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**Performing and Sounding Disruption: Coded Pleasure in Jay-Z and  
Kanye West's "Otis"**

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**Performing and Sounding Disruption: Coded Pleasure in Jay-Z and  
Kanye West's "Otis"**

**by**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2013**

## **Dedication**

*For my mother, Denise V. Maner, M.D.*

## Acknowledgements

To Deborah Paredez whose keen eyes and sharp ears have helped sculpt this work, thank you for the invaluable guidance. To Lisa Moore, thank you for allowing me to discover the queerness of feminist hip-hop scholarship, and for fostering my formalism. I would be remiss to not acknowledge Yvette DeChavez, my soul-sista and partner-in-crime. This work is a product of our weekly sojourns, *Freestyle Fridays*. For that safe space and for you, I am grateful. To Meta DuEwa Jones, Julia Lee, and Roger Reeves—you have all been instrumental to the many forms this work has taken. Lastly, Keith Woodard, thank you for all you do.

## **Abstract**

### **Performing and Sounding Disruption: Coded Pleasure in Jay-Z and Kanye West's "Otis"**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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From minstrelsy to hip-hop, the black performer has always been entangled in a complex network of branding, packaging, and promotion. The black body is cultural capital and in hip-hop, the black thug and his dangerous body are the fetishized objects of desire. Despite these exploitative constraints, artists find spaces to enact what little resistance is possible. In the following report, I perform a close reading and close listening of Jay-Z and Kanye West's "Otis." Paying particular attention to the intersections of the visual and the aural, I find that Jay-Z and West encode desire, pleasure, and imagination beneath boastful rhymes and material opulence. Jay-Z and West adopt American symbols of prosperity and freedom and, in disruptive fashion, resignify black masculinity in the cultural imagination. Soul sound, as intoned through Otis Redding and James Brown, lends a politics of brotherhood and radicalism to Jay-Z and West's articulation of affective black masculinity. I employ a collage-like network of theoretical frames that span performance, sound, and literary theory to trace how race and

gender performance codes a discourse of disruption. I find that “Otis” is a type a blueprint—an instruction manual for youth of color to deconstruct, innovate, and feel deeply. Through linguistic and performative codes, Jay-Z and West create a safe space, a cipher for men of color to desire and, in turn, experience pleasure. I trace how Jay-Z and West move closer to a practice of hip-hop feminism and, in a field notorious for rampant homophobia, misogyny, and violence—that’s remarkable.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction: Vulnerable Black Kings (Hip-Hop Inherits Soul)</b> .....	1
<b>Hustlin’</b> : The Blueprint for Success .....	11
<b>Discursive Disruption: Towards a Hip-Hop Methodology</b> .....	16
<b>Sampling Black Cool</b> .....	22
<b>A Feminist Reading of Swag</b> .....	29
<b>Consumptive Reconstruction and Disruptive Pleasure</b> .....	40
<b>Conclusion: Black Screams, Black Rupture</b> .....	51
<b>Coda: Diasporic Brotherhood</b> .....	55
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	56
<b>Vita</b> .....	62



Black hurt, black self-esteem. It's the contradictory pull of the "cipher," rap terminology for the circle that forms around the kind of freestyling kid Jay-Z once was. What a word! Cipher (noun): 1. A secret or disguised way of writing; a code. 2. A key to such a code. 3. A person or thing of no importance.

— Zadie Smith, "The House That Hova Built"

The emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production.

— Fred Moten, *In the Break*

### **Introduction: Vulnerable Black Kings (Hip-Hop Inherits Soul)**

The new millennium marks a turning point for hip-hop culture. Queer voices, like Frank Ocean and Big Freedia sprinkle the charts. 'Underground' collectives and independent artists are using instruments of technology to transmit their messages of self-love and social change. The cultural movement is staking its claim in the scholarly sphere as the number of academic publications and conferences around hip-hop increase each year. Even as hip-hop proves to be a highly-profitable capitalist enterprise, some of the most commodified rappers are creatively subverting their public roles as black entertainers. This defiant-yet-compliant strategy of subversion can be discerned in close-reading, and close-listening to, Jay-Z and Kanye West's hit single "Otis."<sup>1</sup> Messages of black creativity, brotherhood, and pleasure are discernible beneath diamond-crusted rhymes and boastful performances.

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<sup>1</sup> My application of close listening models that of Meta DuEwa Jones and Fred Moten who listen beyond words to discover the materiality of gender, sexuality, and race within vocal instrumentality.

Performing as heroes for the ‘hood, preachers and teachers to black masses, Jay-Z and West call for men of color to unite: brotherhood becomes the means by which to subvert dominant power structures. Veiling their revolutionary implications beneath coded performances, in signs and symbols that work within acceptable representations of blackness in the American racial imagination, Jay-Z and West work to reconfigure the historical branding of blackness as threatening and frighteningly virile. The artists collaborate in a performance of masculine *intimacy*, embracing a vulnerability that does not forsake the inherent strengths of blackness.<sup>2</sup> Jay-Z and West perform desire and pleasure aided by trickster wordplay and the distillation of soul sound.

I was first attracted to “Otis,” a hit single from Jay-Z and Kanye West’s collaborative album *Watch the Throne*, because of the track’s intense sound. Backed by a choppy sample, the song is joyfully funky. But, the more I listened, the more apparent the song’s oddness became. “Otis” is not the typical club hit—it is a peculiar radio-release for many reasons. For one, “Otis” is structurally imbalanced. Like its sample, “Try a Little Tenderness,” “Otis” contains no *hook*, no refrain or chorus that repeats intermittently. In other words, there is no place for the listener to hold fast to for stability. The hook is typically an eight-bar measure of catchy and memorable lyrics that establishes a set of sonic expectations for the listener—no matter how far the MC may rhythmically stray in his or her verse, they’ll always lead listeners back to the hook. The absence of this stabilizing pattern results in a song where tensions accrue—but a climax never comes. Instead, the song abruptly ends—it breaks—with an emphatic James

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<sup>2</sup> Authors that have shaped my conception of blackness and masculinity within hip-hop include bell hooks, Linda Tucker, Derek Scott, Tricia Rose, Natalie Hopkinson, and Natalie Y. Moore.

Brown-grunt one bar short of melodious closure. The result is the feeling of partiality and incompleteness—an indication that the sound and narrative Jay-Z and West create are not yet finished.

In another atypical twist, the two artists do not rely on digitally-heavy beat productions to create movement within the piece. Instead, the beat is comprised solely of snippets from Otis Redding's original song, "Try a Little Tenderness," and the low boom of a bass drum. The relatively unadorned production creates a palpable tension as the track bleeds an infectious joy that mounts. Along with the track's sonic idiosyncrasies, the rapper's lyrical exchange is also uncharacteristic. Instead of sparring in the attempt to undo one another, Jay-Z and West share equivalent voice and stage time, volleying similarly rhymed octaves to create a space of collectivity where all persons are represented and heard from equally—a rare feat in a genre where "who out-rapped whom" matters.

Departing from hip-hop's conventions, the music video for "Otis" displays a unique type of black brotherhood, an intimate and loving kind hardly seen in hip-hop. All of these oddities—the song's ultimately anticlimactic nature, the unique use of soul sound, the seldom-seen intimacy between rappers, the evocative lyrics, and the deceptively-simple music video—warranted a sustained analysis of the track and accompanying music video. What follows are the fruits of months of transcription, close listening, prosodic and performative analyses that interrogate these sonic anomalies in order to distinguish a rearticulation of black masculinity within the American racial imagination. Here I will illuminate how Jay-Z and West rewrite and recontextualize black

masculine representations endorsed and perpetuated in hip-hop by troping on fantasies of the black body.

Most hip-hop-heads would cite rappers like Talib Kweli, Lupe Fiasco, The Roots, and Common as contemporary artists who spit (or rap) lyrically dense and politically astute critiques—but there is always a hesitancy to include Jay-Z and Kanye West in this category. Those who argue that hip-hop has lost its transformative and politically-rooted potential tend to dismiss Jay-Z and Kanye West for their commercialism and success, but in doing so, fail to concede that “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is the backbone of the American Dream. Happiness for impoverished black communities *is* economic security and the freedoms it avails, so it is no wonder when hip-hop artists relish in their wealth. Perhaps William Jelani Cobb says it best in his coarse metaphor: “If capitalism is the American religion, then the gangster is a rough-hewn altar boy. And on that level, hip hop is American as a motherfucker” (128). Capitalism is the means by which hip-hop artists have found space for limited autonomy—constrained freedom, but freedom nevertheless. The cars, clothing, and jewelry rappers flaunt are coded symbols of agency—items appropriated for pleasure and self-expression. In their music video for “Otis,” Jay-Z and West carve an imagined space for black success that relies on *and* defies American social ideals.

Black defiance is coded in posturing. Atop the throne reserved for black bodies in the profitable and public white sphere, rappers Jay-Z and Kanye West examine their positions as cultural producers and enforcers while also renegotiating their status as objects for consumption in the performance of “Otis.” In the articulation of a new,

unrestrained black masculine self, Jay-Z and West creatively reimagine what it is to be black and male in America. Equating self-worth with material excess, Jay-Z states that “The money isn’t just about money. It’s about finding a sense of worth in the world—after you’ve been told you’re worthless. Status—and self-esteem—are really what the money buys you” (*Decoded*, 301). Critics are right to note *Watch the Throne*’s endorsement of excess, but there has been no effort to closely study Jay-Z and West’s nuanced attitudes toward wealth, to read beyond the boasts. There’s been even less attention paid to the self-conscious lyrics that call for black collectivity and social reform. Jay-Z and West boast about opulence, but they also boast about giving back, about materially and morally nourishing their black community.

Hip-hop was created as a cultural expression of resistance in response to the harsh social conditions of everyday life for youths of color; the genre has always been politically conscious and socially motivated. Dancers pop-lock, jook, and groove in defiance against stillness. Graffiti artists spread colorful political messages, colonizing forbidden space. DJs manipulate time and sculpt sound in ways that continually redefine hip-hop’s tone and style. MCs extend black oral traditions like call and response and improvisation to narrate histories and prophesy futures—they are storytellers, American griots. Early hip-hop was music of syncopation; simplistic in-the-pocket vocals were written to match the beat. *Now what you hear is not a test, I’m rapping to the beat.* Development over the years has produced a genre that rewards polyrhythmic innovation. The best songs create a palpable tension between beat and flow by moving away from a predictable rhyme pattern and melody, only to swing back into a dope groove. With the

evolution of digital beat making and complex sampling techniques, contemporary hip-hop is erratic yet anticipated, spontaneous but patterned.

