

It's Not Me, It's You: Considering the Worthy Sacrifice Hip Hop Artists May Need to Make to Reclaim the Heart of Hip Hop, its People

by

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The origins of Hip Hop evidence that the art form was intended to provide more than music to listen to, but instead offer art that delivers messages on behalf of people who were not always listened to. My thesis offers an analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content and adds to an ongoing discussion of the potential Hip Hop artists have to be effective leaders for the Black community, whose lyrical content can be used to make positive change in society, and how this ability at times can be compromised by creating content that doesn't evidence this potential or undermines it. Along with this, my work highlights how some of Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content exhibits their use of some rhetorical strategies and techniques used in social movements and their use of some African American rhetorical practices and strategies. In addition to this, I acknowledge and discuss points in scholarship that connect with my discussion of their lyrical content, or that aided me in proposing what they could consider for future lyrical content. I analyzed six Jay-Z songs and six J. Cole songs, including one song from their earliest released studio album and one from their most recently released studio album.

I examined their lyrical content to document responses to the following questions: What issues and topics are discussed in the lyrics; Is money referenced? If so, how; Is there a message of uplift or unity?; What does the artist speak out against?; What lifestyles and habits are promoted?; What guidance is provided?; What problems are mentioned? and What solutions are

offered? In my thesis, I explored Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content in a deeper way than I had as a fan who believed that their lyrical content and use of their platforms as artists at times evidenced the ways they can be leaders in the Black community and shapers of society, but also evidenced how they delivered potentially counterproductive lyrical content that may benefit in them progressing in their own careers, but may not guarantee them serving as innovative problem solvers for their communities.

I listened to and read the lyrics of the songs to document instances in the lyrics where the artists are potentially offering lyrical content that is helping and uplifting their community, or potentially hindering their community. My research questions are: Do the lyrics and careers of Jay-Z and J. Cole potentially suggest that you must rap about certain topics and issues or promote a certain lifestyle to be crowned the King of Hip Hop or considered an elite and successful rapper? Sub-question: What do the lyrics of artists like Jay-Z and J. Cole, who are crowned by some as the King or top M.Cs typically promote or speak out against? Guiding questions: What does it take to be crowned the King of Hip Hop? What type of lifestyle do Jay-Z and J. Cole promote and denounce in their art? What do their lyrics suggest or say about where they are from and their lifestyles? What message do their lyrics share about social issues such as poverty, health issues/disparities, race, consumerism and capitalism? What do these successful artists typically sell and promote in their lyrics to consumers of their art? When these artists decide to use their platform and the press to publicly advocate for those they identify as their audience, what is their message and perspective?

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Reclaim the Heart of Hip Hop, its People

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The origins of Hip Hop evidence that the art form was intended to provide more than music to listen to, but instead offer art that delivers messages on behalf of people who were not always listened to. My thesis offers an analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content and adds to an ongoing discussion of the potential Hip Hop artists have to be effective leaders for the Black community, whose lyrical content can be used to make positive change in society, and how this ability at times can be compromised by creating content that doesn't evidence this potential or undermines it. In Marcyliena Morgan's 2001 work, "Nuthin' But a G Thang: Grammar and Language Ideology in Hip Hop Identity," she offers the following point, "While a focus on salacious and aggressive content may be a common criticism of Hip Hop, it provides only a rudimentary view of complex and interactive workings of the Hip Hop community" (189). Morgan's point should motivate not only me, but all scholars interested in exploring Hip Hop to do what I aim to do in my thesis, which is to not only highlight instances where lyrical content is counterproductive or helpful for the Black community, but to provide an analysis and discussion that offers insights about how artists can use their lyrical content to uplift the Black community and help those within the community progress.

My work adds to existing scholarship that focuses on Hip Hop by scholars such as Gwendolyn D. Pough (2004), Elaine Richardson (2006) and Marcus Reeves (2008), whose work offers key insights about the ways rappers within the Hip Hop community function, what may influence their lyrical content, and how their lyrical content does and can influence the Black community and society. The scholarship on Hip Hop that I explored for my thesis offered a foundation for me to build on and refer to for my analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content. My interest in exploring some of Jay-Z and J. Cole's work in my thesis stems from my curiosity about the topics and issues discussed in the lyrical content of career-driven successful artists who

have the ability and opportunity to lead their communities and help make positive societal changes. My work will evidence occasions when an artist's personal ambitions impacts the art they produce and can hinder their ability to lead their communities in a positive and productive way. My analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrics will also evidence the artists' awareness of the issues that exist within the Black community and of some of the social injustices that Black people in America endure.

In *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, Pough defines Hip Hop by making a clear distinction between it and rap, which, "...along with graffiti writing, break dancing, and deejaying," are the elements of Hip Hop (Pough 4). Pough writes, "Hip-Hop started in the early to mid-1970s in the South Bronx and has since come to span the globe. It is a youth movement, a culture, and a way of life. Hip-Hop is the culture; rap is the music" (Pough 3). Pough offers a clear definition of Hip Hop that highlights the movement's origins, while Richardson's *Hip Hop Literacies* which my thesis builds on, offers one of Marcyliena Morgan's perspectives about Hip Hop, which she acknowledges as a multi-faceted system that features different styles and serves different purposes (187). Morgan offers a description of Hip Hop in which she discusses the ways the art form is expanding. Morgan writes, "In the process, what has taken place is a new form of youth socialization that explicitly addresses racism, sexism, capitalism, and morality in ways that simultaneously expose, explore, and critique these practices" (190).

Since its inception, Hip Hop has engaged in the actions that Morgan's work acknowledges. The artform functions as a cultural movement that people can connect with and as an enlightening resource that exposes the public to the experiences and lifestyles of people who have not always been willingly invited into mainstream America or its institutions. Hip Hop has

been, and can continue to be, an art form and movement that helps to redefine people's views and shows them how to have a good quality of life without adopting unnecessary capitalistic and materialistic habits. It is important for those within Hip Hop to produce lyrical content that helps people avoid consistently committing their time to obtain more money in an attempt to afford lifestyles that are promoted as desirable and necessary to live happily, healthfully and comfortably.

My exploration of Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content demonstrates how artists perceive what is essential for their development and the development of their own communities and highlights the artists' perspectives about how the social status of Black people in America is not always enhanced by their financial status. Still, there is a continued push for financial prosperity, despite doubts and uncertainties about how significantly financial prosperity impacts the lives of those who are dehumanized, endure violence and racism, and experience issues such as poverty in their own communities. Jay-Z and J. Cole's discussions of these issues in their work evidences Pough's assertion that "Rappers do bring issues and concerns, via their lyrics, to public attention that might not be otherwise heard" (29). A goal of mine in my thesis is to see whether or not issues often linked to poverty, poor conditions within neighborhoods, and bad experiences can truly and productively be addressed by people whose financial status and lifestyles are maintained and enhanced by talking about these issues. If artists, as Pough acknowledges, are going to speak on behalf of communities they come from (29), then they have to see these communities as more than profitable discussion points, meaning that discussing issues and problems must be accompanied by actions that those within the community can take to improve their living conditions and re-envision what it means to be Black in America.

While Hip Hop has been a unique and powerful form of expression and platform for people for about 45 years, like people in many cultural communities and movements, artists within Hip Hop have not altogether been able to stop chasing their own success, fame and fortune or to escape promotion of capitalistic practices, such as suggesting that a good quality of life and happiness are directly linked to the amount of money in your bank account. Richardson's (2006) work offers insights that align with my point and poses an important question that I believe scholars exploring Hip Hop should continue to investigate. The following point by Richardson highlights some of the popular identities that some rappers associate themselves with in their pursuit of success and how that can contaminate their ability to positively represent the Black community. Richardson states,

Given that rap music and rappers are seen as commodities globally marketed largely by exploitation of stereotypical language and images of “niggas,” “pimps,” gangstas,” “militants,” “hos,” “bitches,” and “bucks,” how do they display, on the one hand, an orientation to their situated, public role as performing products, and, on the other, that their performance is connected to discourses of authenticity and resistance? (12)

Richardson's question here, which is one of the points from her work that guides my work and analysis, highlights one of the challenges that Hip Hop artists face when they are put in a position where making money as rappers is potentially linked to balancing a career where they are creating content that shares problematic portrayals of Blackness and content that opposes and attacks the system that rewards such portrayals. In “Precarious Life, Vulnerability and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” Judith Butler articulates a point about reciprocity previously made by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas:

For Levinas, reciprocity cannot be the basis of ethics, since ethics is not a bargain: It cannot be a case that my ethical relation to another is contingent on his or her ethical relation to me, since that would make their ethical relation less than absolute and binding; and it would establish my self-preservation as a distinct and bounded sort of being as more primary than any relation I have to another. For Levinas, no ethics can be derived from egoism; indeed, egoism is the defeat of ethics itself. (140)

When considering Butler's explanation of Levinas' perspective that the presence of ego eliminates the presence of ethics (140) in relation to Hip Hop, I argue that part of the challenge that might arise when artists try to deliver lyrical content that focuses on providing directives and explanations for the community, is that it removes them from the center of their lyrical content and changes how they are able to reflect on themselves, their abilities, and what having these abilities has afforded them. Since acknowledging one's self and focusing on one's performance is a central part of Hip Hop, Levinas' perspective on ethics provides a reason for why it might be difficult for artists to put self aside to consider how one's own career and financial gains should not be worth more than creating messages that will help improve the communities they came from or the conditions they still rap about after leaving those communities.

Still, I argue that Hip Hop artists have the power to not only stop themselves from being viewed as what Richardson refers to as "commodities" (12) who are expected to promote fame and fortune as ways to enhance our quality of life, but to use their platforms to help others improve poor societal conditions and unjust treatment. These artists can create art that encourages people to be shapers of a society where they can meet their own needs without overly depending on institutions that rely heavily on their contributions they make through employment

and civic contributions, yet at times do not offer them equal or just treatment, security, protection, or peace of mind. I wanted to show how and when Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content encouraged listeners to take control over improving their lives and provided instruction and guidance to do so, and instances where their lyrical content could possibly cause people to stand in their own way of making these improvements.

My work will demonstrate that, at times, rappers' own pursuits to become the top M.C. or to hold the title as one of Hip Hop's best keep them wrapped up in chasing career goals and accolades while, as Richardson suggests, trying to also oppose the system and society that they are working to achieve their professional goals in. Richardson's assertion that rappers tell their stories and share their observations of society and personal experiences for profit (12) is important to recognize because these are habits and practices that still exist within the Hip Hop community, where some rappers speak of progress as lifestyles that involve living arrangements and financial statuses that are perceived upgrades for communities, circumstances and solutions for issues. Sometimes the promotion of these lifestyles involves sharing practices and habits that can be more harmful for listeners than they are practical solutions to improve one's lifestyle. Richardson (2006) acknowledges that "Hiphop discourse tells us a lot about socioeconomic stratification and the struggle between culture and capital" (9). Richardson's work offers meaningful contributions that acknowledge how communities and cultures can be compromised by what people who come from those communities gain in the process of selling lyrical content about their cultural and communal experiences. As a scholar I am interested in exploring how society and the communities rappers emerge from are influenced by their ambitions to progress financially and socially.

As Richardson acknowledges, “Unlike ‘traditional’ African American language data, commercial Hip hop discourse is wholly centered within the new capitalism. The aspect of the new capitalism that pertains to this study is 'knowledge work.' That is, the insider’s knowledge that business and industry uses to design products to tap certain values and create consumer identities by manipulating symbols and markets” (Richardson 9). I build on some of what Richardson’s work offers, which is an in-depth discussion of Hip Hop literacies, and acknowledgement that an artist’s worth is determined by their ability to promote messages that will help advertise certain practices, lifestyles and products. Like Richardson argues, “[p]aying Black folks and allowing us to participate in capitalistic exploitation in no way solves the problem of valuing humanity equally” (56). In my thesis, I draw on Richardson’s powerful assertion and focus on how providing employment opportunities linked to a system and practices that have historically devalued Black people and treated us unfairly and unjustly does not stop any of this inhumane treatment from happening. I believe that when people are paid to deliver lyrical content about money and the power of wealth as a guaranteed way to make ones’ life better, they are perpetuating a notion that my analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole’s lyrics will evidence is untrue. Still, artists continue to receive the type of compensation Richardson refers to, which at times diminishes their ability to be effective leaders who share proactive approaches for fixing the communities they emerged from or to address the societal issues they speak out against in their music.

When Jay-Z and J. Cole present themselves outside of their lyrical content, their perspectives and use of their platforms suggests that they are interested in highlighting social injustices and addressing the experiences of Black Americans being improved, so it was important to evaluate how they discuss this in their music. Hip Hop, like any community, is not

limited to one set of views, perspectives, way of delivering messages or connecting with audiences. I am acknowledging this because I don't want my work to suggest that there aren't any rappers who don't share visions of what people within communities need to do themselves to enhance the conditions and circumstances that are referenced in some rappers' observations of those communities. The following is a list of rappers or rap groups whose work I could've explored. This list is not a representation of the entire Hip Hop community or organized in a way that reflects my views about the artists' abilities or work. These rappers include: MC Lyte, Nas, Cardi B, KRS One, Rhapsody, Common, Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Lil' Kim, A Tribe Called Quest, Q-Tip, Kanye West, Jadakiss, Foxy Brown, 2pac, TI, Busta Rhymes, Kendrick Lamar, Nicki Minaj, Notorious BIG, Rick Ross, Ice Cube, Meek Mill, Snoop Dogg, Lil Wayne, Roxanne Shante, Slum Village, Wu Tang Clan, Eve, Big Sean, Cameron, DMX, Ja Rule, 50 Cent, Big Pun, Diddy, Bun B, Clipse, Nipsey Hussle, Fat Joe, Slick Rick, Public Enemy, Outcast, Pharrell, Eminem, Papoose, NWA, Remy Ma, Bas, ASAP Rocky, Tyler the Creator, Donald Glover, Logic, Drake and a host of lil's. Hip Hop is a big community and these names don't account for all the attitudes, perspectives, rhyme schemes, flow and bars that are shared, but they do offer a glimpse of the variety of voices, perspectives and abilities that exist within Hip Hop. Among these voices are Jay-Z and J. Cole, who both have earned respect and accolades and have established themselves in the Hip Hop community in a way that positions them to be thought of as having ideal careers and setting the tone for what others in Hip Hop and society do.

I wanted to explore the types of topics, issues and lifestyles Jay-Z and J. Cole discuss in their lyrical content and whether or not they pull Hip Hop in a direction that encourages listeners to continue counterproductive traditions for our communities or direct us to ways of being and

living that do not require us to rely on money for happiness, security, stability or equality in a society that has charged us for our freedom. The following are my research questions:

Research Questions

Question: Do the lyrics and careers of Jay-Z and J. Cole potentially suggest that you must rap about certain topics and issues or promote a certain lifestyle to be crowned the King of Hip Hop or considered an elite and successful rapper? Sub-question: What do the lyrics of artists like Jay-Z and J. Cole, who are crowned by some as the King or top M.Cs typically promote or speak out against?

Guiding questions: What does it take to be crowned the King of Hip Hop? What type of lifestyle do Jay-Z and J. Cole promote and denounce in their art? What do their lyrics suggest or say about where they are from and their lifestyles? What message do their lyrics share about social issues such as poverty, health issues/disparities, race, consumerism and capitalism? What do these successful artists typically sell and promote in their lyrics to consumers of their art? When these artists decide to use their platform and the press to publicly advocate for those they identify as their audience, what is their message and perspective?

Before I Found Out I Could Rap, My Life Wasn't All That

In this section of the introduction, I offer background information from the press about the lives of Jay-Z and J. Cole prior to their careers as rappers. In chapter two of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson discusses “the central importance of print-capitalism” (18) and highlights the power and influence of print-capitalism (35-36) while noting how it has impacted different places. In Anderson’s discussion of what he refers to as “three fundamental cultural conceptions” (36), he

talks about the role “print-capitalism” played in the search, “...for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time, meaningfully together” (36) and says, “Nothing perhaps more precipitated this search, nor made it more fruitful, than print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate to others, in profoundly new ways” (36). My use of information from stories about Jay-Z and J. Cole and their perspectives shared in interviews with the press, along with album reviews, highlight the ways that the press is a platform for artists to talk about their perspectives, lifestyles and another way for them to share perspectives that may, or may not be presented in their lyrical content with the communities who are potentially influenced by their lyrical content and who continue to listen to their voices and perspectives even when it is presented outside of their music.

When discussing how Hip Hop has “...grabbed the national imagination,” Pough writes, “the Black and Latino youth who created it were neglected and unseen except for token guest spots in the nightly news as the criminal threat” (30). While my work will highlight some of J. Cole’s lyrical content where he maintains the same view that Pough expresses, my use of press coverage on Jay-Z and J. Cole also affirms Pough’s point that “...Hip-Hop grabbed the national imagination” (30), an outcome that in part shows the media’s willingness to cover stories of people who escape the communities and to report on how they made it out and what they gained in the process. This in some ways suggests that the lives of the artists are more meaningful and worthy of coverage once they have the social and financial status that they lacked prior to leaving those communities.

A 2013 *Vanity Fair* article, Lisa Robinson refers to Jay-Z as a cultural force whose evolution consists of him being a “...drug dealer turned rapper turned mogul and family man” (Robinson). Robinson refers to Jay-Z by his birth name, Shawn Carter, and reports that he grew

up in Marcy Houses — Brooklyn Projects (Robinson). Robinson described the conditions of the neighborhood at the time the article was published as a place where bags of garbage were visible and there was a waiting ambulance outside of the apartment buildings (Robinson). The following content from the piece provides additional details about Robinson's observation of the neighborhood. She writes:

Despite the trees and the playgrounds within the fenced-in-complex, it is a bleak, sad place... There is a palpable sense of utter hopelessness; no one who lives here can escape the fact that they live in government-subsidized public housing. Forget someone becoming an iconic, global superstar or a multi-millionaire — to even get out of here takes something extraordinary, almost a miracle.

It is important to note that Jay-Z came from humble beginnings and lived in an environment where having a successful career and extreme levels of wealth were not thought of as likely possibilities. This is relevant because it provides some explanation for Jay-Z's motivation to continue to acquire more in an effort to ensure that he would not have to endure the challenge of living without. Jay-Z also lived in an environment where incidents, mishaps and circumstances were not conducive to one's development. Robinson writes:

When Shawn was 11, his father's brother was stabbed and died; his father turned to drugs and left the family. Shawn became withdrawn and, for a long time, wouldn't allow himself to get close to anyone. As a teenager he started to deal drugs. When Jay and I talked at length about his youth, his life as a drug dealer, and his rags-to-riches story, I asked what got him out, what helped him survive. 'Music,' he said.

The neighborhood and circumstances that Robinson describes in her piece sound much like the environment and circumstances Jay-Z describes on “D’Evils” when he raps, “This shit is wicked on these mean streets/ None of my friends speak, we’re all tryna win” (Jay-Z) or like the truths Jay-Z reveals about himself on “Moment of Clarity,” when he raps, “Pop died, didn’t cry, didn’t know him that well/ Between him doing heroin and me doing crack sales” (1-2). My discussion of these lyrics in chapter one will demonstrate that Jay-Z sheds light on the struggles and challenges of an individual whose environment and circumstances would push most people into doing what they have to do to avoid enduring hardships and unfortunate circumstances. Along with this, my analysis of Jay-Z’s lyrical content will demonstrate how he views having an abundant amount of everything as an appropriate and effective way to eliminate the possibility of having nothing.

J. Cole’s path into Hip Hop was preceded by different endeavors than Jay-Z’s. J. Cole, whose birth name is Jermaine Lamarr Cole, was raised in Fayetteville, NC, which became his home after his mother moved there following his “birth on a U.S. Army base in Frankfurt, Germany” (Scott). When describing J. Cole’s background and upbringing in Fayetteville, Damien Scott writes:

It’s where he moved from house to house as his mother tried to make ends meet.
It’s where he feels comfortable. Most important, though, it’s where the soon-to-be 30-year-old rapper and producer known as J. Cole learned how to rap and make beats. Those talents powered Cole’s dream to move from the city dubbed “Fayettenam” — a portmanteau of his hometown and Vietnam; similar to the way kids call Chicago “Chiraq” — to New York City, where he attended St. John’s

University, honed his craft, and became the first signee to Jay-Z's Roc Nation Label.

Jay-Z was raised in New York (Robinson) and J. Cole grew up in North Carolina (Scott). Along with being raised in different places, another difference between the artists are the activities they engaged in and their professional pursuits prior to their careers as rappers. Jay-Z worked as a drug dealer (Robinson) and J. Cole pursued his college degree (Scott). The experiences that Jay-Z and J. Cole had prior to entering into Hip Hop evidence that they were motivated and ambitious about changing their circumstances, even if they used different approaches to do so prior to becoming Hip Hop artist.

It is evident that both artists' neighborhoods, experiences in their youth, and their perspectives about these circumstances influenced their lyrical content and made rap and Hip Hop a powerful tool that could not only change their living conditions but give them an opportunity to say something about the way they and others were living. Both Jay-Z and J. Cole were able to succeed and make use of the positives of rap and Hip Hop that Reeves discusses when he writes, "The artistic, cultural, and social possibilities of rap music were finally realized, establishing its relevance in black popular culture by giving its black urban audience a vehicle to speak their pain and frustration along with their hedonistic needs and self-mythology" (37). While my analysis in chapters one, two and three will offer a discussion of examples within Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content that demonstrate Reeve's point, the next part of my introduction will focus on how I selected the songs I analyzed in my thesis.

Selecting the Rap Songs

I read and listened to lyrical content for the following Jay-Z songs, “D’Evils,” “Rap Game/Crack Game,” “Moment of Clarity,” “F.U.T.W.,” “Legacy,” and “Black Effect.” I read and listened to lyrical content for the following J. Cole songs, “Mr. Nice Watch,” featuring Jay-Z,” “Let Nas Down,” “Ville Mentality,” “Window Pain (Outro),” “Neighbors,” and “1985 (Intro to “The Fall Off”).” At the start of my thesis, I had a larger selection of Jay-Z and J. Cole songs that I viewed as the artists providing social commentary on their personal and professional experiences and lifestyles and issues and experiences of Black people in America. I wrote summaries for those songs and the songs I ultimately selected. During the narrowing process, I was concerned that limiting the songs I was analyzing would result in me providing an analysis that failed to capture how the artists discuss the aforementioned topics in other songs or what other perspectives they share. Even now, I am concerned that my analysis doesn’t cover enough of their work to provide a full and comprehensive view of their perspectives about the issues discussed. As a fan of Jay-Z and J. Cole, I knew that both artists within their lyrical content and outside of their lyrical content discussed race, wealth, social inequalities, their communities, experiences, and other issues in their music or in platforms where their perspectives are shared.

While summarizing the songs, I found parallels between some of Jay-Z and J. Cole’s songs that I hadn’t deeply considered. These parallels provided good information to discuss the similarities and differences in the ways the artists address certain issues in their music, as well as examine how the topics they cover differ or are related to one another. I included a song from both artists’ first album because I was able to analyze what their visions were and how they talked about their experiences in lyrical content from the start of their careers and what they focused on in their music prior to becoming popular with mainstream audiences. I also believed

it was important to select a song from their most recently released album to analyze more current lyrical content, to highlight any significant changes in what they rap about, and to consider their evolution as artists. While narrowing my selection of rap songs by Jay-Z and J. Cole, I referred to summaries I wrote for the songs to determine which songs consisted of the artists' discussions of their own experiences, including what they value in their careers and lifestyles, and the experiences of Black people in America. My examination of Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content also involved reviewing the lyrical content to document what issues and problems they discussed, what lifestyles and habits they promoted. what they speak out against, and whether or not they offered solutions, referenced money, or shared a message of uplift or unity. Next, I will provide chapter summaries to share insights about my discussion, analysis and some of the scholarship I refer to in chapters one, two and three of my thesis.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

In Chapter one, I use press coverage to provide background information about Jay-Z's life prior to his career as a rapper and album reviews to offer insights about the overall body of work that songs I analyzed came from. I refer to an NPR Fresh Air interview with Terri Gross that sheds light on Jay-Z's upbringing in Marcy projects where issues like fatherlessness and drug dealing and drug abuse negatively impacted those in the neighborhood, including Jay-Z, who himself became involved in drug dealing and hustling before pursuing his rap career (Gross). I also use press coverage to provide information about Jay-Z's career as a rapper and entrepreneur. The purpose of chapter one is to share my analysis of Jay-Z's lyrical content from six songs, discuss topics explored within his lyrical content, and share my reflections on how his

lyrical content does or doesn't offer productive solutions to help address social injustices and issues faced by the Black community. My review of Jay-Z's work evidences his evolution as an artist and explores his perspective about the role financial prosperity plays in an individual's development and progress. In this chapter, I highlight Jay-Z's career pursuits and ambitions and how they often seem linked to making money, which he sees as a resource that equips him to help the community. Along with this, my analysis of Jay-Z's lyrics shows his awareness of issues that plague the Black community and society and how earning profits is his top priority, which at times makes the value he places on people or sharing a message that can help people seem less important. In this chapter, I draw on Nikki Giovanni's perspective about Black wealth shared in "Nikki Rosa" to present an alternative to Jay-Z's perspective about financial prosperity being the only way we can improve ourselves and help our communities.

