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This opening line of Yasiin Bey's (1998) critically acclaimed album, *Black on both sides*, exists as a sprawling opus to hip-hop. In expressing his profound appreciation for the culture, Bey (formerly known as Mos Def) constructs this nuanced, multilayered worldview through the prism of lyricism – broaching topics from climate change to critiquing capitalism, all while reflecting on life, love, and the ancestral wisdom of the elders. Within the context of education and cultural foundations, scholars of critical pedagogy often look to hip-hop as a pathway for engaging students' self-awareness, critical thinking, and social consciousness. This arts-informed, qualitative study explores the meaning-making processes and learning outcomes of college students who identify as hip-hop artists. This study re-mixes traditional qualitative methodologies by centering hip-hop poetics and participant-analysis, as a primary means of collecting and deconstructing data. Participants were asked to record one song in response to the prompt: *Describe your college experience*. Together, we assess the implications for the consumption, creation, and performance of hip-hop in postsecondary education.

*SPEECH IS MY HAMMER, BANG THE WORLD INTO SHAPE:*

MAKING MEANING IN COLLEGE THROUGH

HIP-HOP LYRICISM

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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To my wife and daughter,  
the rhyme and reason  
in every verse,  
for all  
time.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by DONOVAN A. LIVINGSTON has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Although this section is referred to as *Acknowledgements*, a more befitting title perhaps, is *Props*. Given the nature of this project, its grounding in hip-hop culture and its colloquial appeal, it seemed that this section should bear the name of a phrase that, when translated, describes the act of giving someone their *proper* respect. However, it is the policy of The Graduate School, that all theses and dissertations adhere to a universal nomenclature. In a way, such constraints are emblematic of the ideological rub that exists between hip-hop culture and the academy. Regardless of what this section is called, make no mistake, the completion of this dissertation was made possible by my village; a community of supporters who, together, carried this body of work across the finish line. Props and gratitude go to my wife, my partner, Lauren – who worked alongside me, completing her dissertation, while carrying and giving birth to our daughter, Joy. Props to my mom, dad, and mother-in-law for supporting my art and scholarship. Props to my dissertation committee, Dr. Leila Villaverde (chair), Dr. Silvia Bettez, Dr. Aaliyah El-Amin, and Dr. Connie Jones. Props to my fraternity brother and mentor, Dr. Brian McGowan, whose guidance and advocacy was – and continues to be – invaluable in my development as a qualitative researcher. Props to my colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro from the Student Support Services and the Student Success Center – each of whom supported me being a full-time student and staff member. Props to my colleagues at Wake Forest University for doing the same – from Pre-College Programs, the Office of the Provost, the Office of Personal and Career Development, the Department of Education, the Program for Leadership and Character, and the School of

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## CHAPTER I

### TRACK I: THE INTRO: THEME MUSIC TO A DRIVE BY

#### **The Booth**

On any given day, you could find us in the subbasement of the undergraduate library. Tucked in the far corner of the digital media center was the audio lab – an intimate, 10'x10' room, barely bigger than broom closet. Each day the walls, a chipping pastel green, seemingly ate away itself, eroding into its original eggshell white. Affixed to those same walls were charcoal gray foam panels, wedged, forming a checkered pattern along the room's edges, reminiscent of a chessboard. Quite fitting, for the lone space on campus in which we felt like kings.

All we wanted was a place to be ourselves, a place to be taken seriously. Somewhere, within those four walls, we became collapsing stars – supernovas – hurling our voices into the unknown universe, striking any who dared to listen. Within that hallowed space, we wrote ourselves, our stories, and our experiences into existence. Within that hallowed space, we shined brighter, more brilliant; able to light a path to hope in our darkest days. Just as the North Star hangs purposefully in the night sky, the audio lab – or more affectionately known as, *the booth* – offered us a way to freedom.

We poured into the booth by, what felt like, the dozens. After lunch, before our next classes, in those brief moments we had between study groups and club meetings, prior to retiring to some off-campus apartment for a kick-back or house party, we were

here, rhyming the most intimate parts of our soul. Together, our autonomous hip-hop collective comprised of DJs, dancers, producers, and lyricists – all of whom were undergraduates at the university – worked together to advance hip-hop culture, both on campus and throughout the community. This ritualistic convening was our watershed moment. It was a turning point that many undergraduates experience, albeit in their own unique way.

For this reason, I've always known hip-hop and higher education to be inextricably linked. For the first time, the tools I needed to further explore my poetic sensibilities – a physical space, recording software, and a supportive community of peers, faculty, and staff – were quite literally, at my fingertips. Whether sloppily chopping samples on the MIDI control pad or bouncing shoddily mixed iterations of my newest song to share with friends, the booth was our haven; a space at school, where our mistakes were not definitive, but reflexive moments of rhyme and reason. Although I thrived in the booth, the classroom was another type of enclosure altogether, whose walls always seemed to be caving in.

Harper and Hurtado (2007), suggest that some men of color enter college expecting to experience racism. This expectation makes this population of students susceptible to what Truong and Museus (2012) refer to as racism-related stress and racial trauma. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, racism-related stress refers to the emotional, physical, and psychological discomfort and pain resulting from experiences with racism; whereas, racial trauma denotes the most severe cases of racism-related stress (p. 228). According to Harrell (2000), these psychological impediments to

academic and social success can occur in six types of situations: “racism-related life events, vicarious racism experiences, daily racism micro-stressors, chronic-contextual stress, collective experiences of racism, and the transgenerational transmission of group traumas” (p. 45). In the field of higher education, Jenkins et al. (2017) conclude that scholars and practitioners are “continuing to face serious challenges with issues of admission, retention, and completion for all students of color,” who are often described as “wounded learners” in need of alternative places of inclusion and creative educators who can work to ensure these learners are truly engaged and included (p. 53). This problematic, reductive characterization of historically underrepresented students in higher education has led to reforms that are largely based on deficits, stereotypes, and theories of cultural deprivation. In their study, Truong and Museus (2012) analyze the emotional experiences of students of color in doctoral programs, offering specific strategies for coping with racism: (a) problem-focused coping – which occurs when the victim responds directly to the racism; (b) emotion-focused coping – often characterized by avoidance; and (c) support social seeking – which ensures well-being, evokes sympathy from others, and inspires intervention from someone who can advocate for the victim and respond directly to the oppressor (p. 230). In a way, my frequent absconding to the underbelly of the library, became a coping mechanism, my support social-seeking response to racial trauma and academic underperformance.

I remember looking upon my transcript as a barren wasteland; an empty, dust-ridden landscape that bore no fruit. I remember walking, head hung in shame, past the academic advising office, because for some reason, I’d always *known* the act of asking

for help was synonymous with weakness. As I write this, in my body – a 6’6” frame, with knees pressed against corners of my desk – I remember what it was like in undergrad, being called a waste of height when students discovered I was in fact, not a member of our men’s basketball team. I remember such comments were typically followed with the timeless refrain, “Well, why are you *here*?” as if, Black and Brown bodies were (still) commodities to be bought, sold, and draped in school colors while each note of the fight song falls upon the ears like a funeral dirge. They say, no man is an island entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main (Hemingway, 1995). Yet there were days I begged to differ. I remember each romp through campus, with echoes of the Old South whispering in the pines. Whether attending classes in buildings bearing names of Klansmen or consorting with peers in the shadow of confederate monuments. These enshrinements to whiteness were all around me, as solemn reminders that this place was not my home. I’d always felt I didn’t belong, that is, until my history professor confirmed what, deep down, I already knew to be true. He said my work was insufficient, and I didn’t belong in college; especially at a place like *this*. From there, I set out on a journey, not to prove him wrong, but to remind myself and others like me that there is a space for you here – and every subsequent *here* you inhabit. Honing our crafts as hip-hop artists was defiant, disruptive, and emancipatory. Carving out our own space for hip-hop culture, in this way, was a reclamation of our joy and self-concept, in a community where we were otherwise invisible.



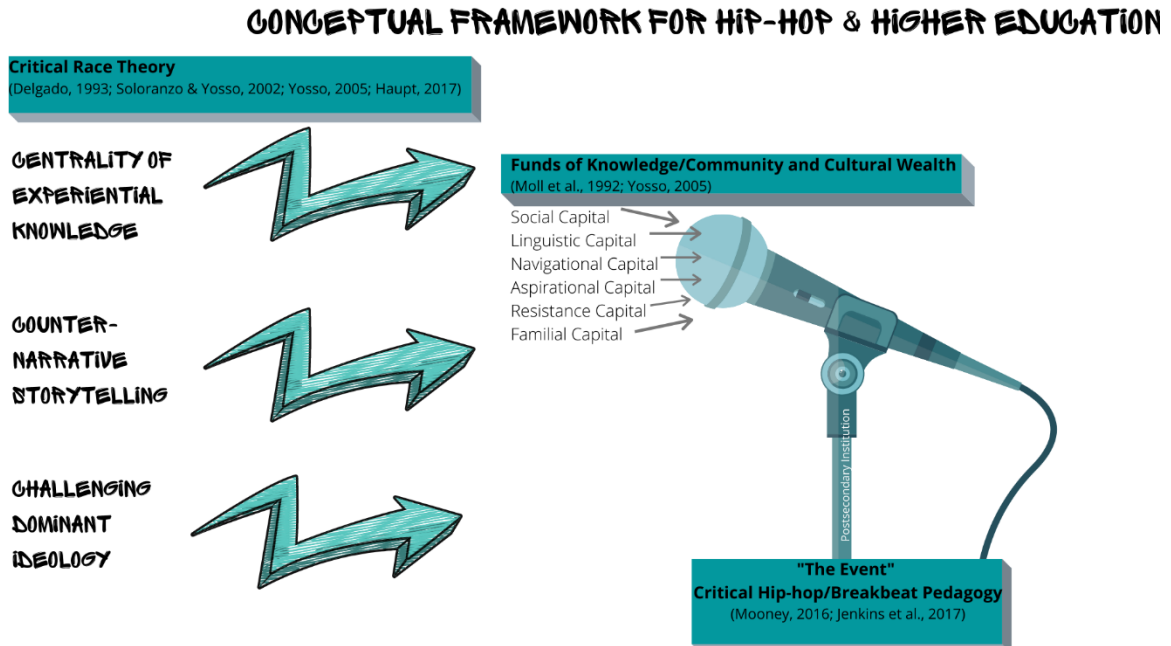
## Conceptual Framework

This project, therefore, is an attempt to build on the work of others (Hill & Petchauer, 2013), and continue making relevant the presence of hip-hop on college campuses. More specifically, this project is aimed at making sense of hip-hop artists interpretations of campus life and climate, hip-hop identities and funds of knowledge, and elucidate the ways in which hip-hop informs students interpretations of and responses to their ecological and educational environment. Hip-hop scholars have provided keen perceptions of hip-hop in educational spaces – its textual value, restorative properties, and its capacity for healing. I’d be naïve to think, however, that hip-hop – especially its mainstream representations – are entirely inclusive and emancipatory. Much of the messages mainstream audiences receive from hip-hop are violent, misogynist, homophobic, capitalist, and willfully uncritical of the sociopolitical problems of the day. Scholars argue that the music industry profits from these conceptualizations of Black death (Rose, 1994; Neuhaus, 2017). Jeff Chang (2005), author of *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, opens his seminal text with a chapter entitled “Necropolis” signifying the ways in which DJs, emcees, breakers, and graffiti artists used hip-hop culture as a platform to reveal tensions within their respective communities; revile government institutions (e.g., the police, housing authorities, education, etc.); and reimagine the nature of joy in communities that had been ravaged by corporate divestment, redlining, and reconstruction that severed predominantly Black, Brown, and poor neighborhoods from city resources. And like the civil rights movement that came

before, the prominent figures and voices of the hip-hop revolution were indeed, heterosexual, cis-gendered, men of color.

As a postmodernist educator, I, like Irizarry (2009), am most concerned with “creating spaces for multiple voices and multiple truths while questioning the representation of history and cultural identities, particularly as reflected in master narratives” (p. 493). There is, within hip-hop discourse, a crisis of representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) that researchers can address in several ways. Therefore, postmodernist research designs address questions like, “Who is represented? How are they represented? Who is doing the representing?” For me, I chose to address this crisis by using multiple frameworks to undergird this study – from its design to its theoretical findings and interpretations. As a hip-hop artist myself, I am often mindful about making room for the multiple voices within the study. Rather than treat this project like a song with guest features, I saw my research participants as co-collaborators on a compilation album, in which each artist has a song of their own to contribute. The resulting framework uniquely centers the knowledges, experiences, and interpretive lenses of the participants in the study (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework for Hip-hop and Higher Education



First, I use the conceptual framework of funds of knowledge, to affirm hip-hop collegians’ respective intelligences and cultural practices, as a means of better understanding how they negotiate their hip-hop identities in collegiate spaces. Moll et al. (1992) refer to funds of knowledge as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Funds of knowledge may include everything from ways of thinking, learning, and the development of practical skills (Hodges et al., 2011), to parents’ language, values and beliefs, ways of discipline, and the value of education (Riojas-Cortez, 2001). Similarly, Yosso’s (2005; 2010) work on Critical Race Theory shifts the gaze of researchers away from deficit views of communities of color, and positions cultural knowledge as a form of capital or cultural wealth. These forms of capital are

inherently aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant (Yosso, 2005, p. 69). Therefore, since Derrida (1978) reminds us that knowledge exists at the intersection of what we think about the world and how we experience the world, centering college students' funds of knowledge is important. This is true, in part, because students enter higher and postsecondary education with a vast array of knowledges that will, in some way, inform their behaviors, mindsets, and interpretations of their college experience. Funds of knowledge are instructive for students as they chart a new educational terrain; and for professors, administrators, and student affairs personnel, it is important that they treat these cultural funds of knowledge as a form of capital unto themselves.

With that in mind, the other frameworks used to guide this are extensions of critical pedagogy. Inclusive in nature, critical pedagogy according to Salazar et al. (2010), recognize students' experiences as worthy knowledge, elicit and build on students' funds of knowledge, invite students to share their knowledge in multiple ways, and educators within this framework, collaborate with students as co-constructors of knowledge. McLaren's (1999) ethnography, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Toward a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures*, provides rationale for funds of knowledge and critical pedagogy frameworks. In his groundbreaking work, McLaren explores the ways in which Chicano students are casualties of a school system that serve mainly the interest of the ruling Euro-American elite. In it, he argues for reorganizing classroom encounters for "optimal, agentive reflexivity" (p. ii). This reflexivity is

accomplished, in part, through counternarrative storytelling, which Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define as:

a method of telling the story of those experiences that are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse - the majoritarian story. (p. 32)

The strength of these stories, according to Morgan et al. (2009), “lies in its ability to make public the experiences of non-dominant cultural groups and to authenticate the voices who tell them,” (p. 258). In other words, centering student voices challenges institutions to reconsider how students’ experiences matter in classroom contexts.

Therefore, Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) – an offshoot of critical pedagogy – according to Tan (2009) needs to be: (a) Rooted in hip hop culture while recognizing that its histories and ideologies are socially produced and at times must be challenged and reworked; (b) socially conscious of how hegemony operates within society, while paying particular attention to how hegemony and power operate within hip hop culture to marginalize populations it seeks to liberate; (c) responsive to marginalization whether it be through structures of gender, class, race, religion, sexuality, or ability; (d) culturally productive by encouraging learners to be producers of their own hip-hop culture; (e) inclusive of multiliteracies across forms of media, technology, and culture (p. 22). Akom (2009) adds that in addition to centering the experiences of minoritized students, should also challenge traditional paradigms by employing transdisciplinary approaches to knowledge construction, and more broadly, teaching and learning. Breakbeat pedagogy (Mooney, 2016), yet another subgenre of critical pedagogy, centers the hip-hop event,

which “initiates democratic space for the elements (e.g., DJ’ing, emceeing, breaking, and graffiti) to live and thrive within a school community” (p. 52). Mooney (2016), a teacher and scholar who explores the intersections of hip-hop, spoken word poetry, and urban education recalls hip-hop’s longstanding tradition of “The Event”- that is, those block parties and summer jams that provided a soundtrack to a South Bronx that was, quite literally, up in flames. The event itself was a break – a break from the realities of urban blight, a break for young people to express themselves and the fullness of their sonic, lyrical, visual, and embodied imaginations. The break or breaking, according to Rosal (2015),

Is the moment when everything a song stops – except for the drums and bass or the drums alone. When Kool Herc, as we know, took two copies of the same record and spun the break back and forth, he extended the drum beat for as long as the people on the floor wanted it to last... the break wasn’t just a fissure, a brief account, a short reprieve... it was an ongoing pulse... [Hip-hop itself] was a sustained breaking. (p. 323)

Breakbeat pedagogy, as Mooney (2016) stipulates, requires educators to create pedagogical moments that suspend the space-time dichotomous relationship between traditional teaching and learning, “looking to the hip-hop event as the primary opportunity for us to honor the complex literacies, talents, interests, and stories of our students” (p. 53). The event itself is both a physical and philosophical space that exists “somewhere between classrooms, between the officially sanctioned spaces, somewhere inside the breakbeat – a place uninterrupted by school bells and announcements” (p. 53). The in-between-ness of the breakbeat is a site of cultural production, the likes of which have resonance on college campuses where hip-hop may exist, but only in the margins.

Breakbeat Pedagogy provides an “authentic forum for radical truth telling, vulnerability, and resistance” (Mooney, 2016, p. 119) – especially for those students whose funds of knowledge are compromised and undermined for the sake of navigating institutions of higher and postsecondary education. Ultimately Breakbeat Pedagogy responds to Tuck’s (2009) conceptualization of “thirdspaces” in education that promote agency and regards joy as a radical response to the systemic oppression that often dictates minoritized students’ experiences in schools. Together, funds of knowledge and these subgenres of critical pedagogy extend the practice of asking “how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not” (McLaren, 2007, p. 197). This project relies heavily on participant voice to guide the data collection, analyses, and future considerations for practice within the field of higher education. The conceptual framework itself is a reminder that the microphone is a sacred instrument for sense-making. It is, in many ways, an extension of the gifts and knowledges an emcee deploys to speak life into being. The conceptual framework is arranged in such a way that leads one to believe the voice of the emcee can – and will stand alone – while, challenging the institution to think and create the space for that voice to thrive. As a rapper and college administrator, I am intrigued by the prospect of uplifting emcees as knowledge producers, using hip-hop lyricism as the basis for theorizing culturally responsive practices in higher education.

### **Setting the Stage: Problem Statement and Research Questions**

As of 2007, it was estimated more than 300 colleges and universities offering courses on hip-hop throughout the U.S. and abroad. As hip-hop culture expanded from the South Bronx to the rest of the world, so too did the literature and scholarly commentary exploring the social, political, and economic implications of this movement; a music and culture at the intersection of social critique and the experience of marginalized communities in America. Hip-hop, as defined by many scholars, has four primary elements: (a) emceeing; (b) DJ'ing; (c) breaking; and (d) graffiti (Chang, 2005; Land & Stovall, 2009; Love, 2016). Together, artists within these cultural frameworks, expressed joy, pain, hope, and perhaps most importantly, questioned sociopolitical power structures that maintained systemic oppression (e.g., poverty, mass incarceration, inequitable housing, etc.). In the late 1970s, on the heels of the disco era, hip-hop provided urban youth of color a new outlet for socio-political commentary. When examined through the lens of critical pedagogy, hip-hop seems to be borne of what Giroux (2011) might consider “a pedagogical culture of questioning” that examines “the effects of power and the mechanisms through which it either constrains, denies, or excludes particular forms of agency – preventing some individuals from speaking in specific ways, in particular spaces, under specific circumstances” (p. 124). Today, nearly 40 years since rap music and hip-hop culture burst onto the American pop-cultural landscape, hip-hop remains a multimodal space of reclamation of voice and agency for youth – especially youth of marginalized identities.



For this reason, as scholars imagine pathways to educational equity, hip-hop – its culture, its influence, and even its shortcomings – present an extraordinary opportunity to build community (Akom, 2009), interrogate toxic masculinity, misogyny, and resist systems of oppression (Rose, 1994, 2008), and perhaps most importantly, promote life skills, both in and beyond the classroom (Dando, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2017). Love (2012) adds that:

It is precisely because rap discusses controversial issues like sex, violence, drugs, and homophobia that we must use rap to bring these issues to the forefront in schools. We cannot acknowledge the profound impact rap music has upon our youth and yet continue to disregard its potential. (p. 108)

Scholars such as Akom (2009) pose questions like: What is the relationship between hip-hop and critical pedagogy? How can hip-hop be used as a tool to promote social justice and youth activism? And what is the relationship between hip-hop culture and the development of critical consciousness amongst urban and suburban youth? (p. 53), in part, to bring awareness to the ways in which hip-hop offer students and teachers alike, an opportunity to center culture in schools. Although these questions provide a framework for hip-hop scholars to theorize pathways to academic success, much of the scholarship linking hip-hop and education is relegated to K-12 schools. Therefore, it is important that hip-hop scholars continue (re)imagining, mapping, and constructing theoretical bridges for hip-hop based education (Hill & Petchauer, 2013) in postsecondary educational contexts. And that's where we come in.

It is imperative that hip-hop scholars and educational researchers consider the cultural and linguistic repertoires of youth of color. These linguistic literacies must be

sustained in educational contexts because “language is a crucial form of sustenance in its own right, providing the basis for young people’s complex identities as well as their social agency” (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017 p. 44). When empowered to shape the linguistic texture of the classroom, Irizarry (2017) adds, “Students seem to move effortlessly within and across languages, often drawing from multiple languages to maximize meaning-making” (p. 87). These observations from various qualitative studies aimed at legitimizing CHHP in schools, lay the framework for understanding *how* hip-hop exposure, engagement, and performance allows students an opportunity to articulate their understandings of the world and themselves in relation to it; while establishing meaningful relationships with peers and teachers, grounded in hip-hop culture.

To that end, it is important to understand the role of belongingness for students within the context of higher education. Belongingness is commonly defined as:

A student’s sense of feeling accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived linking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25)

Although belongingness is found at the academic and institutional levels (student-to-peer, student-to-faculty) and considered to be a crucial aspect of student success (Cureton, 2016), college peers, in a Barber et al. (2013) study, emerged as major sources of support. Peers – which included friends, roommates, and fellow members of student organizations – were adept at helping one another navigate cognitive, social, and emotional dissonance (Barber et al., 2013, p. 882) in college. Such concern with belongingness, suggests a few

questions: What can be said for the college student that understands the world through hip-hop, yet has no formal space to engage with its aesthetics? Where are the communities on college campuses for budding lyricists to hone their craft – and to be taken seriously while doing so? In what ways do hip-hop identities affect interpersonal relationships with peers, faculty, and staff? How do hip-hop performers negotiate their identities in various campus contexts (e.g., classroom, social gatherings, residence halls, etc.)? In what ways does hip-hop inform students' academic decision-making (e.g., selecting a major, career aspirations, etc.)? How does one's hip-hop engagement influence their interpretations of campus climate, and their responses to acts of racism, sexism and other intersecting forms of oppression? Moreover, does hip-hop artists who are also college students *need* regard their work as an act of resistance? Is resistance even the goal? Or is hip-hop's very existence on college campuses a form of resistance in and of itself?

Ultimately, belongingness and student success in higher education, it would seem, has something to do with being *seen* – by peers, faculty, staff, and diverse others. What would it mean, to design a project that invites purveyors of hip-hop culture to a stage, to rap their way out of the shadows of the ivory tower? Thankfully, Petchauer (2011) who coined the term *hip-hop collegian*, providing visibility for an underexplored population within the academy. Hip-hop collegians are college students whose educational interests, motivations, practices, and mind-sets have been influenced by their active participation in hip-hop (Petchauer, 2011, p. 771). As hip-hop continues to garner considerable attention within colleges and universities, researchers must push the boundaries of scholarship.

The broader understanding of the importance of hip-hop (content) and how it is inextricably connected to the issue of place (context) is recognized in hip-hop based education but remains critically underexplored (Irby & Hall, 2013). Hip-hop methodologies therein, are uniquely positioned to challenge conventional forms of knowledge construction. Therefore, my dissertation is anchored by the following research question: How do hip-hop collegians, or those who self-identify as hip-hop artists, use hip-hop lyricism to construct meaning and navigate institutions of higher education?

This study uses a phenomenological approach to address the above research question. Van Manen (1990) writes, “Phenomenology, not unlike poetry is a poetizing project; it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world” (p. 13). I invited five hip-hop collegians attending postsecondary institution in the southeastern United States to participate in the study. The methods used to facilitate this study include semi-structured interviews, a focus group, song recordings, and collaborative lyrical analyses, which I refer to later as a *coding cypher* (see Track III). Although my work is a departure from other scholars who situate hip-hop studies higher education, I look to expound on their work by co-producing hip-hop texts alongside the participants (e.g., co-writing songs, performing together at open-mics, cyphers, and showcases, etc.) and through lyrical inquiry, share in the interpretation of the data. Co-producing hip-hop texts (e.g., song concepts, lyrics, musical arrangements, samples, recordings, etc.) with the participants is, in many ways, an invitation into the meaning-making processes. After all, the songs a hip-hop collegian writes for their mixtape may very well provide insight into their sense

of belonging (Barber et al., 2013; Cureton, 2016), propensity for risky behaviors (Berkowitz, 2004), mental health awareness (Hammond, 2012; Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006), spirituality (Corbett, 2013), and more specifically, how their identities are negotiated on campus. Lyrical inquiry (Neilsen, 2008) therefore, is a natural extension of the phenomenological approach, intended to understand the ways in which hip-hop collegians interpret themselves and others within various higher and postsecondary educational contexts. Because so much of the learning that takes place in college happens within, beyond, and in-between in/formal educational spaces, phenomenology – and in this case lyrical inquiry – provides yet another in-between moment of reflexivity, centering participants’ voices and cultural funds of knowledge through hip-hop.

### **Describing Yellow: Positionality and the Crisis of Representation**

Hello, my name stickers on the stickers of the veins in rehab  
Remembering the feelings when they used to get mellow  
When they was on back of a nickel like Monticello  
When the underworld had to be smarter than Donatello  
No honor amongst fellows  
It’s harder than sitting with a blind man and tryina describe yellow  
Got me feeling like Killer Joe  
My life the album, know the classics by heart and exactly how the filler go  
Repeated on my way to the liquor store  
(Lupe Fiasco, “Theme Music to a Drive By,” 2006)

In the semester following my professor’s decree that I was unfit for the university, I was awarded an opportunity, which would forever change my life. My favorite artist at the time, Lupe Fiasco, was coming to our campus as a part of his nationwide tour of colleges and universities. The night before tickets went on sale, a group of 10 of my closest friends and I decided to camp-out in front of the campus concert venue where

Lupe Fiasco's performance was to take place. We, after all, wanted to be sure we had the best seats in the house! It was a frigid January night replete with wind, rain, and a haunting stillness that hung precariously over the quad. It was the kind of night that makes one grateful for the sun. And all that separated us from the elements was a tarp, a few sleeping bags, and our emphatic recitation of *Lupe Fiasco's Food & Liquor*. That night, after our laptop batteries drew their last breath, we stayed awake, cyphering, rapping our own verses, playing the dozens; anything to keep our minds from the wintry weather that awaited us on the other side of that tent. When morning came, we were, as you may expect, first in line for our tickets. Each of us, vying for front row seats at what we hoped would be, the concert of a lifetime. Little did I know that the 4-track demo I recorded during winter break, just weeks after my professor's admonishment, would be enough for the student activities committee to invite me to be Lupe Fiasco's opening act. That morning however, I was not concerned with such things; it seemed, like most things throughout my college years, to be a longshot. But if I weren't willing to take a chance on myself, then who would?

After a long night with little rest, I stood next in line – in desperate need of a swipe into the dining hall, a warm shower, and a toothbrush (not necessarily in that order) – eager to purchase two tickets. Just as the cashier exchanged my \$20 for two seats in the second row, I received a phone call. I realized, in that moment, the person calling me was indeed the student activities board member, to whom I submitted my demo. I couldn't hear my salutation over the sound of my heart pounding against my chest. My flesh, wrought with goosebumps, crawled at a frenetic pace. I recall two things from our brief

conversation: her question (Donovan, how would you feel about opening for Lupe Fiasco?) and my ardent reply (YESSSSSSSSSSSS!). The line, which now snaked its way around the concert venue, had grown restless as I remained statuesque, unmoved from the box office window. Once the call had ended, I turned to my peers, and all others under the sound of my voice, offering this testimony at the top of my lungs: Y’ALL, I’M OPENING FOR LUPE FIASCO!?! After a thunderous applause from my closest friends, something strange and unexpected happened. The line, filled with faces – some familiar, some new – joined in my jubilation. As we disassembled our tent and made our way to the dining hall, the echoes of “CONGRATULATIONS,” “WAY TO GO,” and “I see you” filled the morning air. I did, in fact, feel *seen*. For once. Finally.

In case you’re wondering what happened to those two tickets, I gifted them to my parents, who ironically, throughout my formative years, wanted me as far away from hip-hop as possible. They had a healthy suspicion of hip-hop, especially rap music that featured violent imagery and misogynistic misrepresentations of women. Whether I was wearing excessively baggy throwback jerseys, sagging pants, or sporting a two-toned durag, their disdain for hip-hop was on full display. Although they supported the development of my poetic voice and stage persona, it was clear that there was a certain brand of poetry they preferred. When it became clear that I was unwilling to abandon my evolving hip-hop sensibilities, they thought it necessary to see for themselves, exactly what it was about hip-hop that resonated with me so much. The Lupe Fiasco concert was as much a turning point for me, as it was for them. That night, my parents bared witness to what became one of many cultural, artistic milestones I experienced in college. That

night, they saw me – their only child – rock an auditorium of 1,500 peers, classmates, and fellow fans of hip-hop. My parents saw me in a different way that night; the way I always hoped to be seen. I carry with me into this research, a deep, abiding love for the culture and those that find themselves, their truth, between the lines of a rhyme book. For this reason, my identities as emcee and researcher inform my analysis of this project.

Ultimately, I've always regarded hip-hop as a methodology unto itself, long before I acquired, understood, and fully-embraced the language of qualitative inquiry.

Dillard (2000) encourages researchers to remember the importance to the connectedness between the researcher and the research. Tan (2009) adds that researchers in particular “need to be cognizant of the complex ways that positioning (including hip hop insider or outsider) affects research with the community” (p. 59). My experiences as educator, poet, and emcee emanate from this moment; this space in time where my hip-hop sensibilities were affirmed in public. I am aware of and done my best to account for my biases. Research, like teaching, is not a neutral act (Freire, 1970/2000), it is value-driven and context-specific. For me, my understanding of, passion for, and relationship to hip-hop was a byproduct of my college experience. Although I embody the stance of an insider, I am also aware of the intersubjectivities that inform the interpretations of this study (Glesne, 2016). Doing this shifts the attention beyond myself, as the researcher, and shares the interpretive responsibilities with the participants, so that we may co-produce knowledge, rather than merely assume knowledge from their lived experience alone. Mooney (2016) describes the importance of the teacher-as-participant model in *Breakbeat Pedagogy*:



This situates the teacher as participant/peer/member of the group. This has implications for my role as researcher, too. As part of the group, I have an inside perspective. It might be true that teachers will never be able to fully discard the institutional authority that is given to the adult leader of a classroom, but it's important to think about the ways we can move between roles and identities. (p. 38)

Likening the teacher in this excerpt, to a researcher informs both the process of interpretation, and more importantly, the relationships between the researcher and the community affected by the study. My insider-ness therefore, can be disarming for hip-hop collegians; my insider-ness welcomes trust and vulnerability. My insider-ness creates a sense of oneness with the hip-hop communities I research. Outside of academic work, I produce hip-hop texts, as a means for social critique and self-affirmation. It is my hope that such an act, models for other hip-hop collegians, how to make their artistry relevant in contexts beyond the booth, the cypher, and open mic. Hip-hop informs my scholarship, my career trajectory. Hip-hop has sustained me across my lifetime.

As a Black man, a husband, father, and son, in his early 30s from Fayetteville, NC – otherwise known to as “Fayettenam” – I am aware that there are shortcomings in my interpretive frames; naiveties and blind spots that impair my ability to look upon hip-hop and higher education through an objective lens. My partner – who's also an emcee – and I were married in a hip-hop themed ceremony that went viral (see Cowen, 2015). To say it was lit, would be an understatement! Even our two dogs, Phife and Left Eye, were named in posthumous (or paws-thumous) recognition of some of our beloved fallen emcees. And to the chagrin of my peers and loved ones, I evoke puns (see previous sentence) as a means of refining my wordplay and lyrical dexterity. Although I may *feel*

like an insider when it comes to hip-hop inquiry, I am still – at times – on the outside, looking in. Because I also occupy space within the academy, I acknowledge that such a position is inherently *unhip-hop*.

As an assistant dean in a division of the provost's office, hip-hop does not *directly* show up in my work. Within the office, I oversee a division that leverages strategic partnerships with internal and external stakeholders – that is, university departments and community organizations – to solve systemic issues on campus and the surrounding community. The work we do is inherently collaborative, student-centered, and often outward facing; it is a symbol of the benevolent responsibility institutions of higher education have within the communities they are situated. In the ten years I've spent working at colleges and universities, I've always been drawn to this work – leveraging institutional resources to engage students in the world beyond the campus walls. We, as scholars and practitioners, must be responsive to the needs of our neighbors, who – at least within the context of my University – are seldom reflected within the racial/ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic makeup of the student body. Even in my role as an administrator, hip-hop offers me a lens to radically reimagine what it means to redistribute, reallocate, and ultimately *remix* the way we deploy institutional resources in support and celebration of the most vulnerable populations that call this city home. Hip-hop provides a framework for recognizing the intrinsic value of knowledges, habits, and dispositions that are historically missing from university leadership.

While this project is grounded by my artistry, I too, am fortified by my identity as a higher education professional. These positions are recurrently at odds with one another.

That tension is most evident in my analyses. As you may notice throughout the text, my connection of participant voices across theories of learning and teaching is unrelenting. At times, it seems that my penchant for analyzing-in-the-moment, overpowers the participants' individual voices. Though this is not my intent, I believe the way I process theoretical concepts and qualitative data – as a rapper and assistant dean - reflects my commitment to hip-hop lyricism. After all, a cypher is a seamless, mutual exchange of ideas, challenging lyricists to make connections across various, sometimes unrelated topics. While I believe the participants' voices (e.g., their comments, lyrics, and analytical contributions) on their own are inherently valuable, weaving their knowledges together with theory and practice is an effort to further legitimize hip-hop within the academy.

Hip-hop scholars must acknowledge these complexities given the contentious historical relationship with hip-hop culture and institutions like colleges. Many hip-hop purists may be wary of its cooption in higher education contexts. Rightfully so. Again, this harkens back to the framework of critical pedagogy, which asks how and why knowledge gets constructed? For whom is this knowledge constructed? And for what purpose (McLaren, 2007)? As a hip-hop artist who happens to be a college administrator, I acknowledge that I am writing to fellow emcees, hip-hop heads, professors, pedagogues, and student affairs personnel actively searching for emancipatory, culturally responsive practices in higher education; a field that has much to learn from the rappers, and hip-hop culture more broadly.

I hope that this experiment yields results that afford hip-hop collegians the space to be heard and improves the overall state of hip-hop within the academy. Some objects are harder to see, the closer you get to them. As a researcher, my proximity to the phenomenon in question, can at times, make it hard to focus on the bigger picture. As I take a step back from a world I know so well, I simultaneously step into a world unfamiliar. I realize now, how difficult it can be to avoid romanticizing that which I love so dearly. Somewhere, in the deep recesses of my heart, I want hip-hop to mean to others what it has meant to me. I want others to get lost in a song, only to find themselves in the notes, in the samples, in the lyrics. I want others to see themselves reflected in the culture – whether behind the mic or wielding a can of spray paint. As much as I want hip-hop to matter to you, I had to learn and accept that such a desire may never come to pass. Hip-hop for some is dehumanizing, reductive, and alienating. While in my case, hip-hop has always been a space for truth telling; I realize that some truths, within rap music, are privileged more than others. I want hip-hop to be more inclusive, more open to women owning their sexuality, more affirming for LGBTQ artists who challenge hip-hop's narrative of heteronormativity and hyper-masculinity. It is my hope this study yields new knowledge that creates spaces within hip-hop for narratives that propel the culture forward. Although this is my hope, I am unwilling to make assumptions about the data, in an attempt to see what isn't there, to prove to myself that what I experienced in college was not in vein, but a part of a common hip-hop experience.

As I pen this chapter with light heart and heavy eyelids, I am reminded of Lupe Fiasco's (2006) "Theme Music to a Drive By," the original intro to his debut album,

*Food & Liquor*. A few weeks prior to its release date, a version of the album was leaked on the internet, thus sending the artist into a frenzy – adding and removing songs to keep the project fresh. Consequently, “Theme Music to a Drive By” didn’t make the final cut. However, the words – to this day – still fall on my heart like a summer’s rain. Though the song is a metaphor-laden musing of Lupe’s life growing up on Chicago’s west side, there is more to it than gangs, drugs, guns, police, and prisons. Each line of the song is meticulously engineered to depict the ways in which, low-income, predominantly Black and Brown communities participate in, reify, and reproduce the cycle of violence that comes to characterize life in urban America. A drive by after all, is a quick, fleeting act of violence inflicted in passing; so quick that we often don’t see it happening, until it *is* happening. Instead of inflicting violence, Lupe’s (2006) drive by is a metaphor for the invisible forces – capitalism, institutional racism, systemic oppression – that “pull up” on us, or said differently, manifest within marginalized communities. Even the in-between spaces have meaning. His deep, seemingly distressed breaths between syllables evokes an unspoken sense of urgency; as if to say sharing this infinite wisdom – that is, dropping knowledge – is a perpetual race against time. No matter how many songs he writes, or mics he rocks, his prowess as an emcee and storyteller is only as strong as his ability to describe *yellow* to eyes devoid of sight. Although language proceeds culture, there are moments when he is constrained by the limits of linguistics. Thus, rendering him incapable of capturing the fullness of a phenomenon, an event, or life as we know it. From beauty and pain to guilt and regret, there are places our words are ill-equipped to take us. What sets classic hip-hop albums apart for Lupe (2006), however, is emcees’

ability to wring colors from words, like water from rag; sprawling paint across an audio canvas.

Becoming a qualitative researcher, for me, feels a lot like describing yellow. No matter how much I love my craft – be it hip-hop or educational studies – my ability to name the unnamable and assign meaning to the complex is limited by my ability to *see*. In other words, my vision for hip-hop in higher education is only as clear as my blind spots. As qualitative researchers tasked with interpreting the intricacies of the human experience, what would it mean to invite others into the sense-making process? Qualitative research, like hip-hop, is an undertaking best accomplished in a community of engaged partners working together to define that which far too often is too hard to put into words.

### **Where We Go from Here**

This dissertation is divided into nine chapters or, what I refer to as, tracks. Track II is a review of the extant literature in hip-hop and hip-hop based education. This review also connects student development theories in higher education to pedagogies grounded in hip-hop, as a means of justifying the study in question. Track III outlines the methodology in further detail. In addition, Track III features more contextual information about the hip-hop collegians in the study. Tracks IV through VIII outline findings from the study, exploring specific themes and outcomes identified from both myself and the participating hip-hop collegians. Finally, Track IX unpacks these findings and their implications in higher education.

## CHAPTER II

### TRACK II: IT'S LIT! A REVIEW OF EXTANT LITERATURE IN HIP-HOP AND HIGHER EDUCATION

#### **From Whence We Came**

Boots Riley, a Bay-area emcee turned filmmaker exclaims, “You can’t talk about hip hop as an art form without talking about the people, the economics, how and why it was made” (Harmanci, 2007, p. 31). Originating in the South Bronx in the 1970s, hip-hop was birthed out of a set of oppressive conditions – the death of the civil rights movement, systemic racism, poverty, militarization of urban space, housing inequalities, and mass incarceration (Akom, 2009) – that encouraged historically marginalized populations to resist and challenge social ideologies, practices, and structures (Land & Stovall, 2009) that reproduced inequality. Hip-hop however, was not created in a vacuum. Its lineage can be traced back to the griots of West Africa; a group of bards and storytellers who performed sociopolitical observations and reflections over rhythmic drumming (Gates, 1988; Lee, 1993; Smitherman, 1997; Stoller, 1994). Stoller (1994) contends that griots were considered “masters of words” (p. 354), charged with passing on social, historical, and political knowledge the next generation. For this reason, hip-hop and social activism (Chang, 2005) are inextricably linked. Since its inception, hip-hop was meant to be a disruptive force, deconstructing systemic oppression (Love, 2016) – complicating those narratives that come to characterize historically marginalized communities. Hip-hop is an

inter-aesthetic movement based in music (Söderman & Sernhede, 2016), with four primary elements: (a) DJ'ing, (b) emceeing, (c) breaking (b-boying/b-girling), and (d) graffiti (Land & Stovall, 2009). Other scholars have added a fifth element known as knowledge of self (Love, 2016). This addition is quite intentional, harkening back to the griots. It was said that griots, before they could let others know them, they first, must know themselves (Stoller, 1994). The distinction of knowledge of self, therefore, creates an epistemological bridge, strengthening the connection among aesthetic traditions of the African diaspora. Combined, these hip-hop elements establish a platform upon which the culture stands.

In Petchauer's (2009) review of extant literature in hip-hop, he identified three domains in which hip-hop scholarship is situated: historical/textual contexts, social commentary, and grounded studies. The literature relevant to educational studies, according to Petchauer's review, exists in three strands – *hip-hop based education*, *hip-hop meaning(s) and identities*, and *hip-hop aesthetic forms* – which cut across the three domains. While each strand has unique implications in educational contexts, grounded studies fill a void created by historical and textual scholarship on hip-hop culture “because they are derived from local participants and creators of hip-hop rather than from products or texts” (p. 951).

Today, Low et al. (2013) remind us that “hip-hop culture is a framework that informs how youth interpret, represent, and negotiate aspects of their sociocultural identities, including race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender” (p. 119). This distinction is important, as many scholars look to make hip-hop relevant within the context of



schools. Although some educators believe that mainstream hip-hop texts have no place in schools, Dyson (1995) cautions educators and community leaders against casting contemporary hip-hop culture to the side.

The leaders of those institutions often castigate the excessive and romanticized violence of this music without trying to understand what precipitated its rise in the first place. In so doing, they drive a greater wedge between themselves and the youth they so desperately want to help. (Dyson, 1995, p. 185)

Reframing the role of hip-hop in educational spaces is necessary, as many youth – especially youth from historically marginalized backgrounds – find meaning and joy in a cultural art form that withstands the test of time. From vibrant communities of West Africa, to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, to the diasporic blending of African and indigenous rhythms of the Caribbean and North America, hip-hop is a vehicle for self-expression, knowledge construction, and social critique, with particular implications for the field of education and cultural foundations.

This literature review is divided into four sections. The first section, *Hegemony, power, and funds of knowledge*, outlines the ways colleges and universities socialize students into ideologies that reify stereotypes, deficit-mindsets, and more broadly, educational inequality. Far too often, in schools, cultural funds of knowledge and ways of being, are undermined within the dominant educational discourse. The second section, *Diversity, inclusion, and what's in it for the academy: Teaching and learning through hip-hop in higher education*, examines the value of diversity in college student experiences, and how hip-hop based initiatives fulfill the educational promises of diversity. Here, I provide examples of colleges and universities successful

implementation of hip-hop courses and programming. The third section, *Haters gon' hate: Critiques of hip-hop and higher education*, discusses the shortcomings of mainstream hip-hop culture, and its sexist, misogynist, and homophobic misrepresentations of women and the LGBTQ community. In addition to these critiques, scholars offer possible suggestions for inclusive hip-hop curricula in the form of Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy (CHHP), Critical Language Pedagogy, and Breakbeat Pedagogy. Finally, the literature review concludes with *Future Considerations* – a section dedicated to exploring the possibilities for future hip-hop based research in higher and postsecondary education. For the field of higher education specifically, hip-hop inquiry continues to be an evolving frontier for scholarly exploration; with grand implications, both in and beyond the classroom.

