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PWR1AN: Rhetoric of Identity Cultivated Through a Hip Hop World

Section 02

808s and Heartbreak:

The Normalization of Vulnerability and Introspection in Hip Hop

Since The Notorious B.I.G. and N.W.A. to Kanye to Drake and Chance the Rapper, hip hop has remained a sphere of self-expression. The genre and culture is built upon the fundamental idea of discussing experience, from the conditions of intercity life to drug use to survivor's guilt to mental health. However, since its conception, hip hop has certainly shifted from its gangsta rap hyper-masculine roots to a culture more widely accepting of transparency. There is a noticeable difference in the themes and the sound of post-80s gangsta rap and today's modern, more introspective and transparent pieces. When did this shift come into focus? Vulnerability in hip hop has existed since the beginning, though in a much more nuanced and covert style, buried beneath layers of sound and other verses, disguised beneath the veil of curses and anger directed at circumstance. Has hip hop become a safer space for transparency since its conception? How have traditional masculine conventions interplayed with the style of music? Since its birth, the genre and culture has experienced a shift towards a more tender space for self-expression.

SUCIDAL THOUGHTS: Vulnerability and Masculinity

*The stress is building up, I can't
I can't believe suicide's on my fucking mind, I wanna leave
I swear to God I feel like death is fucking calling me
Naw, you wouldn't understand.*

The Notorious B.I.G.'s release of *Suicidal Thoughts* in 1994 is a prime example of the discussion of mental health in old hip hop. It is vulnerable, warranting him to open up about his mental state, his dissatisfaction with, and his outrage that he has such feelings. However, he doesn't allow himself to discuss this point of supposed weakness without presenting dominance over it. The way he builds his narrative places him in a position of power over his mental illness.

Hip hop has a history of being some level of "vulnerable," as it has always been a venue to simply express the truth. Michael Eric Dyson, author of *Holler if You Hear Me*, argues that "the genius of hip hop" is that "its devices are meant immediately to disclose the truth of life through reportage," and that the honest individualized narrative is what defines hip hop music, lyrically (Dyson, 158). However, in the context of this paper, "vulnerability" will be defined as transparency and openness in regards to discussing an individual artist's experience and particularly their identity. All rappers and hip-hop artists speak from experience, however this new shade of modern vulnerability manifests itself in a degree emotional availability, willingness to discuss where these feelings come from, and a level of deliberate self-awareness. The genre has historically been a place where this sort of exploration of self was not necessarily cultivated, primarily due to hyper-masculine norms that derive from culture and circumstance.

One of the pillars that stands at the center of hip hop culture is masculinity—more specifically black masculinity. The need for hyper-masculine norms that are in place is a byproduct of the African American experience, as discussed by Kevin Quashie, a professor at Smith College:

"the notion of vulnerability is neutered rather than being seen as a quality of inner life and a necessary human capacity, vulnerability becomes defined as a liability to black survival."
(pg. 76)

This rejection of vulnerability is born out of the social conditions they are born into and causes the concept of traditional masculinity and physical toughness to integrate itself into the black identity as essential. A poor environment, gang culture, and systemic racism and prejudice forces toughness and stoicism unto the outward identity of many African American men, which

then makes vulnerability inaccessible and synonymous with “weakness.” The safety and freedom to express vulnerability manifests itself as a luxury in that sect of society, something that the environment and upbringing does not warrant. This culture inevitably bled into hip hop, as an expression of the inner city experience. Masculinity in this context—defined as physical strength, emotional toughness, and stoicism—is a tool for survival, and the need for this tool bled into early gangsta rap and hip hop culture (Quashie).

Notice in *Suicidal Thoughts*, though emotionally explicit, more straightforward, and more open than one would expect, especially with discussing his mental health, Biggie still beats around his symptoms and his subject-matter without ever outright expressing why he feels suicidal or depressed, quickly darting from dark feeling to dark feeling (Pearce). With vulnerability seen as a “liability,” there is a certain amount of danger that comes with exposing one’s “weakness” through their music, forcing artists like Biggie to maintain control, even when exposing the most vulnerable parts of themselves. The idea of having power and control over your apparent weaknesses still underscores even one of the most “vulnerable” tracks of the era.