In the first chapter, some of the scholarship I refer to includes the work of Pough, Richardson, and Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith and Robert Denton Jr.'s *Persuasion and Social Movements*, 6th ed. I refer to the aforementioned scholars for my discussion of Jay-Z's lyrical content, which at times serves as a resource for his community while at other times is the product of his efforts to have a lucrative career at all costs. I hope my analysis and discussion in this chapter will evidence how an artist's individual goals and ambitions to succeed and improve their own financial status can compromise their ability to create content that helps guide and direct others to envision and shape a society where improving one's lifestyles isn't all about the social and financial status that is a consistent theme in some of the songs I analyzed.

Chapter Two

In chapter two, I analyze six of J. Cole's songs and present an analysis that evidences how he balances his perspectives about his own career with his concerns for society, while questioning the value of things that are typically considered valuable. My discussion of J. Cole's lyrical content addresses his attitude about an artist's music being compromised by efforts to meet expectations, the importance of being accountable as an artist, and the self-doubt and uncertainty one has when they learn that wealth and fame do not equip them to make the significant and positive impact they wanted to make. Like I do in the Jay-Z chapter, I refer to press coverage about J. Cole and album reviews to provide additional insights about his background, perspectives about Hip Hop, and insights about the albums that included the songs that I analyzed.

My analysis of J. Cole's lyrics highlight how he focuses on issues such as gang violence, artist failing to be accountable in their music, sacrificing time to pursue money, and being Black in America. At times in this chapter, I pose questions such as, "If owning and living in these homes won't prevent Black people from being killed or harassed, then what value do they have?" Questions like these are ones that I believe myself and other people can work to investigate and explore in future research.

In this chapter I refer to Richardson's work and Stewart Smith and Denton Jr.'s work and build on Pough's discussion about privacy being a privilege (33) by discussing J. Cole's song "Neighbors," which demonstrates how trying to function in society as a Black person makes it hard to be afforded the privilege Pough refers to. I hope this chapter will also show how an artist's ambitions to serve their community through their music can cause them to question their

influence and ability to make significant change and how this might impact the efforts of other artist looking to make change in a similar way.

Chapter Three

In chapter three, I discuss similarities and differences in Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content and aim to show how they work to connect with and relate to their audiences.

My goal in chapter three is highlighting some of the pitfalls that both artists encounter when trying to consider the cost of making mindful decisions that could serve as effective and meaningful messages for their communities. Along with this, my goal in this chapter is evidencing the differences in the ways that the artists believe their careers can be used to make change in their communities, while highlighting how they both acknowledge that their social and financial class has not prevented them from still experiencing some of the struggles that come with being Black in America. Like in chapters one and two, I refer to the work of Pough, Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr., but also add insight from Reeves' work, and Keith Gilyard's discussion of Smith's work in the introduction of *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives*.

In this chapter I discuss some of the similarities and differences in how Jay-Z and J. Cole use their voices to shed light on hardships endured by the Black Community, along with sharing their perspectives about their lives and the state of society. Along with this, I hope that my work highlights instances where Jay-Z and J. Cole's ability to make effective and meaningful change in the Black community and society seems stifled by sticking to the script and producing music that struggles to move beyond observations of issues.

Chapter 1: If You Ask Jay-Z, He'll Tell You, "I'm Out for Presidents to Represent Me"

Throughout Jay-Z's rap career, he has shared reflections on his upbringing, his time as a hustler, his personal experiences, his wealth and success, and his perspectives on culture and issues in the Black community and society. Jay-Z's lyrics also evidence that he views success and wealth as remedies that can be used to fix societal problems in the same way that they have improved his life, social status and class. While it could be argued that, at times, he fails to uplift his community or share lyrical content that can truly move anyone forward in a meaningful way, I argue that reviewing work from his first album to his most recently released work shows the transformation of an artist, who used his early lyrical content to express his passion for living a prosperous life to later and more recent content in which he seems more focused on how he can use his prosperity to help other people.

In this chapter, I analyze the lyrics in six Jay-Z songs and explore how he discusses his own experiences, what he values about his experiences, what he believes about his personal and professional ambitions, and what he observes about society, about his community and about being Black in America. My goal is to provide insights about what Jay-Z focuses on in his lyrical content and to determine if his lyrics can be used by the Black community to improve conditions and circumstances that are often the focus of rap songs.

As a Jay-Z fan who watched him perform in concert during the Watch the Throne Tour with Kanye West and the *4:44* tour, I was familiar with his lyrical content prior to writing my thesis. Jay-Z's success in Hip Hop, his ability to dominate the radio and the charts throughout the years, makes it is evident that he appeals to large audiences. Jay-Z, at times, uses his platform to publicly advocate for the rights of people from marginalized communities. He addresses issues

such as police-involved shootings, prison reform and poverty in some of his lyrical content. Additionally, some of his business endeavors outside of rap involve him working as a contributor to projects that call attention to injustices experienced by those within the Black community. I examined lyrics from Jay-Z's earliest album to a recently released album to determine how, throughout his career, he has spoken of issues pertaining to the Black community and discussed his own lifestyle and career, and whether he has offered productive suggestions that would enhance the community rather than building his impressive and lucrative career on something I find problematic, which is rapping about the need to get successful and be wealthy in order to overcome obstacles.

Jay-Z, in a Fresh Air interview released on Nov. 16, 2010, discussed his book *Decoded* and answered host Terry Gross' questions with responses that offer insights on his upbringing, life and rap career. In the interview, Gross and Jay-Z discuss him dealing drugs as a young teenager and his reflections on how crack impacted Marcy Projects, where he was raised (Gross). While discussing his childhood in Marcy Projects, Jay-Z talks about the highlights and low points that came with being raised in a neighborhood that was riddled with crack and where he took ownership of old records left behind by his father, who, Gross states, left when he was 9 years old, which was the age his mother gave him a boom box. When Gross asked Jay-Z about selling crack and whether or not he thought "I'm contributing to that damage?" (Gross) he responded:

Oh, not until later on," Jay-Z said. "You know, at 14, 15 years old, you know, you're thinking about — to be honest with you, you're thinking about sneakers, or you're thinking about some sort of relief from all the pain you feeling. You're thinking about buying some food for the house. You're thinking about paying the

extra light bill. So at that young age, you're not thinking about the destruction that you're causing your own community. (Gross)

Jay-Z, who in the interview describes himself as someone who seemed torn between hustling on the streets and honing his skills as a musician, which involved him making demos with a guy named Clark Kent said he recorded his first at twenty-six (Gross). Jay-Z states:

And I was like, one foot in and one foot out. I always had in the back of my mind that I would be back in the streets, for some reason; I guess I didn't have 100 percent belief in what I was doing. Then finally I just said, man, I'm just going to give this music a try. I'm going to give it 100 percent, and just forget everything that I'm doing, you know. And here we are. (Gross)

According to a *Business Insider* piece published on September 9, 2018 Jay-Z is worth \$900 million, which he earned in business ventures including “entertainment labels, a clothing line, alcohol brands, an upscale sports club, and a \$600 million streaming service” (Abadi).

Even though some of Jay-Z's views on wealth and success have remained consistent throughout his career, his lyrical content evidences a transformation from being someone, who, at all costs, wants to make money and live lavishly to guarantee that he succeeds to someone who, in his more recent work, seems more focused on accountability and ways to enhance his culture and community. While “Rap Game/Crack Game” and “D'Evils” are the two songs out of the six that I analyzed that evidence that Jay-Z's lyrical content does not always uplift the Black community or society, lyrical content in the other four songs I analyzed evidences that Jay-Z raises awareness about issues such as the premature deaths of Black men and the experiences of those living in impoverished conditions. He is focused on sharing a message about the benefits of

financial prosperity, along with referencing the luxurious and expensive materialistic items and experiences being wealthy has afforded him.

His earlier work, in which he focuses on making money as a hustler, draws on his own experiences of living in a crack-infested neighborhood. When referring to himself and his friends, Jay-Z states, “And you say that most of your friends’ fathers had left. You say: Our fathers were gone, usually because they just bounced. But we took their old records, and used them to build something fresh” (Gross). Of his own involvement with selling crack and responding to Gross’ question about whether his mother knew, Jay-Z said:

I’m sure she suspected, you know, as much, because, it was so prevalent. What happened was, it was either you were using it or selling it, and that was pretty much the two options. I know there was — and that’s a very blanket statement. I know it was a very small percentage that, you know, had nothing to do with drugs — maybe—in their household but, you know, the brother or sister, somebody — the uncle, the aunt — it was just so prevalent. (Gross)

My analysis of lyrical content shows how Jay-Z’s work highlights the conditions of people, who, because of their class and race, are overlooked and denied a platform to tell the rest of society about the challenges and troubles associated with having limited resources. In some of Jay-Z’s later work he advocates for Black wealth, Black-owned businesses and Black excellence.

Although some of Jay-Z’s lyrics broadcast all the ways having money has improved his life, they are also focused on how he uses his gains and experiences to call attention to social injustices and hardships endured by the Black community and to express his pride in Black culture and leaders.

The remainder of this chapter features an analysis of the following six Jay-Z songs: “D’Evils” on *Reasonable Doubt*, “Rap Game/Crack Game” on *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, “Moment of Clarity” on the *Black Album*, “F.U.T.W.” on *Magna Carta, Holy Grail*, “Legacy” on *4:44* and “Black Effect” on *Everything is Love*. In the introduction, I provided details for my selection of these songs along with the questions I asked when exploring and reviewing lyrical content for my analysis. My analysis of these songs demonstrates how Jay-Z uses his lyrical content to let the public know what he values and what he believes his role is in the Black community and society. Furthermore, my analysis of Jay-Z’s work will evidence Richardson’s point that “Hip-hop discourse tells us a lot about socioeconomic stratification and the struggle between culture and capital. Hip-hop discourse, like previous Afro American expressive forms, is a Black creative response to absence and desire and a site of epistemological development” (9). As someone who relentlessly pursued success in Hip Hop after making a living selling drugs, the stories Jay-Z tells and the experiences he shares earned him profit and helped to improve his socioeconomic status, resulting in him moving away from poverty while also informing the public about conditions in his community and the circumstances of those living in similar communities. Hip Hop is a culture and a movement that shapes the public’s mindsets and can help define people’s perspective about what is needed for their survival and needed to have a fulfilling life. While it is clear that we depend on money to purchase what we want and need, Jay-Z suggests that we must gain excessive amounts of it to thrive in America.

I want to address the thinking that having an abundant amount of wealth and materialistic possessions equals an improved quality of life because I believe this information misdirects people and causes Hip Hop to function as an encourager of materialistic and financial pursuits that do not guarantee that one’s quality of life will be improved. In the poem, “Nikki Rosa”

Nikki Giovanni shares beautiful reflections on Black life, which she speaks of as an experience where the love of a mother, community building, traditions, and making the most of what we have equals being wealthy in a way that ensures you are cared for and have what you need (Giovanni). In lines 27–33 of the poem, Giovanni states:

and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy. (27–33)

In the songs I analyzed, some of Jay-Z's lyrical content, at times, like in "D'Evils" and in "Moment of Clarity" and "Legacy" aligns with the type of recounting and rehashing of Black life that Giovanni suggests a white person would write about Black experiences. Jay-Z highlights the struggles and the strife that is associated with the community he emerged from, speaking of wealth and lavish lifestyles as preferable and necessary alternatives. The issue I have with this is that the rich experiences and memories that Giovanni recalls in her poetry can become absent or overlooked when the environments where these types of experiences are had are thought of as not worthy of remembering or mentioning.

Songs like “Moment of Clarity” and “Rap Game/Crack Game” offer insights on Jay-Z’s role as producer and seller of merchandise and goods that he knows he must successfully push to consumers to have a lucrative career. Some of Jay-Z’s lyrics show the Hip Hop community’s struggle to determine how they will thrive if they break free of traditions and practices, like profiting on the purchases of fans who pay to hear music that promotes unaffordable, unnecessary and unattainable lifestyles. Although Jay-Z, like other artists in Hip Hop, has the ability to shift people’s attitudes about money based on how he discusses his relationship with it and the value he places on it, he instead speaks of it as an essential resource that can be a solution for combatting societal ills and issues faced by Black people and others in America.

My analysis of Jay-Z’s work, including “D’Evils” which is the earliest song of his that I analyzed, evidences that he is an ambitious individual that views wealth and being able to afford expensive materialistic possessions and accolades as making progress. Although this isn’t wrong, the wealth, experiences and materialistic possessions Jay-Z raps about are not necessarily obtainable for everyone else. In songs like “D’Evils” and “F.U.T.W.” Jay-Z speaks of his past experiences and environments as unfavorable and as places of origin that people would want to disconnect from and never return to. His observations and reflections are acceptable and are a reality for some, but his lyrical content that speaks of the wealth, fame and success he earned as an entertainer may not always be productive for some listeners who relate to his past experiences because it suggests that a better quality of life is created and maintained by being wealthy and possessing expensive and unnecessary possessions. Pough addresses this point when she draws parallels between the Black Panther Party and members of the Hip Hop community and shares her perspective about their intent, purpose, actions and earned compensation. Referring to rappers as “self-designated tellers of the people’s suffering” (29), Pough writes:

Some felt that the Panthers were self-serving in the same ways that rappers are seen as self-serving — due to the money they receive and their manipulation of media attention. Rappers do bring issues and concerns, via their lyrics, to public attention that might not otherwise be heard. For example, while the government and the media may pay a certain amount of lip service to the rising unemployment rate and the impact of poverty and crime on Black communities, rappers give narrations of Black experiences with these issues and so represent the concerns for some segments of their communities. (29)

I am not suggesting that some of the conditions that Jay-Z speaks of getting out of and never wanting to return to are conditions anyone should live in or circumstances anyone should experience. I am suggesting that the conditions and lifestyles that Jay-Z views as valuable change makers and his mindset about such statuses perpetuate the notion that it is acceptable for a few individuals to acquire extreme levels of wealth and success while they discuss the circumstances and conditions of those who cannot afford to live like them. It is not wrong for Jay-Z to speak about being wealthy or owning expensive cars or other materialistic possessions, but it hinders his ability to serve as a leader and a voice within the Black community who can help people within the community develop ideas and practices that will equip them to address the issues they are concerned about without pursuits of excessive amounts of money.

While rappers reflecting on their social and financial status gives the Black community someone to cheer for, it fixates us on a possible way of living that doesn't increase our probability of fitting into a country that has historically worked to make us prove we are human and whose treatment of us suggests that we should have to fight for rights that no human should ever be denied. As Pough writes, "Historically, Blacks have been in the public sphere fighting

for the basic rights that Habermas suggests one should receive in the private sphere. Not to mention the fact that it was Black Labor and industriousness that provided economic basis for the comforts and necessities enjoyed by the white male propertied class” (31).

Jay-Z’s work highlights the “basic rights” that Pough writes, “Blacks have been in the public sphere fighting for” (31), but also adds to the problem due to his failure to think about ways to survive with basic needs being met without relying on or participating in a system that continues to overlook us and our “basic rights” (31). The high level of wealth that Jay-Z views as a prescription to fix a sick society isn’t a realistic amount of money for everyone to earn, especially not in America where we are always trying to afford the next product created by someone else but rarely can afford to make positive change in our own lives and communities.

Jay-Z fits the definition of what Pough refers to as “exceptional representations of Blackness,” (30) a phrase that is associated with concepts like the “talented tenth” (30). These are Black figures whose contributions and abilities make them elite members of society, people who demonstrate what type of success can be obtained with potential, ability, hard work, commitment and focus. Although some of Jay-Z’s lyrics don’t always fit the requirement of contradicting “negative stereotyped images” which, Pough suggests, fail after “they became co-opted by the larger public sphere” (30), he still qualifies as one of the “exceptional few,” who, Pough asserts, “The exceptional few stand out as just that, leaving the rest of the group in the same position — marginalized and invisible in — that they previously held” (30).

Jay-Z has a successful and profitable career and still works to stay connected with the Black community and to exhibit his awareness of the experiences of Black people in America, but his career as a rapper who is becoming increasingly wealthy has shifted him into a financial

class of rich people who have more money than is needed to live well. Once again, there is not fault or immediate wrongdoing in this, but it does position him to belong to a small percentage of people who are representative of the poor distribution of wealth and money in America. In “F.U.T.W.,” Jay-Z raps about the issues of poor wealth distribution and acknowledges the problems of many Black people not having opportunities to attain the type of wealth he has earned.

If I Am Not Making Money, Then Why Am I Making Music? An Exploration of Jay-Z’s Lyrical Content and His Ambitions as a Hip Hop Artist

In 1996 Jay-Z released his debut album, *Reasonable Doubt* (Green and Zisook). The Brooklyn native’s sixteen-track album featured popular songs like “Feelin’ It” ft. Mecca, “Ain’t No Nigga” ft. Foxy Brown, “Can I live” “Brooklyn’s Finest” ft. (Notorious B.I.G.), “Can’t Knock the Hustle ft. Mary J. Blige,” “Dead Presidents II” and “D’Evils” (“Reasonable Doubt Tracklist”). In “Breaking Down Every Contributor for Jay-Z’s *Reasonable Doubt*,” Dylan Green and Brian Zisook offer insights about composers and contributors on the album and music that was sampled for the album. While Zisook and Green noted that forty-six people “contributed to the making of *Reasonable Doubt*,” (Green and Zisook) the album wouldn’t exist without the story-telling and vision of Jay-Z, whose experiences from his days as a hustler and ambitions to exist as a successful entity in the Hip Hop industry made for a unique project. The following point from Zisook and Green provides additional insights about this. As Zisook and Green write that the project “...was supposed to be his first and last album; a tell-all that would lift the weight off his shoulders from years spent in the drug game and maybe impress a still-growing number of rap fans in the process” (Green and Zisook).

My analysis of “D’Evils,” a track on *Reasonable Doubt*, involves noting how Jay-Z describes his circumstances, environment, lifestyle and experiences. I also noted lyrics where he talks about money, materialistic possessions, and his relationships with people. On “D’Evils,” Jay-Z invites listeners into his world and shares his experiences. Some of the topics that he discusses in are the conditions of his community, the loneliness of success, the ways that hustling and competing impact personal relationships and financial status, and the desire to be rescued from one’s own circumstances. He also addresses sacrificing one’s own self in order to acquire wealth and a status associated with power. “D’Evils” calls attention to the ways that the pursuit of wealth and materialistic possessions can morph into becoming ill with greed, resulting in someone compromising their morals, as illustrated in the lines 17-18 in verse one when he raps, “It gets dangerous, money and power is changin’ us/And now we’re lethal infected with D’Evils (Jay-Z). In the song, Jay-Z references money, jewelry and a status that he acknowledges make him more privileged than his peers who have come from the same environment and have endured similar circumstances. Jay-Z raps, “The closest of friends when we first started/ But grew apart as soon as the money grew and soon grew black-hearted/ Thinkin’ back when we first learned to use rubbers/ He never learned, so in turn, I’m kidnappin’ his baby’s mother” (3-6).

Jay-Z’s top priority in this song is ensuring that he can secure the things he wants and needs in life — even if it means overlooking the well-being of others. Jay-Z speaks of his pursuits for material things and relationships he wants to be in as endeavors that hinders his ability to be good and do good. “D’Evils” illustrates the competitive, materialistic mentality some people possess — and the despair that can accompany it. He in lines 1-3 of verse one raps, “This shit is wicked on these mean streets/None of my friends speak, we’re all tryna win/ But then again, maybe it’s for the best though” (Jay-Z). In “D’Evils,” Jay-Z acknowledges how

difficult it is to maintain relationships with people because everyone becomes your competitor when you are trying to earn a spot and reach a certain level of success. His lyrics provide a glimpse of the type of destitute and lonely life one can end up living trying to pursue success.

In “D’Evils,” Jay-Z is not in support of monotonous routines that that are typically followed by most people. Lines 9-10 in verse one of the song evidence his lack of interest in traditional employment. He raps, “Nine-to-five is how you survive, I ain’t tryna survive/I’m tryna live it to the limit and love it a lot” (Jay-Z). Since people typically work a 9-5 job to earn money in America, Jay-Z proposes that what the majority of people do to get by is not enough for him and will not satisfy his needs and desires. His lyrics suggest that people need to avoid doing what is typically done if they want more, and that while a regular job may satisfy your needs, it will limit your opportunities to have or do much else. His lyrics about wanting to do more than survive (Jay-Z) imply that he understands that the amount of wealth he is pursuing is not essential for survival. Although Jay-Z doesn’t tell listeners not to work a 9-5 job, he promotes a life of chasing money and luxurious things, even if it causes one to lose themselves in the process. Jay-Z’s reflections on feeling isolated and needing to be rescued speak to the desperation people feel when they are exposed to violent environments with a shortage of resources.

In “D’Evils,” Jay-Z portrays himself as a supporter of capitalistic culture by upholding money in a way that suggest it is more valuable than people. The song is a testament of Jay-Z’s relentless pursuit for money, which includes his admission in line 15 of verse three that “For the love of money, son, I’m givin’ lead showers” (Jay-Z). Lines like these suggest that Jay-Z is willing to commit violence to get what he wants, and by suggesting that he himself is willing to engage in such actions, he is suggesting that it is acceptable to use violence to get what one

wants. I am not suggesting that Jay-Z or any other artist is solely responsible for violence in Black communities, but I am acknowledging that lyrics like these suggest that it is an acceptable form of competing to fulfill ones' own needs, access resources and secure a spot in communities where there is no corporate ladder to climb. Lyrics where Jay-Z in verse two raps, "We used to fight for building blocks/Now we fight for blocks with buildings that make a killin'/The closest friends when we first started/But grew apart as the money grew and soon grew black hearted" (1-4) suggest that living a life with limited resources motivates people to obtain as much as possible to avoid not having what they need in the future.

When I hear "D'Evils," I hear a message about how people can become blindly ambitious and make a God out of money if they are from an environment where there are a limited amount of resources. What I don't hear is a presentation of ways to survive without excessive amounts of money or a proposal for people to build together in a way that will prevent only a few people from monopolizing all the wealth and resources. While Jay-Z in this song does not share lyrics that provide directives on how to improve the Black community, he uses his voice to offer insights about the mental states and the paths that are taken by those who have nothing but want everything. Paths to economic gain in such circumstances don't seem to let people walk alongside others, but instead force people to violently compete until they are left with no one to share the success and status they earned. This is an example of Jay-Z using rap to highlight the plight of those struggling to acquire more than just the bare minimum in America, along with how they are impacted because of their efforts to have so much that they will never have to worry about getting by with so little in the future.