### **Hegemony, Power, and Funds of Knowledge: Negotiating Cultural Identities in College**

Prior to understanding hegemony and how it operates, I must first, address the concept of ideology. Ideology, according to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012), are the big, shared ideas of a society that are reinforced throughout all the institutions that we are, in many ways, conditioned to believe. These ideas include stories, myths, representations, explanations, definitions, and rationalizations that are used to justify inequalities in society (e.g., individualism, meritocracy; p. 45). In schools – especially colleges and universities – ideological language is used to justify and implement a hidden curriculum; that is, as Vallance (1973) says, “The inculcation of values, political socialization, training in obedience and docility, the perpetuation of traditional class structure functions

– that may be characterized generally as social control” (p. 9). In Dhunpath and Amin’s (2017) *Disrupting Higher Education Curriculum: Undoing Cognitive Damage*, scholars go a step further, claiming that ideology and hegemony are, indeed, the principle causes of cognitive damage and are the most pervasive invisible forces that structure the possibilities and limitations of being human. Such a deed is carried out through language, as it constructs and structures the world by conveying ideological and hegemonic articulations (p. 9). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), these ideologies are informed by the knowledges and values from upper and middle classes, and ultimately considered a form of capital that privileges upper- and middle-class ways of being. Consequently, the education we offer, across students’ lifetime in school, rarely reveals those hidden forces that construct our world, and ultimately, our place within it (Dhunpath & Amin, 2017). What we consider as knowledge, across various disciplines, is seldom contested, as students are encouraged to regard knowledge within these disciplines as objective truths. Beyond the classroom, master narratives – including “abnormalization (homosexuality), normalization (gender roles), standardization (IQ tests), dox (religion), marginalization (the homeless, the poor), subalternization (the dispossessed and disempowered), and surveillance mechanisms (schools and prisons)” (Dhunpath & Amin., 2017, p. 10) – are used to colonize peoples’ minds in such a way that renders educators and curriculum planners, *cognitively damaged*. This cognitive damage is made possible through hegemonic forces that allow domination to occur – through the reproduction of the master narratives – with the consent of minoritized groups “rather than by force” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 50).

To this point, Foucault's (1982) theory of power, illustrates how institutions like schools socialize us into compliance with norms, habits, and values that serve dominant interests. Power, according to Cassily and Clarke-Vivier (2016), "Operates by restricting the forms of knowledge that guide actions, outcomes, and possibilities for participants of different social groups in schools," which ultimately render Black and Brown bodies as "deficient and in need of containment" (p. 12). Because students' educational experiences are often shaped by the hidden curriculum, they are, in a way, conditioned to believe certain falsehoods about minoritized groups and their ways of being. Thanks to these hidden curricula (Vallance, 1973), many of the counternarratives that elucidate the experiences of minoritized groups, are left out of mainstream discourses. And because trends in education are often set by market principles and institutions of higher education (Amsler, 2014), colleges and universities have a responsibility to resist abuses of power and invent modes of pedagogy that release the imagination, connect learning to social change, and create social relations in which people assume responsibility for each other (Giroux, 2013).

Illich (1971), who writes of the de-schooled society, avidly disavows the hegemonic, meritocratic function of schools, asserting that "most people acquire most of their knowledge outside school, and in school only insofar as school ... has become their place of confinement during an increasing part of their lives" (p. 12). Because much learning happens informally, both within and beyond the ideological walls of school, cultural foundations scholars aim to identify, articulate, and incorporate the epistemological realities of students within the hidden, null, and explicit curricula that

govern institutions of education. These funds of knowledge possessed by each student, according to Moll and Gonzalez (1994) refer to historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and wellbeing. Ilich's (1971) phenomenology of public schools, defines schooling as an age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full time attendance at an obligatory curriculum (p. 25–26). Lost in this conceptualization of schooling, is the ways in which culture – that is, religion, hometown, heritage, and much more – influence the learning that happens in school. For this reason, when examining the experiences of vulnerable, minoritized populations in schools, many cultural deprivation theorists (Lustman, 1970; Smith & Geoffrey, 1968) express their findings from a deficit perspective. In each case, minoritized students' values, learning styles, and/or ways of knowing were linguistically, culturally, and perhaps morally misaligned, or “mismatch” (Alim, 2007a) with white-middle class standards of socialization. The impact of these theories was, and continues to be far-reaching, affecting every facet of the schooling experience; from teachers' expectations (Oakes, 1985) to students' perceptions of themselves and their academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In response these perceived cultural deficiencies, Yosso (2005) utilizes Critical Race Theory to center transgressive knowledges, or *mestiza*, to conceptualize a framework for community cultural wealth. Yosso's (2005) model hinges on six forms of capital, often unrecognized in educational contexts: (a) aspirational capital; (b) linguistic capital; (c) familial capital; (d) social capital; (e) navigational capital; and (f) resistant capital (p. 78).

Hegemonic ideologies regarding community cultural wealth or cultural funds of knowledge, however, pervade music education as well. Campbell (2018) reminds us that, the musical stylings of African, Latinx, and Native Americans, are often classified as “primitive” and ill-suited for curricular inclusion. This designation of “folk music,” in many ways, is dangerous and reductive; it is “a minimalist or simplified expression when compared to the sophistication of art,” or Western musical traditions (Campbell, 2018, p. 30–31). What messages then, does this send to students of color, especially in music education courses, where their cultural representations are markedly absent? What are the consequences of these messages, especially as they relate to students’ self-concept? Campbell (2018) goes on to write,

Despite music’s centrality to all cultures and as core aspects of undergraduate music study have remained largely insulated from relevance to diverse cultures and the influences of technology. University music schools and departments continue to give almost exclusive emphasis to Western European Classical music. (p. 46)

Greene and the Lincoln Center Institute (2001) agree that this hierarchy of arts is as divisive as it is unproductive. Amsler (2014) challenges higher educators in particular – that is, faculty and student affairs personnel – to refute cultural deprivation theorists’ historical devaluation of local, indigenous, and practical knowledges within the academy:

Rethinking the politics of university education and the meaning of the higher educator may require the unlearning of traditional approaches to theorization which privilege performativity of humble co-operation, abstraction over praxis, individual knowing over collective learning, and monological solution-giving over dialogical inquiry. (p. 279)

Therefore, cultural foundations scholars aim to theorize and implement counterhegemonic learning opportunities with respect to students' multiplicity of knowledges and varied ways of being. To that point, "diverse funds of knowledge and culturally inherited ways of navigating the world" Lee (2017) says, "need to be sustained as goods unto themselves" (p. 261).

For this reason, critical scholars believe there is a need for new pedagogies that evoke within educational spaces, opportunities for hope and action. Simon (1992) for instance, believes a pedagogy of possibility should ask students to "take risks, to struggle with issues of power, to use forms of knowledge that may not exist beyond their immediate experience to envision a world not yet" (p. 56). Kinloch (2017) believes there is a "strong need for sustaining pedagogies that argue against pathologizing black [and other marginalized populations] lives, languages, and literacies" (p. 27). If we consider hip-hop as a pedagogy of possibility or a pedagogy unto itself, it is important to revisit Yosso's (2005) framework for community cultural wealth, and its recognition of linguistic, social, navigational and resistant capitals as viable funds of knowledge. Arguably, participating in hip-hop culture, engages these forms of capital, providing insight into the ways in which hip-hop collegians negotiate their identities on campus. In their pedagogical exploration of the Afrikaans language movement in South Africa, Alim and Haupt (2017) determined that centering culture and counternarratives in collegiate spaces – especially in the classroom – is a form of healing and affirmation to students from historically marginalized backgrounds in higher education. Of one student, they note:

[In this course, she] overcomes her sense of dislocation and alienation by doing research on her ancestors, thereby countering hegemonic claims that she has no race or language. Research on the example of her ancestors is presented as the route to reviving her soul, or to rediscovering herself as a person with a sense of belonging. (Alim & Haupt, 2017, p. 165)

Tuck (2009) challenges scholars to move beyond damage-centered narratives that depict minoritized students as academically inept, impoverished, and perpetually at-risk; and instead Tuck asks how can we, as scholars and practitioners, provide spaces for students to be both critical of society and express joy beyond the intersecting oppressions that circumscribe their lives? “Too often,” Wong and Pena (2017) add, “pain is centered without an equal centering on joy” (p. 131). Therefore, those who believe in the redemptive role of culture in schools, must be mindful, of exactly why, how, and most importantly, for whom culture is leveraged within the context of school. Funds of knowledge, according to Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2017) can potentially transform college classrooms, by promoting teaching that validates student experiences. Critical scholars argue that educators on college campuses have a moral imperative to restructure higher education as an ethical and political response to the demise of critical thinking (hooks, 2010) in schools and, more broadly, in democratic public life (Giroux, 2011). In so doing, students will become more knowledgeable while creating conditions for generating a new vision of the future in which they can recognize themselves (Giroux, 2013).



**Diversity, Inclusion, and What’s in it for the Academy: Teaching and Learning  
Through Hip-Hop in Higher Education**

“Remember, the academy needs hip hop more than hip hop needs the academy”  
(Vincent, as cited in Harmanci, 2007, para. 34)

By 2019, according to the Children’s Defense Fund (2014), most of all children in U.S. schools will be children of color. Already, students of color comprise more than half of the school-aged children in the U.S. (Kena et al., 2016); and by 2043, people of color will outnumber whites. Scholars agree that this new diversity has immense academic, social, and political implications for schools (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Nieto, 2017). Although K-12 public schools experienced the brunt of this demographic shift, postsecondary institutions must adapt to the shifting cultural landscape within American schools. While some producers of hip-hop culture may liken the emergence of hip-hop and higher education to squeezing a round peg in a square hole, for those students who come to know the world and themselves through hip-hop culture – its language and lyricism, its embodiment, visual aesthetics, fashion, and musicianship – there is value in affirming their cultural sensibilities, or funds of knowledge, within college campuses. Though some scholars may wonder what’s in it for the academy (Söderman & Sernhede, 2016), there is a shared belief among critical educators and hip-hop scholars (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Emdin, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Love, 2016) that culturally-relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), -responsive (Tierney, 1999), -sustaining (Paris, 2012), and -revitalizing (McCarty & Lee, 2014) pedagogies are necessary in leveraging educational equity.

The field of higher education since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, has in some ways, been forced to reconcile this demographic shift. With an onslaught of U.S. Supreme Court (see *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Fisher v. Texas*, 2016; *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 2018) cases undermining the value of racial/ethnic diversity on college campuses, institutions of higher education have been tasked with empirically justifying the value of diversity and the practices with which they recruit and retain diverse student bodies. Despite this contemporary attack on racial equity in institutions of higher education, Gurin (2004) writes that college classrooms and informal educational settings have to be authentic public spaces, where students from different backgrounds can converse and share experiences that help them develop an understanding of a multiplicity of perspectives and worldviews. Doing so, according to Gurin, analyses reveals a positive relationship between learning outcomes (e.g., active thinking processes, intellectual skills and abilities, and motivations for educational progress) and student's experiences with diversity (p. 119). Salazar et al. (2010) later argued that, by creating more diverse and inclusive spaces within higher education settings, culturally responsive pedagogy can facilitate the transformative purpose of both engaging the politics of knowledge and challenging the structures that continue to privilege certain students (Osei-Kofi et al., 2004), and "interrupt the cycle of inequity" (Salazar et al., 2010, p. 220) that characterizes college access and completion. With this in mind, critical scholars call for pedagogies in higher education to promote community and solidarity (Amsler, 2014; Simon, 1992) that fulfill the democratic purposes of education (Apple & Beane, 2007; Dewey, 1916; Giroux, 2013), "close[ing] the gap between pedagogy and everyday life"

(Giroux, 2011, p. 102). Cassily and Clarke-Vivier (2016) contend that cultural work in public spaces is, indeed, a precursor to freedom (p. 17). For this reason, college educators must radically reimagine *which* funds of knowledge are favored in the university.

Be that as it may, Sulé (2016) insists, “As colleges seek ways to promote diversity and respond to diverse student experiences, members of hip-hop enclaves may provide insight into how to facilitate a sense of belonging and interactional diversity” (p. 181). Recent advancements in technology and the interconnectedness of global markets, have called higher education researchers to investigate how colleges and universities develop a sense of interculturalism and global citizenship (Evans & Wilson, 2016) among student populations. Competencies such as growth in intercultural sensitivity, cross-cultural adaptability, global competency, international and professionalism, language ability, and increased interest in international affairs are valuable skills, which promote long term educational and career attainment (Jon, 2009). Therefore, it has become increasingly necessary for colleges and universities to create spaces for students to engage with cultural artifacts, like hip-hop, as a means of fulfilling promises of diversity and inclusion. According to Parks (2000), between the ages of 17 and 30, young adults’ meaning making shifts toward: “(1) becoming critically aware of one’s own composing of reality, (2) self-consciously participating in an ongoing dialogue toward truth, and (3) cultivating a capacity to respond – to act – in ways that are satisfying and just” (p. 6). Jehangir (2010) also suggests that the “combination of diverse peers and a diverse curriculum pushe[s] students to ask difficult questions about themselves and one another. The process of engaging authentically in dialogue about identity and community allow[s]

students to come to a deeper understanding of one another” (p. 133). Inserting hip-hop into higher education – that is, a blending of a historically defiant, antiestablishment, inter-aesthetic art from within a historically elitist, exclusionary, and meritocratic system of education – makes for a cultural collision (Beachum & McCray, 2011), a sociopolitical clash of epic proportions.

Thus, Sulé (2016) advises colleges and universities seeking to meaningfully incorporate hip-hop culture in curricular and co-curricular spaces, not to colonize hip hop culture for the purposes of developing another instrumental tool for formal learning (p. 153). Thus, Dando (2017) insists, “Hip-hop education is a rethinking of instructional approach rather than an instructional intervention, unit, lesson, or module” (p. 33). This is an important distinction for Alim and Haupt (2017), who add,

This fundamental shift argues that the cultural and linguistic practices and knowledges of communities of color are of value in their own right, and should be creatively foregrounded rather than merely viewed as resources to take students (almost always unidirectionally) from “where they are at” to some presumably “better” place, or ignored altogether. (p. 158)

It becomes clear that hip-hop culture like institutions of higher education, regard cultural awareness and sensitivity, language and cross-cultural adaptability, and knowledge of self and others as desired learning outcomes. Moreover, as colleges seek to engage students in hip-hop discourse, it is important that the institutions avoid gimmicky, uncritical hip-hop curricula, which coopts, undermines, or misrepresents hip-hop culture.

In a recent study, for example, Wong and Pena (2017) examined the impact of a course about social movements taught through the lens of hip-hop and spoken word

poetry. The students expressed that the course challenged their preconceptions of “good academic writing” while improving their own writing skills, encouraging them to “obtain knowledge of self and link their contemporary struggles to historic movements for freedom” (Wong & Pena, 2017, p. 121). Throughout the course, students learned about local and global struggles for civil rights through the investigation and practice of the performing arts. Wong and Pena (2017) go on to say that “rather than insist [students] adapt [their] writing to fit conventional, Eurocentric notions of theatre or spoken word, [teachers] challenge [students] to use [their] skills rapping on the stage to paint an intimate portrait of their life” (p. 123). These outcomes have important implications for the development of students’ reflexivity, critical consciousness, and “community solidarity” (Simon, 1992). Perhaps more importantly, faculty who ground their teaching in cultural perspectives like hip-hop or spoken word poetry, reflect a campus climate that is accepting of various cultural funds of knowledge. Hip-hop as an inter-aesthetic art form, has always been a movement capable of mobilizing students’ sense of self, community, and desire for social change.

Like Alim and Haupt (2017), this dissertation project is primarily concerned with how hip-hop artists and pedagogues, in particular, have resisted often overwhelming dominant ideologies of language, which are almost always racist, classist, or discriminatory, and imagined new pedagogical possibilities that center our communities’ cultural and linguistic practices (p. 159). These considerations lay the foundation for how hip-hop and higher education can coexist. Within the last decade, critical scholars (Giroux 2011, 2013; hooks, 2010) have explored the purposes, implications, and

educational value of engaging with critical hip-hop pedagogy (CHHP) (Akom, 2009; Land & Stovall, 2009). While the literature on CHHP is extensive, attempts to incorporate hip-hop linguistic practices, teaching methods, and theoretical frameworks on college campuses is sparse. Similarly, Alim's (2007b) critical hip-hop language pedagogies (CHHLP), acknowledges that while teachers aim to equip students with academic language skills, students "celebrat[e], highlight, and consciously manipulate diverse language varieties" (Alim, 2007b, p. 164), as they become more aware of the world, and their relationship to it. Breakbeat pedagogy, according to Mooney (2016), expounds on the consciousness-raising aims of CHHLP and CHHP, by creating "thirdspaces" (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996) devoted to the proliferation of hip-hop's cultural aesthetics (especially through DJ'ing, emceeing, and spoken word poetry). Jenkins et al.'s (2017) recent work demonstrating the social, emotional, and academic efficacy of spoken word poetry programming in student affairs blazes a trail, connecting hip-hop cultural performance to postsecondary success. Hip-hop has already been used as a lens to impact research in counseling (Iwamoto et al., 2007), public health (Stephens et. al., 1998), sociocultural studies (Nasir & Hand, 2006), social work, and more broadly across teacher education programs (Petchauer, 2013). Although institutional leadership must take these cultural considerations seriously when designing curricula and course offerings, more attention should be given to the students who come to understand the world through hip-hop culture. Petchauer (2012) was the first to dub this population as *hip-hop collegians*. They are:

College students who make their active participation in hip-hop relevant to their educational interests, motivations, practices, or mindsets. A student who listens to rap music is not a hip-hop collegian. But a student who *feels* rap music— is invested in its genealogies, studies its micro-eras, deconstructs its themes with friends, and holds it as an authoritative source of knowledge parallel to course material— is a hip-hop collegian. (Petchauer, 2012, p. 7)

Since the mid-to-late 1990s, hip-hop scholars have enacted postmodernist principles to explore hip-hop phenomena in educational spaces, challenging the essentialization of knowledge; positing multiple ways of knowing and viewing multiple truths (Irizarry, 2009). As for higher education, hip-hop research falls into a few categories. Rodriguez (2009) examines the instructional efficacy of hip-hop; other theorists used hip-hop as a lens for teaching undergraduate composition courses (Peterson, 2013), leadership courses at an HBCUs (Wilson, 2013); Iwamoto et al. (2007) explored the ways in which students used rap lyrics as both a space for meaning-making and coping with stress and depression; while Petchauer (2007, 2012) mapped hip-hop aesthetics (e.g., sampling, freestyling/improvisation, etc.) onto identity frameworks, habits, and practices necessary for hip-hop collegians navigating college campuses. Such scholarly undertakings provide new insights into hip-hop based research in education; expanding on phenomenological epistemologies (Sulé, 2016) and postmodern methodologies like ethnography (Wong & Pena, 2017), autoethnography (Kruse, 2016), and portraiture (Petchauer, 2012). The methods that ground many hip-hop studies in higher education include conversational interviews, observational field notes (Kinloch, 2017) and case studies (Low, 2011; Mooney, 2016; Rodriguez, 2009). This theoretical and methodological situating offers new pathways to understanding student development, civic engagement, in addition to

improving cultural competencies, writing skills, academic achievement, and understanding students' complex meaning-making processes over time.

As of 2007, it was estimated that more than 300 colleges and universities were offering courses on hip-hop throughout the U.S. and abroad. That same year, NYU introduced its Hip-Hop Pedagogy initiative. That is, a cluster of events, courses, and symposia aimed at convening students and hip-hop scholars. The University of Wisconsin-Madison initiated the First Wave scholarship, an innovative spoken word poetry and hip-hop arts program (Ladson-Billings, 2014). First Wave scholarship recipients are required to:

- (1) Develop their craft as part of a high-level artistic community alongside faculty, staff, and nationally renowned spoken word and hip hop artists;
- (2) pursue their academic and career goals by studying fields that merge their artistic interests with professional development;
- (3) engage the community in creative service-learning projects that combine multicultural arts and activism;
- (4) showcase their talents around the campus, city, country and globe as part of the First Wave Hip Hop Theater Ensemble. (First Wave Scholarship Program, n.d.)

“Having the room to express one’s self,” Jehangir (2010) says in his study of a first-generation college student learning community, “helps to create validating spaces where students can engage in their multiple identities and make sense of their strengths and weaknesses as learners” (p. 135). Similarly, First Wave brings poets from diverse backgrounds in community with one another, through spoken word, hip-hop culture, and the performing arts.

Hip-hop’s momentum in higher education, however, did not stop there. By 2012, the University of Arizona introduced a minor in Hip-Hop Studies – a subset of courses



within the Africana Studies department. In 2013, an anonymous donor endowed the Nasir Jones Hip-Hop Fellowship at the Harvard Hip-Hop Archive, funding research and hip-hop related projects for scholars in the field (Sullivan, 2013). In 2017, Clemson doctoral candidate – now Assistant Professor of Hip-hop and the Global South, and director of *The Rap Lab at UVA* – A.D. Carson, successfully defended a dissertation entitled, *Owning my masters: Rhetoric, rhymes, & revolutions*, which was written (and recorded) in the form of a rap album. And though it began as an hour-long Twitter chat on Tuesdays, #HipHopEd has grown into its own non-profit organization intended to bring together educators and scholars to challenge hegemonic educational traditions by empowering youth voice through hip-hop culture. Today, #HipHopEd continues bridging the gap between theory and practice “through the development and implementations of hip-hop interventions in STEM, therapy, literacy, and school leadership” (n.d.).

Legendary producer 9<sup>th</sup> Wonder who, alongside his fellow classmates Phonte Coleman and Thomas “Big Pooh” Jones, founded the hip-hop trio Little Brother during their time as students at North Carolina Central University, has been actively engaged in academia in some form since 2006. When he isn’t winning Grammys and producing for music icons like Beyonce, Jay Z, and Mary J. Blige, 9<sup>th</sup>’s scholarly contributions to hip-hop, teaching its history and evolution, reflects the contemporary integration of hip-hop in higher education. “As the music and culture have matured,” Caballero (2012) writes, “colleges and universities have turned their attention to examining hip-hop in various contexts.” In addition to teaching courses at his alma mater, 9<sup>th</sup> Wonder has taught at Duke and Harvard Universities, while creating new music and managing his own record

label (Menconi, 2017). Although this may seem like a tall order, 9<sup>th</sup> Wonder regards these scholarly contributions a responsibility saying, “I believe that a majority of us that's in the culture that's able to articulate what the culture is about are truly the ones that are supposed to teach” (Caballero, 2012). Today, it is as if the foundation has been laid for scholars to continue the work of researching, elevating, and legitimizing hip-hop within higher and postsecondary educational spaces.

### **Haters Gon' Hate: Critiques of Hip-Hop and Higher Education**

Although the educational benefits of hip-hop are far-reaching, many scholars have noted educators' reticence with exploring hip-hop in classroom contexts. Koza (1999) regards much of this apprehension as a moral panic, citing the overrepresentation of gangster rap lyrics and lewd, hypersexualized imagery in mainstream hip-hop culture. While frameworks like CHHP and its positive impact on minoritized students' schooling experiences is well-documented (Akom, 2009; Land & Stovall, 2009; Pulido, 2009), research linking CHHP to academic achievement is scant (Sulé, 2016). Furthermore, in attempting to link hip-hop culture and college campuses, Harmanci (2007) and Gosa and Fields (2012) admit that some see hip-hop in higher education as just another hustle – giving educators with no connection to the culture, an opportunity to exploit it in the classroom. In Harmanci's (2007) interview with David Cook, a.k.a. Davey D, journalist and former emcee, mentioned, “Now it's like everybody is dealing in hip-hop ... but they have nothing to do or no connection with the culture at all. The edicts that drive academia – publish or perish, for instance – aren't hip-hop.” Other hip-hop artists have echoed these sentiments, claiming that universities do not have the courage to go as far as to

incorporate or involve hip-hop pioneers in the creation and facilitation of a hip-hop curriculum, (Snell & Söderman, 2014). In their interviews with several hip-hop scholars documenting the role of hip-hop and the academy, Söderman and Sernhede (2016) determined that many hip-hop artists – especially its pioneers – express conflict between what they regard as more elitist educational ideals within the university and their own educational ideals that advocate more holistic approaches to learning and teaching.

Erik Nielson (2013) writes that legendary artists like KRS-ONE, expressed growing frustration with the notion that academics, journalists, and other social critics with no direct connection to hip-hop culture were nevertheless presenting themselves as authorities on it. At a 2006 conference hosted by Stanford University, KRS-ONE specifically commented on an incompatibility of higher education and hip-hop. This begs the question: Who is an authority on hip-hop? If not the artists themselves, how do colleges and universities justify the study, critique, and performance of hip-hop culture within their respective institutions? It would seem as though, artists who share in KRS-ONE's sentiments, have a perpetual beef with academics, journalists, and social critics because those who primarily benefit from the study, critique, and performance of hip-hop culture are not *of* hip-hop culture. Simply put, those who advance hip-hop in higher education, are seldom regarded as primary consumers and producers of hip-hop culture. DJs and emcees, breakers and graffiti artists harness their varied ways of knowing to communicate nuanced understandings of themselves in relation to the world. Therefore, this insider-outsider dyad is wrought with tension (Low, 2011), illustrating the

complicated, often misaligned values espoused by producers of hip-hop culture and academics that write about them.

It would seem as though hip-hop artists and academics inhabit colliding spheres of influence. These two, historically opposite worlds (Watkins, 2005), hip-hop and the academy, personify a precarious battle among traditional power structures and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986); after all, hip-hop remains a cultural artifact (Sulë, 2016) aimed at analyzing, deconstructing, disrupting, and in some ways, dismantling those very power structures. This brings up the notion of authenticity, begging the question: Who, within or outside of the academy, has the authority to both contribute to and advance hip-hop scholarship? Several scholars (Armstrong, 2004; Dando, 2017; Jacobson, 2009; Low, 2011; Snell & Söderman, 2014) have broached the topic of hip-hop authenticity, as an admonishment to educators looking to implement hip-hop programming. Low (2011) offers a six-point typology that frames the debate around authenticity to hip-hop culture: (a) blackness, (b) the “streets,” (c) “hard” heterosexual masculinity, (d) the importance of representing the place and culture you are from, (e) the importance of being true to yourself, and (f) politically conscious “underground” hip-hop (p. 31). Thus, according to Low (2011), youth and other consumers of hip-hop culture, judge artists’ “realness” – as well as their own authenticity. Consequently, the limits of authenticity extend to students who know the world through hip-hop culture. Low et al. (2013) argue that this typology of “realness” dictates the way youth perceive Blackness, immigrants, maleness, femaleness, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. If this be true, what can be said about interpretivist, critical, and poststructuralist (Glesne, 2016) research in hip-hop and

education, if those studies are conducted by scholars whose identities are not situated within Low's (2011) typology? Or align, at all, with students' perceptions of those who consume and produce hip-hop culture? Moreover, what does it mean to design research that aims at understanding the consequences of students' identification within this typology? As stated in previous sections, hip-hop is an important cultural and community practice (Akom, 2009; Brown & Kwakye, 2012; Love, 2016) that we must seek to sustain, but that we must also love enough to critique (Rose, 2008).

The same must be said for hip-hop and its applications in school settings. Alim and Haupt (2017), though proponents of culturally sustaining pedagogies like hip-hop, write,

The vast majority of hip hop education research and pedagogy continues to focus on the many progressive and politically conscious aspects of hip-hop, while ignoring the regressive elements of youth culture (and all culture), not to mention how those elements will be dealt with upon implementation in classrooms where young women and queer youth have an equal right to learn. (p. 171)

Denying the existence of sexist and homophobic messages within hip-hop music, while promoting its pedagogy is wildly irresponsible. To do so, dehumanizes those students whose narratives are undermined, devalued, and mis/underrepresented in hip-hop texts. Though a staunch supporter of hip-hop culture, Perry (2007) offers critiques of hip-hop music and its proliferation of misogyny and objectification of women. Relying on the tenets of Third Wave (postmodern) feminism, Perry deconstructs the ways in which hip-hop culture influences heterosexual males' approach to women to indicate sexual interest; providing insight to "how we understand sexual harassment both legally and culturally"

(p. 117). Like Alim and Haupt, Rose (2008) postulates that those who take on sexism in hip-hop can generally be divided into two broad groups:

(a) those who use hip-hop's sexism (and other ghetto-inspired imagery) as a means to cement and consolidate the perception of black deviance and inferiority and advance socially conservative and anti-feminist agendas; and (b) those liberals and progressives who are deeply concerned about the depths of the sexist imagery upon which much of hip-hop relies, but you generally support and appreciate the music, and are working on behalf of black people, music, and culture. (p. 114–115)

Since Rose (1994, 2008), Brown and Kwakye's (2012) *Wish to Live: The Hip-Hop Feminism Pedagogy Reader* and Love's (2012) *Lil' Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip-Hop Identities and Politics in the New South*, invoked the voices of women of color, creating substantial space for scholars to effectively critique hip-hop texts while elevating and celebrating the voices of women of color contributing to the field. In their groundbreaking text, Brown and Kwakye's (2012) curation of essays from critical feminist scholars, illustrate the ways hip-hop culture is used in educational and non-educational contexts to support the liberation of women – more specifically, women of color. Similarly, Love's (2012) ethnography addressing girls' cultural consumption of rap lyrics, was anchored on the following questions: How do girls understand the images presented in rap music and rap videos? How do rap's messages contribute to the girls' construction of racial and gender identities? How does rap music shape the girls' lived experiences? (p. 10). This exploration reflected the ways in which six girls from Atlanta, derived from rap music, messages about race, femininity, body image and desirability, hegemony, power, and more specifically, resistance to power. Pursuing hip-hop

scholarship, therefore, requires researchers to take seriously, the experiences of young women and queer consumers and producers of hip-hop culture; as their narratives exist on the peripheries of hip-hop's mainstream.

While first-generation (Chang, 2005; Dyson, 1995, 2010; George, 1999; Perry, 2007; Rose, 1994, 2008; Watkins, 2005) and second-generation (Emdin, 2013; Hill, 2009; Love, 2012; Petchauer, 2011) hip-hop scholars have contributed substantially to the field, hip-hop retains a lower status as an art form inside the academy (Snell & Söderman, 2014). However, emerging scholars across multiple disciplines – especially sociology and education – continue theorizing hip-hop and its implications both within-and-beyond the context of school. It appears then that hip-hop in the university demonstrates a paradoxical duality, acting as both as a gateway and as a trap. Some first-generation hip-hop scholars caution young researchers, saying, “People see a body of work that deals with hip-hop and then they think that [that researcher] is incapable of doing other kinds of work.” (Söderman & Sernhede, 2016, p. 16). Söderman and Sernhede's (2016) subsequent writings note that hip-hop scholars express concern with “academic devaluation,” recounting personal experiences in which the rigor and legitimacy of their work was called into question. If hip-hop culture remains on the margins of contemporary academic discourse, it will continue to occupy lower status within colleges and universities.

### **Future Considerations**

Though Söderman and Sernhede (2016) acknowledge that hip hop and the academy are often at odds, Sulé (2016) contends that hip-hop is a cultural artifact worthy

of scholarly examination. After all, hip-hop culture and its related pedagogies, act as an agent of diversity and inclusivity. Building on the college student development scholarship in the mid-1990s, Barber et al.'s (2013) conceptualization of self-authorship – that is one's internal capacity to generate their own beliefs, identity, and relationships – recommended colleges offer programming that both challenges students to evaluate their knowledge claims and “intentionally shap[e] encounters with diverse others and new cultures to emphasize reevaluating and shifting perspectives” (p. 890). This was probably due, in part, to the absence of racial and ethnic diversity in Baxter Magolda and King's (2004) study, in which the 97% of the participants identified as white. Although self-authorship, otherwise known as the Learning Partnerships Model, was universally heralded among colleges and universities, critical scholars like Ashlee et al. (2017) oppose the study and its lack of racial representation. Sadly, this trend is common among groundbreaking theories in higher education research (see Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975) in which students of color are either absent altogether, or explored through a deficit perspective (Pizzolato, 2003). Ashlee et al. (2017) offer counternarratives – in the form of poetry – in the tradition of Critical Race Theory, to deconstruct the theoretical implications (and consequences) of self-authorship, and other student development theories in higher education that erase or neglect the experiences of minoritized students. Similarly, Wong and Pena (2017) offer perspective on how counterstorytelling through lyricism becomes an integral part of campus culture, normalizing the experiences of those students who are often excluded from the mainstream discourses within the school environment. Hip-hop in higher education, according to Gooding and Montoya (2019),



exists at the intersection of the formal curriculum and public pedagogy, “allow[ing] oppressed peoples to see the contemporary world from a lens that does not come from texts approved by mainstream institutions” (p. 166). These scholarly undertakings are a part of a growing body of research that relies on critical culturally responsive methodologies – such as poetry and hip-hop – to identify, analyze, and implement pedagogies of possibility through cultural funds of knowledge, creating platforms for historically silenced groups to share their voices (DeCuir-Gunby & Walker-DeVose, 2013; Gooding & Montoya, 2018; Santomé & Cavieres, 2009).

That being said, because of its intercultural appeal, hip-hop has the capacity to resonate with people from various corners of the globe. Therefore, Love (2016) insists that any hip-hop interventions used in schools must be

Run by a prominent scholar in the field of hip hop, or the site must be run by youth who are considered leaders in their community with deep knowledge of hip-hop culture... invested in the healing of Black bodies and minds... embody[ing] inclusivity and unity. The site must provide knowledge of self to nurture self-determination and resistance. (p. 419)

Love’s (2016) point begs the question: Given what we know about critiques of hip-hop scholars, can one be both a prominent scholar in hip-hop and the academy? Said differently, can a scholar be both prominent in hip-hop *and* within mainstream academic discourse – advancing to hip-hop culture as well as its status within the academy?

Either way, researchers, in particular, “need to be cognizant of the complex ways that positioning (including hip hop insider or outsider) affects research with the [hip-hop scholarship] community” (Tan, 2009, p. 59). Rodriguez (2009) suggests schools and

universities should invest in curriculum development that addresses hip hop culture, insisting that “hip hop artists can serve as resident experts on hip-hop related content and the universities can provide financial and special resources to pilot and disseminate the curriculum” (p. 33) – this disrupts antiquated epistemological considerations of *who* creates knowledge at colleges and universities. Future research considerations surrounding hip hop and higher education, according to Sulé (2016) examining hip-hop in personal psychology and spirituality; how hip-hop influences persistence toward a degree; hip hop as a facilitator of cross-racial interactions, beliefs and friendships among hip hop collegians (p. 194). Petchauer (2012) also believes a focus on hip-hop aesthetics (e.g., DJing, sampling, battling, freestyling/improvisation) are viable areas for future research as well. Because hip-hop is many interconnected elements with common aesthetics, hip-hop inquiry in the field of higher education would hold more promise, according to Petchauer (2009),

If researchers look at hip-hop holistically with practices in connection with one another rather than divorce them from one another. Studies that hold to this principle are better equipped to pinpoint the kinds of hip-hop pedagogies discussed above and the habits that educators might desire to cultivate in students. (p. 965)

As for teaching and learning more broadly, culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogues must move toward the “thirdspace,” where the cultures of students and their communities are sustained, extended, and complicated outside of a dichotomy of reproduction and resistance, where human agency, complicity, and resistance live together in pedagogies toward liberation (Tuck, 2009, p. 420). Participants in Sulé’s

(2016) study lamented the lack of hip-hop performers invited to campus or lack of studio space to record music. Opening this physical “thirdspace” is consistent with programs at Harvard, NYU, UVA, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison that center hip-hop – its cultural, linguistic, and performative elements – and invites students to communicate across difference, make meaning, and develop a sense of critical consciousness. Although Dando (2017) writes about hip-hop in education from a K-12 perspective, research in higher education supports his notion that “centering hip-hop in the classroom ... allow[s] students to create a sense of agency and empowerment that contrasts the images sold to and told about [marginalized youth]” (p. 33). Physical and philosophical “thirdspaces” allow students to construct meaning on their own terms, which allow for more varied expressions of cultural knowledge – expressions that exist beyond the master narratives of struggle and resistance that characterize minoritized communities.

Peterson (2013) suggests that educational elements – including knowledge, consciousness, search and discovery, and participation – derive from sensibilities, mindsets, and approaches embedded in the four main expressive hip-hop elements (p. 48). Love (2016) adds that these elements are at the core of promoting self-determination and self-knowledge, critical thinking, and problem solving. While these seem like desired learning outcomes for students at any level, Khalili-Tari (2016) challenges postsecondary educators to think what it would mean to incorporate hip-hop in college classrooms as a means for helping students make objective observations and improve society. Those aims, which are not all different from the goals of higher education, especially about promoting social consciousness and civic engagement, are achieved through various

pedagogies that center culture and other non-dominant ideologies. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Alim & Haupt, 2017) for instance, provides a much-needed alternative to traditional teaching methods. In many ways, culturally sustaining pedagogues create spaces for students and teachers to reject the assimilationist drive of hegemonic institutions – like colleges and universities – but also centers organic cultural and linguistic forms in inorganic spaces, linking the social world beyond the school walls to the practices of teaching and learning, wherever they occur (p. 167).

A curricular, or co-curricular program, grounded in the poetics of hip-hop aims to address Maxine Green's (1981) concern: That young people simply are not inspired to question authority. Because hip-hop and spoken word poetry are dialogical in nature, CHHP, CHHLP, and Breakbeat Pedagogy – offshoots of culturally sustaining pedagogy – provides students of all ages and backgrounds, opportunities to contend with current events, engage in political discourse, and artistically communicate across difference. Admittedly, Greene (1981) most likely was not considering hip-hop music at the time her piece was penned, however hip-hop's core elements do align with her claims for dialogical methods in humanities education. Petchauer's (2012) study of hip-hop collegians – a group of college students who consistently espoused a “critical, questioning discourse” (p. 110) – responds to the call of Greene (1981), hooks (2010), and Giroux (2013) who challenge educators to evoke a culture of questioning, among their students.

Like its theoretical predecessor, Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1993; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998), CHHP (Akom, 2009; Land &

Stovall, 2009; Pulido, 2009), CHHLP (Alim, 2007b), and breakbeat pedagogies (Mooney, 2016) are transdisciplinary approaches to teaching that challenge traditional paradigms, remains committed to social justice, while centering the lived experiences of students of color (Akom, 2009). Simon (1992) looks to counternarratives to supply meaning to students' individual lives (p. 60). The critical hope derived from making meaning of their current condition, allows students to develop a sense of agency that ultimately leads to some praxis-informed action (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Simon (1992) goes on to identify three dimensions necessary to sustain a pedagogy of possibility: (a) communicative openness; (b) recognition of partiality; and (c) sense of collective venture (p. 65). Together, these three elements create "community solidarity", allowing hip-hop, spoken word poetry, and its contributors to connect and interact cross-culturally. In summation, breakbeat pedagogies, uniquely situated within the field of cultural foundations, provides scholars a pathway to consider how education can sustain and revive the souls of students who, "far too often, experience schooling as a soul-deadening process where the very things that they hold dear – their languages, cultures, families, identities, and histories – are absent at best, or overtly stigmatized, marginalized, and excluded at worst" (Alim & Haupt, 2017, p. 159). Future considerations for hip-hop education-based research should further examine its aesthetic traditions on college and university campuses as a means of legitimizing its presence and possibility within the academy, but most importantly, providing hip-hop collegians the space to speak their truth as they read the world (Freire, 1970/2000).

## CHAPTER III

### TRACK III: CHECK THE METHOD: HIP-HOP RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES

#### **Methodology**

As an educator and hip-hop artist, I care deeply about the implications of research that addresses the college experiences and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011) of students who express themselves and find meaning through hip-hop culture. Like Alim and Haupt (2017), I am interested in how hip-hop collegians and pedagogues have resisted often overwhelming dominant ideologies of language, which are almost always racist, classist, or discriminatory, and imagined new pedagogical possibilities that center our communities' cultural and linguistic practices (p. 159). These considerations lay the foundation for how hip-hop exists within educational spaces. Within the last decade, critical scholars have explored the purposes, implications, and educational value of engaging with critical hip-hop pedagogy (Akom, 2009; Land & Stovall, 2009) and hip-hop based education more broadly. While the literature on hip-hop based education is extensive, attempts to incorporate hip-hop linguistic practices, teaching methods, and theoretical frameworks on college campuses is sparse. As mentioned in Track II, this may be for good reason, given the fact that hip-hop icons like KRS-ONE are skeptical of colleges' potential cooption of hip-hop culture. Rather than viewing hip-hop in college as

an instructional tool or pedagogical gimmick, Love (2012) insists, “Today’s classrooms must engage students in ways that link students’ lives and communities to their education and make it meaningful” (p. 108). Therefore, it is imperative that higher education researchers continue situating hip-hop in collegiate settings as a means for justifying or refuting its presence on college campuses. Jenkins et al. (2017) are among the most recent of scholarly efforts to demonstrate the impact of postsecondary spoken-word poetry programming in student affairs. Thus, situating hip-hop – especially its oral traditions, poetics, and lyricism – within the context of higher and postsecondary education, offering new pathways to reimagining student development, civic engagement, as well as improving cultural competencies, writing skills, and academic achievement (e.g., retention and completion). It appears the stage is set for new perspectives in higher education; that is, outlooks that center the cultural, linguistic sensibilities of hip-hop collegians. Most assuredly, this scholarly undertaking is one of love, and anchored by the following research question: How do hip-hop collegians, or those who self-identify as hip-hop artists, use hip-hop lyricism to construct meaning and navigate institutions of higher education?

To embrace the idea that hip-hop provides a space for knowledge production and meaning making, requires that we reconsider what counts as knowledge altogether. How do we know what we know? Moreover, how does culture inform these new knowledges and the nature of students’ experiences within a postmodern educational landscape? These epistemological concerns are most appropriately explored through a phenomenological framework (see Figure 1.1; Glesne, 2016), one that captures the

subjectivities of hip-hop collegians' lived experiences. Their deep investment in hip-hop, helps hip-hop collegians make meaningful connections between the culture and their educational lives (Petchauer, 2011). This sense-making is reflective of the type of learning that hip-hop based education provides. To the phenomenologist, "Learning is not the mere byproduct of impersonal forces impinging on the learner. Rather, the learner is an inherent part of the relational nexus within which what is learned is co-constituted" (DeRobertis, 2017, p. 22). Similarly, to the hip-hop collegian, hip-hop culture is not a force unto itself. It transcends the boundaries of their postsecondary experiences, creating moments of connection and contention, reflection, and reflexivity. Simply put, hip-hop collegians mechanize hip-hop culture for the purpose of processing and navigating college life. This study attempts to understand the habits and dispositions necessary for postsecondary success that a deep investment in hip-hop culture offers. Given hip-hop's multimodalities across its four elements, Anzaldúa and Keating's (2002) conception of *conocimiento* offers a fitting justification for hip-hop's epistemological and ontological relevance:

Knowledge derived from the opening of all your senses, consciously inhabiting your body and decoding its symptoms... link[ing] inner reflection and vision – the mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, and subtle bodily awareness – with social, political action and lived experiences to generate subversive knowledges. (p. 542)

*Knowing* what we know therefore, requires researchers to reassess the nature of knowledge altogether. Doing so, allows us to radically reimagine cultural and subversive knowledges that are, unlike most forms of academic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), both a



navigational tool and means for survival. Furthermore, Leggo's (2008) concept of "knowing as poetry" invites new opportunities for epistemological exploration. By regarding the poet (or researcher) as a scientist, and believing that knowledge is constructed through language, the poet assumes expert status. Poetic inquiry, however, is not a new concept. Hermeneutics – which relies on poetics and oration to deconstruct society, and those who govern it – has guided the work of many curriculum theorists (Slattery, 2013). Hermeneutics, like phenomenology, is concerned with the ambiguous and ironic dimensions of the human experience; and most importantly, prioritizes language as a viable dimension for producing new knowledge.

Scholars who rely on arts-based research methods seek to establish language as a viable method for scholarly inquiry. Lyric inquiry for instance, asks participants to engage with lyrical texts, with the goal of understanding how certain phenomena promote liminality, ineffability, metaphorical thinking, embodied understanding, and personal evocations. In many ways, lyric inquiry pushes our epistemological boundaries, challenging what conventional methods purport as objective truth. Knowing within this framework, is an experience of immersion and expression rather than gathering data for argument's sake. Benefits of lyric inquiry include: its capacity to develop voice and agency for researcher and participants, foregrounds conceptual and philosophical processes that ignite the imagination, and it reunites audiences with imagination and beauty (Neilson, 2008). Most importantly, lyric inquiry provides opportunities for marginalized voices in the academy to be heard – especially women, LGBTQ youth, and

youth of color. For many, lyric inquiry is a chance to engage with scholarly discourse while actively resisting dominant narratives in the academy.

Rappers and poets who take it upon themselves to critique and comment on dealings of the government, corruption, institutional racism, and systemic oppression, continue to carry on the hermeneutic tradition. Knowing as poetry – that is, poetry as a research method – invites writers and readers to acknowledge the semiotics of figurative language, voice, rhythm, line breaks, and other poetic elements, that induce moments of meaning-making for all parties engaged in the construction of new knowledge. While some researchers may debate the validity of qualitative findings – especially arts-based inquiries – because of their subjective appeal, Leggo (2008) argues that research methods that engage the heart and imagination, like poetry, are core components of human knowing. Moreover, exploring the lyrical repertoires of hip-hop collegians will hopefully reveal the ways in which linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005) promotes intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style (p. 78) – especially through hip-hop and counternarrative storytelling.

