THESIS

MORE THAN A NIGGER: HOW NIGGER/A CONSTITUTES MASCULINITY

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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Words maintain a particular power over us constituting personalities, beliefs, actions, and reactions. We are a reflection of the words we both use to subject others and by which are subjected. These words often reinforce ideologies that create a consciousness for social interactions. "Nigger" and "nigga," words derived from an abhorrent history, are consequential to the reality, perceptions, and experiences of those who deploy the word and those who are subjected by the word. This thesis examines the ways in which "nigger/a" constitutes masculinity for both the addresser and the addressed when deployed by individuals who identify as Black and individuals who do not identify as Black in film, stand-up comedy, and hip-hop. Analysis of these three discursive genres illustrates how "nigger/a" is a fragmented text with the capacity to constitute masculinity in diverse and sometimes competing ways. Through this thesis I hope to expand on the preceding research and understandings of the term and promote a responsible deployment of the word and the acknowledgment of both its history and its capacity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, Jessie Hayes Sr., and to the Black community.

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Chapter One: Rhymes With "Digger"[1]

"You cool nigga?" I think the exchange of the "er" for an "a" made this stranger think that it was okay to say when he approached me one night, as if the replacement might remove a bit of the sting associated with it. To my knowledge, the 6'3" male didn't identify as Black, and I'm not sure it would have justified what he said and how he said it if he did identify as Black. It was clear the way the word dripped down his tongue that this was not the first time he had used the word. As someone who is very proud of my heritage, culture, and race—and knowing the history of the word—I felt the need to speak up.

"Don't use that word around me, and you need to back up."

"What word?" as if he didn't know, "Nigga?"

"Yes, that word. Don't say that around me."

"I'll say nigga if I [expletive] want to nigga." Just as he said that his friend intervened, also bringing his face in close proximity to mine as he asked the same question. The situation got worse before it got better.

Less than 20 minutes later—after leaving the situation and thinking that it was a rare occasion of someone calling me a derogatory word—I was once again greeted by the egregious epithet as a truck stopped at a red light. The driver yelled out before it changed to green, "What you doin' here nigger?" The "er" was very apparent this time, but it didn't matter if a pink bow was tied on the end of it; in both instances the venom from the word was both debilitating and provocative.

Words are constantly being analyzed by scholars, especially in conjunction with their impact on individuals and society. "Nigger/a" is a term with a complex and convoluted history,

and its uses have been discussed and debated by pundits, entertainers, and activists. Yet despite its history and continued significance in U.S. culture, rhetorical critics have paid scant attention to the term and its functions as an icon. While some words fade away and "die" over time, it is as if "nigger/a" is a vernacular phoenix, finding new life in the ruins it inadvertently creates. While context is a significant factor, it is a word that intertwines itself within the emotions and the mentality of the user and the addressed. It utilizes its power in a staggering fashion to shape individuals' senses of self. This leads the project at hand to consider "nigger/a" as a rhetorical text, as the constitutive icon it really is.

The thesis project is a rhetorical critique of one of the most historically influential and controversial words in the English language: "nigger." I examine how the word "nigger" and its schwa "nigga" constitutes masculinity, focusing on the following two research questions.

1. How does "nigger/a" constitute Black masculinity and masculinity in general when used by individuals who do not identify as Black?

2. How does "nigger/a" constitute Black masculinity and masculinity in general when used by individuals who identify as Black?

The undertaking of these two research questions allows for an intrinsic look into "nigger/a" as a text.[2] Rather than call for a solution or attempt to solve the problem that many may associate with the epithet, the purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which this icon, "nigger/a" constitutes masculinity in order to fully understand the rhetorical implications of each version of the term.

In its most basic sense, communication is the transmission of a message from one entity to another utilizing available means. The study of "nigger/a" as a text and how it works to characterize masculinity allows for the exploration of how historical implications have molded a

word or a text into an interpellating icon, one that can construct, deconstruct, and define a person's identity. The field of Communication has evolved over time, and includes subspecialties such as rhetoric, media, and relational/organization communication. "Nigger/a" is a text that has a significant impact in each of those three areas, and though this project approaches the topic from a rhetorical perspective, the insights gleaned from this analysis will be instructive for the field more broadly.