Formed in the boogie-down Bronx in the mid-70s, hip-hop music was created when DJs like Kool Herc began to isolate percussive breaks—places where the song stops and an instrumental improvisational section occurs that offers a new element to the composition—while scratching popular funk and soul music for block parties.<sup>3</sup> Hip-hop originated as an inner-city phenomenon and became the dominant cultural expression for urban youth’s channeled anger and hurt.<sup>4</sup> Hip-hop of the 90s, an era in which the black “deviant” body was at its highest cultural capital, saw angry disenfranchised black youths rebelliously endorse violent and counternormative lifestyles—the gangsta ruled the throne. Fearlessly living up to the terror-inducing power of their black skin, hardcore rappers reveled in performances of brute blackness.<sup>5</sup> Hip-hop’s expression of black angst is backgrounded by events like the 1992 riots that erupted in South Central after the beating of Rodney King. Much like rap of the late 80s and early 90s which arose in defiance to regulatory policies of Reaganomics and the harsh conditions of urban life, like Public Enemy’s *Fear of a Black Planet* and N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton*, contemporary hip-hop is speaking out on topics as diverse as the treatment of black women by black men, uneven stop-and-frisk policies in New York, racialized

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<sup>3</sup> See Jeff Chang for a definitive hip-historiography. For additional resources, see Tricia Rose, Imani Perry, Cheryl Keyes, and Matt Miller.

<sup>4</sup> Chang describes New York of the 70s as “more separate and less equal than ever—the culmination of three decades of top-down urban renewal, Third World dislocation and white flight” (145). Poverty soared as whites fled boroughs like Brooklyn and the Bronx, and soon, immigrants and disenfranchised blacks overcrowded the wasteland. During Reagan’s presidency, the country fell into a recession and poverty rates soared in black communities, the unemployment rate hit 22% for African Americans, and decaying neighborhoods seethed with resentment and despair. In the 1980s, crack cocaine would further decimate African American communities.

<sup>5</sup> See Tricia Rose and Miles White for hip-hop’s performance of the black brute

incarceration, and other injustices that render black people abject.<sup>6</sup> But unlike “Fuck tha Police” or “Welcome to the Terrordome,” I find that this new generation of politicized verse is less brutal and more thoughtful—the codes and the modes of storytelling have changed, but the rhymes and performances are still disruptive. “Otis” is a politicized track that preaches methods of racial and gendered resistance by sampling the voices and energies of soul sound. Soul encodes the cipher—the communal space where rappers create and collaborate. Capitalizing on the power of the break, Jay-Z and West code a discourse of disruption.

Formed amid the tensions of Jim Crow segregation and racialized violence in the early 1950s, soul music emerged as the popular performance of civil rights discourse for black masses in the late 1960s through the subsequent two decades. Soul is the hypernym for black popular genres transmuted from rhythm and blues and gospel sound—it is a large grouping that ranges from funk to neo-soul to nu-jazz.<sup>7</sup> During the age of Motown, Detroit’s black music swept America, transforming the national imagination with songs of love, pain, survival, and joy. The soul aesthetic connected disparate black communities and ignited civil rights and Black Power movements in ways that would alter pathways of mobility, expressions of resistance, and modern identity formation for black Americans. Marvin Gaye’s “Inner City Blue (Make Me Wanna Holler)” told the harsh truth about violence and drugs in urban ghettos. James Brown’s anthem ignited youth to shout, “I’m black and I’m proud!” in unison. Sly & The Family Stone preached integration and

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<sup>6</sup> Consider hip-hop’s outreach to victims of Hurricane Katrina or Lupe Fiasco’s feminism in his song “Bad Bitch.” Most recently, the Hip-Hop Nation, united through Twitter, rallied against Rick Ross for his rhymes about casual date rape, causing the rapper to publically apologize.

<sup>7</sup> For a genealogy of soul music and its influence on American culture, see Amiri Baraka, Gerald Early Farah Jasmine Griffin, Mark Anthony Neal’s *What the Music Said*.

equality in “Everyday People,” and Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” urged a generation of women to demand R-E-S-P-E-C-T from their male allies. Spreading messages of black love and revolution, soul performers were able to move with a freedom inaccessible- but inspirational- to most black citizens. Soul babies like Jay-Z and Kanye West have inherited these partially-realized black dreams of success and freedom from their soul predecessors. Nostalgically, Jay-Z reflects on the importance of soul in his life and music stylings:

That music from my childhood still lives in my music. From my very first album, a lot of the tracks I rapped over were built on a foundation of classic seventies soul... The music from that era was incredible, full of emotion... The songs carried in them the tension and energy of the era. The seventies were a strange time, especially in black America. The music was beautiful in part because it was keeping a kind of torch lit in a dark time. I feel like we--rappers, DJs, producers--were able to smuggle some the magic of that dying civilization out in our music and use it to build a new world (*Decoded*, 255).

Hip-hop was created as the flame of civil rights began to burn out—King, Malcolm, and Hampton had died; sit-ins and riots catalyzed Universities to establish Afro-American studies programs; the Civil Rights Act was signed.<sup>8</sup> The soul babies kept the “torch lit in dark times” by rapping in syncopated codes that adopted the ideologies and dreams of Generation Soul. The Hip-Hop Nation has inherited the political legacies of the soul era and, in the articulation of their own subjectivities, rap new political narratives. The four fundamental expressions of hip-hop—DJing, MCing, B-boying, and graffiti—adapt the traditions of Generation Soul to fashion new black existences for their particular twenty-

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<sup>8</sup> My contextualization of the post-civil rights era is reductive for the sake of space. For more information, see Mark Anthony Neal’s *What the Music Said* and *Soul Babies*.



first experience of black subjectivity. Sampling, rifting, manipulating, and renegotiating the soul-aesthetic, hip-hop “soul babies” spit narratives about oppressive black existence to the approval of white audiences and the understanding of poor communities of color. But not all of hip-hop is bleak; it is also a form constructed on the imagining of new subjectivities, the celebration of survival and success. Balancing the lingering pain of loss with the pleasures of futurity, soul babies narrate worlds that look beyond painful social conditions of black abjection.

Scholar Mark Anthony Neal first coined the term ‘soul-babies’ in his 2002 work, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. Neal uses the term “post-soul aesthetic” to describe the political, social, and cultural expressions of the African-American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power era.<sup>9</sup> He argues that post-soul babies, inheritors of the soul aesthetic, participate in a “radical reimagining of the contemporary African-American experience, attempting to liberate contemporary interpretations of that experience from sensibilities that were formalized and institutionalized during earlier social paradigms” (3). Jay-Z and West, members of the post-soul generation, take up this task of liberating themselves from the soul aesthetic and the social ideologies the genre reflected. On *Watch the Throne*, Jay-Z and West sample soul legends like Nina Simone, Curtis Mayfield, James Brown, Otis Redding and Quincy Jones. Integrating the political nature of soul sound with the body-rocking infectiousness of electronic dub sound, *Watch the Throne* is sonically multi-temporal in

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<sup>9</sup> Neal locates the beginning of the post-soul era with the landmark 1978 affirmative action case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*. Jay-Z was born in 1969 and Kanye West in 1977; both are members of the post-soul intelligentsia.

nature as the album looks forward, critiques the present, and manipulates the past. I argue that a distinct shift can be traced in the post-soul era occurring at the turn of the twenty-first century, one that is evident in a close listening of “Otis.” Returning to its self-aware, politically focused and socially rooted origins, Jay-Z and West become mentors to the masses, targeting a new generation of hip-hop youth who have the chance to sculpt an unhampered and unconstrained future for people of color in the United States.

## Hustlin': The Blueprint for Success

The uniting theme that surfaces in each song on the album *Watch the Throne* is one of resistance toward white structures of power which continue to deny African Americans full existences. Jay-Z and West call for “a new religion,” an innovative way of being in the world outside of the dominant and stifling dichotomies of white/black, street/commercial, authentic/sellout. As West declares on the duo’s manifesto-like anthem, “Murder to Excellence,” “it’s time for us to stop and redefine black power.” Jay-Z and West destabilize and redefine the margins of topics deemed tolerable for black men to confront on *Watch the Throne*.<sup>10</sup> The album is equal parts over-the-top opulence and humility, egotistical boasting and shrewd political critique. Preaching “black excellence, opulence, decadence,” Jay-Z urges black people to “kick in the door” because “we need a million more” in positions of power. West unabashedly identifies that, “in the past if you picture events like a black tie / What’s the last thing you expect to see, black guys? / What’s the life expectancy for black guys? / The system’s working effectively, that’s why!” Calling for a radical redefinition of black personhood, Jay-Z and West promote the potential for success in relation to white normativity. More importantly, they take up the torches of their soul predecessors like James Brown to preach a message of black

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, on the track “That’s My Bitch,” Jay-Z questions “why all the pretty icons always all white?” His suggestion is to “Put some colored girls in the MoMA,” and while the proposal that black men will be the protectors of black women and their images is problematic on many levels, he *does* decenter the typical representation of black women in hip-hop. “New Day” imagines the duo passing on their life lessons to a pair of sons. Acknowledging that “the sins of a father make your life ten times harder,” West vows “to never let my son have an ego” while Jay-Z raps about teaching “ya good values so you cherish it.” The rappers forefront the problem of absent fathers in black communities and are unafraid to bring critical social issues mainstream.

collectivity in the realization of full civil rights. Jay-Z and West tap into the political potential of hip-hop to ignite a movement for our contemporary moment that builds upon the ruins of the soul era in the construction of a new world.

*Watch the Throne* is an extended verse sequence that meditates on what it means to be black in America and the personas Jay-Z and West have constructed over time have become quintessential narratives of black success. He is the essence of America's self-making, entrepreneurial ethos.<sup>11</sup> Jay-Z spits pedagogical rhymes that teach listeners a model for success: hustling. Jay-Z evolved from thug to prophet, stereotype to exception, in the near two decades that he's reigned hip-hop's metaphorical throne. He tells the quintessential American story of self-made success in his 2010 autocritography *Decoded*.<sup>12</sup> Banging beats on the kitchen table and absorbing every ounce of the freestyle battles that would arise on the street corners in Brooklyn, he started rhyming at an early age, memorizing his verses while on the block slinging crack cocaine where no paper and pen were available. Now, Jay-Z has released over ten albums since his 1996 critically-acclaimed debut, *Reasonable Doubt*. Charting his metamorphosis from drug dealer to global superstar, Jay-Z narrates the hustla-turned-entrepreneur and inspires his audience to believe that the American dream of autogenic achievement and monetary wealth is indeed possible. For Jay-Z, "hustling is the ultimate metaphor for the basic human struggles: the struggle to survive and resist, the struggle to win and to make sense

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<sup>11</sup> Jay-Z established his own record company, Roc-A-Fella Records, which eventually became so successful, the label spawned its own clothing line, Rocawear. Now, estimated worth an estimated \$500 million, much of Jay-Z's fortunes are the result of lucrative business investments. He has recently begun revitalizing his Brooklyn neighborhood by opening the Barclays Center, an entertainment arena and home to the NBA's Brooklyn Nets, a team he holds part-ownership of.