To the point of critical consciousness and resistance, I look to the work of critical race scholars who exalt the counternarrative for its functionality in leveraging educational equity. Counternarratives serve as an instrument for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power (Delgado, 1993), while promoting skills such as memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm, and rhyme (Yosso, 2005). Delgado (1989) reminds us that this form of storytelling is uniquely situated within African American, Chicano/a, and Native

American communities, saying that “oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their survival” (p. 2436). Consciousness is, as described by Peterson (2013), “knowledge of self, one’s surroundings, as well as the social and/or historical forces at play in one’s existence” (p. 50). Critical consciousness allows students to question the validity of the information they read, the knowledges and customs espoused in school, and according to Ladson-Billings (2017), “pose powerful questions about social, cultural, economic, political, and other problems of living in a democracy that attempts to serve a diverse populace” (p. 146). When we reflect upon the sociopolitical conditions to which hip-hop was born – urban upheaval via redlining, wealth and wage gaps, drug abuse, violence, and an emerging prison industrial complex – its early contributors, the DJs, emcees, breakers, and graffiti artists relied on their respective modalities to narrate their reality.

Whether tagging a wall with the name of their crew or extending breakbeats in disco records, hip-hop artists – like their enslaved ancestors – used the tools they’d been given to express themselves, their stories, and an unyielding sense of joy amid much suffering. For many hip-hop historians (Chang, 2005; Lipsitz, 1994; Rose, 1994) the culture itself exists as both an act of resistance and reclamation. Lipsitz (1994) reminds us that “the existence of the African diaspora functions throughout the world as a crucial force for opening up cultural, social, and political space for struggles over identity, autonomy, and power” (p. 27–28). Consequently, given its emergence following the death of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power eras (Boyd, 2002), hip-hop provided Black youth, a space to critique society, and offer visions for a new reality.

Such critiques and meanings are communicated through signifying, that is according to Gates (1988), a focal point of Black vernacular strategies intended quip, trick, or play with words. Low, Tan, and Celemencki (2013) insists that signifying “celebrates the multiplicity and even chaos of meaning-making, and therefore complicates the notion of a static, knowable ‘real’” (p. 133) or objective truth. To this point, hip-hop culture is most assuredly a form of counternarrative storytelling, in accordance with Solórzano and Yosso’s (2002) framework, insisting that counternarratives: build community; challenge perceived stereotypes and transform established belief systems; create hope by demonstrating a person’s possibilities beyond their current conditions, situation, or context, and most importantly, “by combining elements from the story and current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone” (p. 36).

Therefore, if we (re)consider expressions of joy as acts of resistance, we can begin to understand hip-hop, and its musical predecessors (e.g., blues, rock-and-roll, jazz, reggae) as a lineage of hope, through song, dance, and visual art. More specifically, a critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), that is the type of hope which is intended to manifest as a political force which is anchored in practice (Freire, 1994). Critical hope must not be animated by wishful idealism; “Rather it is grounded in actual situation with their particular limits and possibilities, and it clings to the truth of the human power to change what is within reach” (Glass, 2014, p. 102). Therefore, in the tradition of CHHP and Breakbeat Pedagogy, it is important that I center participants’ voices by sharing power in such a way that reframes – or remixes – how we, as researchers invite

participants to co-construct meaning from our data. Moreover, exploring resistance through “the event,” as expressed by Mooney (2016), is essential to understanding how hip-hop artists rely on cultural production to construct meaning and, potentially, inform acts of resistance in college. Exploring these conceptual frameworks is an endeavor in service to critical hope and an act of resistance to the culture of positivism that’s come to define the academy.

After all, hip-hop has always been a tool for resistance against oppressive systems and institutions that reify whiteness, suppressing the rights, sovereignty, and humanity of historically marginalized groups. In the case of colleges and universities – which until recently, begun adopting the language of diversity and inclusion – hip-hop scholarship often remains on the periphery of *rigorous* scholarly exploration. Au (2005) believes this contentious relationship between hip-hop and the academy is grounded in rap lyrics, which often portray formal education as a failing system, ill-equipped to meet the dynamic social, academic, and economic needs of Black and Brown students. Because hip-hop artists communicate their lived realities through cultural, linguistic, and uniquely discursive repertoires (e.g., funds of knowledge), it is important that research in higher education makes room for the interpretive possibilities of hip-hop collegians, who also come to know the world through the consumption and production of hip-hop texts.

### **Study Design and Analysis**

This phenomenological project is situated within an arts-informed research paradigm. Unlike a traditional –or positivist – research projects, arts-informed research is intended to engage the “empathetic and emotional participation of its audience” (Glesne,

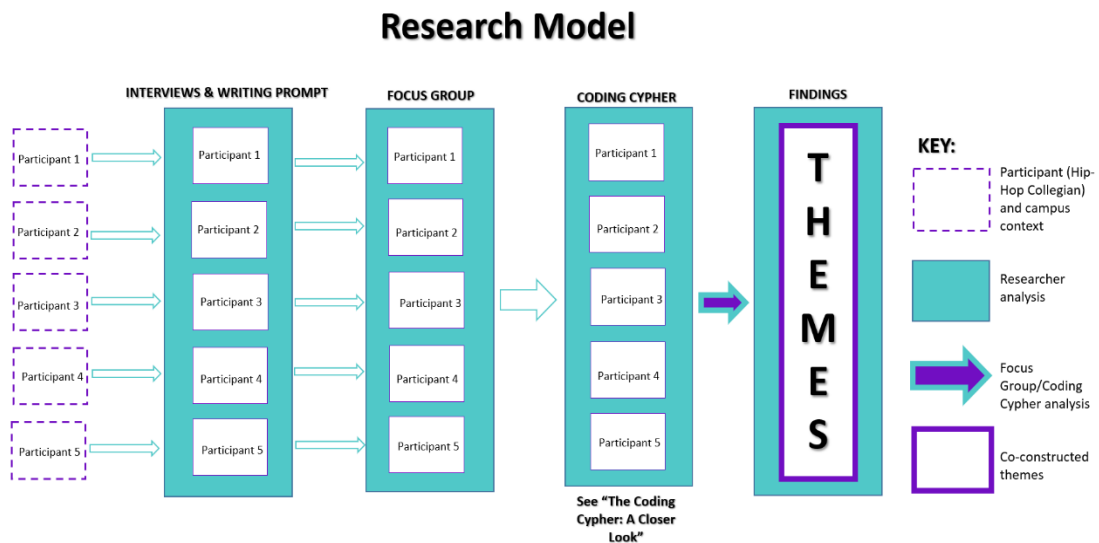
2016, p. 245), uniquely aimed at portraying lives and illuminating untold stories (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Cole & Knowles, 2001). Rather than merely being descriptive, Eisner (2008) insists that this type of research is inherently evocative:

The evocative has as its ambition the provision of a set of qualities that create an empathic sense of life in those who encounter it, whether the work is visual or linguistic, choreographic or musical. In all cases, emotion and imagination are involved. Art in research puts a premium on evocation, even when it has sections or aspects of it that are descriptive in character. Put another way, art is present in research when its presence enables one to participate vicariously in a situation. (p. 6)

I am intentional in my use of arts-*informed* research, rather than arts-*based* research (ABR). Although a subgenre of ABR, arts-informed research, according to Cole and Knowles (2008), is a set of qualitative methodologies that is influenced by, but not solely based within, the arts. Thus, arts-informed research is intended to enhance information gathering beyond the scope of typical qualitative research (e.g., interviews or participant-observation), promote a nuanced understanding of the human condition, and perhaps most importantly, “reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible” (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Patton (2002) provides a partial lexicology listing 27 different terms used (often interchangeably) to describe ABR. Since its emergence in the 1970s, it’s important that any study anchored in the arts be clear about its purpose, design, and execution because arts-informed research and ABR more broadly, is often contested within the academy. For this reason, arts-informed research provides an appropriate foundation, upon which a hip-hop project can be constructed. After all, hip-hop as a cultural aesthetic movement, was and continues to be, unbound by convention.

Participants in hip-hop culture – DJs, breakers, graffiti artists, and emcees – produce art (and knowledge) that is unbound by aesthetic forms. It is that inherent practice of nonconformity that gives hip-hop its edge, accessibility, and capacity for deep, intersubjective insight (Lafreniere & Cox, 2012). Therefore, arts-informed research is not unlike hip-hop culture itself: they are anti-positivist, multimodal, and transdisciplinary. Both arts-informed research and hip-hop are alternate spaces for researchers and the producers of hip-hop culture to challenge conventional forms and construct new knowledge, accessible to audiences beyond the ivory tower. Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the research design.

Figure 3.1 Research Model



To address the original research question, the study featured three key areas of data collection. First, the study began with one 60-minute semi-structured interview, with the goal of getting to know the artist, their relationship to hip-hop, and how they engage

with it in their college environment (see Appendix A). At the conclusion of the interview, participants were instructed to write and record a song in response to the following prompt: *Describe your college experience*. They were also welcomed to select or compose their own instrumentals, collaborate with producers, musicians, and vocalists to bring their song to life. The prompt itself is designed to be broad enough for participants to respond in a manner that is most was authentic and encompassing. Given my orientation as an emcee and spoken word poet, this study paid close attention to the lyrical composition of each song recorded by the participants. Lyric inquiry, as Neilsen (2008) writes,

Draws upon nonrationalist and nondiscursive ways of knowing in order to engage in inquiry practices and to produce written forms that have, up to now, been undervalued or ignored in scholarly discourses. Lyric inquiry is informed by aesthetic and philosophical principles of writing; it is based on a conviction that using expressive and poetic functions of language creates the possibility of a resonant, ethical, and engaged relationship between the knower and the known. Because it often strikes deep, lyric inquiry can move us, in all senses of that word. (p. 94)

Lyric inquiry is situated within the paradigm of arts-informed research because it is anchored by the practice of understanding form as method, which “speaks to the relationship between the art form and the creative inquiry processes” (Cole & Knowles, 2012, p. 62). In this case, gathering information in the form of rap lyrics defies convention and invites raw truth-telling through the use of rhythm and rhyme (Faulkner, 2009; Furman, Lietz, & Langer, 2008), which in turn, enhances the information derived from the 60-minute semi-structured interview. I recorded and transcribed the interview for clarity. After the initial interview transcription, I used an open coding method to



analyze the data. Throughout this process, I wrote memos and field notes to document the experience and pose critical questions that informed our collective interpretations of the data. I compiled my field notes and personal journal entries as an act of what feminist scholars might consider, holistic reflexivity (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012).

To that end, since hip-hop historically, has something to do with collaboration and building community, the participants came together for the other phases of the study: a focus group (see Appendix B), and what I'm referring to as a *coding cypher* (see Appendix C). The focus group took place after the first round of interviews were completed with all participants. The focus group provided us an opportunity as co-researchers, to build community by openly sharing information about our artistic influences, our relationship to hip-hop, our individual writing and recording processes, and reflect on what it means to create hip-hop in college. Glesne (2016) reminds us that "focus group research can have emancipatory qualities if the topic is such that the discussion gives voice to silenced experiences or augments personal reflection, growth, and knowledge development" (p. 126). This is another chance for the participants in the study to grow together, see themselves as producers of knowledge, and ultimately develop a deeper familiarity with one another, that may aid in the interpretation of the forthcoming lyrical data.

Finally, a *coding cypher* situated the participants as co-researchers, because it provided them an opportunity to engage in the analytical and interpretive processes of the study. I refer to this coding endeavor as a cypher because the participants were responsible for co-constructing meaning and producing knowledge. These analytical

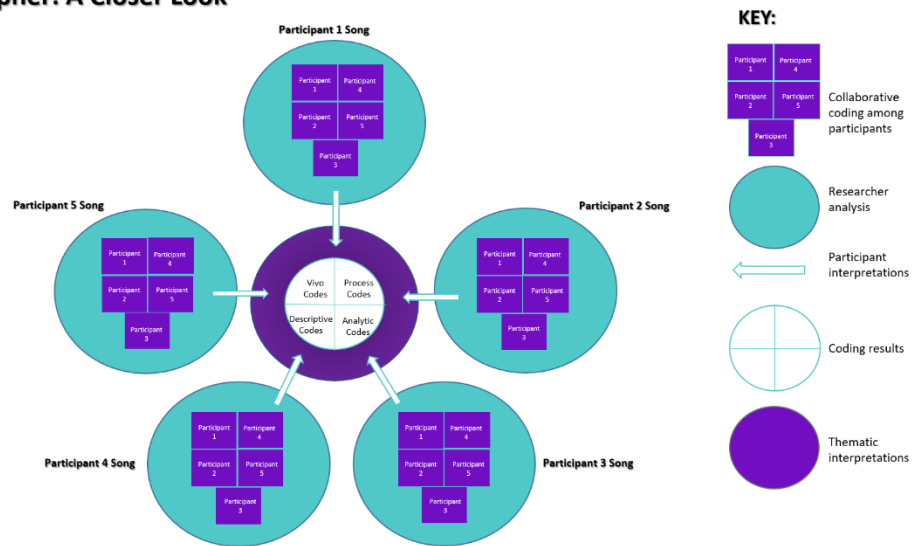
processes, like the hip-hop cypher, were sacred spaces that are both free-flowing and collaborative. Levy, Emdin, and Adjapong (2018) remind us that a cypher is a “home-grown system of mutual aid,” as participants engaged within it often provide verbal validation to one another as they recite verses in rhythm” (p. 104). Decolonizing research in this way, invited participants to be co-researchers, cyphering with one another, in this sacred practice of sense-making. As Hill and Petchauer (2013) put it, the cypher is “the quintessential space in which people create hip-hop [and] a fundamental unit of analysis in hip-hop scholarship” (p. 9).

Therefore, after each participant recorded their song in response to the prompt, I coordinated a date, time, and location convenient for the participants to host the coding cypher. The coding cypher took place in a student-operated co-working space, located on a main street adjacent to the university in which the participants were enrolled (see Track IV). Upon their arrival, I conducted a 40-minute introductory lesson (see Appendix C) on the purpose and practice of coding qualitative data. After all, community-based researchers (Alderson, 2008; Heilgman, 1998; Saldaña, 2013; Warren, 2000) remind us that participants in studies can be taught to investigate and analyze issues that relate to their social worlds. Consequently, I described the concept of open coding, differentiated between the types of codes – in vivo, descriptive, process, and analytical (see Love, 2012, p. 12) – and also facilitated a coding demonstration for the participants using a song of my own, recorded years ago, that was closely related to the writing prompt. I provided copies of the lyrics for the participants to engage with as we play the music aloud. Together, I hoped we could demonstrate how co-researchers identified key words,

symbolism, conceptual themes, and metaphors that may reflect the meaning, message, and purpose of the songs curated among the participants in the study. Figure 3.2 is a visual model of the coding cypher.

Figure 3.2 The Coding Cypher: A Closer Look

**The Coding Cypher: A Closer Look**



Each participant’s song was coded by the participants in the study, paying close attention to the in vivo, descriptive, process, and analytic codes mentioned in Figure 3.2. In the coding cypher, I assumed the role of researcher/facilitator, ceding control to the participants as the interpretive responsibilities became more participatory (Barndt, 2008). After each song was played, participants took a few minutes to review the transcription of the lyrics, make notes, and begin identifying codes individually. At that time, for the sake of clarity, I replayed parts of the song upon a participants’ request. I then initiated a dialogue among the participants, comparing codes, identifying patterns and themes that

emerged in the music. In my facilitation of this dialogue, I modified some of the critical questions posed by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) to fit the parameters of my study:

What is the artist doing [in this song]? What are they trying to accomplish [through their lyrics]? How, exactly, do they do this? What specific means or [literary] strategies do they use? How does [the artist] talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on? What assumptions are they making? What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes? Why did I include them? (p. 146)

These questions promoted a healthy exchange of ideas, and create a rhythmic back-and-forth discourse aimed at producing new knowledge. Because the coding process is messy and multilayered, doing this work in community makes the most sense. Like a rap cypher, this coding in community affirmed participants' cultural identities and self-expression through hip-hop, while challenging one another to see their work through new lenses. This type of open coding, according to Clarke (2012), connotes just that "data are open to multiple simultaneous readings or codes. Many different phenomena and many different properties can be named, tracked, and traced through reams of all different kinds of data. There is no one right reading" (p. 392). Opening the coding process in this way was an attempt to ensure intercoder reliability or agreement/convergence (Saldaña, 2013). These terms are widely used describe the degree to which coders reach similar conclusions from the text (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000).

After coding the five songs, we grouped the codes into categories, subcategories, and themes, much like I did when analyzing the data from the interviews and focus group. I then introduced the codes from the interviews to the participants, drew comparisons across the data sets, and incorporated and/or recategorized themes according

to the suggestions of the participants. Introducing my codes to the participants was a means of both checking the validity of my interpretations and decolonizing the research methods by sharing the interpretive responsibility (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Doing so produced rich, contextual information about the ways in which hip-hop artists navigate through and construct meaning within their experiences in college. The entire coding cypher lasted five hours.

Finally, the codes were published in a community codebook – that is, a set of matrices shared among participants in the study. From there, we performed a final thematic analysis, paying attention to the lyrics themselves, and the participants’ reading of each other’s work. Doing so revealed the ways hip-hop collegians made sense of the work of their peers, who were (and still are) actively negotiating their identities within their postsecondary educational context.

Entering the research process invited me to wonder about their points of connection and contention, and more broadly, what their interpretations of each other’s work would reveal about their consumption and production of hip-hop culture in college? This final thematic analysis responded to the research question, further elucidating the ways hip-hop informs hip-hop collegians’ effective navigation of higher education. I believe a collaborative lyrical phenomenological process is aided by flexibility, collaboration, and methodological triangulation (Annells, 2006).

### **Dixie Southern University and Participant Recruitment**

I began the recruiting process by emailing and direct messaging my network of classmates, coworkers, educators (e.g., teachers, higher education administrators/student

affairs personnel), former students, and/or hip-hop artists to curate a list of viable candidates for the study in the Fall of 2018. I was looking for college students that were actively engaged in creating hip-hop music at their respective institutions. The results were sparse. More often than not, the leads were cold. The students they suggested had recently graduated – and were therefore, ineligible for the study – or uninterested in participating altogether. The Spring of 2019, however, offered a new glimmer of hope. That semester, a small, private, liberal arts college in the southeastern United States, hosted a conference exploring the intersections of hip-hop and higher education. Although I was invited to present at the conference, I also saw this as an opportunity to connect with faculty, staff, and currently enrolled college students and scout prospective participants for this project. It was at that conference where I met Stephen, a rapper and, at the time, first-year student at nearby Dixie Southern University (DSU), a large, public, predominantly white institution (PWI), also in the southeastern United States. That afternoon, Stephen and I talked at length about new music, our “top 5” emcees, and how hip-hop shaped our time in college. Toward the end of our conversation, I explained the nature of my study, its goals, and the level of commitment required of the participants, Stephen was eager to sign-on, and convince a few of his peers to do the same. Given what Stephen shared with me about DSU, its two student-led hip-hop organizations, and budding hip-hop scene, I believed it to be a viable space to advance my recruitment efforts. Track IV features a more detailed, contextual exploration of DSU, its appropriateness for this study, and the organizations these students represent.

Upon identifying the student organizations, I contacted group members listed on the organization's website via email message, introducing myself and my interest in hip-hop. After establishing initial contact with the students, I shared information about my project, the research question, and asked whether any members of their organization would be interested in participating in the study. For those that responded favorably, I collected more formal contact and demographic information (see Table 3.1) and established dates for initial interviews. After receiving their contact information, I shared a consent form with each participant, as well as a summary of the research, which included the purpose of the study, the research question, procedures, risks, benefits, and a statement of confidentiality. Participants were instructed to sign the consent form and bring the completed document to our semi-structured interview.

Originally, I intended to recruit between 6-8 students. However, after nearly one month of cold-emailing and awaiting confirmations from Stephens' contacts, I decided to revise my range from 6-8 to 4-6. After several discussions with my dissertation committee chair, we concluded that the breadth and depth of the data could potentially counteract the smaller sample size. Table 3.1 contains the participants selected for the study.

Table 3.1 Hip-Hop Collegians Involved in Dissertation Study

Name	Hometown	Sex	Race/ Ethnicity	Sexual Identity	Class	Major/Minor
Isaac	Fayetteville, NC	Male	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Junior	Political Science
Stephen	Charlotte, NC	Male	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Sophomore	History, Statistics/African, African American, and Diaspora Studies
Michael	Atlanta, GA	Male	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Junior	Political Science/Music
Eric	Wilson, NC	Male	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Senior	Sports Management
Nick	New Orleans, LA	Male	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Junior	Art History

Researching hip-hop collegians offers new ways to think about how we engage participants in qualitative inquiry. Because this group of participants is of legal age, and potentially uninterested in ambiguity, there is an opportunity to reimagine the way we protect participants' identities. After all, participants may appreciate this opportunity to grow their brand, expand their cultural influence, and introduce their work to a new audience. Although participants were not recruited to the study under the guise of celebrity or viral notoriety, the idea to include their hip-hop aliases (or stage names), rather than traditional pseudonyms was quite compelling. However, for the purposes of fulfilling the requirements of the Institutional Research Board (IRB) and protecting the identities of the participants, I decided to create aliases that concealed both their identities as well as the institutions they attend. Providing some anonymity affords these hip-hop collegians the space to speak freely, unencumbered by their university or external forces.



## Real Talk

To be honest, I was enthusiastic about the design of the study. What I was doing felt new, unique, birthed from a place of sincerity, and what I now understand to be, a misplaced sense of optimism. As innovative as this effort felt, the methodology was not devoid of pitfalls. Recruiting participants was unfathomably difficult. Originally, I'd hoped to recruit up to eight emcees for the study; as it turned out, simply getting five participants to buy-in was a herculean task. To this day, there are undergraduate hip-hop artists at DSU (and other universities), with unread messages from me, haunting their inboxes. It is a ghostly reminder of the ineffectuality of academia; a reminder that your work is as strong as its ability to connect with your audience. I spent so much time designing a study that *I* wanted to read and became frustrated when it failed to resonate widely with the community I sought to learn alongside. And therein lied the problem. Rappers in college did not need to be liberated; they were doing just fine without *my* dissertation. In the initial outreach, I tried so hard to come across as a serious scholar that I neglected the origins of my own scholarship. When I finally let my guard down, and humbled myself to ask for help, I no longer came across as an opportunistic graduate student but someone who saw a value in the creativity of others, someone who believed there was something more to rapping in college than meets the eye.

CHAPTER IV  
TRACK IV: THE INTERLUDE: SETTING THE STAGE FOR DATA COLLECTION  
AND ANALYSIS

I arrived at Starbucks for my first participant-interview *relatively* early; an hour and a half early, to be exact. Having been unable to sleep the night before, to say I was excited would be an understatement of epic proportions. Looking back, having developed rapport and trust with the participants, it almost seems improbable that this scholarly undertaking – at any point in the research process – was laced with anxiety. Nevertheless, I mulled over everything with excruciating detail. From printing excess copies of consent forms as to adhere to the IRB, to selecting an outfit that said “Yes, I’m a researcher...but hey, I’m approachable,” I drank from a cup, brimming with mixed emotions. Be that as it may, there was something restorative about the process, a sort of hope that manifested within the ebb and flow of each conversation. Although the interviews were anchored by a set of core questions, each discussion reflected the lyrical, aesthetic, and cultural sensibilities of each artist. Isaac, Stephen, Michael, Eric, and Nick, like me in some ways, entered this process with a similarly hopeful apprehension, open to exploring the intersections of hip-hop lyricism and the college experience. Tracks IV through VII feature an analysis of the two initial phases of the research process – the semi-structured interview and focus group. The analysis is written in narrative form, synthesizing themes and core concepts that explore hip-hop culture, lyricism, and meaning making for the

participants. Analyzing the results of the interviews and focus group together, will lay the foundation for the collaborative analysis of the songs and coding cypher featured in Track VIII: Step into the cypher.

### **Exploring DSU**

Dixie State University (DSU) is overflowing with school spirit. Although nearly 80% of enrolled students call this state home, out-of-state students harbor a similar enthusiasm for the institution. Located between two metropolitan areas, DSU is an open campus, nestled in what many would consider to be, the consummate “college town.” In other words, the university drives the social, political, and economic climate of the city. Therefore, to be a student at DSU is a form of currency – a social capital that grants access to certain rights, privileges, and expectations from those within and beyond the campus community. Collectively, students at DSU are often perceived as liberal; however, these sentiments are counterbalanced by the governing power of a historically conservative state legislature. Therefore, my naming of DSU is quite intentional. While it would seem as though those in power would rather cling to their confederate past, there is a growing undercurrent of college student voices, eager to critique the establishment through cultural expression and direct action.

To that end, DSU seemed to be the ideal institution to recruit participants for this study. Considering the ways in which hip-hop was borne in a Bronx, quite literally, engulfed in flames (Chang, 2005), it is no coincidence that hip-hop has such a profound resonance within the campus community. After all, hip-hop culture – and those who participate within it – reflects a creative resistance (Garcia, 2017) within members of the

community who choose to exist within and beyond the constraints of the institution. In recent years, DSU has embraced many new curricular and co-curricular opportunities for the exploration and expression of hip-hop culture. For instance, the participants in the study represent two officially recognized student-led hip-hop organizations at the university – *Rap Club* and *Circle Up*. The former is an organization committed to the rigorous exploration of hip-hop culture – namely its music and history. The latter has a more specific focus on the lyrical, communal, and performative elements of hip-hop music. Each Wednesday at 9pm, *Circle Up* gathers in The Quad – a popular gathering space on campus (see Track VI) – and hosts a cypher. For an hour and half, members of *Circle Up* take turns rapping in the geographical center of campus, inviting passerby and onlookers to step into the cypher. “Every Wednesday,” Stephen said, “We want new rappers.” As Michael describes it:

*Rap Club* is a great way to meet different artists and people who just care about hip-hop in general. That's a great place to collaborate or just have conversations about the genre and the culture. *Circle Up* is like *Rap Club*, except [*Circle Up* is] more performance based. I met a lot of my good friends in *Rap Club* and *Circle Up*; but I'd say *Circle Up* even more because it's smaller, so it's more close-knit; and you're rapping, so you're really learning about people and the things they embody in their performance.

While both organizations produce original mixtapes featuring their student-artists at the culmination of the academic year, each organization offers hip-hop collegians a space to debate, discuss, and deconstruct what hip-hop is capable of in the college setting.

Although these organizations are still relatively new (each founded within the last 10

years), they both provide institutionally sanctioned platforms aimed at proliferating hip-hop culture at DSU.

Student organizations, however, are but a small part of the hip-hop oriented co-curricular opportunities on campus. DSU is also home to three different recording studios with varying levels of access. The basement of a popular undergraduate library in the center of campus is home to a recording studio, whose hours of operation are 8:00am – 9:45pm on Monday through Friday, with limited availability on Sundays. With their ID cards, students can reserve this space for up to four hours at a time. The studio in the library is a 10' x 10' enclosure, replete with padded walls, state-of-the art microphones, keyboard, and advanced recording and sound engineering software, including *Reason*, *Logic*, and *Pro Tools*. While access to this space is open to students, staff, and faculty alike, the remaining recording studios across campus are restricted to members of the Department of Music. Although this is the case, participants in the study did not lament the inaccessibility of the remaining studios. As noted in the sections below, these hip-hop collegians rely on their audio-engineering ingenuity – yet another act of creative resistance (Garcia, 2017) – to transform pre-existing campus spaces (e.g., closets in residence halls and fraternity houses) for the purposes of creating hip-hop. In addition, to the vibrant music scene within campus life, DSU itself also flanked by dozens of bars and concert halls that feature an array of local, regional, and national acts. It is not uncommon to stroll along the perimeter of campus and happen onto a live band or open mic. Student performers are often called upon as opening acts for more touring or more established

artists. Opportunities for student bands and individual acts are limitless, as performers of various genres and musical influences are welcomed with open arms.

These co-curricular experiences are foregrounded by a host of curricular offerings as well. At DSU, there are nine courses offered across multiple departments (including but not limited to Anthropology, History, and Music), that explore the musical, cultural, and social implications of hip-hop culture, poetics, and lyricism. In addition to the hip-hop courses, DSU offers enrolled students' access to an 11-week summer institute – funded by the Department of Music – providing students with a comprehensive investigation of music production, dance, and the writing and performing of rap. Since the mid-2010s in conjunction with the U.S. Department of State, two DSU faculty wrote and received a grant which allowed them to implement a series of international workshops using hip-hop – beat-making, dance, graffitiing, and emceeing – to foster meaningful cross-cultural exchange in diverse communities around the globe. This program exists at the nexus of artist-leadership, performance, and cultural (re)production. Although students must audition for this immersive experience abroad, it is the type of rigorous scholarship that hip-hop educators (Söderman & Sernhede, 2016) believe legitimizes hip-hop within the academy. Perhaps what is even more important than the course offerings are who, in fact, is instructing the courses. Love (2016) contends that critical hip-hop pedagogy – and thus, any hip-hop happening in educational contexts – in some way, must be facilitated by knowledge producers within hip-hop culture. Such a conceptualization unsettles the notion that the construction of knowledge on college campuses is limited to PhD candidates and tenured faculty. Instead, inviting community

members, local artists, and activists to share in the instructional responsibility disrupts histories of power and privilege, while simultaneously seeking wisdom from the communities in which the institution is situated. This vision of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) regards communities of color – and in this case, rappers – as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 106).

### **Interviews, Focus Group, and Tracing The Sky**

The interviews were conducted over the course of three weeks following fall break. Each participant scheduled an interview for a date, time, and location that was convenient for them. I found myself tucked away in silent corners of the student union, residence hall study lounges, neighboring coffeehouses, and flexible workspaces throughout campus and the surrounding community. Meeting the participants on their own turf and terms, was an attempt to empower them to participate freely, and comfortably in a space that felt familiar. Wilson (2014) notes that, “the general goal of the semi-structured interview is to gather systematic information about a set of central topics, while also allowing some exploration when new topics emerge” (p. 24). The interview questions were loosely based within three primary categories: (a) Origin stories; (b) Hip-hop and higher education; and (c) Hip-hop creative processes, performance, and presentation. Within each category, I paid close attention to the ways in which lyricism – style, content, and delivery – helped the participants make sense of their campus experiences, identities, relationships, and evolving worldview. After each interview, I transcribed the conversations through an online transcription service. Although the transcription service was convenient, it was not completely devoid of

errors. Therefore, I reviewed each transcript for accuracy, playing back the audio, listening for new insights and revelations. Ironically, even though the conversations were one-on-one exchanges, it still felt as though the participants were speaking to one another, across space and time.

The focus group, conducted one week prior to the final exam period, was held at student-operated collaborative workspace downtown adjacent to DSU. We gathered in an upstairs conference room overlooking the town's bustling main street. There was a basketball game that evening, and we – the participants and I – seemed to be the only one people in town whose attention was elsewhere. The enthusiasm of our coalescence, nonetheless, was infectious. Perhaps this was thanks in part to the participants having known one another, given their participation in student-led hip-hop organizations on campus. Isaac even noted that he'd collaborated on a song with every participant in the study, at some point in his college experience. That energy characterized the conversation and the fluidity of the discussion. Before diving into the focus group questions (see Appendix A), I took 15 minutes to share initial analysis, documented in a community codebook, of the individual interviews with the participants. This was an attempt to clarify any misinterpretations and validate the emergent themes thus far. The codebook itself was a Microsoft Excel sheet featuring participants' names, comments, and notes, with tabs organized thematically by major themes and subcategories. I connected my screen to the monitor in the conference room and openly discussed my transcription process, color coding schemes, and intersections across their comments. The participants were especially curious about which themes their comments reflected and how they



connected to original research question. Some of them asked to see *how many* comments they had and jokingly apologized for talking so much. However, I assured them, that the work, albeit substantial, was an act of joy; and they too, would embark on a similar process during the coding cypher. Although there were no objections to my initial interpretations, I did encourage the participants at the onset of the focus group to be unafraid to challenge, push back, or outright disagree with my interpretations of our initial conversation. Soon thereafter it became clear, that opening the focus group in this way, empowered the participants to fully-engage in this process. There was a moment toward the end of the focus group, where it seemed as though the conversation would go on, well into the night. It was, in many ways, a welcomed reprieve from the calamity of a culminating semester in the lives of college students. Together we arrived at new conclusions, affirmed previous assumptions, and welcomed each other's vulnerabilities. Although I drafted a core set of questions to guide the interviews and focus group, I revisited the list and made modifications based on the evolution of my research question, initial findings, and my interactions with the participants. As I entered each conversation with a template for the discussion, the original set of questions became less of a script and more of a constellation; an opportunity to *connect the dots*, highlighting the unique, artistic brilliance of each participant, and how they use hip-hop to trace their college experience.

### **Abide by the Code**

Coding as Glesne (2016) states, is an iterative process, one that relies on reflection and reflexivity. Like Love (2012), my method of open coding was particularly

useful for making sense of the participants' responses. Upon identifying four groups of codes – vivo, topical, descriptive, and analytic – I sorted them into a matrix, which was then then split into five supporting themes that were salient across the interviews and focus group. The first iteration of coding consisted of a close reading of each transcript, color coding participant responses, and recognizing patterns across their conversations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I assigned colors to those emergent topics in the transcripts, and uploaded the codes, quotes, and field notes to the matrix. Next, I analyzed the topics, adding descriptive terms, made connections to various theories regarding hip-hop, hip-hop education, and student development theories in higher education. In so doing, I emphasized certain quotes that were introspective, poignant, and summative – tethering topics from each participant across the semi-structured interviews and focus group. This was reflective of the ways in which Petchauer (2012) used Kearney's (1984) worldview framework was used as a lens for understanding how hip-hop collegians negotiate their identities, culture, and interpersonal relationships on college campuses. In the final stages of coding I reevaluated my initial findings, identified subthemes within each topic, and ultimately reconfigured the matrix based on these reflections and evolving analytical frames.

To invite the participants into this analytical process, I shared my findings with them at the beginning of our focus group. I demonstrated which topics were salient, and how their comments fit in relation to one another. I welcomed any questions, comments, and reconsiderations. For the most part, the participants were interested in how often they spoke on certain topics and what the interviews revealed about themselves, their artistry,

and how they navigate the sociopolitical elements of their college experience. There was a consensus that participating in this project, until this point, had been transformative. In a follow-up conversation after his interview, Michael mentioned that he, along with the other participants, did not know so much of who they've become in their time at DSU, revolved around their identities as emcees. As the researcher in this dynamic, analytical transparency was essential to the development of trust, openness, and accountability. For a project grounded in hip-hop, such a level of transparency seemed only fitting, prior to transitioning into the more arts-based phases of the study. Figure 4.1 illustrates the findings from the interviews and focus group.

Figure 4.1 Findings (Interviews & Focus Group)



Tracks V, VI, and VII feature a detailed analysis of the interviews and focus group. Each Track makes explicit connections across conversations with the participants, group observations, and field notes. Together, these data created a thematic collage, reflecting the five concepts listed above.

## CHAPTER V

### TRACK V: WITH THAT WHAT? (KNOWLEDGE OF SELF) DETERMINATION: SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNITY BUILDING AS CORE CONSTRUCTS OF HIP-HOP AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Yes yes come on, yes yes  
Knowledge of self is like (life after death)  
With that you never worry about your last breath  
Death comes, that's how I'm livin', it's the next days  
The flesh goes underground, the book of life, flip the page  
Yo they askin' me how old, we (livin' the same age)  
I feel the rage of a million niggas (locked inside a cage)  
At exactly which point do you start to realize  
That (life without knowledge is death in disguise?)  
That's why, knowledge of self is like life after death  
Apply it, to your life, let destiny manifest  
Different day, same confusion, (we're gonna take this  
Hip-hop shit and keep it movin'), shed a little light  
Now y'all bloomin' like a flower with the power of the evident  
Voices and drums original instruments  
In the flesh presently presentin' my representation  
With that what? (Knowledge of self) Determination.  
(Talib Kweli & Mos Def, K.O.S. (Determination), 1998)

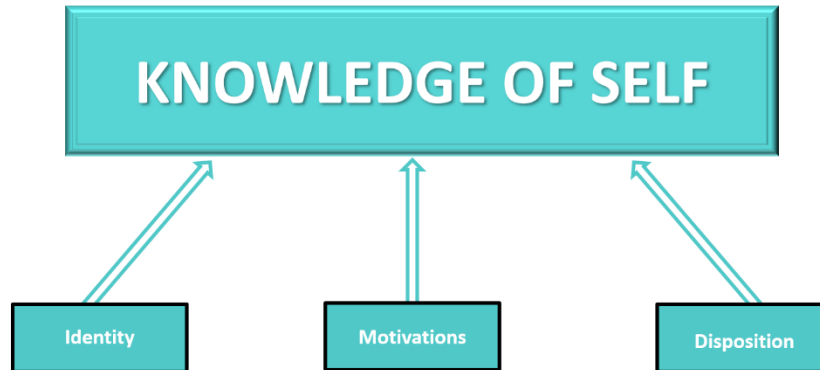
#### **“This is Me”: Knowledge of Self**

Knowledge of self, often touted as the fifth and most transcendent element of hip-hop culture, emerged as central theme within the interviews and focus group. This self-knowledge, or self-awareness, is, as most hip-hop scholars contend, a prominent and integral facet of the culture (Travis & Maston, 2014). Love (2012) defines knowledge of self as “the study of hip-hop culture, music, and elements, alongside an examination of

issues within one's surroundings to create positive change in one's community" (p. 8).

The epigraph is an excerpt from a song on Talib Kweli and Mos Def's (1998) critically acclaimed album, *Mos Def & Talib Kweli are Blackstar*. In this verse, Talib Kweli (1998) implores the audience to bear witness to the transcendence of knowledge, and self-awareness more broadly. Likening a life without self-knowledge to a metaphorical death is a powerful reminder that hip-hop provides a space for people to reconcile their identities, beliefs, habits, and dispositions in such a way that's restorative and everlasting. "Knowledge of self is like life after death," posits that self-knowledge is a conduit to eternity. In other words, to know oneself is to rationalize what it means to exist both within and beyond the material world. And yet, is not enough that one knows themselves. Talib Kweli's (1998) verse concludes with a timely call-and-response: "With that what?" It is an invitation for the audience to not only reply, "knowledge of self!" but it also symbolizes the ways in which self is shaped by community. Hip-hop and Black oral traditions, in this way, are essential to the co-construction of self-knowledge, and one's commitment to something greater than themselves. Figure 5.1 outlines the subcategories – identity, motivations, and disposition – that support self-knowledge as a core outcome of expressing oneself through hip-hop lyricism in college. Hip-hop, then, is a constant pursuit of expressive needs, a way for these artists to construct and maintain a social self and to pursue knowledge of self simultaneously (Kline, 2014).

Figure 5.1 Knowledge of Self



Essentially, the writing, expression, and performance of hip-hop in college has provided the participants in the study a space to understand their complex personhood (Love, 2016) – that is, their habits and dispositions – alongside their evolving identities, artistic motivations – both intrinsic and extrinsic.

### **Identity**

Participants espoused a deep, abiding appreciation for hip-hop culture, and their role in sustaining it. Although their identities at DSU, in many ways, are shaped by their active participation in *Rap Club* and *Circle Up*, Stephen acknowledges that “I’m a writer. Like naturally, even outside of rap. I like poetry. I like writing essays. I like writing and reading [music] reviews. Writing was always going to be my way out.” Similarly, Eric always considered himself both a lover and creator of music. Eric – a graduate of a prestigious boarding school – leaned heavily on his lyricism during his transition from middle to high school. Hundreds of miles away from his home state, Eric, who began to tinker with freestyling in eighth grade, saw his emerging musical identity as not just an outlet of self-expression, but an extension of his authentic self. Such authenticity is



expressed in the participants' naming conventions as well. Eric, Isaac, and Stephen each use elements of their birthnames within their hip-hop pseudonym; that is, an alias or stage name. For Stephen, he was inspired by artists like J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar, who also retained elements of their birthnames in the stage name – connoting what Michael believes to be, a heightened sense of authenticity within their music; an authenticity he aspires toward in his own work. Michael states:

If you listen to [J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar's] music and then look at their names, it's a sense of authenticity. It's like you know, I don't have to hide behind [a name]. It's straight up from the jump. Like *this is who I am*. This is *me*. I think it really embodies what I try to write about, what I try to rap about in my identity as a rapper and a person.

Authenticity, or “keeping it real,” like some hip-hop scholars stipulate (McLeod, 1999) is an essential component of what it means to emcee and to be true to oneself. “Truthfulness to self,” according to McLeod, “can inform the central image of the emcee, with its commitment, at least in theory to documenting real experiences, while being at odds with the image's prescriptions and dictates.” Understanding how Stephen arrived at his pseudonym compelled me to reflect on Low's (2011) typology of authenticity in hip-hop (see Track II). For Stephen, his alias seems to be most connected to his “blackness,” “the importance of representing the place and culture [he] is from,” and “the importance of being true to yourself” (Low, 2011, p. 31).

Michael and Nick on the other hand did not consider themselves musicians prior to their time at DSU. Michael states, “I did not take my rap identity seriously before coming to college.” Perhaps what's most interesting about Michael and Nick's take on

their artistic identities is that they are the only participants who also identify as emcees *and* producers. This is an important distinction because music production – and sound engineering more broadly – calls upon other epistemological approaches to creating hip-hop, that extend beyond the confines of lyricism. Epistemology, as Delgado Bernal (2002) suggests, is more than just a way of knowing; rather it is a system of knowing that is linked to the world. Because the epistemological implications and benefits of writing and producing rap music exist, as Ladson-Billings (2000) might say, “in contrast to the dominant Euro-American epistemology” (p. 258), it became important for me to further examine exactly how these systems of knowing were connected to the participants’ identities.

The similarities between Michael and Nick, however, did not end there. In addition to embracing the identity of “producer-rapper” or “rapper-producer,” Michael and Nick were the only participants whose hip-hop pseudonyms did not explicitly refer to their birthnames. While Michael’s initials are embedded in his pseudonym, his chosen alias is more so a metaphor for personal connection to music, sound, and the ways in which he sees his voice reflected within hip-hop culture. Perhaps there is a causality between naming conventions, writing rap, and understanding how these artists see themselves – and their emergent identities – as a part of a larger cadre of creatives at DSU, or within hip-hop culture altogether. Understanding how the participants construct their identities through hip-hop reflect a larger body of research on identity formation in higher education, namely beginning with developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1968), who was most fascinated by the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Contemporary psychological theorists like Holland and Lachicotte (2007) add that cultural and historical factors play a vital role in shaping identities as well. When examined closely, the aliases selected by the participants are not by happenstance. Rather, their choices are an extension of Erikson's (1968) understanding of identity formation, which "employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning" (p. 22). Hip-hop then becomes a space specifically curated for the participants to reflect, observe, and act upon their evolving identities within a new educational context, while remaining true to who they are as artists and individuals.

### **Motivations**

The participants' identities as rappers and producers is, in some part, informed by their artistic influences. Those influences for some, are familial. Stephen's love of hip-hop was inspired by an older cousin, Antonio (pseudonym), who spent many summers rapping over instrumentals on their grandmother's porch. In his interview, Stephen reflects on Antonio providing guidance on how to write your own rap:

Somehow [Antonio] got an instrumental version of The Game's song 'Old English' off of like *Limewire*, or something, and burned a CD. First, [Antonio] said we were going to learn all the lyrics to it. Then we had to write our own lyrics down in a notebook, then we had to rap over the instrumental.

Stephen however was not the only participant to be influenced by an older male relative. Both he and Eric were also drawn to hip-hop by their fathers who – to the chagrin of their mothers – did not find hip-hop to be suitable for their young sons. In their individual interviews, Stephen and Eric both reminisce on growing up, listening to hip-hop in the

car with their respective fathers, but only when their mothers were not around. Much of their mothers' collective disdain was not dissimilar to critiques of other hip-hop scholars, that acknowledge hip-hop's sexism and hypermasculinity (Rose, 2008). While their fathers (and other male figures) introduced Stephen and Eric to hip-hop, perhaps as a means of establishing deeper connections with their sons, it is worth noting that these unceremonious introductions were at the *behest* of the women in their lives. What implications then, did this have on Stephen and Eric and their perceptions of women and their contributions to hip-hop culture? When asked about their musical influences, male artists were overwhelmingly represented (e.g., Jay Z, J. Cole, Lil' Wayne). However, the lone female artists that were touted as creative influences in the one-on-one interviews were Rapsody (Stephen) and Young MA (Isaac). While each artist professed profound respect for the contributions of female lyricists, I wondered how the absence of feminine artistic influences was related to the ways in which Stephen and Eric were introduced to hip-hop culture? Were they somehow conditioned to believe that rap music was a space uniquely curated by and for Black men? Perhaps it was no coincidence that when asked about recruiting female artists for this project, we – myself and the participants – were at a loss (see Track IX).

Whatever the case may be, Stephen and Eric have made significant attempts in recent years to share their hip-hop selves with their mothers. Now, Stephen often shares hip-hop music that features R&B and soul samples with his mother. Given that R&B and soul music is her preferred genre, Stephen's mother in return, shares music from her generation with him. This mutual exchange resembles an intergenerational cypher,

reaching through time, building bridges across historically Black musical traditions. For Stephen, this exchange is something that “helps keep the relationship [between him and his mother] stable.” When his mother expressed her desire for him to pursue poetry instead of rap, Eric went to great lengths to demonstrate how rap music is, in his words, “poetry to a beat.” Since attending boarding school, Eric has made a point to invite his parents to talent shows, concerts, and campus showcases so that they may experience the joy that hip-hop has given him. Although their mothers have come to support their emergent hip-hop identities in recent years, Eric mentions that he is motivated to create music and perfect his craft because “I know what it's like to be disparaged or discouraged from pursuing what I believe to be my gift.”

