
Hip Hop and the University

The Epistemologies of “Street Knowledge” and “Book Knowledge”

ABSTRACT While hip hop and the university appear to operate within radically different social (and socioeconomic) spheres, we nevertheless see increasing overlap between the two that demonstrates a mutual interest and perhaps desire between the two. With the rise of hip hop studies on the one hand and a remarkable array of hip hop songs and films that address the university space and/or university education on the other, these two discursive spheres produce knowledges that are both complementary and contradictory. By analyzing several texts—major academic works of hip hop scholarship; films on hip hop and the university, especially Method Man and Redman’s 2001 *How High*; and the rap oeuvres of Kanye West and J. Cole—this article examines the ways in which the epistemologies of hip hop and the university interact and conflict. By examining these texts, I show that academic epistemologies, or what I term “book knowledge,” inadvertently impose a hierarchical and colonizing frame on rap and hip hop, such as the practice of “close reading” rap as poetry. Instead, I argue that we can learn how to ethically inhabit and transform the university space by drawing from hip hop’s commitment to producing the radical, decolonial, and embodied practices of “street knowledge.”

KEYWORDS rap, hip hop, Kanye West, J. Cole, Method Man, academia, street knowledge

“You are about to witness the strength of street knowledge”¹—thirty years after the release of *Straight Outta Compton*, Dre’s voice resonates in my ears through the now ubiquitous headphones that bear his name. N.W.A. frequently provides the soundtrack for my morning commute, and today, like so many other days, I step off the bus with my head swimming with the truth they’ve dropped, ready to start my day with a fresh dose of righteous anger at the White institutions that systemically oppress people of color, and Black people in particular.

If, following Zenia Kish, we imagine hip hop as an epistemology, or “a mode of knowing and interpreting the world,”² and if N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton* bears witness to that epistemology by asserting “the strength of street knowledge,” then any moment of listening to that album and the many others that have followed in its wake can and should entail an inculcation of hip hop’s epistemologies. In other words, the

1. N.W.A., “Straight Outta Compton,” in *Straight Outta Compton* (Ruthless Records, 1988).

2. Zenia Kish, “My FEMA People’: Hip-Hop as Disaster Recovery in the Katrina Diaspora,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 274.

immediacy of hip hop music “coming through your stereo” (to quote OutKast)³ and into the ears of the attuned listener is its own form of participant observation; hip hop communities in reality extend beyond “the street” and “the hood” into an increasingly diverse and globalized (or “glocalized”) context. Indeed, the fact that Ice Cube’s rap label was initially called “Street Knowledge Records” suggests that hip hop both embodies this knowledge and also ensures its wide production and dissemination. Or, as Mos Def puts it in his simple theory of hip hop from “Fear Not of Man,” “We are Hip Hop. Me, you, everybody. We are hip hop.” The “you” here, in particular, extends to any theoretical listener of the song at hand.

For this reason, this scene of listening to N.W.A. could happen anywhere—could describe any number of people—but the special irony of my own subject position as a professor of English is not lost on me; even as I may in many ways represent a “new wave” of young, hip, and “woke” female faculty of color, this positionality does not absolve me of the fundamental coloniality of my job: as much as I learn from, respect, and even teach hip hop’s “street knowledge,” my job also inescapably entails the promotion of academic speech forms and epistemologies designed to replace and subsume all other forms of knowing. The central irony of my academic career, then, centers on the tensions between what I will here refer to as hip hop’s “street knowledge” versus academia’s “book knowledge” as both complementary and contradictory forms of knowing. In the broadest sense, hip hop scholarship—including the present article—embodies the tension between hip hop’s move toward broad inclusiveness (“me, you, everybody”) versus the protective strategies, such as incomprehensibility, that rightly limit it to a specific group and locale—or, as Mark Campbell puts it, between hip hop’s “participatory” qualities versus its “disobedience.”⁴

At one level, academia and hip hop appear to represent cultural extremes: one the height of elitist middle- and upper-class achievement dominated by White linguistic and cultural norms, and the other a “low” and/or widely deprecated form representing specifically Black linguistic and cultural norms. Both cultural spheres, however, rely on techniques like incomprehensibility to produce an in-group form of prestige that intentionally excludes non-members and restricts audiences’ access to knowledge. And in both spheres, any “outsider” attempt to master the in-group language—whether Black Language or the academic form of White Mainstream English—can result in missteps that range from claims of racial inauthenticity to outright minstrelsy.⁵ University spaces, however, have figured prominently even at the very beginnings of hip hop’s history, especially through university radio stations, which held resources such as studio

3. Outkast, “Funkin’ Around,” in *Big Boi and Dre Present . . . Outkast* (Arista/LaFace, 2001).

4. Mark V. Campbell, “Hip Hop Archives or an Archive of Hip Hop?: A Remix Impulse,” *Public* 57 (2018): 69.

5. I will rely on H. Samy Alim’s terms—Black Language and White Mainstream English—to differentiate between the two different language practices and the discursive spheres that each elaborates. See H. Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

For the advantages of these terms to other options, such as Black English, African American Vernacular English, and Standard English, see Sara Hakeem Grewal, “Intra- and Inter-Lingual Translation in Blackamerican Muslim Hip Hop,” *African American Review* 46, no. 1 (2013).

equipment, broadcast signal, and records that hip hop participants past and present have exploited in order to create and promote the music that fuels the culture.⁶ Furthermore, even at the more abstract level of discourse, and perhaps because of hip hop's fifth element of "Doin' tha Knowledge," we see multiple ways in which "the streets" are configured as alternative universities—sites of knowledge production that "school" listeners in organic knowledges and allow for the flourishing of thought outside of or in addition to the confines of White Mainstream routes of education, including both the public school classroom and the university.

Yet we cannot ignore that, as Alistair Pennycook succinctly puts it, "Hip-hop produces and is produced by a cultural context that often thinks differently about questions of language, writing, identity, and ownership from the mainstream discourses of the academy."⁷ In particular, as Cheryl Keyes writes in her landmark *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, hip hop's "streets" represent a "survival center," where "one learns about the ghetto, how to survive in it, and how to combat unwarranted economic and social oppression from mainstream society."⁸ In a complementary vein, Eithne Quinn defines hip hop's "street knowledge" as "a form of ad hoc theorizing of popular resistance predicated on a long history of [Black] exclusion from participation in mainstream life and institutions."⁹ This emphasis on survival and resistance via "street knowledge"—rather than the economic and social attainment, advancement, prestige, and values associated with the "book knowledge" of the university—demarcates a sharp divide not only in the cultural context of learning but in the ultimate result of the education process for consumers of street versus book knowledge. Perhaps, at the most basic level, we might say that book knowledge operates within, confers, and confirms (racial, social, and economic) privilege, while street knowledge teaches its learners how to survive without and in spite of it.

It is these differences that I explore here, with particular attention to the ways in which hip hop both shapes and is shaped not only by its own "cultural context," as Pennycook notes, but also by the cultural context of the university—even, and perhaps especially, when that context directly contravenes hip hop's origins and orientations. Because of rap's self-conscious production of a particular epistemology (that I term here "street knowledge"), we see a remarkable number of examples in which emcees actively engage with other epistemological institutions, including and especially academia. Hip hop responses to university culture recognize two key things: first, that the myth of the impenetrability of the university or campus "bubble" is just that—myth; and second, that rap has a responsibility to expose that myth and, in the process, to promote alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. As Tessa Rose Brown argues in her doctoral dissertation on incorporating hip hop into the composition curriculum at

6. Emery Petchauer, *Hip-Hop Culture in College Students' Lives: Elements, Embodiment, and Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 31.

7. Alistair Pennycook, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 150.

8. Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 29. In the article cited above, Zenia Kish also cites survival as a defining aspect of hip hop's epistemology.

9. Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' But a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 23.