<sup>12</sup> A text very much of the moment, *Decoded* is an aptly-titled mixed-media memoir that fuses narrative with lyrical analyses, or decodings, of selected songs.

of it all” (*Decoded*, 19). For Jay-Z, his narratives of the hustle are a blueprint for survival and a model available to all youth of color. Known worldwide for his storytelling, wordplay, soulful styling, and complex flow—Jay-Z is consistently regarded as “the best rapper alive—he is the reigning king of hip-hop.

Jay-Z’s longtime collaborator and friend, Kanye West, is best known for his egoistic antics, unashamed materialism, and talented production skills. He is Jay-Z’s successor to the throne. Raised in Chicago, West has a very different upbringing from Jay-Z, but both come informed by the generation of soul.<sup>13</sup> West’s biggest break would come in 2000 when he began producing albums for Roc-a-Fella Records. With a shattered jaw wired closed after a near-fatal car crash, West recorded his first mainstream single, “Through the Wire,” for his debut album, *The College Dropout*. Self-aware and vulnerable, *The College Dropout* changed the landscape of twenty-first century rap as West became wildly popular for his divergence from hip-hop’s gangster tropes and instead chose to rap about religion, terrorism, and racism. West’s universal themes attracted listeners outside of black inner-city youth: the album went quadruple platinum with the help of suburban whites, Grammy nominations, and the alternative “backpack crowd” of young hip-hop heads. Featuring full choirs, songs like “Jesus Walks” and “Spaceship” channel gospel, while samples from Chaka Khan and Marvin Gaye added a unique soul aesthetic to *The College Dropout*. Balancing Jay-Z’s smoothness and

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<sup>13</sup> West’s father, a former Black-Panther, and his mother Dr. Donda West, an English professor at Clark Atlanta University fostered his academic growth in school. After attending art classes at the American Academy of Art in Chicago, West enrolled in Chicago State University, but quickly dropped out to pursue his music full-time. Before producing much of the music for Jay-Z’s, *The Blueprint*—an album often cited as his best, West produced many hit songs for artists like Alicia Keys, Janet Jackson, Talib Kweli, and Common.

rhythmic complexity, West brings pride, materialism, black angst, and soulful production to “Otis.”

*Watch the Throne* is a distinctly twenty-first century collaborative creation that unites two black voices, two men who symbolize different facets of blackness in the American consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Over time, Jay-Z has evolved into a mentor for inner-city black youth and *Watch the Throne* is his rebellious manifesto for black masses. In an interview with the rapper, professor and novelist Zadie Smith points out that his raps “started out pyrotechnical. Extremely fast, stacked, dense. But time passed and his flow got slower, opened up” (“The House that Hova Built”). Jay-Z’s debut, *Reasonable Doubt*, often cited as his best, was a performance of rhythmic and linguistic dexterity as he rapped about the hustla lifestyle in seldom heard rhyme patterns, like triplets, all while sustaining dense metaphors.<sup>15</sup> Nearly two decades later, Jay-Z’s raps have matured. Miles White notes that “Jay-Z’s evolutionary arc has also seen him move from a bad nigger figure to something more resembling the bad man figure, calling attention to problems as diverse as water shortages in Africa and the human suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina” (81). The slowing down and opening up Smith describes allowed for a movement from skillful witticism to poignant political critique, from young street hustler to mature businessman and political activist.<sup>16</sup> Combining Jay-Z’s politics and *cool* flow

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<sup>14</sup> Jay-Z and West follow in the footsteps of many successful duos—Black Star, Pete Rock & CL Smooth, Mobb Deep, EPMD, and OutKast are a just a few examples of hip-hop’s powerful pairs.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, “22 Two’s,” as the title suggests, strategically deploys the word “two” and its homophones, “to” and “too,” twenty-two times as an extended pun on a .22 pistol.

<sup>16</sup> Jay-Z is now the influential endorser of and friend to President Barack Obama, curator of environmental technologies, and founder of the Shawn Carter Foundation, a scholarship resource which helps students deemed ineligible for college scholarships (single mothers, students with low GPA’s, the formerly incarcerated).

with West's stylish bravado and soul sound, *Watch the Throne* illuminates several facets of hip-hop's unique performance of black masculinity—one that is simultaneously street and corporate, welcoming and threatening, sorrowful and celebratory.

## Discursive Disruption: Towards a Hip-Hop Methodology

I approach hip-hop as a lifelong fan, ardent critic, and ambivalent black feminist. A Los Angeles native and child of the 90s, the hip-hop aesthetic transmitted via Soul Train, Yo! MTV Raps, and spoken word in Leimert Park on Sunday afternoons shape my earliest views of the world. Mine is a world sculpted by beats, color, and rhyme. Like hip-hop's structure, my methodology and theoretical framing is a multi-textual work of collage.<sup>17</sup> Collage relies on the cut and torn edges that indicate the creative process, the construction and refashioning of structures and histories. Through personal and collective memory, rappers are storytellers who stitch new narratives, and, unlike the mosaic which emphasizes the fragment, the collage reflects an identity which is "curiously whole" (40). Unlike Du Boisian philosophy which posits black subjectivity is fragmented and doubled—I suggest that black subjectivity is indeed whole and multivalent. Jay-Z and West perform as black men under many gazes, global gazes that render the black body abject. Contextualized in multiple discourses and vocabularies, a collage-like interpretive lens allows one to better perceive the resistant embodiments of pleasure, intimacy, and corporeal agency as performed by Jay-Z and Kanye West.

Visually and aurally, the artists rely on a coded discourse of disruption to relay their revolutionary objectives. The music video in which the black icon performs, more specifically the camera lens, allows a white audience to regulate a black performer's actions with a constant global gaze that is facilitated through mass media. Moreover, it

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<sup>17</sup> I use the term *collage* as defined by Elizabeth Alexander in her dissertation "Collage: An approach to reading African-American women's literature" (1992). She posits that the form of collage "maps a theoretical space in which the myriad particulars of identity can reside."



allows the black body to be voraciously consumed. Jay-Z and West verbally and visually defy systems of surveillance as inherited by blacks before them, denying the camera's objectifying function. They disrupt this dynamic between performer/viewer and object/consumer by repeatedly breaking the fourth wall in a coded performance of black rebellion.

Work by scholars Saidiya V. Hartman, and Michelle Alexander inform my conception of black bodies and carceral spaces.<sup>18</sup> These authors relay how black Americans have been regulated in the form of prisons, urban renewal projects, and public policy. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman argues that black coded performances are like defense mechanisms that have been habitualized to work within the confines of black subjectivity. Working within restricted and regulated freedoms, black people developed complex systems of communication in the perseverance of culture. Jay-Z and West continue this legacy of coded performance.

Coded performance allows for temporary and imaginative escape from lived social conditions—it creates ciphers which foster community and talent. In her urgent and necessary text, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander captures the bleak social realities available to young black American men, realities Jay-Z and West rebel against. Alexander asserts that the US system of mass incarceration of primarily African American poor is a new type of racialized dominance akin to Jim Crow and that America's systems of racism have not ended but have instead

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<sup>18</sup> Yvette DeChavez made clear to me how systems of surveillance apply to the study of hip-hop. She theorizes through Michel Foucault, concluding that the camera, and the gaze of the audience, functions as a regulatory mechanism akin to the panoptic institution.

been “merely redesigned,” implemented swiftly and, largely, invisibly. Alexander argues, quite effectively, that most of us have slept through a counter-revolution in which the United States has implemented a form of social control unparalleled in world history. According to Alexander, America’s racial caste system has branded more than 31 million civilians as prisoners, a disproportionate number of them being African American. Products of the Marcy Projects in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn and Chicago’s inner-city, Jay-Z and West are some of the few lucky black men who have escaped early death or the plague of lifelong abjection incarceration brings. By embodying Otis Redding and James Brown—the rappers scream and moan in passion and agony and irrefutable presence—they respond to the severe social conditions that continue to snuff out black lives as outlined by Michelle Alexander.

Through this lineage of writers concerned with race and surveillance, I posit that America has never been “the land of the free” for black folks and, while pleasure can be found in black cultural expression, 150 years after the emancipation proclamation, blacks are still yearning for full freedom, still encoding escape. While one lineage of cultural theorists help to construct a past of black coded performance, theorists like Arjun Appadurai help to envision the future of blackness as defined outside of systems of surveillance. In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai identifies a global network of mass-mediated “imagination” that moves beyond national borders. Hip-hop is about world-making through verbal innovation, creating spaces of freedom outside of biopolitical conditions that constrain life. These spaces of mobility reimagine the reality of African American life as exploitable and expendable. This emphasis on imagination—on world-

making, self-fashioning and transformation of everyday discourse—is the kernel of revolution that runs through “Otis.” Jay-Z and West channel the voices and spirits of Otis Redding and James Brown in the creation of a sonic space of bodily freedom and brotherly intimacy that exist counter to America’s racial imagination.

I will interrogate how Jay-Z and West amplify their respective statuses as commodified objects of blackness in order to disseminate a message of unity gained through the appropriation and misuse of the master’s tools.<sup>19</sup> In the music video for “Otis,” Jay-Z and West use their hypervisible public personas to disrupt the negative images of misogynistic and violent black men. My theoretical framework concerning the embodiment of blackness that Jay-Z and West perform is informed primarily by Nicole Fleetwood’s *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*.<sup>20</sup> Her 2011 book explores the dynamics between black cultural producers and the consumers of their racialized images. She posits that “the discourse of blackness is predicated on a knowable, visible, and performing subject,” predominately the black male performer (6). Through black performance the black body has historically come to signify certain meanings in the American imagination—dangerous, criminal, virile, and *ghetto* as mediated through hip-hop. Fleetwood finds within disparate visual media, like installation art and print advertisements, the various “affective” powers black cultural

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<sup>19</sup> I purposely allude to Audre Lorde’s essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Throughout my report, I’ll perform a feminist reading of black masculinity as performed in hip-hop. Lorde’s spirit runs through this work.

<sup>20</sup> Also concerned with mass-mediated images and their audiences, Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald’s canonical reading of the star as “media-text” in their 1980 collaborative book, *Stars*, posits that the celebrity (the black icon) is a constructed object made for consumption (of white masses) and revenue (by white record executives). Dyer and McDonald’s emphasis on the *constructedness* of star personas is particularly important for approaching the study of Jay-Z and West’s performance of blackness.

production has upon the spectating audience or “decoders.” I find that in the music video for “Otis,” Jay-Z and West disrupt the dominant visual field by ironically embracing hip-hop’s tropes of hustling and gangsterism to produce an affective response, one of rebellious pleasure, in their audience. The rapper’s ironic adoption of guns, cars, and the American flag oblige the audience to consider the very problematic definition of blackness as visually replicated through hip-hop in the United States.