Pough addresses the roles rappers play in reporting on their own experiences and the experiences of those they relate to in her work when she asserts that:

Many rappers argue that they bring the stark reality of life in American ghettos to public attention. The fact is, some of the most humanizing and accurate accounts of life in impoverished ghettos come from rap songs and not the network news. Thus rappers bring wreck: they disrupt their way into and make themselves visible in the public sphere with the goal of not only speaking for disenfranchised Black people but also claiming both a voice and living for themselves in a society bereft of opportunity for them. (Pough 27)

Although I understand Pough's point and agree that rappers' lyrics also do expose the public to the experiences of individuals who are overlooked, I argue that the portion of her point where she acknowledges rap being a career for individuals who aim to "make themselves visible in a public sphere" (27) is a practice that hinders the Black community and society because it causes us to hold on to traditional practices, like earning a living from talking about how we don't want to be killed and pursuing professional endeavors that will position us to combat oppression we did not cause. Ongoing efforts to be visible in a society where many people seem to never see, feel or understand the Black experience, condition and culture, despite how much work is done to show it to them is misdirected, misguided and useless. Still, I see the value in Hip Hop artists rapping about issues and experiences they endure or observe, because as Pough notes when discussing the goals of rappers, they are "...claiming both a voice and living for themselves in society bereft of opportunity for them" (27).

We need to invest more time in learning resourcefulness that will allow us to survive without an excessive amount of wealth being the end goal or without needing to be embraced by a country whose biggest investment in Black people has been keeping us healthy enough to produce products. In her work, Pough affirms a point that she attributes to "Black public sphere

scholars,” who, she states, “...have noted, if the Black public sphere is not ultimately about the business of evoking change, then we are wasting time” (40). Continually striving to become wealthy, famous and successful to show that a few can overcome societal struggles that keep many from living a good quality life and promoting those measures is not “about the business of evoking change” (40), so I argue that when artists within Hip Hop do this, they become guilty of wasting time in the way Pough speaks of in her work.

When Jay-Z raps about the conditions of impoverished communities and talks about how people with limited resources make money, he justifies actions typically associated with crime or defined as criminal as essential acts of resourcefulness that people commit in order to take care of themselves. In verse one, Jay-Z raps, “Whoever said illegal was the easy way out/Couldn’t understand the mechanics/ And the workings of the underworld, granted” (6-8). These lines highlight people’s decision to engage in illegal activity for income to get what they need along with showing how their participation can lead to the same greed that caused the poverty they worked to escape. Even though he is proposing a non-traditional career path as a solution, it is not a solution that he is content or happy using, which is evidenced when he in verse three raps, “But now this higher learning got the Remy in me/ Liquor’s invaded my Kidneys” (9–10). Jay-Z raps about substance abuse and other habits as something that he becomes consumed with against his own will. He views his own actions as decisions he was forced to make in order to deal with the reality that he references in verse 1 when he raps, “This shit is wicked on these mean streets” (1). He states in line 12 of verse three, “I can’t be held accountable, D’evils beatin’ me down, boo” (Jay-Z). This claim suggests that we do the things we do, not because we necessarily want to, but because we strive to live lives perceived to be better than our own. Jay-Z calls attention to the way that people, not just from the Black community but from broader

society, are enslaved by capitalism to perform and make decisions that they believe will help them earn profits, which sometimes results in compromising one's self.

A year after his first album was released, Jay-Z in 1997 released *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, which featured songs like “Always be my Sunshine” ft. Babyface and Foxy Brown “Streets is Watching” “Friend or Foe ‘98” “Where I’m From” and “Imaginary Player.” (“In My Lifetime, Vol. 1 Tracklist”). In “Once in a Lifetime: Why ‘Vol 1’ Remains Jay-Z’s Forgotten Masterpiece,” Tyrone Palmer and published on the *Spin* website on June 28, 2016 offers insights about *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*. Palmer shares his perspective about what Jay-Z aimed to do with the album and discusses his image on *Reasonable Doubt*, as well as how he wanted to present himself on *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*. Palmer writes,

The Jay Z of *Vol. 1* also occupies a curious position within the evolution of the Hov persona. Here, Jay is trying to desperately find his footing, aiming for the sweet spot between *RD*’s street-kingpin persona and his grander pop – star aspirations. In this sense, *Vol. 1* is a failure — he never quite strikes the balance between the two sides — but it is a magnificent failure, and the most complex revealing album in Jigga’s oeuvre. (Palmer)

Palmer shares informative points about *Reasonable Doubt*’s lackluster performance on the Billboard Charts, where he states it peaked at No. 23 (Palmer). Comparing *In My Lifetime: Vol. 1* to *Reasonable Doubt*, he writes “...Vol. 1, received a tepid critical response and failed to achieve the sales Hov had hoped for: Much like *RD*, it wasn’t certified platinum until well after its initial release” (Palmer). One of the tracks on *In My Lifetime: Vol. 1* is “Rap Game/Crack Came,” a song in which Jay-Z shares some knowledge about hustling and drug dealing and his plans to

apply a hustler's mentality to his career as a rap artist. Like any other business, the drug game has employees who provide a product and customers who purchase that product. My analysis of "Moment of Clarity" will evidence that Jay-Z acknowledges how this exists within the rap industry when he raps about his audience's receptions of his music and how this influences his artistic decisions.

In "Rap Game/Crack Game," Jay-Z discusses the relationship between the consumer of goods and the supplier of those goods. The relationship between those who purchase and those who sell in America is a complicated one because at times the seller of goods may be more concerned with the profits they make from consumers than they are with the consumer and how they are impacted by the product being sold to them. The desire to make money that is expressed in "D'Evils" is also present in "Rap Game/Crack Game" and serves as an example for the ongoing fascination most people, no matter their profession, have with earning money and another reminder that human beings seem to be less valued than the dollar. Implying that money is so valuable that it is worth killing someone is a perpetuation of the longstanding tradition of devaluing Black bodies and Black lives, an issue that has existed in America since people have profited from slave labor and slaughtered brown bodies for land. The type of practices Jay-Z speaks of as necessary to get money in "Rap Game/Crack Game" are part of a mindset that has been held by others and one that he most likely adopted because of the ways that money is valued in American Culture. Discussing "commodity exchange" Pough writes, "For centuries black people themselves were a commodity, and they provided much of the labor that built this country. They are entering the public sphere after a significant period of being excluded from it; 'the general rules governing relations' at one point worked to keep them out" (18). Lyrics from "Rap Game, Crack Game" evidence that at the time Jay-Z was working on his song, he wanted

to share a message about how earning profits should be a priority, even if it requires selling addicting products.

When Jay-Z in verse one in “Rap Game/Crack Game,” raps, “But first we scope shit, advertise in every area/Let the fiends know hey, we got some dope shit” (7-8). Jay-Z’s ambitious mindset and entrepreneurial spirit is exhibited in these lines where he speaks of money as something that is still worthy of pursuing even if it involves capitalizing on people’s addictions. He acknowledges that he must be aware of neighborhoods where his product will be well received. To do this, putting the word out about what he is selling is a priority, which allows him to promote the product he is supplying to customers. Jay-Z views himself as a supplier and seller of merchandise and acknowledges that without the ability to create something that people want to purchase, people struggle to increase their own value in society. In these lines, the supplier and customer are spoken of as predator and prey, Jay-Z being the predator and his customers being the prey. His gains and success are contingent upon others paying him to supply their needs and wants.

While the aforementioned line in “Rap Game/Crack Game,” along with line 13 in verse one where he raps, “Ain’t tryin’ to, kill ‘em at first just, building clientele” (Jay-Z) doesn’t specifically suggest that he is willing to take the same measures he expressed he would take for money in “D’Evils,” Jay-Z does show little concern for how his actions will impact those to whom he distributed drugs to for profit. I also want to note that the phrase “kill em” could be being used both literally and figuratively. Richardson, in the Hip Hop definitions section of *Hiphop Literacies*, defines “sound boy killin” (116) as “To kill the sound boy is to outperform him by audience approval” (116-117). Taking this definition into consideration, Jay-Z could be

suggesting that his product is superior to other people's, so he will be able to secure a customer base and make profits from constantly supplying their demands.

It is clear that he knows the potential risks of the product he is pushing, but his focus isn't on the dangers that the clients will face; he is focused on providing a product that will secure his customer base and keep people coming back. "Rap Game/Crack Game" is an example of how one's own success and financial state of being takes priority over the community and their well-being. In "Rap Game/Crack Game," the focus doesn't seem to be on moving the community forward, instead lines in verse one, like when Jay-Z raps, "Gon' need a middle man, so we look to radio/Let 'em test the product, give 'em a promo show (9-10) highlight Jay-Z's desire to keep moving forward by creating music that will get radio play, which will make him more popular with listeners. The relationships that Jay-Z speaks of having with other people in "Rap Game/Crack Game" are about getting familiar enough with people to determine who will value his product. Jay-Z was aware that the content he was creating and the product he was pushing into the community wasn't going to uplift people or equip them with resources that would help them establish themselves in the way that he established himself.

"Moment of Clarity," is a song on *The Black Album*, which was released on Nov. 14, 2003 (*The Black Album*, Tidal). Touré in a *Rolling Stone* album review titled, "The Black Album" writes, "Time will tell whether or not *The Black Album* is Jay-Z's final release, but it certainly is a goodbye album. He's settling scores and letting us deeper into his life than ever. He talks in depth about his parents, giving his mother, Gloria Carter time to shine, on the opening song, 'December 4th.' On the Eminem produced track, 'Moment of Clarity,' he invokes the memory of his father: Adnes..." (Touré). Touré's review provides some biographical details about Jay-Z and notes his planned departure from the rap game, an act, as my analysis will show,

that seemed to make him comfortable with personally connecting with fans and sharing his thoughts about the rap industry in a reflective way. While Touré's discussion on contributors to the album and listing of other elite rappers is informative, the following point from his work helps to provide some support for my claims that Jay-Z is considered an elite MC in Hip Hop and offers Touré's perspective on how the album compares to Jay-Z's other work. Touré writes, "Given one last chance to make an impact, Jay-Z has come up with one of the better albums of his career, though perhaps a shade lesser than his very best, *Reasonable Doubt* and *Blueprint*" (Touré).

Jay-Z evolves between "Rap Game/Crack Game" and "Moment of Clarity." The evolution evidences his shift from being primarily concerned with personal profits ("Rap Game/Crack Game") to someone who in "Moment of Clarity" admits that some of his career decisions were moves he made to position himself to financially help others. Jay-Z's desire to be an actively involved member in his community and society is clear on "Moment of Clarity" where his lyrical content suggests that he believes that wealth equips him to positively impact others and help them. Jay-Z, in "Moment of Clarity," also reflects on how drug dealing, and drug abuse are a part of a vicious cycle that, in some cases, causes people to endure the issues that he faced, like selling drugs and growing up with a father who is absent because of his addiction. Jay-Z raps in verse two, "Pop died, didn't cry, didn't know him that well/Between him doing heroin and me doing crack sales" (1-2). While Jay-Z refers to selling drugs in "Rap Game/Crack Game," in "Moment of Clarity" he acknowledges the detrimental impact drugs can have on families and how they result in people immersing themselves into a culture of addiction.

Jay-Z in "Moment of Clarity" speaks of the conditions and environments that shaped his reality and his decision-making. In the song, he acknowledges and speaks of the things and

experiences that in many ways shape us all and profoundly impact the career moves we make and the ways we present ourselves in society. I do not condone drug-dealing any more than I excuse selling alcohol or cigarettes to people, but I am aware that people provide and purchase products for their needs and wants. As Pough notes when discussing Jürgen Habermas' (1991) work on the public sphere.

Therefore, when we apply the notion of the “commodity exchange” to Blacks in the United States (specifically Black women), the term takes on a different significance because of the history of slavery. For centuries black people themselves were a commodity, and they provided much of the labor that built the country. They are entering the public sphere after a significant period of being excluded from it; the ‘general rules governing relations’ at one point worked to keep them out” (18).

Black people were sold in America, so I do not think that it is a stretch for us to fail to see our value and worth, and how we are so valuable that we should not sell white substances that harm us and our communities, in order to make a profit to survive in a country that has made a profit from selling us and made selling drugs to our people profitable. The lack of consciousness and consideration that goes into drug dealing requires an individual who is working to make a living to maintain a more thoughtful mindset than those who worked people from sun up to sun down to pick cotton so that they could profit from distributing a different kind of white.

I share this to think about the complex ways that a Black person may think before distributing a product in our own communities that might cripple people and stop us from moving forward but will cause them to be able to escape conditions that no one prefers. The

illegal activity and crime that is associated with drug trade, was not associated with the slave trade because criminalizing drug dealing results in the type of labor that earned White people profits during slavery. The fatherlessness that Jay-Z speaks of in “Moment of Clarity” offers insights about the ways that drugs negatively impacted the role his father was able to play in life, and how that absence potentially resulted in him being an ideal candidate to sell the very product that consumed his father so much that he could not be a father.

Although Jay-Z failed to hold himself accountable on tracks like “Rap Game/Crack Game,” in “Moment of Clarity,” he acknowledges the responsibility that comes with being a rapper. Lines 11-14 in verse two evidence this point, when he raps, “Since I know what I’m up against/We as rappers must decide what’s most important/And I can’t help the poor if I’m one of them/So I got rich and gave back, to me that’s the win/win (Jay-Z). These lines suggest that Jay-Z believes rappers play a significant role in shaping the community and society. In these lines, Jay-Z’s actions seem to be influenced by his desire to help people, which he doesn’t view as something he would be capable of doing if he didn’t have the financial means or status to do so.

An examination of lines 12–14 in verse two of “Moment of Clarity” provides information about Jay-Z’s perspective on the role of rappers in their communities and society and how they must evaluate and consider what is in the best interest for other people, along with acknowledging how his class and social status have positioned him to be accountable in ways he believes artists should be. He views individuals who are dealing with the hardships of poverty as people who need to be rescued. While Jay-Z doesn’t specifically state how he helped the poor, he acknowledges that he was in a financial position to do so, which made him feel accomplished. In “Moment of Clarity,” Jay-Z’s stance is that being a rapper requires him to make a living that positions him to offer resources to those in need. Jay-Z seems content with knowing that he has

helped people, but also expresses that doing so has cost him as an artist. Instead of helping to change peoples' perspective on money and helping them redefine their relationship with it, Jay-Z echoed many others who suggest that money is our most valuable resource for making change.

Jay-Z in verse two raps, "Music business hate me 'cause the industry ain't make me/ Hustlers and boosters embrace me and the music I be making/ I dumbed down for my audience to double my dollars/They criticized me for it, yet they all yell 'holla'" (1-4). These lines evidence that Jay-Z sees himself as someone who could provide meaningful societal and cultural commentary, but his efforts to please his fans and give them what they want because of the financial benefits of doing so hinder his ability to do so. Although Jay-Z isn't demanding that the music industry changes, his lyrical content exposes the challenges faced by individuals who do not take conventional and traditional routes to pursue their goals and shows how chasing money enslaves you to meeting the demands of people paying money for your product.

Like many people, he is concerned with his income and how it might be impacted by his output. "Moment of Clarity" is the testimony that someone offers in a Black church when they want to explain why they've been doing things a certain way, even though they are aware of what is expected of them by the church. Jay-Z acknowledges that he doesn't avoid conscious lyrics that offer substance because he is not capable of creating such content but because of his awareness of how doing so would impact his financial status and popularity with fans, who he suggests are more interested in catchy phrases and trendy lyrics. Jay-Z, in verse two raps, "If skills sold, truth be told, I'd probably be lyrically Talib Kweli/ Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/But I did five mill' — I ain't been rhyming like Common since (wooo!)" (5-7).

Jay-Z's references to other artists in the Hip Hop community is a way for him to promote art that is serving a purpose and sharing meaningful messages that uplift the community. Naming Talib Kweli and Common make it clear that Jay-Z aspires to make music with similar messages, but also wants to be popular and rich. Jay-Z references Talib Kweli and Common to highlight similarities and differences between his lyrical content and the music of artists known to make socially conscious music. What Jay-Z is suggesting by mentioning the income he has earned from making music that differs from that made by less popular and financially successful artists is that either you can make music like them or make money like him.

While at the time "Moment of Clarity" was released, Jay-Z wasn't noted for making music heavily focused on social justice issues, his acknowledgement of the environment he came from connects him to others who live in similar conditions and educates listeners about practices and habits that some people in that environment feel they have to adopt to stay alive. The following lines in verse two that Jay-Z raps illustrate my point: "When your cents got that much in common/And you been hustling since your inception/ Fuck perception! Go with what makes sense/Since I know what I'm up against/We as rappers must decide what's most important" (8-12). In lines 8-12, Jay-Z makes it clear that capitalizing on any opportunity to make money is instinctual for him and what establishes his ability to take care of himself and help take care of other people. His awareness of how financial means factor into being able to provide support for his community is productive but also seems to suggest that if artists do not have a similar financial status because they are sacrificing it to make music that doesn't make money, then their decision-making about their role as artists may not be as sound for them or their communities as the career decisions he makes.

In 2013, Jay-Z released *Magna Carta, Holy Grail* (*Magna Carta Holy Grail*, Tidal). In his review on Billboard.com, Jeff Rosenthal writes, “Jay’s trying to be a lot of things to all people, as one does when as big as he is. And while it’s unfair to measure Jay against others, we’re living in a world where Yeezus has risen, and it feels like Jay’s dipping a toe rather than fully diving in” (Rosenthal).

The *Magna Carta Holy Grail* album includes “F.U.T.W.” (Tidal) which is a track where Jay-Z references the fates of powerful Black men who tried to make change in America and discusses topics like socioeconomic class and the life expectancy of Black men. Jay-Z in “F.U.T.W.” uses what Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. refer to as “identity politics” which they state are “associated with several assumptions” (148). Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. write:

First, members of the group share common histories, and analysis of their historic and continual shared oppression. Second, the shared experience of oppression is the marker of identity and supersedes all other forms of identity. Third, group members are fierce and constant allies. The concept of identity is thought of as a ‘stable, intact, largely, self-evident category based on markers, such as sex, race, and class-dimensions that exist in the individual. (Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. 148)

In my analysis, I will discuss two points in “F.U.T.W.” that I view as Jay-Z using “identity politics” (Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. 148) and analyze other lyrics in the song. The following lines suggest that Jay-Z believes Black heroes and figures who have tried to make social change suffered unfortunate fates. In lines, 9-10 of verse 2, he raps, “America tried to emasculate the greats/Murder Malcolm, gave Cassius the shakes” (Jay-Z). These lyrics illustrate Jay-Z’s

perspective about what happens to Black men who attempt to make change in America and in some ways offer a reason for why he might not delve deeper into social issues and injustices in some of his own lyrical content. Jay-Z suggests that members of the Hip Hop community are aware of the threats and risks they may face if their messages are focused on positive change and helping the Black community progress.

Along with Jay-Z addressing the assassination of Black leaders and their deaths in this song, in verse one, he talks about the societal issue of Black men dying prematurely in lines 6-7 like, “See most my niggas died early twenties or late teens/ I’m just trying to come from under the thumb of this regime” (Jay-Z). These lines illustrate that Jay-Z uses his work to speak out against violence in the Black community, despite his own admittance in “D’ evils” that his passion for money could result in him being violent against others. He expresses a desire to escape the powerful system that he sees as killing the potential of young Black men. Jay-Z encourages listeners to aspire to a legacy similar to the legends he refers to, when he in line 5 of the introduction raps, “Don’t be good my nigga, be great.” (Jay-Z) Pairing references to powerful Black icons with a directive to excel encourages listeners to be their best while striving to be successful and sharing meaningful work. His acknowledgement of the fates of great Black men in America is encouragement to do it despite the potential risk associated with it.

Jay-Z also discusses the challenges of being Black in America and the struggles people endure trying to overcome those challenges. In lines 6-8 of the introduction, he raps, “After that government cheese, we eating steak/After the projects, now we on estates/I’m from the bottom, I know you can relate” (Jay-Z). In “F.U.T.W.,” Jay-Z connects himself to other people who have lived similar experiences by referring to the potential eating habits and living conditions of those living in poverty and those who possess wealth. Jay-Z’s use of “we” here is an “identification

tactic” (145) that Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. refer to as, “*The implied we*...a subtle means of establishing a feeling of commonalty or common ground. Persuaders use plural pronouns to imply identification and a common purpose and struggle” (Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. 145). Jay-Z uses *we* in lines 4–6 of the introduction to connect with Black people living in impoverished neighborhoods, where some have depended on state-funded resources to eat. Along with using the “implied *we*” (Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. 145) to connect with people living in unfavorable conditions and eating food distributed to them, Jay-Z mentions living a wealthy lifestyle as the alternative for this life, which is one he can speak about and refer to since he is living it. When Jay-Z talks about progression and going from poor living conditions to preferable living conditions, he again uses the term *we*, which suggests that he and other people whom he shares a cultural, racial and socioeconomic background with have all moved forward together.

Jay-Z’s references to estates and steaks could suggest to some listeners that being able to afford such living arrangements and food provides a form of proof that evidences that their lives are better now. Along with this, the lyrics omit a middle ground between projects and estates, and value an extreme progression that is not likely or necessary. These lyrics about using money to invest in estates and steak show that the only way Jay-Z knows how to escape poverty is by obtaining enough money to buy items that most people consider luxuries they can not afford. Jay-Z references public housing and food provided by the government to show how some people have to rely on these forms of assistance. He suggests that those types of living conditions are a starting point that one should work to progress past. The “then and now” mentality that Jay-Z seems to have in the intro of “Moment of Clarity” shows how people often feel they need to move from where they come from and change what they are doing in order to be deemed

successful. Along with providing some insights on the conditions of people experiencing poverty and people reaping the benefits of wealth, the lyrics also show the absence of a middle class, which can't exist with the poor distribution of wealth and resources.

In the intro of "F.U.T.W" Jay-Z refers to his own humble beginnings, which he also references in "D'Evils." Some of Jay-Z's views on "F.U.T.W" align with views expressed on earlier work, like "D'Evils," where he expresses being opposed to the traditional 9–5 job. Lines 7–8 of verse three in "F.U.T.W." evidence this point. Jay Z in verse three raps, "Teacher-Teacher, I'm trying to unteach ya/All the shit they taught y'all, they got you all in the bleachers" (7-8). In these lines, Jay-Z challenges conventional and traditional methods of education, suggesting that students need to rid themselves of what they learn from teachers. While he is not blatantly stating there is no value in academic institutions, he implies that the lessons teachers are teaching students are not preparing them to play in the game and be participants, but instead equipping them to be good fans who can sit on the sidelines and watch the game be played. The past experiences of Black people in America are checkered with struggle and hardships, such as being more likely to experience financial inequalities, receiving lackluster and second-rate education in schools and being unjustly treated because of our race. Jay-Z shares observations about society that make it clear he is aware of the Black experience in America. He also acknowledges that he has earned a certain level of financial success and wealth that other members of the Black community have not earned and do not have access to. In lines 8-9 of verse one, he raps, "1 % of a billion more than niggas even seen/ Still they wanna act like it's an everyday thing, clean" (Jay-Z). While it is common to reference one's success and wealth in Hip Hop, these lines raise awareness about how many people are living without, while a few have more than is needed to live comfortably.

Socioeconomic status is a concept that Jay-Z focuses heavily on in “F.U.T.W.,” where he portrays himself as someone who doesn’t seem satisfied with just being able to afford what everyone else has, but infatuated with spending money on expensive merchandise that other people can’t afford. He takes pride in separating himself from those whom he sees as being in a different class from him. Since he identifies himself as someone who came from a poor background, but currently has enough money to buy whatever he wants, he suggests that happiness and a better quality of life can be purchased. In verse three, Jay-Z raps, “Sipping D’USSE boy this ain’t your daddy yak/He in a Cadillac; me? I’m in the Maybach/This ain’t grey sweat suits and white tube socks/ This is black leather pants and a pair of Stance” (1-4). These lyrics exhibit how Jay-Z endorses the luxurious items that he enjoys and prides himself on noting that he views those who do not have them as beneath him — which is for some a motivator to make more to spend more money and prove their socioeconomic status has improved.

In “F.U.T.W.,” Jay-Z presents himself as a powerful and influential figure in the Hip Hop community and society who has the ability to promote and sell products and influence peoples’ experiences no matter what environment they are in. While he speaks from a privileged position associated with his social status and wealth, the song is an example of how he uses his platform to call attention to poverty, the poor distribution of wealth, and some of the unfortunate fate and circumstance of minorities in America. Jay-Z, in “F.U.T.W.” is invested in connecting with the Black race and the Hispanic race. Lines like the following in verse two evidence this, when Jay-Z raps “Came through Pasadena in the low-low/ Just to show respect to the *cholos*/ Feelin’ like a stranger in my own land” (3-5). Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. refer to this as “coactive or common ground strategies,” (65) which they write, “...emphasize similarities, shared experiences, and a common cause with target audiences” (65). Jay-Z’s lyrics evidence that harsh

treatment can make anyone, including someone born in America, feel like they are not a citizen, and, more importantly, not a human being. He merges the Black and Hispanic culture together in lines 3–5, where his view of being a “stranger” in America can be understood by people from cultures and ethnicities, labeled as immigrants, who at times face rejection, alienation and struggle to fit into a country that constantly minimizes their existence and tries to push them out. Tying common struggles together and connecting minorities, who are also enduring poor experiences because of their race and ethnicity, shows Jay-Z’s efforts to connect with those in America who may feel unwelcome and even fall victim to policies and legislation that aim to push them out of America.