Nick’s motivations toward hip-hop embody a more somber tone. His father passed away in 2001. Nick, in search of connection, turned to hip-hop to find healing and fill that void. Perhaps he, like Stephen and Eric, gravitated toward hip-hop culture – rap music in particular – *because of its ability to allow Black men to share stories*. It was in 2012, when Nick finally found the peace he so desperately sought. That peace came in the form of *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*, Kendrick Lamar’s critically acclaimed debut album. “Kendrick” according to Nick, “[was able to] put all of my experiences into music, experiences that [I thought] were only related to me, and the world around me. *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City* just resonated to a different degree.” Today, as an art history major, Nick attributes his motivation to make music to his appreciation for visual aesthetics (e.g., “pictures,” “paintings”) and the physical environment (e.g., “nature,” “trees”).

Similarly, Michael could attest to *hearing* music in his physical environment. In his interview, Michael talked about being motivated to produce a beat and write a song that sampled the automated voice at a busy campus crosswalk:

I sampled the crosswalk voice. You know when you hit the button [to cross the street], and it's like: 'WAIT...WAIT!?' [Patience] is basically the premise for that song. I just kinda crafted the song - entitled 'Wait' - around that.

Hip-hop culture, according to Forman (2002), compels artists to be aware of their immediate surroundings. For both Michael and Nick, with this perspective on art in the physical world, it is safe to say, that inspiration is always within arms' reach. These motivating factors are important testaments to how the participants see themselves as rappers, and active contributors to hip-hop culture. Reflecting on these motivations also revealed much about how the participants defined their characteristics, habits, and personalities in relation to others.

### **Disposition**

In addition to their conceptualization of their identities, the participants seem to be acutely aware of the nuances of their personalities as well. Although it was important to identify – and be perceived as – as a creator of hip-hop, it seemed just as important that they understand their inherent qualities, traits, and characteristics in relation to others. The participants demonstrated, what educational psychologists (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey 2008, 2016; Mayer & Salovey, 1993, 1997) would consider, *emotional intelligence*. Mayer and Salovey (1997) consider emotionally intelligent people to possess the ability to (a) perceive emotions in oneself and others accurately; (b) use

emotions to facilitate thinking; (c) understand emotions, emotional language, and the signals conveyed by emotions; (d) manage emotions so as to attain specific goals. At the very least, according to Eric, “Hip-hop has helped me know more about how I feel.”

With this theory of emotional intelligence in mind, I recognized connections between the writing and performance of hip-hop, and how the participants weathered the unpredictability of the college transition. More specifically, the participants each talked at length about how hip-hop has helped them making sense of their Blackness and masculinity at a large PWI like DSU. Eric and Stephen during the focus group, both expressed that hip-hop made them more aware of how they feel; which, as Stephen would add, “[was] especially important as Black men.” The participants universally agreed that writing and performing hip-hop at DSU, provided a space for them to express their vulnerability. Even in his darkest moments, Stephen said that writing hip-hop allows him to

kind of see a trend between your thoughts and how you're feeling [when] I get [lyrics] on paper. I didn't always understand what I was going through, but [when] you write it, you realize that's how you were feeling. So even though I'm still in *this* hole, I can start to understand why - how I got here, and how to get myself out.

To this end, in Nick’s interview, he spoke briefly about what it means to truly listen to and appreciate the meaning of artists’ words, stating, “to hear someone articulate their experience in words, opens up a new level of empathy for me.” This notion of empathy is an important, perhaps, undervalued byproduct of critically engaging with hip-hop lyrics on campus. This willingness to bear emotion, at least within the hip-hop community at

DSU, is met with an empathetic ear; creating a space for mutual support and emotional wellbeing.

Although it seems that the hip-hop community at the university is receptive to these lyrical displays of vulnerability and emotionality, Isaac on the other hand, compartmentalizes his emotions. Although this might be an indirect way of processing emotion, it is still a demonstration of emotional intelligence. While he says he “buries emotion so [he] can focus” on school-related tasks, Isaac notes that those suppressed emotions are released when he’s rapping:

I still don't remember those words [to some of my songs]. I don't even remember the stuff I rap [sometimes] bro. It's like, I rap it and my emotions are right there for the verse. And then once I'm done recording it's like shut back off, you know? ... Crazy how a verse can make you feel, bro! When I listen to a song again, I'm put right back in that spot when I wrote the verse like six months ago.

Isaac also claimed, “I create these different narratives of myself when I'm rapping cause I get into different moods. [Sometimes] I want to talk shit. Sometimes I want to be real. So, I feel like I'm a different person a lot of the time.” While it may seem that this sentiment complicates the concept of “keeping it real,” it can also be said that this compartmentalization of emotion is an act of self-preservation, challenging those who consume his music, to contend with the range of his emotions. Isaac admits that “if you only heard me rapping, you would probably think I was like arrogant...because all of my confidence comes out when I freestyle.” It is, as he refers to it, “a persona” – a state of being that harnesses the breadth and depth of his emotionality. Isaac’s own awareness of



his emotional compartmentalization is vital to understanding how the creation of hip-hop lyrics is both shield and sword; an instrument of safety and tool for liberation.

Similarly, Michael has historically referred to himself as “emotionally closed.” Since coming to DSU and joining *Rap Club* and *Circle Up*, he’s acknowledged that he’s more open to expressing himself – and processing those emotions in a public space. His new album, entitled *Stoic: A Journey*, is a paradoxical exploration of his own emotional development, and how his processing of these emotions informs his (in)ability to connect with others in a meaningful way. In many ways, it’s as if Isaac and Michael embody alter egos when they engage in hip-hop writing and performance. Michael admits that while his disposition is generally calm and laid back, that all changes when he’s on stage:

I mean, I - and other people - would say, I'm pretty chill, laid back, and calm. But I would say that goes up another level when I'm rapping. My personality becomes more dynamic. I'm a lot louder; I'm more aggressive, for sure... it's important to have different sides of your personality.

What happens then, when these alter egos are shared in a public space? If writing and performing hip-hop in college allow the participants the opportunity to be vulnerable and express a full range of emotions, what happens when the participants engage one another in song? Isaac and Eric in the focus group spend significant time discussing the ways in which writing and performing hip-hop accentuates their passion for competition. Isaac had a lot to say about his competitive side. For instance, in the focus group, Isaac asks, “How can I know I'm doing the best that I can... If there's no one to compete against, I wouldn't know if I was any good?” He goes on to make a useful analogy, harkening back to a comment he made in his interview, likening rap to a sport. Isaac essentially claims

that the participants – especially those in *Circle Up* - aspire to make each other better as a collective, but I still want to be regarded as the best. Similar to James Harden and Russell Westbrook – two perennial NBA all-stars, and starting guards for the Houston Rockets – "they're collaborating, but also at the same time, they know in their minds that this is a sport, and each is trying to be the best in the game." At this point, other participants in the study who are members of *Circle Up* nod in agreement; to which, Isaac replies, "that's why I talk junk! I feel like y'all are my equals. So, I gotta be competitive, and try to out-rap you!" Because much of the American education machine compels students toward a life of "rugged individualism" (Brazzi, Fiszbein, & Gebresilasse, 2017; Hoover, 1929), it is to no surprise that hip-hop, a notoriously competitive cultural phenomenon (Somers-Willett, 2009), would appeal to a rapper in college. It can be argued that their knack for competition is informed both by their love of hip-hop and their performance in school. Where hip-hop deviates from traditional forms of pedagogy and practice, is the notion that hip-hop, amid its competitive allure, still challenges artists to collaborate and build community with one another. This point about hip-hop dispositions within the context of higher education align with Giroux's (2005) conceptualization of critical pedagogy which confirms that "instead of stressing the individualistic and competitive approaches to learning, students are encouraged to work together on projects, both in terms of their production and evaluation" (p. 104).

From here, Eric elaborated on the significance of this iron-sharpens-iron mentality. Although he admittedly loves competition, there is an important distinction between being featured on a song with a peer and asking a peer to be featured on *your*

own song. After Isaac's rap-as-sport analogy, and timeless decree: "I'm trying to have the best verse on the song!" Eric replies,

Let's be clear: I never want to lose! But it's different when it's my own song versus me being featured on someone else's. [When I'm featured on a song] I just want my verse to be better (collective laughter). My mentality is what does the other artist want me to bring on this song that accentuates the theme? I'm analyzing what he and the other artists on the song are saying, like the words and the structure of their verses. For me, it's a matter of understanding how to have a verse that is different, and thus showing that it deserves to be here, yet adds a different dimension. When it's my song, I want you to be good, but it's more important that your verse fits [the theme].

The participants who were also members of *Circle Up* agreed that this level of interpersonal engagement through hip-hop has enhanced their confidence – an important intrapersonal byproduct of the college experience. Eric goes on to say that hip-hop ultimately shapes the way he interacts with others on campus. "Hip-hop," according to Eric,

Is a defining characteristic of a lot of relationships because a lot of my close friends also make music. That was kind of a shared bond we have. Making that project (an annual *Circle Up* mixtape), was affirming to all of us. We can do anything as long as we're dedicated to the process.

Although it appears that participating in *Circle Up* supports their self-proclaimed joy of competition, creating music as a member of a rap collective also informed their intrapersonal sense of confidence, desire for collaboration, community, and meaningful engagement with others. Much of what this study reveals about knowledge of self aligns student development research in higher education; especially as it relates to self-awareness. According to Travis and Maston (2014),

The core outcomes of the Seal et al. (2011) social emotional development model are self-awareness, consideration of others, connection to others, and ability to affect positive change. These desired outcomes align with current thought on the emergence of hip-hop pedagogical orientations: (a) commitment to self-awareness, (b) call to service, and (c) resistance to social injustice. (p. 6)

Taking these emerging habits and dispositions into account, Eric's reference to being dedicated to the process of creating and sustaining hip-hop culture on campus is twofold. To dedicate oneself to the process is a commitment to self – self-awareness, self-care, and self-actualization – and others – via collaboration, continuity, and building community in their new educational environment. To that end, Eric goes on to say,

For us, it's through the art and the medium of writing the raps, of making the beats, or listening to the beats, and pairing it with the things that you want to say. And I think through that we kind of find clarity of self or gain sort of a deeper understanding of who we are and then who we aspire to be moving forward as well.

This notion speaks back to the Talib Kweli. The participants' knowledge of self and determination to emcee, makes the process of transitioning, existing, and persisting possible for hip-hop collegians to navigate this uncharted academic terrain.

### **“The Most Important Thing”: Building Community**

Parker et al. (2006) determined that students encounter a variety of stressors when transitioning from high school to postsecondary education. The environment is often stressful; students must make new relationships, modify previous relationships with family and friends, learn study habits for a relatively new learning environment, and function independently as adults (p. 1330). For this reason, it is important that students in transition see elements of their identities reflected in campus life. To each participant, the

presence of a hip-hop community at DSU was a pleasant surprise. “Honestly,” Isaac notes, “I didn't know [this community was here]. I toured once, so I didn't know a ton about the school. I probably would have freestyled regardless of what college I chose. I probably wouldn't have gotten into making music as much though.” While each participant acknowledged that they were unaware of the vibrant hip-hop community at DSU, their enthusiastic engagement in the hip-hop scene upon their arrival, marked a critical moment in their college transition. Their active participation in student-led hip-hop organizations, enrollment in hip-hop courses, and their willingness to share their hip-hop identities in public have all played a significant role in building a network of support; a community grounded in hip-hop culture. Because of the sustained artist-leadership from DSU faculty and the attention, space, and time devoted to hip-hop culture, the university, in comparison to its peer institutions, appears both culturally competent and progressive; especially to those students who express themselves and interpret the world through hip-hop. Learning through hip-hop is indeed, as Love (2015) would say, is a community of practice; that is, knowledge-based social structures composed of individuals with a shared interest, concern, or passion for a topic. Love (2015) relies on Wegner’s (1998) framework of community of practice, to justify the use of hip-hop based education in pre-service teacher programs. According to Wegner (1998) communities of practice are comprised of three characteristics:

1. Domain is the identity of the group, the collective expertise that separates members from non-members. A well-defined domain sets the learning outcomes for the group.

2. Community refers to individuals who engage in communal activities, discussions, and sharing of knowledge for the betterment of all members. These communal learning experiences foster a sense of belonging and commitment to the group.
3. Practice has everything to do with the act of “doing.” Creating a community of practitioners who participate in routines, gestures, norms, ways of performing, and actions of the established community.

Figure 5.2 explores the ways in hip-hop culture at DSU exists as a community of practice. The theme of building community is supported by the following subcategories: campus culture, collaboration, deliberative dialogue, and relationships. Each of which plays a significant role in how hip-hop lyricism is leveraged within the participants’ sense of community and belonging at DSU.

Figure 5.2 Building Community



Rather than summarizing the framework above, I'll look to Michael who perhaps said it best:

It's weird thinking how it first started and now like, hip-hop is a part of pop culture ...it's spreading and it's in different countries too, like all around the world, people are rapping. I think that's a great thing. It's a great way to bring people together. That's probably the most important thing.

Hip-hop culture, like most musical traditions, is a great way of bringing people together across difference. Hip-hop within the college, however, is uniquely positioned as a means for not only bringing people together but reminding students – especially those whose funds of knowledge are not valued within Western educational contexts – that their capital, perspectives, and forms of expression matter.

### **Campus Culture**

As stated previously in this Track, DSU has a vibrant hip-hop community. For the participants, though it seems that many of their interpersonal relationships in college are, in some way, connected to the writing and performing of hip-hop (see *Relationships*), I was able to understand more fully, the value of sustaining a campus culture that supports hip-hop artists and the nurturing of their craft. During the one-on-one interviews I challenged each participant to complete this sentence: *Without hip-hop, college would be...*

Isaac: *boring*. I feel like I would've had a lot fewer fun experiences if I wasn't rapping in college. I didn't really notice that until you pointed it out.

Stephen: *methodical, boring, and bland*. Because there is not a day or even an hour that goes by where hip-hop is not inserted into my life - walking to class, in the library, off-campus. I don't know how I would fill my time. I would be filling

a hole, like, if this [hip-hop] culture wasn't welcome here. This is *my* culture. I'd have to ask myself, am I not welcome here either?

Michael: *lonely*. I wouldn't have the friends I have now, I wouldn't be doing this interview. I would have fewer hobbies. I would be, I would be different. Because people know me as someone who makes music. Like, when I'm at my job, the RA is like, 'Oh, he makes music!' Without hip-hop [here], I wouldn't be that. I'd be (pauses) I don't know what I'd be. I'd be somebody else. It's just an important aspect of who I am. It's kind of a scary thing, saying it out loud.

Eric: *dull*. I mean I have some other interests, but I couldn't really imagine this space without hip-hop. It's the foundational, primary piece of my life here at the university. So, I couldn't imagine being here and not making music or taking hip-hop classes.

Nick: *boring*. Like I wouldn't want to be here. I would literally study all day. My leisure activities would be centered around studying.

Much of the participants' socialization in college, therefore, centers hip-hop as of establishing both a sense of self, orienting oneself to campus life, and building meaningful relationships rooted in cultural expression. "I feel like at a PWI," Nick adds, "We have a concentrated black population that's really tight knit. So, there's obviously a community here that can support you musically." The presence of such a supportive community has artistic, academic, and social implications for the participants. Nick's assertion is consistent with Solórzano (1998) research, which regards a sense of belonging as a mitigating factor in postsecondary educational experiences for students of color. Aside from the student organizations, campus performances, and course offerings (see Track VI), a hip-hop friendly campus culture is one that normalizes hip-hop in public spaces. To this point, Stephen reflects on a moment during his first year, when the school newspaper and the DSU website both wrote feature pieces about *Rap Club*:



The school newspaper hasn't been afraid to showcase and support student [hip-hop] artists. *Rap Club* was on the front page, uh, the homepage of the university website. So, it's like, this PWI is willing to embrace hip-hop culture, so much so, that we were featured on their homepage!

When the institution is vocal about its hip-hop representation and creativity, students who express themselves through hip-hop may begin to feel a sense of belonging, much like the participants in the study. Although *belonging* for every student looks different, it is that very reason, why exploring the needs of a niche community – like rappers in college – is so important for the academy. Given that the participants in this study all identify as Black men, I liken these findings to those in O'Shea-Poon's (2016) study of the ethnicity gaps in college degree attainment in the UK. In it, O'Shea-Poon stipulates that nurturing a culture of belonging is key to retention and success, made possible through peer-mentoring. Although the mentoring interventions O'Shea-Poon envisions are aimed at assimilating historically underrepresented students within the university, our project reimagines peer-mentoring in such way, that is student-led and culture-centered, allowing students to retain their funds of knowledge (e.g., hip-hop lyricism), as a means nurturing a culture of belonging. Though they may not necessarily see themselves as mentors, members of *Rap Club* and *Circle Up* set high expectations to produce sustain hip-hop culture on campus. Although Nick mentioned in his interview that there “a lot of hip-hop artists that make and release music are not a part of [*Rap Club*],” Eric says he “take(s) pride in having people realize that it's more than just one or two people who rap [at DSU].” All participants agree with Eric, who says, “We have a lot of really dope music makers on our campus.” Eric and Nick, both active participants in these student-led

organizations grateful for the hip-hop ecosystem at the university. It is that very culture of community-based, peer-informed support of hip-hop artistry that has profound implications from the page, to the stage, the classroom, and surrounding community.

It is necessary then, to acknowledge the ways in which the surrounding community impacts campus culture as well. While much of this concept will be explored in Track VI, it is important to make sense of how the participants use hip-hop to engage with the world around them. In his interview, Nick shared that community service and outreach serves a significant purpose in the mission of *Rap Club*. Throughout the year, the organization hosts several volunteer activities, including adopt-a-highway and football stadium clean-ups following home games. While this sort of volunteerism may not necessarily critically analyze, critique, or disrupt systems of power and privilege, much of their hip-hop-related service initiatives are intended to engage youth. In addition to serving patients in the nearby children's hospital, members of *Rap Club* also host a series of workshops at local elementary schools, introducing youth to hip-hop culture, it's history, and the how to write rap music. When asked, "What's *hip-hop* about volunteering," Nick simply replied, "Community, man. Hip-hop *is* about community, for sure!" For Michael, this is true as well. As a service-learning scholar at DSU, programming for Michael's cohort is comprised of reflective exercises, that challenge him to think about what it means to be critically engaged in community. Michael states that "a lot of what we do is based on reflection...just drawing connections and seeing what things have happened in the community, and how we as scholars, can affect the

future and the present.” For both Michael and Nick, hip-hop provides as a space to contemplate their role, presence, and impact in the campus community and beyond.

### **Collaboration**

After a few minutes of surveying the room, Isaac, half-squinting whilst stroking his chin says, “I think I have a song in the works with everyone in this room!” All of us looked around, made eye-contact, nodded, leaned back in our seats, and shared a collective, “YO!” The subtext here was a genuine astonishment that so much creative energy had been shared among them. “When you step in the studio with somebody,” Nick replies, “you’re essentially playing with energies... this piece of art is coming from you. So, now you have to practice being vulnerable in front of people.” To which, Isaac agreed. He continued recounting his experience collaborating with Nick, lauding Nick’s creative process, and what it was like writing and recording in Nick’s in-home studio, tucked away in a drafty attic of his off-campus townhome. Isaac as you may recall, compartmentalizes emotion such a way that, bears it all in song only to push it all away when the verse is done. Although this cognitive dismissal of emotion is inconsistent with research heralding reflection as a core component of critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Coulter & Jimenez-Silva, 2017), Isaac does find value in collaborating with others when creating music:

What's crazy is, I don't remember what I was talking about in that verse. What I do remember, is what [Nick] was talking about on the song. I have no idea what my verse was like in that song. I don't know what the verse is about, or like what we recorded, but I remember his hook from the song, hearing it that one time, and thinking it was dope....So, I guess like whenever you like make [a song], it's like a part of you is in the work. Like me and Nick made this song, and we ‘aint got it back yet from the engineer. And I feel like a part of *me* is missing.

Because Isaac in his interview acknowledged that he was not encouraged to write music until he joined *Circle Up*, it is no coincidence that he would share these words of affirmation with Nick, in such a public space. The power of collaboration and affirmation from one's peers has a tremendous impact on one's sense of belonging on campus. Moreover, because so much of Isaac's emotional processing is embedded within his lyricism and performance, it makes sense why he was able to publicly express his admiration for Nick in the focus group. Although he chooses not to explore the ways in which his emotions are regulated outside of hip-hop spaces, these comments demonstrate just how necessary it is that students – which in this case, happen to be Black men and a PWI – have spaces to critically reflect on their feelings as a means of pursuing holistic wellness and self-care.

In addition to the socioemotional implications of hip-hop collaborations, Stephen recognizes that “[Hip-hop courses] create a great space to collab and network. There are people at varying stages [of development]. Some people just appreciate rap culture.” Eric agrees, “there's nothing like good collaborators,” further demonstrating the communal nature of hip-hop culture. This revelation is important for those who consider themselves to be rappers, poets, emcees/ lyricists, and producers. Such a network welcomes the opportunity for feedback loops that inspire artistic growth. Both Nick and Isaac spoke about how being introduced to new producers on campus was critical for fostering new ideas, flows (or lyrical delivery), and song concepts. Isaac would even refer to one producer – a first year student, and new member of Circle Up – as his “saving grace.” His beats challenge Isaac to be more creative and engaging with his cadences.

Stephen, who acknowledges that he's "very, very verbose," talks about a moment he collaborated with another artist at DSU that took the time to workshop their verses together. In that conversation, Stephen mentioned that the collaborator said, "I get what you're trying to do, but let's cut *these* words." His self-awareness shined through, as Stephen recounted writing sessions when he'd write too many bars – or lines of a rap. For reference, 16 bars, usually constitutes one complete verse. Stephen ultimately expressed profound appreciation for participating in *Rap Club* and *Circle Up*, as they've been safe spaces for him to be able to share his music and simply ask, "How does this sound?" Nick, currently serving as Vice President of *Rap Club*, is grateful for that space as well. "The last thing we did [last semester]," Nick said, "was allow people to play their music. It was just people showing their music and getting feedback; including me." Stephen and Nick's comments hint at something deeper regarding politics of collaboration. Thus, Stephen's comments bear the question: Is there a difference between giving and receiving feedback? Eric admits that he appreciates all feedback, "whether positive or negative." However, Eric adds:

I had to have a series of tough talks with close friends - I get that every word matters but some of these can go... like what word could you get away with not saying without sacrificing the meaning? At the time it hurt, because it feels personal. It's hard telling somebody 'that verse won't it'.... But you have to learn to separate it.

The ability to receive constructive feedback – without taking it personally – reflects the trust each member of the community has in one another. Moreover, the exchange of constructive feedback is instrumental in sustaining a culture of excellence among the

community as well. When the participants set out to collaborate on a song, communicating feedback with honesty and receiving it with humility, plays a major role in what creating, what they consider to be, good music. Eric states,

Regardless of the quality of the other person's verse, it's also my responsibility not to make you look like a fool. So, if it's not good, on one hand it's like, I don't want to disrespect the place you were in when you wrote it, and the place you're in now for sharing it. But at the same time, I want to put you in the best place to succeed. Not just because of me, but because we're working on it as a collective unit.

The spirit of collectivism is an undervalued byproduct of democratic education. Interestingly, in Tibbitts (1997) exploration of educational systems in post-totalitarian Europe, she depicts a society “struggling to grasp the notion of individualism the rejects collectivism but embraces living in community and tolerance” (p. 48). This depiction is not dissimilar from McLaren (1986) and Giroux’s (2011) work, condemning schooling practices that reward rugged individualism over culturally responsive teaching and learning that center collectivism and acts of solidarity. The participants in this study seemed committed to personal and communal excellence in such a way that also fostered collective accountability. In Isaac’s interview, he exclaimed,

We freestyle every week [in *Circle Up*]. Sometimes I really don't want to go, but I still go anyway. Normally, when I have a lot to do, I don't want to go. The leader of the group is pushy. He'll call you; he'll come pick you up! I do appreciate it! We're on a good level. If I'm saying *no*, he's gonna push [me to rap].

This sort of accountability is an essential precursor to effectively living in community and working toward a collective goal. In a sense, understanding how hip-hop artists collaborate in college through the giving and receiving of feedback, holding one another

accountable for their actions, and living in community may reveal new pedagogical possibilities for faculty and students, reconceptualizing approaches to group work. Whatever the case may be, this intergroup reliance on feedback creates a network of accountability; an accountability for artistic excellence, that certainly has ramifications beyond the hip-hop community on campus.

### **Deliberative Dialogue**

In the landscape of high-impact practices in higher education, deliberative dialogue in recent years has received considerable attention from scholars in the field (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Eager to build on the work of Dewey (1916), scholars like Harriger (2014) and Buchanan (2017) have used deliberative dialogue to explore the intersections of democracy and education. “Deliberative dialogue,” according to Harriger (2014), “encourages participants to listen and try to understand the perspectives of people with whom they disagree and focuses on trying to find common ground for action” (p. 56). In reviewing the comments from his interview, Michael would agree that “finding commonality between people is definitely an important thing when [it comes to] making new friends.” For him and the other participants, the hip-hop community at DSU have given him a chance to meaningfully engage with others on campus. Although deliberative dialogue is typically aimed at resolving campus issues (Buchanan, 2017), I argue that a public cypher on campus, is a culturally centered form of deliberation; one that artistically promotes the habits of democratic citizenship. “When we situate hip-hop as a democratic practice,” Prier (2012) writes, “it is not limited to voting and electoral politics. Urban youth are attempting to

find their voice and freedom of expression and individuality in a multitude of ways that reflect the contradictions and possibilities” (p. 3).

The focus group provided a great space to see these democratic habits in action. Nick acknowledged that “we all come from different places and have diverse opinions.” To which Eric agreed that “sometimes you have to work with people [in college] that you don’t know that well or like, you’re working with people who don’t have the same opinions as you, or the same ideas as you.” Essentially, Nick and Eric were laying the foundation for explaining how the act of creating hip-hop in college, informed the ways in which they interact with, relate to, and build community with others. These comments harkened back to a statement Isaac made in his interview:

Thinking about it now, people in *Circle Up* are nothing alike; like honestly, in general, the people who are in it, are all very different. I think [that’s important] because it doesn’t matter who you are or what kind of person you are. If you like rapping, your personality just morphs into how you rap. And I feel like you can understand people a lot through the way they rap.

Isaac went on to make brilliant analogy likening freestyling to dueling anime characters: “It’s like when you fight with someone [in the anime universe] you can *truly* understand what’s in their heart. The same is true for rapping or freestyling. You can understand more about the person when your engaged in a cypher or rap battle.” Although Isaac did not share this analogy during the focus group, Stephen made a tacit connection to Isaac’s sentiments when he exclaimed, “But when I listen [to someone’s song], I learn some things, and it is as if I had a conversation with them.” It is this conversation – this deliberative dialogue through hip-hop – that welcomes and challenges different



perspectives, in radically (and rhythmically) reimagining the community in which they live. Having attended boarding school from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Eric expressed gratitude for being able to:

Meet a lot of different people from a lot of different backgrounds and cultures, which was really eye opening. Living with different people with different belief systems and different ways of thinking really helped me in terms of figuring out who I was, and determining the things I liked, didn't like, and how to navigate between the two.

Because high school was a coming of age moment for Eric, his artistry, and his identity as a rapper more broadly, it would seem – at least for him – that hip-hop was a critical means for navigating academic boundary crossings (Anzaldúa, 1987) and establishing relationships across difference. Hip-hop in this way becomes a democratic practice that, according to Prier (2012),

Signifies how urban working-class communities attempt to mobilize the cultural and symbolic resources to make places and spaces for themselves in a society that has rejected and pushed them to the margins. That such powerful poetry and insightful social critiques. (p. 4)

To this point, “democracy,” as West (2004) reminds us, “is not just a system of governance, as we tend to think of it, but a cultural way of being. This is where the voices of our great democratic truth tellers come in” (p. 68). Hip-hop therefore, creates a space for truth telling and deliberation. Consequently, the college environment is ripe for further exploration of hip-hop, and its capacity for educating a community of thoughtful, critically engaged participants within a democratic society.

## **Relationships**

The literature exploring the impact of establishing meaningful relationships in college runs deep. This was evident in Michael's interview when he proclaimed that embracing his hip-hop identity allowed him to "make friends, which has helped me transition [to DSU]. Joining these clubs have helped me meet people; because at first, I didn't really know anybody." Within this peer group of hip-hop writers, producers, and performers exists an abiding culture of affirmation. This sentiment was palpable across the interviews and the focus group. In Isaac's interview, he mentioned that since deciding to create hip-hop in college, "I've made a lot of friends. My close group of guy friends, I met them all freestyling [on campus] the first time, in like someone's room. And those are the people I live with right now." This scenario demonstrates the community-building power of hip-hop in colleges and universities. Because of his participation in and production of hip-hop culture on campus, Isaac was not only able to develop meaningful relationships, but also find a favorable living situation, which in turn has a significant impact on retention (Shook & Clay, 2012).

Similarly, Nick adds that participating in hip-hop in college has inspired "many creative bonds" that have sustained him and his developing artistic sensibilities. Perhaps what was most interesting to witness unfold within the focus group was the ways in which the participants expressed a profound appreciation for the work of their peers. These *props*, or words of affirmation, were hurled at a frenetic pace. Although Eric and Nick both mentioned that they were encouraged by peers to pursue music prior enrolling at DSU, Michael noted that it wasn't until he joined *Circle Up* and started freestyling

more and taking his lyricism seriously. “Once I got pretty good at it,” Michael said, “I just kept doing it and other people noticed and they were like, 'Oh, you're pretty good.'” To which Isaac reiterated, “Michael be spittin’, yo!” It was at this moment, the room erupted in adoration. “Just listening to some of the stuff that [Michael’s] played,” Stephen graciously admits, “— I've only heard some of the songs like once or twice and I still think about them... what you do is special, bro.”

It would seem then, that active participation in this hip-hop community aligns with self-affirmation theory which purports that when threatened, people can perform small but meaningful acts to reaffirm their sense of competency (Layous et al., 2017). Although self-affirmation is defined as the process by which individuals validate or affirm the positive aspects of their personality to create self-integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988), perhaps the participants’ sustained individual investments in the hip-hop community is itself, a form of self-affirmation. Seeking the affirmation and accountability within the DSU hip-hop community, is restorative for the participants. Layous et al. (2017) tested the protective effects of self-affirmation for students who have the subjective sense that they do not belong in college by using a lab-administered self-affirmation writing activity (p. 227). It was discovered that these writing exercises not only affirmed students with a low sense of belonging, this group also reported increased GPAs over the course of three semesters. Although tracking participant GPAs is beyond the scope of our study, the practice of writing and performing hip-hop in community, continues to affirm the participants’ presence at, and musical contributions to campus culture.

This apparent normalization of hip-hop at DSU, like other universities referenced in Track II, makes rap music more accessible, while allowing artists to explore the fullness of their identities, dispositions, and meaningful relationships. Eric goes on to say,

I think for me, somebody who is quieter and more on the introverted side, it definitely helped having people tell me it was ok to make music. I gained more confidence in reaching out to other people. It helps to jump into a community that already exists. That way, it is a lot easier to pay it forward because you have an appreciation for what other people did, looking out for you, and getting you incorporated in the community here. I always want to help whomever is invested in making hip-hop.

This willingness to (re)invest in the hip-hop community at DSU, is a part of what allows this legacy to extend across space and time. Nick agrees in saying that “I know I can be one of the people that helps others really do this music thing.” Eric was then reminded of the upperclassmen that made him aware of hip-hop resources, including the studio in the basement of the library. Eric says, “he introduced me to a lot of people that ended up being really close friends of mine... I had a lot of good mentors and friends who, once I got on campus, pointed me in the right direction.” Eric and Nick speak of their music with sense of responsibility. Eric proclaims that “if you're not paying it forward then you're letting the community around you suffer in some ways. I think it's important that you help people have access to having that same experience with the community you had and benefited from.” Such a stance ensures that the hip-hop community at DSU lives on, long after these artists have moved on from the institution. It is a reminder that these artists are a part of something much larger than themselves.

While there was much to say about the self-affirming nature of the inter-peer relationships within the hip-hop community, similar attention was given to the ways in which hip-hop facilitated meaningful connections to others outside of the community as well. In both of their individual interviews, Eric and Nick, spoke of having a responsibility to use their lyrics to “make people feel something.” In his interview, Michael confirms this in saying, “People listen to [artists] their impressed by. It means they kind of like, at least identify a little bit with you or what you're saying. So that's affirming to know that what you're saying has an impact on somebody.” When asked about whether it was important to impress his listeners, Michael replied,

It's important to be able to impress people or show people your talents. It helps them open up to you. Maybe that can spark a connection between people that wouldn't be there otherwise. Just them making that connection is something powerful, because it reaffirms why I'm doing this. I mean impressing people is not the sole purpose [for making music]. But if you have the power to effect or impact other people with your music, then I think that's really powerful.

These sentiments were corroborated in the focus group. Eric spoke about hosting a listening party for his EP, which was released in the previous academic year. Initially, he was astonished, and a bit disconcerted, at the hush that descended upon the crowd as he cycled through the tracks. Eventually, Eric realized that everyone was so quiet because “they were deeply engaged in the lyrics and the storytelling.” Stephen adds, “We get to gain fans and connections which is really dope. It makes me feel like my talents aren't going to waste in this notebook.” Stephen also expressed genuine surprise and gratitude when he shares his music and people, commonality in songs that are deeply personal and difficult to write. “I’m like, damn,” Stephen exclaimed, “I wrote this for me, and *you* got

more out of it than I did!” This sentiment was salient among all participants. From here, the participants began to reflect on their artistic apprehension with sharing older music of theirs with members outside of the hip-hop community. They discussed what happens when songs feel dated, or not representative of their current artistic direction. Nick then reminded the group that “when [we] release something, it can be discovered by somebody every day and it sounds new to each person. You know, I’ve got songs that I released a long time ago on SoundCloud but are just now getting ‘likes’ because it’s the first-time people heard it.” Noticing his co-participants agreed, Nick then asserted, “So these old songs, are always new.”

It is important then, to consider the implications of sharing one’s music. The participants – as well as other college musicians – make themselves susceptible to criticism and ridicule when they volunteer their creative voices in a public forum. Similarly, sharing music in this way is another affirmation-seeking practice; one that validates the artists’ voice, ideas, and evolving world perspectives. Posting songs on social media and/or streaming platforms like SoundCloud, extend artists’ relationships beyond the academy. This, however, may not necessarily be the case for every college emcee. Isaac, though boisterous and outgoing, talks about being nervous about sharing his music – or at the very least – being discovered. At several points in the interview and focus group, he discussed an incongruence with his hip-hop self and his professional aspirations. As a political science major and aspiring politician, Isaac was especially nervous when a student – whom he did not know – approached him on campus and shared that he filmed Isaac freestyling at a party. That student used the footage for a

course assignment. Although Isaac could not elaborate on the details of the assignment, the course, his relationship with that student, or how he felt about being filmed without his consent, he seemed to be less troubled with the abuse of his intellectual property, and more concerned about the footage being linked to him, and adversely impacting his employability. Although the participants are actively engaged in creating hip-hop, it does not mean that they have not internalized some of the negative messages and stereotypes associated with rap music and those who create it. While hip-hop and educational scholarship has often linked writing and performing rap to academic success, there are fewer studies that tether student's hip-hop sensibilities to career readiness. Moreover, Isaac's selectivity with whom he shares his hip-hop identity, warrants a deeper investigation into the politics of respectability in colleges and universities, and its potentially adverse effects on the cultural production of knowledge on campus. Either way, performing hip-hop at OSU, has provided the participants in this study, a space to meaningfully connect with others, and forge new relationships that have been – for the most part – vital to their successful transition to college. At minimum, building community through hip-hop, for Isaac, “gives me a lot of good memories to look back on.” Similarly, Eric adds that writing, recording, and performing on campus has been the source of “a lot of great memories there with my friends - making music in the moment, coming in [the studio] to record, and feeling really accomplished after spitting a really good verse, or having people come in to listen, and walk away feeling like this was really fun.” These memories, as Isaac claims, “balance out the late-night study sessions!”

ultimately, providing the participants with a sustained space for belonging, consistency, and community, more broadly.



## CHAPTER VI

### TRACK VI: THE (S)QUAD: SPACES AND PLACES WHERE HIP-HOP HAPPENS

It all started back in '99 when times was hard  
[University name redacted] but we called it the yard  
Cause niggas wasn't trying to study abroad  
They was tryna study a broad or two or three up in the dorms  
Met my nigga Chaundon then I started to ponder  
"Fuck this, I'ma quit the football team tomorrow"

....

Built my rep up, that's when Pooh and 9th stepped up  
9th was old school, Pooh was young and playing catch-up  
Cool, cause he could still rock an instrumental  
Our first joints, yeah they was wack  
But niggas could hear potential in 'em  
Honing our skills for survival, hustling  
Our flyers passed out like my momma at revival  
The real deal on how I repped my peeps  
You ain't goin' find this in no press release  
(Phonte Coleman of Little Brother, "The Becoming," 2005)

#### **“If You Come and Sit in the Cypher...”: Spaces and Places Where Hip-Hop Happens**

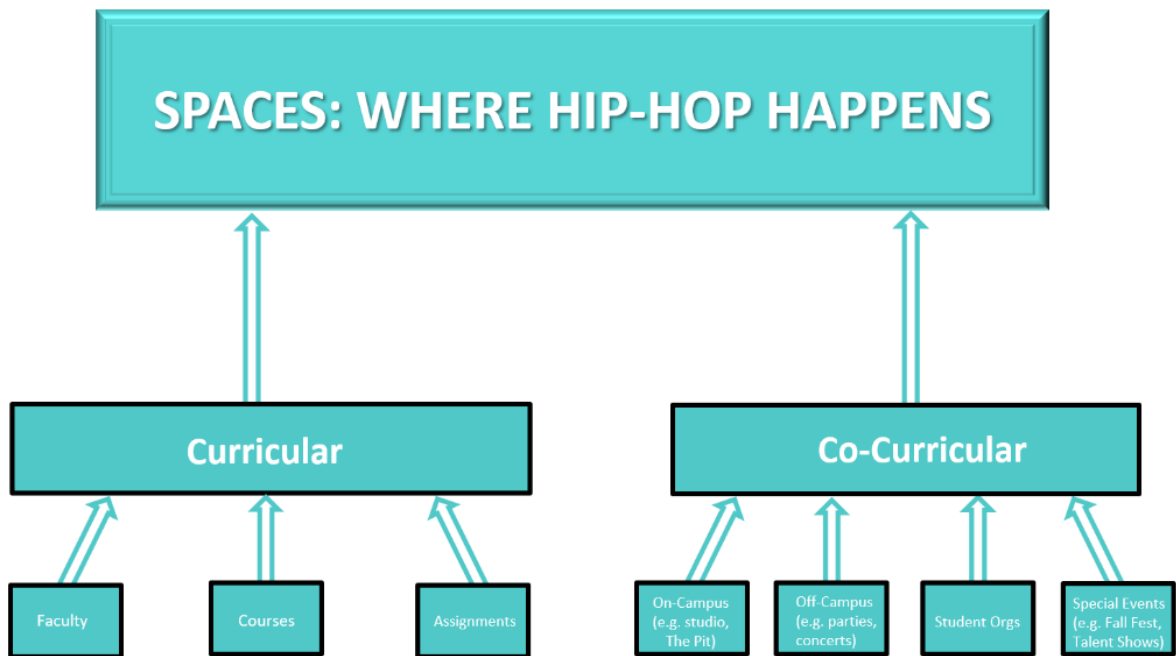
This verse, written and performed by Phonte Coleman of the rap group known as Little Brother (2005), recounts the formulation of his troupe during his time in college. An English major and football player, Phonte’s storytelling captures, in verse, the organic way in which he came to know himself and others who shared his passion and penchant for hip-hop. Colleges compel hip-hop artists, like Phonte, to not only live in community but forge lasting relationships rooted in cultural expression, collectivism, and creativity. As he reminisces on his experiences and the evolution of his perceived lyrical prowess,

Phonte seems remiss if he did not acknowledge the ways in which his college environment inspired him to see himself and his contributions the university through a new lens. From quitting the football team to dedicating himself to his craft, what role did his college environment play in validating his voice as an emcee? Track VI explores the ways in which college campuses are uniquely positioned to be fertile ground for fledgling emcees and the community – or *squad* – that supports them.

Both Peterson (2013) and Wilson (2013) offer pedagogical suggestions for hip-hop in the college classroom. Although they are focused primarily on the exploration of hip-hop culture in composition courses (Peterson, 2013) and leadership development initiatives (Wilson, 2013), these scholars confidently insist that hip-hop culture, in general, deserves a place on campus. Given that hip-hop is an established discourse at DSU, it is safe to say that the institution supports students' critical engagement with hip-hop culture. In that case, what are the necessary preconditions for the successful creation and sustainability of hip-hop community within an institution of higher education? In what ways do hip-hop artists at DSU exist both within and beyond the surveillance of the institution? After all, there is something inherently underground about hip-hop and the ways in which knowledge producers within hip-hop culture critique systems of power – like colleges and universities. While we know the concept of *the underground* to be a part of the lexicon within the hip-hop community, Jenkins et al. (2017) writes, “The underground is not just philosophical.” Morgan (2009) describes the underground as “a physical and expressive location where Black youths and progressive youths develop lyrical skills, identities, social relationships, and theories about society and culture” (p.

187). Part of the allure of hip-hop is its anti-authoritarian stance. Thus, if institutions like DSU continue normalizing hip-hop in academic spaces, does the movement then become compromised? I will explore these critical questions again in Track IX. However, these reflections on spaces for hip-hop on campus were the byproduct of meaningful conversations with the participants in this study. Figure 6.1 illustrates the allocation of space dedicated to hip-hop, both in and around DSU. Based on the participant interviews and focus group, the theme regarding space was best organized in two subcategories: curricular spaces and co-curricular co-curricular spaces. Within these subcategories, the participants discuss how they negotiate their hip-hop identities, lyricism, and culture both in and out of the classroom.

Figure 6.1 Spaces: Where Hip-hop Happens



## Curricular

“Humanizing pedagogy,” according to Bartolome (1994), “respects and uses the reality, history, and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice” (p. 173). Such a pedagogical stance is necessary when elevating hip-hop in the classroom. More importantly, as colleges and universities embrace hip-hop scholarship, it is important that faculty reflect the very culture they hope to teach. Eric, like many of the other participants, assured me that his hip-hop professors were indeed “knowledgeable about it and the history of the genre.” Isaac, previously enrolled in *Rap Lab*, expressed something similar in his interview, stating that “[The professor] is very knowledgeable. [They taught] all the different types of hip hop and the history of it. And then our assignments challenged us to rap based off the different styles he showed us from different eras in hip-hop.” Isaac explains some of the course requirements, which call for students to study different lyrical styles, flows, and cadences, as a means of understanding how rap music – and the writing of rap music – has evolved since its inception. Being conscious of different rhyme schemes, lyrical patterns, and counting bars are but a few of the learning outcomes for *Rap Lab*, a premier course offering in the Department of Music. Isaac goes on to say, “My *Rap Lab* professor has some good accolades. And I see him in other rap stuff too, at other colleges [in the area].” Because Isaac’s professor has such an established reputation, it not only legitimizes the professor, but also the rigorous exploration of hip-hop in a collegiate classroom. This is an important distinction, given Love’s (2016) decree that any hip-hop intervention or programming in a school setting, should be led by a prominent scholar or community

leader with a deep knowledge of hip-hop culture. DSU's consideration of hip-hop instructors then, is directly aligned with the research, insisting that institutions cede authority in these hip-hop spaces, to those who are regarded as producers of knowledge within the culture.

As mentioned previously in Track IV, there are a myriad of course offerings in hip-hop at DSU. Many of the participants have had an opportunity to enroll in most of the courses offered. From *Intro to Hip-hop* and *Hip-hop History*, to *Hip-hop Theatre* and *Beat Making Lab*, the participants in this study have taken advantage of the hip-hop oriented academic experiences at DSU. Isaac went on to mention that *Rap Lab* was "probably my favorite class I've taken!" In addition to their extra-curricular pursuits, having the opportunity to explore hip-hop in an academic setting has proven to be beneficial for the participants. As I'll explain in the following section lessons from their coursework and relationships with hip-hop faculty, have had a positive influence on their artistic development (see Track VII).