Derek Iwamoto, a scholar in psychology and a professor at the University of Maryland, further contextualizes this phenomenon of emotional stoicism and tendency towards hyper-masculine behavior by means of reflecting upon the hyper-masculine traits of Tupac Shakur and where they come from. He begins by supporting these claims by explaining that “young men of color often enter behaviors to combat the degrading effects of racism on their self-esteem,” and feel the need to demonstrate hyper-masculine traits due to underrepresentation of individuals that are not hyper-masculine in the media. He then specifies Tupac’s want to be “affiliated with the thug life” after being called “pretty boy” and “artsy” in adolescence. This led to Tupac’s emulation of “mob images of power, toughness, ruthlessness, elite, ruggedly classy, wealthy and womanizing ways” (Iwamoto).

This image and persona that Tupac adopted out of necessity, in rebuttal to the attacks launched at him as a young man, when paired with his mass popularity, demonstrates the two primary causes for masculinity to entrench itself in the identity of African Americans. Not only are African American men forced to adopt masculine traits to navigate day to day life, but their

representation in the media is also limited. Reliant on individuals such as Tupac among other rappers that possess emotionally stoic and physically tough traits, the only symbols of strength and success readily available to emulate are these prominent figures that project hyper-masculinity.

The accessibility and necessity of hyper-masculinity in the context of an underrepresented and marginalized community, as well as one that has cultivated this need for emotional and physical toughness, further defined the personality of old hip hop, more specifically, the “gangsta rap” image. Maurice L. Johnson, in his Florida State University dissertation, *A Historical Analysis: The Evolution of Commercial Rap Music*, explains the commercial success of the gangsta image in that labels chose to promote artists with street credibility, such as Tupac and B.I.G., often advertised by a highlighting of their criminal actions. This is another factor that bolstered the prominence of hyper-masculine ideals in the genre, due to its commercial accessibility. This era of hip hop culture eclipsed “party-oriented” rap and “socially conscious rap,” “due to the mainstream appeal of hardcore rap,” further popularizing and glorifying this tendency towards masculine projection and performance (Ide).

LOVE LOCKDOWN: The Shift

From a purely musical standpoint, it is evident that the post-80s gangsta rap style fixated much more on stoicism and a sort of tough-guy bravado than blatant vulnerability with artists such as Ice Cube, Biggie, and N.W.A. (Denton). While this is evident lyrically, this also manifests itself, stylistically, in a musicality that involves a lot of harsh sounds, with hard snare hits, boom-bap drum beats, sound bites of gunshots, abrasive lyrics, and an edgier, treble-based, noisy quality (AllMusic).

Now with masculinity so deeply rooted in both the heart and sound of hip hop, when did the genre see a shift in the accessibility of vulnerability? Vulnerability in the context of music is exhibited in two ways in modern hip hop. The first is a shift in the lyrical content towards vulnerability, being the traits previously discussed— such as emotional transparency, willingness

to discuss where these feelings come from, and a level of deliberate self-awareness. The second is a stylistic shift away from harsh sounds towards more experimental styles that pull influence for other genres outside of hip hop. The movement had to be catalyzed by those whose identities and circumstances granted them different emotional expectations, as well as those with different personal experiences and backgrounds that did not force them to eschew vulnerability like early gangsta rappers had to, many coming from impoverished backgrounds, institutional racism, and housing projects.

For example, white rapper Eminem grew up in Detroit's 8-Mile with an absent father. Though he may have had a similar experience to many prominent gangsta rappers, his ethnicity "afforded him different cultural expectations regarding how he was allowed to express himself" (Denton). He likely did not feel the need to reject vulnerability as strongly as his hardcore rap predecessors, and though he still adopted and personified hyper-masculine ideals in the form of misogyny, the promotion of violence, and an aggressive timbre of voice as well as production, he also adopted more vulnerable tracks and slower samples, such as "Sing for the Moment," and often wrote particularly sensitive tracks for, and about, his daughter, such as "Mockingbird" and "Hailie's Song."