The text "nigger/a" is an interpellating iconic text that characterizes both its user and its intended recipient's masculinity. This introduction examines interpellation, identity, spectacular consumption, and Black masculinity/masculinity in general in the literature review in order to lay the foundation for the project. After discussing the relevant academic literature, I discuss the critical method employed in the study and explain the layout of thesis chapters.

Literature Review

Kenneth Burke defines identity through his "Definition of Man." According to Burke "man" [sic] is a "symbol making/using/misusing animal," and "inventor of the negative," who is "goaded by a spirit of hierarchy."[3] Burke explains that identification of one's self and of others requires the use of symbols. Individuals utilize symbols to identify with each other and also to produce distinction between themselves and those whom they may consider an "other." Symbols work to create or dismantle, associate or distinguish, eventually allowing for an invention of the negative, or that which is not. We create symbols, he asserts, from symbols to define ourselves and of course, other symbols. The symbols we construct work within a negotiation between ourselves and the society in which we are enmeshed as those symbols become a means of "role embracing," "position taking, meaning making," or even "dress codes and rule breaking."[4]

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According to Burke, as humans we create, use, and misuse symbols; this process helps us formulate an identity and understand our reality.[5] Symbols, then, are not inconsequential to how we see ourselves and others; they are not inconsequential to who we are or who we may become. Burke notes that "So much of the 'we' that is separated from the nonverbal by the verbal would not even exist were it not for the verbal (or for our symbolicity in general . . .)."[6] Distinction and division—for the purposes of self-identification and identification of another—possesses the potential to create and maintain a societal structure wherein individuals become goaded by a spirit of hierarchy based on the identity they ascribe to themselves or on that which is ascribed to them by another.

As the symbol using, creating and misusing animals, humans are also goaded by a spirit of hierarchy and a sense of the negative. We are moved by a sense of order and we understand who we are by knowing what we are not.[7] Burke's notion of "the negative" does not refer to that which is bad; it marks that which is not—that which is rejected. The utilization of different symbols allows a person to conceive the notion of who is, who is not, how someone is, and how someone is not. Consequently, they are able to negotiate their role and identity in particular contexts. Burke explains that "Identification is compensatory to division. If men [sic] were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity."[8] When identifying words such as "male" and "female," "gay" and "straight," or even "young" and "old" are utilized, these symbols—and their variations—produce distinction between the identified subject and the hegemonic order. The employed symbol also works to mark individuals' roles within a given structure—whether within or outside the community. These symbols become a way to define individuals and create community while also becoming a way

for others to not affiliate. The formation of identity is then a "dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions."[9]

The formation and understanding of identity provides the platform from which individuals are subjected to interpellation. Louis Althusser explains that the subject "is the constitutive category of all ideology."[10] The subject, then, is essential to the establishment and preservation of ideology and subsequently—though not in all cases—culture, as long as ideology can also concurrently establish an individual as a subject. While the subject is necessary to maintaining and constituting ideology, the subject cannot do so unless an ideology constitutes an individual as a subject. Consequently, Althusser describes subjects as being individuals "always already" in existence.[11] Subjectivities are imbued with ideologies and they influence the ways in which an individual negotiates within and between cultures, how one functions in everyday life, and how an individual's identity is constantly under construction, especially within his/her ascribed culture(s). Someone may identify as a particular gender, for example, which in turn requires them to negotiate what gender "rules" have been ascribed to them within a particular culture and/or to another culture when they communicate between cultures. That individual is constantly functioning in their everyday life as the subject of a particular gender construct because cultural and societal norms have transformed them into the subject of that gender. The ideology and the subject work together in a symbiotic relationship where one essentially cannot survive without the other. Althusser explains that:

> to recognize that we are subjects and that we function in the practical rituals of the most
> elementary everyday life (the hand-shake, the fact of calling you by your name, the fact
> of knowing, even if I do not know what it is, that you "have" a name of your own, which
> means that you are recognized as a unique subject, etc.)—this recognition only gives us
> the 'consciousness' of our incessant (eternal) practice of ideological recognition -- its
> consciousness, i.e. its recognition -- but in no sense does it give us the (scientific)
> knowledge of the mechanism of this recognition. Now it is this knowledge that we have
> to reach, if you will, while speaking in ideology, and from within ideology we have to

outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e. subject-less) discourse on ideology.[12]

Even the most miniscule ideological rituals can work to constitute individuals as subjects and it is an individual's recognition of themselves becoming the subject which establishes and reinforces that ideology. Consequently, the subject's identity is either changed or reinforced. As Althusser notes, ideology "interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects."[13] Understanding interpellation, then, is foundational to any examination of how identities function within and among cultures.

Interpellation—being as simplistic as everyday gestures and interactions and yet as complex as an organized ritual—is the "moment one enters into a rhetorical situation" understanding that they, themselves, are the subject who is being addressed and, in turn, "participat[ing] in the discourse that addresses him [sic]."[14] Interpellation changes what was an individual into a subject as it works to "recruit" that individual. Interpellation names and identifies individuals, stripping them of power and "freedom" and yet instills a sense of freedom that is illusory. Subjects must think they are making a choice freely, but they have already been interpellated into an intended subject position. It is when this is recognized by the individual that they consequently become the subject and are successfully interpellated.[15] Althusser explains the paradox inherent to interpellation:

> the individual is interpellated as a (free)subject in order that he [sic] shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself'. There are no subjects except by and for their subjection.[16]

Once individuals are transformed to subjects through interpellation, the ideology they were interpellated through becomes both enabler and oppressor.

Drawing on Althusser, Maurice Charland maintains the idea that interpellation constitutes identity, yet Charland emphasizes that individuals never come to situations as blank slates Instead they come with perceptions, preconceived notions, and molded perspectives that will ultimately determine whether or not the act and process of interpellation by an ideology is even possible. Charland explains that "the acknowledgement of an address entails acceptance of an imputed self-understanding which can form the basis for an appeal."[17] Individual identities interpellate others and are interpellated when a discourse or a text appears to be speaking to their identity. According to Charland, then, building upon interpellation, constitutive rhetoric is "ideological" because it provides "individuals with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives in experience" while also positioning "'narratized' subjects-as-agents into the world."[18]

Constitutive rhetoric goads subjects into "political, social, and economic action" setting a "historical narrative in motion" and altering the ways in which one views "themselves and their conditions."[19] While constitutive rhetoric may have an intended audience, the text and symbols involved my constitute "eavesdroppers" to the point that an unintended audience becomes impacted usually as a means to "effect change."[20] Text and symbols incorporate subjects as members of the community where they act as members of that community. They identify with that text and symbols associated and subsequently build an identity from it utilizing previous understandings. Additionally, as a subject, individuals are capable of embodying "many texts" as subjects and "rearticulate" their identity based on lived experiences and identity inconsistencies.[21] Charland's premise is that we become subjects, or are subjected to the text, from the time we are able to comprehend language. This allows for a compensatory knowledge of how we come to develop our own complex identities through being "formally or informally"

interpellated.[22] Charland contends that interpellation is not a form of persuasion in the traditional sense, yet it is rhetoric and it does act to influence.

Given rhetoric's constitutive function, texts not only enable us to recognize individuals as subjects; they also manufacture new and more intricate identities through symbol systems that determine who and what we are and are not. In U.S. culture, a particularly contested identity has been that of the Black male subject. Black masculinity has been subjected to interpellation from multiple entities; in turn it interpellates those interpellating entities.