In order to decode messages within the disruptive potentiality of sound, I will extend the prosodic methodology formalized by Adam Bradley in *The Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-Hop* (2010). Bradley fuses the methodology of the university with the expression of street culture, high criticism and low art. He shows how hip-hop’s formal verse components like stanzaic structure, rhyme, and meter, validate that rap verses are a complex form of poetry set against established beats. While the book points towards a formal methodology that might serve to further establish hip-hop within the academic institution, Bradley does not offer a full analysis of any one song—instead, he surveys choice snippets from a diverse range of performers. Performing prosody on a full-length song instead allows for a more nuanced reading that considers narratives in their entirety, the full sonic development, the complete use of a sample and its adaption—crucial elements in translating a song’s meaning. My analysis of hip-hop verse as poetry measures metricality, breath, wordplay, and verse form, ultimately revealing formal resistances embedded within the very structure of the song. I highlight the poetic dexterity of Jay-Z and Kanye West’s craft, listening to how flow antagonistically or

harmoniously mingles with beats because cultural critique, and sites of coded communication, exist beneath the surface of sound.

Close listening to hip-hop for its poetic technique and deciphering the subtle modes of defiance that exist enmeshed within its pastiche-like quality of sounds, requires a trained ear and eye.<sup>21</sup> Rhythm is the fundamental element of rap. The beat—whether produced by digital sampling, beatboxing, a hand clap or a live band—forms the rhythmic foundation from which rappers build. When the beat drops and the audience begins to bob heads in sync, a rhythmic ideal is established. An MC, restrained by music's time signature and tempo, creates a second rhythm, a distinctive linguistic cadence known as *flow*, to overlay the beat. Jay-Z's flow is muscular, lithe, and meticulously refined as he mixes meters, takes unorthodox caesura's, and sometimes just sits in the pocket. The predictability of the beat opens room for a rapper to stray from and play with the expected rhythm. The MC proves his or her level of verbal craft by navigating the tensions between beat and flow. Jay-Z manipulates this tension skillful—he's one of the best. Hip-hop's fundamental structure was made to house resistance and as artists continue to develop sampling practices, punning, and narrative arcs, nuanced expressions of cultural critique emerge. Close-listening to the aesthetics of flow, particularly its discursively disruptive qualities, allows for brilliant insight into the gender and racial politics enacted through sound.

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<sup>21</sup> The transcription of rap for prosodic evaluation can be extremely difficult due to the speed of verses and complex polyrhythms produced by the interplay of beat and flow. Unlike most contemporary poetry, rap exploits the usefulness of accentual meter, a system in which only the stresses or accents are counted. Syllables may vary dramatically from line to line in rap, but rhythm is formed by a ritualistic pattern of stresses. In "Otis," since the song is in 4/4 time, one line represents one bar of music.

## Sampling Black Cool

Jay-Z and Kanye pay tribute to the past by sampling Otis Redding's sound—"Otis" is a tribute to their deceased forefather.<sup>22</sup> Tricia Rose describes hip-hop as referential, a culture which adopts and recombines, (re)appropriates and makes new. In "Otis," Jay-Z and West adopt, pull apart, and re-stitch black masculinity as performed in the soul era. Redding, The King of Soul, has come to signify racial tolerance and integrationism in America's collective memory.<sup>23</sup> He is the first true crossover artist of the soul era. As Redding speaks bifocally to white and black audiences, Jay-Z and West deliver a multifocal discourse of collectivity to African American and Latino audiences. But they also move within the confining space afforded by white audiences who demand particular performances of blackness from hip-hop stars. Redding is crucial to the encoding of the cipher that serves as a space of unconstrained expression. As opposed to the raw sexuality of Isaac Hayes or the polished conservatism of the Miracles, Otis Redding came to signify melancholy and angst—his music is the expression of unadulterated, bone-deep feeling. Redding sang with a spirit and yearning that would pour forth from his racked body. His voice is coarse, strained, and *passionate*—it has the power to transform sound into a palpable, material resistance. It is this passion that Jay-Z and West inherit and reinterpret. Redding also embodies a distinctive nobleness, an innate graciousness that

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<sup>22</sup> Best known for his posthumous single, "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay," Redding was an accomplished songwriter, producer, and singer signed to Stax record label. For Otis Redding's autobiography, see Scott Freeman

<sup>23</sup> Otis Redding was formally introduced to the American public as a symbol of integration and equality at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967. Performing as the closing act on the second day of the three-day festival, his infectiously entertaining performance won over the predominantly white crowd of "hippies." His emotive power was universally felt.

makes for a humble king. Jay-Z and West borrow Redding's nobleness but boast in the face of humility.

Jay-Z and West filter Redding's *cool*—his particular styling of black masculinity that is propelled by deep feeling.<sup>24</sup> His lines, “squeeze her, don't tease her / never leave her,” back the closing couplet of each octave, fall on the *break beat*, the polyrhythmic piece of music that serves as a transition. “Otis” is all transition as the break beat relentless repeats every two measure, or every couplet. While “Otis” features no *hook*, Redding's refrain about affection and fidelity serves as the stabilizing loop. Positioned over the moments of climactic orchestration, the refrain augments Jay-Z and West's performance of intimate brotherhood. Redding's repetitious plea is an authenticating tool that that supports black love between men. It makes it okay for black men to squeeze, please and never leave. Enhanced by Redding's gospel-inflected style, they adopt Redding's preacher-like tone and loving lyrics in the creation of a safe space for the male intimacy championed in “Otis.”

“Try a Little Tenderness,” released in 1966, is one of the most memorable love songs within the genre of American popular music as it swells with the anxiety, hopefulness, and joy of budding love. Redding croons about how one should love a woman properly: with a little tenderness. Shaped by drum taps as its only percussion, an organ that provides gospel flavor, simple guitar strums, piano notes that trip along, and a beautifully arranged horn section, “Try a Little Tenderness” opens slowly as Redding considers the plight of a “weary” woman waiting in anticipation of change. Around 2:00

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<sup>24</sup> See Rebecca Walker's collection of essay on “Black Cool” for the many forms cool can take.

minutes, change comes as the orchestration and Redding pick up the pace in a crescendo from bridge to climax. This piece of music which moves from slow to quick, anxious to glorious, is what Jay-Z and West sample. In *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, Kevin Young notes that soul music is metonymic in nature. Love is a coded substitute for politics. While Aretha Franklin may be telling a man that he'd better think, the song also contains a larger message that says, "white America, you'd better think about what you're doing to me." Jay-Z and West employ Redding's sound metonymically, love for a woman encodes political brotherhood in the face of oppression.

In form and content "Otis" is all about movement, transition, change. The song exploits the power of the break through repetition. This looping of moving sound creates a structure that is always anticipating change, a structure that is always breaking towards a new future. The music fluctuates between from disruptive quality of a choppy guitar lick and Redding's stutter, (nah, nah, nah), to the fullness of bellowing horns and Redding's affective refrain. This sonic duality is a reflection of simultaneously looking back and looking forward. Two-ness is indicative of stitching futures from pieces of the past.<sup>25</sup> Like its originary track, "Otis" has a pregnant quality, a palpable feeling of tension that lies beneath the veneer of sumptuous orchestration. It is notable that the rappers choose not to use Redding's full climax which is celebratory and downright funky. They instead truncate Redding's sonic movement at the moment just before the song floods with lively sound in order to restructure their own climax, a new joyous ending. "Otis" is

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<sup>25</sup>I do not intend to evoke Du Bois' concept of double consciousness here. For Jay-Z and West, global black superstars, their identities are exponentially fragmented beyond twoness. While double consciousness is multi-consciousness here, two-ness does happen in the performance. Past/Future, Mayback/Deconstructed Car, Jay-Z/West, Soul Sound/Hip-hop—two-ness exists everywhere in "Otis." So too does double-speak, or double-articulation. Jay-Z and West code words so that they mean two things at once.



exactly this: a 3:00 minute, rhythmically relentless climax that extends and remakes soul style in a twenty-first century way of self-fashioning.

[INTRO: OTIS REDDING]

IT MAKES IT EASIER, EASIER TO BEAR

YOU WON'T BE REGRET IT, NO, NO, NO

SOME GIRLS, THEY DON'T FORGET IT

LOVE IS THEIR WHOLE HAPPINESS

*SOUNDS SO SOULFUL, DON'T YOU AGREE?*

SQUEEZE HER, DON'T TEASE HER, NEVER LEAVE HER

While the music video for “Otis” takes place primarily in the open space indicative of freedom, it begins in an area of enclosure. The video opens with an establishing shot of an idle and gleaming jet-black Maybach, surrounded by blue walls; only a hint of blue sky is visible in the background. To the side of the angled Maybach, five mysterious men, covered head to foot in masks and strange white suits that resemble either the pit crew gear for racecar drivers or hazmat suits, stand militaristically in a row. As the camera slowly zooms in on the Maybach, Redding begins to sing and light trail of white smoke floats across the screen, a reminder of Redding’s ghostly presence and the fire to come. As Redding finishes his first line, *easier to bear*, Jay-Z and West, slowly revealed from the feet up, enter the shot in a slow motion walk towards the Maybach, backs to the camera, carrying an enflamed blowtorch and circular saw. Emphasizing the lavish car, the tools of disassembly, and laboring (black) bodies, the camera and the rappers move toward the car with the intent of lightening burdens, of creating a world that is easier to bear the burdens of blackness, the lingering melancholy of loss. Then,

suddenly and subtly, a strange thing happens. Jay-Z, while still moving forward with his back toward the viewer, rotates his upper body to stare directly into the camera while Redding sings, *you won't be regret it*. Jay-Z disrupts the dynamic between voyeur and subject—he breaks the fourth wall in a glance that is threatening and inviting at once, as if to say, “come experience my world with me if you dare, you won’t regret it.”

As Redding finishes his introductory verse, the video fast-cuts between two shots in which important motifs of the American Dream first appear: the (reconstructed) car and the (remixed) American flag. The mysterious masked men saw the Maybach to its component parts as initially, the windshield is removed, and finally, the entire roof is stripped, transforming the machine into a vehicle for unhampered movement. The second shot frames Jay-Z and West in front of an irregular, larger-than-life-sized American flag. This American flag is a mutated reproduction: the thirteen stripes are shortened; the increased color values of its red, white, and blue colorings are vibrant and lively; the 50 stars are indecipherable, resembling something between automatic weapons and miniature thrones—symbols of the *gangsta*. The remixed flag reminds viewers of American ideals like egalitarianism and economic prosperity which are attained through violence and systems of domination. By replacing stars with weapons, Jay-Z and West adopt the symbol of gangsterism in tribute to what once defined black masculinity as performed in hip-hop. They call attention to the stereotypical portrayals of black men within hip-hop, only to perform an oppositional representation in an act of defiance against traditional American values. Instead of preserving the iconic image of Old Glory flapping in the wind, the remixed print is pasted statically to the side of a blue-toned

industrial wall, positioned like a work of art housed within a museum, an artifact framed and mounted for viewing pleasure. The flag is palimpsestic in that it signifies a long history of black abjection but simultaneously points toward a different future where the black brute is a thing of the past, an antiquated American Dream.