This phenomenon musically made way for Kanye West, one whose middle class childhood that took place in Oak Lawn, Illinois, lacked danger and did not warrant the rejection of vulnerability, to embrace the style of transparency instead (Denton).

While it would be bold to attribute the introduction of vulnerability in hip hop to Kanye West, it would not be too far gone to pose the idea that he normalised transparency and more melodious tracks when he hit the mainstream in 2004 with the release of *The College Dropout* and further on with his subsequent albums. Defined as a "backpack rapper," or an underground, more socially conscious, artist, West brought this style of transparency and back to the mainstream since the days preceding gangsta rap, according to rapper Ice Cube (HipHopDX).

His subject matter did not approach violence, since he was not necessarily exposed to it in the years leading up to his musical debut, however *The College Dropout* does not shy away

from his own brand of truth, discussing social and economic issues, as well as admitting to his own shortcomings and demonstrating a very strong sense of self. The album features tracks such as “We Don’t Care,” “All Falls Down,” and “Jesus Walks,” which discuss issues in education, consumerism and poverty, and the discussion of religion in pop culture, respectively. His debut single, called “Through the Wire” was recorded the week following the wiring of his jaw shut as a result of a car accident he had gotten into. The record even concludes with the 12 minute 40 second song, “Last Call,” all about the process he went through to get signed by a label. West further embraces the style of candid commentary on life as he sees it through his lens throughout his subsequent albums *Late Registration* and *Graduation*, which altogether form a sort of education trilogy. Throughout his meteoric rise in popularity, following the massive ten-Grammy win, a number-two debut on Billboard in 2014, and a high critical acclaim for *College Dropout*, Kanye West catalyzes the normalization of vulnerability and above all, transparency, in hip hop.

This all led up the turning point of both lyrical content and musical style—the release of *808’s and Heartbreaks* in 2008, an album that epitomizes vulnerability in hip hop, all through its brooding production, drastic change in musical style, and undeniably human lyrics that “project a sense of loss and despair” released following both a very public break-up with then fiancée, Amber Rose, and the death of his mother (Smith-Strickland). After three albums of breaking the mold and criticizing his own materialism and vice through soulful samples and melodic raps, he further shatters it by producing a desolate album that utilized musicality and eclectic instrumentation in a way that was unprecedented in hip hop.

The fifth track, as well as one of the hit singles, off the album, “Love Lockdown,” exhibits the shift towards more vulnerable and introspective content in its lyrical content and its production. The latter is demonstrated by a “heavily auto-tuned soundscape held together by the mesmerizing and mechanized beat of an electronic drum simulating the beating of a human heart,” as discussed by Reynaldo Anderson and John Jennings in Julius Bailey’s book, *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*. The former is demonstrated in lyrics such as,

I’m not lovin you, way I wanted to

What I had to do, had to run from you

I'm in love with you, but the vibe is wrong

And that haunted me, all the way home.

Between the movement away from misogynistic ideas, as well as an exploration of an inner conflict deriving from the loss of a love, its lyrical deviation from hyper-masculinity is more than evident.

SOUNDTRACK 2 MY LIFE: Influence and Legacy

The wake of Kanye's *808s and Heartbreaks* gave rise to many new artists. The birth of Drake's career is almost entirely accredited to the influence that *808s* had on his style, namely the fluency and relationship of rapping and singing, "emotionally transparent subject matter" (AXS) and his use of the album's track "Say You Will" for his own song "Say What's Real." Kid Cudi's album *Man on the Moon: End of the Day*, released one year later, is praised for its "introspective persona, ear for melody, and eclectic taste in beats" by Entertainment Weekly and by AllMusic, its perfection of "futuristic bleak hip hop" purposed by West in the year previous. In *808s and Heartbreaks*, Kanye West bends the genre, not only by shifting its subject matter, emulated by both Kid Cudi and eventually Drake, but also primarily by adopting the atmospheric, almost RnB characteristic of the sound.