In 2017, Jay-Z released *4:44*, which featured tracks like, “The Story of O.J.,” (*4:44*, Tidal), a song in which he shares his perspective that being a wealthy Black person doesn’t change society’s negative perception or treatment of you. Other songs on the album include “4:44” and “Family Feud”; these are songs where Jay-Z offers more personal reflections on his personal life and marriage. In an album review of *4:44* published on July 5, 2017 on the Pitchfork website, Sheldon Pearce, provides some interesting content on the role the album plays in Jay-Z and wife Beyoncé’s ongoing musical saga of their family’s personal life; for the purposes of my project, I am interested in points in his piece that offer an overview of *4:44*. In his discussion of the album, Pearce writes, “This is Hov’s gospel, a Shawn Carter retrospective measuring missteps and triumphs, wondering aloud if his work will appreciate in value, and what exactly is worth valuing” (Pearce).

Pearce’s point here offers some insights on Jay-Z’s personal and creative mindset on *4:44*. Along with this point, the following point offers important details. He writes “But, above all else, *4:44* is about legacy: how Jay will be remembered, what he’s leaving to his children,

what he's done for the culture, and what he's trying to do for society" (Pearce). Pearce's analysis dovetails with some of my own analysis of "Legacy." In "Legacy," Jay-Z discusses religion and spirituality, generational wealth, family, death, legacy and abuse, financial literacy and money are also themes in the song. As he does in "Moment of Clarity," Jay-Z expresses an interest in helping individuals who may struggle to provide for themselves. "Legacy" is a living will that offers insights about potential ways that Jay-Z believes the money he has earned can be spent after his death. In this song, Jay-Z portrays himself as someone whose legacy will be helping to improve society by leaving money behind to fund opportunities for Black people who might not otherwise have them.

He in verse 1, lines 1–5 raps, "Take those monies and spread 'cross families/My sisters, Hattie and Lou, the nephews, cousins and TT/Eric, the rest to B for whatever she wants to do/She might start an institute, she might put poor kids through/ school" (Jay-Z). These lines suggest that Jay-Z, like he expressed on "Moment of Clarity," is invested in helping less fortunate people. Jay-Z's perspective on school in "Legacy" differs from his perspective in "F.U.T.W.," where he suggested that the lessons teachers teach do not prepare students for life. Since he is proposing that some money could be used to send children to school, he is suggesting that school is a resource worth investing his finances in.

Jay-Z's discussion of spirituality and religion in "Legacy" offers a solution that is not money, which evidences that at this point in his career he sees other resources as valuable and essential for one's growth. This is productive not only because it provides listeners with an additional solution or method to address life issues, but because, as Keith Gilyard points out when discussing Arthur L. Smith's (Molefi Asante) proposition about Black audiences, "Adult audiences, then, are seen to favor and more apt to respond to religious oratory than would Black

youth” (Gilyard 12). Considering this, Jay-Z’s references to religion, his spiritual journey and growth is a technique that is more likely to appeal to the Black adult audiences with whom Jay-Z is sharing the benefits of spiritual practices and knowledge.

Using spiritual growth for self-development and to improve one’s life is not a method that Jay-Z typically offers in other songs I analyzed, but it is spoken of as something that he values in “Legacy.” In “Legacy” Jay-Z acknowledges that he has earned such an abundance of money that his wealth will not solely be used by his family, who he expects to invest his finances in ventures that will build and enhance Black culture and communities. This is evidenced in the following lines, when Jay-Z in verse one raps, “We gon’ start a society within society/ That’s major, just like the Negro League” (10-11) Along with expressing an interest in his family financially investing in Black America to help people progress, Jay-Z discusses how people can be impacted by their experience, environment, ancestors’ actions, and societal traditions. In verse two, Jay-Z raps:

You see, my father, son of a preacher man

Whose daughter couldn’t escape the reach of the preacher’s hand

That charge of energy set all the Carters back

It took all these years to get to zero in fact

I hated religion ‘cause here was this Christian

He was preachin’ on Sundays, versus how he was livin’ Monday. (1-6)

The Black church has historically played an important role in the Black community, so an individual’s severed relationship or struggle to embrace religion that Jay-Z speaks of later in

“Legacy” is something that could position them to experience the type of moral void and spiritual deprivation that he seems to experience on “D’Evils.” Jay-Z discusses some of the struggles people endure in their family and the sense of hopelessness that can exist when shaping one’s belief system. He shares insights about his own journey and discusses how embracing religion helped him get closer to a higher being and develop a respect for spiritual practices and beliefs, beyond dominant religions like Christianity.

His lyrics in “Legacy” explain why on “D’Evils” he sounded like an individual who relied heavily on a belief system centered on money and crime, which seemed to be a substitute for an almost absent relationship with God. Lines like the following evidence this point. In verse one Jay-Z raps “I never prayed to God, I prayed to Gotti” (12). The aforementioned lines with Jay-Z’s discussion of religion and spirituality in 4:44, evidence that he has developed and grown spiritually and is now able to offer people more than just money as a solution for societal issues. In verse two, Jay-Z raps, “Someday I forgive him/‘Cause strangely our division led to multiple religions/ I studied Muslims, Buddhist, and Christians/ And I was runnin’ from him, He was givin’ me wisdom” (7-10). The solution that Jay-Z offers for dealing with issues that he acknowledges deeply impacted his own family is spiritual growth. This solution, along with his wishes for his money to be used to improve society, show that he still sees the value in using his individual experiences to educate people but has reached a point in his career where he is offering new insights on how people can enhance their lives at the same time that he has expanded his own view about how money should be spent to improve society.

In 2018, Beyoncé and Jay-Z dropped a collaborative album, *Everything is Love* (*Everything is Love*, Tidal) which features tracks that offer lyrical content about their personal relationships, their influence on society, their wealth, power, love, family, and ability to still

thrive, while reportedly being the focus of investigations conducted by governmental agencies and outcast by large industries like the NFL. Briana Younger published a review of *Everything is Love* on the *Pitchfork* website on June 19, 2018. In her discussion of Beyoncé and Jay-Z's collaboration album she writes, "Their surprise joint release, *Everything is Love*, completes the arc. It's a testament to how a complicated love survived through self-reflection, compromise, and ruthless honesty. The quintessential power couple has reemerged to stunt on everyone — haters, mistresses, America itself..." (Younger).

Younger's article and her point about the Carters stunting on people (meaning they are showing off or flaunting their status and abilities) offers insights on Beyoncé and Jay-Z's collective progression through the years, and the Carters' intent, attitude, delivery and tone on the album. While Younger's piece offers some backstory on the couple's personal lives and careers leading up to *Everything is Love* and discusses the album's cultural significance (Younger), for the purposes of my project, I want to highlight Younger's take on Jay-Z and Beyoncé's socioeconomic state and their desire to stay connected to the Black community. Younger writes, "The Carters remain billionaires who are not interested in leaving their blackness behind, and that, in some ways, is renegade — even if capitalism isn't salvation" ("Everything is Love"). Younger reminds us that the Carters are entertainers whose moves, even when culturally and racially conscious are career decisions they get paid to make.

"Black Effect," a song on Jay-Z and Beyoncé's joint album *Everything is Love* is an example of Jay-Z using his art for activism, even if that activism is to reach a Black audience that is financially invested in him and show them that he is willing to advocate for them. In the chorus, Jay-Z raps, "I'm good on any MLK Boulevard (repeat x 2)/ See my vision with a tech, bitch, I'm Malcolm X/Haters dreadin' my effect, they want the Das EFX" (1-4). Jay-Z's

reference to Malcolm X in “Black Effect” makes it the second song that I have discussed in which the artist references Malcolm X, but here he goes beyond a reference to the Black thinker and revolutionary and refers to himself as being him. Malcolm X’s influence as a leader cannot be disputed, and, in America, his early methods and perspectives about change have not historically been preferred or embraced. He is a revolutionary who did not advocate for fitting into America, but instead embraced the notion of Black people being so self-reliant that they could detach from America in a way that proved they were too large to fit within the boxes that America tried to put them in.

The references to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King offer another example of how Jay-Z uses his platform to honor powerful Black leaders who made contributions that helped to improve Black people’s lives and experiences in America and suggests that he has similar aspirations. “Black Effect” shows Jay-Z’s evolution as an artist and the responsibility he currently associates with being a rapper. In “Black Effect,” he seems unfazed by the ways being actively engaged in the Black community and working to make change will affect his career. He directly addresses governmental agencies that are historically known to have troubled histories with the Black community, especially Black leaders working to make change. He raps in lines 13–16 of verse 1 “Since the Kaleif doc, they’ve been at my neck/ Y’all can tell ‘em Trayvon is comin’ next/ The SEC, the FBI or the IRS/ I pass the alphabet boys like an eye test” (Jay-Z). Here Jay-Z references his work on the Kaleif Browder documentary to shed light on societal issues faced by the Black community and suggesting that doing so has made him targeted by the government.

Jay-Z’s work on the Kalief Browder documentary exposes issues in the criminal justice system and educates people on unethical practices, like denying Black people a speedy trial,

setting unreasonably high bond amounts, and subjecting them to unfit and inhumane treatment and circumstances while incarcerated. In Elijah C. Watson's article, "Kalief Browder Documentary Wins 2018 Peabody Award," he notes that the 2017 docuseries was a Peabody Award winning work that focuses on the story of a teenager who was arrested and incarcerated for three years at Riker's Island for stealing a backpack, a crime he was not convicted of (Watson). According to Watson's piece, "In 2015, two years after being released, Browder died by suicide" (Watson).

Along with Jay-Z's mention of the Kalief Browder documentary in "Black Effect," he references Trayvon Martin. His reference to Trayvon Martin connects him to the Black Lives Matter Movement and also illustrates how he is using his music and status as an artist to speak out against the unjust murder of a Black teenager who was killed by a White man who didn't face any consequences for the murder. Verse 1 illustrates the ways that Jay-Z has morphed into an artist using his art, career and platform to serve as an activist who advocates for societal improvements that will help to address issues such as a corrupt criminal justice system that unjustly fails to hold White people accountable for their treatment of Black bodies. This song evidences how Jay-Z does, at times share a perspective where he doesn't present himself as only focusing on self, and needing to eliminate anyone on his path to avoid compromising his chances of moving forward in society.

Jay-Z, on "Black Effect," seems relentless and unbothered by those who might try to stop his progress or stop him from helping people progress. In line five of the chorus of "Black Effect," the lyrics "Get your hands up high like a false arrest" (Jay-Z), evidence Jay-Z's focus on addressing issues like poor policing practices which result in Black people enduring poor treatment during traffic stops and other police-encounters. Using the term "false arrest" indicates

that Jay-Z doesn't view the actions of the police departments as justifiable, valid, truthful, or trustworthy. Instead he views the relationship between the Black community and the police as tainted. Discussing the issues faced by the Black community is not something that Jay-Z just started on "Black Effect," but, in some ways, it suggests that his influential voice and interest in advocating for the Black community is more evident in his later work.

Even considering these points, the troubling truth is that Jay-Z seems to come up short offering innovative suggestions that pull Black people away from having to live within a society where he and others recognize that, despite their social and financial status, they are still treated inhumanely. The pursuits of wealth and materialistic possessions that he identifies as solutions in his own life and that have afforded him the platform to discuss problems in the Black community compromise his ability to talk about other ways that people can move forward in America without money and materialistic things. While Jay-Z refers to himself as Malcolm X in "Black Effect," his expressed ambition to pursue profits at all cost make it difficult to determine when his messages are being shared because he is genuinely concerned with the state of Black America or because he is aware of how he will profit from this expressed concern. One of the biggest changes in Jay-Z's lyrical content from "D'evils" to "Black Effect" is how he talks about the community in relation to himself and what he views as his role in the Hip Hop community and in society. His evolution involves him going from speaking about his own ambitions to become rich and successful to him focusing on how he can use his status and platform to help others.

Jay-Z's career shows that eventually one has to reevaluate, consider whether all the money was worth it, and find a cause worth risking the money and success for. Some slave masters offered slaves who made no profit the opportunity to buy their freedom from the

abusive, hateful and money-hungry institution of slavery. This evidences how money is upheld as a more valuable asset than people in society where the kind of money that is associated with freedom is not often attainable, which is why Jay-Z's references to it as a solution undermine his ability to use his lyrical content to help people detach themselves from the notion that they have to make excessive amounts of money to improve their lives and be free. It also shows that sometimes the only way to maintain the financial status that you've invested a lifetime earning is to give customers something they believe is worth paying for.

Chapter 2: If you Ask J. Cole He'll Tell You, "I Don't Want No Picture With The President"

Aspiring to be great requires an individual recognizing their own potential to be great. Achieving greatness requires someone else acknowledging those aspirations and investing time, energy, resources and money into supporting your pursuit of greatness. Throughout his career, J. Cole, who released his first studio album *The Sideline Story* in 2011 (Greene), has earned the respect of other Hip Hop artists and public figures and aligned himself with people focused on making social change to improve the lives and experiences of Black people. Raised in Fayetteville, N.C. (Scott), J. Cole is a successful performer who is committed to using his music to discuss his experiences and share his observations of society. He is invested in connecting with fans and the Hip Hop community and often shares lyrics that push people to think more deeply about their own lives, the lives of others and the human condition.

His lyrics address a wide-array of topics ranging from poverty, violence in the Black community, unjust and poor police practices, to mental health issues and addiction. This chapter offers an analysis of six of J. Cole's songs to show how he, in his lyrical content, addresses these societal issues, along with sharing his own ambitions to be wealthy and have a meaningful career in the music industry, even though at times he makes it clear that these pursuits don't always equate to positive change and improvements for society. In this chapter, my analysis of these songs also highlights that while J. Cole has earned a certain level of fame and has the platform to discuss his concerns for the Black community, he can't whole-heartedly claim that the financial and social status he has earned would benefit others. A quote from Scott's *Complex* interview with the artist evidences this point. Cole in the article says, "Wanting to be a movie star, wanting to be a rap star, wanting to have jewelry, wanting to have girls, and wanting to have

money, all that shit is just trying to plug those holes. It's dangerous because it's not real" (Cole qtd. by Scott).

Before discussing J. Cole's lyrics, I will provide some background on him and how he made his way into the rap game. Prior to becoming a successful recording artist who had released five studio albums, Cole earned his degree and graduated magna cum laude from St. John's University. ("J. Cole: "An Upstart Rapper Speaks for Himself"). In "An Upstart Rapper Speaks for Himself," which was published on the National Public Radio website on Nov. 1, 2011, Cole is portrayed as a bold, confident, resilient, ambitious person who is fully invested in getting into the Hip Hop industry. According to the article, "When Cole finished his first mixtape, he went after the biggest in the business camping outside Jay-Z's studio for two hours for a chance to connect with the mogul" ("J. Cole: An Upstart Rapper Speaks for Himself"). Although J. Cole described an encounter with Jay-Z where he was initially rejected, he eventually signed with the artist's record label, Roc Nation, and, at the time the article was published, had clear expectations set for what he wanted to do as a Hip Hop artist ("J. Cole: An Upstart Rapper Speaks for Himself").

Cole stated, "There's a 12-year-old right now whose favorite rapper is J. Cole, and because I'm representing the true essence of what this thing should be about, this hip-hop thing, [if] he decides tomorrow he wants to write rhymes, he's going to emulate me." Cole continues, "Which means the future of hip-hop is kind of secure, if we continue in this pattern" ("J. Cole: "An Upstart Rapper Speaks for Himself"). This thought shared by Cole illustrates that he sees himself as a positive role model who can create rap songs that will deliver messages that will speak for and to the people.

The next portion of this chapter focuses on the methods I used to explore and examine some of J. Cole's music, some of the scholarship I refer to in the chapter to build on my discussion of these lyrics, and my analysis of the following six J. Cole songs: "Mr. Nice Watch" ft. Jay-Z, on *Cole World: The Sideline Story*; "Let Nas Down" on *Born Sinner*; "Ville Mentality" and "Neighbors" on *4 Your Eyez Only*; "Window Pain-Intro" and "1985 (Intro to the Fall Off)" on *KOD* to determine what Cole's vision for Hip Hop is as well as to determine what his lyrics suggest about what he believes is needed to represent the "true essence of what" ("J. Cole: "An Upstart Rapper Speaks for Himself") Hip Hop should be about.

When reviewing the six J. Cole songs I selected, I documented instances in the lyrical content that highlighted the issues and topics that are addressed in the lyrics, how money is referenced, whether there is a message of uplift and unity, the issues the artists speaks out against, the lifestyles and habits are promoted and whether guidance or solutions are offered. I additionally documented some connections between some of J. Cole's other music and Jay-Z's music. While I listened to all of these songs prior to my work on this thesis, I listened to them, read and reviewed the song lyrics and at times did both in order to try to find answers to the aforementioned points of exploration and to determine what other topics were discussed in the music.

Despite my admiration for J. Cole as an artist and my awareness of him focusing on social injustices and advocating for social justice, both in his music and outside of his music, I believe he and other Hip Hop artists can do more to help redirect people who are supporters of their music. Examining J. Cole's lyrics gave me the opportunity to try to determine whether his own discussion about his ambition to improve his status and social class trump his abilities to

steer other people in a different direction, to put them on a path to build and create communities where they are not relying on practices that are a part of a system that they cannot rely on.

For my analysis of J. Cole's work, it was useful to refer to Richardson's discussion of stereotypes of Black people perpetuated in rap music for profit (12) and some of Pough's points (33) from the "Theorizing Race, Rap, Gender and the Public Sphere" section of her 2004 book. Along with this, it was helpful to reference Patricia Malesh's (2011) "Sharing Our Recipes: Vegan Conversion Narratives as Social Praxis" for her perspective on the role storytelling and narratives play in social movements (132) to discuss how I see J. Cole using storytelling and narratives in his work, as well as his use of various languaging strategies that Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. discuss in their (2012) work.

The Come-up and What Comes After

Cole's pursuit of education and a career as a Hip Hop artist in New York ("J. Cole: An Upstart Rapper Speaks for Himself") illustrates the ways that pursuing success and our dreams often results in us leaving our environments and what we are familiar with to pursue opportunities we think will improve and change our circumstances. It was important for me to explore Cole's work to consider how our own pursuits to achieve greatness in our professions afford us lifestyles that may improve our social and financial status but don't necessarily help us deal with personal struggles and poor circumstances in society. Instead, such pursuits can suggest that having more will mean that we are worth more, which may undermine our chance to help show people that these pursuits may not aid us in our individual growth or improve society. Examining the lyrical content of Hip Hop artists such as J. Cole make it possible to explore this

topic because they often rap about their own experiences and how those experiences have impacted them.

For J. Cole, these pursuits included aligning himself with Jay-Z, a New York native who shifted from hustling to escape a life of poverty in his neighborhood to hustling as a successful, internationally known Hip Hop artist. While it is possible to reference Jay-Z's career, success and role in Hip Hop without referencing J. Cole, the same cannot be said for discussing J. Cole's career, which includes his first studio album, *Cole World: The Sideline Story*, being released on Jay-Z's Roc Nation in 2011. His first studio album followed an already successful start as a mixtape artist, who established himself with fans and listeners in the Hip Hop community (Greene). A review of this album written in *Pitch Fork* by Jayson Greene offers insights on the album while delving into details about the artist who created it. Greene discusses Cole's success as a mixtape artist, who, prior to the release of his first studio album, was a rapper who:

...rapped in writerly thickets in which the semicolons and embedded clauses were audible, and he produced all his own tracks. He became a leading light of the conscious-rap crowd, who, always eager for a viable mainstream entrant in rap's ongoing culture wars, fervently embraced him. And then perhaps, inevitably Jay-Z swooped down and signed him. (Greene)

Of *Cole World: The Sideline Story*, Greene suggests that, despite not receiving much radio play at the time, it was "...projected to sell nearly 250,000 copies" (Greene). Greene also suggests that "People appear to care deeply about this guy. But it's difficult to imagine why from the evidence of his studiously bland and compromise-riddled record, which seems to be searching for the meeting point of every conceivable middle" (Greene). Greene's review evidences

people's respect and admiration for J. Cole, who they seem to rely on to deliver lyrical content that would be different than commercial content in Hip Hop. In the next section of my thesis, I offer an analysis of the six J. Cole songs I selected, starting with "Mr. Nice Watch."

Now that I'm Rapping, I Made It. I Think?

In "Mr. Nice Watch," J. Cole presents himself as an ambitious individual who is focused on leaving an everlasting impression on Hip Hop but who is also care-free at times and interested in living life to the fullest. Although Cole seems invested in spending money on lavish things, having a good time and drinking in excess to escape having to deal with issues that he doesn't disclose, time seems to be of greater importance than money for the artist, who speaks of money as something that he can make as long as he has time.

Cole, in "Mr. Nice Watch," comes off as someone who feels he has to prove himself to people who doubt his ability. J. Cole in verse one raps, "What you say? 'Cole ain't hot,' what? Where you read that shit? /You believe that shit? All cause some lame nigga tweet that shit? Have you seen my shows? Have you seen my hoes?/ If I wasn't hot would they be so thick?" (2-5). These lines illustrate that Cole feels obligated to make sure that his image is not tainted by other people's perception of him, so he boasts about his abilities and the women that are attracted to him because of his success. Cole addresses the ways artists can become the center of the public's critique and scrutiny while suggesting that other people's perception of him aren't indicators of his abilities; rather his status and success are. His reference to his shows suggests that one must perform well and be able to prove that their work is desired and worthy of attention, but his line about women and their bodies show that he struggles to see his own success as valuable without being able to refer to the type of women that desire to be with him

because of his fame and his success. The lyrics in lines 2–5 offer little other than bragging and an expressed need to prove oneself and to attack anyone that doubts his ability.

As J. Cole gets to the hook, he delivers what are arguably the most meaningful and valuable lyrics in the song. In the hook, J. Cole raps:

It cost me a lot, my chain and my watch/They say time is money but really it's
not/If we ever go broke girl, then time is all we got/ And you can't make that
back, no you can't make that back/So let's ball while we here, let's ball while we
here/Like ain't no tomorrow, like ain't no next year/Drink away all our problems,
make it rain with no care/ Like I'll make that back, fuck it, I'll make that back, go.
(1-8)

Here, Cole makes a clear distinction between money and time and upholds time as the most valuable and less guaranteed of the two. These lyrics evidence that Cole, like many, struggles to detach from materialistic practices such as spending an excessive amount of money on items that aren't necessary.

His uncertainty about how much time he has and acknowledgement that time will eventually run out seems to fuel a careless approach to using the money he has, causing him to believe that it is more worthwhile to engage in senseless and excessive financial endeavors that will allow him to enjoy life and rid himself of having to deal with addressing issues. The lyrics, however, also can be interpreted as a message about sacrifice. In the first line of the hook, J. Cole raps, "It costs me lot," which suggests that he has invested a great deal of time pursuing his professional goals. Time, unlike money, can't be recovered. Cole's lyrics thus call attention to deeper societal issues, such as fear of not being able to control time, making poor financial

decisions, using all our time to pursue things that we don't need, feeling the urge to escape, and engaging in habits that aren't necessarily productive for people, such as the solution that he suggests when he in line seven of the hook states, "Drink away all our problems, make it rain with no care" (J. Cole).