Predominantly White Institutions of higher learning, “the widespread uptake of Black language and practices by millennials and youth” creates a necessity for informed instruction of hip hop in the university that nevertheless must be accompanied by “critical reflexivity” with regard to the positionality of both students and professors of hip hop.¹⁰

I think, for instance, of my own journey in academia: while professors, academics, theorists, and authors taught me new ways of understanding the world that I implicitly respected and even relied on, hip hop taught me to question that implicit respect and reliance. Hip hop also taught me how to respond when my colleagues of color and I faced both implicit and explicit racism in the very context in which we were supposedly learning how to dismantle discourses of power, privilege, and oppression. And now, in my current faculty role, hip hop’s “street knowledge” keeps me accountable to itself; unlike the other literary texts I read, study, and teach, hip hop—and particularly the hip hop texts that reflect on academia, which I explore here—will tell me when I’m doing it wrong, as long as I continue to listen to and reflect on its critiques. In this sense, the “street knowledge” of hip hop demands the application of its epistemological lens, so that this knowledge is not only discursive but also active and embodied in ways that academia’s “book knowledge” is not.¹¹

In short, I embark here on a journey to understand how hip hop posits itself in relation to academia, and vice versa. As Marcella Runell Hall suggests, the question of whether or not hip hop should be used in the academy is somewhat moot given that it already is and will likely continue to be used despite the opinions of hip hop artists and/or educators.¹² Instead of considering an “either/or” debate, I here examine the ways in which the streets and the campus already intersect—or rather, I reject the false dichotomy between the two in order to show how hip hop itself might show us how to resolve the tensions between these forms of knowledge and being. I argue that hip hop films and songs reject the colonizing impulses of academic book knowledge on hip hop, which too often co-opts hip hop in the university classroom by conferring upon it cultural prestige in order to reify the privilege of the university space; instead, the texts below teach us that an anti-colonial academic approach to hip hop would dismantle the very concept of privilege in order to mobilize varied epistemologies that would together teach students “how to combat unwarranted economic and social oppression from mainstream society”¹³—where “the streets” are both within and beyond the “mainstream” space of the university.

The analysis that follows consists of two main sections: first, I elucidate the ways in which rap and hip hop appear in academic scholarship, focusing especially on scholars’

10. Tessa Rose Brown, “SCHOOLED: Hip-hop Composition at the Predominantly White University” (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 2017).

11. Candice Jenkins refutes critiques of scholarship that overemphasize the individualized experience of listening to rap music over more community-based forms of hip hop (such as dance), insisting instead that even the ways in which “the rapper’s voice also implicates the body—his or her own speaking body, but also quite possibly the body of the listener, which takes the artist’s voice and often repeats it, and is (at least momentarily) transformed by that participatory performance.” Jenkins, “Introduction” in *African American Review* special issue on “Hip Hop and the Literary,” 4.

12. Marcella Runell Hill, *Education in a Hip-Hop Nation: Our Identity, Politics & Pedagogy* (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2011), accessed at Open Access Dissertations, 5 September 2019.

13. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 29.

attempts to co-opt and discipline rap's knowledge practices through a recuperation of rap as poetry. This section will clarify the ways in which literary study of hip hop has often marginalized this genre by reifying and/or objectifying it by imposing colonizing methodologies onto these texts. Thereafter, in the second section, I explore the ways in which the university appears in hip hop and hip hop-inspired media. This latter part of the paper will focus first on hip hop-inspired films and then rap songs to engage with the university as a site of knowledge production, culture, and discourse that these artists seek to grapple with in relation to their own grounding in "the streets." In particular, I will examine texts from the first decade of the twenty-first century: Method Man and Redman's cult-classic stoner film *How High* (2001) and Kanye West's first three albums known as the College Dropout trilogy (2004, 2005, and 2007). Together, these texts use satire and parody to critique the coloniality of the university as a particularly elitist subset of White Mainstream society while also putting forth a model of "street knowledge" as the moral corollary to academia's "book knowledge."

For the purposes of context, my analysis of *How High* and Kanye's *College Dropout* trilogy will be bookended by brief analyses of other texts that engage with the question of the interaction between street and book knowledge: first, John Singleton's *Higher Learning* (1995), which precedes the period at stake here, but which first opens the question of the relationship between hip hop and academia on film using dramatic allegory; and at the end, J. Cole's body of work on hip hop and university education (2010), which suggests a shift from the satire of the 2000's to a more direct and earnest consideration of what it means to simultaneously occupy the spaces of streets and campus. By counterposing "book knowledge" and "street knowledge," each of these artists clarifies hip hop's commitment to "doin' tha knowledge" through the lens of the university as a space that variously preserves, challenges, promotes, and/or erases rap's forms of knowing. Through this analysis of hip hop critiques of the academy, I argue that one contribution literary studies can make to academic hip hop studies more broadly includes close attention to the ways in which the "street knowledge" of hip hop texts teach us how we might decolonize the institutions and epistemologies in and through which we work.¹⁴

14. While I focus below on the ways in which the university appears discursively in more widely disseminated media contexts, such as hip hop-inspired films as well as the albums of rap celebrities such as Kanye West and J. Cole, other scholars have examined the role of hip hop in the *literal* university context. Emery Petchauer, in particular, argues that students' engagement with hip hop through principles like edutainment, kinetic consumption, and sampling as approach can be instructive for professors. Unlike scholars, such as Kermit Campbell, who discuss hip hop in the university composition classroom to primarily engage with this genre as an object of study, Petchauer, along with Bettina Love, James Braxton Peterson, Christopher Emdin, Tessa Rose Brown (cited above), and others, helpfully elucidate hip hop as discourse and/or discursive model for composition as well as other university disciplines. Petchauer, *Hip-Hop Culture in College Students' Lives: Elements, Embodiment, and Higher Edutainment* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Kermit E. Campbell, "There Goes the Neighborhood: Hip Hop Creepin' on a Come up at the U," in *College Composition and Communication* 58, no. 3; James Braxton Peterson, "Rewriting the Remix: College Composition and the Educational Elements of Hip-Hop," in *Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education across the Curriculum*, ed. Marc Lamont Hill and Emery Petchauer (New York: Teachers College of Columbia University, 2013).

"THE STREETS" IN THE BOOKS: RAP IN ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP AND RAP AS POETRY

Perhaps so as to disavow the inherent coloniality of our positions in the academy,¹⁵ scholars like myself who write about hip hop from positions of academic privilege turn to a particular narrative technique that moves to naturalize the hip hop scholar as a member of the Hip Hop Nation: the "opening scene" of hip hop listening that I myself have deployed so as to simultaneously signal my own resemblance to and self-consciousness of the meta-narrative tropes that structure academic studies of hip hop. For example, in the introduction to *Prophets of the Hood*, Imani Perry begins by describing her experiences as one of a group of black students and "hip hop heads" at Harvard law school, one of whom claims "I wouldn't have been able to get through [exams] without Biggie."¹⁶

In contrast, H. Samy Alim opens his seminal book in the (socio)linguistics of hip hop, *Roc the Mic Right*, by describing an academic roundtable on hip hop that brought together both rappers like Boots Riley and Afrika Baambaata, as well as major scholars like Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Comparing this roundtable to the hip hop "caph," Alim argues that "conventional notions of power, authority, and the hierarchical construction of knowledge melt within the flow and exchange of ideas."¹⁷ And yet, in the description that follows, Alim notes that an unidentified but important scholar of Black literature lamented the lack of Black writers and dismissed the literariness of hip hop entirely, instead advocating for Black people to conquer White literature and literary forms.

Significantly, both Perry's and Alim's narratives take place at Harvard, which—as we will see to comedic effect in the film *How High*—retains its symbolism of austerity and academic prestige; it also houses the Hiphop Archive and Research Institute. In Alim's case, for example, he may imagine that particular academic roundtable as an idealized egalitarian space for knowledge building, but the place and context in which that particular "academic caph" occurred necessarily suggests that, like Harvard itself, not everyone was invited and welcome to attend. These rhetorical gestures may well fall under the rubric of what Bordieu calls "academic anti-academicism," in which "academics earn a certain amount of cultural capital by posturing as if they were against the system in which they take part."¹⁸ In my own self-conscious deployment of this trope of hip hop

15. Elsewhere I have considered the potential repercussions of academics like me who act as "translators" between these cultural and discursive spheres, particularly in regard to the ways in which hip hop's incomprehensibility, unlike academia's, is a protective strategy—meant for cultural self-preservation rather than the preservation of elitism—that produces "hidden transcripts" accessible only to those initiated in the Hip Hop Nation's forms of speaking and knowing. By providing wider access to these hidden transcripts through our pedagogical translations of this form, we risk embodying that old adage of *traduttore, traditore*—the translator as traitor. Grewal, "Intra- and Inter-Lingual Translation in Blackamerican Muslim Hip Hop," in *African American Review* 46, no. 1 (2013): 37–54. See also Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Weslayan, OH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 100. Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 50–51. Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 70–73.

16. Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 1.

17. Alim, *Roc the Mic Right*, 2.

18. Cited in Chris Richardson, "'Can't Tell Me Nothing': Symbolic Violence, Education, and Kanye West," *Popular Music and Society* 34, no. 1 (2011): 102.

scholarship, however, I intentionally narrated a scene of my own participation in the epistemologies of rap and hip hop culture through a relatively solitary scene of listening mediated by technologies such as streaming services and Bluetooth headphones, so as to show that the cipa can and does occur just as often in the ears and heads of attuned hip hop listeners as it does in reality.