Thus, vulnerability in hip hop takes its first bounds in its road to "normalization" in the genre, defined as the positive reception of emotional hip hop by the public, the growing popularity of more experimental artists, and the commercial success of artists embracing this new style and persona.

Drake, a man that fully embraced the stylistic shift presented by Kanye West's fourth album, is also a prominent figure in the shift of public interest towards transparency. *Take Care*, released in 2011, among Kid Cudi's *Man on the Moon: The End of the Day* (2009) and Frank Ocean's *Channel Orange* in 2012, is described by music critic Ryan Dombal from Pitchfork as "[banking] on a sonic tableau that was slow and sensual and dark" and defined by "moody atmospherics," "smooth piano and muffled drums." This is all paired with a very decadent lyrical

focus on relationships, primarily lost love. *Take Care* set another musical precedent, while it was experimental and acceptable due to the strides that Kanye made with *808s*, for more explicitly emotional music. This album had tremendous commercial success, hitting two-million sales by April 2013 (Billboard) and even causing the birth of an internet-meme called “Draking,” which according to Urban Dictionary, is used to “describe someone behaving very emotional.” Thus, the mainstream continues to further accept hip hop as a space for emotional vulnerability.

Along with the prolific success of Drake, new artists arose, further pushing the boundaries of hip hop with influences of RnB and jazz slowly bleeding into the genre. Frank Ocean, with his major-label debut album, *Channel Orange*, found tremendous success, nominated for six Grammy awards. Described Dombal, as swinging “from Stevie-style keyboard breeziness to 90s R&B to mystic psych rock to crunching 8-bit funk without thinking twice,” the eclectic album is an exploration of love through relatable and carefully crafted characters, told via a narrative that possesses a “type of voice, wit, charm, smarts, and ineffable humanity that's always hoped for, but never promised” (Pitchfork).

Despite the growing success of introspective hip hop, it is argued that rap is still “hard” and still performing hyper-masculinity. Migos’s 2017 No. 1 track on Billboard’s Hot 100, “Bad and Boujee,” featuring the lyrics in the hook,

Raindrop (drip), drop top (drop top)
Smokin' on cookie in the hotbox (cookie)
Fuckin' on your bitch she a thot, thot (thot)
Cookin' up dope in the crockpot (pot)
We came from nothin' to somethin' nigga (hey)
I don't trust nobody grip the trigger (nobody)
Call up the gang, and they come and get you (gang)
Cry me a river, give you a tissue (hey)

checks off all of the hallmarks of hardcore rap, such as misogyny, implications of violence, drug use, and emotional stoicism. However, due to the trailblazing led by those whose circumstance

allowed them to convey vulnerability, that sort of bravado coexists with more open pieces, birthing more diverse and adventurous tracklists. Hip hop is now a sphere where the backpack rap that Kanye West brought back can hold its own against more hyper-masculine tracks, and artists can explore this spectrum as a means of expression, songwriting, and producing without a real commercial risk. A prime example of this is Childish Gambino's 2011 debut album, *Camp*, which features "Bonfire," in all of its siren-wailing-braggadocio, and "Kids," and its use of nostalgic strings and a quaint glockenspiel.

BECAUSE THE INTERNET: Social Media and Public Image

Though the hyper-masculinity in music that is conveyed through the lyricism of these artists, despite being so prevalent in modern hip hop, is a defining feature of the genre—this is not the only access we have to these artists. The rise of social media has given hip hop artists a platform beyond their records and has given listeners and fans a more intimate look into the lives and minds of their favorite artists. For example, Frank Ocean, came out to the world in a Tumblr post revealing that he was gay following the release of *Channel Orange*, launching a worldwide discussion regarding homosexuality and queerness in a stereotypically homophobic culture, and thus impacting the LGBTQIA+ community in an unprecedented way (NPR). Kid Cudi is also a prime example of an artist who is both transparent in his work as well as in the way he presents himself online. He utilizes social media as a way to convey complete honesty and transparency with his fans, especially when it comes to his mental health.