Framed by the flag, Jay-Z poses coolly in the foreground on bended knee—Hublot watch glistening in the sun and snapback hat pulled low—singing to Redding’s non-diegetic voice.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, West bends and spasms, intoning Redding’s words with his full body. In reverence to Redding’s sonic presence, both men sing in profile, eyes turned away from the camera, inviting the viewer to voyeuristically gaze upon them. In this scopophilic, pleasure-inducing moment that moves beyond lip-syncing to embodiment, Jay-Z and West perform as Redding in the inheritance of a particularly vulnerable and affectionate black masculine sound, uniting in a trio of kingship.<sup>27</sup> As the film continues to cut back and forth between the mutated flag and the mutilated car, Jay-Z interjects into Redding’s introductory solo, reaching out to the audience to ask, “Sounds so *soulful*, don’t you agree?” (emphasis added). In this first moment of trickery, his direct address to the listener sets the expectation of a certain mood and subject: the longing, sensuality, and hopefulness of “Try a Little Tenderness,” but immediately after, the track skips and quickens, scrambling Redding’s moan into a lively syncopated stutter

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<sup>26</sup> Like the establishing shot, this frame of Jay-Z and his Hublot resembles a car advertisement. It is rumored that Jay-Z was paid a large sum to name-drop the brand. Here Jay-Z exploits the value of his body’s cultural capital.

<sup>27</sup> I employ the term “scopophilia” as used by film theorist Laura Mulvey. She finds there is pleasure in looking *and* in being looked at. Mulvey finds two contradictory pleasurable structures: the pleasure of using a person as a sexually stimulating object through sight, and pleasure from the identification with the image seen. The pleasures of scopophilia rely on mechanisms of recognition and mis-recognition. The black body has been mis-recognized as threatening and exploitable in hip-hop, a reality Jay-Z and West disrupt.

that backs the rest of the song. Redding's disruptive grunts form the beat for Jay-Z and West's flows. The three voices intermingle for the song's duration and the trio of black male voices encodes the cipher as a space of black brotherhood and deeply-felt desire.

## A Feminist Reading of Swag

[VERSE 1: JAY-Z]

I INVENTED SWAG,  
POPPIN' BOTTLES, PUTTING SUPERMODELS IN THE CAB  
PROOF, *I GUESS I GOT MY*  
*SWAGGER BACK*, TRUTH  
NEW WATCH ALERT; HUBLOTS  
OR THE BIG FACE ROLLIE; I GOT TWO OF THOSE  
ARM OUT THE WINDOW THROUGH THE CITY, I MANEUVER SLOW  
COCK BACK, SNAP BACK, SEE MY CUT THROUGH THE HOLES

The lyrics of “Otis” seem to be typical of a mainstream hip-hop track. Jay opens the verse flinging around the quintessential tropes of hip-hop: wealth and women. Center screen for the video’s entirety, Jay-Z and West smile widely from ear-to-ear while wildly racing their altered Maybach across the industrial lot. Four women, mildly dressed for hip-hop’s standards of excessive nudity and booty-poppin’, partake in the fun, crushed into the backseat and enjoying the ride. There is neither choreography nor storyline—just two men having what looks like the time of their lives, reveling in the pleasurable space of bodily freedom. As the first verse kicks in, the deconstructed car shoots flames and Jay-Z, once again confronting the viewer with his direct gaze, grabs hold of the camera, causing a visual disruption that further distorts the remixed American flag. Visually and verbally taking the means of mediation into his own hands, Jay-Z lets us know that this is no longer a space of containment, we’re in a new world now that allows for joyous freedom.

The video for “Otis” takes place in an abandoned industrial landscape of azure-blue warehouses and wide-open spaces. It is a place of everywhere and nowhere, a setting familiar to all implicated in industrialism’s global spread. The industrial setting, which evokes the ghosts of laboring bodies, is the site of the imaginative manufacturing work that Jay-Z and Kanye West perform in the construction of a new world—a safe space for particular brown bodies. Shot low to the ground by director Spike Jonze with a wide-angle, reverse fish-eye lens, the bright blue walls appear soaring as they blend with the sky. The space feels limitless. Along with a joyful display of movement, of bodily liberation, Jay-Z and West boast and brag. They spit dense metaphors that on the surface appear trite, but when decoded, reveal a nuanced response to national policies and black civil rights. Through visual enactment and sonic vocalization, Jay-Z and West discursively disrupt the commoditizing of blackness. They refuse to be made into stereotypical objects of blackness for the consumption of white America.

Lyrically, Jay-Z begins his verse in acephalous style. From the Greek for “headless,” acephaly indicates “lines of verse that are missing an initial syllable.”<sup>28</sup> Translated for hip-hop prosody, acephaly indicates a headless verse, one missing an initial word on the first beat of a measure. Headlessness describes a state of powerlessness, a manifestation of phallic castration that renders oppositional and awkward against the flaunting of opulence that pervades the track. The acephaly and caesuras that mark Jay-Z’s verse are the first indications of a vulnerable black subjectivity. Jay-Z moves between trochaic and iambic meters while expanding from

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<sup>28</sup> See *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics*, 4e.

shortened half lines to metrically dense closing couplets. This progression from brevity to breadth performs the transmutation of soul resistance to hip-hop revolution. His movement away from acephaly indicates defiance against powerlessness, an articulation indicative of agency.

Jay-Z deliberately waits half a measure in acephalous-fashion for Otis' drawl to kick in, only to claim one of the most persistent and cliché tropes of the MC: "I invented swag." A term most often associated with men, one with *swag*, a shortened form of swagger, exudes a type of confidence that, in the rap world, extends from economic success. Swag embraces a cool bravado that hinges on the performance of power. Reading the first line in another way, "I invented swag," is the boasts of all boasts. Known for alerting the masses to new commercial fashions, Jay-Z brags about his role for bringing luxury brands, like Bacardi's D'ussé Cognac or the Maybach, into the world of hip-hop.<sup>29</sup> Arguably the most influential and commercially successful rapper in history, Jay-Z asserts that he created the means by which the twenty-first century ideal of swag, this newest representation of black masculinity, exists. The performance of swag is similar to the type of cool Otis Redding embodies. Swagger indicates a comfort within one's body no matter the environment. One with swag adapts and flows because their cool emanates from an innate confidence. Articulating deep feeling despite and in spite of a violent Jim Crow racial landscape, Redding has OG-swag. Jay-Z and West perform swag in two ways. First, they articulate antinational, counter-normative narratives despite

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<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that Jay-Z chooses his endorsements with discrimination. In 2006, the rapper made headlines when he announced his decision to cut ties with Cristal, a brand he advertised regularly. Refusing to serve the distinguished champagne brand at his 40/40 nightclub and inciting a consumer boycott, Jay-Z accused Cristal of racism after the brand's president was quoted in an interview saying that he could not prevent those within hip-hop from buying his drink.

and in spite of America's contemporary racial landscape. Secondly, Jay-Z and West mimic Redding's cool by multivalently coding their performance of black masculinity for the approval/understanding of disparate audiences. For an audience who demands a performance from the brute black, swag codes as 'hood vernacular—it signifies black authenticity. For the audience who decodes black popular expression, swag indicates black resilience and resistance.

Boasting, a popular and well-studied rhetorical tradition of the black diaspora, is also a formal technique of the epic literary tradition. The boast is pride wrapped in lyric and the boast is written into hip-hop's core. Over the years, Jay-Z has exercised and refined his verbal dexterity and innovation; each new verse is a boast to the last, a one-up of himself. Part of the larger rhetorical strategy of "signifying," inherent within the boast is a unique type of defiance, a refusal to acquiesce to dominant language patterns, expression outside the realm of language's oppressive force. Signifying is the linguistic technique of the trickster/hustler and preacher figures, all of which Jay-Z simultaneously embodies. Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that "signifyin(g)... is a game of language, independent of reaction to white racism or even to collective black wish-fulfillment vis-à-vis racism" (70). For Gates, signifying is a type of linguistic circumnavigation, a tool for negotiating the disparate realms of white and black lived realities. Boasting, a signifying trope, has also been historicized as masculine for the boast delineates the extremes of man's figurative power—the bigger the boast, the bigger the phallus.

"Otis" is a song made almost entirely of boasts, proclamations of an undeniable superhuman-like presence. The stately boast imbues Jay-Z with power, imbalancing the



dynamic between rapper and audiences. By skillfully employing the boast, Jay-Z proclaims himself to be teacher to the masses, parent of hip-hop's newest generation, and king of the metaphorical throne. Through boasting, the rappers enact disruptive agency that destabilizes the relationship between consumer and object. Jay-Z paints his performance of nobility with a gangster coating. Jay-Z throws all of hip-hop's violent and masculinist tropes into one verse: champagne, women, jewelry, cars, and guns. With his "arm out the window" flashing his Hublot, Jay-Z rhymes of driving through the city with his iconographic NY "snapback" hat (as seen in the music video) pulled low, his hairline visible through the holes. Cleverly, he also evokes the image of a drive-by shooting, "cocking back" a gun visible through the "holes" or windows. Jay-Z is aware of his role as black fetish for white masses and prophets of the 'hood for black youth, and he plays his role for both audiences. He consciously relies on the fascination and terror his hypervisible black body brings in order to *ironically* claim power in positions of powerlessness, defiance in black abjection. While he spits violent lines, he performs a deep love that emanates through the lens. Troping is one technique of coding that embeds messages of black love within a wrapper of black ignorance. Relying on gangster tropes, Jay-Z and West preach unity and freedom in coded language.