These rhetorical gestures in hip hop scholarship—including the present article—reflect the principle outlined in KRS-One’s “Introduction to Hip Hop”: professors who do not live Hip Hop Kulture have no right to teach it. For KRS-One, “being Hip Hop” is a form of knowing that cannot happen through the pure will to knowledge; in other words, simply “knowing Hip Hop” cannot lead to the proper inhabitation of hip hop as a mode of existing in the world.¹⁹ For KRS-One, hip hop is its own epistemology, which reveals itself through etymology: hip hop, he claims, “literally means intelligence moving, conscious movement, or a movement aware of itself—‘I am hip to my hop,’ I know why I move.”²⁰

In this vein, Emery Petchauer’s definition of *hip hop collegians* as any college student whose “active participation in hip hop” informs their “educational interests, motivations, practices, or mindsets” encompasses both students who actively practice one of the four elements of hip hop and students who, for example, “pinpoint Tupac Shakur as a key figure in [their] process of radical politicization.”²¹ While Petchauer refers primarily to students who already bring to the classroom a sense of self informed by their knowledge of and/or participation in hip hop, the breadth of his definition confirms that even attentive rap listening can be a form of “participation” in hip hop. To put this notion into my own terms, Petchauer’s “hip hop collegian” could extend beyond students to encompass faculty as well, so long as the individual at hand remains attuned to the “street knowledge” offered by hip hop’s epistemology as an alternative to the power structures implied in the university’s epistemology of “book knowledge.”

An unfortunate swath of hip hop scholarship, however, does not meet this standard of taking seriously hip hop’s “street knowledge,” particularly that subset of academic research that seeks to redeem rap and hip hop as sub-genres of poetry worthy of study at the university level. Perhaps most famously amongst those who advocate for close reading as a disciplinary reading strategy that can and should be applied to hip hop, Adam Bradley argues in his *Book of Rhymes* (2009) that “every rap song is a poem waiting to be performed.”²² Bradley’s approach to “rap poetry,” as he calls it, involves a careful and prescriptive transcription method in which the close reader of hip hop should translate a single bar of rap (in which a bar consists of “four quarter-note beats”) into a single line

19. “. . . original people BECAME the reality they wanted to know—being as a form of knowing. However, the reverse, knowing as a form of being is the result of observing something that you are not in an attempt to either eat it or assume its resource for your own survival. This seems to be the historical model for the colonization of most of the World’s tribes and their lands by Europe.” KRS-One, *Ruminations* (New York: Welcome Rain Publishers, 2003).

20. For KRS-One and his followers in the Temple of Hip Hop, any attempts to erase this form of self-knowledge through hip hop represents a threat to the culture as a whole—which explains why several Temple of Hip Hop members protested the opening of Harvard’s Hiphop archive and its museumization, reification, and colonization of the living culture of Hip Hop. Petchauer, *Hip-Hop Culture in College Students’ Lives*, 15

21. *Ibid.*, 7.

22. Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2009), xi.

of poetry.²³ For Bradley, transcribing rap enables us to better capture its essence, since, he argues, we can turn more careful attention to the process of interpretation if rap's lyrics are written down.

Bradley's vision of "rap poetry," then, relies on an understanding of poetry as a fundamentally written genre: "Like all poetry," he writes, "rap is defined by the art of the line."²⁴ Even the title of his introduction, "Rap Poetry 101," suggests that he hopes to inculcate the art of "reading" rap in a manner that mirrors and reproduces that of the university classroom—both on the physical page, through the process of transcription, and through the unique mode of analysis that we in literary studies broadly understand as "close reading." Bradley's attempt to prescribe close reading for all readers of rap, then, proscribes other forms of reading by privileging this professionalized mode of interpretation that is predicated on defining rap as (lyric) poetry.²⁵ In responding to Bradley's recuperation of (transcribed) rap as poetry, David Caplan rightly points out that this association between the two genres assumes that poetry "retains a stable definition across cultures, time periods, and genres."²⁶ More importantly, for our purposes, even Bradley's title, *Book of Rhymes*, suggests a privileging of "book knowledge" over "street knowledge"; however, the dynamism, physicality and embodiment, and contingency and ephemerality of rap as a performed, oral/aural genre are, I argue, essential to the "street" aspects of its epistemology.

We can further see the work of this colonizing, "book knowledge" approach to "rap poetry" in Bradley's other major rap-related scholarly undertaking, *The Anthology of Rap*. This anthology, published by Yale University Press, resembles the archival impulse toward hip hop exhibited in the hip hop archives at Harvard, Cornell, Tulane, and other universities. As Mark Campbell insightfully points out in his recent article on this archival turn in hip hop studies, these major institutions produce an "archive of hip hop," where hip hop becomes objectified, reified, and "captured" in the most colonial sense, whereas we should, instead, seek a "hip hop archive," where hip hop functions not only as a descriptive adjective, but as a symbol of the cultural aspects of hip hop's principles and epistemologies, such as egalitarianism, open access, and remixing. Campbell's comments apply just as easily to Bradley's anthology, which, like most major university hip hop archives, "attempts to capture and institutionalize Afrodiasporic

23. *Ibid.*, xix–xx.

24. *Ibid.*, xi.

25. As Virginia Jackson argues, this very understanding of poetry, which she terms "lyricization," is created through the rise of print culture and close reading, which in the twentieth century becomes the *only* way to interpret any broadly poetic text: "My argument here is that the lyric takes form through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that become the practice of literary criticism." Jackson also notes that "if the lyric is the creation of print and critical mediation, and if that creation then produces the very versions of interpretive mediation that in turn produce it, any attempt to trace the historical situation of the lyric will end in tautology." Jackson demonstrates that the framing of poetry in printed and edited anthologies combined with "close reading" practices in the twentieth century ultimately created a new definition of lyric as a ballooning genre that subsumes more specifically generic understandings of poetry—including ode, ballad, epic, and, in this case, rap—under its broad umbrella. Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.

26. David Caplan, *Rhyme's Challenge: Hip Hop, Poetry, and Contemporary Rhyming Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

cultural innovations within a Eurocentric, colonial entity.”²⁷ This contrast in the contexts of race and class in hip hop versus academia highlights the many ways in which rap’s appearance in academic research—and particularly literary studies—represents an exertion of power and privilege through academics’ impositions of colonizing reading practices as applied to hip hop’s cultural production.

In short, the recuperation of rap as poetry implies a *subordination* of rap under the aegis of poetry that necessarily hierarchizes the two. As Caplan notes, the debate about whether rap is poetry “largely focuses on issues of cultural prestige,” such that “poetry” becomes an “honorific term.”²⁸ Similarly, Bradley’s formulation of rap as essentially *written*—which relies on the correlation of rap with poetry, and poetry with writing—also hierarchizes writing over speech; the notion that “we can better understand rap when it’s written down” contains unwritten assumptions about how and where knowledge and interpretation of rap can occur.²⁹ Adam Bradley’s archivization of rap, then, relies on an objectification of rap that hierarchizes White Mainstream forms of knowing and speaking over those presented in and through hip hop.

In stark contrast to the ways in which the literary discourse of poetry and genre classification can enact colonizing discourses on rap and hip hop, Tupac provides a particularly good counter-example for thinking through the relationship between rap and poetry, at least partly because he is widely understood as a particularly “poetic” rapper, and because of the posthumously published volume of his written poetry titled *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*.³⁰ But even more than these aspects of his career, Tupac helps us think through the relationship through rap and poetry because of his ability to

27. Mark Campbell, “Hip Hop Archives or an Archive of Hip Hop?: A Remix Impulse,” *Public* 57 (2018), 70.

28. Caplan, *Rhyme’s Challenge*, 15.

29. Furthermore, as Robin Leigh Kelly has pointed out, using rap as a “bridge” to more canonical (and colonizing) literary texts and techniques preserves a hierarchization of knowledge that disserves both rap itself and the students whom this teaching strategy supposedly serves. Lauren Leigh Kelly, “Hip-Hop Literature: The Politics, Poetics, and Power of Hip-Hop in the English Classroom,” *The English Journal* 102, no. 5 (2013), 51–56.

In imagining how *not* to use hip hop in the university classroom, we might recall the tense and yet poignant scene in the 2007 movie *Freedom Writers*, where the central protagonist, teacher Erin Gruwell, attempts to use Tupac to teach the poetic device of internal rhyme to her students in South Central Los Angeles, only to have her students turn on her to challenge her audacity: “Think we don’t know about Tupac?” one says—followed by another: “White girl gon’ teach us about rap?” This form of relying on rap’s pedagogical value as a way of “connecting” with students in order to ultimately insist on White Mainstream ways of knowing perhaps represents one of the worst forms of classroom-based colonialism, even while studies touting hip hop as a valuable teaching tool continue to proliferate. Indeed, even as the students in this scene clearly reject their white teacher’s attempt at cultural and pedagogical colonization of hip hop, the film as a whole depicts Ms. Gruwell as a white savior whose ability to impart her ways of knowing and speaking ultimately make her a heroic figure for her overwhelmingly low-income and non-white students.