The participants also noted how accessible hip-hop faculty have been in their time at DSU. Although Michael hasn't taken the *Beat Making Lab*, expressed gratitude that "the professor has been available to speak with me about enrolling in the upcoming semester." With Michael being one of the two rapper-producers in this study, being able to enroll in this course matters deeply to him. Informal student-faculty interactions like these are positively correlated with student learning and development (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2006). Moreover, Himelhoch et al. (as cited in Kuh et al., 2006) confirm that faculty interaction outside of the classroom is also positively related to African American

student persistence at PWIs and HBCUs. For a student like Michael, who interprets the world through a hip-hop lens, having this type of positive interaction with a faculty member, through the prism of hip-hop no less, is another source of affirmation, an acknowledgement that his epistemologies matter to those in power.

Hip-hop acceptance in curricular spaces does extend beyond the Department of Music. Stephen mentioned that professors in humanities courses have praised him for making connections to themes in hip-hop music. Stephen said,

I can raise my hand in class and make this connection to a hip-hop artist. My professor might play like jazz or hip-hop at the beginning [of class] and use it as an introduction to the lesson; sometimes in the meat of the lecture, the professor brought hip-hop into the discussion - artists like Killer Mike and Public Enemy are at the center of discussion in some of my humanities classes.

These culturally relevant pedagogical practices are consistent with the work of Ladson-Billings (1995; 2014), in that, the professors who welcome hip-hop connections in their courses, honor the knowledge Stephen brings with him into the classroom. They assume, as Ladson-Billings (1995) puts it, students – like Stephen – come to school with important cultural, linguistic and community knowledge. Those epistemological foundations in this context, are regarded as assets, and thus, create a space for a culturally responsive dialogue. While these pedagogical practices may be seen as progressive, it is worth noting that artists like Killer Mike and Public Enemy are what many hip-hop fans would consider, socially conscious artists (Sisario, 2014) because their lyrics address a set of complex socioeconomic and political issues that preserve systems of inequity and oppression. This conceptualization of conscious artists creates a typology (Krimms, 2000;

Tan, 2009) that divides rap music into subgenres, based upon lyrical content and quality. Often, these subgenres create hierarchies in rap music; privileging some voices over others in an academic space. While hip hop's pedagogical influence is somewhat of a recent phenomenon, educators often acknowledge a certain type of rap – underground or socially conscious artists – as harboring messages deemed appropriate for the classroom. However, ignoring the didactic possibilities of a pedagogy rooted in an inclusive hip hop – that is, a hip hop that makes room for all voices, linguistic sensibilities, and thematic diversity – denies the possibility of culturally relevant and responsive teaching (Prier, 2012). As educators, we should not seek to demonize rap music based solely on mainstream representations of hip-hop music. “If we do,” Mooney (2016) states, “we are unintentionally enacting a form of symbolic violence on students who identify with hip-hop culture and consider it a part of who they are” (p. 13).

Though many of the sexist, violent, and hypermasculine messages found in popular rap songs run counter to the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, professors' willingness to deconstruct and problematize rap music – rather than romanticize it – allows students the opportunity to question the messages, meanings, and biases that historically preclude certain subgenres' relevancy in the classroom.

Using hip-hop as a pedagogical tool does not end with discussions, however. Participants have been encouraged to incorporate hip-hop in their assignments as well. For an English class, rather than writing an essay, Nick was able to write and record a song inspired by the book assigned by his professor. According to Nick, it was easier for him to “articulate what I understood about the book in [the form of] a song.” In his

statistics course, Michael was conducting “a comparative analysis of rap performances between established hip-hop artists and the rappers in *Circle Up*.” As for Eric, he was instructed by his professor in *Rap Lab*:

To make an EP or mixtape for our final class project. Afterward, we hosted a listening session for our class in the auditorium. That was a cool experience I didn't expect to have here at DSU. [This was] definitely was one of the highlights from my academic experience.

As knowledge producers and contributors to hip-hop culture, the participants have benefited from the experience of nurturing their craft in the classroom. Belongingness for college students, is intrinsically connected to what happens in the classroom. Because DSU centers hip-hop discourses across multiple disciplines, the classroom becomes another space for the participants to see themselves reflected within campus culture, and the dominant narrative of the institution.

### **Co-Curricular**

The curricular spaces dedicated to rap music and hip-hop culture at DSU exist, in part, because of the presence of a vibrant contingent of hip-hop collegians committed to promoting hip-hop beyond the classroom. As mentioned throughout Track 4, the participants in this study are members – and in some cases, leaders of – hip-hop organizations on campus. Between *Rap Club* and *Circle Up*, exists a growing contingent of DSU students, dedicated to the proliferation of hip-hop on campus. I was fortunate enough to witness this first-hand. Originally, I was scheduled to interview Michael immediately after my interview with Stephen. Due to a scheduling conflict with Michael however, I had some time to spare following my conversation with Stephen. When he



realized I'd be transcribing alone for next couple of hours, he asked, "Would you rather come to our meeting? The *Rap Club* meeting." My heart, in that moment, leapt from my chest and began breakdancing atop my keyboard. I replied as calm and collected as I could; but my exhilaration was not to be suppressed. "Of course!" I answered, with the enthusiasm of a poet at an open mic.

As excited as I was to enter their sacred space, I was nervous that my presence may influence the normal ebb and flow of *Rap Club*. Dressed in a polo shirt with my employer-institution's insignia, khakis, and hard-bottom dress shoes, I looked more like an Assistant Dean than fellow hip-hop head. Like ethnographers describing the experience of participant-observations (Glesne, 2016; Goodall, 2000), I was mindful of the ways in which my presence as a researcher and college administrator – from another institution no less – might disrupt the natural order of things, and obfuscate what Goodall (2000) refers to as "raw data." In the walk from our conference room to the *Rap Club* meeting space, Stephen expounded on some of his comments in the interview, expressing sincere gratitude for having ample opportunities to develop as an artist, and fully embrace his hip-hop identity since enrolling at DSU. Upon arriving at the meeting, Stephen introduced me and explained the goal of my dissertation project. Rather than elaborate on my dissertation, I thought it was important to legitimize myself as a participant in hip-hop culture, given my status as a cultural outsider (Low, 2011). In short, I reassured the group that much of who I am as an artist and educator is thanks, in part, to the community of hip-hop artists that supported me and the development of my artistic voice while in

college. I mentioned that I was still searching for participants in my study, but I was grateful to be welcomed into their space for the evening.

Ironically, had Stephen not invited me to the meeting, it is possible that I would've never met Nick, who was presiding over the meeting. There were 12 students (11 men, 1 woman) in attendance. With midterms on the horizon, attendance was down that week, according to Nick. *Rap Club*, which meets bimonthly (twice per month) – sometimes more frequently when compiling group members' songs for a mixtape. Nick assured us that the meeting would not be long, but thought it was important to have an opportunity to reconnect and recharge during this incredibly stressful juncture in the semester. Consequently, there was no formal agenda for the meeting. Nick invited group members to share some of the new hip-hop releases that pique their interest. For the next 15 minutes, we discussed the finer points and shortcomings of everything from PnB Rock, Smino, Noname, and Saba's new projects, to Kanye West's *Jesus King*, genre-blending, and the sonic direction of hip-hop's future. At some point, we digressed into a conversation about rapper nomenclature, pondering – perhaps for the first time – the consequences of so many popular mainstream rappers with aliases that include the word *Baby* (e.g., DaBaby, Lil Baby, Big Baby Gucci). Group members posed questions like: What implications does the name *Baby* have on audience's perceptions of Black masculinity? How do the names of these artists influence how young Black men see themselves (and others)? What does the music industry, pop culture, and/or mainstream America stand to gain from the presence of so many Black male artists referring to themselves as babies? For me, I was left thinking: How might these artists re-appropriate

and reclaim the term *Baby* in such a way that disrupts rather than reifies stereotypical depictions of young Black men? Members of *Rap Club* left the conversation with more questions than answers; but seemed to be grateful to explore such commentary among fellow fans of hip-hop.

Following the announcements and dialogue, the members of *Rap Club* transitioned to a trivia-like activity entitled *Aux Battle*. The group, including myself, was split into two teams. Nick and another member of the executive board served as moderators. The game *Aux Battle* is not too dissimilar from *Cards Against Humanity*. The objective is to pick a rap song in a given category that would most likely appeal to the moderator's musical tastes. Teams have 30 seconds to select a song that fits the category. While on the surface this may seem elementary, participants in the game, had to name specific points in the song that aligned with the category. Facilitating and participating in type of activity requires a deep knowledge of hip-hop, lyricism. For instance, one of the categories was "Memes (Songs Based on Memes)." Each team had to not only name a song based on a meme but be able to pinpoint an exact moment in the song when the name of the meme is referenced. "Hoes Mad" by Famous Dex, was the winning song; as my team, unfortunately, was stumped in this category. "Memes (Songs Based on Memes)" is a category that required both digital and cultural literacy, as team members were compelled to reflect on memes, pop culture, and the hip-hop artists who speak back to pop culture in song. Although my team members and I struggled with this category, we did however, win the game (7–6), in what felt like an epic battle of wits and lyricism. Some of the other categories included: "Shit you'd never play around your

mom,” “Drug Raps,” “Experimental/Abrasive Raps,” “Songs to Start a Family To,” “Songs by Women Emcees,” “Moshpit Songs,” “In Your Feelings,” “East Coast Raps,” etc. Throughout *Aux Battle*, I was mindful of the degree to which I participated in the activity, asking myself questions like: Am I saying too much? If I can think of a song, should I wait to hear what others have to say? And although I’d just met Nick, how might this song appeal to him enough to the point for this round? Moreover, how does my competitiveness in this moment mirror that of a rap battle, with the intent of outwitting my opponent(s) across the room? At times, it seemed as though, I was more into it than I should’ve been. And yet, as someone who wanted to be legitimized as both a creator and supporter of hip-hop culture, I wanted to model for Stephen and other prospective participants in my study that you can be an emcee, assistant dean, and Ph.D. Candidate without sacrificing your cultural sense of self.

As stated in Track V, Nick, in his one-on-one interview admitted that, several of the artists who record and release hip-hop music at DSU are not members of *Rap Club* or *Circle Up*, DSU’s premier student-led hip-hop organizations. Naturally, at a university as large as DSU, there are bound to be a few students whose artistic and aesthetic values are misaligned with existing student organizations. To that end, it is worth noting that Nick, although he’s benefited from participating in (and leading) a hip-hop centered student organization, he still believes DSU could do more to support hip-hop culture and artists on campus. Both he and Eric note other organizations on campus that are tangentially related to the poetics of hip-hop. Eric called attention to, *Black Stanzas* (pseudonym), a student-led spoken word poetry troupe hosts open mics, poetry slams, writing workshops,

pop-up performances, and showcases throughout the academic year. *Black Stanzas* is also known to perform at student recruitment events; especially those sponsored by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. A subgroup of the *Black Student Organization* (pseudonym), *Black Stanzas*' history dates to the early 1980s; and in many ways, created the first space at DSU dedicated to the exploration and performance of Black oral traditions on campus. Although it would be another 25 years before hip-hop courses found their way into DSU curricula, the stage had been set for the campus-wide acceptance of and appreciation for historically Black lyrical aesthetics. Nick would also reference the *Organization for Student Activities* (pseudonym), who in recent years, have invited more nationally-renown hip-hop artists to campus. Though these established performers headline the shows, students at DSU, at times, are offered opportunities to perform as opening acts. Still, Nick believes these opportunities are few and far between. Perhaps Nick has yet to receive sustained mentorship and support from faculty as it relates to his craft. While hip-hop may be highly visible at DSU, that doesn't necessarily mean it is widely accessible. This disconnect between *real* and *perceived* hip-hop opportunities on campus reflects the need for a deeper analysis of hip-hop and higher education, addressing those factors that cause students to (dis)engage with hip-hop exploration, production, and performance at the university.

Throughout the academic year, there are several special events and specific spaces that do not necessarily center hip-hop but accommodate hip-hop as a part of mainstream campus culture. *Fall Kick-Off* (pseudonym), for instance, is an extensive block party that engulfs a main street in the center of campus. Seemingly every department from the

division of student affairs is represented. From 9:00 pm to 3:00 am, student affairs personnel – from the counseling services to student health, intramural sports to the LGBTQ center – are out in droves, at the epicenter of campus life. *Fall Kick-Off* is flanked at opposite ends of the street with stages, featuring performances from student organizations and independent campus artists. The gospel choir, a cappella groups, and even the students in *Circle Up*, take the stage for their moment in the sun. Many of these organizations use their 20-minute *Fall Kick-Off* performance as an opportunity to recruit new members. *Circle Up*, however, doesn't stop there. In addition to their set on the main stage, the members of the organization walk about the festival, toting a box speaker and aux cord, stopping at different posts along the street, rapping for all who care to listen. With them, they bring an email list for interested emcees to sign-up for more information about the club, their meeting times, and how to engage in their weekly cypher. Isaac admits that this was how he was recruited into the organization during the fall of his first year. On the surface, such recruitment tactics might come across as competitive or unintentionally confrontational. However, it is this spirit of healthy competition that sustains group members like Isaac, who find this type of performance to be mutually uplifting for his fellow emcees. The participants, throughout this process, reflected on this competitiveness with a sense of fondness, knowing that being in community with other emcees, inspires them to hone their craft.

Other preeminent spaces for hip-hop culture on campus include *The Quad* (pseudonym) and the recording studio in a popular undergraduate library. Although the latter was mentioned in the onset of Track IV, the frequency in which the participants

take advantage of this space cannot be overstated. Eric jokingly stated that the staff members that oversee the operation and upkeep of the studio “must hate me! I’m in there all the time!” In his interview, Stephen corroborated that “my friends and I reserve large blocks of time and set up shop in the booth.” Hours seem to slip away within these four padded walls. While the studio is more tucked away, *The Quad* on the other hand, is arguably one of the most open areas on campus. Situated in the center of the student union, two libraries, the campus bookstore, coffee shops, and a dining hall, legend has it that every DSU student walks through *The Quad* at least once per day. *The Quad* is a large, brick-lined rectangular enclosure, with steps on each side, dipping roughly 3 feet in relation to the surrounding buildings. The steps create an almost amphitheater-like enclosure. With this being a hub of campus activity, *The Quad* is prime real estate for students looking to make a bold statement. Often, *The Quad* is a preferred location for student protests and demonstrations, Black Greek step shows and stroll-offs, pre-game pep rallies, and much more. Although *The Quad* is busiest during the lunch hour, *Circle Up* hosts its weekly cypher there on Wednesday nights (see Track IV). Both venues are ideal places for hip-hop to happen for a couple reasons.

First, hip-hop is an inherently underground, countercultural artform that seemingly exists in a realm unto itself. The studio, which is *literally* underground, is a fitting metaphor for the existence of hip-hop in college, and historically oppressive institutions in general. Because of its unique ability to critique systems of power, creating hip-hop in the basement of an academic building is a radical means of reclaiming space on campus for those who’ve been marginalized, mistreated, and undermined within the

institution's history. DSU, like many of America's early colleges and universities has deep ties to slavery (Wilder, 2013) and the Confederacy. Although a few colleges have worked to reconcile and atone for their exploitation of Black bodies in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, reimagining a physical space on campus for the production of hip-hop – that is, an artform by and for Black bodies – in a predominantly white space, is a revolutionary act. The hip-hop patrons of the studio are carving out a space for themselves, in an institution that was not carved out for them. Secondly, hip-hop culture seems to be both invisible and hyper-visible. While mainstream and underground rappers establish new linguistic repertoires, set fashion trends, and push the culture forward, it seems as though hip-hop's knowledge producers thrive in both obscurity and esteem; seeking attention and high praise for what is non-figuratively, created below the surface.

If the studio in the library is an homage to hip-hop's underground, countercultural roots, then *The Quad* represents what happens when hip-hop is deemed appropriate and palatable to mainstream audiences. Isaac, Stephen, and Michael each regard *The Quad* as a physical space on campus where their hip-hop identities are brought to bear. For them, *The Quad* is a representation of what it means to be your full self, unapologetically, in public. Isaac and Stephen for instance both refer to a performance in *The Quad* during Family Weekend. Although they were admittedly apprehensive about rapping for a predominantly white audience of parents, Isaac said, “we did a set amount of songs, with freestyling in between.” To this point, Stephen in his interview, mentioned he was especially selective in determining which songs to perform:



It's family weekend, you know, let's say I'm from Arizona. I might not have seen my parents since, you know, school started. So, they might want to hear something that's gonna make them dance with their parents; but I want to do something that's more relevant to the occasion.... There are times when I want to do songs about police brutality for instance. [The way I see it] you can't consume Black culture and ignore Black plight.

*The Quad* makes rappers hyper-visible in such a way that compels these student-artists to think critically about the messages they share and the feelings these messages elicit within the audience. Although it is, in some fashion, a form of self-censorship, this does not completely impede rappers' ability to share what Stephen refers to as "the Black plight" in this lyrical space.

Stephen goes on to recount an incident where DSU Campus Police threatened to shut down the cypher one Wednesday evening, when an officer happened upon their performance. The officer, according to Stephen, claimed "groups performing in *The Quad* need permission from the student union to be out here." Although *Circle Up* was not the only group that'd performed in *The Quad* that evening, Stephen and another member of the group entered the student union to verify that they indeed "had permission" to assemble in *The Quad*. Once the matter was cleared up, the officer according to Stephen, asked to retain a student ID from a member of *Circle Up* "just in case something happened." The officer remained in *The Quad*, surveilling the performance for the remainder of the evening. In response, whenever it was Stephen's turn to jump in the cypher, his lyrics were aimed at the officer, and the events that transpired from their testy, convoluted exchange:

From 9:40 until like 11:20 every, um, every time I opened my mouth to rap, there was a bar about the cops included. These white women or these white guys [that stop by the cypher] may not take an African American studies class or open themselves up to understanding the Black experience. So, I ask you: what medium do they learn about Blackness or Black culture? Hip hop. Everybody listens to hip hop. So, if you come in and sit in the cypher and I'm rhyming, I'm gonna talk to you about the Black experience.

*The Quad* becomes a space for rappers to display their lyrical dexterity in the open, while at times, boldly (and quite literally) spitting truth in the face of power. This act of resistance is consistent with Darder's (2011) conceptualization of critical pedagogy that accepts the notion that all people have the capacity and ability to produce knowledge and to resist dominance. While Stephen's stance seems to center the white gaze and place the burden of counteracting racism solely on the shoulders of emcees – who, in this study, all identify as Black – *The Quad* is at least a space, where this discourse about race, race relations, and the Black experience can happen at DSU. Although it was unclear if Stephen sought support from student affairs personnel following the incident, it is clear that hip-hop emboldened him to be a truth-teller in spaces on campus beyond *The Quad* (e.g., the studio, coursework/assignments, off-campus performances, etc.) Together, these artists' voices *figuratively* arise from the underground, to *literally* reclaim a space for marginalized persons at DSU.

It is also worth noting that there is a lively hip-hop scene off campus as well. There exists a row of fraternity and sorority houses that are university-affiliated and independently operated. Although these predominantly white Greek letter organizations remain racially and socioeconomically homogeneous, there is a culture among some of the fraternities that embraces hip-hop culture. Isaac mentioned that he's recorded in a

makeshift studio in a fraternity house and freestyled at some fraternity parties. On the surface, this gesture at the hands of the fraternities would seem like an olive branch of acceptance, representation of Black and Brown initiates in predominantly white Greek letter organizations at DSU remains woefully low. What then does this signal to Black and Brown emcees asked to perform at fraternity parties? Essentially, I am curious about what it signifies to Black rappers that they may be *cool* enough to perform at your party, but not cool enough to claim space in your organization – with access to power, privilege, fellowship, and an uncontested sense of belonging.

Each participant mentioned a list of performance venues in town that welcomed hip-hop artists from the college and the surrounding community. Stephen, Nick, and Isaac in their individual interviews all acknowledged that a popular spot in town known as *Giraffe's Neck* (pseudonym) “hosts some of the most turned up hip-hop shows!” Historically, *Giraffe's Neck* has hosted hip-hop artists like Wale, J. Cole, Nipsey Hussle, Joey BadA\$\$ and Vince Staples prior to rising to (inter)national acclaim. *Giraffe's Neck* also hosts showcases for hip-hop artists at DSU as well. Perhaps these shows, at least for rappers in college, are not subject to the same censorship and policing that may occur on campus. This is not to say that anything goes at *Giraffe's Neck*. Rather, college-enrolled rappers like those in this study, may feel lyrically encumbered knowing those who wield power and influence over their campus life experience (e.g., professors, student affairs personnel, alumni donors) are in the audience. Performing hip-hop off campus, could provide a semblance of lyrical and conceptual freedom that is impossible to replicate in an on-campus, university-sanctioned space. While hip-hop is not an

inherently lawless, irrational artform, much of its allure is related to its ability to evolve and exist in defiance of oppressive institutions. It can be argued that there must be a combination of on and off campus spaces dedicated to the production of hip-hop culture, if hip-hop – and those who see the world through it – are to be fully embraced as a part of campus life.

## CHAPTER VII

### TRACK VII: BEYOND THE BARS: CREATIVE PROCESSES, PRACTICES, AND THE UTILITY OF THE HIP-HOP SKILL SET

Are we a lost generation of our people?  
Add us to equations but they'll never make us equal  
She who writes the movie owns the script and the sequel  
So why ain't the stealing of my rights made illegal?  
They keep us underground working hard for the greedy  
But when it's time pay they turn around and call us needy  
My crown too heavy like the Queen Nefertiti  
Gimme back my pyramid, I'm trying to free Kansas City  
Mixing masterminds like your name Bernie Grundman  
Well I'ma keep leading like a young Harriet Tubman  
You can take my wings but I'm still gonna fly  
And even when you edit me the booty don't lie  
Yeah, I'ma keep sangin', I'ma keep writin' songs  
I'm tired of Marvin asking me "What's Going On?"  
March through the streets 'cuz I'm willing and I'm able  
Categorize me, I defy every label  
And while you're selling dope, we're gonna keep selling hope  
We rising up now, you gotta deal you gotta cope  
Will you be electric sheep? Electric ladies, will you sleep?  
Or will you preach?"  
(Janelle Monae, "Q.U.E.E.N.," 2013)

#### **"I Fell in Love With the Process...": Creative Practice, Finding Voice**

Perhaps one of the most revealing components of the interviews and focus group was the insight participants provided into their creative practice. Understanding how the participants created hip-hop, demonstrated a powerful use of voice. The way I perceive voice is grounded in experiential knowledge and counternarrative storytelling; essential

components of understanding self in relation to one's shifting social environment.

Similarly, Giroux (1988) had this to say about the concept of voice,

[It] refers to the principles of dialogue as they are enunciated and enacted within particular social settings. The concept of voice represents the unique instances of self-expression through which students affirm their own class, culture, racial, and gender identities. The category of voice, then refers to the means at our disposal - the discourses available to use - to make ourselves understood and listened to, and to define ourselves as active participants in the world. (p. 199)

Such an understanding of voice is critical to seeing the knowledges, skills, and creative resistance required to sustain one's hip-hop identity in college. Giroux's (1988) conceptualization of voice is, in many ways, related to Janelle Monae's (2013) demonstration of voice in the final verse of her song, "Q.U.E.E.N." Here, we find Janelle Monae (2013) posing a series of rhetorical questions aimed at our – potentially lost – generation. In what feels like a fit of desperation, Monae summons our ancestors, challenging us to overcome systemic forms of oppression through reflection and collective action. "She who writes the movie owns the script and the sequel... yeah, I'ma keep sangin', I'ma keep writin' songs" is a profound proclamation of agency, and a reclamation of voice. Such a stance by Janelle Monae, models for others, the ways in which our resistance – as members of marginalized communities – is a form of capital (Yosso, 2005). It is also worth noting that Janelle Monae, who is typically characterized as an R&B/Soul artist, chooses to rap intermittently on her albums. One can speculate that Janelle Monae's (2013) ability to transition between signing and rapping implies that some messages are best conveyed through a specific musical aesthetic. With this being the third verse on "Q.U.E.E.N.," perhaps Monae preferred the welcomed sense of

assertiveness associated with rap and social critique, to the more passive reflections on social injustice, like Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*. It is as if her decision to rap instead of sing, illustrates a heightened sense of urgency – feeling more like a call to action than an astute social observation.

Janelle Monae (2013) and Giroux (1988) offer keen examples of why and how cultural producers of knowledge must reclaim voice as a means of navigating historically oppressive institutions and systems of power. This conceptualization of voice and cultural knowledge is important because higher education research often acknowledges that institutions, upon enrolling new students, design orientation and enrichment programming intended to help students assimilate to their new environment, as opposed to helping students rely on their community, cultural, and linguistic capital to adapt to, and ultimately navigate, the institution. Such is often the case with students who hail from historically underrepresented backgrounds in higher education (e.g., racial ethnic minorities, undocumented students, first generation college students, low-socio-economic status students, etc.). Figure 7.1 illustrates how the elements of hip-hop lyrical composition and performance, informs creative practice and the affirmation of voice in college. Because of their engagement with hip-hop lyricism, it was determined that their creative practice is fostered through writing, recording, and performing at DSU. Documenting these creative techniques may provide avenues for understanding how hip-hop collegians orient themselves to campus life.

Figure 7.1 Creative Practice



### **Writing and Recording**

Writing, as many scholars believe, is an act of liberation – an expression of pain, joy, and resistance (Kinloch, 2017; Wong & Pena, 2017). Through writing, students can reclaim pieces of themselves, their knowledges, and experiences. In their one-on-one interviews, when asked about typical themes that arise in their writing, the participants shared a vast array of topics, ranging from spirituality, relationships (re: situation-ships), current events, and reflections on home; nothing seemed to be off-limits. Below are a few of their responses:

Isaac: Sometimes I'll be in different moods. Sometimes I'm on some conscious shit and sometimes, I'll just be saying stupid shit.... It depends on how cocky I feel in the moment, cause [freestyling] is the only time I'll get cocky about something.

Michael: The answer is everything. But really, just things I see happening on the news, things that happened to me personally, things that friends tell me about... I remember one time in high school, there were terrorist attacks in France and some



other ones in the US, sadly at this point, I don't remember what they were. But I was really moved by that. So, I just started writing this rap about that.

Nick: Girls, relationships, being honest about my flaws... these things make me more relatable. I know I'm not at my highest spiritual peak right now, so it's best to be introspective about it.

Such a thematic range reflects the fullness of the college experience: Cognitive and cultural dissonance, the forging and/or dissolution of relationships, leaving home, commentary on global events. This emerging sense of consciousness about the self and the world is what many higher education scholars believe to be, the purpose of a college education (Lagemann & Lewis, 2012; Shapiro, 2005). If this is true, and hip-hop lyricism *does* create an avenue for the participants to explore these themes, what are the processes or the means through which rappers construct their songs? Moreover, how does their writing style reflect their knowledge of self – that is, their identities, habits, and dispositions? For the most part, the participants rely on some literary devices to support the execution of their ideas and identities through lyricism. Metaphor, as it seems, is the participants' lyrical weapon of choice. For instance, during Nick's interview, he discussed how the use of "metaphor" allowed him to be "more introspective" in his lyrical content. Isaac also expressed in his interview that "I like using a lot of metaphors and making different words mean different things in different contexts... a lot of playing with the English language." According to Eric, "every word matters.... I want things to connect. I love double entendre and extended metaphors." This notion that each word holds unique value in a rap verse is not lost on the participants in this study. Eric would later go on to say, "The way you use language really demonstrates care." Such is true for

these emcees, who are deliberateness with words reflects a critically informed perspective on the power of hip-hop and its poetic aesthetic.

I sought to understand the participants' personal orientation toward hip-hop as a means for capturing how they embark on writing hip-hop lyrics. Michael had this to say in his interview:

I'd say it's important to have a sense of awareness of the world, but if you're not using that in your raps, I think there's a lane for that. Hip-hop at its core tells these stories about the African American struggle. But I think it's evolved so much that there are so many different kinds of rap. I think that's good for the genre as a whole.

Acknowledging the various styles of rap that exist, reminded me of Stephen's interview, and his depiction of his older cousin, teaching him the lyrics to The Game's "Old English," then teaching him to write with a rhyme scheme similar to that of The Game. I also recalled Isaac's reflection from *Rap Lab*, recounting his assignments that required him to write raps with flows and cadences like artists from various eras in hip-hop history. Eric would go on to offer some insight into how his style emerged over time:

I went from freestyling on the back of the bus to freestyling in my room for practice. I started rewriting songs, like a Jay Z song. I would write to the instrumental and change the verses and words to match Jay Z's rhyme scheme. This helped me formulate the process of writing songs. From there, I fell in love with the writing process. To this day, I'll put the beat on, and start humming to see what flows, and what sounds interesting; finding what fits.

Finding what fits for most of the participants in this study, begins with counting bars. For many, this was not a natural process. Counting the bars is akin to counting beats in a measure, thus determining how many syllables can fit in a line. Michael admits that "I

did not understand how to count out 16 bars prior to rapping with my friends in *Circle Up*.” This practice is essential to the construction of a verse, and a song more broadly. A rapper’s ability to count beats dictates everything from the rhyme scheme to the number of syllables that fit within each line. Isaac noted that his *Rap Lab* professor instructed the class to write 16 dots along the margin of a page. Those dots exist, in part, to help rappers *see* the rhyme as the lyrics build; ensuring that the words fit within the confines of the beat. “Since I took *Rap Lab*,” Isaac during his interview, “there’s more structure to [my writing] now.” Being able to dictate how many bars, or lines, constitutes one verse requires artists to pay close attention to changes in the rhythm, the addition of new instruments, and other signals within the instrumentation that signify where a verse ends, and the chorus begins. Such is an integral part in the song-writing process. “Now,” Isaac said, “I write like, 16 dots on the lines of pages; it’s an overview of how much space I have, and it makes it a lot easier to structure a verse.”

For some of the participants, the verses didn’t always come so easy. In fact, the lyrics weren’t necessarily what drew rappers like Michael to hip-hop in the first place:

I fell in love with the process of creating hip-hop. I started out doing a lot of production. I decided getting into production the summer after I graduated from high school. Really a lot of what I was doing my first year in college was producing. I would go home after classes and I would just make a beat on *Fruity Loops Studio*; the demo version of it, at that! So, I couldn’t save or re-open a project. So, I would spend the whole weekend just making something, then finish it, export it, and do it again the next weekend.

It is no surprise that Michael, one of two producer-rappers in the study, begins his writing process through the prism of sound. Given that writing raps is in some way, connected to

the auditory experience of the instrumental, Michael would later contend that “I hear the beat and then the writing comes from there.” In the focus group, Stephen admitted to finding inspiration in the instrumentals as well. He confessed to writing raps while driving; well, sort of. Stephen said, “I started playing a bunch of beats [on the drive home]. That beat came on and I started freestyling, and I was like whoa! I'm catching a flow here. And then I pulled over and recorded what I had on my phone.” It seems that when stricken with lyrical inspiration, there is a heightened sense of urgency. It is as if to say, their craft is too meaningful to be ignored. This sentiment was corroborated by the participants in the focus group.

Even when they experience writer’s block, the participants put provisions in place that inspire them to keep writing. Eric said, “I keep a short list of lines or one-liners in my phone. If ever I don't know where to start, I just say, 'let me scroll!' I go back and forth after I start writing to make sure what I’m writing makes sense thematically.” These methods of circumventing writer’s block vary among the participants. For Eric, he admitted to this incessant need to finish a verse in one sitting. “I feel defeated if I don’t finish the verse immediately.” Just as other heads began to nod, Stephen chimes in: “That’s weird because I can’t do that.” The other participants erupt in disbelief. After a few moments of curious banter, Isaac substantiated Stephen’s claim: “I remember we were doing a verse and Stephen was like, ‘I'm not feeling this.’ (claps hands) He closed his notepad and just set it down and came back to it later?! I cannot!” Other participants agreed that their approach to writing is quite different than Stephen’s. “Normally,” Isaac continues, “when I'm writing, I put on the beat in my headphones, and it's kinda like I'm

possessed a little bit. Like I can't stop writing until I finish the verse.” Although Stephen’s patience may be emblematic of his personality, style, and delivery, according to his anecdote, he was still moved by the words so much that he was compelled to stop driving, pull over, and jot down what was on his mind. During the focus group, Eric summarized these points in saying that such a relentless pursuit of perfection “is the curse of artistry.” To this end, songwriting, though it may seem like it has little to do with the college experience, has everything to do with goal setting and attainment. As I will explain in the following section (see *Transferable Skills*), the participants collectively attested to the sense of accomplishment and confidence associated with writing the perfect verse, to the perfect beat. That confidence is transcendent; capable of anchoring students from the studio to the classroom.

Writing however, is but the first step in a lengthy creative journey. The recording process brings the written word to life. While it was noted that many of the participants, at some point during their time at DSU, had recorded together in the past (see Track V), exploring their recording methodologies revealed more clearly, how meaning in college is communicated in song. The focus group yielded an interesting conversation about compositional strategies. “The first thing I do when I wake up,” Stephen exclaimed, “is grab a notebook and write two pages.” This daily exercise to expounds upon, connects, or reimagines lyrics Stephen had been composing from previous writing sessions. He mentioned several times throughout the focus group that he did not want his works to live and die in his notebook – signifying that the act of recording the written word was just as, if not more, important than writing the words in the first place. Michael and Isaac both

admitted to transferring handwritten lyrics to their phones. “I don't really write a verse and then record it,” Isaac said, “I write it and transfer it to my phone so I can *actually* read what I wrote!” Similarly, Michael states that “my phone is easier to read from when I’m recording.” Although this transferring of lyrics from the page to an app on their smart phones is more of a case function over form (Isaac and Michael attributed this to illegible penmanship), the participants agreed that rappers should not feel constrained when recording in the studio.

In a way, this transference of lyrics from the page to performance, invites rappers to internalize their message and imagine how the music will be received in different literal and figurative spaces. For Eric, after writing a verse, he said, “I might record on my iPad, then take it to the studio the next day.” Rather than transferring the written lyrics from the page to app, Eric goes a step further and transfers the written lyrics to a referential recording. This helps him understand how to dictate the flow of the lyrics in relation to the beat. In this process, Eric can make judgements about how to pace his breathing, which words to emphasize, and how to fit the lyrical content within the framework of the instrumentation. This process however is not infallible. “Sometimes,” Eric proclaimed, “I must record a song like 12 or 13 times to get it to sound the way I had it in my head!” This is a goal-oriented act; it demonstrates his ability to reflect and act in accordance with his goal. While not entirely like Freire’s notion of praxis (1970/2000) – a framework for social justice education, which incorporates reflection and action – this work of compiling, recording, and sharing counter-stories through non-majoritarian

epistemologies, like hip-hop, is what Freire (1994) envisioned when he coined a pedagogy of freedom.

Recording music often compels the participants to work with other artists and audio engineers to bring their creations to life. While the studio in the library has been a haven for many of the participants to create, Isaac mentioned that he likes to record in different locations,

I don't have a spot to record in my room, but I've recorded at my friend's frat house, in his room. I recorded in [another student's] apartment, on the mic in freshman's room from *Circle Up*, Michael has a setup in his closet too. I pull up like - I normally circulate and record with different people, so people don't get annoyed that I'm using their stuff so much (laughs). People like when you come to their room, honestly.

Isaac, ever the outgoing emcee, seems to have relied heavily on the expertise and resources of others to facilitate his campus and community contributions to hip-hop culture. It appears this practice of revolving recording locations has reinforced relationships with others through the medium of hip-hop. Isaac even outsources the mixing and mastering of his songs to peers at other institutions, further demonstrating the connective power of rap music, and the production of knowledge through lyricism.

### **Performing**

Although it cannot be assumed that everyone who raps intends to share their creations, the rappers in this study do. With that in mind, it seems as though the transfer of lyrics from the page to performance is a vital step in inching artists closer to criticism and feedback. In so doing, rappers grow accustomed to editing, revising, and receiving feedback on their written and performative work. Michael would review films of his

previous performances and make notes (e.g., “I was really stiff”) and corrections based on personal critique and peer feedback. After reviewing his performances, Michael reviewed footage from more established hip-hop artists to “see how people do little things, like hold the microphone or how they're moving their hands and what they're doing with their body.” Nick substantiated this claim in his interview, when he said, “I’m open to doing what it takes to take my sound to the next level.... I want to make good music, music that makes you move emotionally, physically, or spiritually.” This level of effort and analysis is indicative of the what it takes to hone one’s craft. Curiosity and commitment like this, after all, is what Bain (2012) believes to be a hallmark of a successful college student.

This sort of self-accountability Michael and Nick demonstrate is also reflected in Eric’s discussion of his weekly performances with *Circle Up*. For Eric, “*Circle Up* has been a big part of my life” because it is “a place where I can continue to hone my craft as a freestyle rapper, [learning] how to engage an audience, bringing people into the cypher that may look curious but... have no idea of what's going on.” Michael would also claim that “*Circle Up* has helped me make connections to people in the audience” as well. “Like, if I see someone has some kind of emblem on their shirt,” Michael says, “I’ll try to make a lyrical connection to that. Now, I read the audience a little bit more.” Performing hip-hop, as it seems, compels emcees to demonstrate a keen awareness of their surroundings. In a way, to engaging in hip-hop performance requires an astuteness of place and space. Historically after all, hip-hop performance – especially its poetic aesthetic – critically engages the public in counternarrative discourses that challenge



communities to contend with the nuance, that is, the joy and pain, of life in the margins. This commitment to performance by participants not only reflects the appreciation the participants have for hip-hop lyricism and one another; it also compels them to think critically about their surroundings, using their artistic voices to reclaim space on campus.

However, performing hip-hop in college is not without risk. For Isaac, he often reflects on the how his joy of performing might be perceived by prospective employers in the years to come. Because hip-hop is still not a part of mainstream discourses in higher education, and the workforce more broadly, in his interview and the focus group, Isaac worried that the very prowess he exudes on stage may be a liability in the job market.

When asked about his performances and his views on sharing his music, Isaac had this to say,

There is like, this surface level stuff that I'll tell people [in a rap]. And the *deeper* stuff, normally I don't really talk about in songs. I make like subtle references to deeper things. So, I'll rap a lot about hard times I've been through 'cause I feel like that helps people get through stuff. But some of my personal, like family issues, I don't, I don't like talking about a lot. There are just some things I'm afraid of recording or prefer not to record.... Honestly, I don't [share my music] often online. I'm kind of scared to put out music and stuff, 'cause I feel like it might end up being harmful to my career.

Although hip-hop is globally accepted as a form of popular culture, many institutions – like colleges and universities – have narrow, often misguided interpretations of those who participate in and contribute to hip-hop culture. While the participants in this study harbor a deep, abiding passion for their art, that does not mean that they have not internalized messages about hip-hop from family, peers, teachers, and those who hold power in educational spaces. While the participants might be acutely aware of the ways in which

hip-hop reifies capitalism, homophobia, sexism and misogyny, those who are not active participants in the culture, may be unable to readily identify the redeemable qualities of hip-hop culture and those who create it.

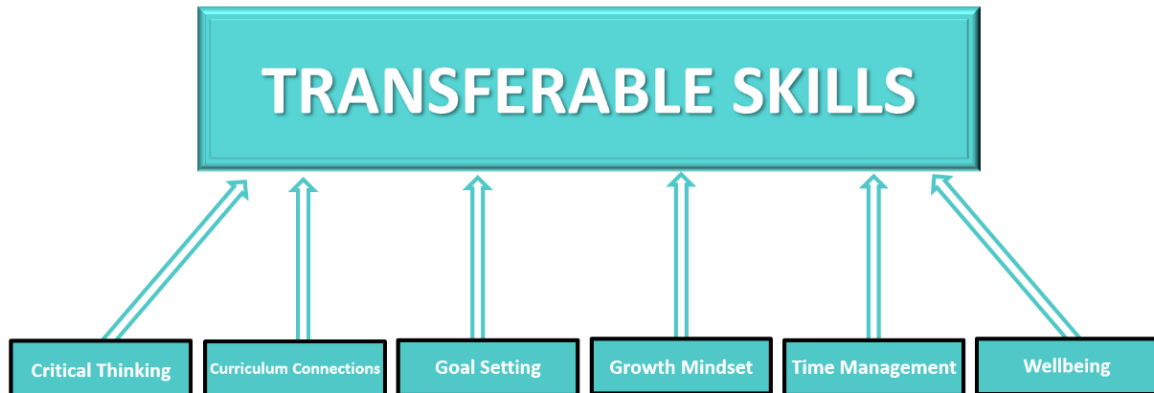
Ostensibly, it is no wonder why Isaac was mortified that someone filmed him freestyling at a party without his consent. Other risks associated with hip-hop performance at DSU include the harassment Stephen suffered at the hands of campus police (see Track VI). There is an inherent danger – be it real or symbolic – associated with the performance of hip-hop and other non-white aesthetic traditions on college campuses. Isaac’s aversion to sharing his music in certain spaces is indeed a reflection of that danger, and the risk he assumes whenever he steps into a cypher. These revelations about Isaac’s conceptualization of his public-facing hip-hop persona, reminded me of the words of Anzaldúa (1987), “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk bad about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity... I am my language.... I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice.... I will overcome” (p. 345). Just as in the conceptual framework for this study, students enter college with forms of capital that are often misaligned or undervalued within the institution. Such an emphasis on the creative practices that inform hip-hop knowledge production – and student voice, more broadly – could begin the process of dismantling the hegemonic structures that characterize campus life.

### **“Failure Leads to Growth”: Transferable Skills**

The knowledges acquired from participation in hip-hop’s poetic aesthetics is salient across various areas of the participants’ collegiate experiences. Although they do

not contribute to hip-hop culture as a means navigating the institution, their ability to navigate the DSU is due, in part, to their critical engagement with hip-hop via writing, recording, and performance. It is the application of these hip-hop sensibilities that has afforded the participants an opportunity to see value in their cultural knowledge and epistemologies. Like Petchauer's (2012) groundbreaking exploration of hip-hop in the lives of college students, my analysis revealed that "the degree to which something comes 'from hip-hop' is not always clear... and should not be assumed that every habit, practice, disposition from hip-hop supports education" (p. 113). And yet, it is empowering for those who create hip-hop culture on college campuses to see the utility of their hip-hop skillset in various areas of their collegiate lives. Figure 7.2 provides insight into the skills derived from the participants' production of hip-hop culture. Based on the participant interviews and focus groups, it was determined that active engagement with hip-hop lyricism on campus, informed the development of critical thinking, interdisciplinary curriculum connections, goal setting (and attainment), growth mindset, time management, and wellbeing. These transferable skills have grand implications for the participants' orientation to campus life and life-after after college, as well.

Figure 7.2 Transferable Skills



### **Critical Thinking**

The education system according to Love (2012) does not promote critical thinking skills. This is corroborated by other feminist and critical scholars (Giroux, 1988; hooks, 2010), who believe that incorporating culture in the classroom should promote agency and consciousness-raising habits within students. Hip-hop, in this way, has inspired the participants to think critically about the world, and their power to name and resist systems of oppression. In the focus group, Stephen, discussed how it feels to play songs he's recorded at DSU for peers back home. After leaving the mall with his friends on Black Friday, Stephen played one of his new songs about police brutality; a concept he referred to quite a bit in his interview, as well. Aside from the harassment from campus police during the cypher (see Track V), Stephen made several references to one of his cousins who is currently incarcerated. His concern for his wellbeing in prison manifested in song, and he thought it appropriate to share with his hometown friends. It wasn't until he was in the focus group however, that Stephen made an interesting connection: "It's crazy that while participating in Black Friday shopping – an act of capitalism – I was

willing to play a song of mine that addresses an important social issue.” To which Nick replies, “Hip-hop exposes hypocrisies. It exposes contradictions.” While the connection between police brutality – that is, state-sanctioned violence – and capitalism – an economic system that may not always be transparent, it wasn’t until this moment of being in community with other hip-hop artists that Stephen was able to see the ways in which hip-hop can expose contradictions *and* contradict itself. Eric suggests,

Like Nick was saying, the notion of playing a song about police brutality while you're going Christmas shopping isn't inherently wrong, but it's like there is a sort of contradiction and a sort of conflict within that, and it's sort of like, how do you navigate that? How do you come to terms with those contradictions, justify, or further understand them, and break them down?

Cultural outsiders (Low, 2011; Tan, 2009) often denigrate hip-hop because of the materialism expressed by mainstream artists. Rappers, however, are uniquely adept at critiquing the culture from within. This emerging dialogue about hip-hop’s contradictory nature, reminded me of a line from the third verse of Lupe Fiasco’s (2006) “Hurt Me Soul,” which beautifully rhymes various evils that threaten to tear the world asunder. From the Israeli occupation of Palestine to oil-inspired global conflict, Lupe Fiasco uses this verse as a means of illustrating how hip-hop can illuminate these evils, while participating in them as well. Lupe Fiasco demonstrates this in the final bar that reads, “All the world’s ills/sittin’ on chrome 24-inch wheels” – a commonly referenced automobile accessory that exists as a status symbol among hip-hop artists.