As the reconstructed Maybach drifts across the frame, we catch a glimpse of the four supermodels in the cab. Racially ambiguous, modestly clad, and participating in the fun, the supermodels mark a departure from the typical video vixen.<sup>30</sup> Most hip-hop

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<sup>30</sup> Hip-Hop has a notorious history for objectifying women, particularly black women. Complimenting homophobic and misogynist lyrics, most hip-hop music videos feature nearly-, and sometimes completely-nude women contorting their bodies for the pleasure of men. Spanked, defaced, and showered in champagne, video vixens are routinely hypersexualized in the hip-hop music video.

videos feature women of color dancing provocatively, mimicking the moves of strippers while the camera pans up and down in a way that fragments the black female body to its sexual parts. Mireille Miller-Young finds that the pornographic performance of the video ho “sells the rapper,” authenticates his consumptive black cool. Rather than exploiting the women for their sexuality, the music video for “Otis” opens a safe space for the women to express pleasure. Instead of focusing on the erotic desire the body elicits, the camera focuses on the women’s smiling faces. In this space, the women have some limited agency. However, the attempt to divorce black women from stereotypes like “bitches” and “hoes” as portrayed in most hip-hop videos results in an overcorrection. The women are relegated to the backseat and their participation is minimal—indeed, the women are nearly erased.<sup>31</sup> Consumption is divorced from the body of the black woman but the post-racial ambiguousness of the supermodels eradicates black women entirely from this space. In a genre where we have been utterly misrepresented, our erasure further contributes to the damage. I find that even while “Otis” departs from the exploitation and objectification of black women and their bodies, the song does not create space for their unbounded bodily freedom. In Jay-Z and West’s imagined realm, uneven and gendered power dynamics persist.

In her landmark book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick finds that in male-dominated societies, women function as a conduit for male homosocial desire in order to maintain structures of

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<sup>31</sup>Black feminist scholars like Hortense Spillers and bell hooks have made life’s work of illuminating how the black woman’s body has historically been misnamed, either hypersexualized or reified to the point of erasure. For further reading in the rich resource of black feminist thought, see Spiller’s “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” and “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought*, Imani Perry’s *Prophets of the Hood*, and bell hooks’ “Ain’t I a Woman.”

patriarchal power. Homosociality is the deep feeling (antagonistic or pleasant) between men that may not necessarily be erotic (but certainly can be). In hip-hop, homosocial desire is predicated on intense homophobia, a deep fear of sexual love between black men. Compensating for sexual revulsion, black women in hip-hop have been reduced to currencies of exchange, an authenticating force for the desire between men. Though patriarchy's systems of power remain intact, the rappers destabilize the image of black women circulated through hip-hop. Jay-Z and West depart from generic conventions of the hip-hop music video which feature "hip-hop honeys" who are nearly nude, bent over in sexual positions, gyrating and grinding for the pleasure of male voyeurs.<sup>32</sup> In their space of patriarchal power, Jay-Z and West disempower women, they do not demean them. I commend Jay-Z and West for displaying a mature, respectful, and loving image of womanhood—this is progress for hip-hop—but we need a more radical change. In order to remove the stain of misogyny and homophobia from hip-hop, men will have to stop predicating homosociality and brotherhood on the subordination of women. Revolution cannot be attained through disempowerment—we must be allies for change.

[VERSE 2: KANYE WEST]

DAMN YEEZY AND HOV, WHERE THE HELL YA BEEN?

NIGGAS TALKING REAL RECKLESS; STUNTMEN!

I ADOPTED THESE NIGGAS, PHILLIP DRUMMOND THEM

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<sup>32</sup> Both rappers have a long history of objectifying women in music videos and lyrics. For instance, Jay-Z's "Big Pimpin'," his first true crossover hit, features the rapper on a yacht surrounded by dozens of bikini-clad women dancing in slow motion. Jay-Z and the rap group, UGK, pour alcohol on the women's bodies and throw money at them as they would a sex worker. Jay-Z boasts about the women he thugs, fucks, loves, then leaves, bragging that he takes "'em out the 'hood, keep 'em looking good, / But I don't fucking feed 'em." Needless to say, the song became one of Jay-Z's most successful and his misogyny raised hackles in the hip-hop community.

NOW I'M ABOUT TO MAKE THEM TUCK THEIR WHOLE SUMMER IN  
THEY SAY I'M CRAZY, BUT I'M ABOUT TO GO DUMB AGAIN  
THEY AIN'T SEEN ME 'CAUSE I PULLED UP IN MY OTHER BENZ  
LAST WEEK I WAS IN MY OTHER OTHER BENZ  
THROW YOUR DIAMONDS UP 'CAUSE WE IN THIS BITCH ANOTHER 'GAIN

In the song's second octave, West picks up on Jay's self-aware boasts and clever wordplay, claiming to other artists that *Watch the Throne* will dominate the summer airwaves and "make them tuck their whole summer in." With the use of one word, *stuntmen*, West disses his competitors and slyly reveals the intent behind his lyrics. To stunt in the black vernacular is to boast, or show off—to claim that others stunt and talk "reckless" implies that competitors feel the need to brag in the wake of West's skilled flow. But the caesura that precedes "stuntmen," isolates and emphasizes the term in a way that indicates the noun applies to the speaker, not the subject of West's flow. In other words, "stuntmen" is self-reflexive. In the most literal sense, stuntmen are those who perform dangerous and daring feats, risking their bodies in a defiance of Nature's laws.<sup>33</sup> Jay-Z and West are bodily-bold in "Otis." They speak unabashedly about the oppressed reality of black life in the United States and perform an ecstatic expression of freedom. They are risk-takers, stuntmen who perform danger by enacting the gestures and mannerisms of the thug (for instance, Jay-Z mimes shooting a gun as he spits his "cock back, snap back" line). In the song's later verses, the artists will also flirt with danger by articulating narratives of black achievement and success that operate outside of American

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<sup>33</sup> This second valence of "stuntmen" considers a history of young black men, most famously Tupac Shakur and The Notorious BIG, who have sacrificed their bodies for the sake of "hip-hop" and its valorized gangsta culture.

systems of control. Jay-Z and West are dangerous in their extra-ness. They are too present.

West goes on to compare himself to Phillip Drummond, the fictional white father of two adopted black children on the 80s sitcom, *Diff'rent Strokes*. West boasts that he has adopted hip-hop youth and raises them to be men. He is father and teacher in this creative space but he buries the love he'll later openly express within deprecatory boasts. West stunts, plays the role of the prideful and potent black man. Then, mid-way through his octave, a moment of linguistic trickery occurs as West states, "they call me crazy, but I'm 'bout to go dumb again." *Dumb*, another coded word, connotes two meanings to two very different audiences. In one sense, dumb means unintelligent or inferior, to be crass, dumb can translate to "niggerish." Stressing the word "dumb" surfaces all of the negative associations of blackness. In another sense, "dumb" reaches back to African American vernacular of the 90s. It's a word that connotes a heightened affective response. To exclaim, "Yo! That beat is *dumb!*," is to indicate that a rhythm induces pleasure, a good feeling that is deeply sensed. When West says that he's "about to make them go dumb again," he suggests that he will make "them," the black men he's adopted, feel deeply again. West embeds messages of black masculine love within the abjection of black significations—his flow is auto-antonymic in nature.

West ends his verse rapping about material excess, the "other other Benz." Once again it appears that West has fallen victim to hip-hop's materialistic trappings, but close reading the line in its full context, "They ain't seen me 'cause I pulled up in my other Benz, / Last week I was in my other other Benz," reveals that West isn't flaunting his

wealth as much as we'd like to he is. What matters here is that "they," those who say he's "crazy" and "dumb," cannot *see* West for who he truly is. West forefronts the problems of seeing hypervisible black bodies that are configured through a global gaze. "They ain't seen him" because his black body disrupts visibility and alter the process of seeing. They ain't seen him because his constructedness as black rapper requires material excess for stardom and, in turn, occludes his true self. West's forward-looking and self-reflexive vision is limited by hip-hop's conventions, the other other Benzes.

West hints at a masculine love that embraces black men, adopts and rears them, but is unable to fully articulate this without losing credibility. What the rappers are unable or unwilling to fully vocalize, they perform. The video for "Otis" suspends and stretches time—the rappers appear to *luxuriate* in time as they move in slow motion but spit rhymes in real time. Produced by rapping to the track at high-speed then slowing the footage down, Jay-Z and West travel slowly, appearing to superhumanly glide across the frame in a dreamlike effect. The low level camera angles upward to capture the rappers' full bodies, creating the illusion of larger than life presence. Jay-Z and West present themselves as heroes, heavenly bodies sent to guide. Slowed down so the audience has time to look beyond the posturing, Jay-Z and West intimately interact. They mingle vocally and physically, unafraid to touch and embrace one another. Jay-Z and West perform an intimate and loving brotherliness. Draping arms over one another while lip-synching each other's lines, they display a comfortable camaraderie: brotherhood lives here. I argue that this display of affinity and communion between black men has revolutionary potential. Jay-Z and West send a message that interaction predicated on

deep love and desire between black men is acceptable, that brotherhood in hip-hop is fun, pleasurable, and vital. Homosociality in Jay-Z and West's realm counters the historical construction of black brotherhood within hip-hop that has historically relied on the denigration of the black female body for the substantiation of homosocial enjoyment.<sup>34</sup> Here, brotherhood relies on the cipher.

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<sup>34</sup> A notorious case of this is the music video for Nelly's "Tip Drill." The video features topless women shaking their exposed breasts and vaginas. The video inspired protests from the hip-hop community while it also bred a string of similar videos.

## **Consumptive Reconstruction and Disruptive Pleasure**

The car has historically symbolized innovation and progress, freedom and independence, for the American public. Taking to the open road, literary protagonists, movie characters, and real American citizens have driven towards new places in pursuit of self-realized change. For black Americans, and more specifically for hip-hop culture, the car has historically remained an important symbol of wealth and American “success.” The automobile is a marker of social mobility. In her essay “Drive Slow: Rehearing Hip Hop Automotivity,” Adrienne Brown states,

Hip hop cars are rarely shown to be vehicles of isolation and exile as they appear in television commercials, moving through rural environments as a means to move away from or beyond the social, a fantasy deeply tied to mid-century narratives on the left and on the right that equated the road with freedom. Instead, the hip hop car often remains rooted in the social, deriving its value from its proximity to the commons of creativity and performance (272).

In hip-hop videos, the car does not escape from the ‘hood, does not drive toward some better existence, but instead, elevates the ‘hood with luxury. The classic Chevrolet Impala’s and rimmed-out Rolls-Royce Phantom’s drive slowly through the streets, ornamenting poverty with material excess. The hip-hop car signifies success attained through creativity and skill. In this turn of the century moment, luxury has evolved to opulence as rappers now flaunt Maybachs, a luxury line of Mercedes USA, with starting



sticker prices that costs more than most Americans' homes.<sup>35</sup> The Maybach, a brand first established in 1909, was revitalized in 2002 and marketed *specifically* through hip-hop. For instance, rapper Rick Ross christened his record label "Maybach Music Group" and then released a string of hit singles with the Maybach brand name as titles. The domination of the Maybach brand within hip-hop indicates a new level of excessive consumption in hip-hop culture. Ultimately, mechanisms of consumption would fail because Mercedes did not take into consideration the large divide between producer and consumer, between the rapper and his or her audience. Mercedes-Benz decided to discontinue their Maybach brand starting in 2013—because who can afford a Maybach besides a commercial rapper? Jay-Z and Kanye West do not celebrate the wealth the Maybach signifies—they rejoice in the failure of the Maybach brand to profit from the hypervisibility of hip-hop's black bodies. Jay-Z and West commemorate the death of the American symbol of exploitation, opting to make their own vehicle of mobility from its pieces.