I also think of the hierarchization of certain forms of “intellectual” hip hop as opposed to its everyday listeners, perhaps best encapsulated in OutKast’s line from “Funkin’ Around” (2001): “I’m out here knowin’ hip hop is dead / the average n—a on the corner yellin’ / what the fuck you mean, mean?” Furthermore, the institutionalization of hip hop in written and/or archival form is perhaps one of the academic strategies that presents hip hop as a passive, reified, and/or “dead” object of study, rather than as an ongoing, active challenge to the status quo and those institutions that aim to preserve it. Outkast, “Funkin’ Around.”

30. Walter Edwards, “From Poetry to Rap: The Lyrics of Tupac Shakur,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 2 (2002). I should note, though, that in this article, Edwards enforces a distinction between Tupac’s written poetry and his rapping/oral poetry that Tupac himself disavows in the deposition video that I engage with here.

simultaneously deploy and subvert the White Mainstream discourse around these ideas. For example, in a 1995 deposition tape, Tupac undergoes questioning from prosecutors who have charged him with inciting violence against police that led to the death of a Texas state trooper, as the teen who shot the officer claimed he did so because he listened to Tupac's music. In the deposition, the prosecutor asks Tupac leading questions about the nature of what he terms "gangsta rap," hoping to demonstrate a relationship between rap and violence.

In the course of this questioning, the prosecutor asks Tupac how he "got into rap," to which Tupac replies: "It is of my opinion that I was rapping while I was writing poetry." The prosecutor persists in his line of questioning, asking, "How do you define rap? What constitutes rap?" Again, Tupac insists on his initial definition: "That's what it is, it's poetry." Unsatisfied with this definition, the prosecutor suggests that rap has music and/or a beat to accompany the lyrics. Here, Tupac replies, "No—even iambic pentameter is rap."³¹ The prosecutor's refusal of Tupac's initial definition of poetry as rap—his insistence of some fundamental difference, and his lack of resources with which to assert this understanding—represents the extent to which the discourse of poetry can be contextually deployed to either credit or discredit rap in White Public Spaces. Furthermore, whether rap is admitted as poetry or not, this discourse serves to underline the fundamental whiteness of the discourse of poetry; rap can be read as poetry only in cases where that particular definition serves to reinforce White power structures, such as in the public school and/or university classroom, but can just as easily be disavowed as poetry in legal and media contexts that vilify rap as disruptive of White cultural, legal, and speech norms.³² On the other hand, Tupac's responses to this line of questioning represent his signifying through "flipping the script"; his clever reversals not only discredit the very line of questioning that the prosecutor takes, but also refuse the cultural power differential between rap and poetry by insisting not only that rap is poetry, but also that poetry ("iambic pentameter") is rap.

At the end of the video deposition, Tupac's own lawyer asks whether Tupac intended his listeners to perpetrate violence against police officers in response to his music; Tupac responds in the negative. Finally, his lawyer asks, "Were you trying to get them [your listeners] to do something?" Tupac responds, "Think. Use your head."³³ This comment's push toward knowledge, understanding, and thought embodies hip hop as epistemology; it also, ideally, represents what we ask students to do—what we train them to do—in academia. Despite this resemblance, however, we can identify gaps between academic "book" (and particularly literary) knowledge and "street" knowledge in how, with what assumptions and biases, and toward which texts, peoples, and ideas this "thinking" becomes applied.

31. Mrmakaveli, "2pac Interview by Judge," YouTube video, February 2, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vigPk9n5-50>. This YouTube video, uploaded through a fan account dedicated to Tupac's work, mislabels the content of the video as "interview by judge," where it appears that in fact Tupac is undergoing a pre-trial deposition.

32. Lily E. Hirsch, "Rap as Threat? The Violent Translation of Music in American Law," *Law, Culture, & the Humanities* 14, no. 3 (2014).

33. Mrmakaveli, "2pac Interview by Judge."

Tupac's signifying subversion of the colonizing discourse of poetry not only highlights his own personal mastery of multiple knowledge practices, but also provides a model for how we might do the same—a performance also highlighted in hip hop-inspired films such as John Singleton's *Higher Learning* (1995) and, most significantly, Jesse Dylan's *How High* (2001). These films help demonstrate the ways in which academia's book knowledge and hip hop's street knowledge are both competing and complementary, while, like Tupac, presenting a way forward for those who simultaneously occupy both spheres.

"HIGH"ER EDUCATION

Released in 1995, John Singleton's star-studded film *Higher Learning* presents a pioneering critique of campus race relations between students and the white supremacist structure of a fictional college named Columbus University—not least made visible through the clearly colonial implications of the university's name. The film portrays the university context as rife with the extremism of both White and Black students, amidst which the protagonists struggle to find any middle ground within these fraught racial politics. While not a "hip hop film" per se, *Higher Learning* continues Singleton's work, begun most prominently with his classic *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), in bridging the realms of hip hop and film in the 1990s. With *Higher Learning*, Singleton acknowledges the controversial ways in which hip hop began to appear in White Mainstream culture at this particular historical moment, while also astutely picking up on the academy's burgeoning acknowledgment of and engagement with hip hop culture, especially following the publication of Tricia Rose's seminal monograph *Black Noise* (1994).

Featuring Ice Cube as Fudge, an Afrocentric, militant student activist, and Busta Rhymes in the minor role of Dreads, hip hop makes a central appearance in the film—not only because of the particular casting of these Black characters, but also because a struggle over music—its loudness, its genre—at a dorm party precipitates the radicalization of one of the White characters, Remy, whose excessive dislike of rap music not only results in his calling the police on Fudge and Dreads, but also acts as a proxy for his racism.³⁴ The film ultimately portrays a deep skepticism toward the university space through its a tragic plotline, in which Remy commits a campus shooting that results in the death of two students, as well as his suicide. The film ends with a shot of the U.S. flag fluttering in the wind, with a superimposed caption stating "Unlearn," which then fades to the credits.³⁵ With this ending, *Higher Learning* makes explicit its aim to allegorize Columbus University as a symbol for the U.S. as a whole. The subthemes of gun violence, white supremacy and radicalization, police violence and racial profiling, as well as sexual violence (a central sub-plot focuses on the rape of the female protagonist) suggest that these issues appear in campus life because the university campus reflects American society more broadly.

34. Christine Reyna, Mark Brandt, and G. Tendayi Viki, "Blame It on Hip-Hop: Anti-Rap Attitudes as a Proxy for Prejudice," *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 12, no. 3 (2009).

35. John Singleton, "Higher Learning" (Columbia Pictures, 1995).

In this sense, though *Higher Learning* presents a useful critique of campus race relations, its implicit conservatism and move toward allegory do not necessarily unseat the deeply racist and white supremacist character of the university space, despite its recognition of the same. The message that we should “unlearn” racism seems to imply a “color blind” ideology—the prevailing mainstream model for anti-racism in the 1990s—in which the film encourages us to “unlearn” race instead of encouraging us to “unlearn” the fundamental coloniality of white supremacy and its institutions, including both the university and the linguistic supremacy of White Mainstream English. Nevertheless, Singleton’s critique of race relations in the university, whether read allegorically or literally, represents a pioneering moment in bringing the principle of hip hop’s “street knowledge” to challenge racial (and sexual) violence in the university.

In contrast, Method Man and Redman’s 2001 stoner film *How High* provides a satire of campus life and university education based on signifying, providing a “teachy not preachy,”³⁶ and yet deeply anti-colonial critique in the guise of stoner film, such that it represents hip hop’s subversiveness at its best. Indeed, *How High* not only presents a “smoked out” and unabashedly silly tribute to marijuana and cannabis culture, but also provides one of the most astute and trenchant critiques of university culture and campus life ever produced on film.

The narrative begins with Silas, played by Method Man, running his own business selling various strands of marijuana that provide different types of highs for solutions to various medical and emotional problems. One of his friends and customers, Ivory, is a college student who encourages Silas to pursue a degree in order to patent his marijuana strands and otherwise make his natural talent respectable. Shortly thereafter, Ivory dies when his dreads catch fire after he falls asleep smoking a joint; to honor his memory, Silas mixes his ashes with soil and grows a special cannabis strain that he names after his friend. He also chooses to take the THC (“Test for Higher Credentials”) in order to fulfill the dream of going to college that Ivory had for him. Before the test, Silas meets Jamal, played by Redman, and they smoke the “Ivory” strand of cannabis together in the parking lot. Smoking this leaf causes Ivory’s ghost to appear, and he pledges to help Jamal and Silas on their test. With Ivory’s help, both Jamal and Silas achieve perfect scores, and they are recruited to Harvard, at least partly because of a recent push to increase the diversity of Harvard’s student body.