On October 4th, 2016, Scott Mescudi, famously known as Kid Cudi, wrote to his Facebook followers:

"Yesterday I checked myself into rehab for depression and suicidal urges. I am not at peace. I haven't been since you've known me. If I didn't come here, I would've done something to myself. I simply am a damaged human swimming in a pool of emotions every day of my life."

This is an excerpt of a long status, addressed to his fans regarding his mental illness. The word “ashamed” bookended the message, filled with examples of how the disease had affected his life: how he cannot make new friends, leave the house, or trust people. He promises that new music is on the way and that he’ll be back, stronger than ever. He signs out with, “I love you, Scott Mescudi” (Facebook).

This status launched a full-fledged discussion around masculinity, race, and depression (the Atlantic). Many responded with messages of admiration and well-wishes to the rapper, opening the hashtag and trend #YouGoodMan, which featured tweets similar to this popular one (Twitter):

Tell a black man it's okay to show emotion today. Tell a black man that "Strength" isn't only physical. Tell a black man he can be depressed.

This demonstrates the modern day acceptance of and willingness to discuss transparency in experience and social media’s role in that. With such a direct line of communication between the artist and the listener, the relationship between the two has never been more intimate than it is now.

This new intimacy comes with the caveat of a fan’s thirst for knowledge regarding an artist’s life- which has been a prevalent need, evident since the days of Eminem’s *Stan*, a song highlighting the obsession of a “stalker fan.” Today’s media, social and traditional, feeds into this need for transparency and information, which can be observed in the worship of Yeezus himself, Kanye West. Since his rise to fame, upon the release of every subsequent album, the rapper has grown to become a personified conglomerate of all things pop culture. He has transcended the bounds of a typical rap artist, accumulating a cult following, dating a reality TV star—which forces him into the limelight and forces a type of vulnerability and transparency upon him.

News sources such as Huffington Post, LA Times, TMZ, Fox, and CNN followed and reported the rapper’s recent hospitalization in the midst of his latest Saint Pablo tour. Unlike Kid

Cudi, he never released a statement or addressed his fans about his mental health, but rather it was reported on, the information released by “a source” that “the rapper is being treated for "exhaustion" at UCLA Medical Center” (CNN). Not only is transparency accepted and normalized, but it is also craved by today’s public.

This may be a side-effect of the rise of social media, where the public is now accustomed to sharing and consuming anything and everything in real time as well as feeding “the desire to have a constant pulse on everything that’s trending locally and globally” (Huffington Post). While social media encourages artists to maintain an intimate connection with their fans, it also gives fans the means to pursue, and thus consume, any information doled out by gossip media and news sources. This encourages the media to follow large celebrities closely, which forces vulnerability upon more guarded artists, such as Kanye West, even as an artist that is notably open in the music they produce.

Social media not only opens up avenues of vulnerability on the side of those who produce music, but it also encourages those consuming, the fans and listeners, especially those traditionally forced into positions of masculinity to find a safe and normalised outlet for self-expression online (Denton). With this, the relationship between artist and listener grows even deeper, both able to introspect in safer spaces as well as indulge themselves with a fan base or role models, respectively, that have the same wish to pursue the same kind of understanding of self that they do. The musical experience becomes more collaborative, giving artists someone to share with and listeners someone to relate and look up to. Donald Glover, widely known as Childish Gambino, hints at this phenomenon of the rise of vulnerable rap and a willingness to share, perhaps even overshare, in the title of his second studio album *Because the Internet*.