What was it about this space, this hip-hop community, or this moment within the focus group that invited the Stephen to be critical of himself and hip-hop culture? Perhaps

Michael said it best in his interview, “Hip-hop emphasizes that people are complex, and there's a lot of different things that make up who we are and how we look at the world, and thus what goes into the art that you make.” Maybe hip-hop will always be a living contradiction; exposing our shortcomings while reconciling them in verse. In Stephen’s case, perhaps it was his critical consumption and production of hip-hop culture that motivated him to not only share his music with peers, but problematize the ways he, at times, falls short of his own vision for social justice and systemic change. Hip-hop in a way, provides Stephen a sense of agency as he rationalizes his own social, moral, and political beliefs, while critiquing the ironies that manifest within the culture itself. For that reason, it is important to heed Love’s (2012) advice, encouraging more students and educators to be critical of hip-hop, rather than romanticize it within academic contexts.

### **Curriculum Connections**

When it comes to curriculum connections, Nick set the tone in the focus group when he said, “I feel like with me, my creativity and work ethic drive one another in a way that allows me to see a connection between everything.” This is an important note, because it symbolizes that Nick’s creative sensibilities – which are undoubtedly rooted in hip-hop – somehow inform the way he approaches, makes sense of, and communicates what he’s learning in his courses. At this point in the research process, it was clear that the participants were, perhaps unknowingly, applying their hip-hop skills in ways that allowed them to deconstruct course content, and their classroom experiences more broadly. Michael for instance mentioned that:

If you really try to make connections in your rap [to what you're learning in class], those are going to help you. When you were trying to write an essay or something, you use the same analytical skills [you use when rapping] to make connections between disparate topics.

Prior to this investigation, it seemed that Michael and Isaac – both political science majors – were unable to draw connections to their interests in political science and creating rap music.

When asked to make a comparison between those in public office and those who rap, Isaac, the lone participant with aspirations of running for political office, contested that “Politicians and rappers are alike because they *create* themselves. They create personas. I feel like I wanna get into politics to help people and solve problems. As for rapping, that's like [a space] for me [to solve problems]; and if it helps other people, then that's good too.” It was at that moment, Eric and I recalled – almost in unison – a line from Kendrick Lamar’s (2015) “Hood Politics” that reads: “Ain't nothin' new, but a flu of new Demo-Crips and Re-Blood-licans/Red state versus a blue state, which one you governin'?” His wordplay tethering the democratic and republican parties to the Crips and Bloods – two notorious street gangs – symbolizes the ways in which politicians are fundamentally, no different from members of warring gangs, whose indiscretions have violent consequences in the lives of all Americans. This revelation by Eric and I reflected the way lyricists with a deep knowledge of hip-hop make curricular – or in this case, dialectical – connections in real time.

As for Stephen and Michael, they both referenced hip-hop as being particularly useful in making sense of historical events. This is no coincidence however, as Love

(2012) contends, “Hip-hop music and culture are a direct reflection of varying experiences of Black and Brown people. This history is rooted in their Black lineage that spoke and still speaks back to Americanism” (p. 211). Artists like KRS-ONE (2003) believe “hiphoppas” – or those who appreciate and participate in hip-hop culture – are public historians, creating new knowledge for public discourse. Similarly, Nick, an art history major, began to make connections in his own course of study: “Art history is so visual and hip-hop is so sonic. There is some realm of my imagination where the two come together and I try to put that in my art.” When asked if there are painters or visual artists throughout history whose style is comparable to or reflect the ethos of hip-hop culture, Nick responded, “I hear a lot of music in people's art, but not necessarily hip-hop. Basquiat comes to mind. You can trace that to pop art or the recycling movement, which is the idea of using commercial products to make stuff that isn't fine art into fine art.” For Nick, this exercise problematizes the idea of “fine art” and the ways in which cultural traditions, like hip-hop, are relegated to the margins within predominantly white institutions (e.g., colleges and universities, arts councils). We, as a society, rarely look at breakdancing the same way we do the ballet; rarely do we see graffiti as visual art, or rap lyrics as literature. Which, for instance, makes Kendrick Lamar’s 2018 Pulitzer Prize for his third studio album, *DAMN.*, all the more groundbreaking. Nick goes on to say, “When I’m in the classroom and I’m learning about art history, I’m really thinking of the ways that my [musical] creations reflect how something looks, the musicality of a picture, vice versa, ya know? [I ask myself] how music my music *looks and feels* aesthetically.” It is his visual acuity and appreciation for art history that empowers Nick to validate his work



on his own terms. These connections between hip-hop and the curriculum demonstrate a sort of cognitive flexibility that has positive implications for student academic outcomes (Diamond, 2013), not to mention the emcee's own sense of affirmation, belonging, and self-worth. Hip-hop artists might not see themselves reflected in mainstream discourses on campus. However, it is their ability to take what they've learned in the classroom and repurpose it for their the (re)production of hip-hop culture within the university.

### **Goal Setting**

Producing hip-hop in college has provided the participants a chance to both set and attain personal goals. Eric expressed, "You become more confident and comfortable as you grow in your art." This assertion is important because it implies that the setting and attaining of hip-hop goals is positively correlated to self-confidence, self-knowledge, and self-actualization. "Rapping and writing have taught me things about myself," Michael added in his interview, "things I never really think of. Well, maybe I think of them, but they're just more subconscious. It's made me aware of political issues I didn't even know I cared about." This acknowledgement is a necessary antecedent to the creating and achievement of his artistic goals. Michael would later insist that "Knowing that you have the skill and the talent to take something from nothing and then build it into a song is reassuring." Later in the focus group, Eric would validate this claim stating, "There is a sort of beauty in finishing a verse and knowing I actually had to fight through it to make it happen." This was a fitting affirmation given that Eric would go on to release an EP across multiple streaming platforms – including Apple Music and Spotify –

a few weeks later during winter break. Fittingly, in the spirit of collaboration, songs featuring both Isaac and Stephen are included on the EP.

Other participants have set similar goals for the year. To this point, Isaac professed, “I want to make a mixtape of 10 songs, each one in the style of my 10 favorite rappers.” Stephen mentioned his work on an upcoming album, which he intends to craft as a narrative exploration of life in his hometown, told from the perspective of members of his family. He is currently compiling field notes from conversations with people of unique importance in his life – especially cousins and grandparents – broaching topics that impact life back home (e.g., gentrification, mass incarceration). For Stephen, the only member of his immediate family currently enrolled in college, this project seems to be a journey through his own, seemingly inescapable sense of survivor’s guilt. In his interview, he often felt culpable for having access to artistic resources and academic opportunity like those found at DSU. Because he has the freedom to pursue the fullness of his curiosity, he wondered what role he was playing in reifying systems of inequity that manifest in his own family. As mentioned previously in Track V, Michael too, is making his way through the writing and recording of an album of his own. Whether writing a verse or conceptualizing a full-length album, these participants are uniquely adept at not only setting, but following-through on the goals they’ve named for themselves and their artistry. Moreover, given their propensity for collaboration, the participants are also willing to hold one another accountable to their creative goals as well. In the end, “we just want to make something we can be proud of” Eric said.

This ability to set goals, however, is not limited to hip-hop. In many ways, hip-hop informs the participants' career aspirations as well. In the focus group, Eric also had this to say,

My goal is to apply to law school for sports management. But I also want to do music as a career. So, I'm trying to find law schools that are in cities where I can work on both simultaneously.... I went from seeing hip-hop as a fun hobby to wanting to do this for a living.

Similarly, "Hip hop began more as a hobby," Nick conferred, "but now my intentions are to make a comfortable living off music." Isaac went a step further, stating, "If I could drop out and be guaranteed a career as a rapper, I'd probably do it. And then pull the whole actor-to-politician thing; [instead] I'd just go from rapper-to-politician!" Isaac's confession, while garnering some laughs from the group, deserves to be taken seriously. His statement reflects an earlier point mentioned in Track II that acknowledges more-established rappers' dissolution with hip-hop and higher education (Nielson, 2013). Although Kanye West (2004) is arguably hip-hop's most notable college dropout, contemporary emcees illuminate an apparent incongruence of higher education with their artistic goals. On the second verse of "Down Bad," a single from Dreamville's (2019) critically acclaimed compilation album, JID raps,

I was just fucked up, I was just down, down bad/I had to tighten the fuck up, but I'm here for the crown/Board of Education vs. Brown/I was bored of education, left the town/Fuck a resume and fuck a cap and gown/Fuck a background check back 'round when I get the check/That's now....

In addition to the word play manipulating the homonyms “board” and “bored,” JID makes a profound statement addressing his own experiences in higher education. After his expulsion during his senior year at Hampton University, JID returned to his hometown – Atlanta, GA – to pursue his music career full time. This passage from “Down Bad” reflects cognitive processes of a student searching for meaning within a wayward education system, which insists that young people pursue higher education, without having pondered the purpose of that education. While I do not believe that hip-hop and higher education are inherently incongruent, I do believe that hip-hop can inform students’ perceptions and critiques of higher education, its purpose, and ultimately, their place within it. For artists like JID and Kanye West, a college education was not necessary for them find success within the music industry. Attending college, however, did play a critical role in the shaping of their narrative and evolving worldview. While Isaac admitted – perhaps in jest – that he would drop out of college if promised a career in the music industry, there can be no such guarantee. Although Isaac has participated in and benefitted from enrolling in hip-hop courses and being deeply engaged in the hip-hop community at DSU, the subtext of his comment challenges us to think about the ways in which a *formal* education – that is, institutionalized schooling – undermines the concept of community and cultural wealth. To attempt to validate cultural knowledges like hip-hop within the academy is both insufficient and unnecessary. Institutions of higher education honor these cultural epistemologies – and those whose identities, dispositions, and aspirations are defined by them – by exploring the culture itself, rather than attempting to define it.

What then, does this have to do with goal setting and attainment? To this point, I turn to modern studies of hope theory that states that people view hope as being appropriate when it is: (a) a short-term response to specific environmental conditions, and (b) tapping important, societally endorsed goals with 50% attainment probabilities (Averill et al., 1990). Hope therefore, is about finding alternate pathways to desired goals. In JID's case, he saw his expulsion from college as an opportunity to nurture his rhetorical gifts as an emcee. Simply put, hope theory emphasizes a person's self-referential thoughts about reaching desired goals (Snyder, 2001). Though measurement strategies have varied, hope theory is, in a way, connected to hip-hop's linguistic underpinnings. Schulman (1991) determined that from ages three to six, hopeful thinking is enhanced as a child's vocabulary grows from approximately 50 to 10,000 words. Therefore, "by providing the means for describing goals and communicating with others, words and language help to frame hopeful thinking" (Snyder, 2001, p. 6908). Ostensibly, Isaac, JID, and Kanye West each communicate their sense of hope through the prism of lyricism.

### **Growth Mindset**

When Dweck (2006) coined her paradigm shifting psychological research on mindsets, she most likely did not have hip-hop culture in mind. In positing the differences between fixed and growth views of intelligence, Dweck (2006) claimed that our mindsets shape everything from our goals and worldviews, to the way we approach failure and fulfilling our potential. Bain (2012) goes on to insist, "To believe in solutions is to believe that the world is flexible, that you can change it with effort. That's a growth

mindset” (p. 125). Growth mindset in educational contexts is typically regarded as a viable response to failure. To this point, Eric proclaimed, “Failure leads to growth. If you're committed to figuring that out and then working on what went wrong so that you don't do it again or modify your approach, then you'll be fine.” This commitment to honing one's craft has implications that extend beyond school and beyond the music.

In the case of hip-hop, the participants discuss their responses to writer's block – which to the lyricist, is its own kind of self-proclaimed creative letdown. In his interview, Michael confessed, “Sometimes I wanna write the perfect song. I wanna write the best possible song I can, to describe my experience, but I can't always find the words to do it.” As for Stephen, “Writer's block is normally when I can't get anything on the page. I ran into this problem when trying to respond to the prompt.” As we will explore in Track VIII, the prompt participants were to respond to in song was: *Describe your college experience*. Although the topic is incredibly broad and, in a sense, difficult to deconstruct in one song, its ambiguity makes it such a compelling glimpse into the lives of these college-enrolled emcees. Although he was experiencing writers block, Stephen did seem to actively write-through his creative slump. In the focus group, Stephen shared, “A friend and I were just flipping through my notebook one night, trying to work on a song, and she was like, ‘you have so many unfinished ideas. You just need to get this idea out and finish it regardless if you like it or not.’ And I'm now on my seventh version of this verse, I'm working on.” Seemingly impressed with Stephen's dedication, Eric agreed, “There is a natural growth that occurs when you edit and revise your writing.”

Growth mindset has implications for hip-hop collaborations as well. In the focus group, Eric confessed that when he enrolled at DSU:

I was happy just knowing how to rap. I wasn't trying to make songs. I had no knowledge really; like very limited knowledge of making songs. It was kind of like, I was gonna rap a verse and you know, y'all [producers and engineers] do the things you do to make it come out great. But at a certain point, you just naturally gain knowledge, and rapport, develop good relationships, and grow out of that.

To that end, Nick admits that this is the reason why “I’m always listening to artists [on campus] that are better than me.” Nick notes other knowledge producers and hip-hop creatives on campus that help him hone his skill. He reflected on receiving feedback from peers in *Rap Club* stating, “[I was told] my early songs sounded empty... but it didn't stop me from creating and seeing improvement.” Eric would go on to add, “You have to take a step back to learn the stuff you need to learn, recognize that it's ok to not know something. I'm building the tools and skills necessary to get to that point where I can claim space for myself and my art ... it's ok not to know something. It's not ok to be unprepared.” By exploring their hip-hop identities in college, the participants were not only aware of their successes, they were secure in their shortcomings as well.

Developing a growth mindset through the prism of hip-hop culture, certainly has other real-world applications as well. According to Michael,

I'd say [hip-hop] taught me patience, and [how to] work things out. Like if something doesn't sound right now, I have to work it out. I'd say hip-hop has taught me perseverance and working [toward a goal] for a long time. That's definitely a skill that can be used for other things, like writing a paper or working on a project.

Patience and perseverance are viable transferable skills that are essential to navigating campus life. Writing and performing hip-hop at DSU, as Eric put it, is about “dedicating yourself to getting better, and finding a reason to care [about the craft].” It is this idea of “dedicating yourself to getting better” that underscores key components of Dweck’s (2006) original conceptualization of growth mindset.

### **Time Management**

The participants in this study were conscientious in the way they budget their time. This is thanks in part, to their participation in the hip-hop community at DSU. In their exploration of the impact of time management in the lives of full- versus part-time community college students, MacCann, Fogarty, and Roberts (2012) claim, “Empirical evidence suggests that effective time management is associated with greater academic achievement. . . . Time management is a set of habits or learnable behaviors that may be acquired through increased knowledge, training, or deliberate practice” (p. 619).

According to Roberts, Schulze, and Minsky (2006), competencies that support time management skills include setting goals, meeting deadlines, using time management aids such as list making, coping with change, making plans, and effectively organizing one's time. Such skills are necessary when balancing the time, it takes to nurture one’s artistic gifts amid competing academic, social, and emotional priorities. “Sometimes I have to stop making music because I have to do work,” Nick disclosed in his interview, “or I have to get away from my work and make music because I've been in it too much. Music provides a kind of creative freedom. So, they’re mutually beneficial roles in a sense that they contribute to a balance in my life.” For Nick, hip-hop is an escape, one that must be



treated with care. However, he is also aware of the point in which that perceived escape becomes a distraction. With experience, Nick has become more adept at knowing how to invest his time. Navigating this balance was critical in his transition to DSU and the cultivation of his hip-hop identity. Similarly, in his interview, Stephen adds,

[Participating in hip-hop] has made me work smarter. There are times when I'm working on a paper, this stats homework, and I have inspiration to write a song, or a bar will come in my head, or I just want to finish a verse. I will literally close my laptop or throw the homework aside and continue writing/rapping. What I've learned is that if my mind is on finishing a verse or that bar, I'm not going to write that essay as effectively as I can.

This level of self-knowledge and awareness of his time makes Stephen, as well as the other participants in this study, perceive time as something that they can use to their advantage. For Stephen in this instance, he admits to prioritizing hip-hop over schoolwork. It is as if writing music is a necessary antecedent to his academic performance. He is secure enough to turn his attention away from schoolwork if it impedes his artistic impulses.

Conversely, Isaac confesses his aversion to free time, "I'm not a good 'plan-ahead' kinda person. I *am* really good with like, in the moment and fast-paced situations, or short deadlines. I'm not good with a lot of time. I'm really good in situations where we need a quick turnaround and things like that." His ability to improvise and work within time constraints is both a skill and a reflection of his identity as a rapper – more specifically, his knack for freestyling, as evidenced by his performance in *Circle Up*. Such practices demonstrate the participants' perceived sense of control over their time. "Students who perceived control of their time," according to Macan et al. (1990), "reported significantly

greater evaluations of their performance, greater work and life satisfaction, less role ambiguity, less role overload, and fewer job-induced and somatic tensions” (p. 760). So, while it may seem that his lyricism takes precedent over his academics, Stephen’s ability to budget time is a form of navigational capital that eased his transition to DSU, while mediating the stressors often associated with the college experience. To this end, Nonis et al. (1998) contend, “Only if time management behaviors (i.e., setting goals, scheduling, prioritizing, organizing) provide a person with the perception that he or she has control over time will stress reduction or changes in stress-related outcomes result” (p. 589). Between their new projects and increasing demands of their majors and academic lives, the participants have mastered the ability to manage their time.

### **Wellbeing**

The concept of wellness – or wellbeing – is not a new phenomenon. However, with more college students reporting cases of psychological distress, depression, and anxiety (Baldwin et al., 2017; Burris et al., 2009; Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013), higher education researchers have devoted scholarly attention to the role of wellness as a mitigating factor for student success. Baldwin et al.’s (2017) study of college student wellness at a liberal arts and research university suggests that holistic wellness is comprised of six broad dimensions of health-related behaviors: *Physical Wellness* (e.g., diet, exercise, sleep, smoking, alcohol use, and personal hygiene), *Emotional Wellness* (e.g., self-identity and self-esteem), *Spiritual Wellness* (e.g., sense of peace and connectedness with the universe), *Social Wellness* (e.g., sense of community and social support), *Occupational Wellness* (e.g., job satisfaction), and *Intellectual Wellness* (e.g.,

creative stimulating mental activities). When it comes to the participants in the study, each of them expressed that hip-hop, in some way, has supported some dimension of wellness since transitioning to DSU.

The American College Health Association (2015) reported that 30% of students that stress negatively impacted their academic performance. “Everybody is talking about how college is more stressful,” Stephen said in the focus group, “and I use hip-hop as a source of stress management.” This reminded me of a point Isaac made in his interview, “I can't focus on writing or rapping when I'm in a negative vibe or have a lot of work to do. On the flipside, I feel less stressed when I have time to sit there and rap and stuff. It's like a good de-stressor for me.” He went on to say, “Rap allows me to clear my head.” This is a necessary space for college students eager to find some semblance of normalcy in their new academic environment. Given the unpredictability of shifting academic contexts, it is important to note that Isaac was recently accepted to a study-away public policy internship program in Washington, D.C. During the spring semester, he will live, work, and learn in our nation's capital alongside other political science and honors students from DSU. When asked if he would continue writing while in Washington, D.C., Isaac responded, “Oh yeah, for sure. I'm for sure still gonna write in my downtime, so, like can keep my stress levels down.” For Isaac, rapping seems to be both a pleasurable activity and coping mechanism; something that grounds him amid shifting contexts. Henning et al. (2018) insist that “pleasurable experiences or a sense of feeling good about oneself can reduce the impact of stress and thus enhance wellness” (p. 11). Isaac, who

throughout the research process has asserted that rapping – that is, the writing and performing of hip-hop music – provide him with an abiding sense of joy and confidence.

Performing hip-hop as it would seem, also has an impact on the wellness of others. In his interview, Stephen mentioned that during their weekly cypher, he notices the expressions and dispositions of the onlookers who indulge in the experience. Stephen said, “You can see the stress on their faces when they arrive; even if they don't rap and they sit there, and you can see how our rapping is relieving their stress - maybe they'll give us a word [to rhyme] and they're amazed at how we're able to flip that word [into a verse].” While this is mere speculation, the assumption that hip-hop promotes wellness in the lives of onlookers speaks to the community appeal of hip-hop and its ability to bring people together across difference. As for the rappers themselves, and the other purveyors of hip-hop culture on campus, it seems that the writing and performing of hip-hop promotes emotional awareness and wellbeing as well. According to Eric, his emotional intelligence and wellbeing as a Black man at DSU, hinges on his ability to express himself through hip-hop:

Especially as black men, we're allowed to feel certain emotions: anger, frustration, and happiness [at times] is ok. And that's kind of it. Like it's a really limited set of emotions that we're allowed to, or expected to express, and in turn understand on a deep level. So, like, being depressed or you know, really feeling sad [is unacceptable]. Like those are things where you know, you know them in so far as they're emotions, but you don't really *know* them because you've never really had access to those emotions and experiencing them for yourself and learning to express those in really healthy ways. As a black man, hip-hop is where I can kind of work through those emotions and have a space where I can express those freely in a way that society probably wouldn't otherwise expect me to express.

With so many contemporary psychological studies exploring the efficacy of hip-hop interventions in mental health counseling (Harper & Jackson, 2018; Izadi, 2016; Kobin & Tyson, 2006), there is no wonder why so many counselors who serve in urban communities, and communities of color rely on hip-hop as a means for connecting with young men and destigmatizing mental health. Although hip-hop is not solely responsible for the participants' wellbeing at DSU, the writing and performing of hip-hop music – and hip-hop culture, more broadly – plays a significant role in sustaining their emotional, social, and intellectual wellness.

## CHAPTER VIII

### TRACK VIII: STEP INTO THE CYPHER

My wife, Lauren, insisted I reschedule the coding cypher, but I reached an impasse, like most doctoral students, where all I wanted to do was *finish*. However, bulldozing my way through the research process would've destroyed what I hoped to build. Although I set deadlines for the participants to submit their songs and lyrics, I found myself as coding cypher approached, altering my timeline to accommodate the participants' other, more conflicting responsibilities. Originally, the coding cypher was scheduled for MLK Day, but at that time, one participant, Isaac, had already left for his semester-long internship in Washington, D.C.; another, took an impromptu trip out-of-state, and asked to delay the start of the cypher for a couple of hours, as he sat in traffic; another had a family emergency, and returned home for the holiday weekend, unsure if he'd return to campus in time for the coding cypher; and, on top of all that, there was *still* one participant whose song I'd yet to receive. I remember grabbing my keys that afternoon, with my wife's voice ringing in the recesses of my mind. A medical student and doctoral student herself, Lauren knew, all too well, the rigor and frustration of empirical research and the need to be flexible when things don't go according to plan.

Her surprise gave way to relief when I reentered our home, albeit visibly frustrated, one half hour after my departure. I was 15 miles into my trip to DSU when I received a text from the participant who took the impromptu trip out-of-state. He said he

would return to DSU much later than originally anticipated. At that moment, I pulled over to text the group, saying that it would be best if we postponed the cypher until the following weekend. I felt depleted, and preemptively braced myself Lauren's chorus of "*I told ya' so*" when I walked in the door. However, when I returned, Lauren reassured me, that grace and patience were gifts I owed to myself, but more importantly, the participants. That afternoon, the participants agreed to convene the following Saturday; and it was, indeed, worth the wait.

The night prior to the coding cypher, members of *Rap Club* and *Circle Up* hosted a showcase at a popular performance venue on campus. They performed before a raucous audience of their peers, which to them, was a crowning achievement of the semester. All the participants – except for Isaac, who was in a study-away public policy internship program in Washington, D.C. – performed at the event. Each of the participants in the study, however, laid the groundwork for the three-hour hip-hop showcase in the semester leading up to the event. From producing, writing, and recording the music to shoring up the logistics (e.g. reserving the venue, publicizing, determining set lists, etc.), the participants saw this showcase as an opportunity to cement hip-hop's place within campus culture, and establish their legacy; a theme that, as we would later discover, grounded our investigation of hip-hop in higher education.

The room was kinetic, filled with enough energy to light a city block. At the onset of the coding cypher, we recapped their experience the night before – the rush, the aura, the aftermath of such a cathartic performance before a receptive crowd. Stephen noted that there were a couple of moments on stage where he'd be short of breath, and the

audience – being familiar with his lyrical catalogue – finished his lines. Those moments, the participants said, were surreal. Nick, who admittedly, didn't have many opportunities to perform before the showcase, spoke about how excited he was to find another platform to share his voice. He mentioned *Giraffe's Neck*, and a forthcoming showcase for local artists, and his eagerness to rock the mic. I asked the participants to reflect on the night before, their embodied reactions to the performance, and the culmination of a labor of love. Each participant shared one word, in a rapid-fire warmup, that characterized how they felt about the evening: “relieved” (Nick), “energized” (Stephen), “proud” (Michael), “exhilarated” (Eric). Eric would go on to say, that this type of event would be inconceivable during his first year at DSU, given all that he's learned during his time at the university, and from his peers in *Rap Club* and *Circle Up*. This discourse set the tone for the coding cypher, and what would prove to be, an immersive, engaging experience that elevated the participants to researcher status.

To reiterate, the cypher opened with a brief orientation to coding. Together, we reviewed a concise, yet comprehensive, YouTube video deconstructing the process of coding. At certain points during the video clip, I would pause, and illustrate how I followed a similar process when coding the participants' interviews and focus group conversation. After reviewing the YouTube video, I placed a copy of the research question at the center of the coffee table, encouraging the participants to return to this as they develop their codes and identify themes. I regarded the research question as our North Star, a point of reference, if ever we were unsure about how certain concepts fit within the context of our collective analysis. Next, I shared printed copies of the



conceptual framework, paying close attention to the theories of funds of knowledge and community and cultural wealth, as a means of validating both the lyrical content and literary strategies each participant evokes within their music. Again, I reminded them that if we get lost on this analytical journey that we can always “come back to the mic” and make sense of the data through the prism of the conceptual framework. As mentioned in Track III, participants were asked to write and record a song in response to the prompt: *Describe your college experience*. After the songs were recorded, the participants emailed a copy of their song and the lyrics to me. For the coding cypher, I ensured that everyone’s lyrics, including my own used for demonstrational purposes, were printed triple spaced, with right margins set at three inches. This allowed the participants to highlight, annotate, and sort the lyrics in a way that was easy to read. Upon the conclusion of the coding cypher, I collected copies of the lyrics with their annotations, scanned them, and uploaded them to our encrypted shared folder. It was my hope that they felt empowered to not only determine their own coding strategy, but to remind them that the work we were about to undertake, was not uncommon from what they already do as creators and consumers of hip-hop music. That is, this sort of close reading of each other’s lyrics allows them to construct deeper meaning, draw connections, and support the artistic expression of their fellow emcees.

This introductory lesson gave the participants an opportunity to ask questions, to ensure the accuracy and consistency of their codes. In fielding their questions, I reassured them, that this method of analysis was not at all dissimilar from the ways in which they assess each other’s music. The primary difference here, was that this study specifically

centered the lyrical composition as our primary frame of analysis. After the brief coding lecture (see Appendix C), I distributed pens, highlighters, post-it notes, and copies of each participant's lyrics. Instead of diving directly into coding their work however, I first leaned on my experiences as an emcee to break the proverbial ice. In 2011, I wrote and recorded a mixtape, which featured a song entitled "Undergrad." Although "Undergrad" was not created with the dissertation songwriting prompt in mind, its content and takeaways, (in)directly reflect the nature of the prompt itself – using rap lyrics to make sense of my own experiences in college. I explained that we'd listen to everyone's song twice, coding together in silence, then deliberating aloud as a group in hopes of making connections, and labeling codes in the text. After deliberating, we'd play the songs once again, without deliberation, but checking for consistency and accuracy. I explained that opening with my song, "Undergrad," although not an official part of the data, would be an opportunity to try their hand at coding in community. With enthusiasm in the space at a fever-pitch, I motioned toward my laptop, and pressed play.

Verse 1:

Now everybody wanted the shawty that was the baddest  
But in college it was all about your status, and I had it  
Well that, and a low grade point average  
We'll see who gets the last laugh when your black ass is back in  
The trap...in your momma's kitchen  
With crack residue up in them dishes  
thinking 'bout how life might be different if you finished  
But you didn't...well, that's what it is, and isn't  
College not for everyone?  
Underaged drinking, it was very fun...but we were very young  
Steady reppin' where we from  
They ask, "was it worth it D?"  
Well, college brought out the best and worst in me, life's a university  
But the *intuition* is free...

A student to the game, and still teach em to think  
I see a great leader in the mirror, it's me  
With knowledge at my disposal, like beneath every sink  
But if you ask me, I'm 'bout to blow like gas leak  
'Eff this empty wallet on my ass cheek  
I've never been a spoiled brat or scholarship athlete  
I'm leaving my mark, a legacy, will outlast me  
Now the homies from my crib are appalled or surprised  
I'm so LIVE, you couldn't record if you tried  
But the flow is really kinda morbid sometimes,  
They clappin' four 45s like a quarter to 5  
Only 15 minutes remain in my fame  
I think about all the songs I used to do with Jermaine  
I was only 16, shit, my voice hadn't changed  
But I always had a drive; at times I mashed on the breaks  
Learn from mistakes, and really tried to stay in my lane  
But since June of '06 this is what I became:  
An unruly emcee, you could only hope to contain  
Diploma toting, dope quotes, flow, and focus for days

Chorus:

Living in the present, we just anxious to see  
Exactly what the future holds, what's in it for me?  
Will I be in the streets, or obtain a degree,  
Making moves, or still hanging where I usually be?  
Living in the present, we just anxious to see  
Exactly what the future holds, what's in it for me?  
Will I be in the streets, or obtain a degree,  
Making moves, or still hanging where I usually be?

Verse 2:

You wanna play, we'll call an audible  
Pump up the volume, phenomenal, but nah, don't let it startle you  
All of you better try and recognize the stakes  
The world don't care about your drive, all they see is your race  
The way I get on a track, is polite, 'cause I'm nice  
More like a "Pioneer" than a "stereo" -type  
That's right, don't let society define your condition,  
Whether GED or a doctorate pimpin' –  
You see I'm a still spit it if they not gonna listen,  
They getting' jazzed over bull, like Stockton and Pippen  
Nah, that's not business, but we still move (move)  
Around with burners, feelin' real cool (cool)  
Looking for someone to appeal to (to)

But see the mind is like a real tool (tool)  
Construct a future that fulfils you (you)  
Break it down, and rebuild you (you)  
Break it down, and rebuild you (you)  
Break it down, break it down (down, down)

Chorus:

Living in the present, we just anxious to see  
Exactly what the future holds, what's in it for me?  
Will I be in the streets, or obtain a degree,  
Making moves, or still hanging where I usually be?  
Living in the present, we just anxious to see  
Exactly what the future holds, what's in it for me?  
Will I be in the streets, or obtain a degree,  
Making moves, or still hanging where I usually be?

As the music played, the participants' embodied reactions existed as unspoken term of endearment. As rappers, there is a set of distinct gesticulations that, when translated, essentially mean, "I like what I'm hearing!" For instance, there was the irrefutable "WOWWWW?!" that followed the pun, "life's a university/*but the intuition is free*"; and the fiendish grin proceeding the "Stockton/Pippen/Jazzed/Bull" reference. The participants dropped their pens, shook their heads, and screwed their faces, as if to say, "We see you, we hear you, and we approve this message." I must say, disaggregating myself from my art and my research was tough in this moment. While part of me wanted to survey the room and note the not-so-obvious interactions with the music, the artist in me was bashful, secretly hoping that my own lyricism validated me and my claim to hip-hop culture.

When the dust settled, and the final bars were said, we shifted our collective focus to the goal of coding "Undergrad." We spent five minutes or so, furiously highlighting lyrics that seemed important, within the context of the research question. I encouraged

everyone to come up with their own color-schemes and note taking strategies. The lyrics on their handouts were triple-spaced, so there was ample room to, quite literally, read between the lines, making notes and dissecting the text. Eric noted that this exercise was not unlike things he'd done in English composition courses, reminiscent of the process of peer-editing classmates' writing. The primary difference, however, was that this exercise occurred at a faster, more frenetic pace. Eric mentioned that in some places it was tough to listen and keep up with the metaphors, make notes, and appreciate the music as its own body of work. To that end, I assured him, that each participant was welcome to take the time they needed to arrive at their own conclusions before returning to the circle to decipher the codes. Below is the list of codes derived from our initial examination of "Undergrad":

- Knowledge
- Legacy
- Social life/pressures
- Future (anxiety about the future)
- Reflections (on the past)
- Life lessons
- Benefits of college
- Self-confidence
- Introspection
- Home
- Identity

- Lessons
- Short-term vs. long-term desires
- Dropping out
- Pride
- Competition

These initial codes were written on the whiteboard in our conference room. With each code, participants referred to specific lyrics that justified their rationale. Upon listening to “Undergrad” a second time, we were able to affirm some of the ideas in our conversation. In addition to drawing new connections within the wordplay and conceptual themes, we were able to affectively label key elements of the text and associate them with larger themes related to the navigation of campus life. After another few minutes of self-directed coding time, we returned to the circle to discuss the codes, and determine the meaning of the text, more broadly. Some codes were consolidated, while others were reimagined altogether. While the lyrics provided raw data, there were some instances where the inferences from the text were especially compelling and transparent. From here in Table 8.1 we suggest that hip-hop lyricism provides a space for the emcee to come to some of the following revelations about the college experience.

Table 8.1 Coding Cypher Exercise

<b>Creating hip-hop music in college allows the artist to consider their <u>LEGACY</u>:</b>		
<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Lyrics</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Future (anxiety about the future)</b>	“We’ll see who gets the last laugh when your black ass is back in the trap, in your momma’s kitchen/with crack residue up in them dishes”	These lyrics are loosely related to the idea of the future and the artist’s concern about what’s next – in this case, after deciding to stay/leave school. Moreover, the artist is wrestling with the futility of things like time, fame, degrees and credentials, and intrinsic motivations to persist despite these lingering anxieties.
	“I always had a drive; at times I mashed on the breaks”	
	“Learned from mistakes, and really tried to stay in my lane”	
	“Leaving my mark, a legacy will outlast me”	
	“Only 15 minutes remain in my fame”	
	“Living in the present, we’re just anxious to see/Exactly what the future holds, what’s in it for me?/Will I be in the streets or obtain a degree?/Making moves or still hanging where I usually be?”	
	“Living in the present, we’re just anxious to see/Exactly what the future holds, what’s in it for	

	<p>me?/Will I be in the streets or obtain a degree?/Making moves or still hanging where I usually be?”</p>	
	<p>“You see I’m a still spit it if they not gonna listen”</p>	
	<p>“Construct a future that fulfills you/Break it down, and rebuild you”</p>	
<p><b>Reflections and critical questions (about the past)</b></p>	<p>“Steady reppin where we from”</p>	<p>The artist is posing questions related to the college experience to determine the true value and purpose of a college education. This internal dialogue acts as a soliloquy of sorts, as the artists negotiates past, present, and future before his audience. The artist is contending with poor academic performance, homesickness, a growing affinity for lyricism, and the tension emerging between the demands of college/home/hip-hop.</p>
	<p>“In college it was all about your status, and I had it/Well that, and a low grade point average”</p>	
	<p>“Was it worth it, D?”</p>	
	<p>“They clappin’ four 45s like a quarter to 5”</p>	
	<p>“I think about all the songs I used to do with Jermaine”</p>	
	<p>“I was only 16, shit, my voice hadn’t changed”</p>	
	<p>“Since June of ’06, this is what I became”</p>	



<b>Creating hip-hop music in college allows the artist to develop a sense of their <u>IDENTITY</u>:</b>		
<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Lyrics</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Self-confident/words of affirmation</b>	“I see a great leader in the mirror, it’s me”	Self-affirmation, in a sense, is necessary in an environment such as college. It would seem these affirmations inform the artist’s sense of confidence, manifesting in improved performance within and beyond the classroom. Moreover, these affirmations help the artist overcome perceived stereotypes. Although it is not explicitly stated, perhaps these perceived stereotypes are related to the statistics addressing Black men and their college enrollment, retention, and graduation rates?
	“If you ask me, I’m bout to blow like gas leak”	
	“Never been a spoiled brat or scholarship athlete”	
	“I’m so live, you couldn’t record if you tried”	
	“I always had a drive”	
	“Diploma toting, dope quotes, flow, and focus for days”	
	“The way I get on a track is polite, cuz I’m nice/More like a pioneer than a stereotype”	
<b>Introspection</b>	“I had it... and a low grade point average”	Turning inward creates a space in time for the artist to negotiate the evolution of his identities and how they manifest at different places, spaces, and time during his college experience.
	“Well, that’s what it is, and isn’t college not for everyone?”	
	“College brought out the best and worst in me”	
	“A student to the game, and I teach ‘em to think”	

	<p>“Since June of ’06, this is what I became/An unruly emcee you can only hope to contain”</p>	
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**Creating hip-hop music in college allows artists to consider the idea of SELF IN SOCIETY:**

Subtheme	Lyrics	Notes
<b>Benefits of completing college</b>	“Thinking about how life would be different if you finished/but you didn’t	The artist is working through the social implications and consequences of completing a college degree or leaving early. At this point, it seems as if college has not provided him insight, he doesn’t already possess (e.g. intuition). The artist, because and despite his experience in college, he is earning something valuable, about the world and himself – it is a knowledge that can’t be taken away.
	“Life’s a university, but the intuition is free”	
	“Knowledge at my disposal”	
	“Diploma toting, dope quotes ... focus for days”	
	“Whether a GED or a doctorate, pimpin”	
	“Everybody wanted the shawty that was the baddest”	The artist is contending with peer pressure and its realities when navigating social spaces in undergrad.
	“it was all about your status”	
	“Underaged drinking, it was very fun/but we were very young”	

<b>Peers</b>	“All of you better try and recognize the stakes”	
	“We still move around with burners, feeling real cool/looking for someone to appeal to”	
<b>Social critique</b>	“The world don’t care about your drive/All they see is your race”	The artist in a couple instances, uses metaphor and double entendre to offer pithy social critiques.
	“Don’t let society define your condition/Whether a GED or a doctorate, pimpin”	
	“We still move around with burners, feeling real cool/looking for someone to appeal to”	

This exercise was as informative as it was flattering. I implored the participants to not *gas me* up while coding the text. And yet, in those moments, we all noted how affirming it was to know that someone else regards your lyrical repertoire as clever as it is compelling. Although this deliberation about “Undergrad” was not necessarily representative of the findings in the coding cypher, this exercise provided the requisite scaffolding for the individual, iterative process of coding and the ensuing group deliberation.

Each participant graciously allowed their counterparts the chance to bear witness to uniquely personal reflections on their experiences at DSU. These reflections, in song, were indeed an extension of their identities as hip-hop artists. Each song featured original instrumentation and lyrical composition. While we noticed some fascinating elements within the instrumentation, reflecting on the lyricism was the sole means of our analysis during the coding cypher. Narrowing our focus in this way, allowed us to remain true to the original research question and conceptual framework. The following songs are listed in the order in which they were shared in the coding cypher:

**Nick: “Smooth Sailor”**

Intro:

Gotta get mine, I gotta come up, yeah  
Bring all my family, bring all my brothers, yeah  
Them and they cousins, them and they mothers, yea

Verse 1:

Bring everybody, everybody but me  
How to stay free with this shit  
How to still stay me with the shit  
I done been so me this year  
Still feel like I’m doing too much,  
Still feel like the shit ain’t enough,  
Still feel like believing in trust, hmm  
But I think I just found my answer  
It was in a bad lil’ dancer  
Or maybe in the backwood cancer  
Smoke, smoke  
Nobody showed him the ropes  
I had to pave my road  
They never told me which way to...

Chorus:

Go, flow, you gotta find your own road  
Go, flow, you gotta know what you know  
They never told me which way to go

They never showed me the ropes  
They never show ya how to move  
You gotta find your own road

Verse 2:

Wo, wo, but I think I just found my answer  
It was in a textbook chapter  
I think it was me, it was after  
Instructions for becoming the great,  
And that's just who I wanna be  
But then I take, one down look at my skin,  
And I cannot tell If I'm free,  
Then I take look at my mind  
Yeah yeah, I know that I'm free  
Yeah yeah, I know that I'm me  
So, get on this ultralight beammm  
Yeah, yeah, yeah  
We on an ultralight beam  
Battle between me and a dream

Chorus:

Go, flow, you gotta pave your own road  
Go, flow, you gotta know what you know  
They never tell you which way to go, they never show you the ropes  
They never told you how to move  
You gotta find your own road  
Go, flow, you gotta know what you know  
Flow, soul, you gotta go where you go  
They told u which way to go, they never showed u the ropes,  
They never showed you how to move, you gotta find your own road

### **Isaac: "Sounds like Lies"**

Verse 1:

I loved her cuz she'd keep shooting, even on my knees  
She was the only one to let me know that I could bleed  
I love her and I hate her but she'll always have a piece  
Through the yelling and the fighting, she kept my mind at ease  
Never thought the day would come when I'd decide to leave  
In autumn, fall apart, like the trees with the leaves  
Every time I close my eyes, she's the women that I'll see  
Gotta fight the urge to beg her, baby please, baby please  
I want her but can't have her, turned my life into a tease

Tried to keep her in my arms, did it all to appease  
She wants to make a house a home, I just wanted to lease  
She want commitment in the most, right now, I want that in the least  
Now every time they mention we, I think 'bout my nigga tendencies  
How she was always envying, and I focused on the sins I'd see  
Now I deserve no sympathy and to never see an inch of she  
And she deserves the world, won't forget just what she meant to me

Chorus:

I ruined, I ruined her life  
Just 'cause, I wanted good times  
I said, baby me mine  
Now I know, it all sounds like lies  
Now I know, it all sounds like lies  
Now I know, it all sounds like lies  
Now I know, it all sounds like lies  
Now I know, it all sounds like lies

Verse 2:

Our friends could never understand, how we met with demands  
Relationship was toxic but felt so warm inside our hands  
I told you things about me that I'll never tell again  
You showed me things about you that you'll never show again  
You'll never know what it meant to me to call you my best friend  
I'll never know what it meant to you to call me your man  
Together we had sunk, together we had swam  
For better or for worse, we still have each other's hand  
Together we done lied, together we have cried  
For better or for worse, together we survived  
Now as I sit and think as the days go by  
I think 'bout the mistakes that I made on the ride  
I think about how I became such an ass  
Ruined all the memories that I hoped would last  
Realized that I'm not ready for this task  
And by the time I'm ready, you'll have moved past

Chorus:

I ruined, I ruined her life  
Just cause, I wanted good times  
I said, baby me mine  
Now I know, it all sounds like lies  
Now I know, it all sounds like lies

Now I know, it all sounds like lies  
Now I know, it all sounds like lies  
Now I know, it all sounds like lies

**Eric: "State of Mind"**

Verse:

Ready set go  
G-g-g-g-go away  
Going for the gold, and focusing on the goals to pace  
Golden state, future mold by hand that Klay  
Unsteady with the steps, step back, hesitate  
Always hated when the game was in transition  
Rather pass, but see the vision  
Rather add than cause division  
It's unsettling, my uncle died  
My friend died too  
The die cast, another crash, a bunch of deja vu  
Life so hard, can get off track, you just displace the roots  
And ain't no Jimmy Fallon stagetime can heal those wounds  
Emotions all monsoon  
And looking back, sometimes these classes were just things I'd do  
They ain't made me move  
Learned more from the people in my circle when we run together  
Music making, intellectual debate, and simple pleasures  
Rapping 'bout these new trends, how I'm OJ with the juice man  
And only Sam I love is Toucan  
Homies pulled me to the side said rap about that real stuff  
Know you got some things on mind  
A canvas, man, just spill stuff  
Know you holding back on us, the people need the realness  
Ain't appreciate that before, but looking back that still stuck  
They wanted me to grow, that meant I had to grow up  
On my Willie Beamen, inner demons, make me wanna throw up  
But the real ones always showed support, no question that they show up  
Now the show's up, nearly curtain call  
Is on its way, take one last bow then dip off  
Tied together, memories more secured than a clip on  
A community that's built strong  
Ready set go  
G-g-g-g-go away  
The past once is the future now  
And finally I know my place

Outro:

I learned, I grow  
And fortified my soul  
I learned, I grow  
And fortified my soul  
I learned, I grow  
And fortified my soul  
I learned, I grow

**Stephen: “Black Man, White House”**

Pre-Chorus:

Black man, White House  
Black man, White House  
Black man, White House  
Black man, White House

Chorus:

This White House is a black cocoon  
Built from caterpillars in dunes  
Monarch to pimp a butterfly  
Grew wings and watch this brother fly  
Man, this my metamorphosis  
This circle of life led me to oval offices

Verse 1:

Even though my ancestors built this from brick and mortar  
I'm like the only nigga to live here for four years  
Same ones who built this fortress gave birth to this nation  
Got me in this White House watching Birth of a Nation  
Told me wasn't no space in here for me 'till recent  
But they want me to treat it  
Like it was mine since the begin  
Turns out, we America's ghost authors  
I'ma turn style, I ain't ya token brother  
I'm the chosen brother  
Man, I'm running the game  
Yelling my name as I'm walking the stage  
Studied US and Black history and found out they are one in the same

Pre-Chorus:

Black man, White House  
Black man, White House



Chorus:

This White House is a black cocoon  
Built from caterpillars in dunes  
Monarch to pimp a butterfly  
Grew wings and watch this brother fly  
Man, this my metamorphosis  
This circle of life led me to oval offices

Verse 2:

Only royalty can live in this house  
They pulled they trump card  
And kept us marginalized  
It's awful that I  
Feel a lot like that Obama guy (Black Man, White House)  
Questioning when I leave, what happens after?  
Will the apprentice become the master?  
I feel the same way that the flag does –  
Stained and bloodied  
Hanged in the name of this country  
Playing the Star Spangled loudly  
While I kneel over these char-mangled bodies  
Called a nigga by Nazis  
DSU giving money to sons of confederate soldiers  
No reparations for niggas, instead you in debt if you go here  
Man, we way too broke  
To make Sallie Mae payment notes  
Cancel it, they slangin' dope  
I changed the face of hope  
Proved a Black man could run for things instead of away from those  
Former slaves so  
Son of the soil like papoose so I pour Rémy out  
Hoping my feet don't fail me now  
So, help me God  
[Cues: Star Spangled Banner spliced with DSU Fight Song]

**Michael: “Insecurities”**

Chorus:

Sometimes, I just wanna fall in love  
But then I remember that I ain't really got enough, time, but  
Sometimes I just wanna stay inside  
And its 6pm I missed a day of light  
Another day of life

Verse 1:

I can't even complain  
I'm in a position to gain  
Wealth and notches on the brain  
But does that not come with the pain?  
And the sorrow from the parties that I missed out  
And maybe shade from the shawties that I pissed off?  
Nah, nah that couldn't be more than a couple  
Still not sure what's the meaning of couple  
Not because I was movin' on chicks doin' a shuffle  
Cause I was never shootin' my shot no triple double  
Sometimes I rather ride the bench won't get in the huddle  
Cause the fence I'm tryna climb is an Internal Struggle  
Muffled – like a dog with muzzle  
A lack of confidence has caused me not to go and guzzle  
All the troubled hoes that travel by the busloads  
I haven't got my dose  
But maybe I ain't supposed to  
Maybe I should be postal  
I haven't I'm staying local  
Haven't got the chance to even travel past the coast though  
I'm doing more than the most  
I'm doing more than most bro  
But has that been enough?  
Have I done enough to post tho?  
Have I done enough to post tho?