At Harvard, a series of hijinks ensue, as neither Silas nor Jamal takes their academics seriously; instead, they throw raucous parties, initiate their peers into aspects of Black culture coded as “hip hop” (including styles of speech and dress), and play pranks on the self-hating Black dean, Dean Cain; however, they perform well academically because they continue to get help from Ivory’s ghost by smoking the cannabis grown from his ashes. But after their Ivory plant is stolen by a fellow student out of revenge, Silas and Jamal must pass on their own.

36. In this definition of signifying, Perry quotes Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who in turn has cited the work of linguist Geneva Smitherman. Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, 62.

While they initially fail after losing Ivory's help, Silas determines that if he can invent a truth serum in his botany class, then he can pass and continue to study at Harvard. After some continued setbacks, the film ends at the Harvard Alumni party, where Silas's truth serum works on all those present, leading the attendees to "loosen up," particularly when it comes to the self-segregation between Black and White attendees. Lauren, Silas's love interest, then announces that she has identified some of Benjamin Franklin's previously undiscovered artifacts, finding out that one of these items is, in fact, "the Liberty Bong." When Dean Cain objects, the (white) chancellor, perhaps under the effects of the truth serum, overrules him, exclaiming, "You are FIRED! Hit the bricks, dawg!" The film ends with an all-out dance party to James Brown's funk song "The Big Payback."³⁷

From the internalized racism of Dean Cain, to the satire of fraternity life and the rushing process, to the deep skepticism of the use value of academic knowledge in the university, Method Man and Redman decimate the supposed prestige of the Ivy League in favor of their own ways of knowing and being that can broadly be brought under the aegis of "hip hop culture." Even in the symbolism of the name of their ghost patron, "Ivory," we can see how only a Black man literally turned white (in this case, through death) can fully penetrate the walls of academia's "Ivory" tower. The name "Ivory" also provides an oblique reference to the 1982 Stevie Wonder and Paul McCartney duet "Ebony and Ivory," in which the piano (and its music) provides the symbol for racial harmony. In their updated version of this narrative, Silas and Jamal's injection of rap music (and hip hop culture more broadly) into Harvard campus life—and Silas's ultimately successful creation of a strain of cannabis that erases racism in favor of "truth"—allows for the "perfect harmony" of Black and White in the university context.

In particular, we see how Method Man's character Silas aims only to gain the respectability that a degree in botany would provide, and perhaps the market network and/or lab resources available through an Ivy League education; however, he brings his own knowledge to Harvard and widens others' knowledge practices on campus—not the other way around. Indeed, at the beginning of the film, we see his skepticism toward the academic endeavor as a whole: when Ivory first suggests the idea of college, Silas exclaims, "Half those books is filled with bullshit—the other half, lies." Silas's refusal to bow to the prestige of Harvard's physical and discursive space continues throughout the film; while the pranks that he and Jamal pull seem childish and unnecessary, they nevertheless represent their imperviousness to academic "discipline" in every sense of the word.

We can also see our heroes' imperviousness to the language of academia when, faced with failing midterm grades, Jamal exclaims: "F in Women's Studies? But I love bitches!" Jamal's ridiculous assertion here not only highlights his own unabashed and unselfconscious misogyny, but also pokes fun at the impenetrability of academic discourse on gender, which constitutes not only its own field of study, but its own forms of language

37. Jesse Dylan, "How High," (Jersey Films, Native Pictures, 2001). Notably, a 2011 book about the history of hip hop's commercialization also takes its name from James Brown's song; see Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

and knowing that starkly contrast with the daily language and experience of “the streets” that surround the ivory tower.

At the same time, Silas—who is painted as the consummate organic intellectual, in contrast to Jamal’s buffoonery—demonstrates a remarkable fluency in academic registers of English that, like Tupac in the clip examined above, suggests that his preference for BL throughout the film represents a conscious choice, and not an inability to codeswitch.³⁸ For example, in exiting a conversation with Bart, a privileged and entitled white student who is one of the film’s villains, Silas says, “Peace” by way of farewell. Bart, angry with Silas for flirting with his girlfriend, corrects him, saying “Peace is meant to explain a state of tranquility, okay? So why don’t you try finding a way to say goodbye now that you’re among civilized people.” Maintaining his cool (in every sense of the word), despite the racially charged implications of Bart’s claim about “civilized people,” Silas responds, “Well, Mr. Civilized, peace can also be used interjectionally, as a request, greeting, or farewell. So try to find another way to be an asshole, if you don’t know your grammar, that is. Peace.”³⁹ His decimation of Bart in this scene, who is left hemming and hawing in response, demonstrates one of the many ways in which Silas educates the other (white) students at Harvard, rather than himself benefitting from a Harvard education. It also recalls Tupac’s similar deployment of White Mainstream English to signify on “book knowledge,” subversively demonstrating not only his ability to “styleshift,”⁴⁰ but also to use that styleshifting to create a reversal of power that insists on the legitimacy of Black ways of speaking and knowing.

Similarly, perhaps the most powerful and hilarious scene in the film comes in Black History class. The scene begins with the white professor, played by Spalding Gray, pointing out that history changes depending on who has the power to write it: “if it’s snowflake, whitey, paleface, peckawoods, cracker,” he says, while pointing at individual white students in the room, “well, we’ve got Cleopatra looking like Elizabeth Taylor and Jesus looking like a hippie in a dashiki.” He continues, “But if it’s one of my proud Black people that’s doing the recording of the account”—and here Jamal walks in, disturbing the class, to which the professor responds—“well, we might have Moses looking like this fine Black man right here.” The professor makes this point to show not only how famous historical figures are wrongly represented as white, but also that “Black people don’t get any credit.”

Silas appears transfixed at this monologue, but Jamal is unconvinced, whispering to Silas “Black History? Man, it look like all the Black students that was in here ARE history.” In response, a white classmate shushes Jamal, to which he responds, “You tellin me to shhh? See what I mean? Fuck history.” The white professor overhears this interjection and states, “Well that’s right! Fuck history!” and “That’s the kind of attitude I like to hear!” Jamal, in protest to the ironic power differentials in a Black History class both taught and dominated by whiteness, walks out of the classroom to “go to take a long shit”;

38. Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture*, 60–62.

39. Dylan, “How High.”

40. Alim, *Roc the Mic Right*, 60.

when Silas then follows Jamal, and the professor asks where he's going, he quotes Malcolm X: "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock, Plymouth Rock landed on us." The professor responds with a fist raised in an attempt to encapsulate the Black power salute, stating, "Oooo alright! Malcolm X! Well I'm glad someone's appreciating the knowledge I'm trying to drop on you today." He then turns to the two remaining Black students in the classroom, who are both dressed as stereotypical Ivy League students in khakis and sweater vests, and tells them, "What about you two? Why don't you walk out in protest with your brothers? Walk out on me! What are you doing sitting there? You look like whitey, you look like a couple of goddamn Uncle Toms! Walk on out! That's right! Get up and move!" The two Black students walk out as the professor continues, shouting "You should lynch me! Lynch me for what my people have done to your people!"⁴¹

Of course, this scene's satire works not only because of the irony of a white man teaching Black history, which Jamal outright rejects as "bullshit," but also because even in a lecture about how "Black people don't get any credit," the white professor takes credit for the knowledge and actions that Silas and Jamal have and deploy of their own accord, stating, "I'm glad someone's appreciating the knowledge I'm trying to drop on you today." He then kicks the other Black students out of the classroom in an attempt to bizarrely compensate for his white guilt by performatively identifying with Silas and Jamal, which ultimately discriminatorily legislates the terms and conditions of all Black students' belonging in a Harvard history classroom.

Even the consciously anti-racist political alignments of the white professor, then, do not result in the professor's ability to justly and conscientiously deal with Black people in real life—perhaps most clearly demonstrated by his "calling out" of individuals using slurs against white people, but perhaps more controversially in his calling the Black students "Uncle Toms." Even while the professor seems to have a "book knowledge" fluency in Black history and politics, he has failed to internalize anti-racism because his colonizing mindset still dictates the power dynamics of the classroom environment. Indeed, even the mini-revolution that Silas and Jamal stage becomes appropriated through the professor's discourse as a form of white, academic knowledge gifted to the would-be revolutionaries, who then become "students" interpellated by the power differential in white versus Black knowledge practices.

This power differential is restored to balance in the film's resolution, which comes about not only through the triumph of Silas's organic knowledge—literalized through the metaphor of organic plant matter—but also through the realization of Truth via this form of epistemology. The final song, "The Big Payback," emphasizes the "funkification" of academia via the "revenge" of de-colonization brought on by Silas's truth serum and the discovery of Benjamin Franklin's bong—which prompts the appearance of the ghosts of both Ivory and Ben Franklin, who, while hugging each other, simultaneously pronounce, "Light that shit, smoke that shit, pass that shit!" This rejection of the academic norms of respectability in both comportment and speech represents the true de-colonization of the Harvard campus, particularly because it involves the highest levels

41. Dylan, "How High."

of the university administration and some of the most esteemed figures in American history. This decolonization provides a stark contrast to the power differentials preserved by individual faculty members, even in the seemingly “woke” Black History classroom. *How High* as a whole, then, despite its goofy and often outright ridiculous surface, presents an incisive challenge to the colonizing discourse of academia, at least partly through its deep skepticism toward academic forms of knowing and the attendant power of this epistemology and its discursive space.