These lyrics touch on people's reliance on money and obtaining it to buy materialistic possessions to temporarily enhance one's experiences; they also call attention to the larger societal issue of people wanting to rid themselves of having to deal with their problems and doing so in a counterproductive way. In "Mr. Nice Watch," progress for Cole is being in a different and a better position, which allows someone to be equipped with resources and the financial means to take chances. As the song goes on, Cole provides details about who he is, describing himself as a resilient and ambitious individual who doesn't give up and quit despite being faced with adversity. J. Cole in verse two raps, "Young, black and gifted, I rap like it's Christmas Eve/Coach wouldn't let a nigga off the bench/Now wonder why I didn't quit the team, but/ I'm cut from a different sleeve/ Cole World so 'til the wrist'll freeze/ Hurry up with your pictures please, I gotta make history" (5-10). In line 5–10 of verse 2, Cole also uplifts the Black community by associating Blackness with positive descriptors such as young and gifted. Speaking of being Black as a positive that people should be proud of and that is a part of your identity that can be credited for making key contributions to society is powerful because it helps to eliminate the notion that being Black means that our contributions and existence are worthless.

These lyrics are the types of lyrics that show the ways that Hip Hop functions as a social movement. I will refer to Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr.'s point about "[t]he rhetoric of other-directed social movements" (60) to provide support for my statement. When referring to members' views of themselves in these types of movements, they write, "Members do not see

themselves as members of oppressed or exploited groups but as saviors of the oppressed and exploited. There are no signs of despair, insecurity, or inferiority” (Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. 60). Cole’s decision to pair being Black with being gifted shows that, along with bragging about himself and his own abilities, he uses his talents to present his race and generation as being capable and qualified too. While he refers to being Black as a part of his identity that he takes pride in, he also references his youth. In society, Black young people are not always welcomed and invited to discuss their perspectives and experiences, and when they do, these things are not always valued. But here, Cole’s reference to his identity serves as a way for him to inform people of the type of successful career that young Black people in America can have when they are resilient.

J. Cole, in the outro of “Mr. Nice Watch,” leaves listeners to think about whether the spot that Jay-Z believes he is worthy of, the fame and fortune that come with that spot and having to target an entire community to protect that spot, are all worth it. No matter what conclusion listeners come to, J. Cole makes it clear that success and wealth take time, which is something that we can’t retrieve once we have spent it trying to earn income that affords people experiences that they think will help them at least escape moments of thinking about problems and at most rid them of having to deal with them. While Cole in this song encourages listeners to value time, he doesn’t offer suggestions for a productive way to spend time.

In 2013, two years after the release of his debut solo album, J. Cole released *Born Sinner*, which Alex Gale, in his track-by-track review of the album, refers to as, “...easily the best hip-hop album of 2013 so far...” (Gale). Gale refers to Kanye West’s grandiose release of his song “New Slaves” and how Cole’s tech-centered release of his music at an “international listening party” open to select members of the public had some complications, but none that would cause

them to not be able to express an appreciation for Cole's work (Gale). Gale writes, "The experience lost more of its impact when the album leaked online hours after. Maybe the old-fashioned listening party isn't bad after all. Still, the complaints couldn't stifle the real takeaway of the night: "Born Sinner" was stellar, and a big step up from Cole's previous work" (Gale). Gale's review highlights that Cole, at the time, had transformed from an artist trying to introduce himself to larger audiences into a rapper who earned the support and respect of those audiences and who established himself as a well-known artist whose work was anticipated.

"Let Nas Down" was on *Born Sinner*, which also included tracks like, "Villuminati" "Forbidden Fruit" ft. Kendrick Lamar and "Crooked Smile" ft. TLC. Prior to my analysis of "Let Nas Down" ("Born Sinner Tracklist"), I will offer some background to help increase the relevance of certain points made in the analysis. The relationship between Jay-Z and Nas, which includes one of the most notable rap battles of all time, has at times been confrontational and competitive. Although Jay-Z and J. Cole's "Mr. Nice Watch," along with other songs on Cole's first solo album, received radio play and helped him to establish himself with a mainstream audience, his track "Let Nas Down" evidences that not everyone, including himself, approved of the type of music he released on his debut album. Some of the themes, topics and issues Cole addresses in the song include: disappointment, self-doubt, idols, religion, the struggle to honestly pursue one's passion and deliver art that represents one's truth, the desire to educate and inform people, and the desire to make a difference.

"Let Nas Down" starts with lyrics from Nas' song "Nas is Like" song. Nas in the intro raps, "Freedom or jail, clips inserted, a baby's bein' born/ Same time my man is murdered; the beginning and the end/ As far as rap goes, it's only natural, I explain/ My plateau, and also, what defines my name" (1-4). Nas' lyrics on the track reveal the limited outcomes that exist for Black

people in America. J. Cole seems reflective about embracing his role as a Hip Hop artist and is quick to acknowledge legends or those before him who he seemed dismissive of on “Mr. Nice Watch.” In the refrain, he raps, “Yeah, long live the idols, may they never be your rivals/ ‘Pac was like Jesus, Nas wrote the Bible/Now what you bout to hear is a tale of glory and sin/No I.D., my mentor, now let the story begin” (J. Cole).

In lines 1–4 of the refrain, J. Cole compares Tupac to Jesus and compares Nas’ lyrical content to a religious text that is referred to by followers as a resource that provides guidance and governs their actions. He doesn’t refer here to Jay-Z, who he was signed to the record label of at the time and sought out to start his career, but instead to Nas and Tupac, two artists whose work garnered mainstream attention but often expressed their revolutionary views, appealed to the Black community, and offered more than the lyrics of songs fit for the commercial side of Hip Hop. The level of respect and admiration Cole expresses shows that those in Hip Hop value legends and pay tribute to their elders and that the community is not a newly created, directionless art form detached from its roots, but one with values, long standing traditions, a rich history and important figures who all are a part of a community and culture that J. Cole is also a part of.

Along with acknowledging those who have influenced him, J. Cole in “Let Nas Down” sheds light on his own progression by briefly recapping his journey from a watchful fan of the greats to someone who is admired by them. J. Cole raps in verse one, “Fast forward, who’d a thought that I would meet him on tour/I’m earnin’ stripes now, a nigga got Adidas galore/ Backstage I shook his hand, let ‘em know that he’s the man/ When he said he was a fan it was too hard to understand” (5-8). In these lines we are hearing a different J. Cole than the one who, in “Mr. Nice Watch,” came off arrogantly, so self-assured and focused on becoming great that he

did not seem to care about what older individuals had to say, even coming off at times as dismissive of their perspectives. In lines 5–8 of verse 1 of “Let Nas Down,” Cole expresses a humbleness when meeting Nas, his hero, and is in awe that someone he looks up to is familiar with his work.

Having a career requires meeting expectations and Cole in “Let Nas Down” acknowledges that Hip Hop artists aren’t excused from meeting the expectations set by their bosses. Along with this, Cole addresses how such expectations can put unnecessary pressure on people and taint their intent to create and produce art they are passionate about. In verse one Cole raps:

Hov askin’ where’s the record the radio could play/And I was strikin’ out for months, 9th inning, feelin’ fear/Jeter under pressure, made the biggest hit of my career/ But at first, that wasn’t clear, niggas had no idea/ Dion called me when it dropped, sounded sad but sincere/Told me Nas heard your single and he hate that shit/ Said, ‘You the one, yo, why you make that shit?’ (10-16)

Here, Cole discusses the challenge of being expected to meet Jay-Z’s demands to produce a hit and Nas’ standards to create lyrical content that offers deeper, more meaningful content that addresses societal issues. These lines evidence that the expectation to perform in a certain way influences people’s performance and can determine what they will do and how it is done in an attempt to avoid jeopardizing success. J. Cole highlights the issues within the Hip Hop community that occur when someone is pushing you to become commercially successful and make music for profits and popularity, and one taints their own chances to make art that reflects their vision.

Cole reflects on how pursuing notoriety and success can cause someone to deviate from focusing on their original goals. In his case, this resulted in his art being shaped into content that would be popular and reach the masses, but not necessarily convey the messages he intended to convey because of narrowly focusing on making a hit. J. Cole acknowledges how pressure can push people away from who they are and their own aspirations. For Cole, this is problematic because trying to meet the demands of making a hit, in some ways, hinders his ability to dig deeper and go beyond writing catchy hooks and punch lines, to instead offer lyrical content that may help to improve Black people's experiences.

Cole opens up verse two by pointing out a Nas' song that he sees as similar to his own work, to suggest that despite his disapproval, he took a similar route to earn his stardom and success and should be more understanding as a result. J. Cole in verse two raps, "I couldn't help but think that maybe I had made a mistake/I mean, you made, 'You Owe Me'/ Dog, I thought you could relate/But while I shot up the charts/ You mean tellin' me I was not up to par" (1-5).

Cole's lyrics suggest that those who inspire us and that we aspire to be like may expect us to use our talents to take a different path than them and avoid some of the mistakes they made while staying true to who we are and what our visions of a meaningful career are. The issue with this type of thinking and expectations is that people push others to be accountable and make significant change that may impact their income but have not always expected this of themselves. Cole's decision-making in lines 4-10 shows that sometimes an artist's own ambition leads to them falling into the trap of producing art for those reasons instead of creating art that could really help to benefit the fans. Cole's acknowledgement that making hits was a requirement suggests that if he was not expected to do these things, he would be creating different music and sharing different messages.

His interest to produce these other messages is clear when in lines 12-16 of verse two he raps, “Labels are archaic, formulaic with the outcome/ They don’t know, they just study the charts/ Me I studied shows, the fans, the charts, study they hearts/ I had a feelin’ I was killin’, and this music we were spillin’ out/Would changes lives forever, fuck the label, put it out” (J. Cole). As an artist, J. Cole is in a position to create lyrical content based on observations, his experiences and interactions with fans. He is aware that while the music he created might be what some fans want to hear, it might not necessarily fulfill the Hip Hop community’s needs or his desire to make music that doesn’t just meet the requirement of being trendy, but that helps to make social change. “Let Nas Down” isn’t an excuse for songs like “Mr. Nice Watch,” but it is an explanation that offers insights on some of the motivation behind J. Cole’s musical decisions. The stand that J. Cole takes in these lyrics is one that calls attention to how an artist and their intentions can be contaminated by what they feel obligated to do to be successful and maintain their positions in the Hip Hop industry.

Even though J. Cole’s lyrics provide insights on his experience, he makes it clear that his goals of becoming famous and receiving notoriety were a part of his plan that he thought would lead to making effective change. J. Cole in verse three raps, “I always believed in the bigger picture/If I could get them niggas to listen outside my core/Then I could open the door/ Reintroduce them to honesty, show em’ that they need more/ The difference between the pretenders and the Kendrick Lamars/and so I took the fall” (1-6). What Cole expresses in lines 1–6 of verse three is that his goal to reach more people led to poor decision making, including trying to connect with an audience outside of his usual fans, by steering away from his normal messages and instead sharing lyrical content that he believed would appeal to the masses so that he could then share the messages he believed they needed to hear. In an attempt to better explain

his own motives and intent, J. Cole references Kendrick Lamar, a popular and successful Hip Hop artist who is embraced for providing social commentary and talking about the experience of Black people in America, more specifically in Compton and impoverished neighborhoods like it where some people deal with hardships that are associated with drugs, poverty and crime. As someone who has earned fame and success, J. Cole expresses that these things alone do not satisfy him, and he seems to be let down by fans who are satisfied with him making music that may lack substance. In lines 10–12 of verse 3, Cole seems to be content with the message he has shared on “Let Nas Down” and raps, “If I should pass, please let this be my last essay/Therefore I write from the heart/Apologies to OGs for sacrificin’ my art” (J. Cole).

It is difficult to be in a position where making a living results in limiting one’s aspirations as a person and an artist because you have to decide whether you are willing to sacrifice and compromise who you are. J. Cole references the impact that creating a product for profit can have on artist. J. Cole in verse three raps, “Dyin’ for that fake shit you niggas bought/For the past decade” (8-9 Here, J. Cole holds the music industry and fans accountable for the compromises he has made to supply music that he believed they would want—which in some ways negatively impacted his decision to be more accountable and consider how the music he was making impacted his community and compromised his message.

At the end of verse three, it is clear that J. Cole has not only let Nas down, but that he has also let himself down. Cole’s last five lines in verse three are, “Don’t cry Mama, this is the life I choose myself/Just pray along the way that I don’t lose myself/ This is for the nigga that said Hip-Hop was dead/I went to Hell to resurrect it/ How could you fail to respect it? (17-21). These lines are significant because, in them, Cole acknowledges that he consciously makes a decision that he thought would benefit him and strengthen his ability to reach more people than just those

interested in messages that might not be popular enough to make a hit. The lines also show that even though J. Cole wasn't happy about having to alter his career and art, he seems content and thinks of it as a worthy sacrifice since he believes it will benefit Hip Hop. His reference to hell here suggests that he suffered, endured pain and potentially felt persecuted along the way, but his journey to a dark, undesirable place isn't something he expresses regret about. He also speaks of himself of doing something that Nas and other artists who have questioned the state of Hip Hop have not done, which is anything it takes to retrieve Hip Hop and ensure that it is serving the people it was intended to speak to and for.

In 2016, J. Cole released *4 Your Eyez Only*, his fourth studio album, which Jon Caramanica reviewed for a *New York Times* piece published on Dec. 14, 2016. The *4 Your Eyez Only* album, included songs like, "Immortal"; "Change"; "Foldin' Clothes"; "Ville Mentality" and "Neighbors" (*4 Your Eyez Only Tracklist + Album Art*). Caramanica provides details about the album and reflects on J. Cole the person and the rapper. Caramanica's review offers details about not only the album he is reviewing but also provides information about Cole's overall career and success at the time. He writes, "Each of J. Cole's three major label albums to date has gone platinum, but as his online defenders will never fail to remind you, the most recent one, '2014 Forest Hills Drive,' went platinum with no features..." (Caramanica). Caramanica's review of the album is insightful due to his assessment of Cole's career in relation to that of the rest of the Hip Hop Community, including Kendrick Lamar. Caramanica writes, "And often, Mr. Cole raps with a forceful tone at odds with his contemplative subject matter. In this, he differs from his closest peer, Mr. Lamar, hip hop's social philosopher in chief. Knottiness is crucial to Mr. Lamar's presentation, but Mr. Cole has always been more earthen than that" (Caramanica). Caramanica's review provides insights on how Cole compares to other elite and successful

rappers in Hip Hop, what he brings to the table, and what category of artists he is grouped with. Caramanica describes Cole as a “beacon of modesty” (“Review: The Only Big Name Here”) and describes the album as work that someone who has such a title would create and at other times where he expands on Anthony Parrino’s comments on the album that are from a Complex article. Caramanica’s review of the album touches on important parts of J. Cole’s identity as a rapper and a person, while sharing a thorough review of the album that suggests that it is a body of work that truly represents the artist, his evolution, and his perspectives on societal issues that need to be addressed.

Referring to Cole’s use of a child’s story and voice on “Ville Mentality,” a song I will offer an analysis of, Caramanica writes “This is a part of the album’s emotional strategy: “4 Your Eyez Only” is delivered 'largely from a perspective that is not J. Cole,' said Anthony Parrino, a.k.a Elite, the album’s co-executive producer...And yet these songs are among his most naked and revealing especially the title track, one of the most moving songs of this, or any year” (Parrino qtd. by Caramanica, “New York Times”).

As I transition into my analysis of J. Cole’s “Ville Mentality,” it is imperative for me to start my analysis with Cole’s message to his mother on “Let Nas Down,” which was, “Don’t cry mama, this is the life I chose myself/ Just pray along the way that I don’t lose myself” (J. Cole). J. Cole expresses that he is aware of how the pursuit to become a successful Hip Hop artist can cause one to lose themselves. While J. Cole expresses a desire to do more than just make hits and shares that he wants to make change in “Let Nas Down,” he doesn’t detail how but instead highlights things that stood in the way of him doing so — and acknowledges that he viewed having a platform as a way to make change.

The tough, young and resilient Hip Hop artist who seems confident and established enough to say what he wants to say on “Let Nas Down” presents a different state of mind on “Ville Mentality,” where his resilience seems to be waning as he comes off as reflective and desperately trying to escape the reality he is currently living. “Ville Mentality” touches on mental health, facing challenges in life, prison and living during the internet age. J. Cole opens the song by repeating the same question twice in the first two lines of the hook where he asks, “How long can I survive with this mentality?” (J. Cole). In what seems to be an address to anyone who is listening, J. Cole is speaking to young individuals living in the information age trying to determine the value of their life and self-worth. This song shows that, at this point in his career, Cole is invested in discussing issues in society and is also not quite sure about his own place in a world where he observes issues that make him want to escape. In “Ville Mentality,” Cole is struggling to deal with his current mindset and sees it as a threat to not only his well-being, but his survival. His lyrics evidence that he is deeply focused on his survival and is unsure about how his state of mind will impact his existence. J. Cole in verse one, “Trials and tribulations I’m facing/ In this age of information, I hate this shit/Cause niggas hit my phone when they want some shit/Bitches hit my phone when they want some dick” (1-4). These lines evidence how Cole is struggling to develop and maintain meaningful relationships that do not require him to be a provider of things that people want from him. His experiences with other individuals seem to be contingent upon his ability to fulfill their desire. Along with struggling to deal with the reality that sometimes what we have to offer is the only reason people are interested in connecting with us, J. Cole seems to find it difficult to function in the information age where technology and social media make us more accessible. The song is brief and

repetitive, but clearly expresses a need to escape a reality that is compromised by the internet and people's inability to connect for more than just artificial, self-motivated reasons.

Cole, who seems to embrace his position in Hip Hop and in society on "Let Nas Down," is a different person on "Ville Mentality" a song in which he repeats his intent to leave four times. J.Cole says, "Damn it, won't be long 'fore I disappear" (5-8) and addresses societal issues such as the criminal justice system by paralleling his own desire to escape to that of an individual looking to avoid being imprisoned. In lines 9-12 of verse one, he raps, "You call it runnin,' I call it escapin'/Start a new life in a foreign location/Similar to my niggas duckin' cases" (J. Cole). These types of lyrics are important in Hip Hop because they move us from observing issues into an inquiry about what these issues mean for our mental health and overall existence.

J. Cole's voice isn't the only one on the track, which evidences the way he values sharing the voices and stories of those who may not have a platform to tell people about their experiences. An example of this is in lines 1-4 of the interlude, where a child sharing his experience states:

My dad, he died—he got shot 'cause his friend set him up/And I didn't go to his funeral — and sometimes when I'm in my room, I get/ mad at my momma when she mean to me. And she/ And she say, 'clean up' — I say — (J. Cole).

The perspective shared by the child offers insights about the potential experiences endured by those who are living in fatherless homes and tells listeners about some of the ways that those who are left behind are also victims of the senseless violence. J. Cole, in the bridge, seems to be the adult voice of the child responding to the experience with his own anger, grief, pride and refusal to deal with anyone ever demeaning or disrespecting him (J. Cole). Unlike the other two

songs of Cole's that I have analyzed, here he isn't focused on an individual's personal or professional development or ambitions, but instead he is focused on the deep desire for an individual to escape, while reflecting on the ways experiences and interactions that are not ideal hinder our existence. Although Malesh's (2011) work is not focused on Hip Hop which is made clear when she writes, "I extend and theorize vegetarian and vegan 'stories of becoming' as recipes for identity that individuals share to lace their experience with meaning and show other's possibilities for resistance, defiance, and change" (132), the "possibilities" that she sees narratives and stories of vegan and vegetarian experiences possessing (132) are the same possibilities that I view as existing for the lyrical content of Hip Hop artists. I believe Malesh's discussion on the role that storytelling plays in social movements offers insights that are meaningful for my work because it enables me to point to how content and stories based on individuals' experiences are one element of what art can be — and highlights another important way these stories and narratives can and should be used by artists within Hip Hop not only to share their experiences, but to also provide insightful, positive and productive guidance to help communities who relate to their music deal with the types of issues, and circumstances that some of the lyrical content is focused on. In "Window Pain (Outro)," which will be discussed later in this chapter, J. Cole uses the type of storytelling Malesh refers to when she writes:

In this respect, stories are more than personal accounts; they are social tools that both reflect and break from cultural norms to help individuals and collectives digest experience and dramatize processes of becoming. As such, stories, and their telling, are inherently rhetorical, contextualized, purposeful, and dialogic *actions*. (132)

While Cole on “Ville Mentality” invites the child to share his personal account, the story that the child shares fits Malesh’s description of stories because J. Cole is using the child’s story to shed light on violence and the ways it can impact Black youth. Although there is one child speaking in the song, his story is also the story of other people who have endured similar experiences and tragedies and presents their reality to others who may be unfamiliar with such circumstances and societal issues. Although Cole could’ve addressed violence in inner-cities without the child’s narrative, sharing the perspective of a child strengthened the message in the song because the story of pain, the harsh realities that come with violence, and the details about what a victim endures were shared from a child’s perspective. A child sharing the traumatic experience puts people in a position where they have to consider how violence is victimizing the most vulnerable parts of the population. The child’s voice strengthens the song, and it shows people the ways that a childlike innocence can be snatched away and replaced with dealing with the death of a loved one, rejection, isolation and no positive outlets to express emotions or grieve. Using his music to call attention to an issue that might otherwise go unheard shows that J. Cole’s intent isn’t just to rap about guns and violence, but it is to show the ways people are impacted by these things.

Money isn’t referred to in “Ville Mentality,” and it doesn’t seem to be discussed as an essential resource for the type of escape that Cole has a desire to make or as a remedy for people looking to escape realities that they are forced to face. J. Cole in “Ville Mentality” shares a perspective that reflects on his life as a rapper, whose fame and fortune are thought of as being enough to satisfy people and realizing that none of this prevents him from having a desire to escape from a lifestyle and career that on “Mr. Nice Watch” he was ambitious about pursuing.

“Neighbors,” another song on *4 Your Eyez Only* (2016) (“4 Your Eyez Only Tracklist + Album Art”) shows J. Cole’s growth as an artist and his desire to address some of the issues

impacting the Black community. Although J. Cole primarily focuses on issues that are typically experienced by the Black community, he also addresses societal issues that are a part of most human beings' experiences. Themes discussed in the song include, but are not limited to, segregation, politics, fame fortune escape, taxes, death, money and social status. Cole opens the song with a reference to a common stereotype associated with Black men in America and speaks of an issue that occurs because of his neighbor's perception and prejudice. J. Cole in the intro raps, "I guess the neighbors think I'm sellin' dope, sellin' dope" (1). In verse one, Cole portrays himself as someone who isn't interested in using his fame and status to become more famous or improve his social status. He raps in verse one, "Yeah, I don't want no picture with the president/I just wanna talk to the man/Speak for the boys in the bando/And my nigga never walkin' again" (1-4).

These lines evidence Cole's commitment to speak for other people and to use his lyrics to address concerns that he has for people who might not have the means to discuss some experiences and living conditions that are problematic. It is important for artists in Hip Hop to use their roles to address issues and hardships that people endure, but it is imperative that they use their privilege and status to develop strategies and solutions instead of sharing their gripes about issues that have been overly discussed, yet consistently under addressed. A part of the solution requires artists helping to discontinue the notion that our time and efforts should be spent trying to reach a certain financial status and earn a certain level of prestige without considering ways to create solutions to address the struggles and poor realities that still exist for others. J. Cole's rejection of the opportunity to take a picture with the president is powerful because if we constantly work to place ourselves alongside those who hold positions of power, but fail to use that power to do what's best and the most helpful for our communities, then we

value being embraced by those in power more than we do empowering those whom America fails to embrace. Artists within the Hip Hop community need more references to the president like the one Cole has, where he hints at the way progress can be made by having discussions about the issues faced by those in our communities. Beyond this, I think that the lyrics must offer the artist's proposal of how to fix these problems instead of an expressed reliance on a corrupt system that they should be combatting for constantly criminalizing us but not seeing their inhumane actions towards us as criminal.

Cole in lines 1–4 of verse 1 of “Neighbors” speaks of his privilege and status as an artist as benefits that afford him with the opportunity to interact with people who are powerful enough to make change. I believe Hip Hop artists must see themselves as the individuals who do not need such interactions because they hold the same power as political figures who want to capitalize on photo opportunities with them. When mentioning that he has a friend that is not able to walk anymore, Cole doesn’t focus on what resulted in him having such an ailment, but decides to speak about the circumstances as a pressing issue that he would use his time with the president to address, which demonstrates his willingness to advocate for those who have historically relied on advocates to help them advance in society.