The music video resembles an advertisement that features the Maybach and the rappers as its objects of consumption. Defying time and reveling in the freedom of their space, the video cuts from shots of the rapper's driving, walking beside, or standing in front of the reconstructed Maybach. Resembling the same technique that reduces video vixens to their sexual parts, slow motion camera pans reveal the vehicle in its entire futuristic splendor. The camera forces the viewer to take in, to fully see the deconstructed

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<sup>35</sup> In the 90s, the Mercedes Benz with all of its luxury bells and whistles, blinged- and rimmed-out, was the status symbol of achievement for hip-hop. The company's dominant influence upon rappers continues as in early 2012, Kanye West made headlines for arriving to the amfAR Cinema Against AIDS Gala, held during the Cannes Film Festival, in a \$1.7 million Mercedes-Benz SLR McLaren Stirling Moss sports coupe.

car. By dismantling the car, Jay-Z and West disassemble the exploitative power of the American symbol. No longer does the Maybach signify the black body as cultural capital but the black body as disruptor, creator, artist. In the safety of the cipher, Jay-Z and West deconstruct and then reconstruct. The Maybach is the primary bifocal code (in that it means different things to different audiences) of the various reconstructions and reconfigurations happening throughout “Otis:” blackness, masculinity, consumption, desire.

Arjun Appadurai’s notion of imagination and the post national are helpful in understanding this complex relationship to consumerism and self-fashioning. He posits that the linkages between mass migration (displacement) and mass mediation have effected imagination in a move toward the postnational. In other words, technology has altered the way people think of themselves. Moving beyond the local, the self is now constitutive of the global and contemporary cultural production, work of the imagination, reflects this change. For Appadurai, “Consumption in the contemporary world is often a form of drudgery, part of the capitalist civilizing process. Nevertheless, where there is consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency” (7).

Seemingly perpetuating America’s car-centered and consumerist culture, the deconstructed car is pimped out to the point of intelligibility, something so new it appears otherworldly and futuristic. Roofless, doorless, chromed out and shooting flames, the reconstructed car signifies the creative ability inherent within black Americans. Despite abjection, creation breeds change and change is that much closer to freedom.

Deconstruction is, in this sense, an avenue for disruptive pleasure. While we initially *hear*

Jay and Kanye promote a type of luxury and excessiveness typical to the hustla persona, we see an astute critique of American values and the biopolitical relation of white power structures and minority powerlessness. Dismantling the car then donating its profits indicates awareness of an audience composed of those who have been invited into this imagined space yet cannot afford the excessive material opulence that Maybach's signify—those who dream of self-fashioning, bodily mobility, and the possibilities of pleasure.

[VERSE 3: JAY-Z]

PHOTO SHOOT FRESH, LOOKING LIKE WEALTH  
I'M BOUT TO CALL THE PAPARAZZI ON MYSELF  
LIVE FROM THE MERCER  
RUN UP ON YEEZY THE WRONG WAY, I MIGHT MURK YA  
FLEE IN THE G450 I MIGHT SURFACE  
POLITICAL REFUGEE ASYLUM CAN BE PURCHASED  
EVERYTHING'S FOR SALE  
I GOT 5 PASSPORTS, I'M NEVER GOING TO JAIL

Deviance comes in the form of mimicry in “Otis.” In *Location of Culture*, postcolonialist scholar Homi Bhabha argues that colonial mimicry is a “double articulation” of self that asserts sameness as it simultaneously disavows identification with a colonizing force (86). Mimicry is a tool that destabilizes power relations between an oppressor (the gazing audience) and the oppressed (the black performer). Jay-Z and West turn mimicry to mockery as they adopt tropes of the “bad nigger” as narrated through hip-hop and The American Dream. “Otis” is black cultural expression that appropriates doctrines of the American Dream in an effort to move from the national

space of regulated black bodies to an imagined space of sovereignty and mobility. The rappers distort the American flag and deconstruct symbols of American success in order to destabilize the very notion of black American subjectivity. In *Decoded*, Jay-Z states,

After Barack was elected, I realized that the same thing hip-hop had been doing for years with language and brands--that is, reinventing them to mean something different from what they originally meant--we could now do to American icons like the flag. Things that had once symbolized slavery, oppression, militarism, and hypocrisy might now begin to legitimately represent us (221).

Visually, the truncated American flag with guns/thrones for stars, the sawed-off Maybach, and the ironic image of blacks draped in red, white, and blue accentuate Jay-Z and West's resistant response to American nationalism. Appropriating American objects for their own use, they find the possibility for power in powerlessness, creation in abjection. Antinationalism comes in the guise of assimilation and visual disruption comes as opulence. The mimicry of normative American-ness is used a tool of subversion, a guise obscuring radical political underpinnings. Wearing complimentary white shirts and blue jeans with hints of red throughout their ensembles, the rappers are ironically draped in the colors of the flag. If the flag's red and white stripes and its blue stars are said to represent American valor, purity, and justice, for black folks it has historically represented bloodshed and bodily constraint. To defiantly clothe themselves in red, white, and blue is to proclaim a human subjectivity despite a history of misrecognition, misnaming, and mistreatment in America. I can't help but be reminded of the images of poor blacks stranded on rooftops pleading for help from overhead media choppers in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. As if to visually relay that "we are American too," to disrupt

the discursive visibility of black skin, some Katrina victims waved American flags. As the media choppers circled, the effect was a heightened awareness of black abjection. Red, white, and blue hold the same shame-tinged and horrifying meanings for Jay-Z and West even in this imagined space.

Jay-Z articulates this always-present violence against black bodies by rapping a fantastical violent narrative in which he escapes American law, purchasing his freedom, after committing a murder in defense of West. Once again Jay-Z tropes hip-hop's hyperviolent gangsta conventions, claiming he "might murk ya," or shoot to kill, but unlike the many rappers we've seen sent to prison for long sentences on charges ranging from drug distribution to violent assault, Jay-Z boasts of a different fate.<sup>36</sup> Much like his real-life narrative of escape from inner-city street life, Jay-Z is able to circumvent the American legal system. Jay-Z's narrative reinforces the extra-legality of his particular body. For Jay-Z, violence functions as a disruptive force to the nation state.

Jay-Z carries out his own style of vigilante justice and asserts that the means of escape is wealth because, "everything's for sale." Black performers and their evocative bodies are for sale, and in Jay-Z's (imagined) world, so is freedom. But what about those without the clout to buy freedom, how do they escape? What of those who have nothing to sell? As William Jelani Cobb notes, hip-hop narratives "relay the doings of strong men who, by their brute strength or brute wit, muscle their way beyond the parameters—legal, moral, social, or otherwise—that constrain the rest of us" (111). Jay-Z boasts of invincibility but in his role as teacher, educates irresponsibly. He implies that some black

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<sup>36</sup> Shyne, Mystikal, T.I., Remy Ma, Slick Rick, Lil' Kim, and Tupac are a few rappers who've seen prison times while at the height of their popularity.

bodies are indestructible but history tells us this is not true. Martin Luther King Jr., Trayvon Martin, Tupac and Biggie, Emmett Till, Hadiya Pendleton—they could not escape death. Jay-Z’s narrative rings absurd against a backdrop of indiscriminate black death. Jay-Z successfully disrupts national boundaries by embracing violence but he places idolatrous students at risk because, while he may never go to jail, his listeners may.

[VERSE 4: KANYE WEST]  
I MADE JESUS WALKS, I'M NEVER GOING TO HELL  
COUTURE LEVEL FLOW IS NEVER GOING ON SALE  
LUXURY RAP, THE HERMÈS OF VERSES  
SOPHISTICATED IGNORANCE, WRITE MY CURSES IN CURSIVE  
I GET IT CUSTOM, YOU A CUSTOMER  
YOU AIN'T ACCUSTOMED TO GOING THROUGH CUSTOMS YOU AIN'T BEEN  
NOWHERE, HAH?  
AND ALL THE LADIES IN THE HOUSE GOT THEM SHOWING OFF  
I'M DONE I'LL HIT YOU UP MAÑA-NAH!

West picks up Jay-Z’s narrative thread about skirting the law and applies this logic to the spiritual world as he alludes to one of his debut singles that cemented his success as a controversial crossover artist: “Jesus Walks” (2004).<sup>37</sup> Declaring that people from every walk of life was worthy of salvation, even “the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers,” West chose to work outside of the stereotypical conventions of hip-hop and center his focus on religion. In “Otis,” West egoistically asserts that because he

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<sup>37</sup> Jesus Walks was an odd radio hit that challenged the conventions of rap as West rapped, “They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus / That means guns, sex, lies videotape / But if I talk about God my record won’t get played, huh?”

recorded “Jesus Walks,” “I’m never going to hell,” as if he can superhumanly defy God’s laws.

If Jay-Z failed his audience by spiting a hyperviolent verse of falsities, West makes up for it here through spiritual allusions. In a move that shows technical finesse, West slickly reveals his role as a trickster figure when he calls himself “the Hermès of verses.” Using a French pronunciation West evokes the luxury fashion line Hermès whose lavish silk scarves and fashionable Birkin bags accessorize celebrities from Queen Elizabeth II to Kanye West himself. It is a line the fashionable rapper and aspiring-fashion designer would be expected to spit. Unexpectedly, West plays between this modern commodified association of Hermès and the classical attributes of the Greek god Hermes. Son of Zeus and the nymph Maia, Hermes is associated with a wide range of characteristics and roles in Greek mythology.<sup>38</sup> He is the messenger god, a liaison between spiritual and mortal realms. He is also a guide to travelers and others searchers, marking routes and illuminating paths for the lost. He is a god that symbolizes the profusion of good things, of fertility, abundance and success. Lastly, Hermes is also a playfully cunning and witty god, a mischievous trickster whose powers of persuasion oftentimes work towards the benefit of humankind. West embodies all of the various qualities associated with the herald Hermes simultaneously and beneath a one-dimensional veneer of materialism. He performs as a messenger, a trickster, and a spiritual conduit. To “write curses in cursive” is to rap about the possibilities of existence outside of American boundaries while seeming to conform. It is to veil critique within

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<sup>38</sup> *Oxford Classical Dictionary*

“niggerisms,” sophistication within ignorance. Jay-Z and West perform salvation through codes and this cipher is sacred.

[VERSE 5: JAY-Z]

WELCOME TO HAVANA

SMOKING CUBANA’S WITH CASTRO IN CABANAS

VIVA MEXICO            CUBANO

DOMINICANO, ALL THE PLUGS THAT I KNOW

DRIVING BENZES WITH NO BENEFITS

NOT BAD, HUH? FOR SOME IMMIGRANTS

BUILD YOUR FENCES, WE DIGGING TUNNELS

CAN’T YOU SEE WE GETTIN MONEY UP UNDER YOU?

In his last complete verse, Jay-Z picks up on West’s lighthearted and rather silly Spanish punning, “maña-nah!,” to bring “Otis” to its sonic and thematic peak. Continuing his narrative of extra-legal freedom, Jay-Z lyrically transports the listener to Havana, the tropical urban center, governmental headquarters, and capital city of Cuba. Although Jay-Z evokes a world of relaxation and eternal vacation by smoking premium cigars “with Castro in cabanas,” he concurrently conjures memories of the fraught history between the United States and Cuba.<sup>39</sup> His use of “immigrants” also chillingly alludes to the origin of African Americans in the United States. To include African Americans in his address to immigrants is a painful reminder of our forced displacement, enslavement, and deaths. Again, his vision of uninhibited movement is not divorced from violent lived social conditions.

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<sup>39</sup> Here, I refer to the embargos that have been in place since the Cold War, embargos that have crippled the once profitable Cuban nation.



In just a few words, Jay-Z counters America-Cuban history of tenuousness and tension-ridden interaction with an imagining of brown collectivity, safe spaces, and bodily mobility. Calling out to a brown diaspora of listeners who relate to the crippling effects of US policy, Jay-Z unites disparate brown peoples of country's disrupted and disaffected by US intrusion. He urges Mexicanos, Cubanos, and Dominicanos living without the "benefits" and access to American ideals of democratized opportunity to dig tunnels in order to circumnavigate the oppressive US government. His reference to the Mercedes Benz, first introduced by West as a trope of African American success, incorporates black people in this imagined brown collectivity. In multi-temporal and multi-spatial fashion, Jay-Z speaks for geographically and politically distinct backgrounds to redefine the parameters of existence by overturning things from the ground up by "digging tunnels."<sup>40</sup> Jay-Z imaginatively disrupts the limits of the nationstate as brown bodies across the diaspora unite in the dismantling of America.

Joining the debates over immigration Jay-Z alludes to "The Great Wall of Mexico." He decenters white supremacy in an open challenge to, "build your fences" because "we [the brown collective] are "digging tunnels / Can't you see we getting' money up under you?" The fences Jay-Z rhymes about may be the white picket fences which symbolize the American Dream of economic prosperity, a largely inaccessible ideal for inner-city blacks and Latinos. This couplet may alternatively be read as a reference to the Mexican Cartel and their ability to negotiate US enforcement by

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<sup>40</sup> Celebrity comedian and friend of Jay-Z and West, Aziz Anzari makes a cameo appearance in the video driving a car and joining in on the celebration. Of Indian descent, he is another brown body invited into Jay-Z and West's space of brotherhood. Jay-Z's conception of brotherhood is expansive.

smuggling drugs through underground tunnels. In either case Jay-Z insinuates that black (I use this term widely) men will make strides towards success, as defined outside of white normative standards, by circumnavigating exclusive and repressive boundaries, by any means necessary. He implies that a new majority, one that may weaken white normativity, is inevitable in the US. As Jay-Z practices deviance under the surface of his songs, drug smugglers and immigrant bodies will continue to break order by practicing a type of subterranean and collective resistance. Jay-Z began “Otis” by calling out to the audience, “sounds so soulful don’t you agree?” Coded through Redding, he invited an audience of black men to join the coalition, let down their guards, and smile. As he ends, he invites a black collective composed of disparate ethnic bodies to overturn, defy, and revolt. Through codes, the rappers move from vulnerable to militant, pleasure-seeking to threatening. For those who say hip-hop is no longer political, I say you are not listening, nor reading, closely enough.

## Conclusion: Black Screams, Black Rupture

[VERSE 6: KANYE]

CAN'T YOU SEE THE PRIVATE JETS FLYING OVER YOU?

MAYBACH BUMPER STICKER READS: "WHAT WOULD HOVA DO?"

JAY IS CHILLING, YE IS CHILLING

WHAT MORE CAN I SAY? WE KILLING 'EM

HOLD UP BEFORE WE END THIS CAMPAIGN

AS YOU CAN SEE WE DONE BODIED THE DAMN LANES

LORD PLEASE LET THEM ACCEPT THE THINGS THEY CAN'T CHANGE

AND PRAY THAT ALL OF THEIR PAIN BE CHAMPAGNE

In the closing verse, West ends his “campaign” addressed to brown men in triumphant fashion. Standing atop the Maybach with his arms spread out toward an invisible congregation, West flaunts his “private jets” and basks in the glory of his deviancy. Cobb theorizes that MCs can perform as the “secular preacher, the sanctified exhorter whose skills have passed by cultural osmosis from the pulpit to the boulevard” (16). West conflates Jay-Z with God, “Hova” with Jehovah, in a move that once again substantiates the collaborators as supreme rulers. But it is also a move that places them within a legacy of black oration that collectivizes the masses. Aligning themselves with figures like Bishop C. L. Franklin and Black Nationalist, Malcolm X, propels the rappers from entertainers to evangelists, from flattened representations of black masculinity to multi-faceted oracles who divine the liberation of black folks.

West’s closing verse, though celebratory and forward-looking, is haunted by the specter of America’s violent past. The assertion “we done bodied the damn lanes” is a proclamation of presence that suggests “we are here, we have survived, and we are going

nowhere.” Even in West’s celebration, melancholy lingers. The last couplet of the song is perhaps the greatest indicator of the pain that seeps into the rapper’s space carved for pleasure. In an ambiguous address, West hopes that an unspecified “they” will “accept the things they can’t change.” Multivalent in its syntax, “they” may read differently depending on the audience. If addressed to his white consumers, West calls for an end to the manipulation of black representations. For whites to accept the black body as unchangeable, un-malleable, and un-exploitable is to acknowledge an essential humanity and autonomous subjectivity. To accept the bodies they can’t change is to allow for the unrestrained mobility, the freedom sought-after by minority communities in America. But the “they” of West’s direct address may not be powerful whites but disenfranchised blacks. For black people to accept the things they cannot change, the humiliating and painful ruptures of trauma, is a call to move beyond the past and instead work towards a more hopeful future. For West, he implies that black people in America cannot afford to dwell in America’s past of chattel slavery, mob lynchings, Jim Crow, and the many other systematized racisms aimed to control abject black folks. Perhaps West indicates that these wrongs can never be righted, so we must change this current moment to sculpt our idealized futures. West’s last verse is hopeful, and ambiguous, and deeply mournful.

During the last verse, the setting changes from day to night. Bright bursts of flames shoot into the night sky and James Brown’s iconic shriek sounds. Suddenly the tension that has accrued throughout the duration of “Otis” turns somber. Pleasure erupts into terror (it is a fine line between the two feelings) as the scream repeats. The scream seems unending as the break beat loops again and again, assaulting the ears with intense

aurality. The “James Brown scream” is a primal vocalization flowing with creative energy and ideological import. Coupled with the disruptive viscosity of black masculine performance and its codings, the shrieks too disrupt normative values of speech and language.

Mirroring the song’s introduction which capitalizes on the politics of soul sound, Jay-Z and West channel The Godfather of Soul in a similar vein. Jay-Z and West move beyond the limits of coded language to coded sound, transmuting resistance to militancy. Unlike Redding who functions as a symbol of integration for his deep-felt desire, James Brown is symbol of black aggressiveness in the American racial imagination. He was unafraid to tell black audiences that they were bold, black, and beautiful—a risky action considering the intensely racial climate of Jim Crow America. A political activist during the Civil Rights Movement, Brown aggressively sung about the woes of his black community while inspiring fierce passion for revolution in black and white audiences. Brown’s voice is tormented, fitful, disruptive. He often expresses himself outside of language, preferring communication through screams, shouts, grunts, groans, wails, and sobs with deeply-felt emotion. Like Redding, his passionate sound creates a materiality that lends authenticity and structure to Jay-Z and West’s coded message. Where Redding’s voice indicates masculine vulnerability, Brown’s voice indicates black revolution.

Evincing a joy and celebration beyond words, the shriek endures where words do not. The scream is a transgressive force that resists language, a guttural sound that invokes the joy and pain of black survival. The scream is a destabilizing force of

revolution exploded outward, a sustained alarm that refuses to be silenced. As Fred Moten writes of the shriek in *In the Break*, his dizzying and evocative reflection on the intersections of the black image and black sound:

The revolution embedded in such duration is, for a moment, a run of questions: What is the edge of this event? What am I, the object? What is the music? What is manhood? What is the feminine? What is the beautiful? What will masculinity be? (22)

Doubled over, feeling every ounce of Brown's joy and agony, Jay-Z and West channel Brown's scream—a sound that throws everything into chaos: identity, purpose, and power. The scream carries the revolutionary potential to destabilize and redefine what it means to be black; what it means to be a man; what it means to be a young black man of Generation Hip-Hop; what it means to be. The scream is a form of communication older than spoken and written word—it is instinctive, affective, and disruptive. The scream can resignify the black body and turn “pain” into “champagne.” The scream is pleasure and terror materialized—it is the sound of Generation Hip-Hop.

### **Coda: Diasporic Brotherhood**

“Otis” abruptly ends with an emphatic James Brown-grunt. The screen turns black, the beat and the scream die a measure early—the song ends unfinished, partial, disrupted by silence. The audience still listens for the scream, its incessant and enduring sound still echoing in ears. The brown collective waits for the other side of revolution, the other side of the break, but it never comes. Jay-Z and West have completed their duty as teachers—they’ve dropped knowledge, fed starved brains, and catalyzed creativity. The rest is up to us.

Approximately 15 seconds after the video’s conclusion, in what feels like a lifetime, a notice appears which states, “THE VEHICLE USED IN THIS VISUAL WILL BE OFFERED UP FOR AUCTION. PROCEEDS WILL BE DONATED TOWARDS THE EAST AFRICAN DROUGHT DISASTER.” The rappers remind us of how to attain a hoped for future: through paying it forward. The notice illuminates that black abjection is not solely an American phenomenon but is, instead, lived worldwide and daily. Global brotherhood whose structure is composed of pleasure, autonomy, and desire can disrupt and dismantle the insidious significations that entangle the black body. Jay-Z and West inspire Generation Hip-Hop to use the creative tools at their disposal to deconstruct and then reconstruct. Through a discourse of disruption, “Otis” functions as a blueprint for youth of color to recode black masculinity and reimagine the American Dream.

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## **Vita**

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This report was typed by the author.