In this sense, *How High* not only critiques the university structure, but does so via signifying, such that the pleasure of the film reveals itself in the unexpected reversals of power, as when Silas explains the various syntactical and semantic valences of the word “peace.” In addition, unlike *Higher Learning*, *How High* fully embraces the multiple valences of the word “high,” such that the central plot revolving around marijuana usage actually becomes the primary means by which Silas and Jamal achieve their heroic acts of decolonization; in this sense, the various puns on “higher” education become a reversal of the elitism implied in one sense of the word “high,” as well as an insistence on the value of cannabis culture (as well as hip hop culture) to the decolonization of these elite spaces.⁴² By using literary analysis, we can learn from how each of these films deconstructs both the knowledge practices and the sociocultural power of the university; unlike the types of reading proposed in Adam Bradley’s work on “rap poetry,” a “street knowledge”-attuned form of literary practice could use the tools of academic literary study to examine hip hop-inspired texts to critique the hegemony of academia’s “book knowledge.” Perhaps, for example, a Foucauldian critique of the discourses of knowledge and power in the university might never fully succeed so long as Foucault remains a staple of that very discourse; instead, hip hop’s street knowledge provides us the models of Tupac and Method Man’s Silas that we can use to critique the colonizing space of the university without using the colonizer’s own tools.⁴³

In the next section, I will examine how these reversals of power and the rejection of the university as a colonizing institution play out in the early part of Kanye West’s hip hop career. While Kanye’s three *College Dropout*-related albums use the purely aural medium of rap music—in contrast to a film-based approach like *Higher Learning*, or, particularly, *How High*—Kanye’s work nevertheless builds intertextually on these existing hip hop films by creating mini-narratives or “skits” within each album that powerfully (and humorously) ask listeners to question the value of the university’s “book knowledge.” Kanye’s parody of the Black college student who implicitly believes in and relies on the value of a university education, and in contrast, his braggadocio when it comes to his own

42. Other hip hop-related films about education and the university exist: for example, in 2001, Wiz Khalifa and Snoop Dogg released an album, followed by a film in the cannabis-related genre, titled *Mac and Devin Go to High School*; and *Dear White People*, the movie (2014) followed by the Netflix series (2017), also argues for the fundamental coloniality of the university, which—in a similar but more nuanced and less allegorical manner to *Higher Learning*—shows the precarity of black students no matter what strategies they use to navigate its white supremacist space.

43. Perhaps hip hop’s street knowledge is the unexpected solution to the double bind of colonial knowledge and power that Dipesh Chakrabarty famously explored in *Provincializing Europe*.

agency in dropping out, represents, perhaps, a point midway between the two contrasting characters of *How High*'s Silas and Jamal. Despite his interruption of the norms of university culture, Method Man's Silas still implicitly endorses the advantages of the university space (its labs, for example, or the collegiality of other intelligent Black students), and indeed, both his and Jamal's main source of conflict is the repeated threat of being "kicked out" of Harvard. In contrast, Kanye repudiates the tangible or intangible benefits of university, instead valorizing the agency of the Black college dropout and in the process suggesting instead that the university's "book knowledge" is, at best, superfluous, or at worst, a disingenuous "dupe" in order to socialize intelligent Black men into conforming to a social structure that continues to oppress them. Through a revisioning of the central metaphor of "high"-ness literalized in the film *How High*, Kanye further extends this foray into satire across his first three groundbreaking albums by exploring at length the themes of dropping out, graduation, and lateness.

KANYE WEST: THE TRILOGY OF *THE COLLEGE DROPOUT*, *LATE REGISTRATION*, AND *GRADUATION*

In the song "Get Em High," from *The College Dropout* (2004)—his first album—Kanye collaborates with Talib Kweli and Common to produce a catchy, hypnotic beat that combines the relatively standard themes of picking up girls and dissing other rappers, intertwined with critiques of the university and the entire premise of a university education. At one point, Kweli asks Kanye, "Ain't you meet that chick at that conference with your mom? / She's the bomb, but she got the bougie behavior."⁴⁴ This reference to one of the staples of academia—the academic conference—not only emphasizes the solidly middle class ("bougie") nature of the university and its attendant intellectual spaces, but also subtly references the way that Kanye's and Kweli's own mothers met: at an academic conference—or more specifically, at the Black Caucus meeting at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Talib Kweli's mother, Brenda Greene, reflects, "How ironic that we two educators were attending an academic conference focused on the teaching of English composition, while our sons were on tour performing original lyrics before arenas filled with thousands of eager young fans bobbing their heads to hip hop beats."⁴⁵ In "Get Em High," Common joins Kanye and Kweli as another major rapper whose mother, Dr. Mahalia Hines, is a professor.

In the context of their individual backgrounds as the college dropout sons of academic parents—a context which the song explicitly references—these three rappers' exhortation to "get 'em high" takes on not only the obvious meanings expounded in the hook (which, they clarify, implies that listeners "throw your motherfucking hands" and "all the girls pass the weed to your motherfucking man")—but also takes on the additional valence of "higher" education exploited in the film titles mentioned above. But the song leaves this sense of the word "high" unexplored, representing perhaps an intentional rejection of the

44. Kanye West, "Get Em High," in *The College Dropout* (Def Jam; Roc-A-Fella, 2004).

45. Brenda Greene, "In the Beginning Was the Word . . .," *Black Issues Book Review* (2007): 20.

very premise of “higher ed” in favor of other means of “getting high.” This repudiation especially comes through as Kanye raps these lines early on in his verse: “My freshman year I was going through hella problems / til I built up the nerve to drop my ass up outta college / My teacher said I’m a loser / I told her why don’t you kill me / I give a fuck if you fail me.”⁴⁶

This “I [don’t] give a fuck” attitude pervades Kanye’s work, especially as it pertains to university education. As Chris Richardson writes in his article on Kanye: “West recognizes that a university degree is necessary for attaining status and the hope of a well-paying career but is also a way for the dominant culture to judge others and legitimate social hierarchies and segregation.”⁴⁷ Richardson notes that the “symbolic violence” of the university’s implicit whiteness becomes the primary focus on Kanye’s critiques of college life. Or, as Kanye West mentions in his “School Spirit Skit 1,” having a college degree (and taking on the enormous amount of debt required to get that degree) does little in the face of the white networks that privilege whiteness over education or intelligence; the college graduate in the skit, voiced by comedian DeRay Davis, notes: “If you continue to work at the Gap, after several interviews—oh my God—you’ll come in at an entry level position. And when you do that, if you kiss enough ass, you’ll move up to the next level, which is being the secretary’s secretary—who *never* went to college! She’s actually the boss’s niece!”⁴⁸

In the context of the album’s critique of the institution of the university, its implicit racism, as well as the racism of a system that requires a college degree as both a mark of achievement and a necessary step for success and security in the middle-class job market, the metaphor of “dropping out” represents a necessary exercise of self-determination outside of the double consciousness imposed by the university and academic culture. The “nerve to drop my ass up outta college” that Kanye espouses contrasts with the confusion of characters like the nerdy, hapless college graduate of the “School Spirit” skits, or the college girl in “All Falls Down” who “has no idea what she doin’ in college” but “won’t drop out, her parents will look at her funny.”⁴⁹ Similarly, in the song “School Spirit” (sandwiched between skits that parody the futility and absurdity of a college education), Kanye raps, “Told ‘em I was finished school and started my own business / They say ‘Oh you graduated?’ – no, I decided I was finished.”⁵⁰ This emphasis on the autonomy of dropping out also emerges through the mascot, Dropout Bear, who appears as the central figure in the album art and videos for Kanye’s first three albums.

As the corollary to the theme of dropping out, the trope of graduation also pervades Kanye’s work, not only in oblique references throughout *The College Dropout* (including the main context for the first three tracks on this album), but also providing the title of the third album in the trilogy, *Graduation*. Kanye’s refusal of the white middle class standards of achievement implied by a college degree not only appears in his pride in

46. West, “Get Em High.”

47. Richardson, ““Can’t Tell Me Nothing”: Symbolic Violence, Education, and Kanye West,” 102.

48. Kanye West, “School Spirit (Skit 1),” in *The College Dropout* (Def Jam; Roc-A-Fella, 2004).

49. “All Falls Down,” in *The College Dropout* (Def Jam; Roc-A-Fella, 2004).