Although J. Cole finds the issues experienced by those he refers to as problematic, as he continues on in the song, it is clear that the type of challenges that he is rapping about are commonplace and that he feels they might not be deemed worth taking up time to discuss with people who can not relate or who have not endured similar hardships. In lines 5–6 of Neighbors, J. Cole raps, “Apologize if I’m harpin’ again/I know these things happen often” (J. Cole). The apology that J. Cole offers to listeners here in some ways suggests that he recognizes that issues such as drugs, violence and limited access to health care are heavily discussed challenges that

people typically endure and can often times become the center of attention in a way that dominates conversations and eliminates opportunities to discuss much else.

J. Cole sheds light on how these issues will continue to be treated with a sense of normalcy if self-promotional photo opportunities are what we invest time and energy in. Encounters with people in power shouldn't be photo opportunities to make the individuals in the picture more appealing to the audiences and followers of those they are standing next to. Instead, these encounters should be like the one J. Cole expresses a desire to have in lines 1–4, where he speaks of a photo opportunity as something he would replace with a chance to talk about issues that are troubling those in communities the president may never go to. I believe this type of lyrical content is productive and would be enhanced by Cole sharing how he would fix the issues and problems that he is interested in discussing with the president. Some of the changes in the Black community and in society must come from those within the communities and in society, who do not need to always rely on their relationships with individuals in power because that power is linked to a system that continues to oppress them despite the efforts of individuals within the system.

In “Neighbors,” J. Cole’s suggests that his financial status and career has afforded him the luxury of finding the type of escape he seemed desperate for in “Ville Mentality.” Still, his reflections in the song offer important insights that show the limited opportunities that exist for Black men who earn elite statuses and are afforded certain luxuries. He in lines 10-15 of verse one raps, “I been buildin’ me a house/Back home in the South, ma/Won’t believe what it’s costin’/And it’s fit for a king, right?/Or a nigga that could sing/And explain all the pain that it cost him” (J. Cole). In lines 10-15 of verse one of “Neighbors,” Cole sheds light on the opportunities and career paths that typically are thought of as options for Black people to become

wealthy in America. Black people's talents are not limited to dancing, singing and rapping about how bad our experiences of being Black in America are. We can be more than entertainers, but Cole's lyrics highlight the perception that in order to have a desirable lifestyle fit for royalty, Black people need to sing our way into it by talking about how bad our lives were before changing our financial and social class. I view this as problematic because doing well and living well should not always be equated to the homes we can afford but should instead be associated with whether or not we are safe, healthy and happy when we are in those homes and when we leave them. Although it is helpful for J. Cole to speak to the lack of possibilities for Black people to become wealthy, it would be more helpful if he and other artists considered and spoke about other ways Black people do and can earn the means necessary to lead fulfilling lives in productive, healthy and lively communities that they don't feel the need to flee.

Cole's lyrics highlight the issue of Black people being limited to reach certain heights and excel in a limited amount of positions, which they are thought of as being qualified to hold in order to earn wealth and elite status. Along with there being a limited amount of positions that Black people can acquire to earn such wealth and status is the way these positions seem to come with a requirement to reflect on our ability to now afford living accommodations that aren't really necessary, but that somehow dishonestly suggest that our worth as people has increased.

I want to acknowledge a point shared by Richardson who suggests that rappers demonstrate an ability and willingness to perpetuate certain notions about Blackness to make a living, but in doing so potentially strain their relationship with their communities, and potentially hinder their ability to truly help combat the system that pays them for sharing such limiting and devaluing versions of themselves. Richardson asserts that:

The ability to survive, ‘to make a way outta no way,’ and to narrate this experience rhythmically in such a way that it resonates with the primary audience, is what is at stake in evaluation of rappers’ performance, delivery, style, as authentic. Given that rap music and rappers are seen as commodities globally marketed largely by exploitation of stereotypical language and images of “niggas,” “pimps,” gangstas,” “militants,” “hos” “bitches,” and “bucks,” how do they display, on the one hand, an orientation to their situated, public role as performing products, and, on the other, that their performance is connected to discourses of authenticity and resistance? (12)

“Neighbors” is a piece of art that answers Richardson’s question about what artists must do to earn compensation as performers who work to present lyrical content that resonates with paying fans while also raising awareness about larger societal issues that are troubling the Black community. Although J. Cole’s career as a rapper financially positioned him to afford a home in the neighborhood where he became the victim of negative stereotypes, he likens being a talented and accomplished Hip Hop artist whose living revolves around making music to selling drugs. This is important to note because it affirms Richardson’s point about rappers being paid to perpetuate the notion that being Black is associated with certain activities and figures that usually pose more harm to their neighborhoods than good. While the “Neighbors” in Cole’s song share a close-minded, prejudice view of him rooted in suspicions of Black people, he himself, instead of denouncing the portrayal, embraces the negative and false representation of himself and other Black people when he in lines 7-9 of the chorus raps, “I guess the neighbors think I’m sellin’ dope, sellin dope/Sellin’ dope, sellin dope’, sellin dope/Well motherfucker, I am” (J. Cole).

Richardson's point (12) highlights how associating Blackness with negative, criminal and historically detrimental figures who aren't thought of as being positive contributors to society potentially hurts rapper's ability to mindfully and positively represent the audiences who rely on them and their music the most. It is important to mention these points in relation to Cole's lyrics about his career as a rapper making him financially established enough to afford lavish living conditions, yet still being subjected to prejudice and being made to feel like he doesn't fit in certain environments because of his race. Cole uses the negative portrayals of Blackness to show how we are outcast in society and often thought of as not belonging even when we have legally earned money from legit careers and use this money to pay to belong. Still Cole's decisions to attach himself to problematic actions such as drug dealing highlight an issue of rappers embracing negative stereotypes for payment as Richardson suggests in her work.

I propose that it is more productive for rappers to share their visions of Blackness and rap about how we want to be viewed instead of rapping about versions of ourselves that others are content with seeing. While in lines 12–14 Cole embraces the financial benefits of being an entertainer, he finds other elements of his career less satisfying. In lines 20–30 of verse one, being in the type of public spotlight that J. Cole seems committed to escaping used to be viewed as worthy of having, and how having one's own space and peace of mind has become more desirable, yet even his social and financial status can not afford him this because of his race. In lines 16-35 of verse one, he raps:

My sixteen should've came with a coffin/Fuck the fame and the fortune/Well,
maybe not the fortune/ But one thing is for sure though/The fame is
exhaustin'/That's why I moved away, I needed privacy/Surrounded by the trees
and Ivy League/Students that's recruited highly/ Thinkin' 'You do you and I do

me'/Crib has got a big 'ol back 'ol yard/My niggas stand outside and pass
cigars/Filled with marijuana, laughin' hard/Thankful that they friend's a platinum
star/In the driveway there's no rapper cars/Just some shit to get from back and
forth/Just some shit to get from back and forth/Welcome to the Sheltuh, this is
pure/ We'll help you if you've felt too insecure/To be the star you always knew
you were/ Wait, I think police is at the door (J. Cole).

These lines affirm Pough's argument that "Even the once valorized public has become devalued, and privacy itself — especially access to it — becomes the marker of real privilege" (33). J. Cole, in these lyrics, discusses his desire to be in a place where he can be comfortable and remove himself from constantly being in the spotlight and public eye. His ability to do so is an indication that he can afford the kind of privacy that Pough (33) speaks of as privilege. Although Cole shifts back into a community where he can embrace the people he cares about and get away from publicity and attention that comes with fame, being Black taints his opportunity to reap the benefits of having privacy. Even though he can afford to escape the spotlight, being Black in a certain neighborhood makes him the center of a different kind of unwanted attention that results in him encountering the police, simply because of his race. A discussion of these lines is relevant, because it's a reminder that being Black in America makes it difficult to avoid being the target of invasive practices that make people feel like prisoners, even in their own home. Cole's discussion about his way of living provides an example that deviates from the narrative often shared by Hip Hop artists when they suggest that having an excessive amount of materialistic possessions leads to happier and improved lifestyles. As Cole's lyrics evidence, he was able to find happiness by living a carefree life and having his basic needs fulfilled. Despite this, he had to deal with the reality that financial security and stability do not afford him the

privilege to escape being racially profiled and mistreated due to being a Black man. Cole's suggestion that the neighbors think that he is selling drugs, which resulted in the police showing up at his home, addresses the issue of being racially profiled and the ways that being Black qualifies as a reason people provide when reporting criminal activity. For listeners who know that J. Cole is selling music, not dope, he is shedding light on how race can cause a famous, popular and established artist to be targeted for criminal actions they did not commit.

In verse 2 of "Neighbors," J. Cole acknowledges that despite his success, he is still a vulnerable member of the population who can face the same fate as other Black people in America. J. Cole in verse two raps: "Some things you can't escape/Death, taxes, and a rac-/ist society that make/Every nigga feel like a candidate/For a Trayvon kinda fate/Even when your crib sit on a lake/Even when your plaques hang on wall/ Even when the president jam your tape" (1-8). These lyrics show how it's seemingly impossible for Black people to avoid being the targets of violence or killed without justice being served. As Cole suggests in his lyrics, for him, me, and many Black people in America, such a fate feels inevitable as death. J. Cole educates listeners on this by referring to his own success and materialistic gain to highlight the truth that none of this will save his life. Cole's reference to Trayvon Martin suggests that he is interested in using his art as a form of activism and holding himself accountable to call attention to societal issues, such as the murder of a young Black teenager whose death helped to spark and fuel the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Cole's lyrics in "Neighbors" are essential because they push listeners to think more deeply about a message that needs to be shared more in Hip Hop: why it's problematic to place such a high value on wealth and possessions like fancy expensive homes in certain neighborhoods. Cole guides listeners to think about what it is they should value and how they

should value themselves and their communities. Artists within Hip Hop can use their lyrical content to help people evaluate the following questions: If owning and living in these homes won't prevent Black people from being killed or harassed, then what value do they have?; If the constant pursuit to improve one's life, wealth, status and rank does not guarantee that we will be alive to enjoy any of it, then what's the point of pursuing it?

"Neighbors" also evidences how Cole views his role as an artist as a position that requires him to rap about experiences and circumstances that some listeners may be unaware of or avoid paying attention to. Cole, in verse two addresses race, talks about escaping, and speaks of himself as someone who is an observer, who sees all that happens, because of his own discomfort in America and fear of what might happen to him. As a celebrity and entertainer, he speaks out against carrying ourselves out of our own communities, when he in the outro raps, "So much for integration/Don't know what I was thinkin'/I'm movin' back to south side" (J. Cole, 6-8). J. Cole shares the experiences of an individual who has attained a great level of wealth and fame but continues to live in a society where so many other people who he shares a racial identity with are still struggling to make it.

Cole in "Neighbors" offers insights on how Black people are portrayed in the media and how such portrayals impact the public's perception of us. He himself is not in chains and doesn't make the news for criminal activity but, in lines 15–16 of verse two, he raps, "Just a couple of neighbors that assume we slang/Only time they see us we be on the news, in chains, damn" (J. Cole). In line 16, Cole uses the "implied we," which Stewart, Denton Jr. and Smith refer to as an identification tactic (145). Cole's reference to news coverage of Black people being hauled off to prison in chains is an example of him sharing "perceptions of social status," (Stewart, Denton Jr.

and Smith 61) which Stewart, Denton Jr. and Smith refer to when discussing self-directed social movements. Stewart, Denton Jr. and Smith write:

Protestors must locate their proper places in the symbolic and social hierarchy if they are to overcome their oppression and realize equality and justice. They see themselves as marginalized, disenfranchised, and ignored, and claim they are stereotyped and bracketed with children and the lowest elements of society, such as criminals, idiots and the insane. (61-62)

Cole references the press coverage on Black people heading to jail, and he calls attention to the issue of Black people in America often times being referred to and portrayed as criminals. This is an example of him achieving the goal that Richardson is talking about when she questions whether or not artists can balance their role as entertainers and as advocates. J. Cole understands that even though he himself doesn't make the news for being a criminal, being a Black man connects him to the experiences of others who do and subjects him to the opinions of people who believe that this is his reality because of their limited views of Blackness. Even though Cole shared these observations and acknowledgements on the 2016 album, my analysis of two of his rap songs on his more recent album *KOD* will demonstrate that issues pertaining to Black culture, identity and experiences continue to be the focus of some of his lyrical content.

In 2018, Cole released *KOD*, which has 12 tracks, including, "Window Pain (Outro)"; "1985 (Intro to The Fall Off)"; "Kevin's Heart"; Motiv8; "ATM" and "FRIENDS" (*KOD*, Tidal). On *KOD*, Cole addresses important concepts, such as addiction, personal relationships, violence in Black communities, the state of Hip Hop, and his take on using meditation as a positive alternative to the alcohol infused state of being used to deal with stress and mental health issues

that he raps about on “Mr. Nice Watch.” Cole’s tone and delivery on the album is occasionally satirical, which makes songs like “ATM” more impactful when paired with visuals such as the album cover that help to provide a deeper commentary on the ways we sacrifice ourselves to pursue money. In line four of the chorus of “ATM,” Cole raps, “Can’t take it when you die, but you can’t live without it” (Cole). Craig Jenkins’s review of *KOD* in *Vulture* offers a discussion of Cole’s work in relation to films that address addiction, provides commentary on Cole’s lyrical content on songs like “1985 (Intro to the Fall Off)” and “FRIENDS,” and compares some of Cole’s work on the album to that of other artists. Craig Jenkins’ perspective on the album’s cover details the visuals that Cole seemed to share to show the ways substances are persistently pursued to avoid dealing with reality. He writes,

I thought of *Trainspotting* when I saw the artwork to J. Cole’s new album, *KOD*. It’s a striking illustration of the rapper as a hollow-eyed king in a woolly cape concealing children smoking weed, popping pills, sniffing coke, and sipping lean. The cover is both profoundly haunted and entirely too heavy-handed, like an ace piece of D.A.R.E. or M.A.D.D advertising. You can imagine Nancy Reagan hanging it on a White House wall in the mid – ‘80s and solemnly gesturing to it in a televised public-service announcement advising kids to “Just Say No” to drugs. Above the rapper’s head is a disclaimer: “This album is in no way intended to glorify addiction.” (Jenkins)

Jenkins’ review offers important insights on J. Cole’s use of visuals as well as lyrical content to tell stories and share messages about addiction. Jenkins’ review is also significant because of his acknowledgement of Cole’s use of his platform to speak to other rappers about how they use their platforms and what messages they promote. Referring to Cole’s approach and

delivery, Jenkins writes, “It’s possible to celebrate hip-hop’s growth and worry about it stagnating and plead with its stars to be better stewards without malice. However bullish or idealistic his manner can be, Cole is trying to push his peers to greater heights” (Jenkins). Jenkin’s point about J. Cole holding others within the rap game to certain standards is important because it shows that Cole is now in a position where he himself can challenge others to think more deeply about their role in Hip Hop and being accountable, but it also makes us think about whether his status and position are the only thing that qualify him to provide such direction.

The two songs from KOD that I will analyze are, “Window Pain (Outro)” and “1985 (Intro to the Fall Off)”. In “Window Pain (Outro),” Cole delivers an emotional performance that consists of his observations of neighborhoods where worthless and unnecessary violence is decreasing chances that people will be able to live safe and satisfying lives. Similar to “Ville Mentality” in tone and mood, Cole seems fed up in “Window Pain (Outro)” where he speaks from a position of someone who is not in the chaotic and dangerous environment of those he is speaking about but is aware of the negative ways that people in those environments are impacted by their circumstances. The voice of a young child is the first voice on “Window Pain” (“Window Pain (Outro)”). Cole’s lyrics can be thought of as a speech of a leader advocating for people to end the violence that has profoundly impacted this child. Of the songs I analyzed, this is the second where J. Cole uses a child to deliver a message to shed light on the negative impact of unnecessary violence. The child in the intro of the songs says:

One night/When me and my mom was about to go to bed/All the doors was locked/Then when I had fell asleep/My mom had heard three gun shots/It was to my cousin, his name was Rod/ The one that came to pick me up/He had been shot right through the face, right in the neck/And he got shot right in the stomach. (1-9)

This child's story sheds light on the problem of children becoming almost immune to the violence to the point where they can detail traumatic experiences in the way that other children their age would detail a field trip. At other times in the song, Cole's lyrics highlight the various issues that not even money can fix, like the constant longing we have to be with loved ones who have died (J. Cole). Despite in the chorus of "Window Pain (Outro)" acknowledging that he is a powerful artist who has the ability to create art, share messages with the world and get paid for doing so, Cole expresses here that he still has basic wants and needs and is driven by his ambition to continue to be successful in life despite dealing with pain that money can't prevent any of us from experiencing.

There needs to be more lyrical content in Hip Hop like that in "Window Pain" which makes us see how problems persist in our lives and we must work to find ways to address our pain, work to reduce the amount of pain we inflict on others, and come to understand that money is not a requirement to achieve these things. It is important that artists within Hip Hop focus on delivering lyrical content that acknowledges that, since obtaining everything that we want isn't necessarily enough to address the types of societal issues and disparities that some lyrics address, then the most productive things for artists to do is move beyond their observations of the negative ways communities are impacted by these issues. Instead, as I have recommended throughout my thesis, rappers should use their lyrics to propose other ways of existing and placing value on pursuits of something other than wealth, and fame. In some ways, Cole offers this to listeners by sharing his truth and letting people know that money, access to women, and commercial success are not remedies and solutions. Themes like gun violence and self-doubt are addressed by Cole when he in lines 1-5 of verse 1 raps, "Right now I'm starin' out the window of my Range and/ contemplating, am I sane?/Have I sacrificed for fame?/My occupation's on my

brain/Thought that I could change it all if I had change” (J. Cole). Here Cole acknowledges that money and an elite social status haven’t positioned him to make the significant changes that he thought he would be able to make. If artists, like Cole does here, acknowledge that their income doesn’t position them to afford solutions that rid society of hate, inequality and unjust treatment of people, then the goal should be to focus on creating lyrical content that will help people in the communities develop solutions to address aforementioned issues.

In Lines 1–3 of verse one, Cole speaks of himself as an observer contemplating his own life and realizing that money and success alone are not enough to make the change he hoped to make. Cole’s lyrics in line one of verse five, ‘Thought that I could change it all if I had change’ (J. Cole), suggests that individual success alone is never enough for the kind of change that he reflects on in these lines. Cole is an observer, holding himself accountable for informing listeners that having more money doesn’t necessarily equip you to enhance society. Cole also shares the reality that he doesn’t believe his music has had the impact on people that he hoped it would, a conclusion that he seems to base on them still being in the same position in life, failing to progress, and continuing to engage in ongoing violence. In verse one J. Cole raps:

But the niggas that I came up with way back is still the same/ I be tryna give ‘em
game like Santa did when Christmas came/They be listenin’ but it’s clear to me
they did not hear a thing/It go in one ear and out the other like a bullet out the
muzzle of a/ pistol shot by brothers standin’ point-blank range. (6-10)

As “Window Pain (Outro) continues, Cole proceeds to use his music to make a statement and speak out about violence in Black communities, where he believes useless and senseless gang violence is killing people. In verse one J. Cole raps:

Niggas bang in the Ville, I always thought that shit was strange/How you claim blood or cuz when that was just a LA thing?/ I don't mean no disrespect towards your set, no I'm just sayin'/ That it seem like for acceptance nigaas will do anything/Niggas will rep any gang, niggas will bust any head/ Niggas will risk everything, point him out and then he dead/Shootin up where his granny live, 'blaow, blaow!', his granny duck/He don't give a fuck, he's on Henny and Xanny'd up (11-18).

While Cole in line 13 of verse 1 in “Window Pain” makes it clear that he doesn't intend to offend members of the gang, he raps about their actions in a way that makes them seem foolish and pointless and that certainly expresses that they are problematic and detrimental for their communities. Despite Cole's failure to see the ambitions of people in these neighborhoods as similar to his own, he is still sharing a perspective and observation that calls attention to the ongoing cycle of violence in communities where people experience the type of pain that the child at the beginning of the song has endured. Cole's lyrics in lines 10–16 also point to a type of desperation that exists for some who are willing to eliminate another human being and who seek refuge in criminal organizations in order to protect themselves, make money, and have a sense of security and safety. Line 18 in verse one of “Window Pain (Outro)” evidences how Cole's perspective about the use of substances changed since “Mr. Nice Watch” when he in line 7 of the hook raps, “Drink away all our problems, make it rain with no care.” (Cole) In “Window Pain (Outro)”, Cole highlights the detrimental actions that can be linked to alcohol and drug intake opposed to the way he speaks of substances as being a way to free oneself in “Mr. Nice Watch.” The perspective Cole shares about alcohol and substances in “Window Pain (Outro)” is one that people need to hear in order to hear awareness raised about the damage drugs and alcohol can

cause, instead of hearing substances be glorified as remedies for the realities people struggle to deal with.

While I have aimed to offer a discussion of how J. Cole's lyrics shed light on the human condition, society, and issues in society, I believe it is important to provide an analysis of a song where he directly addresses the Hip Hop community and the state of things in the community. Survival, accountability, portrayals of the Black community and personal and professional growth are some of the themes in "1985 (Intro to the Fall Off)." In the opening lines J. Cole raps, "1985, I arrived/ 33 years, damn, I'm grateful I survived/We wasn't s'posed to get past 25/ Joke's on you motherfucker, we alive" (1-4). Here, Cole references his own age to highlight the short life expectancy of young Black men in America. He raps about turning 33 (1), which is an age that some would consider relatively young, but that J. Cole speaks of as an age to be celebrated and thought of as an accomplishment due to the premature deaths of Black men in America. His remark about his survival being a joke that's on someone else is a point that I view as him taunting society for not being able to get rid of another young Black man.

The lyrics in lines 1-4 of verse one are an example of Cole using some of the techniques that are present in what Gilyard states, "Smith also identifies a four-part thematic structure that is basic to Black secular, agitational rhetors..." (11) I view Cole's reference to living longer than the expected age of a Black man as him suggesting one part of Smith's four-part thematic structure that, "(1) all Blacks face a common enemy" (Gilyard 11), which Cole, in this case, views as a society that, he implies, seems to think that a Black man surviving in it is laughable. I see Cole's use of a celebratory tone when he raps about the reality of Black men dying at a young age as him shedding light on the issues and circumstances experienced by Black people in

America and demonstrating what Smith's work identifies and that is that "(3) there is a pervasive American hypocrisy" (Gilyard 11).

In the lines that follow, Cole shifts into discussing how young artists within the Hip Hop community can lack awareness about the importance of being accountable in their lyrical content. J. Cole raps:

All these niggas popping now is young/Everybody say the music that they make
is dumb/I remember I was 18/ Money, pussy, parties, I was on the same thing/
You gotta give a boy a chance to grow some/ Everybody talkin' like they know
somethin' these days/ Niggas actin' woke, but they broke, umm/I respect the
struggle but you all frontin' these days. (5–12)

Cole takes aim at people attacking young rappers, who he believes haven't lived long enough or experienced enough to know that there is more to life than talking about a good time and money. J. Cole provides insights on what some identify as the lack of music with substance in the Hip Hop industry. Cole himself on "Let Nas Down" responded to being challenged for not being accountable, so "1985 (Intro to the Fall Off)" is his version of Nas' address to him. As a rapper, it is clear that Cole has shifted from his role as newcomer working to make his way in the game to advice-giver who has something to say about the state of Hip Hop. I view this as him evolving into someone who sees himself as a coach or leader whose lyrical content is focused on advising younger artists and acknowledging that he was in a position where he too made lyrical content that was scrutinized for being shallow. By embracing the younger artists despite them not receiving the same reception from people who view their music as problematic or as artificial, Cole is demonstrating the fourth element of the "four-part thematic structure" that Smith

identities which is that “(4) Black unity is requisite for Black liberation” (Gilyard 11). J. Cole exhibits a recognition that these artists' impact is significant enough for him to encourage them to think about the messages shared in the lyrical content and how they use their platform.