Pre-Chorus:

That's a story that's a side  
If it were to go online  
You would put it on the line  
Would you sign on the line  
Just to get a chance to shine

Chorus:

Sometimes, I just wanna fall in love  
But then I remember that I ain't really got enough, time, but  
Sometimes I just wanna stay inside  
And its 6pm I missed a day of light  
Another day of life

Bridge:

Sometimes it's hard to remember  
Where you been, where you been where you, where you been

But sometimes you've got to remember,  
You can win, you can win, you can win  
That's all it's been all it's been all it's been  
You'll never bend never bend never bend  
You can win, you can win, you can win  
You'll never bend never bend never bend  
That's all it's been  
That's all it's been

Outro:

That's all it's been, I can't hide my common sense  
We ain't spent, we just all got common sins  
Hope I'm sayin' something we can comprehend  
But sometimes it's something that I can't prevent cause  
I can't be too independent  
Not dependent on mothers  
Not dependent on brothers  
Not dependent on others  
Not dependent music  
But I'm still gon' pursue it  
Not dependent on mothers  
Not dependent on brothers  
Not dependent on others  
Not dependent music  
But I'm still gon' pursue it

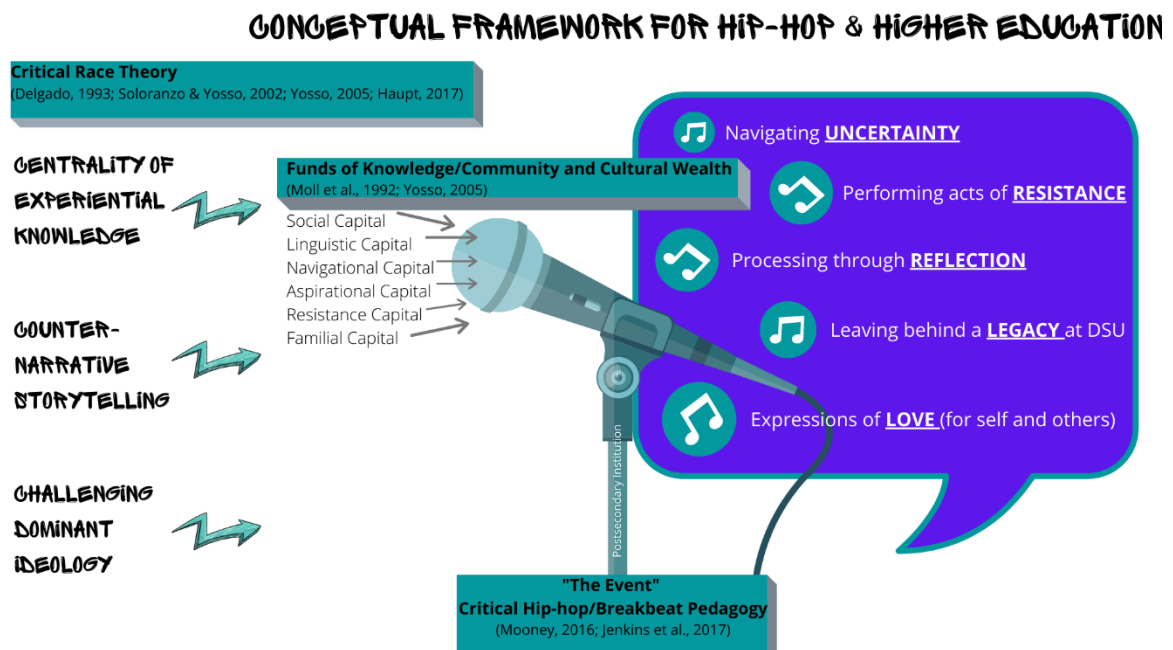
Together, we spent nearly five hours coding, reclassifying, and sorting data. After listening to each song twice, we reviewed our collective findings to determine consensus and consistency. Throughout this process, we added words to our whiteboard, consolidating similar codes, and expounding upon others. This rapid exchange intensified as the cypher continued, as participants were making new connections to new songs. It is worth noting, that they did not share their work prior to the cypher. So, in addition to the coding, the participants spent significant time affirming each other's creative output. It was as if the adoration shared onstage the night before, manifested once again, in our hallowed space. There was something uniquely electric about coding cypher, as I

witnessed the participants sharing new songs with one another for the first time. Isaac, at the end of the coding cypher mentioned that this exercise “felt like therapy.” As you may recall, Isaac – who admittedly struggles with expressing emotion – provided an intensely personal take on his college experience, chronicling his complicated romantic relationship. The significance of his vulnerability was not lost among his peers. They heralded him for being bold enough to *go there* emotionally, while challenging him to think about the what it means to grow with and/or apart from his partner, and the cost of maturity when comes at the expense of those we claim to love. These pauses for reflexivity were essential to helping the artists see their own work through the lens of others. Although I was unsure about how analyzing one’s own work would impact the reliability of the data, I was reminded that auto-ethnographers rely on these self-referential methodologies to deconstruct the self in relation to larger, social phenomena (Goodall, 2000). The participants commented on their own work, and yet, were so committed to the process of coding, that they were able to reimagine their own lyricism through the lens of their peers. At the conclusion of our deliberation, our whiteboard, now full of codes (see Appendix C), was consolidated into distinct categories that mapped onto the mic; that is, our original conceptual framework. Bringing it back to the mic allowed us to connect the lyrics with other established theoretical frameworks in education, that corroborate the original hypothesis which claims that the writing, recording, and performing of hip-hop music is both emotionally restorative *and* educationally viable. Figure 8.1 illustrates the findings of the coding cypher. According

to the participants, creating and performing hip-hop lyricism on campus allows students to:

1. Contemplate their legacy at DSU
2. Navigate uncertainty
3. Perform acts of resistance
4. Process meaning through reflection
5. Express love (for self and others)

Figure 8.1 Modified Conceptual Framework Following the Coding Cypher



### Upon Which it Stands: Leaving a Legacy at DSU

I believe it is important to start here because the idea of legacy is transcendent across the participants' lyrics. In their own way, each participant pontificates what they hope to leave behind at DSU. Said differently, we saw each of the songs – my own

included – pondering the social, emotional, and academic implications of our music, and our collective responsibility to create from a place of authenticity. Furthermore, it made sense to map this concept onto the microphone stand, as each of the participants has made use of the institution’s resources (e.g., coursework, the audio lab, campus showcases) to not only create hip-hop on campus, but come to understand hip-hop culture as an integral part of their college experience. The accessibility of these resources speaks directly to Mooney’s (2016) conceptualization of breakbeat pedagogy. “The break, manipulated by Kool Herc for the sake of dance,” according to Mooney (2016), “represents the most elemental nature of hip-hop” (p. 53). He challenges educators to create pedagogical sites that sustain this culture of breaking, suspending the space and time of traditional teaching and learning, exploring what Coval et al. (2015) considers, “a break from the norm... a break in time... a rupture in narrative... a signifying of something new” (p. xvii). In many ways, negotiating their legacies in song is a poetic reclamation of their educational experience.

The participants take up this conversation on legacy in various ways. Nick, for instance, did not disclose that he was a first-generation college student in any of our previous meetings. However, when we heard his chorus, “Go, flow, you gotta know what you know/They never told me which way to go/They never showed me the ropes/They never show you how to move/You gotta find your own road,” I was inspired to ask whether he was the first in his family to attend college. Having spent the bulk of my career as a practitioner of higher education serving first-generation college students, his ability to capture the experience of this population so succinctly, led me – and others to

believe – that admission to college and *acceptance* were not one in the same. The experiences of first-generation college students are well documented (Bell & Santamaría, 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012) studies of higher education, and thus, deeply connected to Nick’s assertion, that one’s ability to successfully navigate campus life requires access to certain forms of capital. “They never told me which way to go” speaks to a sort of hidden curriculum (Margolis, 2001) that dictates a set of habits, norms, and dispositions that govern social life and acceptance within historically oppressive institutions – like colleges and universities. And while the institution – in this case, DSU – seemingly renders students from historically underrepresented populations socially, emotionally, and academically inept upon enrolling at the university, Nick concludes the song with a timely shift in tone. The lyric, “You gotta find your own road” is somehow uniquely foreboding yet reaffirming. It’s as if the line itself is a tightrope of empowerment, stretched precariously across an ocean of obscurity. He walks that line with ease, seamlessly tethering the disparate parts of his life – from home and college – in such a way that instructs students from similar backgrounds to somehow follow his footsteps while charting their own path. Interestingly, when viewed through the prism of college admissions, the word *legacy* bears deeper meaning. Although Nick is a first-generation college student, if he is to graduate from DSU, he then acquires a more traditional form of capital that imbues the privilege of legacy status, upon future generations of his family that may consider applying to DSU. Nick after all, begins the song by saying, “Gotta get mine... Bring all my family, bring all my brothers, yeah/Them and they cousins, them and they mothers.” Such a declaration reflects his

desire to make a way for himself in college and how important it is to bring his family along for the ride. Ironically, although the song is entitled “Smooth Sailor,” Nick reminds us that the college experience for first-generation students is anything but that. However, the exploration of his collegiate legacy evokes a confidence within Nick that motivates him to pursue his degree.

Conversely, Michael’s song, “Insecurities,” takes a different, more introspective approach to deconstructing the notion of legacy. Throughout his first verse, he poses several critical questions; perhaps none were more important than the question posed in the final quatrain: “I’m doing more than most/I’m doing more than most bro/But has that been enough?/Have I done enough to post though?” After he spends several bars reflecting some of the social elements of the college experience – via parties, traveling, and the triviality of romantic relationships – he acknowledges that all of his efforts in his time in college will somehow be reduced to a post on a social media platform. “I’m doing more than most... Have I done enough to post?” reflects the insecurity of a generation of that came of age online. Michael repeats the question once again before the pre-chorus; it is a lingering inquiry that rests uneasily on the spirit. Despite all that Michael does to fit in, engage his peers, and adjust to the social pressures of college life, sometimes he just wants to “stay inside.” Our conversation in the cypher reaffirmed the idea that the content that eventually makes its way to social media is so carefully curated, that we are left to wonder whether we can believe what we see on our respective timelines. Paradoxically, if something is not posted online, we are also left to wonder if a *thing* really happened at all. For an introvert like Michael, these mental gymnastics are exhausting to the point of



immobilization. And yet, he goes on to acknowledge that this desire for exposure is consistent with his musical ambition: “That’s a story, that’s a side/If it were to go online, would you put it on the line?/Would you sign on the line/Just to get a chance to shine?” He is essentially asking himself, is he willing contend with his insecurities to achieve conventional success as an artist, whilst sharing his authentic, unfiltered self with the world.

To that end, we also noticed Eric broaching the topic of authenticity and community as it relates to legacy. He raps, “Homies pulled me to the side, said rap about that real stuff/Know you got some things on mind, a canvas, man, just spill stuff/Know you holding back on us, the people need the realness.” Like Michael, Eric is wrestling with the concept of what’s real. Rather than “rapping bout these new trends,” Eric’s peers inspired him to showcase a lyrical repertoire that goes deeper than conventional tropes of hip-hop artists. Because Eric is the lone senior of our group, many of his comments – from the interview, focus group, and coding cypher – embody a bittersweet nostalgia. On the one hand, Eric harbors a profound, unconditional admiration for his peers in the hip-hop community; on the other, he is reticent to leave the community behind: “But the real ones always showed support/No question that they show up/Now the show’s up,... curtain call is on its way/Take one last bow then dip off.” The thought of leaving this community weighs heavy on his mind; it is a burden he, at times in the song, seems unprepared to lift. That is, until the last line of his verse: “The past once is the future, now finally I know my place.” This calming reassurance about his commitment to the craft, will sustain him in his life beyond DSU. Eric and Michael demonstrate how hip-

hop allows a space for reflection and introspection, while actively asserting how they hope to be remembered by their peers in their time on campus.

Stephen – whose social consciousness was on full display – offers his take on legacy by providing a scathing critique of DSU and its contentious history with slavery and systemic racism. In one fell swoop, Stephen weaponizes four words – “Black man, White House” – to slay the establishment. It is as if Stephen is unable to reconcile what his legacy *can* be at DSU, until he unpacks the centuries-long dehumanization of Black bodies on campus. Because DSU is a PWI, it is – both literally and metaphorically – a White House, and Stephen’s identity as a Black man within the institution is as undervalued as it is politicized. In spite of the current climate in higher education that espouses the mission-based rhetoric of diversity and inclusion (Feldner, 2006), Stephen quips, “Told me wasn’t no space in here for me ‘til recent/But they want me to treat it, like it was mine since the begin.” Many colleges take up diversity efforts without having acknowledged or attempted to reconcile their active participation in, or complicity with, systemic racism. Simply admitting more historically underrepresented students is moot without proper institutional support, and an understanding of the historical context which got them there. Though Stephen, as the character in the song, undergoes a “metamorphosis” that “led to oval offices,” the institution too must undergo a similar transformation in order to live up to its claim of inclusion. In the cypher, the participants concurred that being a Black man at DSU was not unlike being a Black man in America. And yet, there was still a remnant of hope in his breath, as Stephen draws parallels to himself and President Barack Obama, who, in his own right, navigated a space that was

not historically designed for his success, or for that matter, his survival. That same hope is evident in Michael's bridge: "Sometimes it's hard to remember where you been, where you been, where you been/But sometimes you've got to remember, you can win, you can win, you can win... never bend, never bend, never bend." Wielding lyricism in this way is a *modus operandi* for self-affirmation and actualization. The legacy of these emcees, we believe, is one of hope, a reminder that being authentic, vulnerable, critically conscious, and committed to the community (e.g., family, friends, and fellow creatives) is essential to the successful navigation of the college experience.

### **"You Gotta Know What You Know": College and the Art of Navigating Uncertainty**

It is no secret that the college experience – for many students – is steeped in uncertainty. Whether navigating a new social environment or coming to terms with new expectations and academic rigor, student's ability to adapt to their new surroundings is critical to their success. While many institutions of higher education place the onus on students to assimilate to their new environment, this project reflects the ways in which students – in this case, rappers – manipulate campus resources for the purpose of cultural exploration, expression, and preservation. Hip-hop in this way, is an outlet for the participants to make sense of the unknown. Upon an initial review of the lyrics, it seems as if hip-hop is the only thing, at times, that makes sense. It is a skill, not entirely unto itself. Rather it is a set of lenses each participant activates to see themselves amid the darkness; illuminating the self in relation to others. Therefore, the first theme that emerged in the coding cypher was: Navigating Uncertainty.

Perhaps that notion is best illustrated by Isaac in “Sounds Like Lies.” “My relationship with my girlfriend,” Isaac said to me in a text message after submitting his song, “has been the biggest element of college.” In the coding cypher that message was heard loud and clear. Isaac, typically the more emotionally reserved emcee, surprised his peers with this intensely personal display of lyricism. While hip-hop has been proven to forge relationships in college (see Track V), Isaac demonstrates how hip-hop – especially its poetic aesthetic – can be used to analyze those relationships as well. “I love her, and I hate her,” Isaac raps, “but she’ll always have a piece.” This duality implies that an inherent misalignment in the desires of his heart: on the one hand, he believes this person to be significant; on the other, he is conflicted between the desires of his heart and her long-term romantic aspirations. He continues, “She want commitment in the most, right now, I want that in the least/Now every time they mention *we*, I think ‘bout nigga tendencies.” I noticed each of the participants reacted to this line in various ways – nods, smirks, and confined laughter – affirming that there exists a shared understanding of the behaviors, habits, and dispositions that define “nigga tendencies.” After collecting the materials at the coding cypher, I verified that half of the handouts I collected, had this phrase circled, highlighted, or coded in Isaac’s lyrics. And because each of us identified as Black, and has – at some point, used the n-word in our music – we were free to move beyond the veneer of political correctness to unpack this loaded phrase. “Nigga tendencies,” in this context, by our definition, is a set of behaviors that reflects a willful, selfish disregard for the socially prescribed rules of monogamy. “Relationship was toxic but felt so warm inside our hands” reflects his attempt to reciprocate love for his partner

while contending with their apparent inability to *let go* of those behaviors that caused one another pain. As he moves through the verses, we find Isaac falling deeper into the gray – a liminal space between his mind and heart, thinking about “the mistakes [he] made on the ride.”

This liminality, as it relates to romantic relationships is also present in Michael’s “Insecurities.” He notes that “But does that not come with the pain?/And the sorrow from the parties that I missed out/And maybe shade from the shawties that I pissed off? Nah, nah that couldn’t be more than a couple/Still not sure what’s the meaning of couple.” This soliloquy invites listeners to ponder these critical questions alongside Michael, who, in his college years, has wrestled with his own set of insecurities as it relates to finding love. Such a feat seems difficult in a space and time where his classmates are more concerned with partying and posting on social media. His use of the phrase “internal struggle/muffled, like a dog with muzzle” is a metaphor for how insecurities – or uncertainty, in a general sense – prohibit people from blurring the boundaries between isolation and community. Albeit a different context, Eric goes as far as to say, “My inner demons make me wanna throw up” in a cleverly crafted reference to Jamie Foxx’s character, Willie Beamen, in the 1999 film, *Any Given Sunday*. Willie Beamen, a backup, journeyman quarterback who is thrust into a starting lineup becomes notorious for vomiting prior to each game. Although he performs well on the field and exceeds expectations throughout the season, “throwing up” for Beamen – and in a way, Black men – is an embodied response to the repeated suppression of emotions. In each instance, the participants rationalize uncertainty through a fearless display of lyrical vulnerability.

Because the desire for intimate relationships, holds such an importance in the college lives of Isaac and Michael, it is undeniable that hip-hop and its poetic aesthetics are a useful mechanism for introspection and self-assessment.

The participants also use lyricism to demonstrate their negotiation of uncertainty in other social and academic spaces as well. In a well-crafted basketball metaphor, Eric speaks of college as an opportunity to “mold the future by hand” like Klay – a play on words, referencing the Golden State Warriors’ all-star guard, Klay Thompson. With the step-back jump shot serving as one of his signature moves, Eric goes on to regard his maneuvering as “unsteady,” often “step[ping] back” or “hesitat[ing],” opting to “pass” on opportunities, rather than pursue them, much like Michael in “Insecurities.” This reticence to fully engage with his collegiate aspirations is perhaps informed by the “unsettling” deaths of his uncle and friend, both casualties of vehicular collisions. Consequently, this haunting sense of déjà vu impedes the mental wellbeing Eric requires to be fully present, and attentive his performance on stage and in the classroom.

Similarly, in yet another vulnerable display of self-consciousness, Nick raps, “Still feel like I’m doing too much/Still feel like the shit ‘aint enough.” This couplet epitomizes how many first-generation college students feel when attempting to adapt to their new learning environment (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014; Yosso et al., 2009). This line demonstrates the sense of hopelessness felt when students try their best but reap no reward for their labor. Rather than retreat in the face of hopelessness, Nick proactively seeks the answers that may nurture within himself, the capital necessary to navigate the uncertainties of life at DSU. Although Nick “thinks [he’s] found the answers” to the

mysteries of college life in “a bad lil dancer, . . . or backwood cancer, smoke,” he realizes that exposure to these vices is but a small part of what it means to be engaged in the collegiate social scene. Ironically, the answers he seeks are not found in a “textbook chapter” either. From his perspective, students like Nick are often conditioned to believe that college courses offer “instructions for becoming great.” While that may be the case when it comes to equipping students with mainstream forms of academic and social capital, Nick does not consider the accessibility of power and privilege to be absolute freedom. “I take one look at my skin, and I cannot tell if I’m free” is a damning critique of the system of higher education, a system that promises social mobility for Nick, so long as he is willing to sacrifice his cultural and spiritual knowledge. As the “battle between me and a dream” wages on, Nick remains on an “ultralight beam” – place of peace, faith, and peak spirituality. Such an act is how he, in fact, paves his own road and knows what he *knows*. In these lines, Nick – like all participants in the study – rely on lyricism to negotiate the liminal spaces between conflict and resolution, tension and contentedness and, perhaps most of all, despair and hope.

### **“I ‘Aint Your Token Brother, I’m the Chosen Brother”:** Performing Acts of **Resistance**

For communities of color, resistance capital is necessary for sustaining self-efficacy when navigating historically oppressive institutions (Hartlep, Hensley, et al., 2017; Whitaker & Grollman, 2019). That fact is especially true for Black students, staff, and faculty at PWIs. In many ways, acts of resistance empower historically underrepresented communities on campus when the institution fails to meet their needs;

which make this concept an important theme from the coding cypher This begs the question, what exactly are these participants resisting?

That answer is perhaps most evident in Stephen's "Black Man, White House," which, ironically enough, was recorded in the study lounge of his residence hall. In other words, if we take the sociologically term whiteness literally, Stephen, a Black man, records this song in a "white house." The song opens with a soft voice repeatedly chanting, "Black man, white house." The slow, methodical cadence induces a sort of trance that compels us to question what that white house *is*, and the purpose the Black man serves within it. When Stephen's voice finally enters the track, it embodies a sort of defiance of both the beat and the system of higher education itself, which he so wittingly deconstructs. Although Stephen reaps the social benefits of his college education, he refers to himself – and his ancestors who, physically "built this fortress" known as DSU – as "America's ghost authors." From this line, it seems that DSU may want him to believe that this institution was built *for* him; Stephen, a "ghost author," resists this claim, reminding the listener that this place was built *by* him, instead. This haunting reminder that his "ancestors built [DSU] from brick and mortar" pushes back against perfunctory declarations of diversity and inclusion in higher education, an industry that has depoliticized these formerly contentious terms. After all, what is diversity and inclusion without public memory and reconciliation?

Regarding public memory, Stephen's lyricism maintains a posture of defiance, resisting the temptation to forget the permanence of racism (Bell, 1993) amid the illusion of progress. Upon "studying US and Black history" and discovering that they are "one in



the same,” Stephen continues to exercise resistance to the dominant narrative that downplays DSU’s protection of its Confederate history. In calling out the institution – a school that supplied rebel soldiers to the Confederate army – Stephen raps with a similar hint of rebellion on his breath, ultimately justifying his condemnation of the DSU’s longstanding financial association with Confederate sympathizers and interest groups. He continues his scathing critique of DSU and the institution of higher education more broadly, likening his enrollment at DSU to a form of reparations. Although it may seem that there is equitable access to opportunity in higher education, Stephen reminds us, there are “no reparations for niggas, instead you in debt if you go here.” In this context, “niggas” is less a racial term, and more related to social class and economic mobility. Though we, as educators and practitioners, often regard the college education as a pathway to economic mobility (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010), Stephen reminds us of the financial tradeoffs associated with college costs. With American college students owing more than \$1.3 trillion in student loans, it is no wonder why Stephen harbors such skepticism toward the neoliberal agenda which compels young people to pursue higher education (Akers & Chingos, 2016; Hartlep, Eckrich, & Hensley, 2017). Stephen raps, “Man, we way too broke/to make Sallie Mae payment notes/Cancel it, they slingin’ dope.” However bleak the circumstance may be, there is still an inherent economic value in completing a college degree. In doing so, Stephen “changed the face of hope/Proved a Black man could run for things” – an homage to Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. For all intents and purposes, Stephen – like Obama – is fueled by hope, because he too is a Black man navigating white spaces. His defiance of this history then

is informed by this notion of critical hope – a hope that is both Socratic and audacious (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

Critical hope acts as a form of resistance, which manifests within the participant's songs. Even Nick's plea to "find your own ropes/find your own road" is a rallying cry for students who, for generations, have been left out of the hegemonic, often toxic campus climate, that privileges some ways of being over others. Far too often, it is the students from these underrepresented backgrounds who carry the weight of assimilation; negotiating a tension between what they've always known and what they must learn, in order to successfully navigate institutions governed by whiteness. To that end, Michael exercises resistance to hegemony in his own way. As mentioned in a previous section, his bridge, "You can win, you can win, you can win/that's all it's been all it's been all it's been/you'll never bend, never bend, never bend," exists as a declaration of hope. This sort of self-affirmation is sustaining in a long, grueling journey toward a degree and a sense of purpose. Both Nick and Michael express resistance in style as well. Although it is difficult to capture this sentiment without access to the recordings, it is worth noting that Nick and Michael were the only participants who performed their songs with a melody. Though Nick would classify his melodies as *flow*, rather than what we would consider to be signing, his ability to carry the tune while addressing the pitfalls of being a first-generation college student is a testament to his music and how he uses it to overcome educational obstacles. Michael on the other hand, opens "Insecurities" with a catchy, upbeat melody that challenges listeners to embrace diffidence, rather than retreat from it. Sonically, within the coding cypher, we were challenged to fall into the melody – its

intricacies, the lyricism, and the musicianship – nodding our collective heads, while resisting the idea that acknowledging our insecurities is somehow a liability. For me, I was reminded of a line from Common’s (2005) song, “Real People,” that goes: “It’s like a colored song, that keep keepin’ on/I guess knowing I’m weak is when I’m really being strong/Somehow through the dust, I can see the dawn.” Like Common, Nick and Michael bring their insecurities to the forefront, as if to say, who we are is, and always has been, enough.

#### **“The Mistakes I Made on the Ride”: Processing Meaning Through Reflection**

Reflection is an antecedent to action. This theme of reflection was salient, not only in the coding cypher, but throughout the study. It’s as if the art of lyricism is itself a form of active remembering, looking back as a means for moving ahead. According to Freire (1970/2000), reflection is the first step of implementing problem-based pedagogies, otherwise known as praxis. Often regarded as the process of reflection and action, praxis intended to transform historically oppressive social structures by imbuing historically oppressed groups with a sense of critical awareness of their condition within an overarching struggle for liberation. Praxis, therefore, is an iterative, ongoing process that moves subjects from theory to practice to assessment, and back again. Usually understood through the lens of teacher-student dynamics, praxis, in this study, manifests in the form of lyricism aimed at the self in relation to the learning environment, or self in relation to others.

Take the latter for instance. Isaac’s second verse is a reflective proclamation, recounting the ways in which he’s fallen short as a partner in a romantic relationship, a

bond that has come to characterize his experience in college. Lyrically, he anchors his bars in the past tense, renegotiating, reliving, and reevaluating his romantic missteps. “I told you things about me that I’ll never tell again,” Isaac raps, which explains, at least in part, his reluctance to express vulnerability and why he self-identifies as emotionally closed. He continues, “You’ll never know what it meant to me to call you my best friend,” further capturing his frustration with his inability to express emotion. In an interesting display, Isaac, who in the previous verse admitted to “want[ing] commitment in the least,” uses the nuptial phrase “for better or for worse” twice in the second verse. This demonstrates the ways in which the love he once felt for his partner, though unspoken, was transcendent. Between verses one and two, Isaac relies on his reflectiveness to critically analyze the long-term consequences of fulfilling short-term desires. Though phrases like “nigga tendencies” and “I became such an ass” leaves much to the imagination, by the end of the second verse, Isaac is remorseful for “the mistakes that [he] made on the ride.” Realizing that “I’m not ready for this task,” according to Isaac, is the byproduct of critical reflection. And while it remains unclear as to what action Isaac will take having reached this conclusion, he has at least begun to own his mistakes, a necessary precursor for forgiveness, reciprocity, and reconciliation.

Conversely, it is important to consider at which point reflection dissolves into to overthinking, ultimately becoming a ceaseless cycle of rumination *without* action. For Michael, this deep contemplation is demonstrated in the chorus: “Sometimes, I just wanna fall in love/But then I remember, that I ‘aint really got enough, time, but/sometimes I just wanna stay inside/and it’s 6pm, I missed a day of light/Another day

of life.” It is as if Michael’s reflections on his time at DSU reveal that the spoils of the commonly portrayed college experience – “parties” and “shawties” – were perhaps not meant for him to pursue. Moreover, his reflections on love and legacy take up so much of his mental capacity, that these opportunities for socialization, always seem to pass him by. Although it is not as apparent through the written word, it is worth noting that after Michael sings “I missed a day of light/Another day of life,” there is a brief pause, between the chorus and the first line of the first verse. There is a slight reverb – or echo – on Michael’s vocals, which allows the lyric to slice through the silence like a light in the fog.

Similarly, for Eric, his initial reflections on college life led him to a dark place, reimagining the passing of his uncle and close friend. The violent, back-to-back nature of their deaths drove Eric into an existential crisis, an inescapable morbidity that clouded his college transition. Questioning the value of college and the meaning of life compelled Eric to reflect on the moments and memories in college that brought him joy. Upon “looking back,” Eric realizes, “sometimes these classes were just things I’d do/They ‘aint made me move.” Instead, Eric “learned more from the people in [his] circle” – a concept that is not dissimilar from theorists in cultural foundations of education (Tozer et al., 2010) who would agree that, within the context of school, teaching and learning is not merely limited to the classroom. “Music making, intellectual debate, and simple pleasures” lead the listener to believe that rapping, for Eric, has something to do with sustaining a sense of joy. It is as if rapping allows Eric to find light in the darkness, navigating thoughts on mortality and his time in college more broadly. The light these

participants experience through hip-hop, manifests in the form of critical hope. Michael reminds us that “sometimes it’s hard to remember where you’ve been,” and yet, as Duncan-Andrade (2009) might insist, knowing where we’ve been is prerequisite for informing a sense of material hope, that is, the sense of control young people have when they are given the resources to “deal with the forces that affect their lives” (Syme, 2004, p. 3). Processing emotions and meaning, therefore, begins with reflection. For these participants, hip-hop provides the medium through which they organize their thoughts, aspirations, and next steps toward liberation.

#### **“Fortify my Soul”: Expressing Love of Self and Others**

Admittedly, when designing the conceptual framework, I did not think much about the placement of the microphone stand. What mattered most to me at that time – long before participants were recruited, and the data collection was underway – was ensuring that each of the preexisting theories fit together cohesively. After the coding cypher, I reviewed the theories, their points of intersection, and how the theories were illustrated in the diagram. Although I’d like to think there was intentionality behind all the subtle details of the conceptual framework illustration, one revelation was not obvious until performing my final analysis. Notice the placement of the microphone stand and how it wraps around the concept of counternarrative storytelling. Colleges and universities support counternarratives in principle but not necessarily in practice. When it comes to challenging dominant ideologies and centering students’ experiential knowledge on campuses, students of minoritized identities are left to contend with the consequences of demanding accountability of those in power. While the institution may

provide a platform for students to express these counternarratives, colleges and universities may be unprepared for the fallout associated with centering student knowledge and challenging the dominant ideologies that govern campus life.

This emergent theme of – Expressions of Love for Self and Others – is best understood through the lens of critical race theory and the concept of counternarrative storytelling. According to Hiraldo (2010), counter-storytelling – or counternarratives – is a framework that legitimizes the racial and subordinate experiences of marginalized groups (p. 53). While their songs, save for “Black Man, White House,” don’t necessarily rage against the machine, they do resist mainstream narratives on campus and in hip-hop more broadly. “Smooth Sailor” unearths the realities of a first-generation college student, desperate to make sense of who he is within the social landscape of DSU. It is as if questioning his own uncertainty strengthened his resolve. By the end of the song, Nick realizes the war he is waging happens in an arena of his own design. He knows that liberation is a habit of the mind and not something that can be acquired and taken away. These displays of lyrical ingenuity set in motion a process of unmasking the realities of a college experience that exists beyond the boundaries of institutional influence and surveillance. As hip-hop lyricists, the participants found an improbable balance between observing the university and themselves through a critical lens, while constructing an ethos of hope and authenticity. These counternarratives are, in many ways, expressions of love for self and others. For the participants, such a declaration of love, is a radical act.

When viewed through the lens of critical race theory, love is not an empty statement cloaked in passivity. Instead, bell hooks (1994) insists that we, as creators of

Black culture, must return to “an ethic of love as the platform on which to renew a progressive anti-racist struggle, and offering a blueprint for black survival and self-determination” (p. 291). Love, as articulated by Rose (2008), must be affirmational and transformational, “affirm[ing] us fundamentally” while also “push[ing] us past our comfort zone, that demands us to wrestle with standards and challenges growth in the interests of society’s well-being” (p. 272). It’s not so much that each song itself exists as a counternarrative. Rather, each participant approaches the art of counternarrative storytelling from their own experiential framework and linguistic repertoire. At the core of each story, is an ethic of love; one that necessitates a deeper understanding of self in relation to the world.

For example, though each participant incorporated metaphors within their lyrics, Stephen’s use of extended metaphor has an elastic quality, stretching the limits of language and analogy so much so, that the listener is compelled to catch something new each lap around the track. Although Stephen weaponizes his wordplay, exposing DSU and its intergenerational hypocrisies, his critiques are not unlike those of James Baldwin (1955) who is famously quoted as saying, “I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually” (p. 9). Rather than externally processing who he’s become in relation to the university, Eric on “State of Mind” uses his gift of metaphor to rationalize the tragic deaths of his uncle and close friend, and how it has impacted his transition to DSU. By referring to their legacies as “roots,” Eric cleverly shifts to a “Jimmy Fallon stage time” reference, which of course, is a nod to legendary hip-hop band, The Roots, which plays the Tonight Show



hosted by Jimmy Fallon. However, the root metaphor does not end there. From these roots – that is, his relationships with family and peers, both living and passed away – Eric can “learn,” “grow,” and perhaps most importantly, “fortify [his] soul.” These relationships for Eric and the other participants, were both foundational and necessary for success in college. As for Isaac, who recounts the (d)evolution of a love story, he too makes good use of metaphor throughout the text. However, his most powerful rhetorical device was that of paradox. After reflecting on past indiscretions, Isaac finally understands that the moments he shared with his partner – faded memories and feigned commitments – are insufficient and unsustainable. The hook, “Now I know, it all sounds like lies” is more than a startling revelation. Instead, Isaac’s honesty with himself as he openly lies to his partner, demonstrates a paradox of great consequence. It is as if Isaac is saying, “Now [after all this time], I know it all sounds like lies.” This sort of admission by a rapper challenges conventional depictions of hypermasculinity in hip-hop that seldom wrestle with the remorse of romantic indiscretion.

Other participants’ songs challenged tropes of mainstream hip-hop artists as well. Michael’s ability to both embrace and express diffidence – that manifests in somewhat debilitating sense of self-consciousness – is in direct conflict with the way many Black cisgender, heterosexual men often depict themselves in rap music. “Hard” heterosexual masculinity according to Low (2011) is marked by resourcefulness, pragmaticism, and coldness. His inclination to take a critical stance and question his own apprehension with establishing meaningful relationships is reminiscent of a young Kanye West (2004) who on his first album, ironically entitled *The College Dropout*, boasted, “Man I promise, I’m

so self-conscious... we all self-conscious, I'm just the first to admit it." "Insecurities" and West's hit single, "All Falls Down," have a lot in common. Aside from the tempo and upbeat nature of the melody, both Michael's and West's lyricism explores two hegemonic institutions – college and the music industry – through a critical perspective, that is as damning as it is catchy. As much as declaring one's own self-consciousness is defies traditional tropes of masculinity in hip-hop, Michael was the only participant to use the word "hoes" in reference to a group of women, saying, "I haven't gotten my dose/But maybe I 'aint supposed to?" He is, in his own way, challenging dominant ideologies that severely limit the ways in which women are represented in rap music, by questioning – and ultimately resisting – the "pimp-ho" dyad has saturated commercial hip-hop (Rose, 2008). As it turns out, interrogating his insecurities allowed Michael the ability to experience the liberation of self-love. No longer is he "dependent on others." Instead he is going to "pursue it" – that is, his love of music – at all costs.

Upon performing this final analysis of the coding cypher, it became clear that the concept of radical love grounded this lyrical exercise. Freire (1970/2000) reminds us that love is "the foundation of dialogue" (p. 89). And what, after all, is a cypher but a dialogue with rhythm and flow? According to Mayo (2013), this interpretation of love is the basis for all good teaching and emancipatory work. Consequently, having reviewed field notes and reflected on the experience, I was reminded of lyrics from another Common (2005) song, entitled "Love is..." with a hook that goes: "How beautiful love can be/On the streets, love is hard to see/It's a place I got to be/Loving you is loving me." As Common seeks to make sense of what it means to actively be engaged in the act of

love, he, in the first verse, goes on to say, “As men, we were taught to hold it in/That’s why we don’t know how ‘til we older men/If love is a place, I’m a go again/At least now, now I know to go within.” Defining love for the legendary emcee, is impossible without first deconstructing the ways in which men, especially in hip-hop, are not socialized to love one another; let alone themselves. Common’s (2005) stance, like the participants in the study, challenges dominant ideologies that render emotionality and masculinity inherently incongruent. Witnessing these five men pour into each other so selflessly throughout the research process revealed that what lies beneath rap’s commercially hardcore exterior, for these artists, is an ethic of love. It is an emancipatory approach to building community in historically oppressive spaces; spaces unintended for their survival. Love is Isaac’s ruthless honesty. Love is Eric’s introspection and Michael’s vulnerability. Love is Stephen’s unapologetic expression of critical consciousness. Love is Nick’s unwillingness to reap the rewards of college completion without “bring[ing] all my family... them and they cousins.” The fearlessness with which the participants wrote, recorded, and shared their music was made possible because of love – a love for self, a love for others, a love for hip-hop. A love for all time.

### **The wRAP up**

At the conclusion of the coding cypher, the participants collectively admitted that it was “weird” to hear their songs deconstructed in such a public forum. However, there was some degree of comfort in knowing that everyone in the room – myself included – at some point, received support, appreciation, and gratitude for the existence of their creative voice. Listening to others analyze your work through a critically informed lens,

was as frightening as it was emancipatory. There were moments that felt messy; moments that made each of us feel the need to rationalize or reconcile the decisions we've made and the people we've hurt. Whether it was Isaac coming to terms with the fragility of his romantic relationships, Michael's incessant self-consciousness, or my own cautionary tale of academic ineptitude, there we each shared appreciation for the healing power of hip-hop lyricism. That spirit of raw, unfiltered honesty in a way is exactly what made our collective analysis more authentic.

## CHAPTER IX

### TRACK IX: THE OUTRO: NOW LET IT FALL

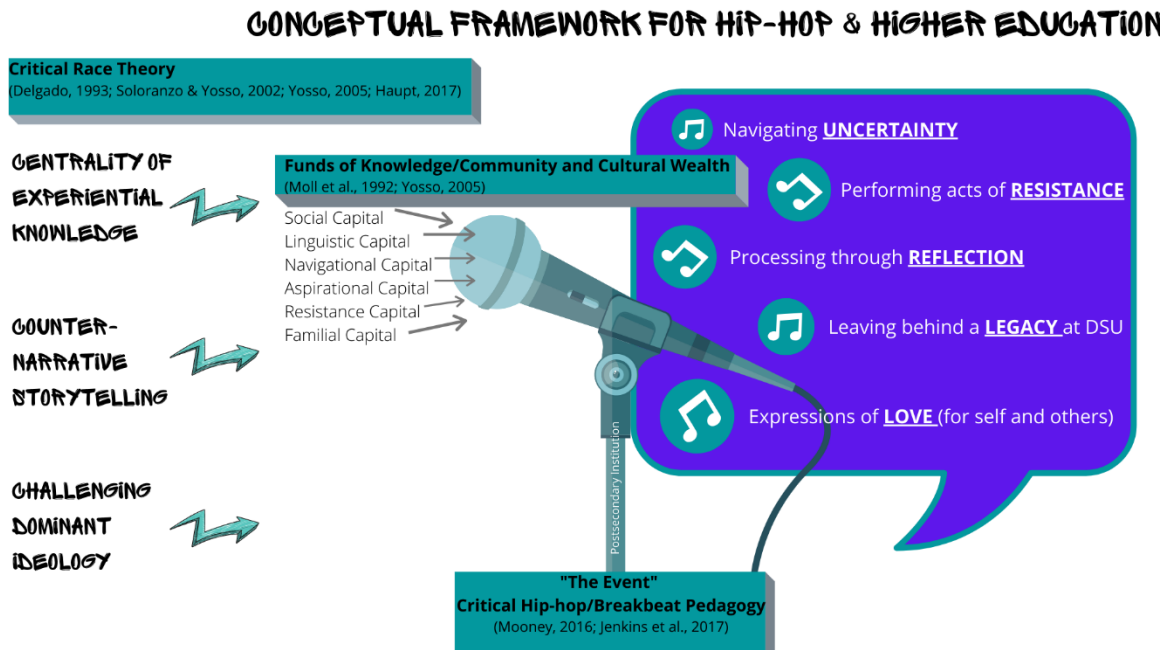
Speech is my hammer, bang the world into shape  
Now let it fall, (huh!)  
My restlessness is my nemesis  
It's hard to really chill and sit still, committed to page  
I write a rhyme, sometimes won't finish for days  
Scrutinize my literature from the large to the miniature  
I mathematically add-minister, subtract the wack  
Selector, wheel it back, I'm feeling that  
From the core to the perimeter black  
You know the motto, stay fluid even in staccato (Mos Def)  
Full blooded, full throttle  
Breathe deep inside the drum hollow... There's the hum  
Young man, where you from? Brooklyn number one!  
Native son, speaking in the native tongue  
I got my eyes on tomorrow (there it is)  
While you still tryin to find where it is  
I'm on the Ave where it lives and dies, violently but silently  
Shine so vibrantly that eyes squint to catch a glimpse  
Embrace the bass with my dark ink fingertips  
Used to speak the King's En-ga-lish  
But caught a rash on my lips, so now my chat just like dis...  
We went from picking cotton  
To chain gang line chopping, to Be-Bopping, to Hip-Hopping  
Blues people got the blue chip stock option  
Invisible man, got the whole world watching  
(Where ya at?) I'm high, low, east, west, all over your map  
I'm getting big props, with this thing called hip hop  
Where you can either get paid or get shot  
When your product in stock, the fair-weather friends flock  
When your chart position drop, then the phone calls....  
Chill for a minute, let's see who else hot, snatch your shelf spot  
Don't gas yourself, akh'  
The industry just a better built cell block  
A long way from the shell tops  
And the bells that L rocked (rock, rock, rock, rock...)  
(Yasiin Bey, "Hip Hop," 1998)

For me, this project was an attempt to, as Yasiin Bey (1998) puts it, “Bang the world into shape” – to explore the functionality of hip-hop lyricism in the lives of college students. Throughout this journey I was compelled to reflect on my missteps, and question whether my analyses were the byproduct of my biases. As a rapper, poet, and educator, the lenses I use to interpret the world are colored by this sacred trinity of identities. On many occasions, I asked myself critical questions in hopes of unearthing the nature of what I’d learned: How might these lenses inform my interpretation? How might these lenses challenge conventions of scholarly research? In what ways did these lenses convince that I was *seeing* something that wasn’t there? Rather than romanticizing what hip-hop may offer institutions of higher education, posing these questions of myself and my research allowed me to wrestle with some hard truths; that hip-hop and higher education may inherently be incongruent. While I believe it is unlikely that researchers can be fully objective when embarking on their quest for truth, the most *hip-hop* (re: authentic) thing I could do, was to rely on that cultural knowledge to not only affirm my subjectivities, but to follow in the footsteps of multicultural educators and critical race fore-scholars, (re)claiming a space in the academy for those whose lived experiences are processed through the five sacred elements of hip-hop. Doing so, demands that I turn those cultural knowledges inward, using hip-hop to critique itself and its viability within postsecondary educational contexts. I had to do more than simply “bang the world into shape” – I had to first acknowledge how the culture shaped me and my emergent identity as a fledgling qualitative researcher. If speech – that is, the poetics of hip-hop culture –

was the hammer I believed it to be, I had to trust others to swing their voices and co-construct a world of new knowledge in their own community, in their own way.