50. “School Spirit,” in *The College Dropout* (Def Jam; Roc-A-Fella, 2004).

“dropping out,” but also in his outright parody of both the “pomp and circumstance” of the graduation ceremony, as well as the symbolism of the degree itself. Indeed, *The College Dropout* opens with an introductory skit in which the college dean asks Kanye to perform a song “for the kids,”⁵¹ to which Kanye responds with the song “We Don’t Care”; when the dean hears the lyrics that repudiate the value of mainstream education—implied by the very title of the song—he responds by revoking Kanye’s right to graduate: “You can give me your motherfucking graduation ticket right now! You will not walk across that stage, you won’t slide across that stage, a motherfucker can’t pull you across that stage, Kanye! [. . .] You getting the fuck out of this campus!”⁵² Of course, despite the dean’s blustering, Kanye has already emptied the value of the ceremony with the song itself—the threats of revoking his graduation are ultimately meaningless, at least partly because Kanye, unlike the dean, is not interested in being “out here with these white people.”⁵³

In “School Spirit,” Kanye not only redefines what it means to be “finished” with school, but also cements the comments in this song with the skits that follow, and in particular with the scathingly satirical “Lil Jimmy Skit,” in which the central character responds to an interlocutor asking where he’s going now that his dad has died: “My dad died, and he left me his degrees. [. . .] He was so greedy with degrees, he took my degree. And now I’m just glad he left me these. Because all of the regular homeless people have newspaper, and look what I have. [. . .] I’m going to learn too. I’m going to get super smart, so I too can die without money. But I’ll be the smartest dead guy! Who has that?”⁵⁴ This denial of the value of a college education in both monetary and utilitarian terms joins the myriad ways in which Kanye’s skits in particular enumerate the ways in which college fails its students, including but not limited to: lack of sexual prowess (“no, I’ve never had sex, but my degree keeps me satisfied”); lack of job prospects (the nepotism of the white job market described above); the self-destructive aspects of college party life (“don’t forget about that drug habit you picked up at school being around your peers!”); and the tautological value of intelligence for its own sake (“Hate all you want, but I’m smart, I’m *so* smart!”).⁵⁵

In this sense, Kanye’s repudiation of both graduation and the college degree mirrors the refusal symbolized by the ending of *How High*, explored above—for, significantly, that film does not end with graduation, even as a “flash forward” moment, because the depiction of Silas’s and Jamal’s graduation would only reify Harvard’s institutional prestige, while turning *How High* into a predictable Bildungsroman about the unlikely success of two Black men from the “hood” in navigating one of the most elite (i.e. one of the whitest) academic institutions in the world. This ending would not have interrupted any of our assumptions about the “ivory tower” of the university, nor about hip hop culture in relation to academic culture. Instead, Kanye’s and Method Man’s and Redman’s respective insistence on disrupting the white norms of academia—especially via an interruption

51. “School Spirit (Skit 1).”

52. “School Spirit (Skit 2),” in *The College Dropout* (Def Jam; Roc-A-Fella, 2004).

53. *Ibid.*

54. Kanye West, “Lil Jimmy,” in *The College Dropout* (Def Jam; Roc-A-Fella, 2004).

55. “School Spirit (Skit 1).”; “School Spirit (Skit 2).”; “Lil Jimmy.”

of the norms of respectability in terms of both speech and sartorial styles—implies a corollary insistence on establishing their own individual standards of success based on “street knowledge” and organic genius outside of the white gaze implicit in the academic’s “book knowledge.”

This interruption of white norms of respectable behavior also appears in both Kanye’s work and in *How High* through the theme of lateness. Just as *How High* depicts Jamal’s interruption of Black History class with his lateness, Kanye highlights this theme in the name of his second album, *Late Registration*. The final song on the album, simply titled “Late,” most clearly criticizes the “standard” timetables of college life: “They said the best classes go to the fastest / sorry Mr. West, there’s no good classes / and that’s what yo’ ass get.”⁵⁶ In contrast, Kanye insists, “I’ll be late for that” and “I’m comin’ in when I feel like.” These assertions not only refer to the lateness of both *The College Dropout* and *Late Registration* (both albums were released well past the original release date), but also insist on lateness as the necessary and excusable corollary to genius: “If I can catch the beat, then slow down the tempo / Just throw this at the end if I’m too late for the intro.”⁵⁷

The line immediately following this insistence on lateness—“Will I make it from the student loans to a Benzo?”—gestures toward the other major theme in Kanye’s work, which is capitalist consumerism. This song—and indeed, Kanye’s Dropout trilogy as a whole, as explored particularly through the School Spirit Skits described above—encapsulates what we might call “late” capitalism. Kanye’s impatience for monetary success (“back to school, and I hate it there, I hate it there / everything I want, I gotta wait a year, I wait a year”⁵⁸) combined with his critique of the cost of college versus the limited earning potential guaranteed by a college degree, and his repeated insistence on profits and buying power as true markers of success (in contrast to educational markers symbolized by graduation or a degree) suggest an investment in the capitalist enterprise characterized by the intertwining of anti-intellectualism and anti-racism.⁵⁹

This critique of the white supremacist structure of college education speaks particularly to millennial listeners, who recognize the “rigged” nature of a system that requires taking out thousands of dollars in student loan money at exorbitant interest rates in order to earn a college degree for low-paying (or even non-paying) jobs in a market that disproportionately punishes or excludes consumers of color. In particular, Kanye’s critique of college—as conveyed through the themes of “highness,” graduation versus dropping out,

56. “Late,” in *Late Registration* (Def Jam; Roc-A-Fella, 2005).

57. Ibid., In *Graduation*, Kanye combines the themes of graduation and lateness—again, not least through the album title itself, which suggests that he has determined his own “graduation” within the hip hop world from rap rookie (and apprentice to “big brother” Jay-Z) to rap star. On “Can’t Tell me Nothin,’” Kanye raps, “Class started two hours ago / oh, am I late? / No, I already graduated.” The “two hours” in this line not only self-referentially recalls the two previous albums in the *College Dropout* trilogy in the context of the current *Graduation* album, but also, again, insists on Kanye setting his own metaphorical timeline and standard for success. Kanye West, “Can’t Tell Me Nothin’,” in *Graduation* (Def Jam; Roc-A-Fella, 2007).

58. “School Spirit.”

59. In light of the Kanye persona we see unfolding in the Trump era, it’s perhaps easy to see how this capitalist anti-intellectualism has taken a turn from the anti-racism of this early part of Kanye’s career toward right-wing populist elitism in the current political moment.

and “lateness”—brilliantly intertwines a satire of the university system with a concomitant analysis, if not critique, of the structural racism of the American capitalist system. Though both Kanye’s dropping out and his subsequent financial success represents a symbolic overcoming of the racism of the white systems of both the university and capitalism, he nevertheless critiques his own participation in the latter system, as when he acknowledges “drug dealer buy Jordans / crackhead buy crack / and a white man get paid offa all of that.”⁶⁰ In Kanye’s Dropout world, then, as well as in our own, the white supremacy of the university cannot be disentangled from the white supremacy of American society more broadly.

Despite the concordance in themes between certain scenes in *How High* and Kanye’s *Dropout* trilogy, the central difference between Method Man and Redman, on the one hand, and Kanye West, on the other, comes down to socioeconomic class. Kanye’s critique of the university partly rests on his solidly middle class upbringing, which includes, as discussed above, his own mother’s membership in the professoriate. In this sense, Kanye’s repudiation of college and the “support” that he describes receiving from his mother stems at least partly from the social net entailed in that class status—one that allowed him the luxury of access to college (though he dropped out), to a job at the Gap (though he quit), and to an environment steeped in conscious engagement with word play and rhyme (though he claims a level of organic genius).⁶¹ But where Kanye can dismiss the status and prestige associated with a college degree, Method Man’s character of Silas in *How High* seeks that status (though not always on the terms by which it is conferred) in order to legitimate the “street knowledge” of his organic intellectualism. *How High*, in contrast to Kanye, does not engage in anti-intellectualism, despite the rampant silliness of its protagonists; on the contrary, the film depicts the raw power of Black intellectualism as it struggles for recognition against the oversight (in every sense of the word) of white people and white institutions.

In contrast to these two parodic approaches, however, I will finally examine briefly the work of J. Cole, whose earliest mixtape dropped in 2010; his work on the relationship between hip hop and the university signals a shift away from the satirical mode of the 2000s to a reconsideration of the status of the middle- and/or upper-class Black intellectual who need not subscribe to the false dichotomy of “street knowledge” and “book knowledge.” Cole engages explicitly with Kanye’s work in order to establish a continuity of tropes and themes, even while his troping on the notion of the “college dropout”

60. West, “All Falls Down.”

61. In an interview with Talib Kweli’s mother, Dr. Brenda Greene, Kanye’s mother, Donde West, reflects on her son’s talent with words: “Like you’ve said to me before, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. I don’t say that just to comment you, me, or Ann Hines [Common’s mother], [so we can] pat ourselves on the back. But we are all professionally trained educators in English; we all have sons who became rappers, and I don’t know whether we contributed to their skills consciously or subconsciously. I do know that all three of us always pushed the language with our sons.

With Kanye, I frequently played word games with him where we rhymed. I’d say ‘sky,’ he’d say ‘bye’ and we would keep going until we ran out of words. It’s that kind of involvement with your children—playing word games and helping them to understand the power in being able to manipulate the language in a good way, with a morality and a social consciousness behind it.” Greene, “In the Beginning Was the Word . . .,” 21.

promotes a new vision that balances both “street knowledge” and “book knowledge” as epistemologies that, while both contradictory and complementary, need not require a singular “choice” of one over the other. For example, Cole’s deployment of the trope of “high”-ness in his single “High for Hours” insists on, as Tricia Rose puts it, balancing “individual agency” and “structural oppression” such that “the forces that constrain black agency must be acknowledged while the spirit and reality of black free will must be preserved.”⁶² By refusing pure parody as too given to hyperbole and caricature, J. Cole’s realist (or realest?) rap provides us with a model for reading the university through the lens of hip hop without resorting to a binary logic.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: J. COLE, “CLASS” AS METAPHOR AND PUN, AND THE ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL

To conclude with a turn to our present moment, we now look at the work of J. Cole as a rapper in this most recent generation of hip hop who not only engages with the theme of university education within his brand of socially conscious rap, but also himself embodies the transcendence from low to middle class that informs his own particular take on college culture. Indeed, Cole thematizes precisely this upward class mobility in relation to education in “Before I’m Gone” from the 2010 mixtape *Friday Night Lights*: Cole raps, “See me I lived it all from dirt-poor in a trailer / Worried about my mother and never trustin’ my neighbors / To middle-class with a backyard and my own room / To bein’ the only black kid in my homeroom / Academically gifted and followed my own rules.”⁶³

In other ruminations on socioeconomic status and education, Cole continues many of the themes noted above. For example, in “Too Deep for the Intro,” from the same mixtape, he rhymes, “A lot of shit up on my plate so you know a n***a late / to my first class”;⁶⁴ this engagement with lateness, however, does not suggest the self-determination and refusal to abide by white standards of propriety that we see with Kanye or Jamal from *How High*. Instead, his admission of the responsibilities, stresses, and obstacles that he faces in pursuing education promotes the sort of “realness” and relatability that Cole embodies.

Indeed, in the same song, he notes:

It’s Cole, I had a dream and so I made a move / A ill ass n— a who just so happened to stay in school / Still rap for hustlers and mothafuckers that hated school / said “that’s for busters,” then heard my shit and I made it cool / It’s safe to say that I’m gifted as if I’m Christmas shopping / I got gangsta n—as lining up in admissions office.⁶⁵

Continuing the assertions of his own giftedness, Cole in some ways embodies the organic intellectualism of “street knowledge”—but in his case, he uses his success in school, and

62. Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 141–42.

63. J. Cole, “Before I’m Gone,” in *Friday Night Lights* (Dreamville; Roc Nation; Columbia, 2010).

64. “Too Deep for the Intro,” in *Friday Night Lights* (Dreamville; Roc Nation; Columbia, 2010).

65. *Ibid.*

his ability to move freely between the physical and discursive spaces of “the hood” (often symbolized by his childhood in Fayetteville, North Carolina) and those of the white public school and university. In this sense, his genius comes not from his repudiation of white education, but his clever ability to master the norms and expectations of these seemingly radically opposed contexts. For Cole, “street knowledge” does not fundamentally exclude facility with “book knowledge.”

At the same time, Cole—unlike Kanye—is not satisfied with merely proclaiming his own genius; instead, part of his engagement with “conscious rap” includes his ability to make education “cool.” He partly achieves this reimagining of university education through explicit references to Kanye’s oeuvre. Cole’s song “Work Out” (2011)—one of Cole’s major radio hits, and the first single released from his debut studio album, *Cole World*—perhaps most explicitly achieves this reference via its sampling of Kanye’s highly recognizable hook from “The New Workout Plan.” Though Cole’s reimagining of the song primarily focuses on a narrative about a one-night stand, one line in particular stands out: “Life is a test, so before the night pass / get right, get right.”⁶⁶ Contrary to Kanye’s glorification of his dropping out of college in favor of the “real world,” as noted through *The College Dropout* album from which he samples, Cole notes the difficulty of the “real life” struggles outside of university.⁶⁷

Part of Cole’s brand, then, involves his simultaneously proclaiming his own genius in line with the best of rap braggadocio, while also suggesting that others might also reject cycles of violence and abuse in order to achieve personal “revolution.”⁶⁸ Cole balances this emphasis on personal responsibility, which at least partly takes the shape of the promotion of university education, with analysis of the structural racism that often limits individual agency. In “Villuminati,” for example, Cole raps not only that “Sometimes I brag like Hov, sometimes I’m real like Pac”—neatly summarizing the opposing poles that he represents⁶⁹—but also that “they hate to see a black man with a college degree.” In this sense, Cole’s achievement of the degree does not represent “selling out” to the white establishment based on white middle-class standards of success, but rather a symbolic conquering of a system rigged against Black success; Cole’s educational success signifies a reversal of social power akin to the consumer-capitalist signifying of most hip hop, including Kanye’s. While Alim explores the question of whether “the blackest thing” is to conquer white literature or to “appreciate our own culture, history, and traditions,”⁷⁰ J. Cole, quite simply, does both.

66. J. Cole, “Work Out,” in *Cole World: The Sideline Story* (Roc Nation; Columbia; Sony, 2011).

67. We also see the metaphor of “life” as an alternative university in the song “Villematic” from *Friday Night Lights*, which opens with Cole’s advice to “college kids, no scholarships”: “Enjoy it while you got it cuz after that it’s God bless ya / Life is your professor, know that bitch is gonna test ya.” “Villematic,” in *Friday Night Lights* (Dreamville; Roc Nation; Columbia, 2010).

68. “High for Hours,” in *High for Hours* (Dreamville; Roc Nation; Interscope, 2017).

69. Or, as he notes in the hook of the song aptly named “2Face,” “Sometimes I scrap sometimes I’m throwing up the peace sign / There’s 2 sides to a n—a though / I said it’s two sides to a n—a yo / Ay look sometimes I’m feeling high, then I’m feeling low / Lord will I die will I survive let a n—a know / You say you know me but what side did you get to know? / It’s two sides to a n—a yo yo yo.” “2face,” in *Friday Night Lights* (Dreamville; Roc Nation; Columbia, 2010).

70. Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture*, 3.

For myself, J. Cole represents one solution to the problem that Kanye all too insightfully articulates in “All Falls Down,” where he might as well have been describing me directly when he raps, “She has no idea what she’s doing in college [. . .] / but she won’t drop out, her parents’ll look at her funny.”⁷¹ If we think of hip hop as the counter-epistemology to academic “book knowledge,” then the means that (pre-2008) Kanye gives us to protest the hegemony of academia would be to simply “drop [ourselves] up outta college.”⁷² Indeed, for Kanye, *not* dropping out appears as the cowardly choice (or non-choice) for those unable or unwilling to exercise individual agency within the hegemonic structures of the university. But what if, despite the frustrations of feeling unmoored and directionless that come along with being a young woman of color in the white space of the university, the decision to stay in academia is, as it was for me, a conscious choice instead of a failure to act? Kanye’s satire does not allow us to consider this scenario in any critical way.

In contrast, however, J. Cole teaches us that we needn’t choose between “book knowledge” and “street knowledge,” but we do have a responsibility to refuse a simple and unthinking hierarchy of one over the other. By refusing either allegory or satire, and instead directly and seriously engaging with the clash between hip hop and academia, Cole provides a new way forward for those of us whose “streets” traverse the university campus. In this sense, J. Cole represents the latest in a series of rap artists since N.W.A., Tupac, Method Man and Redman, and Kanye West, who have explicitly explored the “strength of street knowledge” via the fraught relationship between “white,” colonial forms of knowledge put forth by the institution of the university, on the one hand, and the organic knowledges disseminated by hip hop as an explicitly anti-colonial epistemology, on the other. When these two ways of knowing collide, we who occupy both spaces physically and/or intellectually face a critical juncture in which we can either recolonize hip hop by unduly imposing epistemological or interpretive frames (like “close reading” rap as poetry), as KRS-One fears, reinforcing the hierarchy of the university over the streets—or we can use the intellectual tools at our disposal to learn and then embody the “street knowledge” of hip hop to decolonize both our own minds and the university space as a whole. ■

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