J. Cole's line in verse one “Niggas actin' woke, but they broke, umm” (11) suggests that being socially aware and addressing societal issues doesn't have much value if you don't have money and aren't getting paid for their perspectives, but it also highlights tension in the Black community between people who have different perspectives about what the end goal should be for members of the Black community, including Black leaders. Speaking from the perspective of a mentor, advisor or big brother, Cole directly addresses the young rappers and provides commentary on reckless spending of money, which is similar to his own spending habits that he spoke of on “Mr. Nice Watch.” J. Cole in verse one raps:

Come here lil' man, let me talk with ya/See if I can paint for you the large
picture/Congrats 'cause you made it out your mamma's house/I hope you make
enough to buy your mom a house/ I see you watch icy and your whip foreign/I got
some good advice, never quit tourin'/Cause that's the way we eat here in this rap
game. (17-23)

It is evident in these lines that Cole wants to offer knowledge he acquired in his career and that he believes it is important to share with young artists whose careers may not be as fulfilling as they could be if they continue their current practices. Doing this shows the unity that exists within the Hip Hop community and reveals that, while Cole himself has also been guilty of engaging in such habits and practices, he wants to help up-and-coming artists understand how doing so will impact them.

Although J. Cole seems to give the young artists a pass for letting trends and fads impact their music in the first half of the song, his tone and attitude shift in later lines of the verse, and themes like accountability and influence become the focus of the song. In lines, 32–41 of “1985 (Intro to the Fall Off)” J. Cole raps:

I must say, by your songs I'm unimpressed, hey/ But I love to see a Black man get paid/And plus, you havin' fun and I respect that/But have you ever thought about your impact?/ These white kids love that you don't give a fuck/ 'Cause that's exactly what's expected when your skin black/They wanna see you dab, they wanna see you pop a pill/ They wanna see you tatted from your face to your heels/And somewhere deep down, fuck it, I gotta keep it real/They wanna be black and think your song is how it feels/ So when you turn up, you see them turnin' up too. (31-41)

In these lines, J. Cole addresses the portrayal of the Black community and the power and influence Hip Hop artists have to shape peoples' minds about Black culture and the Black experience. For fans, who are impressed with the lyrical content of young rappers who portray themselves the way that Cole refers to in these lines, Blackness is about partying, having a good time, ingesting toxins and living a carefree life. The powerful message that Cole shares is that Black rappers do not only influence Black listeners. Their message is received by White audiences, whose perceptions and knowledge of Black people and Black culture might be shaped by rappers who, at times, suggest that excessive drug use and spending money are practices that are common in our communities. It is difficult for Black people to change their actions and contributions to their communities when rappers present portrayals of us that suggest that we are willing to sabotage ourselves for money.

J. Cole's point that "They wanna be black and think your song is how it feels" (40) suggests that when artists settle for making music that will get them paid, they are willing to sell any representation of Blackness, even if it is counterproductive for Black communities. Pough makes a similar point when discussing spectacle as a strategy used by some rappers who, she suggests, are simply working to stay in the spotlight (30):

Before Hip-Hop grabbed the national imagination, the Black and Latino youth who created it were neglected and unseen except for token guest spots in the nightly news as the criminal threat. With Hip-Hop culture sweeping the country and the world, these same youth now enjoy a form of publicity once denied to them. Spectacle, however, becomes a double-edged sword, because while without it rappers would have no vehicle to represent to the public at large or themselves, with only spectacle and no semblance of the political projects inherent in other forms of Black public culture the rappers risk becoming stuck in forms of publicity that have limited usefulness. (Pough 30)

Pough's point is important because she touches on the potential of the Black community being pigeonholed into only sharing a certain type of Blackness and the ways that wanting so badly to be represented can result in us sharing poor representations of ourselves that weaken our own ability to be viewed as effective and productive and that give other people examples of the ways that we are detrimental problem causers who need someone to interject in our communities to put an end to chaos and conflict. If having a stage will position us to put on a show that only allows us to shape and share a certain vision of ourselves, it is not necessary to be on stage. If rappers who have earned an abundance of money and elite social status say enough is enough and do not accept payment for lyrical content that at times encourages us to subject ourselves to

counterproductive practices, then they can determine how much they and their messages are worth instead of sending the message that money is worth so much that, in order to make it, we will think of ourselves and communities as worthless.

Cole's lyrics in "1985 (Intro to "The Fall Off)" are an acknowledgement that Hip Hop artists have the power to influence people, but the lyrics also challenge artists to be mindful about their influence and think about what they are losing or gaining for themselves and others in the process. His lyrics affirm my point that rappers have the ability to be leaders in society, meaning they should consider how being a trendsetter positions them to shape society and help people navigate through life, without chasing dreams that don't necessarily change or improve the majority's reality. Similar to Richardson's point "[p]aying Black folks and allowing us to participate in capitalistic exploitation in no way solves the problem of valuing humanity equally" (56) that I discussed earlier, I believe that, paying to come see us self-destruct proves that a mainstream audience is not invested in our growth and that they do not entrust the Hip Hop community with helping them grow. If we must compromise our decency and our community's ability to progress in order to be on an international stage, then it is important that we consider how we can reclaim our art and think about focusing on an audience that is as invested in our growth and development as we are.

Chapter 3 (Outro): Can't Turn Our Backs on Being Black, Never That

In this final chapter, I discuss similarities and differences in Jay-Z and J. Cole lyrics that I analyzed in the previous chapters. Some of the similarities I will discuss are how Jay-Z and J. Cole use their music to shed light on the communities they came from and to call attention to issues endured by Black people in America. Along with discussing these similarities, I aim to offer an analysis of other commonalities and differences I have identified in how Jay-Z and J. Cole view and value money, what resources and actions they believe are essential for change, their views of the experiences and treatment of Black people in America, and their visions and ambitions for their careers as artists.

I will also expand on my discussion of the artists' shared recognition that wealth and excelling in one's career aren't guaranteed remedies for some of the other topics of discussion in rap songs, such as violence, use of legal and illegal substances, poverty, health disparities and racial inequality. The final chapter of my thesis offers reflections and analysis that are guided by my interest in examining whether or not Jay-Z and J. Cole offer meaningful messages that could be used by their communities to make productive change, redefine progress, and help to improve their quality of life, or if their lyrics share messages that encourage people to pursue unattainable lifestyles and engage in practices that are counterproductive for their community. Hip Hop artists have the ability to be the leading voices in society and can be influencers whose work provides instruction for how we as people can productively move forward and create and enhance our own environments while improving circumstances within those environments.

As someone who loves Hip Hop and who has been encouraged by the work of people like Pough, Richardson, Reeves, and Morgan, I hope my thesis will encourage others to investigate

the lyrical content of rappers and present meaningful insights that move us all beyond our acknowledgement of the following point by Richardson, whose work has helped to motivate me to find out what rappers need to do to find a solution for the issue that she highlights when she writes, “[p]laying Black folks and allowing us to participate in capitalistic exploitation in no way solves the problem of valuing humanity equally” (Richardson 56). While I still have not determined exactly what artists’ lyrical content should address in order to help themselves and others step away from our dependence on a system that is not built to ensure equality, I know that artists using lyrics to value financial and social statuses that some view as moving them to the elite positions in that system is not the solution.

My analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole’s work will show that some of their lyrical content aligns with Richardson’s point here, yet these artists, who I view as being able to be shapers of society and determiners of how we value ourselves and communities, do not always share lyrical content that demonstrates their ability to move us past trying to establish ourselves and our worth in society. Although I have already acknowledged that Jay-Z and J. Cole, at times, use their lyrical content to focus on the communities that they emerged from, I do not always view this focus as productive for the enhancement of these communities due to them sharing limited visions of ways people can improve their circumstances, despite their own acknowledgement that wealth does not guarantee an improved experience or fulfillment. In the following section of the final chapter of my thesis, I will offer my analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole’s lyrical content and discuss some of the similarities and differences in their work.

That's All You, But I See Me in It: An Analysis of the Similarities and Differences in Jay-Z and J. Cole's Lyrics

On Jay-Z's and J. Cole's initial albums, songs like "D'Evils" on *Reasonable Doubt* and "Mr. Nice Watch" on *Cole World: The Sideline Story* illustrate both artists' desire for wealthy lifestyles and social status that comes with receiving a certain level of respect and recognition for their contributions. While there are similarities and differences in these artists' discussion of wealth, in other songs, I found it important to acknowledge the perspectives and attitudes the rappers expressed about money when they entered into the rap game and were still working to establish their careers. Both Jay-Z and J. Cole in "D'Evils" and "Mr. Nice" shared their reflections on past experiences and circumstances while acknowledging how they are thriving and flourishing as a result of their ambition and their ability to dominate in their careers and outperform others doing similar work. Their references to scenarios and circumstances from their past and their choices to highlight some of the benefits of their current experiences is done by using now-and-then scenarios that offer listeners a glimpse into what the artists' lives were like before their current lifestyles. In doing this, the artists speak of their own evolution by associating their growth and progress with living without limits and an improved financial and social status.

Additionally, Jay-Z and J. Cole both speak about wealth as an essential asset that is necessary to position one to escape circumstances, even if it's only temporarily like J. Cole suggests in Mr. Nice Watch, or if it's a phase in an ongoing process to avoid routine and rigid limitations that cause one to feel they do not have enough and are not experiencing all that life has to offer, as Jay-Z does in "D'Evils." The ways that Jay-Z and J. Cole discuss materialistic possessions in "D'Evils" and "Mr. Nice Watch" and the value that they place on costly items is

similar. As discussed in chapter one, Jay-Z speaks of materialistic possessions as so valuable he is willing to do whatever it takes to ensure that he has them. His claim that his soul is possessed is an acknowledgement that the cars and jewelry he names in these lines are essential purchases that allow one to be a part of an elite social and financial class, adding value to his life that might not otherwise exist without these items. He speaks of the items as definers of his existence and objects that motivate him to continue pursuing financial success so that he can afford more luxurious items. Jay-Z's use of the word "possessed" further suggests that his desire to have possessions is controlled and influenced by an outside force, such as societal expectations to possess items that we can use as markers of our social and financial status.

Like Jay-Z, J. Cole places emphasis on materialistic possessions. As my analysis suggests above, the hook in "Mr. Nice Watch" shows that Cole is invested in using his time to spend his money on expensive jewelry and having a good time. For him, the purchases of the watch and the chain makes a statement about his own financial status. In addition, lines 5-6 in the hook, "So let's ball while we here, let's ball while we here/Like ain't no tomorrow, like ain't no next year" (J. Cole) speaks to a desire to spend excessive amounts of money due to life not being promised and an acknowledgement that having money can buy a temporary escape, even if it does not ultimately change the conditions and challenges someone is faced with. Relying on large amounts of money and paying for a lavish time to drink away problems isn't productive for anyone because it doesn't combat societal and personal issues, but positions people to become reliant on temporary escapes that do not eliminate the problems they were escaping from.

At the same time, J. Cole's lyrical content does call attention to the issue of people trying to temporarily escape without properly establishing plans to work towards one's development.

The similarities that I have highlighted between Jay-Z and J. Cole using money to live without limits and investing in expensive possessions to show that their social and financial status has improved demonstrate how both artists place value on extraordinary and unlikely lifestyles and counterproductive ways to deal with troubling circumstances. Although J. Cole, as mentioned earlier, offers a temporary solution of slipping out of reality by drinking excessively and spending money, and Jay-Z prides himself on owning valuable items and living life to the fullest, neither J. Cole in “Mr. Nice Watch” nor Jay-Z in “D’Evils” shares a perspective that would equip someone to enhance their life without investing money in expensive purchases that falsely suggest that conditions have improved for individuals.

Money and Time: If you ask J. Cole, “Time is All We Got”

Although Jay-Z in “D’Evils” and J. Cole in “Mr. Nice Watch” both value living without limits and living life to the fullest, and Jay-Z’s reference to time lets listeners know in line nine of verse one in “D’Evils” that he doesn’t intend to spend it by working a “nine-to-five” (Jay-Z) I view the value that Jay-Z and J. Cole place on time in “Mr. Nice Watch” and “D’Evils” as different. While Jay-Z in “D’Evils” expresses that he is not looking to waste time, and he is committed to escaping the confines of traditional employment, he prioritizes money over everything else, which differs from the perspective J. Cole shares in “Mr. Nice Watch” where he suggests that time is the most valuable and essential resource an individual can have. J. Cole’s choice in “Mr. Nice Watch” to rap about time as significant and irreplaceable is a reminder that no matter how much money we have or what materialistic things we can afford, the most valuable part of life is time, which does not cost and can not be replaced. I am highlighting the value J. Cole places on time because it is important to recognize instances where artists place value on something other than money. While I understand how valuable and essential having

money is for us all, I view valuing a resource other than money as important because it is a reminder that despite our personal, professional, or societal conditions and experiences, we all have something we can offer. One of the ways rappers can serve as leaders in their community is by using lyrical content to help enlighten people about effective and productive ways, they can use their time, knowledge and abilities to enhance their lives and society, even if they do not have excessive financial means to do so.

Since everyone does not possess enough money to qualify them to be classified as wealthy, or be a part of a financial and social class that is associated with the power to make significant change, it is important that we acknowledge what we do have to offer and determine what we must do for our needs to be met and to have a good quality of life. As J. Cole acknowledges in the hook on “Mr. Nice Watch,” “They say time is money, but really it’s not/If we ever go broke girl, then time is all we got/And you can’t make that back, no, you can’t make that back” (2-4).

I think J. Cole’s acknowledgement of the power associated with money and the high value placed on money, paired with his perspective that it does not equate to time is an important mindset for rappers to share, because it invites listeners to evaluate how they use time and reminds people that even if they do not have money, that the time they can invest in positively changing their community is valuable.

J. Cole speaks of money as something that has little value and should be spent without even putting thought into it. He expresses a lack of interest in investing money to prepare for his future but seems enamored with spending excessive amounts of money to live in the moment, which sends the message that he has money to blow and is not concerned with the consequences

that come with doing so. While this message seems like one that would misguide people to make bad financial decisions and be careless, it in some ways is a recommendation to recognize that the most valuable aspect of their existence is not something that should be wasted trying to pursue expensive items and experiences that will result in a loss of time that can't be replaced. This is powerful because, as I mentioned earlier, J. Cole prioritizes time, which everyone has over money, a resource that some people have limited amounts of and are always willing to invest more time in earning due to it being essential for our lives. A notable difference between the lyrical content in "D'Evils" and "Mr. Nice Watch" is that Jay-Z does not prioritize anything over money. It is clear that he is solely focused on making money and doing so at all costs.

While it may not be Jay-Z's reality outside of his lyrics to pursue money at all costs, in "D'Evils," money is so valuable that he is willing to reduce the amount of time someone else is on this earth because of it. The constant pursuit of money at all costs that Jay-Z's speaks of in the songs I analyzed presents the notion that it is essential for one's development and satisfaction, which isn't productive for listeners because it exposes them to a mindset that nothing should be valued more than money. This is problematic because everyone doesn't have the same access to opportunities that equip them to make money, especially not for the type of lifestyle Jay-Z speaks of in "D'Evils."

What I appreciate about J. Cole's decision to prioritize time over everything else is that it shows his willingness to deviate from speaking about making money as top priority and treating it as it should be the only priority. I view his mindset about time as productive because he is sharing it from his position as a successful and wealthy rapper who has money but still views time, which we all have as the most powerful and appealing thing we can possess. On the other hand, Jay-Z's lyrical content in "D'Evils" offers lyrical content that seems to align with some of

his personal experiences of making it out of a tough neighborhood, which can be a motivator for other people in similar situations looking to make similar growth. While Jay-Z's lyrical content highlights how those who possess wealth are in a position to help their communities in ways that they would not otherwise be able to, the rap songs I analyzed also suggest that in order for people to avoid living with nothing or to lead enjoyable lives where they have what they want and need, they should be willing to commit themselves to do anything required of them to get everything.

Findings: The Ways Money Makes Its Way into Jay-Z and J. Cole's Lyrical Content and What Making Money Means for Their Messages

In all six songs that I analyzed Jay-Z mentions money or business endeavors and opportunities that are linked to profit in some way. Lyrics that directly or indirectly referenced money, lifestyles that were afforded by having money or references to one's earned income due to business pursuits classified as rapping about money. Money plays an essential role in Jay-Z's vision for what it means to progress and how he envisions progress for other individuals.

J. Cole references money or discusses a lifestyle that exhibits one's profits or earnings in five out of the six of the songs I analyzed. While I found instances of Jay-Z talking about money as a resource that could potentially help others or how having money positioned him to help others, I did not find similar instances for J. Cole. J. Cole's discussion of money involved him at times acknowledging his own financial prosperity and the benefits associated with wealth and at other times admitting that possessing money isn't something that equips someone to significantly change society. While Jay-Z seems to have solidified his views about the role money and status play in positioning him to make change for his community, J. Cole, at times has an idealistic

vision of using his art to make change, but at other times exhibits a lack of confidence in whether or not he can actually make meaningful change with his music.

My analysis of “Moment of Clarity” in chapter one highlights Jay-Z’s embrace of making profits. A notable difference is that Jay-Z is invested in becoming rich, even if it costs him an opportunity to make music that he views as having more substance. My discussion in chapter two of J. Cole’s lyrics in “Let Nas Down” evidences that he, unlike Jay-Z, is troubled by making music just to be popular with fans who do not appreciate the messages that he believes his lyrical content should be focused on. While both Jay-Z and J. Cole hold the audience accountable and acknowledge the ways that a rappers’ mainstream success is contingent upon producing hits and making music that appeals to fans, Jay-Z sees the benefit in making money, but J. Cole expresses that he views making music for the masses as sacrificing his art and making decisions based on what fans want and what will become popular as a career move that compromises him and his music.

Although Jay-Z and other artists are not obligated to present lyrical content that will help people do more than learn catchy phrases, Jay-Z, in “Moment of Clarity,” makes it clear that his decision to share certain lyrical content with audiences is linked to his desire to earn money. I appreciate J. Cole’s expressed desire to make conscious and socially aware lyrical content and use his platform to share messages that impact peoples’ lives. While I will not fault Jay-Z for using his money and status to make contributions to society, I do believe that the back and forth that J. Cole has about other people in society being stagnant, despite the progression of one individual, is a helpful recognition that challenges artists and audiences to think about what art should present and how these presentations can improve our lives and communities. During his discussion of the role of the artist in shaping society’s culture and values, Daniel Bell shares

Henri de Saint-Simon's point that, "It is we artists, who will serve you as *avant-garde*: the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and rapid. When we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or canvas; ... and in that way above all we exert an electric and victorious influence" (Saint Simon qtd. by Bell, 13.) Like Saint-Simon, I argue that artists do have an ability to create art that will shape people's minds and society, but I also believe if those artists are working to get paid and that payment seems to be linked to rapping about practices that are potentially problematic for their communities, then they are failing to create the type of art that can position them to be effective leaders of those communities.

I prefer J. Cole's decision to not compromise his art for the money that can be made by popularity and fame over Jay-Z's message that the money we can make should influence the decisions we do make about our art, even if that means deciding that we will focus on making music just to get paid. I believe it is important to see art as a resource because the messages that are communicated to audiences helps to shape their perspectives of their experiences and what they need to do to enhance those experiences. If artists focus on the message and not the money earned from certain messages, then they can function as leaders who can develop and deliver solutions through their art instead of as artists willing to say anything to make money.

Making Money is One Thing, but it Can't be The Only Thing...

Speaking about money as an earnable thing that isn't all we have to hold on to as people, makes us think more deeply about what practices, experiences and values we should hold on to. J. Cole's views about time in "Mr. Nice Watch" and seeing one's own contributions as valuable in "Let Nas Down" offer us a chance to see what we have and what we create as valuable and as assets that can enhance our existence and communities. It is imperative that more artists create

lyrical content about valuing time and treating it as our most valuable resource and about valuing our contributions, creating resources, and practicing resourcefulness. There are ways to produce what we need in our communities to nourish and take care of ourselves and provide safe and secure living conditions. Practicing resourcefulness, investing in one's own community, which both Jay-Z and J. Cole offer their perspectives on what doing this requires, and working towards establishing ways to have a good quality is important because it helps to change what we value and deem as essential. If artists with platforms speak of making money as a top priority and as the most valuable resource for making change, then other people will see no other way to make change, which results in artists we support then becoming as threatening to us improving our communities as the threats they get paid to rap about.

J. Cole presents a mindset that should push listeners to think about how they see money, and encourages them to see themselves as more than what they make. At the same time, Jay-Z and J. Cole also educate Black listeners by sharing their realities of still enduring hardships, inequalities and unjust treatment in America, where it seems like wealth does not prevent or solve problems stemming from unfair and unjust treatment. Jay-Z and J. Cole's awareness about how society continues to view their Black bodies as targets of violence and inequalities, despite their wealth, illustrates Richardson's point that, "...capitalistic exploitation in no way solves the problem of valuing humanity equally" (56) and affirms the need for those within the Hip Hop community to stop engaging in pursuits that are not effective for directly addressing the violence, poverty, and inhumane treatment of Black people and others living in mainly minority communities.

My aforementioned points are among some of the reasons, it is important that Hip Hop artists use their lyrical content to share their visions for the future of Black communities and

society, while offering more than reflections of the ways that money has improved their lifestyles and positioned them to live in a way that many people believe is preferable to their own conditions and circumstances. In doing this work, I found examples that evidence that Jay-Z and J. Cole are interested in making contributions that will help move their communities forward. At times, Jay-Z and J. Cole, within the songs I explored share different perspectives about the ways they should contribute, with Jay-Z's contributions often being linked to what he is financially equipped to do, and J. Cole's contributions often being linked to what he believes he is obligated to do as an artist. For me, what it comes down to, is seeing our contributions as worthy even if it costs. I will continue to build on this point in the next section of the chapter.

Money Makes Jay-Z A Musician for the Movement and Makes J. Cole Realize It Doesn't Make a Difference

An important commonality between Jay-Z and J. Cole is how they use what Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. refer to as “language strategies” (143) or “patterns or methods of language usage that attempt to achieve a specific purpose, goal or objective. [These strategies] state key movement messages, themes, and rationales for actions. The ‘effect’ of the strategy may be intended, real, unintended, or all three. All communication is audience centered and purposeful” (Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. 143). For example, Jay-Z and J. Cole both use the “implied we,” which Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. write is, “a subtle means of establishing a feeling of commonality or common ground” (145) to address audiences and show that they understand what some people from the Black community are enduring due to being Black. As Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. write, “There are many levels of identification, with the most obvious being a persuader’s attempt to establish common ground with an audience. Simple common

ground may result from groups identifying according to gender, age, race, ethnic background, or sexual orientation” (144).

My analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole’s lyrical content demonstrates how they use their experiences as Black men, social and financial status and experiences to connect with Black audiences and show their ability to not only relate but be aware of issues that Black people face, in a way that qualifies them to use their platforms to speak out about them. Along with this, my analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole’s lyrics shows that, as Pough asserts,

Rappers do bring issues and concerns, via their lyrics, to public attention that might not otherwise be heard. For example, while the government and the media pay a certain amount of lip service to the rising unemployment rate and the impact of poverty and crime on Black communities, rappers give narrations of Black experiences with these issues and so represent the concerns of some segments of their communities. For rappers, speaking for the people means representing the people. They are self-designated tellers of the people’s suffering. (29)

While I discuss lyrics in this section that evidence Pough’s point that rappers “are self-designated tellers of the people’s suffering,” (29), I argue that it is not enough to get rich and lead financially prosperous lives from discussing the struggles of people who rappers use the “implied we” (Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. 145) to connect with. It is imperative that rappers understand the value in helping people envision better circumstances and conditions for themselves by using methods that do not make pursuits of potentially unattainable amounts of income seem like the only way out.

I highlight in my analysis times within Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrics when they use some of the African American rhetorical practices that Gilyard discusses when talking about Smith's work in the introduction of *African American Rhetorics: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. In Gilyard's introduction he credits Smith, who he states is "...now known as Molefi Asante"(10) for making major contributions to African American Rhetoric. In Gilyard's discussion of Smith's work, he speaks of him as a scholar who identified clear differences in the ways that those associated with Black movements, including Black power rhetorics, addressed White and Black audiences. Writing of a view that Smith held of agitational Black rhetoric, Gilyard writes, "He sees Black nationalist and Black power rhetorics to be essentially aggressive (toward Whites) and unifying (toward African Americans). To move the Black masses, the Black rhetor must, as Boulware suggests, posit grievances" (10-11).

As Black rhetors, neither Jay-Z or J. Cole has any issues speaking of the hardships such as racism, poverty and inequalities, which evidences that they possess the skill to "posit grievances" (11). In addition, my analysis of Jay-Z and J. Cole shows that both artists use elements of the four-part thematic structure that Gilyard references in his work when he writes, "Smith also identifies a four-part thematic structure that is basic to Black secular, agitational rhetors: (1) all Blacks face a common enemy, (2) there is a conspiracy to violate Black manhood, (3) there is pervasive American hypocrisy, and (4) Black unity is requisite for Black liberation" (11). Furthermore, both artists highlight mistreatment they believe is caused by a racist and oppressive system through their use of strategies, such as "vilification" and "objectification," that are a part of "the four-part strategic structure that appears as part of all long-term agitation campaigns" (Gilyard 11). While I believe that Jay-Z and J. Cole successfully use strategies such as vilification and objectification, I believe that the concept " (4) Black unity is requisite for

Black liberation” (Gilyard 11), which Gilyard states is identified in Smith’s “four part thematic structure” (11) needs to become more prevalent in the artists’ lyrics in order to make positive and significant change that doesn’t revolve around one needing to be financially established to make meaningful contributions in their communities.

Jay-Z and J. Cole both share lyrical content that shows that they believe it is necessary to stay connected with the communities they came from. Their decision to acknowledge their race in a way that considers the experiences of other Black men suggests that they view Hip Hop as a resource that should not only be used to speak about their own experiences, but to also deliver content that suggests that, despite being a part of a socioeconomic class that not many other people are a part of, their identities as Black men subject them to the same kind of problems and issues that they faced prior to becoming wealthy. Jay-Z and J. Cole use what Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. refer to as “coactive or common ground strategies” which they write, “emphasize similarities, shared experiences, and a common cause with target audiences” (65). When discussing identification tactics, Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. write, “A barrage of simple plural pronouns such as we, our, and us in place of a leader-centered and individualistic pronouns such as I, me, and mine invites a feeling of common ground — a common bond. Audiences sense active involvement *together* in a great moral struggle” (145).

In “F.U.T.W.,” Jay-Z uses the “implied we” (145) when speaking about his experiences as a Black man who has shifted from living in a lower-income environment and depending on government assistance for food to someone who is able to choose not only what he eats, but what he invests in. In the introduction of “F.U.T.W.,” Jay-Z tries to find common ground with audiences, by using the “implied we” (145) to highlight that he, like those he is addressing is aware of the hardships that are associated with poverty but also aware of what path one needs to

take to emerge from communities where poverty can result in limited access to opportunities and where violence may result in death. I view Jay-Z's goals in the following lyrical content in the hook as pushing young Black men to aspire for more than is expected of them despite what seems to be a predetermined fate of being the target of violence or being outcast for one's actions. Jay-Z raps, "I feel like mothafuckin' Cassius Clay right now/Genius!/ Don't be good my nigga, be great/After that government cheese, we eating steak/After the projects, now we on estates/I'm from the bottom, I know you can relate" (3-8). Here Jay-Z uses the "implied we" (Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. 145) here to show how he, like listeners who are experiencing poverty, has experienced the ways being poor impacts where you live and what you eat.

He also speaks of a "common purpose," (145) which is to be great like other Black iconic men such as Muhammad Ali. Speaking from the position of a successful and wealthy rapper and referencing other Black legends, Jay-Z shows the possibility that you can come from humble beginnings and face the challenges that come with being Black in America and still achieve greatness. I view Jay-Z's use of terms such as "my niggas" as his way of expressing that he views himself as connected to the young Black men falling victim to the same oppressive system that he views as holding him now. The bond that he views himself as having is evidenced when Jay-Z in verse one raps, "See most my niggas died early twenties or late teens/I'm just trying to come from under the thumb of this regime/1 % of a billion more than niggas ever seen/Still they wanna act like it's an everyday thing, clean" (6-9). Aligning his discussion about what he views as Black men dying before they have had the opportunity to live their lives out with his discussion of great Black figures whose abilities helped them significantly influence society shows how he uses his lyrical content in a way that positions him to advocate for individuals

whose experiences may be unknown due to the issues they are faced with seeming to specifically plague them and their communities.

The use of the term in line six of verse one “my niggas” in line 6 of verse 1 (Jay-Z) classifies as Jay-Z using “identity politics” which Stewart, Smith and Denton refer to as one of three assumptions, including the assumption that “...members of the group share common histories and analyses of their historic and continual shared oppression” (148). Jay-Z’s suggestion that premature death is a tragedy that plagues most of the Black community because of a problematic system that he still views as a threat to him despite his wealth, is why I view him using identity politics (148) to connect with his audiences and show that he is aware of conditions and problems within the Black community that result in Black men dying too soon.

These lyrics evidence that Jay-Z views it as necessary to address some of the issues that are cutting the lives of Black men short, but what he doesn’t offer in these lyrics is anything more than wealth as a solution. In acknowledging his own wealth as a benefit that many other people have never had access to, it should become evident that the type of financial freedom that he sought for himself will not rid people of inequalities or problematic realities. Although Jay-Z is offering meaningful and potentially helpful encouragement to pursue a better financial status to improve one’s experiences, his acknowledgement of the hardships faced by Black men despite their contributions, financial status or social status serves as a suggestion that social and financial classes that are associated with progress, do not always equate to progress. Still, speaking of his own pursuits suggests that he is working to convince Black people that such wealth is worth pursuing, when the change we can make in our communities may not require such wealth or us pursuing that wealth in the same ways as people who have built their existence on chasing money so ambitiously that it resulted in them treating Black people inhumanely. As Pough

explains, drawing on bell hooks “Gangsta, Culture - Sexism and Misogyny: Who Will Take the Rap?”:

In fact, the rappers become grunt workers for the patriarchy: they sow the field of misogyny for the patriarchy and provide the labor necessary to keep it in operation, much as Black men and women provided the free and exploited labor that built the United States. (71)

My point is that Jay-Z’s decision to place value on extreme amounts of wealth that are not necessarily needed to have money for our needs and his perspective that being wealthy will eliminate the inequalities Black people faced in America makes him what Pough refers to as a “grunt worker” (71) whose rap career and lyrical content result in him being positioned to “provide the labor necessary to keep” (71) himself and other people continuously committed to trying to upgrade their financial status, because of the suggestion that it will upgrade their quality of life.

Like Jay-Z, J. Cole in “Window Pain (Outro)” speaks about issues that he views as directly connected to the experiences of Black people in America. Unlike Jay-Z, J. Cole doesn’t specifically use the term “we” in the lyrics from “Window Pain,” but he still is rapping about experiences and issues that he believes other Black people can relate to and highlighting issues faced by those who live in neighborhoods that are plagued with poverty and violence. I view the following lyrics from “Window Pain” as an example of J. Cole using “coactive strategies” (Stewart, Smith and Denton Jr. 65). In verse one J. Cole:

Niggas bang in the Ville, I always thought that shit was strange/
How you claim blood or cuz when that was just a LA thing? I don’t mean no disrespect towards

your set, no I'm just sayin' / That it seems like for acceptance niggas will do anything / Niggas will rep any gang, niggas will bust any head / Niggas will risk everything, point him out and then he dead (11-16).

The issue that J. Cole addresses in these lines is gang violence and the ways that young Black men are eliminating each other to improve their chances of survival and to have a sense of camaraderie in an environment where not having some form of protection may result in loss of life. Both Jay-Z and J. Cole acknowledge how the treatment of Black people in America and their experiences of feeling targeted, rejected, and less than human make it difficult to view America as a place where they are welcome and belong. Both artists discuss the unlikely possibility of young Black men staying alive in a country where they are faced by opposition outside of and within their communities. Since these types of acknowledgements are valid and important enough to share, there has to be a commitment to creating environments where people do not experience such threats.

Neither Jay-Z nor J. Cole share perspectives that their wealth and social status are enough to prevent them from dealing with being treated unfairly, unequally and unjustly because of their race. My point is supported by the following J. Cole's lyrics, in verse two of "Neighbors":

Some things you can't escape / Death, taxes, and a ra-/cist society that make / Every nigga feel like a candidate / For a Trayvon kinda fate / Even when your crib sit on a lake / Even when your plaques hang on a wall / Even when the president jam your tape. (1-8)

As a successful artist who sees his music as influential enough to reach the president of the United States, J. Cole expresses that his success and wealth do not shield him from being killed

without justice being served. The lyrical content in J. Cole's "Neighbors" and "Window Pain" and Jay-Z's "F.U.T.W" and "Black Effect" evidences how they both use "vilification," which, Gilyard writes, is used to "...create an antihero by attacking the ideas, actions, and being of a conspicuous member of the opposition, mainly by charging that the person is a key agent of domination" (11). I view J. Cole's reference in lines 1-5 of verse three to a "Some things you can't escape/Death taxes and a ra-/cist society that make/Every nigga feel like a candidate/For a Trayvon kinda fate" (J. Cole) and Jay-Z's reference in verse one to a regime and his remarks in verse two that "America tried to emasculate the greats" (9) as ways to portray America as a negative force whose actions involve ensuring that Black people do not thrive, which is one way of successfully showing audiences that, "(1) all Blacks face a common enemy" and that "(2) there is a conspiracy to violate Black manhood" (Gilyard 11). Along with using vilification, Cole and Jay-Z both use objectification, which Gilyard writes, "...is to blame a specific but ill-defined group, such as the White power structure or, simply, Whitey for the audience's suffering" (11). Although Jay-Z doesn't directly use the descriptor "Black" when referring to the leaders he mentions or the young men he mentions as being the targets of violence and ill-fates in America in "F.U.T.W.", his decision to only name Black heroes and use phrases such as "my nigga" makes it clear that he views Black people as being the victims of actions and mistreatment that comes at the hands of an unjust system, which J. Cole doesn't dance around mentioning but directly refers to as a "racist society" (J. Cole). It is clear that J. Cole views White people as antagonistic and as responsible for his experience of being violated and having his privacy invaded in his neighborhood. The solution to move away from White people that is offered in lines 6-8 of the outro reflects this view: "So much for integration/ Don't know what I was thinkin'/ I'm movin' back to south side" (J. Cole).

Unity Has to Move Beyond Standing Together or Standing on Stage Talking About Where We Stand...

When examining whether or not Jay-Z and J. Cole shared a message of uplift or unity in their lyrics—I identified four songs out of the six of Jay-Z’s as examples of lyrical content that presents a mindset or perspectives that could be viewed as beneficial and productive for the Black community. To answer this question, I tried to find lyrical content that shared messages of embracing of the Black community, instances of the artist expressing pride in being Black, references to other Black figures and leaders within the community, along with discussion of experiences and circumstances impacting the Black community. The four songs are “Moment of Clarity,” “F.U.T.W.” “Legacy” and “Black Effect.” While “D’Evils” and “Rap Game/Crack” both highlight issues that may exist within some Black communities and neighborhoods where poverty exists, the lyrical content does not offer a helpful or insightful way of addressing issues such as violence, crime or drug addiction, but instead shares an acknowledgement of how these might be acts of survival in some communities. It is important to note this because crime and drug dealing are linked to a need to make money but are also problematic pursuits because of the destruction and detriment they cause the communities.

In “Black Effect,” like in “F.U.T.W.” Jay-Z’s reference to notable Black figures, who are valued, respected and whose lives have inspired and influenced change evidences that he sees himself as a part of the Black community and, as he suggests in “Legacy,” envisions a world where Black prosperity is possible. Since he sees himself this way, it is important that he and other artists provide effective measures and methods that build on Giovanni’s view of Black wealth being Black love (Giovanni).

I identified all six of the J. Cole songs that I analyzed as presenting some message of unity or uplift. While I believe at times J. Cole's efforts to uplift the entire Black community come through his acknowledgement of his individual rise and development and cautionary tales about his inability at times to realize the beauty and power in what he had before sacrificing it all, I believe such messages are essential, although, as I have acknowledged he, like other artists must offer more than observations and reflections on their own experiences in order for people to be able to use Hip Hop as a tool to make positive change. The one song that possibly lacks a vision that considers the community but focuses on J. Cole propelling himself forward is "Mr. Nice Watch," but even in this song, he equates his abilities with possessing talents and being capable to make meaningful contributions. This positive view of Blackness positions Black people to be viewed as qualified, capable, ambitious and focused enough to significantly impact society and build meaningful legacies.

For J. Cole messages of accountability and the role of art created within the Hip Hop community are themes that emerge in songs like "Let Nas Down" "1985 (Intro to the Fall Off)" and "Window Pain." In these songs, J. Cole thinks about what lyrical content in rap songs means for the community and whether or not the financial gains and career success that comes from dominating as a mainstream artist is worth the chaos and tragedy that occurs within some communities and is also the focus of some of his music. In at least three songs, J. Cole shares reflections about the importance of viewing art as a way to make change within communities or challenges himself or other artist to think more deeply about the ways their art influences society.

Considering the Cost of Helping the Community

When thinking about potential solutions for poor living conditions, violence within the Black community, and being negatively stereotyped and targeted because of race, Jay-Z in “Legacy” and J. Cole in “Neighbors” both embrace the notion of a Black society or environment, where Black people can progress and have fruitful experiences. Jay-Z’ vision of this is expressed in verse one of “Legacy” when Jay-Z raps, “A nice peace-fund ideas from people who look like we/We gon’ start a society within a society/ That’s major, just like the Negro League” (9-11). Lines 9–11 of verse one demonstrates that Jay-Z believes it is beneficial for Black people to uplift and value their own resources and create organizations and opportunities that lead to prosperity within the Black community. Jay-Z’s reference to the Negro League, a professional baseball league that was developed for Black baseball players, evidences that he sees some benefit in Black people building their own communities and businesses.

Like Jay-Z, J. Cole, sees being among people who share your racial and cultural identity as productive, but Jay-Z’s vision to operate and function within society through acts of supporting Black financial wealth and Black entrepreneurship is much more ambitious and still linked to financial prosperity, unlike the visions of change that J. Cole presents in his work. In the outro of “Neighbors” J. Cole in the outro states twice, “So much for integration/ Don’t know what I was thinkin’/I’m movin’ back to south side” (6-11). J. Cole’s response to dealing with the challenges that come with trying to fit into a society that he views as putting more time and energy into eliminating him than embracing him is to exit and return to where he came from. When I attended J. Cole’s *4 Your Eyez Only Tour* in Charlotte, N.C., he spoke of the value of investing in Black communities and taking pride in where one comes from, which is a view he and Jay-Z both seem to hold.

In verse three of “F.U.T.W.” Jay-Z raps, “Make a million another million let my niggas make a million/ ‘til we all check a billion, shit it’s just the way I’m feeling/We have yet to see a ceiling, we just top what we top/Cause the bars don’t struggle and the struggle don’t stop” (13-16). Jay-Z doesn’t recommend that people stop trying to progress or succeed within the system as a result of it being problematic but recommends that we instead continue to perform in a way that shows that we are more than capable of existing in America and will achieve whatever we need to achieve to have productive and progressive experiences. Like Jay-Z, J. Cole sees the struggle faced by Black people in America as never-ending, but what differs is the solution he offers for the issue. In the outro, J. Cole sings twice, “So much for integration/Don’t know what I was thinking/ I’m moving back to south side” (6-11). These lyrics evidence that J. Cole, like Jay-Z, does not view America as a place where Black people can live comfortably among White people without enduring troubling experiences and unfair, unjust and inhumane treatment. Both artists envision Black communities as possible ways for Black people to improve their experiences, only Jay-Z offers a business-inspired vision for the society he refers to in “Legacy,” and J. Cole, in “Neighbors,” embraces the possibility of returning to his life prior to pursuits of wealth and fame.

Now, I will highlight Jay-Z and J. Cole’s expressed mindsets about what their communities need from them and what they are willing to provide to meet the needs of those they are culturally and racially connected to. In “1985 (Intro to the Fall Off),” J. Cole raps:

I must say, by your songs I’m unimpressed, hey/ But I love to see a black man get paid/And plus, you havin’ fun and I respect that/But have you ever thought about your impact?/ These white kids love that you don’t give a fuck/‘Cause that’s exactly what’s expected when your skin black/ They wanna see you dab, they

wanna see you pop a pill/ They want to see you tatted from your face to your heels/ And somewhere deep down, fuck it, I gotta keep it real/They wanna be black and think your song is how it feels/So when you turn up, you see them turnin' up too/ You hit the next city, collect your money when it's due (31-42).

While Cole expresses an understanding of artists making income from their art and establishing themselves financially, he encourages artists to consider the cost of making art that may not positively impact their communities or the perception people have of Black culture. He challenges artists to think deeply about the way they are portraying the Black community and what types of trends they are setting for society. In doing this, he takes aim at music that he refers to as “commercial” (“1985” Genius, Line 27). In both “1985 (Intro to the Fall Off)” and “Let Nas Down” J. Cole acknowledges that he is not necessarily in favor of commercial music despite being aware of how well it is received by audiences and what that potentially means for artists’ careers.

Although “1985 (Intro to the Fall Off)” is his address to rappers who he is challenging to be more accountable, he himself acknowledges how difficult it can be to have a successful career and meet the demands and expectations set by those within the industry. J. Cole in verse two raps, “Where’s the hits?” You ain’t got none/ You know Jay’ll never put your album out without none/And, dog, you know how come/Labels are archaic, formulaic with the outcome” (9-12). J. Cole’s lyrics in “Let Nas Down” highlight the problem that is faced by artists who are expected to think less about their content and more about concepts that will be popularly embraced and yield positive results on the charts.

As discussed in chapter two, Cole acknowledges that there are outside influences, which, in his personal experience, included Jay-Z, that can result in one compromising self and art for money and the appeal to mainstream audiences. For Jay-Z, personal goals and leaving one's mark by earning profits and making impressionable music are worthy trades that seem like they have at times made him willing to overlook the impact that his actions could potentially have on other people. This is evidenced verse one of "Rap Game/Crack Game" when Jay-Z raps:

But first we scope shit, advertise in every area/Let the fiends know hey, we got
some dope shit/ Gon' need a middle man, so we look to radio/Let 'em test the
product, give 'em a promo show/Just a breeze, not enough to catch a real
vibe/Then we drop a maxi single and charge 'em two for five/Ain't tryin' to kill
'em at first, just buildin' clientele/So when the album drops the first weeks it's on
sale. (7-14)

For Jay-Z, achieving his goal to sell music, drugs or any product takes precedence over how doing so will impact the community and the public who he sees as customers. He is invested in supplying the people with what they want and capitalizing off profits. Although there are times, as noted in my earlier discussion of "Moment of Clarity," where Jay-Z's financial ambitions go beyond his self-interest and seem to be directly linked to the type of help he sees himself providing for the community, in the J. Cole songs that I examined, some of his lyrics suggest that he views his lyrical content as a resource that can be used to make change, in the way that Jay-Z views money as a resource that can be used to make change in communities.

While Jay-Z and J. Cole both express an interest in helping their communities, Jay-Z believes that one positively influences their own community when they can make financial

contributions that will improve someone's financial status. Despite J. Cole's expressed intent to change communities with his lyrics, as discussed earlier in this chapter, his ability to use his art to make change seems at times stifled by his own doubt, which is evidenced in lines 8-10 of "Window Pain (Outro)" like "They be listenin' but it's clear to me they did not hear a thing/ It go in one ear and out the other like a bullet out the muzzle of a/ pistol shot by brothers standin' point-blank range" (J. Cole). J. Cole expresses doubt about the impact that his lyrical content has with members of his community, who he suggests are not being receptive to him shedding light on some of the issues caused by substance abuse and violence. The uncertainty that he has about his ability to make music that makes change, when he believes this is supposed to be the purpose of his art, hinders his ability to offer a productive solution that others can believe in like Jay-Z does when he raps about the benefits of wealth.

Conclusion: A Consideration of Content That May Help Improve Conditions

In the introduction, I listed the names of a myriad of artists whose work I could've explored in my thesis. I intentionally left one name off the list and that is because I view her, Lauryn Hill, as the most notable example of a Hip Hop artist who isn't defined by the entertainment industry and the demands of listener, and who did not overly invest in chasing the initial success she had with *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

Her absence in the mainstream Hip Hop community after the release of her 1998 album, which became an instant Hip Hop classic, speaks as loudly and influentially as the words she shared on the record. While my work is not focused on Lauryn Hill, referencing her and her work helps me to highlight an artist whose work I envision as ideal and which I believe can serve as a blueprint for other artists to build on. Through my work, I hope that people will see Hill's

point in verse one of “Lost Ones” that, “It’s funny how money change situation/Miscommunication lead to complication/ My emancipation don’t fit your equation/I was on the humble, you on every station” (1–4).

I agree with Pough’s assertion that, “*The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* stands as an example of the way an artist can use Hip-Hop to tell her life story and make an impact in the public sphere. The title of the album itself a political statement. It plays off Carter G. Woodson’s work *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, which was written in 1933 but still speaks volumes about the status of Africans in America today” (107). While artists are not obligated to create the type of work that Pough credits Hill for here, I believe it is important that they approach art with some of the same mindfulness and consideration for society that is present in Hill’s album, of which Pough writes, “...by signifying on Woodson’s work, brings forth a history and legacy of critique” (107). My work evidences that Jay-Z and J. Cole’s work “...brings forth a history and legacy of critique” (Pough 107), but it also evidences how these efforts, at times, come up short because the work of the artists should move people to a state of existing that has not yet been lived, meaning that acknowledgements of the past and now are important, but enhancing the now and offering ways to shape and ensure that we will have a better future are even more important. My examination of Jay-Z and J. Cole’s lyrics, from songs selected from their early and their more recently released studio albums, helped me to determine how these individuals’ perspectives about their experiences, society, issues such as violence in their community, poverty and progress for these communities have evolved throughout their careers.

While debating who the top M.C. is and who has the potential to be the best rapper are engaging discussions, it is more important to continue a discussion on the lyrics of artists who earn such ranks and how these lyrics can result in them stifling their own potential to be

innovative leaders who are capable of writing their own handbooks for improving society. While my work evidences that Jay-Z and J. Cole are aware of the issues and problems that exist within the Black community and demonstrates their intent to broadcast the problems faced by those who come from communities like those they worked so diligently to leave, it also highlights how both artists acknowledge that social status, fame and wealth possessed by an individual do not improve the conditions of the masses. As a result, rappers need to focus more on guiding and instructing people to embark upon improving their own conditions, circumstances and communities in ways that are not always contingent upon financial prosperity but that are based on actions and contributions made by those within the communities.

Although Jay-Z and J. Cole's lyrical content illustrates the productive ways artists' lyrical content can be used to discuss their personal experiences and call attention to the issues of those who they are culturally and racially connected to, elite artists such as Jay-Z and J. Cole must move beyond their acknowledgments of the ways they and their communities continue to be oppressed and towards creating lyrical content that helps change their relationship with and reliance on an oppressive system.

Rappers' lyrical content must evolve from reflections about their own experiences and observations of society to methods and suggestions about how to renovate society. If not, the following point of Pough's, which I discussed in chapter one, will be Hip Hop's reality. Pough asserts that "Black public sphere scholars," who she states, "...have noted, if the Black public sphere is not about the business of evoking change, then we are wasting time" (40). I hope that my work will highlight instances where certain discussions do not offer meaningful suggestions for positive change and instances where topics being addressed, and suggestions being proposed, are more mindful ways for Hip Hop to move forward. If rap artists, in their music share

productive and positive perspectives and mindsets that can be used by communities as forms of guidance to rethink their circumstances and how they can use resourcefulness and make contributions to enhance their communities and improve the conditions of those communities, then other communities, cultures and movements can follow Hip Hop's lead and do the same through their messages, contributions and work. Still, I understand that these artists like me are moving through life trying to earn a living, while, possibly, and like many of us, looking for someone else to provide solutions to the issues they rap about.

While there is much work to be done by myself and other scholars, I hope we will at least be able to all share Ms. Hill's realization. I did this work because it should be clear to those within the Hip Hop community that we must expect more from the most valuable and listened to voices in our community. We should value their abilities to communicate and deliver lyrical content that can be used for meaningful change while also ensuring that we do not compromise their chance to make a living doing so, unless they compromise our communities in the process.

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