As the dissertation entered its final stages, I did exactly as I'd done in each phase of the study, and returned to my original research question: How do hip-hop collegians, or those who self-identify as hip-hop artists, use hip-hop lyricism to construct meaning and navigate institutions of higher education? This practice was an act of mindfulness, intended to ground me in my exploration, while opening myself to new possibilities. In addition to reviewing the research question, I also came back to the mic; that is, I revisited the conceptual framework and emergent themes from the coding cypher (see Figure 9.1). In returning to the mic, I also thought about my positionality – as a rapper, college administrator, and now, qualitative researcher – and how those perspectives informed my findings. I acknowledge that these outcomes are both participant-driven and practitioner-focused. Simply put, these outcomes, which are derived from participant voice and analysis, are aimed at practitioners and pedagogues in higher education, in hopes of demonstrating the educative value of hip-hop lyricism in collegiate learning environments. Let me be clear: hip-hop can (and will) exist, at least informally, on college campuses. However, DSU provided a unique opportunity to showcase what is possible with hip-hop and higher education, when an institution nurtures students' unique way of knowing by making sustained investments in their funds of knowledge.

Figure 9.1 Conceptual Framework for Hip-Hop and Higher Education – Revisited



**“The Industry is Just a Better Built Cell Block”: The Postsecondary Institution**

Having reviewed the data, both individually and collectively alongside the participants, it seems as though the conceptual framework fulfilled its purpose; mapping the meaning making processes of hip-hop collegians. Ironically, although DSU continues to fetishize its confederate history, the institution has created and sustained a campus culture – replete with curricular and co-curricular structures – that support the rigorous exploration and proliferation of hip-hop. When examined through the conceptual framework, it seems improbable that an institution that pacifies white supremacists would also celebrate members of its hip-hop community, and their scathing critiques of institutional practices. Within that dissonance however, the participants were granted the freedom to express themselves while understanding the covert practices, procedures, and



pedagogies that govern historically oppressive systems. For them, hip-hop was a means of not only navigating the institution, but a means for critically analyzing it as well. At DSU, it was made to seem that the act of surviving was the most rebellious – and restorative – thing to do, in the face of mainstream campus culture. To that end, I was reminded of Love’s (2019), “We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom,” where she discusses the need for educators to not only trust marginalized students ways of knowing but create opportunities for them to thrive within the context of schools, to imagine teaching and learning opportunities regard their cultural knowledges as valuable, affirming, and critical to life outside of school as well. This sentiment was brilliantly displayed in Stephen’s and Nick’s lyrical offerings, dissecting with great precision, the ways DSU, at times has failed Black and first-generation college students. When played back-to-back, it’s as if their songs are providing a set of instructions – acknowledging the atrocities against historically underrepresented communities at DSU, while simultaneously “finding your own road” to survival. Though it remains to be seen if hip-hop culture promotes a more critically engaged citizenry across the entire campus, the consensus among the participants leads me to believe that hip-hop lyricism provides a platform for students to critically engage with their evolving personal identities, social relationships, and political beliefs within the institution.

In that context, I turn to Chang (2005), and argue that hip-hop is indeed rebel music; it is a declaration of joy and hope, amid systemic oppression. Although performers of Black aesthetic traditions and C.S.A.-sympathizers may be diametrically

opposed – they both embody a spirit of resistance to the Bourdieuan notion of power. Because DSU students fought and died in the confederate army, the university, as it seems, has a long, storied history of supporting voices of rebellion. It is, as Stephen might say, a tradition as old as the fight song. To be clear, I am not comparing the rappers in this study to the confederate soldiers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I am suggesting however that within the vast landscape of institutional memory, those that govern DSU must come to terms with the values, morals, and philosophical beliefs that ground the university. If it is important that the institution support student voices – even the voices of dissent – what obligation does it have to both acknowledge and untether itself from its checkered past? It is important that DSU officials uphold the spirit of rebellion against the status quo, which is undoubtedly preceded by critical thought. Upholding this rebellious sentiment is important to the vitality of campus culture, granting students the space and grace to voice their grievances with traditional structures of power within the institution. However, I do believe institutions – like colleges – have a responsibility to walk and chew gum. That is, naming their historical indiscretions while supporting students whose very humanity has historically been commodified, objectified, and tokenized by the university. Therefore, it is important to support voices of rebellion, so long as that rebellion does not compromise the humanity of others. For DSU, the question is simply this: Are we willing to renounce white supremacy while, at the same time, trusting that these voices from the margin are informed by critical consciousness? Because it cannot be assumed that all responses to white supremacy are restorative, constructive, and inconsequential for students of marginalized identities at the university, personnel within the institution must work

collaboratively with these students to reimagine spaces to critically examine the institution – its successes and shortcomings – as a means of developing as socially conscious contributors to campus culture.

Like Yasiin Bey (1998), who likens the music industry to a prison cell, I believe colleges are uniquely positioned to both support and suppress student voices. Much like the music industry, which from the outside, seems to be a site for artistic freedom and expression, can significantly restrict the content in an artist's message. The music industry – and entertainment industry, more broadly – is a tool of capitalism. Thus, what matters more than the message in the music, is the record label's bottom line. To that end, Jay Z (2003) famously rapped on *The Black Album's* "Moment of Clarity," "Truthfully, I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/(But I did \$5 mil) I 'aint been rhyming like Common since." For Jay Z and other emcees, there comes a time when artists ask themselves if the cost of authenticity and lyrical freedom is worth the price of fame. With the promise of economic prosperity, record companies can curate narratives within rap music that meet the demands of the market; a market that often purveys messages of sexism, materialism, homophobia, hypermasculinity, and Black death (Rose, 1994). As higher education becomes more privatized (Teixeira, 2011), it too, resembles the "better-built cell block" Bey (1998) spoke of in "Hip Hop." As corporations continue to pour funding into colleges and universities, students in these institutions may face pressure to align their academic, social, and professional aspirations with that of these corporations. Although this might seem more of an existential crisis regarding the purpose of higher education, students – perhaps for the first time – are being asked to make potentially life-altering

decisions about their future. For the participants, hip-hop provides an outlet for expressing the emotional labor of the college experience. Yet somehow, creating hip-hop in college does not liberate students from the perceived pressure to achieve the spoils of the college experience – be it landing a job or enrolling in graduate school. Thanks to the increasing pressures of our meritocratic society (Guinier, 2015), the industry of higher education, is itself a cell block. For the lyricist and hip-hop collegian, more broadly, this censure of higher education does not absolve them from participating in it.

**“I Used to Speak the King’s Eng-A-Lish, but I Caught a Rash on my Lips”: Funds of Knowledge and Community Wealth**

*The King’s English* originally published in 1906, was a widely circulated text on English language usage. In many ways, *The King’s English* dictated the course of modern, conventional speech and verbal communication. Today, we might consider the expression, “the King’s English,” to be a metaphor for speaking proper – that is, with appropriate grammar and sentence structure, in avoidance of colloquial phrases and euphemisms. *The King’s English* leaves no room for linguistic innovation or cultural aphorisms. Whether dropping the -ing at the ends of verbs, or repurposing turns of phrase, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and other cultural linguistic apparatuses are often considered informal, improper, and highly politicized within institutions that are historically governed by and inextricably bound to whiteness. Thus, having spoken the King’s English throughout his life, Bey (1998) cleverly turns the language against itself, by adding a syllable to the word “Eng-a-lish,” denouncing conventional forms of speech while simultaneously satisfying conventional functions of

poetics – including meter, rhyme, enjambment, and metaphor. The “rash on my lips” represents the ways in which common, socially accepted forms of speech were for Bey a disingenuous attempt at fitting in. “Now,” rather risking further irritation, Bey “chats just like dis,” weaponizing language in the fight to preserve his sense of humanity, wholeness, and community in a world that seeks to exterminate his cultural ways of being.

These funds of knowledge are critical to the survival of those whose perspectives are not reflected in the dominant culture within historically oppressive systems. In the case of the participants, they too relied on linguistic capital in the same way as Bey. In addition to rhyme and metaphor, the literary devices that most often appeared in the participants’ lyrics included analogy, paradox, irony, voice, and imagery. The latter was not only most prevalent, but essential to the ways in which each participant negotiated time, space, and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Readers can bear witness to Michael’s lyrical soliloquy; an inner dialogue bringing his deepest insecurities to the surface. In a way, Michael makes it easy for us to *see* him, going back-and-forth with himself: should I attend this party? Should I pursue a romantic relationship? Have I done something meaningful enough to post online? As day slips into night, Michael invites us to observe the immobilizing nature of his insecurities in real time. His lyrical lamentation – and the images it evokes – make Michael a relatable figure; one we see our own insecurities reflected within.

Of all the forms of capital comprised in the funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth frameworks, linguistic capital – in the case of participants – proved to be the most affirming. Their lyrics provide a framework for reckoning with the past,

reconciling the present, and radically imagining the future. To that end, aspirational capital was quite evident as well. Whether it was Nick reflecting on intellectual freedom and degree completion or Michael doubling down on his desire to pursue a career in music, each participant offered an intimate glimpse into their process for setting and attaining goals. The concept of aspirational capital is essential to the function of funds of knowledge and community and cultural wealth. Essentially, hip-hop is the vehicle through which the participants can articulate their aspirations. Such an articulation is, in many ways, an act of resistance as well. Stephen's song exists as a critical analysis of white supremacy, an expression of his intellectual gifts, and an oppositional stance against systemic oppression. Like Bey (1998), Stephen, who wrote and recorded this song in a study lounge in his residence hall, used the resources of the institution to critique the institution. Thus, flipping the script in this way is a grand performance of resistance capital; and for many marginalized groups, acts of resistance are a subversive, yet reaffirming means of navigating the university.

### **L-O-V-E to Emcee: Critical Race Theory in the Meaning Making Process**

I start to think, and then I sink  
Into the paper, like I was ink  
When I'm writing I'm trapped in between the lines  
I escape when I finish the rhyme  
(Yasiin Bey, "Love," 1998)

The more I listen to *Black on Both Sides*, the more I realize that it is no coincidence that the song following "Hip hop" on Bey's (1998) groundbreaking album was aptly entitled "Love." Love is, after all, a liberation from that which threatens our joy

and peace of mind. Love is a deep, abiding sense of gladness in self and others. Love is in the breakbeat, as Mooney (2016) might proclaim. It is time standing still. Love, as Bey (1998) would say, is the finding of words “inside the vibe, . . . inside the space/when you close your eyes and screw your face.” Love may be liminality itself, somewhere at the nexus of hope and sacrifice. Within the context of this study, love – in its many forms – is everything. Even Isaac, whose honesty about the toxicity within his romantic relationship, demonstrates a deep, abiding love that allows him to critique his shortcomings as a partner. Hip-hop provides a venue for his regret and discontent. As difficult as it was for him to come to this realization within himself, it was love that provided the foundation for his self-honesty. Love, as it seems, undergirds the meaning, expression, and functionality of the participants’ stories communicated in through the lyricism. It is this love of self and others that inspires participants to use their music to pave a pathway to critical consciousness and an emancipatory escape from the social pressures of the college experience.

Critical Race Theory, at least in part, provides an appropriate framework for the development of that consciousness. While there are five core tenets of CRT – the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest conversion, the critique of liberalism, and counter-storytelling (Hirald, 2010) – only the latter is most evident throughout the study. It can be argued that the notion of whiteness as property is taken up by Michael, Nick, and Stephen as they each offer a few bars of analyses on the systems of whiteness that dictate campus culture at DSU. Stephen’s song goes as far as to hint at a permanence of racism. Meanwhile Nick, a first-generation college student, critiques

liberalism and the illusion of educational opportunity. Nick's song, essentially, asserts that access to college without adequate institutional support, is access denied. However evident these tenets may be, none manifests as clearly as that of counternarrative storytelling. Counternarratives, as discussed in previous tracks, center experiential knowledge while simultaneously challenging dominant ideologies. The participants – hip-hop collegians, who represent an understudied demographic in higher education – craft their personal stories in such a way that illuminates the intricacies of navigating an institution built on broken promises. In that process, the participants demonstrate such vulnerabilities that are only made possible through radical love; a love that, according to Fisher (2017), “ought to be part of this counterhegemonic and liberation process” (p. 262). It is as hooks (1994) says, “Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed” (p. 243). Thus, radical love must be at the core of our analyses, the root of our critiques. To love is to hold self and community in high regard. To love is to hold systems accountable to the missions they espouse. To love is to speak truth to power. To love is to create. In short, to love is to emcee.

### **Lessons and Limitations**

Reflecting on this experience offered me an opportunity to make note of the lessons I've learned as a qualitative researcher, and the limitations within my design and analysis. One of the principle lessons I've taken away from this exploration is this: Never underestimate your participants! It's not to say that I was skeptical about their commitment to the study. What truly surprised me was the way in which they managed



their time. Imagine having to meet the demands of your professors as the semester draws to a close, while somehow, finding time to hone your craft – writing, recording, and performing – and entertain a mildly obsessive doctoral candidate, eager to complete their Ph.D. Because our study launched in mid-October, around fall break, there was ample opportunity for the participants to disengage. However, once the five emcees signed on to the study, they locked-in and fully devoted themselves to the process. Sure, there were moments of unresponsiveness; I recall read-receipt text messages with no replies. Yet when it came time to execute certain elements of the study – the interviews and focus group, especially – it was clear that the participants were eager to remain engaged. That level of buy-in was important, as they were able to complete the various stages of the research study, in relation to the work they were already doing for school and the hip-hop community at DSU. It was as if the research design was aligned with, rather than disruptive to, their natural order. During the six months of the study, Eric and Michael released solo projects; Isaac, Stephen, and Michael released a single and music video with a few members of *Circle Up*; and all five participated in the planning and execution of the hip-hop showcase that kicked-off the spring semester. Although our project was time consuming, based on our conversations and lyrical analysis, I imagine the participants would've filled that time with other hip-hop-related activities.

As affirming as this experience has been however, it was not without its flaws. The most glaring limitation – and my chief disappointment – is the absence of women and queer lyricists in the study. Although I was aware that finding students who did not identify as cisgender, heterosexual Black men would require patience and intentionality, I

was disappointed that I was unable to find a more diverse pool of participants. I chose DSU to conduct the study, in part, because of its vibrant hip-hop community, a community, I hoped would engage more women and queer folks who perform hip-hop poetics. I cast a wide net, even leveraging the connections of the participants I'd already recruited, to find artists who did not identify as Black, male, cisgender, or heterosexual. At the advice of the participants, I contacted specific women at DSU who rapped and had a considerable following. After a monthlong series of text messages, emails, and Direct Messages on Instagram to these potential candidates, I'd decided to suspend my recruitment of new participants. Having already begun to interview the first five participants, I did not want to disrupt the continuity of the study by waiting any longer for an untimely reply. It is without a doubt that historically rap music – and in a way, hip-hop culture more broadly – has been unkind to women and members of the LGBTQ community. Though the participants would agree that artists like Lauryn Hill hold a revered place in the cannon, such an admiration did not necessarily translate into inclusivity. Newer emcees like Rapsody and Young M.A. were both mentioned as artists the participants often look to for inspiration. And yet, I did not ask questions – in the interview or focus group – related to the absence of women and queer folks in hip-hop spaces at DSU. Although there was one woman at the *Rap Club* meeting I attended, I should've been more diligent in my investigation of the accessibility, or lack thereof, of the hip-hop community on campus.

Upon reading this study through a queer or feminist pedagogical lens (Alim & Haupt, 2017; Shlasko, 2005), one might believe the findings to be invalid or woefully

insufficient in the way of establishing an inclusive hip-hop community on college campuses. After all, with queer identifying artists like Lil' Nas X ascending to global, genre-bending celebrity, it would seem as if the hip-hop community might finally be ready to accept queer creatives within its ranks. At the 2020 Grammys, Lil' Nas X won three awards for his hit single, "Old Town Road" – which was heavily circulated on hip-hop stations throughout the country. That night, Lil' Nas X was joined on stage by the legendary emcee Nas for a performance of epic proportions. Although Lil' Nas X, after winning three Grammys, did not necessarily *need* a collaboration with Nas to validate his claim to hip-hop culture, it did however signify his proximity to the greats, a co-sign with implications for hip-hop culture overcoming its inherent homophobia. It is worth noting that none of the participants expressed homophobic or sexist views. However, the absence of these views does not assume allyship, advocacy, or even acceptance of the rights and freedoms of women or the LGBTQ community. The data in this project would've only been enhanced by the presence of non-Black, cis-het men; shifting the dynamic among the participants in such a way that might reveal something new about hip-hop lyricism, the college experience, intersectionality, and accountability in the way of using more inclusive language.

Other lessons and limitations were related to the overall design and timing of the study. Although there were no specific time constraints bestowed upon me by my dissertation committee, in my mind, I fabricated a timeline that was as ambitious as it was unrealistic. I soon realized that an arts-informed qualitative study is a feat of great endurance. I entered this process with an idea of the timeline, and just how the study was

to proceed. I was however, cursed with impatience, and did not appreciate the deliberate speed in which the study unfolded. Recruiting undergraduate students via email, scheduling interviews, and coordinating a focus group was, for me, an education in and of itself. In “Hip Hop,” Bey (1998) raps, “I write a rhyme, sometimes won’t finish for days.” This line resonated differently after the first month of data collection, when it became clear that my timeline would be upended. I did not offer the participants the same grace I’d given myself when falling short of my own expectations. When we rescheduled the coding cypher for third and final time, it was then I knew that what we were hoping to create was more important than adhering to a specific timeline. To conduct a coding cypher without full participation would undermine the goals I intended to accomplish.

The coding cypher, albeit empowering, was difficult to manage, and even more difficult to analyze. Although I’d listened to the participants’ music beforehand, I was merely attempting to ensure that their files functioned properly and were sorted onto an iTunes playlist. I did not conduct a formal analysis of their work until we came together for the coding cypher. With four participants present and an additional participant tuned in remotely via FaceTime, I was managing several logistics, while also trying to coach the group in the art of analyzing qualitative data. To further complicate matters, I elected not to conduct an audio recording of the coding cypher. Rather than transcribing four and a half hours of footage, I thought it best to rely on field notes, as I would be actively engaged in the analytical process, as well. Although I was able to capture the themes in within the music and the participants’ interactions, I would’ve benefited from being able to return to a transcribed text or video recording to more accurately recall some of their

more impassioned exchanges and revelations. While I would record this experience differently in the future, I believe the format of the coding cypher not only served its purpose, but it exceeded my expectations. Afterward, Isaac – who tuned in from his study away program in Washington, D.C. – stated that the coding cypher experience felt like a form of therapy. It provided the participants a chance to reconnect with one another, and deeply engage in the meaning of each other’s work.

### **Implications for Practice and Future Research**

Having developed meaningful relationships with the participants and analyzed the data, it seems as if hip-hop is indeed worthy of exploring within the context of colleges and universities. This under-researched demographic in higher education – the hip-hop collegian – deserves critical examination, theorizing what it means to create hip-hop in college. Although it is not necessarily reflected in this study, hip-hop collegians embody a diverse constituency, cutting across age, race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and much more. Given the modern context of higher education, which espouses the language of diversity and inclusion, it is important that colleges take up efforts to celebrate culture and cultural expression. It is not so much that hip-hop be given a seat at the table; it already has one. Instead, hip-hop lyricism provides faculty, staff, and students an avenue for working together to create fundamental changes within the institution that promote diversity, inclusion, *and* community and cultural wealth. Viewing higher education through a hip-hop lens, challenges people within the institution to dismantle traditional power structures that limit equitable participation in campus life. What follows are six implications for practice as it relates to hip-hop and higher education:

**1. Mapping hip-hop in campus life.** Although this might seem like an ambitious undertaking, compiling information on the ways in which hip-hop is created, consumed, and performed on campus is an essential step in understanding its place within mainstream campus culture. DSU normalized hip-hop within the student experience in various ways. Whether the presence of active student organizations or featurettes on the university homepage, DSU has provided a unique platform for hip-hop creatives to get their due. As progressive as this may be, DSU is an exemplar when it comes to depoliticizing hip-hop on campus. The participants each expressed an appreciation for the university the investments the university has made in hip-hop culture. Whether course offerings, student organizations, or campus performances, participants admit that their college experience would not be the same without the accessibility of hip-hop culture. Therefore, other colleges and universities interested in affirming its hip-hop community should consider mapping its resources for hip-hop arts. This mapping can take several forms. Institutions might consider conducting a survey of the student body, determining how hip-hop manifests in their day-to-day experiences on campus. Likert scale questions (e.g., Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) like “I listen to hip-hop alone,” “I listen to hip-hop with others in my residence hall,” or “I would take a hip-hop course,” are a great mechanism for determining both the existence of and collective desire for hip-hop on campus. Institutions may also consider conducting an inventory of course offerings that broach topics related to hip-hop and hip-hop culture. Furthermore, institutions can track how often

students utilize campus facilities for the purposes of creating and performing hip-hop culture (e.g., recording studios and media labs, student performances).

Results from a community mapping project should be published on the university website. Although some hip-hop icons might oppose this sort of endeavor, proclaiming hip-hop and the academy as notoriously incongruent (Nielson, 2013), I believe colleges and universities that are truly committed to cultural competence and the practice of diversity and inclusion, owe it to their students to be proactive, and determine the vitality of hip-hop culture on campus.

- 2. Incorporate Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy in faculty teaching programs.** While the professoriate is wrought with demands related to research and publishing, many colleges and universities offer opportunities for professional development in the way of instructional training. Whether a teaching and learning center, workshop or speaker series, or freestanding center for faculty resources, many institutions offer spaces for faculty to share knowledge regarding innovations for teaching and learning. Although some, more seasoned faculty may be resistant to implementing new teaching methods within their pedagogy, exposing faculty to hip-hop as a pedagogical practice goes a long way in legitimizing hip-hop in academic spaces – especially within the classroom. Akom's (2009) conceptualization of CHHP is an appropriate place to begin imagining what it would mean to incorporate hip-hop in classroom spaces. While it may seem that concepts from CHHP like problem-posing pedagogies and encouraging interdisciplinary approaches to problem-solving (Akom, 2009) are universally

accepted as engaging instructional practices, *naming* them as hip-hop and centering students' experiential knowledge is vital to the academic hip-hop experience. Therefore, it is important that faculty see examples of the rigor and intentionality that goes into coursework, research, and community programming designed through a CHHP lens. As colleges and universities think about *who* is qualified to do this work, it is important to lean on the intellectual capital that exists within the local hip-hop ecosystem. It was Isaac who spoke glowingly of his Rap Lab professor, and his notoriety in hip-hop communities across multiple campuses. If colleges are to make sustained commitments to the exploration of hip-hop culture in the classroom, they must do as Isaac and Akom (2009) suggest and elevate the voices of local hip-hop leaders. Though it is unrealistic to believe that CHHP will be widely incorporated into faculty curricula, it is important that they be made aware of its efficacy within and beyond the classroom.

- 3. Create and sustain physical spaces devoted to hip-hop culture.** These suggestions for practice, however, are moot unless hip-hop has a space to live. Although proposed spaces don't necessarily have to be named or officially dubbed a *hip-hop space*; it is important that hip-hop culture can potentially be produced in those spaces. At DSU for instance, the recording studio in the library is open to all students for various purposes. However, it also happens to be a hip-hop haven for participants in this study. Similarly, events like *Fall Kick-Off* provide student groups with campus-wide exposure, and in doing so, welcome hip-hop organizations to perform and promote their product. These venues are but



a few spaces hip-hop is created at DSU. While this project is conducted through a poetic lens, holding spaces for other hip-hop aesthetics – visual and embodied – are necessary as well. How might hip-hop inspired art and artifacts exist in exhibit spaces in well-trafficked areas on campus (e.g., student union, libraries, museums or special collections)? How might an art class or student group repurpose a wall on campus with a graffiti-inscribed mural with a meaningful message or informed critique of campus life? How might a student dance company reclaim a public space, like *The Quad* or dining hall – with breakers and hip-hop dance routines that challenge onlookers to question the commodification of Black and brown bodies at the university? What message would it send to the hip-hop collegian that their institution creates and maintains a protected, university-sanctioned space on campus for the proliferation of the hip-hop culture? Moreover, how might students, steeped in hip-hop knowledge, identify spaces where hip-hop is denigrated or devalued? In some ways, the latter might seem counterintuitive. After all, hip-hop culture, in a way, was a means of reclaiming space, in defiance of historically oppressive systems and institutions. However, learning about the physical environments on campus where one's cultural identities and customs are contested is also a means of ensuring safety and self-preservation. It is not to say that hip-hop can *only* happen in specific spaces on campus. Rather, it begs the question: What spaces on campus allow students to use hip-hop for its intended purpose, expressing joy while speaking truth to power? As Stephen reflected on being harassed by campus police during their weekly cypher *The Quad*, was

evidence that a physical space devoted to hip-hop must not exist for the sake of existing. That space must also be protected. As students make use of that space, they must be free to use it, without fear of harassment or racial profiling. It is clear that hip-hop will exist, at least in the case of DSU, whether the institution decides to devote space to its scholarly exploration or not. As colleges continue to promote diversity and inclusion, it is important that faculty and staff think critically about how physical spaces are devoted to rigorous investigation of culture.

- 4. Design courses in hip-hop composition.** Hip-hop's inherent academic value as it relates to this study, is well-aligned with Peterson's (2013) conceptualization of the four educational elements of hip-hop: knowledge, consciousness, search and discovery, and participation. Lyricism offered a pathway into understanding more clearly, exactly how the act of creating and the power of language influence students' self-awareness, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging in college. Although the participants revealed that many of the hip-hop experiences, which required the most engagement and longstanding commitment, took place outside of the classroom. Therefore, it is important to think critically about how the classroom can be a viable site for exploring the impact of hip-hop poetics. In Isaac's interview, he talked about how Rap Lab equipped his writing with more structure. His penchant for improvisation and thinking-on-his-feet, often overshadowed his desire to put pen to paper. For Isaac, Rap Lab initiated reflective pauses and organization to his creative process that endow him with a

newfound sense of literary confidence. In most colleges and universities students must satisfy a composition requirement for successful degree completion. What would it look like to allow students to examine the poeticism of a Cardi B or YBN Cordae? Moreover, what might it mean to explore the possibilities of hip-hop writing across multiple disciplines – especially the humanities? After all, embracing CHHP requires an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum design (Akom, 2009). While it requires faculty to have a preconceived appreciation for hip-hop culture, and a scholarly openmindedness that is often uncharacteristic of academe, it is worth noting that some critical pedagogues (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Peterson, 2013) have already pioneered opportunities for normalizing hip-hop in academic spaces. If instructors, especially those in English composition courses, are interested in this work but apprehensive about implementation, it may be an opportunity for them to leverage the intellectual capital of local poets and emcees. Such an opportunity demonstrates for students, the funds of knowledge within the surrounding creative community, and pushes back against the notion that all intellectual capital is forged in the ivory tower. If hip-hop then is to be taken seriously as a space for interdisciplinary opportunities, thinking critically about building course sequences into the curriculum is necessary step in normalizing hip-hop scholarship. Because creating hip-hop is an inherently cooperative venture, designing composition courses could be an opportunity for more meaningful co-teaching and interdisciplinary collaborations among faculty. Therefore, what would it mean to offer a myriad of hip-hop-related courses across

the humanities – English, Sociology, Music, Visual and/or Studio Art, Art History, Dance, etc. – in such a way that culminates in some sort of capstone project, and eventually a credential? Creating certificate program or minor in hip-hop is not at all a new concept. As mentioned in Track II, the University of Arizona already offers a minor in Africana Studies with a Hip-hop Cultures focus. According to the website, the minor introduces students to the main themes represented in hip-hop cultures, which include “appropriation and defense of spaces, mixing of different cultures, migrations, multilingualism, race, class, gender, religions, sexuality, nationality, politics and the economy, and, the search for identity” (“Announcing a new minor...,” 2012, para. 4). Building sequences of courses that address these topics, offers students the opportunity to not only see hip-hop through a critical lens, but operationalize their funds of knowledge while pairing it with other majors, minors, and long-term career interests. It is, therefore, not enough that these courses exist on campus; they must also fit together with intentionality, so that students may begin to make sense of how hip-hop – and Black and Brown communities and cultural wealth – inform popular culture, more broadly.

- 5. Design research opportunities for students interested in hip-hop culture and composition.** As new studies centering hip-hop continue to emerge, it is important that college students who come to understand the world through hip-hop culture have an opportunity to examine it through a scholarly lens. Studies show that developing meaningful relationships with faculty is important for

student retention and sense of belonging. Because hip-hop cuts across multiple disciplines, cultural theorists can play a significant role in reaching out to a cadre of students who may not have otherwise considered, situating hip-hop in an academic context. Nick, Eric, and Stephen all discussed assignments and final projects that were hip-hop focused. Stephen conducted a comparative study of hip-hop lyrics in a statistics course; Nick recorded a song as a part of a book review in English; Eric recorded a mixtape in a music course. These experiences signaled to the participants that faculty valued the lenses through which they interpreted course content. To build on this momentum, faculty must continue to offer students, pathways to understanding their scholarship in new contexts.

While it is important for faculty members who take up hip-hop or cultural studies to create meaningful academic experiences with hip-hop in higher education settings, these faculty must also be open to proposing methodological innovations that welcome multiple voices in the research process. Whether collaborating with students on projects, using coding cyphers, or and other qualitative/arts-based methodologies may provide a pathway for students to develop a sustained interest in cultural studies. Although this project was grounded in hip-hop poetics, professors with an interest in hip-hop and different methodological expertise, might consider designing projects that are as multimodal as hip-hop culture itself. How might a study in public health, nursing, or sociology make use of poetic inquiry or movement analysis? After all, hip-hop lyricism has already been used as an intervention in counseling studies related to mental health and Black and

Brown youth (Levy, 2019; Washington, 2018). Perhaps incorporating a coding cypher or song recording in the study design would be an opportunity to engage participants *and* inspire a new generation of qualitative researchers to pursue graduate school. Conversely, how might hip-hop lyricism influence the way we interpret quantitative data as well? Faculty could lead the way in shaping studies that incorporate *re-mixed* methods that bridge the divide between constructivist and postmodern paradigms using hip-hop research techniques.

- 6. Make sustained investments in hip-hop scholarship by hiring hip-hop faculty, artist-in-residencies, etc.** For arts, dance, and music departments, arts institutes and colleges, or schools of design, it is especially important to locate talent in places the academy seldom seeks. Although the participants do not speak to this directly, I know from my experiences in higher education that making long-term financial investments in a particular campaign has a cumulative effect on campus culture. Investing in intellectual capital in this way – that is, through direct hires and faculty appointments – signals to students that hip-hop is here to stay. Creating residencies, assistantships, or faculty appointments may provide inroads for the sustained presence of hip-hop scholarship on campus. Local arts councils may play a significant role in creating these opportunities as well. For instance, an artist-in-residency program supported by institutional resources and aimed at developing local, regional, and/or national hip-hop artists across various modalities, signals to students, cultural theorists, and community members writ large that the institution values – both figuratively and literally – hip-hop culture

and its contribution to society. In the same way institutions might consider the ballet or orchestra to be *fine arts*, what would it mean to expand that definition to hip-hop? Or better yet, begin the departure from the language of exclusion that often situates countercultural performances to the peripheries of traditional arts-based curricula. The idea here is to envision a more radical, inclusive conceptualization of what it means to be *classically* trained. While it is important to problematize this language, it is just as necessary to create structures that historically, have left Black and Brown performers out of these spaces, and treat hip-hop culture as unrefined, uncritical, and mere spectacle. Creating residencies or temporary appointments begins to chip away at that which has excluded hip-hop artists from acquiring social and academic capital within the academy, an ecosystem that is often unkind to those who threaten the status quo. Perhaps just as important as creating these spaces for new faculty or artists-in-residence is ensuring there are academic structures beyond the university to support their efforts as well. Universities should, therefore, also consider funding memberships, for new hires or artists-in-residence with hip-hop foci, in associations like the American Educational Research Association (AERA) – which features special interest groups for faculty with hip-hop research interests. Such an effort on behalf of the institution, goes a long way in validating the continued study and advancement of hip-hop research and professional development.

When it comes to future research, it seems as if opportunities for studying hip-hop in higher education would be limitless. I see this study as the first installment in a series

of projects that attempts to understand what it means to create hip-hop music in college. I would be interested in investigating this phenomenon through the perspective of a more diverse group of emcees. Although it would require a much more robust recruitment effort, the prospect of conducting a similar study with a group of all women or LGBTQ-identifying emcees would be an undertaking of great importance. Also, as a higher education practitioner myself, who has only been educated by, employed by, and conducted research within public and private liberal arts PWIs, I'd be curious as to how the results might vary across institutional type. What would the study look like had it been conducted at an HBCU, MSI, HSI, or Tribal College? Is there any reason to believe a hip-hop artist at a community college would have an educational experience dissimilar from the participants in this study? Recreating this project in new postsecondary educational environments may yield new insights into the ways in which lyricism promotes self-knowledge and other learning outcomes.

Future research might also consider more longitudinal approaches to data collection, capturing empirical data related to retention and persistence, GPA, and career interests. Perhaps the most renowned precedent for such an exploration is that of the First Wave Scholarship Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (see Track II), which provides structural support to artists, while collecting data essential for successful college completion. Future studies grounded in these hip-hop methodologies should also consider analyzing participants' social media presence as well. Throughout this study, it became clear that as the participants released new music – albums and videos, especially – their social media platforms provided a pathway for publicity. Instagram proved to be the most



useful medium through which the participants curated their public persona. Each participant as well as the student organization *Circle Up* had their own Instagram account. Although this study was grounded in poetic inquiry, visual arts-based methodologies would've served this project well. In the interviews, I would consider adding questions about how, and through what means, do hip-hop collegians curate their digital identities.

More broadly, with streaming capabilities increasing the accessibility of independent artists, how might emcee's visual acuties work in their favor, and use social media to broaden their audience? A cultural phenomenon like hip-hop, in some form or another, commands the attention of all our senses. For that reason, it is also important to imagine what it would mean to replicate this study across hip-hop's various modalities. How might this project be adapted to study DJs, producers, breakers, or graffiti artists in college? Might that this shift away from lyricism attract a more diverse participant pool? Although hip-hop culture is comprised of a vast array of artists and visionaries, it seems that at DSU, hip-hop poetics is a male-dominated network of creators. While that network is of men, aside from a few white artists, embodies an underrepresented demographic in higher education, *Rap Club* and *Circle Up* are merely one brick in a mighty cultural foundation, and do not speak for the whole of hip-hop culture as it exists at DSU. Spoken word poetry clubs, dance troupes, improvisational theatre groups, and visual artists all participate in a robust cadre of student organizations at DSU that reflect parts, if not entire segments, of hip-hop culture in some form.

As a post-script to this study, I'd also be interested in curating a mixtape – of these DSU emcees and others – responding to various prompts that challenge artists to critically reflect on their college experiences while offering critiques of higher education in general. Having been forged in systems of higher education, hip-hop collegians – especially emcees, as we've seen in this study – are uniquely adept at using language to navigate a rugged terrain; living, learning, and thriving in a new social environment with a sense of artful empowerment. For me, that sense of empowerment is something I've always known. From the first time I stumbled upon Nas and Lauryn Hill imploring me to imagine *if I ruled the world*, to the painstaking penning of this passage, I know there is healing woven within these bars. Hip-hop is, in many ways, a labor of love and mirror to the street, a reflection of life, at times, we'd wish not to see. For those of us who can't look away, who have too much to lose by averting their eyes from the truth, we have always known that preserving our stories is a pathway to immortality. As Nas's ponderance poured through my speakers and Lauryn Hill's voice punctuated his proclamation, I understood, for the first time, the absolute power of language. To the lyricist, storytelling is more than an exercise in freedom; it is an ancestral practice, connecting the diaspora across space and time. A rhyme scheme is not an instrument of poetics, but a tool in and of itself. Although the art of rhyme is not unique to hip-hop culture, it is within these cultural practices that rhyme shapes world around us, fashioning hope from despair. From our notepads to the booth, from the soundboard to the stage, we are not only reminded that we belong, but our voices, our music, our culture is here to stay.

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## APPENDIX A

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### **Hip-Hop Background**

*The following questions are designed to gain a better understanding of your relationship with hip-hop, when you discovered it/how it discovered you. I am interested in learning about your story – especially your origins as both a fan of the genre and a contributor to hip-hop culture in your collegiate community.*

- Tell me about a time/moment when you realized you were a fan of hip-hop music?
- Describe the time/moment you decided to create hip-hop music?
- Please share your stage name, alias, or pseudonym. (Probes: How is it stylized (or written-out)? What is the significance of this name?)

#### **Hip-Hop Creative Processes, Performance, and Presentation**

*My next set of questions are intended to understand how it is you do what you do ... That is, how you create your write, create, record, share, and perform your music.*

- Describe your hip-hop creating process and how it has evolved over time.
- How do you record and share your music? (Probes: What do you remember about the first time you attempted recording your music?)
  - Other probes/follow-up questions: How did it feel to hear your music played back? What did you like about your voice? Your lyrical content? What did you want to change?
- How did you learn to write and perform hip-hop? (Probes: Did you take a class? Are you self-taught?)
- Describe some of common themes expressed in your music.
- Describe your first hip-hop performance? (Probes: When was it? Where was it? Who was in the audience? How did you prepare?)
- Describe how it feels when you are on stage/in the studio performing your original work?
- In what ways has your performance of hip-hop shaped your college experience?

- What do you write about? (Probe: Are you willing to share your music with me as a part of my data collection?)
- Describe your social media presence and what it says about your music.
  - What social media platforms do you use?
    - Do you use some platforms more frequently than others? Why?
    - (Probes: How do you determine what to post on social media? Do you have a separate social media accounts for your personal and musical posts? Or are these accounts integrated?)

### **Hip-Hop and Higher Education**

*My next set of questions is aimed at understanding how your exposure, understanding, and relationship with hip-hop has evolved since coming to college.*

- Was it important for you to continue creating hip-hop when you started college?
- Are there any lessons (e.g. interpersonal, social/emotional, academic, political, cultural, etc.) you learned in college that were articulated through hip-hop?
- To what extent has your college/university devoted physical and intellectual spaces to the exploration of hip-hop culture and performance?
  - (Probes: If student is a member of a hip-hop group: What circumstances led you to create/join this organization? What do you consider to be your role within your hip-hop collective?)
- Tell me about a time teachers, administrators, or other student affairs personnel have encouraged you to create and/or perform hip-hop? If any?
- In what ways has hip-hop (performance or exposure) affected your transition into college?
- In what ways has writing and performing hip-hop impacted to your performance in school? (Probe: What specific skills have you learned as a hip-hop artist that help have helped you in college?)
- Since becoming a hip-hop artist, can you recall a time you were discouraged from pursuing music?
  - To what extent do you address these critiques/criticisms in your music?
- In what ways has your participation in hip-hop informed your relationships with others in college? Said differently: How has hip-hop influenced your relationships with peers, university staff/faculty, community members?

- In what ways, if at all, has writing or performing hip-hop impacted your academic experiences in college?
- In what ways, if at all, has writing or performing hip-hop impacted the way you navigate college life?
- Complete the following sentence, and explain:  
Were it not for hip-hop, college would've been  
\_\_\_\_\_.

### **Concluding Questions**

- Given that I am interested in hip-hop artists' experiences in college is there anything else you want to tell me that I might not have thought to ask?
- Please write a song in response to the following prompt: *Write a song depicting a day in your life; describing what it means and how it feels to walk in your shoes.* (Probe: *What do you see? What do you know?*)

## APPENDIX B

### FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT

**Donovan Livingston (PI):** Welcome! Thank you so much for your participation in this study so far! I hope your participation in this process has been both rewarding and informative. Having interviewed each of you, and given you an opportunity to record your song, I wanted to convene us for a focus group to discuss in greater detail, the nature of your experiences with hip-hop in college.

Focus groups, or group interviews, are used in qualitative research to, as Glesne (2016) says, “to better understand how a group would discuss some issue and elicit multiple perspectives in the process,” (p. 123). As active participants in hip-hop culture, you may agree that hip-hop does not happen in isolation. Rather, hip-hop is a communal endeavor. Thus, I wanted us to collaborate to explore the differences and similarities in your creative and meaning-making processes. The ultimate purpose of this conversation is to reflect on *why* and *how* you make hip-hop music in college. Therefore, rather than discussing the lyrical *content* of your recordings, I hope to have a conversation about the ways in which you went about *composing* your lyrical content.

I will take a moment to explain how the focus group will proceed.

This focus group will last approximately one hour. The focus group will be audio recorded and later transcribed for clarity. Therefore, I would ask that you silence your phones. All comments and voices are welcome in this space. Treat this conversation as you would a cypher; withhold nothing but remember to “pass the mic.” You’re welcome to respond to one another in a manner that’s most authentic. However, please do so respectfully. Remember all participation in this study is voluntary. If at any point you need to leave the space, you’re welcome to do so. Do you have any ground rules you’d like to add before moving forward?

**Participants:** *(Pause for additional ground rules)*

**Donovan Livingston (PI):** Do you have any questions before we get started?

**Participants:** *(Pause for questions)*

\*\*\* START RECORDING \*\*\*

**Donovan Livingston (PI):** Please complete the following sentence and elaborate: *Writing and recording this song made me feel \_\_\_\_\_.*

**Participants:** ...

**Donovan Livingston (PI):** Describe your songwriting process.

**Participants:** ...

**Donovan Livingston (PI):** In writing this song, what did you learn about the nature of your college experience?

**Participants:** ...

**Donovan Livingston (PI):** Why is it important that you create hip-hop at this university?

**Participants:** ...

**Donovan Livingston (PI):** Thank you for taking the time to participate in our focus group. Before we conclude, given that I am interested in hip-hop artists' experiences in college is there anything else you want to tell me that I might not have thought to ask?

**Participants:** ...

**Donovan Livingston (PI):** Again, thank you for your time and insight! I look forward to our coding cypher, which will take place (TBD). In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns, feel free to email, call, or text me.

\*\*\* STOP RECORDING \*\*\*

## APPENDIX C

### CODING CYPHER OUTLINE

- I. **Welcome**
- II. **What is coding? (20 minutes)**
  - a. **Video:** [Qualitative Data Analysis – Coding & Developing Themes](#)
  - b. **Types of Codes**
    - i. **Descriptive:** [summarizes in a word or noun the basic topic of a passage](#)
    - ii. **Vivo:** [identifying actual spoken words of the participants which have unique connections to or resonance within hip-hop culture.](#)
    - iii. **Process:** [Process coding uses gerunds \(“-ing” words\) exclusively to connote action in the data.](#)
    - iv. **Analytic:** summarizes findings and draws connections across the data
  - c. **Questions**
- III. **Review Conceptual Framework (10 minutes)**
  - a. **Research Question:** How do hip-hop collegians, or those who self-identify as hip-hop artists, use hip-hop lyricism to construct meaning and navigate institutions of higher education?
  - b. **Conceptual Framework**
    - i. Cultural Wealth: aspirational, navigational, linguistic, resistance, social, familial capital (Community, Creative Practice, Transferable Skills)
    - ii. Critical Race Theory: experiential knowledges, counternarratives, center student voices (Knowledge of Self)
    - iii. Breakbeat Pedagogy: Institutionally supported spaces (Spaces: Where Hip-hop Happens)
- IV. **Practice (10 minutes)**
  - a. “Undergrad” – Donovan Livingston
- V. **Participant 1: Isaac\***
- VI. **Participant 2: Stephen\***
- VII. **Participant 3: Michael\***
- VIII. **Participant 4: Eric\***
- IX. **Participant 5: Nick\***
- X. **Adjourn**

**\*allow participants to volunteer**

#### **Materials**

- Highlighters
- Sticky notes
- Lyrics to all songs (mine included)
- Printout of the conceptual framework



- Printout of the following statement, reminding participants to ask themselves the following questions as they consider themes within the music:

*What is the artist doing [in this song]? What are they trying to accomplish [through their lyrics]? How, exactly, do they do this? What specific means or [literary] strategies do they use? How does [the artist] talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on? What assumptions are they making? What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes? Why did I include them?*

*(p. 146)*

#### Coding Cypher Whiteboard Photos:

