rural black Americans, hip-hop is a way to cultivate a community identity and possibly generate economic activity if their music does one day make money. For these artists to make a lot of money (or to disseminate images of making a lot of money) is less about highlighting individual success, but alludes to their ability to help their hood. These artists do not operate under the standard American notion of meritocracy. This individual ideal is repositioned by the assumption that either their street, block, or city's future is dependent upon them.

Bill's vision, as I discussed earlier, remains family centered. While I was conceptualizing the extraordinary in American Dream-centric terms, Bill and other artists shifted my thinking of what these possibilities could be. I assumed, in asking them their ultimate goal, that I would get answers such as buying my mother a house or getting a recording deal. No artist mentioned these things and, in listening to their dreams, I *felt* Bill's answer the most: "My goals are to be more positive, talk about less bullshit. I see my kids: my daughter and my nephews they listening." Bill's critique of the content in his music is similar to the way the black community here employs black-on-black crime. He is not limiting or linking black subjectivity to criminality, but rather highlighting the democratic nature of it. He is contending that violence and drugs do occur within his lived experience and music, but it can't be reduced to those things. Bill continues and explains how he would love to get paid for the shows he does, but how his daughter's future may be more dependent on the more holistic aspects of his music career.

"Of course, I would love to get money from doing these shows around here. But, I do music because I like music and I make what I want to listen to do. I saw my daughter back there in the room listening to my music, and I realized the kids really listening, this music thing really impacting people. I'm about to be on some other stuff, switch it up so I can wake them up".

For Bill his music is a way to connect with his daughter in a manner that he never had before. His daughter *vibing* to his music creates a bond that can't be manufactured in other ways.

While most artists suggested they did not want fame, their aspirations were framed through discourses about developing identity. At first, I read it as a contradiction that these artists would suggest that they aren't in it for the fame, while simultaneously contending that they wanted to develop a regional and national identity. Redd is a 252 artist who started out rapping in middle school as a way to connect to her peers. She has a vibe that would make you rethink approaching her, but you will later realize she is extremely nice once you speak with her. This ambivalence of simultaneously striving for a regional identity and not wanting fame is captured in Redd's statement:

“I just dropped a mixtape on DatPiff and it's called *I Don't want to Be Famous* and the whole concept is that it's more than just a mixtape it's a brand, that's what I'm building for myself. I really don't want to be famous, this isn't a fame type of thing. I want to save my people, so I'm not out here looking for a record deal or looking for the first person that gonna offer me some money. It's bigger than that.”²

Redd highlights how she wants to develop a brand, which is generally thought of as a marketing and economics term. But, then she continues and suggests that the goal of this brand isn't fame or money. In my ongoing project of stepping back from simply understanding what people are saying and trying to *feel* what they are conveying, I reflected on conversations with Flank. Flank is an artist whose answers to my questions were always short and to the point. In conversation he

² Datpiff is an online hip-hop music distribution platform. Up and coming artist use it to upload and disseminate their musical projects.

is calm and stoic, but in his music he is passionate and explosive. He is one of those people who was never really heard by his peers or larger society, until his first track was played. When I asked him, what he wanted from this music thing, in the humblest voice he said, “I want the world to hear my music, I want the world to know the story”.

I do not claim that I know exactly how these artists fully reconcile both wanting to develop a nationwide brand, while not striving for fame and money. My suggestions are primarily derived from personally growing up in the 252, living the 252 with the eyes of a researcher, and experiencing the affective texture in the voices of the artists I worked with. I argue that given the intimate role place plays in hip-hop (Forman 2002), these artists are less interested in developing individual reputations, and more focused on bringing their hood into the public consciousness. While rural black Americans’ stories are rarely documented in hip-hop discourse; to have their stories heard nationally is less about situating them as an individual into this conversation but more about positioning a particular type of black experience in this conversation. The south has a dominant position in contemporary hip-hop, particularly Atlanta. But what about those blacks in the south who were never urbanized? Since the 252, like most rural black American experiences, is not documented in mainstream hip-hop discourse these artists create a distinction between striving for national recognition of their community and striving for the kind of personal fame that holds an individualistic connotation. This undertaking is understood in terms of the distinction between home identity and developing a communal voice. Given the 252 hip-hop identity is nationally invisible and locally illegible, this created a space where having their music and brand known nationally shines a spotlight on a place that has been historically (mis) conceptualized as nowhere.

Questions about the impact of this invisibility on an artist's career generally plays out in discussions about whether or not an artist has to move out of the 252 in order to "make it." Many artists believe that for someone from the 252 to be successful they must move to a larger city, with a bigger market. This same trend is not only seen with hip-hop artists, but with the college educated population. Given the limited economic possibilities in the 252, once one has obtained a 4-year degree, the common plan is not to move back home because you will not be able to find any employment. This has started a trend where the citizens, whose skills are a commodity, whether that's musically or academically, don't use their skills in the 252, thus depleting the community of its best assets. This pattern is situated within a larger black diasporic process referred to as the 'brain drain'. Highly skilled Afro-Caribbean and Africans have migrated to the United States, but rather than simply deplete human capital, it can also generate positive network externalities and new conversations on blackness and belonging (Docquier and Rapoport 2012).

Drop calls this process "riding the wave of another city". He suggests that other localities have larger populations and were able to cultivate a hip-hop scene that includes dope producers, top recording studios, and fans eager to hear new music. While I sat down and spoke with Shell and J, two cousins who both are hip-hop artists, they had an exchange back and forth about their plans to move out of the 252. While they were discussing their plan to move J shifted towards me and said:

"When I get my stuff together and get back on my feet I'm going to work on my music up there in Baltimore. You know you got a better chance up there instead of around this area. When you look at smaller cities and you see the ones (artists) that start doing real good and they leave they city, they will go to somewhere with a bigger population and more options. That's typically how it works."

A defining feature of hip-hop in the 252 is that the invisibility that drives the hip-hop community's search for identity is also what forces them to find new spaces of cultural production.

This is why the brand becomes important. Redd's alluding to developing a brand to save her people suggests that regardless of where she has to go for her music career, she would embody the aesthetic, cultural, and ideological sensibilities of the 252. Her brand reflected that she came from somewhere and that where she's from had culture and style. A brand is a way to contend with the societal impositions of identity. Her brand was less about selling herself and her music, but more about marking the 252 as something to be experienced. The significance of hip-hop in the 252 is in part about the finished musical project, but more importantly about how the music-making process has allowed this community to use aesthetic sensibilities as way to know who they are outside of the value metrics prescribed by mainstream institutions.

We all Have a Stake in This

As I drive to meet Mook at his place to have a chat about my project and hip-hop, I think about how he will view me. We have had numerous interactions via social media, but this is the first time we are meeting in person because he has been back and forth between Raleigh and the 252 for work. I have the dress and style of a hip-hop head and the cultural knowledge of the 252, but I am marked by the fact I am carrying an ethnographic journal and a research agenda. I feel inauthentic to the 252-hip-hop scene because I have a PhD dissertation at stake. My career and identity as a researcher rests on finding something profitable from this musical scene. I must in some way turn their lifestyle into an academic commodity.

After kicking it with Mook for a few hours, I realized that he also had some form of personal gain at stake in the 252-hip-hop scene. His identity as a 252 artist also relied on the commodification of the 252-musical scene. His ability to feed his family and pay rent was wrapped up in how many beats he could sell. I questioned if my academic stake in the 252-hip-hop culture was as genuine as Mook's beat making career? In that moment, I needed him. But he didn't need me. Could my allegiance to this community give me a legitimate claim to the 252-hip-hop scene? Or does my seasonal presence here only make the 252 symbolically my home?

These questions are largely around notions of identity. How do I personally engage in discourses around identification as it relates to the 252? What I am essentially doing is finding ways to place the competing discourses about my identity within and outside of my conceptualization of the 252. Growing up in the 252, I did not fully engage in the hip-hop scene. While I was one of the few students who naturally did well in school, I used that institution to construct my identity more so than others. When I got to Western Carolina University as an undergrad, I assumed all my white classmates knew things I didn't. I thought their familiarity with what an AP course was meant they were better suited for college than me. I didn't know this as a freshman, but I grew to learn that while I was pulling directly from mainstream institutions, I was learning to despise my home. I blamed the community, not the institutions, for my feeling of second-class citizenship. Because I was using the educational system as a primary tool to figure out who I was, I felt since I didn't know Freud or Marx that I was nobody in college.

But the artists I worked with during my ethnographic experience knew *their selves* in a different way. Knowing Freud or Marx didn't matter to them, as they weren't relevant to their lived experience. There are many things that did matter. But for this paper I'm primarily

focusing on *vibe*. They wanted to know to what degree someone is aesthetically and affectively situated within this community. This is similar to when Jackson Jr (2005) moves us from being ideologically trapped in discourses around racial authenticity, discourses that create static notions of race, and moves us to notions of racial sincerity. Sincerity provides an organizing framework for the always incomplete, practical, intellectual, and expressive engagements with racial beings in contemporary America. Sincerity presumes one another's humanity and subjectivity and allows us to look at the person rather than the prescribed social scripts that accompany set identities (Jackson Jr 2005). Unlike sincerity, or at least my reading of it, the concept of *vibe* foregrounds the way these subjective expressive engagements use aesthetic and cultural sensibilities to structure the affective nature of the interaction. Your racial and/or cultural belonging is not solely based on if you understand the cultural scripts, but rather if it feels like you belong. Just as Jackson Jr suggests you can fake sincerity, you can fake a *vibe*.

Vibe has, on one hand, allowed the black community in the 252 to reposition the importance of dominant institutions and to use the knowledge gained through their aesthetic negotiations as ways of understanding themselves and others. On the other hand, *vibe* allows us to reimage the significance of blackness. It allows us to think through the ways that blackness is so fluid that at times it is difficult to use language to know what is or what isn't black. So, we construct understandings of blackness based on the affective nature of the person or artifact. Hip-hop has been the primary ideological space in which to negotiate conceptualizations of a *vibe*.

Chapter 5. Niggaz think I'm too pretty to spit rhymes this gritty/F--k y'all thought? Be dancin' around in suits like I'm Diddy? The Style of Vibe and Construction of Gendered Identity

A few weeks into my senior year of high school my close friend Zay purchased a Toyota Camry for around \$1000. For Zay, and the other black teenage boys in the 252, owning a car did not solely represent freedom, but was also a way to assert manhood through the way they aesthetically constructed their vehicle. Black manhood wasn't necessarily about being able to move freely, but how you moved. Through his fast-food job, Zay was able to save up enough money to buy some rims for his \$1000 Camry.³ I'm not sure how much the rims cost, but I would assume at minimum they cost a fourth of what he paid for the vehicle. At the time, Zay was a hip-hop artist (he isn't any longer) and wanted a sound system similar to the ones we saw all the adults who we believed to be financially stable had. When those adults drove by, the vibrations from their subwoofers would not only shake the trunk of their car, but any object in close proximity. Zay was able to buy a stereo and sound system for a few hundred dollars and save money on installation by installing it himself. Suddenly Zay became one of those dope black guys the younger guys looked up to because of the way southern trap beats emanated from his Camry. The bass was so loud that you couldn't hear the lyrics to his music, but you could feel it. More importantly, you could feel Zay's presence. For black American women and men, sound has been used as a tool of oppositional consciousness, specifically as it relates to struggles over space (Wald 2011). As I rode around with Zay, I noticed the stares from white drivers resulting

³ A trend in the black community is to replace factory wheel and hub cap on cars with after-market rims. The rims are generally the color of a shiny metal and lift the vehicle higher off the ground. In black communities this is generally viewed socially as a status symbol, given rims can range from \$20 per wheel to \$23,000 per wheel.

from the way the trap beats from his speakers would infiltrate their space. In those moments I felt cool, proud, and masculine because of my association with Zay.

Growing up, this process was not unique to Zay. It even continued during my fieldwork. In high-school I assumed black men's cars were supposed to have rims and a sound system with heavy subwoofers. It almost felt like a 'social fact' (Durkheim 1982) that existed independently of a set of cultural and aesthetic processes. However, while home during my fieldwork, I saw my brother do this and I wanted to scrutinize it. I did not have any intention of including it into my dissertation. My interest was out of ethnographic curiosity. After my oldest brother Wink had just purchased a car for \$900 when he began looking online for some rims. One day just sitting at his place chilling, he looks at me and says, "That's my work car. I just drive it to work, but when it gets right I might drive it on the weekend". "Dang, what's wrong with it?", I ask. "It run good. Just doesn't have a radio right now." "You looking for a radio right now", I ask while looking at his phone. "Naw, seeing if anybody around here selling some rims. Need to fix her up." For my brother, the car in its current state was only important for utility: to get him to work. However, the weekend is the time people drive around the city and are socially engaged. The 252 is a non-urban community, thus city alludes to an urban imaginary that situates rural communities into modernity. The car in its current condition did not have the aesthetic and cultural attributes for him to be seen driving in a social setting.

Some may argue that it is more rational to buy a \$2000 car, rather than spend \$900 on an extremely cheap car and a \$1000 for it to meet aesthetic standards. In thinking through how hip-hop has allowed the black community in the 252 to perform gender, I understand buying the \$900 car and putting expensive rims on it the same way that I argue we should read hip-hop performance and lyrical content. Derek Iwamoto (2003) contends that society misunderstood

Tupac's importance because they engaged his music and performative behavior as literal representations, which did not allow them to see how Tupac's work was a matter of style rather than simply substance. My brother would rather spend more on creating a car that would draw attention because of its aesthetics than to spend money on a car with a reliable engine and transmission because his car allowed him to perform a particular style of masculinity: repositioning the substantive value of what's under the hood. Destabilizing the substantive value and privileging aesthetics has a long tradition in black aesthetics, with William De Vaughn saying, "You may not have a car at all, but you can still stand tall" (1974). In this chapter, I want to engage with the types of gendered narratives that can be constructed by centering the style of hip-hop performativity, rather than engaging with the lyrics and behaviors of 252 artists solely as literal representations of who they are or want to be. Instead of engaging merely with what is being said, I want to examine the way artists construct gendered identity by how they aesthetically and poetically choose to make statements.

In repositioning the importance of style, I am not suggesting that rap music does not have substance, rather suggesting we need a more nuanced framework in which to accurately understand what that substance is. Scholars have made meaningful contributions to our understanding of hip-hop and the black experience by reading key rap albums through different critical lens (e.g. Bluijs 2017). My privileging of style is to not only think through what artists say in lyrics and share with me in ethnographic interactions, but to take serious how they choose to aesthetically present their messages: engaging with the style. Style has been characterized as the process whereby objects and behaviors are made to mean (Hebdige 2012). Michael Hanson (2007) has viewed style as a culturally conditioned constellation of practice, orientation, and sensibility that coheres in body-based expression (172). Style in reference to behavior and

performance is conceptualized within Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Habitus allows us to think through the ways habits, skills, and dispositions become deeply engrained into individuals and how we ourselves embody cultural capital (Bourdieu 2018). Bourdieu suggests that our 'taste' for cultural objects and our aesthetic sensibilities are shaped by our socially and culturally engrained habitus. Style as it is employed here refers to the process of using aesthetic and cultural sensibilities to inscribe meaning into objects, words, and behaviors. Style is the way in which meaning becomes structured into a *vibe*. Style not only refers to a particular way in which something is done, but a key component of what that something is. I contend that black men, given their being excluded from developing masculinity in a humanizing manner through mainstream institutions, have used style as a way in which to construct and perform masculinity. Black women being both marginalized in dominant institutions and in the hip-hop realm have used style to carve out spaces of visibility to destabilize the patriarchal organization of hip-hop.

Masculinity and Vocal Style

Black men are uniquely situated within the social order by being at the bottom of society in life chance indicators such as incarceration rates, educational achievement, and unemployment rates; while simultaneously being beneficiaries of black male sexism (Staples 2004). bell hooks has suggested that black men live internalizing patriarchal masculinity that pushes the notion that the key to black male liberation is to be better patriarchs: having the ability to control women and children with economic stability, political power, and social status (2004). Given that historically "black" has implicitly meant black men, black men have failed to conceptualize themselves as gendered bodies thus missing how they are victims of gendered racial marginalization. Black men have bought into an idealized notion of masculinity and engaged in behaviors that uphold a patriarchal structure that reproduces physical, sexual, economic, and political violence against

women (Mutua 2006). This section's aim is not to examine the ways in which black men uphold patriarchal oppression in their process of constructing identity in the 252. Nor is it aimed at documenting how black men in the 252 challenge normative oppressive ideals about gender, gender performance, and sexuality. This section's purpose is humbler: it aims to point to the way rural black male hip-hop artists come to understand masculinity outside of dominant institutional avenues. Even though I do not directly engage with the political ramifications of this process, I position masculinity, gender, and race as political enterprises. Identities are not simply about who I am, but how I am structurally positioned.

By styling a \$900 car black men (women also) in the 252 are adopting what Richard Mayors and Janet Billson calls the 'cool pose' (1992). The cool pose is a way in which to enact gendered personhood through a set of interrelated aesthetic and cultural signifiers such as: style of dress, flow of speech, handshakes, physical postures, style of walk, types of dances, and social scripts. Mayors and Billson (1992) suggest that all groups engage in cool behavior to various degrees, but because of historical and contemporary racial marginalization, they suspect that low-income black communities exert more energy into being cool. Julian Mayfield (1972) suggested that the investment in aesthetic coolness is a search for a new program because the programs of the Western world have failed us. Mayfield was contending that dominant ways of being did not meet the social or cultural needs of black people, so they have paid special attention to their aesthetic performativity. Cool performativity can be seen in numerous aspects of black male life, with basketball being one of the most notable sites. Hanson's (2007) analysis of the distinction between black style in basketball and white style in basketball suggests that black style is characterized as a presentation of an overdetermined cool and stylized self that was competent and confident. Similarly, in the 1992 film *White Man Can't Jump* Billy, the white

protagonist, critiques his black teammate Sidney by telling him, “You’d rather look good and lose, than look bad and win”. It is my contention that black male hip-hop artists in the 252 use being cool as a performative style in which to enact masculinity. To be cool on one hand is to enact a stylized cultural aesthetic and on the other hand can be read as having everything under control. To be cool is to understand a cultural and aesthetic knowledge base and have the physical and material ability to perform it.

Hip-hop vocal performance is one way in which to examine this cool stylized vibe and its relation to masculinity. Jackson (2005) highlighted a hip-hop trope where rappers would purposely sing badly to create an aesthetic distance from vocal musicianship. Jackson goes on to suggest that Mos Def’s 1999 hip-hop project *Black on Both Sides*, because the artist took seriously both rapping and singing was an intervention that restructured the mainstream template of how a hip-hop artist could perform masculinity. He continues to suggest that, “Mos Def opens up space for the black male hip-hop body to sing itself anew, to destroy the categories of expressive difference that make an authentic male rapper different from an authentic male singer” (Jackson 2005, 188). Much has changed in the hip-hop landscape since Jackson’s fieldwork in the 1990’s, primarily a collapse in the essentialist divide between singing and rapping.

There is an emergence of an alternative r&b sound, which grows out of contemporary r&b characterized by its neo-soul sound and smooth vibe. However, this alternative r&b departs from contemporary r&b with its transgressive themes and content and its huge reception by indie-artist fans (Fennessey 2011). In this alternative r&b black queer themes and other previously underexplored aspects of the black male experience are centered to reimagine black masculinity. Alongside this emergence of alternative r&b, singing-rappers have become the

norm, particularly with trap rapper Future being the most notable (Drake 2018). Rappers primarily do this using auto-tune: a studio technique that can take a vocal and move it to the proper note and pitch (Tyrangiel 2009). Auto-tune has provided hip-hop artists with a new performative avenue to construct identity. Nick Prior in discussing Brittany Spears suggested that auto-tune turned her vocals into a series of interrupted chops allowing her identity to become under constant assemblage (2009). Rather than being simply a way in which to construct a vocal that is sonically pleasing, auto-tune has allowed artists to engage in new modes of identification. It allows artists to make aesthetic choices about the style in which their work is presented.

“Singing doesn’t make you soft. It just shows you have more to offer as an artist”, Shell tells me while we discussed how widespread the practice of rappers singing on their songs has become. “Do you sing on a lot of your songs?”, I ask in an inquisitive manner to suggest that I didn’t think singing was soft. Unapologetically he says, “Yes. I add some vocals to most tracks. I can actually sing though”. Shell is highlighting a shift in the hip-hop landscape, that masculinity for him is not reserved solely for rapping, but rather in having the ability to engage in multiple forms of male performativity. His statement, “I can actually sing though” is suggesting that unlike other artists who could not hit a note without auto-tune, his choice to use auto-tune speaks to a decision of style not his ability to sing.

Premo’s song *Worth It* starts by him singing, “All the wrong I did, man, now seem worth it. Have you ever been down so low and, you feel all worthless. Almost lost my soul in the streets, now I found my purpose”. Singing through auto-tune provided him with a range of vocal stylized choices of how to convey his message. Rappers understand what it means to be masculine and cool through the stylized choices made around how they structure songs. For hip-hop artists in the 252, masculinity is not understood using a traditional rapper and singer binary,

but rather about engaging that spectrum to produce a dope sound. Masculinity is in part understood by the way in which artists make aesthetic stylized judgements. This is not solely done through having the artist himself sing, but through the digital sampling of r&b music.

Sampling has been theorized as creating a lineage between hip-hop and older genres of African-American music such as r&b and blues (Demers 2003). Justin Williams (2013) makes a distinction between digital sampling and musical borrowing, by suggesting that digital sampling has radicalized music making and listening because of how accurately sounds can be reproduced and reconstructed to meet specific goals. Digital sampling, more so than other forms of musical borrowing, allows artists and producers to recreate the exact details of timing and timbre from previous sounds, signifying to specific sonic qualities or events (Williams 2013; Katz 2010). Sampling in hip-hop provides artists with more detailed control over aesthetic representations. Potter (1995) views sampling as highly political because through borrowing and subverting traditional author functions to contend with contemporary issues facing black America, sampling binds together communities and traditions. Sampling isn't simply about recreating old representations, but rather using previous black sounds as a site of articulation to recast contemporary black subjectivity.

For artists in the 252, sampling old r&b songs provided a range of stylized choices that could be made. G50's song *Stand By Me* is a sample of New Edition's *Can you Stand the Rain* that talks about the struggles and difficulties of taking care of your loved ones in the 252. The added kick drums and bass, give the sample a southern trap vibe, and illustrates how hip-hop's interconnectedness with r&b provides artists with massive amounts of stylized choices. The more an artist can push these boundaries successfully the cooler they become. Having the ability to create and perform style is a key component of 252 artists' processes of negotiating identity. A

hip-hop artist's incorporation of singing is an epistemological statement: it shows I know how to sing and I know a range of different types of sounds. It constructs masculinity by positioning the artist as someone with control over multiple facets of the contemporary black musical world. Sampling from previous black musical genres provides artists with a historical repertoire to make stylized statements. Manhood is derived from sampling because it highlights an understanding of previous black cultural sounds and when done well artists can create multifaceted representations.⁴ Digital sampling also serves as an example of a larger societal process that is not discussed at length here: it forces us to think through how black youth's negotiations with masculinity are in part shaped by historical forces.

Guns Ain't Masculine, The Way I Talk about Them Is

Black people have faced structural forms of disenfranchisement when they exude emotional responses that can be construed as unwarranted rage or anger. "Whether in an actual prison or not, practically every black male in the United States has been forced at some point in his life to hold back the self he wants to express, to repress and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed" (hooks 2004, ix-x). Black affective expressions and representations have been misinterpreted because of the ideological frames in which society engages black subjectivity. We have rationalized the structural positioning of black people by viewing black behavior through a lens of 'black pathology' (Lawrence 2004). American society engages with blackness from frames that suggest black behavior is deviant or criminal and that shapes the reception of what is being understood. If black subjectivity was understood from a humanizing

⁴ Artists felt masculine or a form of status by showing they had a mastery of a range of black musical traditions. Part of being a man was to know something about something important.

starting point that saw blackness as adaptive strength, creatively beautiful, and inherently valuable then society would understand black behavior differently (Cross 1991).

Some scholars who have engaged with hip-hop and masculinity have viewed references to guns and drugs as claims to a form of street masculinity (Patton, Eschmann, and Butler 2013). Most of the artists I worked with continuously reference drugs and guns in their music. However, it is my contention that for many artists these references exist independently from their construction of masculinity. These references should not simply be understood through the substance of the text, but via the style of the presentation. The idea that black male rap artists understand guns to be signs of masculinity is more of an imposition than something based in empirical data. As Craig famously says in *Friday*, when his father asked him, “You think you a man with that gun in your hand, huh?” Then Craig replies, “I’m a man without it”. That scene depicted how young black men didn’t see masculinity inherently residing within a gun, but in the ability to live a safe life. In viewing black subjectivity as inherently criminal we have overemphasized and misrepresented the importance of gun bars in hip-hop. In rap a ‘bar’ is loosely comparable to a poetic stanza; thus, a gun bar is a rap line or stanza referencing guns and/or gun accessories. Black male rap artists don’t incorporate gun bars into their lyrics as a way to create a masculine representation, but rather masculinity is found in the *style* of presentation.

“Men need more masculinity in their music. And adding how many guns you own isn’t making it masculine either”, TDot explains. While he says this, I’m thinking about his newest single entitled *Free Smoke* that starts off with him rapping “Free smoke, free smoke. Unload, reload. These niggas they don’t know, me.” Through my personal relationship with TDot, I grew to understand him as someone who cared about the success of his community. He exemplifies

this by offering a sliding scale fee to local artists for his videographer services. Our conversations were often filled with laughter. One time, in illustrating his passion for being a videographer, he explained, “I would shoot a porno if I could get paid for it.” In his music, TDot makes consistent gun references throughout. TDot has been vocal, specifically on Facebook, about suggesting that guns don’t make you masculine. TDot, like many other artists, construct lyrics centered on gun violence not as a way in which to negotiate a hyper-masculine identity, but as an artistic endeavor. TDot, an avid user of gun bars, is not a hypocrite for critiquing rappers who use gun bars to seem tough or masculine; rather he is challenging the style and framing of gun bars these other rappers are using. Style here is understood as the process of adding meaning to music. Hip-hop serving as a nuanced musical endeavor disseminates cultural information not solely through what is literally being said, but through its aesthetic construction. Style is both a way to make a statement and a statement itself.

In making clear my contention that gun bars receive significance through the style in which they are employed, I turn to Bill. Artists such as TDot and Bill use hip-hop to tell a racialized narrative about living in systems of violence. Often those who experience life outside of the black structural positioning equate black style of expression with content (Rose 2008). They read hip-hop lyrics as literal texts and fail to engage them as nuanced traces of a cultural experience. The house that Bill’s grandma “got from the white folks” currently remains in Bill’s family. His grandma recently passed away and Bill was tasked with cleaning out her home. While cleaning up, he came across a pair of her white gloves. As a child she would never let him touch them. Touching those white gloves solidified the fact that his grandma was gone.

“I came up with a song idea once I saw my grandma’s gloves. She never let me touch them while she was alive”, Bill tells me as he prepares to explain his new single. I turn my

speakers up as I prepare to hear Bills song entitled *Grandma Glovez*. The song comes on with a catchy trap beat. I was surprised; I was expecting a song with a more sentimental vibe. The hook comes on and Bill is rapping, “Loading up them thirties with my grandma glovez, Ak 47 I done fell in love. The streetz want that savage shit, what is us”. A literal reading of the hook would suggest that he is using his grandma’s gloves to handle weapons so that his finger prints can’t be detected. However, I cannot remember an interaction with Bill where he did not bring up a lesson he learned from his grandmother. She was central to him and his identity. To incorporate his grandma into this song wasn’t simply a literal reference to her nor to his values (his grandma didn’t believe in violence). Rather he used his grandma’s memory to make a stylized rhetorical move. I was confused at first as to why Bill would associate his grandma with a song that on the surface was about gun violence. Through our interactions, I learned that for rappers simply saying, “I’m going to shoot you” is corny. Guns and violence in and of themselves are empty vessels that only hold value through the stylized manner in which they are employed. To reference grandma gloves was to use his grandma’s memory to engage in a stylized articulation. Bill doesn’t read his art as literal representations, but as nuanced negotiations. Given his grandma is central to his identity she becomes part of the aesthetic construction of his music.

Literal readings of hip-hop lyrics miss the stylized choices artists make because they do not take into consideration the way in which the beat of the song adds meaning. Beats are not simply background instrumentals in which content is added over it through lyrics, but the beat and lyrical text both construct meaning within each other. The beat is the structure in which lyrics are developed and take meaning (Perkins 1996). Drop when asked how does he come up with lyrics to his songs states, “I hear a beat and try to write to the vibe of it”. Similarly, Premo says “It ain’t anything better than hearing a fire beat for the first time. It is becomes easy to write

because it puts you in your zone”. Most artists in the 252 follow this process in which they write songs to fit the context of the beat; only in few cases it occurs the other way around. In thinking about the genesis of a hip-hop song, the beat itself is the initial source of meaning in which created space for the written lyrics. Psychologists have long documented the influence of music, particularly instrumentals, has on mood (Götell et al 2009; Alpert and Alpert 1989). Without taking serious sound of the beat and lyrics, we miss how it structures the vibe and meaning of the song.

The core structure of many of the songs produced in the 252 follow the sonic structuring of southern trap music that uses triple hi hats, sub based kick drums, and low end 808 bass samples to produce a gritty hard attitude vibe. There are many variations of the vibe of trap beats that are used to add different affective contexts to songs. Auditory shifts in the sound and tempo of voice are used to shape the aesthetic nature of these trap songs. An example is G50’s song *For Drama* that is an ode to loved ones lost to the streets and the criminal justice system. The hook of the song states, “You know that I’m going to ride when it’s time to ride, if I take the stand I’m gone tell a lie, Damn they took my brother, made his mama cry”. A literal reading of the text would simply suggest that if we must do something illegal I’m there with you and will lie on trial if need be. When his brother got caught his mother took it bad. However, the hook is styled with a series of adlibs that includes ahh, ummmhuh, and yeahh to imitate the sound of crying.⁵ Using the sound of cries to sonically structure the hook shapes the affective nature and our understanding of the lyrics. Also in that song specific lines are sung rather than rapped. The line, “getting high while throwing P’s up” is sung and immediately after the artists go back to

⁵ In hip-hop adlibs are phrases (some may call them catch phrases) that are added throughout songs. They add a sonic measure of emphasis to a song. If an artist’s says a really important line, often times an adlib is added directly after to indicate something important was stated.

rapping. The reference to P is signifying to a lost loved one, and singing that line in a dolce form was to highlight the love that was being expressed. Without thinking through the stylized choices made by the artists, we miss key expressions of identity and desires.

I am not contending that choices of style are the only or primary way in which black male 252 artists come to understand masculinity. Black subjectivity is constantly under threat by societal misrepresentation and these threats are mediated through expressive style (Hanson 2007). I am suggesting that style is one way in which black male artists in the 252 perform personhood and manhood in the face of structural oppression. Black men draw inspiration from and are socialized outside of dominant societal institutions (Oliver 2006). Black men have enacted their understanding of this black centered socialization process through stylized performance. For black men in the 252 they understood who was cool through their vibe.

Having “bad vibes” was used to reference someone who was childish, rude, or didn’t understand how to engage in the cultural context. It was one of the primary measures used to judge if an artist would work with another artist. As Drop told me, “When I choose a videographer I want someone I can vibe with. We can feed off of each other”. Vibe alludes to the affective reception of a person’s aesthetic and cultural sensibilities. Someone can learn the aesthetic and cultural knowledge fairly easy, but they may not know how to perform that understanding in a way that feels sincere. TDot draws this distinction when he makes the case that not just anyone can be a hip-hop videographer. Tdot suggests, “To shoot hip-hop videos you have to be able to vibe with the people and culture. You have to have rhythm and be able to flow with the song while you shooting it”. An appropriate hip-hop hermeneutic is needed to capture and disseminate proper representations of black subjectivity. A useful hip-hop hermeneutic cannot be reduced to a simple accumulation of words and meaning as interpreted through a

formal script (Metro-Roland 2010). In the 252 understandings of taste and style have been constructed through the subjectivities that inhabit this space. For TDot, someone can have the technological knowledge base of a videographer, but to be able to capture and create a hip-hop video the videographer must be able to sincerely engage with those he or she is filming. Another example can be seen when Joel Rudinow (1994) asks, “Can white people sing the blues?” At the moment I am not concerned about the debates on essentializing race or the rhetorical importance of authenticity. Rather I want to engage Rudinow’s question to highlight how style and vibe have always underpinned the narratives we construct when tasked to deal with questions of appropriation and racialized performativity. In answering the question Rudinow suggests, “What we should say is that the authenticity of a blues performance turns not on the ethnicity of the performer but on the degree of mastery and the integrity of the performer’s use of the idiom in performance” (1994, 135). For me the idea of mastery and integrity are ways in which to conceptualize a vibe. They are ways of articulating the sentiment that if a person understands the cultural landscape and can perform it in an affectivity pleasing manner, then it feels racially sincere.

What does this tell us about black male masculinity in the 252? Vibe is used to make aesthetic and affective judgements of people, behavior, and institutions. Vibe is a way in which to understand and perform masculinity. While Lee (1991) has documented that stylized expressiveness is linked to positive development and well-being for black male youth, I suggest that for black male hip-hop artists having stylized freedom over the aesthetic contours of their vibe was central in their understanding of who they were as black men. Facing institutional exclusion and having their identity misrepresented by those institutions, style becomes a way to assert self-image in spaces where adequate representations of black male subjectivity are

invisible. Drake's *Gods Plan* video, arguably the most popular hip-hop video of 2018 nearing 1 billion views on YouTube, strategically starts with a local community member saying, "I look good. I ain't got nothing, but I look good. It's a good life. It's a good life". Similar to how Michèle Lamont (2009) found that working class white and black workers found new ways to understand their identity and definition of self that enabled them to view themselves in a dignifying manner, low-income black males have reimaged masculinity outside of dominant notions. In the 252 black male hip-hop artists partly understood who they were as men through their stylized presentations of self. To interpret their work as artists without engaging how they made constant choices about style is to miss a key piece of how masculinity is intentionally performed. Masculinity in hip-hop reflects the desire to assert black male subjectivity (Perry 2004). The notion of style allows one to assert subjectivity creatively and in a manner reflected by their experience.

Invisibility of Black Women in 252 Hip-hop

"The women artists round here are tough. They be spitting just as hard as the guys", Mook yells from the kitchen when responding to my question about if there are any women rappers in the 252. I had been in the field for a month or so and had not seen any women artist videos shared on social media, did not have any women artists come up in conversations, and had not engaged with any women artists in a meaning way. The invisibility of black women artists was normal, but when I became aware of their invisibility there was this huge uncomfortability. While gender was not a primary focus of my research, noticing all my experiences were with a specific type of gendered body showed me that even though gender wasn't the focus it was still at work. Even my choice to start the only section of this project that deals specifically with black women with a

quote from a black man shows the lack of gendered data I was able to gather and how easy it is for black men in the 252 to constantly render black women invisible. This invisibility is not only prevalent in the hip-hop world, but is a defining experience of black women in the 252. Black women's invisibility in the narratives we tell about the construction of the political and cultural landscape of the south, generally never has anything to do with their inactivity, but highlights how the interlocking systems of gender, race, and class not only restrict participation in society but disarms us from seeing it even when it occurs (Barnett 1993). I began actively asking male artists about 252 women artists to assert their presence into our conversations. Most would give positive responses, similar to Mook's comment. Most male artists knew about and had positive things to say about the women artists, but never discussed them unless prompted to because black women were constructed outside of the mainstream 252 hip-hop culture. It is my contention that black women artist existed within the 252 hip-hop periphery, able to be seen when needed.

Hip-hop has disseminated, in uncritical ways, misogynistic and homophobic images and straight men have received material and social benefits from it (Oikelome 2013). Dominant hip-hop discourses have embraced patriarchal privilege and more often than not it has been women of color who are the targets of this sexist discourse (Neal 2014; Rivera 2014). This is not to suggest that hip-hop has infected an otherwise sexist free society, but hip-hop's sexism is indicative of larger patriarchal social processes engrained within the structure of society (Rose 1994). For black women hip-hop has been documented as a site where they have both challenged hegemonic notions of black womanhood and upheld them (Pough 2004; Rose 1994). It has also been a site where black women have used performance to take control over their bodies and images (Morgan 2014), but have also supported and produced misogynistic images (Cheers

2008). In thinking through the existing dialectics in hip-hop, I approach hip-hop from a Derridean (1978) framework of ‘difference’ suggesting that hip-hop is a polysemic cultural tool that can be utilized in an array of ways for various political, social, economic, and cultural outcomes. I suggest that black women in the 252 have used hip-hop as a site to make intersectional (Crenshaw 1995) critiques of their experience as a way to reclaim their time.

Reclaiming my Time by Bringing Wreck

On July 27, 2017 Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin was testifying on the house floor when Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), the committee’s ranking Democrat, asked why his office had not responded to a letter from her regarding President Trump’s financial ties to Russia. Mnuchin rather than answer her question responded with platitudes and political rhetoric that did not relate to what was being asked of him as a way to waste the time Waters had for questioning. Waters would continuously interpret Mnuchin’s rambling by stating, “reclaiming my time”: a way for a member who has yielded to another member to take the time back while on the house floor. Waters went viral because Mnuchin’s attempt to waste Waters time was indicative of a larger social process of invalidating the voices, experiences, and humanity of black women. Waters’s suppressing of Mnuchin’s attempted misdirection by utilizing long-established rules to her advantage allowed this incident to be read by many as a powerful overturning and reworking of a system usually used to keep black women invisible and marginalized (Emba 2017). I use *reclaiming my time* as a theoretical intervention to describe the ways in which black women artists in the 252 use hip-hop as a way to contend with the invisibility of their subjectivity, desires, and humanity. Nicole describes hip-hop in the 252 as male structured stating, “There aren’t a lot of us women artists. There really aren’t any black women producers, engineers, or

studio owners. You have to go to Raleigh for that”. *Reclaiming my time* means taking the rules of a male centered structure and reworking them to respect and make visible the time black women have invested in the continuous construction of hip-hop. Dominant hip-hop discourse is organized around sexism, but black women in the 252 have used the liberating components of the genre to make critiques about their experiences within and outside of hip-hop that other avenues in society have not allowed them to do.

The women artists experienced the hip-hop realm as a male dominated space, however, they cited that most spaces in society are male dominated. Redd was the first woman artist I had the opportunity to interview so I was eager to hear about her experiences as a woman. Shortly into the interview I asked “Do you see a difference in gender in the 252 between what it’s like to be a male rapper and a woman rapper?” She replies:

“I think it’s the same as anywhere else. It’s just like playing basketball I guess. It is looked at as a predominately male thing so as a woman you have to be on your A1 at all times. Bring your best game because people constantly looking at you and judging you because you are a woman.”

In suggesting it is like everything thing else, Redd is highlighting how most of her experiences are structured around patriarchy and her survival is based on performing better than her male counterparts. In intercollegiate basketball, men’s performance has been documented as serving as the standard of comparison by which to conceptualize women’s performances (Blinde, Greendorfer, and Shanker 1991). Hip-hop and basketball are two arenas of popular culture where the spectacular performance of black male identity flourish (Dimitriadis 2009; Hanson 2007). For black people in both hip-hop and basketball, style has been a key piece in understanding the

cultural importance of a performance. In the 252, black women artists have restructured the struggle rap style with a rough gritty cadence and gendered double entendre to carve out spaces of identity formation for women. Within oral traditions there is no definitive text; rather the significance of the text/lyrics is partly constructed in its verbalization (May 2013; Cooper 1993). Rappers add meaning to their songs through their flow. A rapper's flow has been described as dealing with the nature and frequency of the words they rhyme, the length of their sentences, and the frequency in which they repeat or construct new rhymes in a song (Conner 2013). I do not contend that there is a set flow that concretely distinguishes men and women in the 252, as flow greatly fluctuates from artist to artist. However, in the shows I attended and the songs I analyzed women artists were less likely to rely heavily on singing with auto-tune. Women artists do use auto-tune to sing and style their rap flow, but women were more likely than men to aggressively deliver their lyrics than to use auto-tune to hold specific notes. In attempting to gauge how Ivy understood her flow I asked, "How would you describe your rap delivery?" "My style as an artist is raw. My flow is more like the New York spitters" Ivy says confidently.⁶ A lot of women artists, like Ivy, use a continuous free-flowing delivery style as this cadence structures the vibe of the song around notions of seriousness and toughness. It is my contention that black women artists in the 252 have relied less on singing their rhymes and harmonic adlibs, but instead engages more in an aggressive continuous flow as a way to highlight their mastery of rhyming to solidify spaces of belonging.

The content of black women's songs was often similar to that of the men, however, their aggressive flow paired with gendered double entendres were stylized tools to make their songs

⁶ In the 252 Hip-hop is understood in a rap binary between New York and Atlanta. New York is understood to have complex wordplay, multi-syllable rhymes, and conscious content. Atlanta (the home of trap) relies more on the singing-rapping duality. When an artist's links their self with a New York style, it generally speaks to rough and hardcore delivery.

socially identifiable as a black woman construction. This is not to suggest that in the 252 dominant hip-hop is solely male constructed and black women incorporate gendered language and create a sound distinctly different. It acknowledges that black women in the 252 have co-constructed struggle rap with men, but in using gendered poetic tools have also constructed humanizing spaces for black women where their presence cannot be erased. The aesthetic use of language through formal patterning and symbolic content of texts has been documented as playing a central role in constructing community's social reality (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Black women in the 252 use poetic devices, particularly gendered double entendres, to decenter and recontextualize the male centeredness of struggle rap. Centering on black women's style in the 252 is to engage in what Gwendolyn Pough (2015) calls 'bringing wreck'. Bringing wreck are those moments when black women's discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses and impact the way we understand women and/or hip-hop in the public imaginary.

Reclaiming women's time and bringing wreck in the 252 have been met with pushback from the masculine hip-hop world. Speaking explicitly about women's issues has been seen as problematic and unmarketable by black male artists and producers. Nicole describes the hip-hop culture in the 252 as a 'network of misogyny' (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016) where the entire structured experience of music-making from the engineers to male artists is organized around misogynist behavior towards women that comes in the form of not promoting a woman's music or providing her with top level beats if she doesn't sleep with you. While the music-making process is often oppressive, for women destabilizing that oppression through lyrics draws the ire of male artists. Nicole states:

“A lot of guys don't like when you talk positive about women and I don't understand that. Why wouldn't you want us to talk positive about ourselves or uplift each other?”

Because ya'll help each other all the time (said in a manner so I would know that I was included) or put out a positive message for males. But when it comes to a woman ya'll think that's crazy or too different. And ask us, 'Why would you do that? No one's going to listen to that'. I remember one guy told me, 'guys aren't going to listen to that or take that serious because you are talking too positive about women.' And I'm like 'what?' I'm like, 'that is ridiculous'. For you to say that to me and you are supposed to be one of these people that is in the music industry hard and well known. You would think they would like that women are helping each other, uplifting each. Even though the song had a positive message to, it was a catchy song."

Scholars have documented that men are equipped with and use powerful discursive moves to delegitimize the validity and reception of any form of feminist rhetoric (DeKeseredy 1999). For women in the 252, pro-black women lyrics are met with rhetorical comments centered on taste and viability. However, black women artists have used the aesthetic power of style to dress up their music and make gendered statements. Their lyrics are not generally explicitly always about women's liberation. But, rather black women artists transform masculine or gender-neutral statements with black woman centered analogies and metaphors to reclaim their space in hip-hop and to bring wreck. To frame this conversation on women using style to carve out spaces of visibility I turn to Ivy's song *Roll in Peace*:

I just want to roll in peace, but bitches be thinking I'm weak,

Cuz I stay cooking in every kitchen I walk in, but I'm never in beef.

In this excerpt Ivy is engaging in a rap scheme contending that she is tough or gangsta. She engages in this scheme in an extremely gendered manner. 'Roll in peace' alludes to a double

entendre from rapper Kodak Black suggesting she can't just chill in her city because everyone knows her or has something to say; and also alludes to not being able to comfortably roll a blunt because of police activity. 'But, bitches be thinking I'm weak', refers to men and women assuming she is soft. The following line, 'Cuz I stay cooking in every kitchen I walk in', is also a double entendre that is a play on the idea that a woman's place is the kitchen, but she is referencing cooking crack. She finishes by stating 'but I'm never in beef', which is a double entendre letting us know I'm in the kitchen, but I'm not handling food; and also they think I'm weak because I don't engage in beef (prolonged arguments) with anyone. Many black women artists in the 252 utilize musical content that is street or gangsta centered, but these artists destabilize the masculine undertones by styling the content with gendered aesthetics. The songs may be talking about drugs or guns, but because of poetically styling the song with gendered references the vibe of the song resonates with black women sensibilities. In repositioning the importance of content and privileging the stylistic moves women make, we can see how they reclaim what has been socially defined as black male spaces.

Often times this gendered style is to position black women as 'real' in hip-hop discourse on authenticity. Jaz in her song *Rock* says:

I was serving trying to stack, because my nigga he locked,

Made sure he had some bread when he came up out the box,

I was standing right there when the case got dropped,

He was looking for all his homies off the block,

They was suppose to be his brother, so why the love stop,

Aint nobody want him around, they said that nigga too hot,

That ain't even matter because I was right there.

In Jaz's verse she narrates how her boyfriend's homies who were supposedly down for him forgot about him when he was locked up. She documents how she made a way to help him financially, when no one else could or wanted to. She positions herself as real and genuine in comparison to the males from the block. Realness and authenticity are central organizing frames in the hip-hop world (Hess 2005). In mainstream society a girlfriend is generally constructed as secondary in status to the boyfriend or thought of as a sidekick. In this rhetorical scheme by appropriating hip-hop's huge emphasis on realness and staying true, Jaz positions the girlfriend as an active player in that process, even when male friends cannot. Jaz's verse highlights when we take serious the style of presentation alongside the content, we develop richer understandings of what the author is attempting to convey.

Simon Frith (1996) suggests that social groups do not have agreed upon values that become expressed through cultural activity, but rather they come to know their selves through cultural activity. If Frith is right in that making music isn't a way of expressing ideas, but living them; then I contend that black women artists in the 252 develop a localized identity through the gendered stylized choices they make in their music. In *reclaiming their time* by creating spaces that uphold the visibility of black women, identity is constantly constructed because they are engaging negotiations of a particular kind of experience. I am not contending that taking what are generally conceptualized as masculine themes and styling them with an aggressive flow and gendered language is the only or the best way for black women in the 252 to assert womanhood. There is a historical legacy in hip-hop where black women become popular because of how close

they stay to dominant masculine discourses (Clay 2003). However, I am suggesting that: (1) notions of realness, authenticity, and the drug game may be socially viewed as masculine themes in hip-hop, but are co-constructed by black women and (2) stylized references that incorporate experiences of black womanhood create a vibe that allows us to know black women in a different way. The content of a song can be centered on drugs, guns, or any other street-culture theme, but when black women incorporated gendered stylized forms of presentation the song is experienced differently. The content itself is important, but style is the key piece that adds gendered meaning.

6. It didn't change me, I'm the same me 'Got shot at, did turkey drives on the same street:

Forging Diaspora in Structures of Racial Oppression

Stuart Hall (1990) suggests that growing up in the 1940s and 1950s in Kingston, Jamaica no one identified themselves as African, even though everyone around him was a shade of brown and black. He contends that it was not until the 1970s that an Afro-Caribbean identity became available to most Caribbean people, and Jamaicans discovered themselves to be black. For Hall this was only made possible *through* the popular life; specifically, Civil Rights struggles, reggae, Rastafarianism, and all the signifiers of a new construction of Jamaican-ness. Popular culture as it is situated within racialized social structures has provided a conceptual tool-kit for the development of a black diasporic identity. In thinking through a Jamaican diasporic identity, Hall offers his analysis of Tony Sewell's book *Garvey's Children: The Legacy of Marcus Garvey*, suggesting that the story of Garvey's return to an African identity:

“went by the long route-through London and the United States. It ‘ends’, not in Ethiopia but with Garvey’s statue in front of the St Ann Parish Library in Jamaica: not with a traditional tribal chant but with the music of Burning Spear and Bob Marley’s Redemption Song” (232).

For Hall black diasporic people must come to terms with an African presence, but it cannot be thought of as something to be recovered as if Africa and ourselves have not be transformed through centuries of dismemberment and transportation.

If Hall is correct in his analysis of Garvey's journey to his African identity, then for Bill his return to an African identity went by the long route-through the streets of Rocky Mount, North Carolina to the Eastern Correction Center in Maury, North Carolina. It ‘ends’ not in Ghana

but with Bill's family and black community members having a welcome back party for him on the southside of Rocky Mount: not with traditional African drums playing but with the music Bill created while he was away. I argue that it was from Bill's experiences with a racialized criminal justice system that he was forced to think deeply about the core tenants of diaspora: family, belonging, and community. A socio-diasporic framework asks us to consider how those socially positioned as black through this structural recognition carve out spaces of national and local belonging? A prescriptive analysis would suggest that 'because I'm black the criminal justice system treats me this way'. A socio-diasporic framework forces us to think through the way those socially positioned as black come to understand that positioning via the way institutions structure their day-to-day reality. Through performance, struggle rap creates counter discourses about black 252 identities and its emphasis on the local has recast black rural bodies as having a right to northeast North Carolina.

This chapter seeks to understand how rural black Americans in northeast North Carolina come to understand blackness. I view the ways in which negotiations and discourses about blackness occur at local sites and are facilitated by interactions with racialized social structures. I document how those socially positioned as black forge diasporic identities as a response to and because of a shared structural position within the organization of society. Specifically, I look at how the criminal justice system has socially positioned some people as black in the 252, and how the aesthetic realm has provided the conceptual tools to reimagine black subjectivity. The chapter goes on to argue that a defining feature of the black diasporic experience is that the racialized social structures that organize local sites are different depending on locality and that the black experience is made possible because of, not despite, its heterogeneity. The act of transgressing across personal and social differences allows a person to engage in the process of identification

developing new and better ways to imagine who they are. I aim to highlight the diversity of black subjectivity and the ways diaspora involves not only movement but staying put (Campt 2012), while attending to the institutional components of the diasporic condition.

Being Black in the 252

While being in the 252 for an extended period of time, I would run into old friends and acquaintances at the grocery store and out at restaurants. They would usually ask me how long I was in town and tell me that they see me doing my thing on Facebook. My Facebook profile is a mixture between my socio-political commentary on black life in America and select accomplishments throughout my academic career. While in Walmart one day I ran into an old friend, Maliek, who was working, but on break now. After a casual greeting and catching up on what had been going on with each other, Maliek tells me, “Your Facebook posts be having me think”. While home I have received many compliments, questions, and comments about my consistent engagement with America’s political structure as it relates to black people, but Maliek’s comment stood out to me. From the texture of Maliek’s voice and his vibe “having me think” was meant as a compliment that suggested my posts were not only thought provoking, but that I made him think about his life in a particular way. His body language and mannerisms were similar to that of my black students when I teach Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*—lost in the ambivalence of experiencing that liberating feeling of accurately hearing your condition described but trapped because you don’t know how to fix it. While friends and my community loved listening to my perspective about structural issues, there were specific times when they did not want to talk about blackness, particularly their blackness, as something politicized.

I drove over to my friend James's place one Saturday night as we had plans to go out. There was nothing special going on that night, we were just going to head to Entourage, a local nightclub that hosts local artist performances. As I walk in the door, James screams, "COORRREEEYYYYY". I scream back "James James". James tells me, in one of those tones that's frame as a joke but phrased in a particular way that you know every word of it is true, "We ain't on that black power shit tonight, we having fun". He was indicating that he doesn't want to hear about any black social issues tonight. I reply laughingly, "Alright we good". James and the rest of the community generally encouraged hearing my "black power shit", however, not when we were going out. Monday through Friday James worked a 9-5 and existed as a politicized black body. However, on Saturday night for those 3 hours at Entourage, James could drink, dance, and perform blackness in a different way. Even after passing the mandatory police checkpoint that is stationed a couple of feet from most black nightclubs in the 252, we went out and enjoyed ourselves. I would grow to learn, through a methodological issue in the way I conceptualized blackness, why it was so important to James for me not to be on that black power shit when we went out that night.

Interviews were an important part of my ethnographic experience. I wanted my interviews to have a conversational flow, so I memorized my questions. My interview questions were organized into three sections: music, blackness, and the criminal justice system. In every interview when it came to discussing blackness and being black in the 252, issues surrounding criminal justice always came up. Methodologically I understood music, blackness, and the criminal justice system to be three distinct categories that were interrelated. However, during my interview process, never being able to get through a discussion about being black in the 252 without references to the criminal justice system coming up, highlighted how I underestimated

the relationship between criminal justice and black identity. In conversations about music, blackness and the criminal justice system would come up as well. However, it was nowhere near the same degree as the inevitableness of hearing about law enforcement when trying to understand how black people exist within these local spaces.

I suggest that learning what it means to be black in a locality, partly means learning how you are structured within institutions. Being a structurally positioned black body is constantly experienced through inevitable engagement with mainstream institutions (Bonilla-Silva 1997). For James, me being on that black shit meant I was forcing us to engage in discourses of identification that he consistently goes through during the week. To have fun was to reposition those institutions, to engage in an ontological experience in a black centered space where who he was wasn't juxtaposed to mainstream understandings of himself. For me to engage in discourse on black identification was my job, my research, and career: it was in part chosen. For James, it was being the friendly black person to his manager and not looking too suspicious when a police officer was beside him at a traffic light: it was his day-to-day experience with institutions. In underestimating the intimate relationship between experiencing blackness and the criminal justice system in the 252, I almost missed how and why repositioning mainstream institutions is important to the black experience. To center institutional interactions in African diasporic conversations is not to suggest that this is the constitutive aspect of the experience, but it is to explore what stories we can tell from this framework. It is to imagine the way we personally experience the macro and the way the macro is challenged by our ordinary practices.

Christina Sharpe asks, "What happens when instead of becoming enraged and shocked every time a Black person is killed in the United States, we recognize Black death as a predictable and constitutive aspect of this democracy" (2016, 7). She continues and asks, "if

state-sanctioned violence is the foundation in which America rests, how do we live in relation to this requirement of our death?” I read this line of questioning as an engagement with how black people exist within institutions that normalize anti-blackness. Particularly, I’m interested in black peoples’ negotiations of identity and belonging while viewing their interactions with mainstream institutions as experiences of violence. In asking Nicole, a 252 artist, what issues black people in the 252 face, she went on at length describing how normal it is to see or hear of a dead black body on the street. In this moment her tone changed. During our time together, she was upbeat throughout the interview, even as she described how being an alopecia survivor gave flava to her music.⁷ Her words about black death didn’t move me to want to include her statement in the final copy of the research, but the hopelessness in her voice did. It was a tone and pitch that can’t be captured in writing, nor was it there in the audio recordings. In using the discursive power of her vibe Nicole says,

“I feel like for black people as a whole there are a lot of things we have accomplished, but also a lot of things we are still struggling with. Like I’m happy and proud that we had our first black president, that’s like the biggest thing that happened during my generation. But I feel like with the police brutality, that’s one of the biggest things that’s going on right now with the black community. It’s an issue and for some reason we cannot get over it and we cannot get it taken care of for some reason. It’s the biggest thing going on right now and I feel like nobody’s taking it seriously or listening to us. It’s like ‘okay another black guy been gunned down by a policeman’. To them that’s just less black people on the streets; and that’s how I feel the world is looking at it. Who cares? But he was somebody. I’m

⁷ Alopecia is a condition where an individual’s immune system attacks hair follicles and causes mild to severe hair loss.

like this man was somebody's kid, probably someone's brother, or someone's boyfriend, or husband, or father. People don't care, other than their family and maybe their community nobody else is really taking a stand to overcome this stuff. Any police officer can do anything to a black person and they will get away with it”.

For Nicole violence towards black bodies was a normalized aspect of the functioning of the criminal justice system. This institution has not functioned to protect its citizens, but served to organize racial oppression into the legal functioning of society (Alexander 2012). In most of my interactions in the 252, the conversations did not center on black death, but on the existential limits placed on black bodies by the way we have structured law and order into American society. Black death was understood as a function to prohibit blacks who transgressed those institutionalized limits placed on the black community. Tiera, a 27-year old black woman from the 252, recalls going to Halifax city, known as one of the white city's in Halifax county, and feeling as if she broke an unwritten law. While we were both recalling growing up in the 252 she tells me,

“It's just the atmosphere and you can tell the way people look at you, that you are not welcome. If we hanging out, Halifax actually has a town part and it be events there all the time, we would go and you could just tell by the way people look at you that you are not welcomed here. I remember being a teenager and being harassed by the police officers or have the cops called on us for doing the same thing the white kids were doing: like riding around sonic. It was not fair how that would always end up happening to us, but the white kids are tearing down the city”.

For Tiera her personal experiences lead her to believe that black people don't have a claim to specific parts of the 252.

Even without first hand experiences with law enforcement, this vibe can be felt. Bill felt it necessary to have a conversation with his seven-year-old daughter about race and law enforcement. He wanted to instill dignity and pride in her, while always making her aware of the dangers of being a dark skin young girl. As he told her, "baby don't worry all police officers aren't bad" and when she responded, "I can't tell", it shook his core. His voice trembled as he worked up the courage to tell me that conversation.

A constitutive aspect of the black experience is the misrecognition by the criminal justice system. It is to be placed socially and politically outside of the ontological bounds of the 252. However, Nicole, Tiera, and Bill all love the 252. They all expressed that it is home and will forever hold a special place in their heart. Diaspora as an analytical tool allows us to examine how black diasporic populations can call home localities that are organized around anti-blackness. Scholars that have theorized the conceptual power of diaspora have suggested that:

"diaspora as an ideology is a struggle against misrecognition that positions black subjectivity firmly within the space of modernity. As consciousness it is constitutive of the conditions for collective self-recognition made possible through entanglements across social, cultural, political, economic, psychological, national, and material fields of engagement" (Hintzen and Rahier 2010, xviii).

Diaspora allows us to see how black 252 artists, in their fight against institutional misrecognition, reimagine their identity and belonging to the area code. In displacing dominant

institutional narratives, these artists write themselves as historical and contemporary actors in the 252-landscape.

Tina Campt in *Image Matters* showed that black Europeans used photography to construct a vision of themselves that did not always square with how they were popularly perceived (2012). These images did not capture a static identity, but rather enunciated forms of identification that had not yet been articulated and created a foundation for the development of individuals who we can now perceive to be black Europeans. Just as Campt (2012) did with images, I view hip-hop in the 252 as a site of articulation and aspiration. These personal and communal statements document how black artists in the 252 envision their subjectivity and relationship to their community. They articulate a 252 identity that centers diasporic and 252 belonging. Dominant discourses on the African diaspora have overemphasized spatial movement that results from geographical dispersal in their conceptualization of the diasporic experience, thus underemphasizing the social and affective ways in which belonging is constructed (Bailey 2010). Studying hip-hop artists in the 252 is to examine how the children of those who were enslaved found belonging by not moving from the plantation.

Struggle Rap as a Site of Diaspora

One Sunday morning James hits me up and asks me to ride to a hip-hop showcase with him in Raleigh, North Carolina. A hip-hop showcase is an open mic event where artists pay to perform. The winner receives a range of prizes that may include: free studio time, appearances on local radio stations, songs being played on radio stations, cash prizes, and free marketing materials. James was performing, and he wanted me to come for support. Raleigh is an hour and a half drive from us and is the nearest major city to the 252. While the 252 is home to rural cities,

Raleigh is where 252 artists go to get a relatively urban hip-hop experience.⁸ As we walk into the venue I noticed it is designed to have a basement aesthetic feel. The lights are dim, and it seems that on a Friday or Saturday night this would be a dope place to party. The vibe created a feeling of 90's nostalgia that was paired with modern updated tables, bar stools, and flooring. The venue has a small crowd of around 15 people, just lingering. James goes and sits on a barstool in the backside of the venue and I go to the bar to get a drink. As James and I discuss his performance a few people begin to filter in, bringing the crowd to around 30-35. James views himself as a lyrical artist, but tonight he wanted to perform one of his party songs as he felt the vibe of the room shifting into a party direction.

While waiting for the show to start, the MC gets on the mic and encourages everyone to socialize and network. People would walk up to me and introduce themselves. Artists had free CDs and would give me their usernames to their artist social media pages. I noticed that a large majority of the crowd was artists and the rest were their marketing team that came in the form of friends, family members, producers, and DJs. In the beginning of the event, the artists primarily networked with other artists. I did not feel out of place as most artists found my presence refreshing. It was nice for them to connect with someone simply there to support. As this was my first hip-hop showcase, I did not know if showcases were inherently for networking but this one played out that way. The vibe in the room felt as if there was no competition about who was the best artist, but the air was filled with love and support for someone with a similar dream.

The MC gets on the mic and asks everyone if they are ready to hear some dope music and the crowd screams "yeaaahhhh". The MC introduces the first act, who went on to win the event, Chris from the 252. The crowd cheers to welcome Chris to the stage. As the beat to Chris's song

⁸ Rural city is a discursive move to pull the rural into modernity. It signifies that these localities may not be built-up in the mainstream sense, but that the community here has modern aspirations.

comes on he says, “I need everyone from the motherfucking 252 to put your hands in air”. As I begin to raise my hand I look around the room and see 70% of the crowd’s hands go up.

Instantly, Chris had connected with most of the crowd. While I do not remember the lyrics nor the beat of Chris’s song, I remember the energy and vibe of the performance. Standing at only around 5’6 Chris had a huge personality. He danced and jumped around the stage signifying to the 252 continuously throughout his set. Chris had set the tempo for the entire night, and he proved to be an act that could not be followed.

After Chris’s performance, the MC gets on the mic stating, “So the 252 is in here deep tonight”. Throughout the entire night, the crowd would erupt with cheer anytime someone made a 252 reference, and the 252 artists would huddle up and cheer after each 252-performance. It took me leaving the 252 to see that a hip-hop 252-identity not only existed, but was a source of community and belonging for many artists. Even though there is competition and beef between many artists in the 252, there is also love and care facilitated under the umbrella of 252. While 252 artists face exclusion from local belonging and mainstream hip-hop discourse, struggle rap has been used to construct a black diasporic identity to recast their black rural subjectivity as important to both the 252 and the global hip-hop scene. Murray Forman (2002) documents how rap lyrics in dealing with spatially oriented themes provide counter-discourses to space-myths, particularly those constructed around the inner-city. Struggle rap by documenting the experiences of rural black artists with various 252 signifiers show us a record of choices made by these artists. By choosing what stories to tell and what places are important, these artists are constructing a meaning of the 252 counter to dominant narratives. In making choices they articulate a vision of their sense of self, community, and subjectivity (Campt 2012). Artists forging a sense of community and belonging in the 252 was most vividly expressed to me when

many artists stated that they want to give back to their community by building businesses in the form of recreation centers, recording studios, soul food restaurants, and parks. While their music serves as a site of articulation to negotiate belonging in the 252, engaging in entrepreneurial enterprise was a primary way to manifest this belonging.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying I never took a gun to the club, but when I out grew that I realized we fighting over turf. Shooting over turf, but we don’t own none of this. None of this land or property we own. Its landing us dead or in prison”, Drop tells me while speaking candidly about black people in the 252 needing to do something different. Black owned businesses are less prevalent and not as successful as white owned businesses throughout America due to centuries of systematic exclusion in the economic market (Fairlie and Robb 2007). A huge issue in the 252, as it relates to belonging, is that in this heavily black populated area, black people own little to no land or businesses. Most stores and restaurants I frequented while in the 252 were major chains. I did not go to the local mom-and-pop stores or restaurants because no black people did. While the schools are highly segregated, so are social establishments. On Saturday night, black people went to Applebee’s, while the white community went to Billiards.⁹ The black teenagers went to Prestige, while white teenagers hosted house parties¹⁰. For these artists a major step in forging a sense of belonging is developing black owned businesses in the 252, if their career affords them that type of financial stability.

Philanthropic and ethical justifications play a major role in the development of minority owned businesses in comparison to non-minority enterprises (Edmondson and Carroll 1999). Developing black business in the 252 was framed under two lines of thought: buying black and urbanizing the rural. Studies have shown that African Americans have less favorable impressions

⁹ Billiards is a local pool-hall.

¹⁰ Prestige is a local venue where community members rent out to have social gatherings.

of rural areas, partly due to black's collective memory of sociohistorical forces such as slavery, sharecropping, and lynching (Merchant 2003; Johnson 1998). These artists saw their future interconnected with the larger black 252 community, and restructuring the physical landscape was a way to carve out diasporic spaces of belonging. Starting and/or supporting black owned business by buying black was seen less as an economic endeavor, but a way to forge a diasporic sense of community. For African Americans shopping is an expression of social and political relations (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004); to buy black is to restructure the black community's political ideology. Kris noting the need for black owned businesses suggested we don't have to wait for the brick and mortar, but he tells me, "when I say buying black I'm talking about your friend got a clothing line, your auntie sell plates, you know your cousin do taxes. I'm talking about all that. We have to live and depend on each other". This emphasis on black business is not an attempt to substitute 'white' capitalism with black capitalism, but a way to forge a diasporic sense of community and belonging. It is a way to recognize the interconnectedness of the black 252 community.

Mainstream discourses have documented the structural issues that face black people in urban areas. 252 artists highlight how the rural experience creates conditions that reinforces black poverty and criminality. In talking about growing up in the 252 J recalls:

"Once they took that mall from around here, and the bowling alley, and the skating ring closed, where could we go? Where can the young kids go? There isn't anything around here for them to do, except killing and robbing. They can only do bad things, be in the street life".

While building malls and recreational activities in the 252 without changing the economic make-up of its citizens will not meaningfully change the structural condition of black people, the artists

are expressing the lack of opportunities to engage in the 252. There are no cultural museums, few recreation centers, no bowling alleys, few places to shop, and other places that for them structure a city. If there really isn't *shit* in this small town, then the artists believe this leaves black youth with no alternative but to engage in drug use and gangs.

Building a black owned restaurant or clothing store is not seen solely as an economic endeavor but a way to pull the 252 into modernity. While we have consistently theorized the ghettos of Philadelphia and Chicago, what does the hood look like in city with one stop light? It is the look of being crippled by poverty and lack of structural organizations to invest in even if you were to get some form of economic capital. It looks like driving an hour and a half to experience what you have been thought to believe is the modern world. In having lunch with Shonte, a community member who works for Northampton County's department of Social Services, she stresses that we need to develop businesses in the 252 community and stop traveling out of town to buy things. In attempting to see if she would dig deeper I ask, "What exactly do you think needs to be built", and she states, "I don't know, something. These kids don't have anything". Building black businesses in the 252 is to restructure the way the black community here engages each other. To suggest we shouldn't have to go out of town to buy things is to reimagine the economic social processes here.

The Extreme Local as a Site of Diasporic Articulation

I be posted on Hurley Ave,

Its been a whole week since I took a bath,

Cuz I'm out here trying to go get this cash.

And I don't scream Roanoke Rapids, South Weldon, or Halifax,

*B*tch I'm from Scoko Park,*

Long live my nigga Dot, I'll catch a grenade for him,

Call me Bruno Mars.

-Fu*k da World, Yung Pane

Thus far this chapter has asked us to think through the ways black diasporic communities' recognition of their structural position shape their diasporic experience. In the 252 I have positioned the criminal justice system as the primarily institutional apparatus that excludes the black community from local belonging and how this feeling of structural exclusion is intensified because the black community owns little of the land and economic resources in the area. However, we have seen local hip-hop artists develop identity, community, and a sense of pride under the 252 moniker and their desire to invest in the very place they are systematically excluded from. I conclude this chapter by suggesting that hip-hop's strong emphasis on the local has allowed black artists in the 252 the ability to rearticulate both their identity and how the 252 is conceptually understood, to create community and belonging despite being structurally excluded from citizenship.

The lyrics above are from Yung Pane's first single off his latest album entitled *Live from Hurley Ave 3*. Hurley Ave is the street Yung Pane grew up on in a neighborhood called Scoko Park, which is named after the park adjacent to it. Yung Pane did three installments of *Live from Hurley Ave* to mark himself not just as a 252 rapper, but a rapper from that street. There are hierarchies within the 252. Even with the 252's median household income well below the national average, Scoko Park is understood to be one of the poorest neighborhoods in the area

code. In viewing hip-hop as a site of articulation where choices about identity, community, and belonging are made, we must ask why is Hurley Ave so important? Most people from that street would say they are from Weldon or the 252 depending on who is asking and their familiarity with the area. I argue that hip-hop provided a diasporic conceptual space for Young Pane to engage in a process of identification to counter the misrecognition of not only his personal identity but of his street.

Scholars have documented the impact hip-hop has had globally. These scholars have shown how globally hip-hop has been appropriated and local articulations such as language, song topics, and cultural references have created localized versions of hip-hop that are distinct from, but also interconnected with, African American hip-hop (Androutsopoulos 2008). For example, Andy Bennett (1999) shows how Frankfurt rappers were able to transform hip-hop into a localized genre by incorporating German and Turkish rap lyrics. I argue that such scholars have assumed that hip-hop is coming into relatively stable cultures with static languages, identities, and communities. In this assumption scholars have argued that hip-hop becomes localized by becoming incorporated into the local culture and providing youth with a means to articulate desires and identities that are particular to their home experience (Motley and Henderson 2008). I depart from this line of thinking in suggesting that by viewing hip-hop as a site of articulation, it does not become localized because youth globally use their local language to articulate their marginalized experience or identity. Rather I suggest that hip-hop becomes localized by restructuring local languages, providing a space to rethink desires, and construct an identity that is constantly in motion. As a site of articulation and aspiration hip-hop does not simply become situated in various cultures globally, but its mere presence restructures and reimagines those cultures.

I contend that Yung Pane didn't identify with the 252 or his city, but with his street because hip-hop provided an avenue to create specific modes of identification. In creating his rap lyrics and videos he made a series of choices and constructed an understanding of himself that only his street was nuanced enough to capture. Hurley Ave being socially constructed as one of the worst parts of the 252, Young Pane had another layer of exclusion and marginalization to deal with. Articulating a struggle specific to his street, has allowed him and others the ability to engage with notions of citizenship and belonging to what Forman (2002) calls the "extreme local". Forman suggests that rappers not only draw inspiration from regional affiliation, but from streets, telephone area codes, and other specific sociospatial information. While drawing inspiration from the extreme local, artists simultaneously restructure and recast the conceptual bounds of the 252. Doing three installments of *Live from Hurley Ave* and constantly situating himself as from Hurley Ave in his lyrics, Yung Pane is negotiating his belonging to the 252 and creating a broader profile for his street in a nurturing manner.

This recasting of the extreme local is not simply a cultural or social phenomenon, but a political negotiation. Many have called into question if racialized beings can make art for art's sake, with actor and playwright Ossie Davis in the 1990s suggesting that "Art among us blacks has always been a statement about our condition, and therefore it has always been political" (Davis & Dee 1998, 86-87). The art for art's sake argument in part rests on a false dichotomy. Political communication does not exist independently from the same kind of considerations that determine our responses to aesthetic and cultural stimuli (Iton 2008). The 'art for art's sake' position misses how the political and aesthetic organize language and subjectivity: shaping how we come to know symbols, style, and performances whose qualities exceed the political and cultural realm.

Gwaltney's (1980) notion of 'core black culture' views black people as fully capable of self-expression and understands black culture not simply as an adaptation to mainstream culture, but as mainstream to black people. I am not using Gwaltney's 'core black culture' to make the essentialist claim that black culture and black people exist independently of white culture or the mainstream. Rather it is to highlight how black people are constantly engaging in theory making and don't experience their culture as a subset to something larger: they simply experience it. While one of Gwaltney's participants felt that anthropology was just another way to call them a "nigger," to view black culture as mainstream is to position it as the lens in which I name black behaviors, thoughts, and feelings.

In deconstructing the artistic and political dichotomy and viewing black culture as mainstream I argue that hip-hop forges diasporic belonging in the 252 because it is understood as participating formally in the political sphere. Recasting Hurley Ave through hip-hop is not seen as using art to make political statements, but rather a political process. Hip-hop is understood to be the primary voice and vehicle in shifting the local landscape. Premo suggests:

"Look at Jay Z and 50 Cent. Look at their following and their position. They got the whole community that listens to them. You gotta take advantage of it. One of my favorite artists is Meek Mill, he be motivating the streets. He really be dropping knowledge, he be on some next level type shit. He is inspiring change in the youth. That's our chance to really make a difference. I'm the Meek Mill to my area. Teachers may try to teach the youth the positive route, but they rarely listen to them. But, when I give them the same knowledge they listen because they can see their selves in me. We have the same experiences".

For Premo and others, artists don't simply compliment the work done by institutional structures, but rather their work is necessary to the success of their community. Oak, a 252-hip-hop artist, painter, and dancer, articulated a similar story of how the artist's work is understood alongside institutional social processes, not secondary to them. Oak has long black coarse hair. He has often been described physically as 'black Jesus'. To compliment his savior appearance, conversations with Oak are filled with metaphors and stories about black redemption, art, and history. Oak dresses similar to most in the 252 with tennis shoes and urban jackets, but he styles his with a long clean beard and a constant smile. As Oak was the only person who requested to meet at a book store, I went into our interview intrigued about his narrative of hip-hop in the 252. Oak got involved with painting and hip-hop because he wanted to be the newspaper for the ghetto.

"I want to be a newspaper for our rural areas and to articulate a message that our reverends and pastors can't because of their reach. But, when you have a brother or sister that comes along with a message and they can articulate it over a beat, its all over. Society becomes nervous then, because that brother or sister has the tools to pass that message to the youth."

When it comes to the well-being of young black people in the 252, the artists highlight a need that can only be filled by hip-hop.

Oak continues and contends, "Hip-hop is freeing. You need approval to engage in biology. You must meet requirements to be a chemist, but when you are in the arts you don't even need school. It gives the community the ability to tell their story without being constrained". This is not to suggest that there are not formal skills, technologies, and sensibilities that need to be learned prior to becoming an artist. It is contending that there are not as many

systematic limitations to developing this knowledge base. Given the way black culture, specifically hip-hop has been pathologized, the massive numbers of black youth engaging in hip-hop has been used to argue that hip-hop doesn't require a large amount of skill, talent, and dedication. In viewing hip-hop as an art form, I suggest that the large number of black youth engaging in this type of music production speaks to the inclusivity and diversity of the genre. It shows that when structural barriers are broken down ordinary people can choose to engage in artistic endeavors to highlight their extra-ordinary possibilities. The massive amount of participation of black youth in hip-hop should in-and-of-itself speak to why it is so important for researchers to engage with. As Campt (2012) has suggested, it is often not that something is unique or exceptional that makes it important, but the serial production of it. It allows us to see how ordinary individuals envision their identity, community, and subjectively.

Oak's analogy highlights how art's power has enabled those who are systematically excluded from full participation in institutions to partly construct their reality. The art realm, particularly hip-hop, is a site of community engagement that allows for narratives about the 252 to be constructed that could not have occurred anywhere else. In this decentering of dominant institutions in the 252, hip-hop organizes the everyday reality of black youth because it allows for a form of community participation that dominant avenues have not provided. Hip-hop artists are then not solely understood as belonging to the 252, but are a required component of the social structure. Hip-hop was the conceptual avenue in the black-252-diasporic experience that legitimized black subjectivity. If Yung Pane did not put out the *Live from Hurley Ave* series how would we know the lived experience on that street outside of dominant (mis)representations?

“People can listen to my music and say, ‘Oh he a gansta. That’s gangsta music’. If you think I’m gangsta, then that’s just your opinion. I’m just telling you what I go

through. I'm just telling you my struggle and what I will do to make sure my family straight", Drop tells while talking about his identity as an artist.

Davis (2003) has documented how crime discourse has served as a masquerade to mobilize anti-blackness, shaping how we interpret black subjectivity and culture. Black humanity becomes illegible and we read black people as inherently violent (Smith 2016). Drop's narratives about selling drugs to feed his family and carrying weapons to protect his close ones are read as inherently violent because of the framework in which we understand black subjectivity. In engaging hip-hop in the 252 from the socio-diasporic framework, I view selling drugs and carrying weapons as signs of love and belonging. To engage in illegal activity to provide stability for your family when mainstream institutions wouldn't, shows a commitment to a cause larger than yourself. To fight over and protect the neighborhood that raised you can be read as service to your community, like the way we understand a soldier's patriotism. Crime and drugs are not seen as inherently good by any community, however when a community is structurally disorganized crime has been used as tool to attempt to create stability (Pattillo 2013). Without humanizing frames to understand black behavior as inherently human, it is difficult to adequately see the ways in which they forge community and belonging. Just as Drop suggested if you think he is a gangsta, then that is just your opinion. Drop is highlighting how one person's reading of his condition is simply their definition of the situation (Altheide 2000), which is an artificial social construction. In viewing hip-hop as a genre filled with people with human and creative sensibilities, we don't have to engage in a literal interpretation of the lyrics. But, rather we can think through the way they document the harsh realities of living within structures of oppression, but have found ways to be dedicated to someone and somewhere. We see that those who have

been excluded from full citizenship, have found ways to carve out a home in the 252 worth fighting for and reshaped notions of what it means to belong.

Epilogue

In July 2018 Stacie was leaving home to drive five-minutes down the street to get some food from a local restaurant. While she was driving she became short of breath and grabbed her inhaler that was in the passenger seat beside her. She strapped the inhaler to her head and proceeded to take two puffs, breathing deeply for each. After she has finished her breathing treatment, she tilted her head slightly to the left and pulled the straps from the inhaler off her head. Immediately after she laid her inhaler down, she saw police lights flashing behind her. The police officer walked to her car and asked her why was she swerving. She tells the officer, “I wasn’t swerving”. Stacie felt that she was pulled over because she had an object unknown to the officer in her hand. She continued to protest that she did not swerve and soon four police officers and a K-9 are at her car. While telling me this story, she looked at me and said, “they think this is just normal procedure for a traffic stop”. As she began to get emotional about stop she tells me, “Yea I could have popped off on them because I know I didn’t do anything wrong, but the last thing I want to do is have my mother get a call saying, ‘Oh yea we shot your daughter’”. I tell her I’m sorry she had to experience that. She asked me should she get a lawyer because the stop made her feel *some type of way*. I was unsure about what could legally be done, but I suggested it wouldn’t hurt to get free legal consultation to see if this could be pursued. In the moment, I felt it would be difficult to prove any socially constructed legal rights were violated, unless black dignity and safety are now protected.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I spoke with numerous individuals who faced situations exactly like this: who were unsure if they were racially profiled or discriminated against. Most were not able to articulate why they believed discrimination happened, in the legal sense, but

most narratives spoke to feeling violated and unsafe. When Stacie told me, “the stop made her feel some type of way” she was alluding to the vibe of the situation. She was making an affective and social assessment of the way in which the traffic stop played out. Dominant legal discriminatory discourse doesn’t provide a framework to understand these feelings in a meaningful way. Michele Lamont (2018) suggests that when dealing with inequality we cannot solely focus on how resources are distributed, but we must also tend to what she calls ‘recognition gaps’. Recognition gaps are inequalities and disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society. Through the vibe of her interaction with the officers, Stacie was able to feel her race. She felt in the eyes of the criminal justice system she was worthless.

Never being able to meaningfully help anyone in these situations, I began to think deeply about my position as a researcher in the field. Scholarship on engaging in social justice work in sociology is aimed at redistribution of resources, creating spaces of democratic decision-making, and empowering communities (Feagin 2004). It was highly unlikely that I would be able to do any of these in a meaningful way while in the field and I also doubt these would address the issues at hand. As a sociologist who returned home to study the social and cultural impact of mass incarceration, I felt useless when it came to doing anything about the institution I was documenting. I do not think anyone expected me to be the person to meaningfully do that type of work, but I think they saw me as someone who cared and found comfort in talking with me. I suspect a few even thought that voluntarily sharing their stories about their interactions with law enforcement was a way to help me and not the other way around.

What was so fascinating to me about being a sociologist and not being able to engage with the issues I was documenting in a meaningful way was witnessing first hand a community

destabilize the worthlessness that was imposed on them by the criminal justice system. The fact that I was a physical artifact of a mainstream institution, but was unable help the community battle this stamp of worthlessness alludes to the larger point of this project. When mainstream institutions, because of their epistemological and ontological limitations, are not equipped to meet the day-to-day needs of oppressed people, communities come together in unique ways to challenge their structural condition. This research positions hip-hop as one of many aesthetic and cultural sites of articulation where this battle is waged. While hip-hop is centered throughout, it should be read as simply a lens to view larger social processes surrounding black people's ability to work within, against, alongside, and outside of dominant institutions and discourses to forge humanizing conceptions of black subjectivity.

In the 252 the criminal justice system has been used to legally marginalize black people by mobilizing old conceptions of blackness (Davis 2003). Organizing black subjectivity around notions of criminality is the ideological linchpin in maintaining structural racism. Once individuals are racialized and placed within oppressive institutions, racial inequality becomes engrained into the everyday social practices of society and operates without any intent (Brown et al 2003). Black hip-hop artists in the 252 used hip-hop as a tool to contend with their structural position and the invisibility of the rural black American experience. Hip-hop is often deeply political because of the structural position of the bodies that create it. Rose (1994) cites Cornel West when he says, "The black underclass faces a reality that they *cannot not know*" (184). Hip-hop is not simply a space for black artists to express what they know, but has been a site of articulation for them to come to know their experiences in a new way. The remixed English vocabulary, life-affirming resonances, and aesthetic performativity of hip-hop provides a cultural space to continue to grow and to learn who you are.

While living under the forces of gendered racism and capitalism, mainstream institutions are often insufficient avenues to develop affirming black gendered identities (Wingfield 2007). In the 252 hip-hop has been a site to engage in negotiations around black masculinity and womanhood. Hip-hop's privileging of style has allowed black artists to construct gendered representations through stylized performance. Living under the constant strain of racism and capitalism black people have never had complete control over the substance of their material existence, but they have found dignity in the ways in which they present what they have. Aaron Howard (2011) suggested that the way black people experience religion is shaped by theology, but the way they live their religious experience is shaped by aesthetic elements. Similar to the political and cultural significance surrounding the way black people present their bodies on Sunday morning, hip-hop has provided an aesthetic space to create affirming representations of black identity. Black men have used the stylized powers of hip-hop to develop understandings of black masculinity outside of the ones imposed by society and black women have styled their gendered performance to destabilize both dominant institutional impositions and the sexism within hip-hop.

While diaspora literature has largely been shaped around notions of movement, hip-hop in the 252 provides a framework to see how diasporic negotiations of belonging and community play out in the way black communities purposefully choose to stay put. While the institutional experience of blackness is one shaped around exclusion, hip-hop's intimate engagement with the local creates a space to reimagine black local belonging. The black artists in the 252 understood hip-hop as providing a voice and a message for their community that mainstream institutions proved incapable of doing. Through articulating both black subjectivity and the cultural and

social processes of the 252, hip-hop allowed artists to forge a diasporic sense of belonging in spaces they are systemically policed in.

The day after I left the field I saw a post on Facebook indicating that one of the artists I worked with had been arrested. I asked myself, “was simply documenting the way in which the black 252 community resists structural oppression enough?” I left the field with enough data to, at minimum, complete my dissertation and at most to get a few publications to secure an Assistant Professor position. But I was unsure as to what I left the community. I do not suggest that my research has or will drastically change the structural condition of black people in the 252, but I do believe my presence there added to their already held belief that there is something special about hip-hop in the 252. Given the nature of my project I realized there was nothing that needed to be changed about the community members I was working with, but there needed to be a change in people like me who come from mainstream institutions to document their lives. I want this project to pull researchers out of the illusion that communities become better because we choose to study them. My social justice oriented goals for this project currently are humble and evolving. The educational system often misrepresents poor black communities. I aim for this project to be a small step towards remedying this. I hope this project is not read as simply a descriptive analysis of how hip-hop has allowed black people to develop a humanizing identity in structures of oppression, but rather I want it to be read as imaginative. What stories can we tell by privileging the language and affective sensibilities of the communities we work with? As I have argued through this project, it is not simply about what is said, but how it is said. This project should be read not simply by focusing on the content, but paying attention to how specific statements are made; with the intent that the vibe can pull us closer.

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