As an individual from a middle-class background in Atlanta that has produced albums that notably span across an incredibly wide spectrum of genres from hardcore rap in *Camp*, to experimental IDM in *Kauai*, to extraterrestrial soul and RnB in *Awaken, My Love!*, and has simultaneously breached into the film and TV industry as an actor and stand-up comedian (the Guardian)—Glover is one of two artists that come to mind that represent the shift of hip hop

culture to a space that welcomes both emotional vulnerability, self-exploration and expression, and artistic experimentation.

EVERYTHING'S GOOD (GOOD ASS OUTRO): Conclusion

The second individual that comes to mind when considering a hip hop artist that personifies all the values and elements of the shift in hip hop culture would be none other than Chancelor Bennett, professionally known as Chance the Rapper. Since his first mixtape, *#10Day*, born out of a 10-day suspension in high school, the charismatic then-teenager followed the model of Kanye West in shaping his subject matter around candid commentary on what he's experienced and what he knows, criticizing himself and the institutions around him, insisting that if "nobody talks about it, nothing gets done" (Billboard). He has crafted an entire career completely independent of major record labels, producing *Acid Rap* in 2013, as well as *Coloring Book* in 2016, which, in itself, proliferated into a massive wave of success for the 23-year-old. The mixtape cites heavy gospel influences (NPR), demonstrating an openness in expressing one's faith and relationship with God, while interspersed with tracks about friendship and nostalgia, and ultimately shatters the norms of hardcore rap found 20-30 years ago. The rapper also has an immovable, vibrant Twitter-presence that gives fans an intimate relationship between them and his creative process, successes, family life, as well as his political views and engagements. Nominated for seven Grammy Awards in 2017 and winning three, as well as selling out an entire stadium tour set for the spring of the same year, Chance the Rapper has taken popular culture by storm on a platform and brand built on individuality, passion, and truth.

Would Chance the Rapper and his music have been able to succeed in the days of gangsta rap? Would his gospel influences, his unique timbre, and experimental style commercially succeed or even be considered rap by the rest of the hip hop community? Are these the right questions to ask, or should we interrogate if Chancelor Bennett would have even had the desire to be a part of that era's culture given that it surrounded hypermasculine ideals? Without Kanye West's influence and willingness to overcome the barrier of being a backpack rapper in a hardcore world, would Chance have been the individual to shift hip hop towards vulnerability?

Would the rise of social media eventually move us in this direction towards transparency in music, even if no individual explicitly shifted the culture in that direction? Or could the trajectory of hip hop music only be changed by a motivation to open the culture up to those outside of the nexus of artists that created gangsta rap and hardcore style music?

Regardless of the questions one could ask regarding how else this shift towards vulnerability could come about, it is undeniable that modern hip hop has evolved into an environment more accepting of vulnerability, transparency, and musical experimentation. Though norms of hyper-masculinity have not completely dissipated, as it is a hallmark in the culture and subject matter of hip hop, the deeply entrenched necessity of masculinity has loosened its grip on the lyrical content and musicality of the genre. With the meteoric rise of Kanye West and the success and influence of the education trilogy leading up to *808s and Heartbreaks*, new artists began following in stride, exploring more socially conscious topics. With this, artists also deviated even further from the hardcore production and style of gangsta and hardcore rappers, pulling influences from RnB, soul, IDM, and even indie rock, as well as exploring the atmospheric sound popularized by *808s*. Social media also gave artists and listeners a more intimate relationship, further encouraging introspection and vulnerability, providing guaranteed consumers of historically commercially risky tracks for the musicians, as well as giving fans visible symbols of success that deviate away from emotionally stoic norms.

This recent shift in hip hop, though drastically different from its hardcore roots, honors the history of the genre well. A genre rooted in commentary, a counterculture that derives from breaching the standards of what music should sound like, and a space that respects and supports individuals neglected by society—hip hop moves wherever the people need it most. The direction it has taken in the past 10 years came in response to a need for more acute self-expression. This direction expanded the genre beyond commercial needs, to a sphere of influence that interacts with both producers and consumers at a more personal level. Wherever hip hop goes next, it is sure to continue to break molds, transcend norms, and serve its players well.

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