Eric King Watts and Mark Orbe illustrate the process and repercussions of interpellation in their discussion of the ways in which a popular advertising campaign constituted Black culture. Examining the Budweiser "Whassup?" guys, Watts and Orbe theorize the concept of "spectacular consumption" which is "the intensity of the pleasure of consuming the other," the other's culture and ideologies and/or the other's practices and rituals—in essence, the other's identity.[23] The article discusses Whites who want to be interpellated into Black culture, desiring to "reconstitute their identities through acts of black consumption."[24] Watts and Orbe argue that particular Budweiser advertisements were examples of how cultures communicate and as a result, exchange or colonize different dimensions of diverse cultural identities as they incorporate new traits into their "own" identity. Spectacular consumption differs from interpellation due to the fact that spectacular consumption is concerned with a consumer and what is consumed. The way spectacular consumption is performing persuasion is twofold. For instance, Budweiser is explicitly aiming to sell beer and actively attempting to persuade the consumer to purchase the product, while implicitly allowing White consumers to appropriate Black culture for the purpose of making that product more appealing to its target consumers. Interpellation, however, refers narrowly to the process of constituting subjects rather than with

rhetoric's broader instrumental objectives. Still, Watts and Orbe present the notion that

spectacular consumption, as related to interpellation, finds its subjects experiencing "pleasure"

through "consuming otherness" because of the "Other's uniqueness." At the same time, the

scholars demonstrate that a subject can "consume" or assume another cultural identity without

completely losing their own.[25] Watts' and Orbe's exploration of spectacular consumption serves

the purpose of helping to show how and why an individual might be interpellated into another

culture/cultural ideology, through the use of a text/word, and, subsequently, perform a sort of

intercultural communication.

Insofar as the identity of humans is defined based on symbols, the consciousness of the

negative, and a sense of order and hierarchy, it may appear clear from a Burkean point of view

how those symbols work in unison to interpellate/constitute a subject. Black identity is

complicated by the fact that it historically has been in a state of constant flux. Much of what

Burke has laid out can directly relate to Black identity such as individuals being "goaded by a

spirit of hierarchy." For example, most symbols in American society maintain Eurocentric

dispositions. So these texts and symbols—along with their creators and their transmitters—play a

role in the subjugation of individuals who identify as the minority within that system of symbols

and texts. George Yancy draws on Frantz Fanon who asserts that Blacks cannot be considered

human without adhering to the canons of Eurocentric and White/American discourse.[26] Carter G.

Woodson's ideals reinforce these notions as he maintains that Blacks have been considered

"equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man" only when they've

finished being educated in Americanized or Europeanized schools.[27] Watts and Orbe's

aforementioned study inversely demonstrates that Black identity, in turn, is taken, imitated,

caricatured, and exploited as a "desire for white folk to reconstitute their identities through acts

of black consumption," which arises through their voyeurism of the socially constructed Black identity.[28] Black identity is, then, an identity that has to adhere to hegemonic "prescriptions" while also working to maintain both a sense of individuality and tradition.

In his discussion of Black identity James Baldwin states, "Almost all Negroes . . . are almost always acting, but before a white audience—which is quite incapable of judging their performance: and even the 'bad nigger' is, inevitably giving something of performance, even if the entire purpose of his performance is to terrify or blackmail white people."[29] Bryant K. Alexander expands upon this notion of a "Good-Man and a Bad-Man" performance, asserting that this social compromise allows for a chance at "self-creation that provides agency."[30] This performance does not aim to "unweave the cultural tapestry" of Black history, but instead serves as a means to "reconfigure and offer alternate perceptions . . . reveal[ing] the dimensions" of Black identity and character.[31] Still, as a means to pass, these performances can easy be misconstrued—especially by those who identify as the other.

Arguably one of the biggest insults in terms of Black identity would be to question an individual's Blackness and reference them as being White or not Black enough. Proving your Blackness/Black identity is a "burden all blacks bear" while being compelled to "pass" if they desire certain kinds of success and acknowledgements in American society.[32] According to Vershawn Ashanti Young:

> to prove our blackness to one another and our whiteness to whites and sometimes our whiteness to blacks and our blackness to whites and how tangled up this gets—and how confusing and frustrating it is. So much so, that we'd go insane if we didn't prevent it, if we didn't choose to live as either a Resisting Black, embracing the performance of blackness while resisting whiteness . . . or as a Passing Black, striving toward whiteness and repudiating blackness.[33]

The complexity of Black identity creates a convoluted situation in terms of what it means to be Black and how to be Black while also negotiating how to maneuver successfully throughout the

establishments of American society. The integration into "White performance" or even the constituting of Blackness can be almost imperceptible and yet immensely significant to the development of identity.

Molefi Kete Asante explains that in 1816 a group of Whites, forming the American Colonization Society, suggested that Africans should be returned to Africa. The response from free Africans at the time was a negative one. The rise of White supremacy and White paternalism, the "acceptance of social and cultural fatalism" and the "most pronounced brainwashing that had ever been perpetrated on Africans in America" was the result according to Asante.[34] Black identity is not only a result of a stolen or lost identity from slavery, what was salvaged from "old world" mixed with what was indoctrinated in the "new," but also a rejection of ancestry, and an acceptance of Eurocentric views and American ideologies, as well as a new found sense of hierarchy. The use of certain texts and symbols that maintain Eurocentric conventions, in terms of Black identity, work to strengthen American and Eurocentric ideologies. The text helps to define Black masculinity as well in terms of Eurocentric and American ideologies. This is especially true as Black identity began to be defined by attempts to be interpellated into American society as well as others making attempts to be interpellated into the Black community.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain that metaphor is more than just a stylistic device. It is a persuasive device used in "language" and in "action."[35] Ultimately, metaphors "govern our everyday functioning . . . what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people."[36] The use of metaphor is not only impactful to our lives, but also essential especially as we make "transactions between contexts" to negotiate our understanding of a text and, subsequently, reality.[37] Such an understanding can help us deepen our

comprehension of how our identities are conceptualized and structured, how our attitudes and actions are aroused, how we constrain and limit ourselves or how we utilize metaphor to liberate ourselves.[38]

Black identity, and its role in the constitution of Black masculinity, finds life, liberation, or constraint within the confines of a metaphor and in some instances, an icon, as metaphors and icons work to shape identity. It is through different text and symbols that we create sense of reality for ourselves. Discourse and context find their foundation and function in metaphors which allow us to perceive reality. Metaphors can help to clarify concepts in narratives that sometimes lack clarity and continuity. In the traditional sense, metaphors are thought of as a stylistic device that compare two or more unlike things. Traditionally, a metaphor works through the use of a vehicle, the said expression, and a tenor what is really being represented. The tenor is a symbol used to represent something entirely different and typically arbitrary. The text or metaphor functions as an icon, a "representational mark (signifier) bearing an actual resemblance to whatever it signifies."[39]

In their discussion of iconicity, Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs explain that the use of metaphor "rests on the intuitive recognition of similarities between on field of reference and another";[40] the icon, then, is meant to have a "natural" connection to its referent. Icons or iconicity carry a seemingly natural connection to their referent similar to the way connotations do, where the "connotations of names affect their appropriateness."[41] When one can tease out the connotations behind a text/word/metaphor, you can "identify the community attitude towards it."[42] The uses of names of animals for humans and products can directly demonstrate how society views that particular subject. A car model named "rat" is not going to sell, especially compared to a model named "mustang." One has connotations of unattractiveness, inferiority,

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filth, disease, and guile, while the other has connotations of strength, speed, superiority, and beauty. It is these concepts of metaphor, metaphor as iconic and connotative, that ultimately structure the way we live, the way we think and believe, our attitudes and actions, and our identity.

Take the example of the controversial professional football team name "Washington Redskins." The term "Redskin"—historically a pejorative label meant to describe persons of Native American/American Indian decent—is more than just a metaphor. It is an icon. Through successful interpellative strategy, the label has developed a seemingly natural connection to its referents—the football team which hails from the nation's capital or people of Native American descent. It becomes more than a metaphor, attributing everything one might associate with the term to the subject implicitly or explicitly. Eventually, we have to understand that metaphors are destined to become reality, destined to develop literality. Tenors do not just use the vehicle, they become the vehicle, and connotations become denotations. Thus, we are left with an iconic metaphor as the text that not only represents, but also reflects what it describes. So a word such as "Redskin," then, is meant to be an actual representation of what it signifies as it impacts community and individual attitudes. It is both tenor and vehicle as it persuasively negotiates reality and ultimately structures identity. In the case of this discussion, it is the identity of those who identify as Native American/American Indian. Consequently, if this is so, then the reality and identity of Black masculinity can also be persuasively negotiated and structured by a word that is simultaneously an icon.

One aim of this thesis is to examine the extent to which "nigger" and "nigga" function as metaphors of Black identity. Each term lacks a material analog in the natural world. In that way, they are unlike epithets like "bitch," which began as a label for a female dog and became a

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misogynistic slur. "Nigger" was a racist slur from its inception—a metaphoric container that held a set of racialized stereotypes. This study seeks to document the ways in which "nigger/a" function as metaphors of Black male identity in historical and contemporary popular culture.

As a socially constructed, prescriptive construct, masculinity is inherently complex; when race is also implicated into a gendered identity, the ideological formation becomes even more complicated. Masculinity/femininity are major components of an individual's performance of identity, ones that are complex and constantly fluid, "tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."[43] If this is the case, then, as Judith Butler would contend, masculinity is a constructed component of identity that not only has no concrete system, but is also circumstantial and constituted through "acts."[44] Specific circumstances result in these acts being imitated as way of processing, creating meaning, negotiating and positioning self in the world. On one hand, the dominant population shapes an individual's understanding of masculinity/femininity; on the other hand, other factors like race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class must negotiated in order to perform masculinity/femininity in a given setting.

In the case of Black masculinity, it is simultaneously an imitation and a negotiation. Historically, Black males, in particularly adult Black men, have been subjected to being called boys, stripping them of the characteristics (e.g. masculinity and maturity) typically associated with being a man. Roland Martin explains that Black men's "stature was diminished when someone white called them a boy."[45] It is as if, at most, the best a Black individual could ever achieve is the mentality of a child. It is because of this that Black males have had to come to agreement as to what masculinity (in general), and Black masculinity (more specifically) actually entails. Vershawn Young argues that "white masculinity defines black male gender performance within a patriarchal American culture."[46] Blacks need to imitate what has been established by

norms of "White masculinity" or American ideology—in order to find some sort of "success"

within society, while at the same time negotiating their own Blackness in the process as to not

lose their own cultural identity and heritage. It is a means of "engaging the close scrutiny of the

Self and Other" while negotiating between "ourselves, the Black community, and our individual

lives while commenting on others [non-Blacks]" in an attempt to achieve resolution.[47] Young

explains:

> This is illustrated in the command I often heard as a boy -- "man up!" -- when I was
> acting in ways others perceive as unmanly. Of course, white boys, my white friends tell
> me, are also subject to such invectives. Nevertheless, the impact of race on blacks is
> different from the way it affects whites and this difference is most significant. When
> white men are told to "man up" or given some like command to perform gender, there is
> no stake in their racial identity. There is no perception that they are any less white if they
> do not "man up." In this sense, and in view of our historical situation, the insistence to
> man up for white men is understood as the effort to retain the heterosexuality one
> believes they have because they are white; for black men it is the effort against the
> homosexuality others may perceive us to have because we are not white . . . Therefore,
> while for both black and white men the primary task is performing acceptable manhood;
> for black men, the problem remains how to perform that manhood without abandoning
> their definition of Blackness. [48]

In short, where "Blackness" may be defined within the confines of the Black community, Black

masculinity is often—directly or indirectly—determined by non-Blacks. Black masculinity has

been "authored not by Black men but by social, political, and economic institutions with

power."[49] White racial identity is rarely, if ever, at risk should thoughts of White men's

masculinity be questioned. Blacks are in a position to have to adhere to both notions of the

patriarchal American standards of masculinity and notions of what it means to be a Black man.

What becomes apparent is how important the rhetoric of nigger/nigga is in shaping and

negotiating Black masculinity.

Scholars have begun to examine the ways in which individual words have interpellative

functions. Karrin Vasby Anderson's examination of the term "bitch" argues that the noun is

more than just an epithet, it is a metaphor that works as a means of sexual containment.[50] Unfortunately, while working to contain, it also performs interpellation and constitutes an identity the same way "queer" does. Judith Butler addresses the rhetorical force of the term "queer," contending that

> "Queer" derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. This is an invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time. The interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time. In this sense, it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts 'queer!'[51]

"Queer" is a complex label that has been used both pejoratively and resistively. In this way it functions similarly to how "nigger/a" functions. Thus the examples of "bitch" and "queer" are just a few examples of how single words can function constitutively. This study—through the understanding of interpellation, constitutive rhetoric, identity, metaphors, icons, and masculinity—assesses the deployment of "nigger" and "nigga" by Black and White subjects.

Critical Method

William Eadie explains that, "stories are powerful socializing agents. They help us make sense of not only our environments but also what binds us together."[52] Communities are socialized, bound, and developed through stories. When there is no unified story to tell, the results can be quite detrimental to communities.[53] Every text comes with its own story or multiple stories. Consequently, texts are best explained through the concept of fragmentation. Michael Calvin McGee asserts that a text is more than just the "finished discourse"; instead, it is a "dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made."[54] A text is created concurrently and understood from the many constructions and discourses from which it came. It includes the "facts, events, texts, and stylized expressions" that shaped it and its meaning.[55] Because of this complexity, the best way to understand a text is as wholes fashioned

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from many discourses, many fragments. Texts come from multiple discourses and contexts, and likewise texts create multiple discourses and contexts. It is as if texts are the present shaped by the past in order to construct the future.

McGee contends that when a discourse is uninteresting or irrelevant, it will be silenced and forgotten, but when it matters—when it has some kind of effect on our attitudes—the discourse will continue to structure the text and, consequently, our experiences, beliefs, and the way we see the world through that text.[56] However, when there is misunderstanding of context or something is taken out of context, discourse loses its potency and meaning is lost. We know the text is missing parts because the structures are not complete, understandings are lost and the consequences become a division amongst the community. These consequences and their connection with stories and narratives become apparent as they become pieces which play a role in the establishment of identity. Therefore, in order to understand how terms like "nigger/a" tell stories which constitute Black identity, we must study a range of discursive fragments that indicate how the term is deployed in various contexts. This study examines how the "nigger/a" icon is deployed in film, music, and comedy in hopes of answering the following research questions:

1. How does "nigger/a" constitute Black masculinity and masculinity in general when used by individuals who do not identify as Black?

2. How does "nigger/a" constitute Black masculinity and masculinity in general when used by individuals who identify as Black?

Because I am approaching my research questions with awareness that texts are transitory and fragmented, part of the academic project entails discovering "text[s] suitable for criticism."[57] I have identified categories of discourses that I believe are the most relevant to my research

questions, and have selected textual samples within those categories for discussion here. However, my analytical chapters build on the collection of texts presented here. The three categories of discourse that my thesis examines are songs (focusing primarily on rap and hip hop), stand-up comedy, and film (with an emphasis on Blaxploitation films). I assess the use of "nigger/a" as it has been deployed by Blacks and non-Blacks in those communication genres, focusing especially on the ways in which the deployment constitutes masculinity. Taking into consideration that no one form of media can be a representation of the masses, the hope is that with the use of diverse media artifacts, there will be a better understanding of the use of the word "nigger/a" and how it can characterize masculinity. Alexander has done much work analyzing the construction of Black masculinity. His analysis explores Black masculinity from the performative aspect engaging both the academy and politics of space. The work in this study is meant to extend the conversation through the utilization of popular culture. Artifacts were chosen based on whether or not they use the word "nigger/a," and on how the word is used (in an "empowering" manner, a demeaning fashion, as a means of endearment, as a means of separation, etc.). I consider the identities of the individuals using and/or being targeted by the word.

This is a qualitative analysis through the methodology of metaphoric criticism, examining fragments from these three discourses—music, comedy, and film. Two films, two stand-up comedians, and three musicians have been selected for this analysis based on their deployment of "nigger/a." Robert L. Ivie establishes the framework for the methodology. First "significant clusters" involving the metaphor, "nigger/a," and the characteristics, qualities, contexts, and connotations that surround it are identified.[58] The findings are then compared with similar terms.[59] Karrin Vasby Anderson and Kristina Horn Sheeler explain that within the "immediate

verbal (or, more generally, symbolic) context" "problematic vehicles" are recognized by the critic through "close readings of representative texts."[60] The mapping of metaphoric clusters leads to determining what motives, values, and perspectives are animating the metaphor and assessing what ideologies are constituted by the metaphor.

The application of metaphorical criticism with the examined discourses of media—music, comedy, and film—strategically enables the analysis of fragments. With "nigger/a" being a fragmented text itself, the use of solely one artifact from one discourse leaves the text largely fragmented. Considering popularity and media's critical influence on society and culture, these artifacts are assembled as a means of presenting the term through different context, albeit, fragmented. Within each genre, the term has been used extensively by Blacks and non-Blacks alike ultimately with consequences to subjects'—Black and non-Black—encompassing identities. The selected texts are by no means exhaustive, yet exploring this set of discourses activates facilitation of novel understandings on how the term is deployed through a variety of cultural context.

"Nigger/a" finds some of its most apparent and influential usage within the music where sanctions and censorship are more limited than other media counterparts. I have specifically chosen the musical genre of hip-hop because it is an embodiment and representation of society's perception of Black masculinity and the Black community. The genre is often reflected and perpetuated by its listeners and followers. Hip-hop artists also employ the word more frequently than artists representing any other genre of music. Both the songs and associated artists have been selected because of their ability to help demonstrate the usage of the word. One of the most recently released songs is entitled "My Nigga"[61] by rapper Y.G. The word "nigga" is used over 120 times between the chorus and the verses which have nearly every line ending with "nigga"

or an attempt to rhyme with it. Though the song is performed by individuals who identify as being Black, the song has gained popularity amongst "rap enthusiasts" from all a number of different races. In many ways this song was an inspiration for this study.

Not every text used as an artifact in this study is authored by an artist who identifies as Black. Some of the artists examined in this study identify with a different race—the female rapper V-Nasty self-identifies as White. V-Nasty is significant to the study, not just because of her use of the pejorative form of the term and the fact that she does not identify as Black, but also because of her stance on the use of the word and the apparent cultural appropriation occurring in her songs. Another rapper being examined who repeatedly uses the word without hesitation or any push back from the Black community is rapper Fat Joe who identifies as Puerto Rican. This study considers the implications of another person of color (other than Black) using the word, reflecting on how that connects to the characterization of masculinity/Black masculinity.

Comedy has always been a way of bringing people together. It is one place that freedom of speech is rarely infringed upon and political correctness is pushed to the margins. My analysis of stand-up comedy includes Chris Rock's piece on the difference between Black people and "niggas," [62] and his joke on White's deployment of "nigger/a."[63] That bit brings a number of important aspects of the conversation to light including how it separates a community, its use for men over women, and how it dehumanizes its target. A sort of protégé of Rock's, Louis CK—a comedian who is Mexican American but through his comedy identifies as a White male—is another comic examined. CK presents a bit on why we should all just say "nigger" rather than not say it or saying "n-word" in its place. Louis CK has also been adamant in a couple of

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interviews as to why he sees no problem in using the word and why he will continue using it in his routines.

Film is an interesting medium in terms of Black movies and Black characters. Most often we see three main categories: the "hood"/coming of age film, the stereotypical comedy, and the biographical piece. Typically, if the film falls in one of these three categories, other than the biographical category, Black masculinity is on display in exaggerated form. This is true in Blaxploitation films more so than any other genre. The action films typically help to establish a view of Black masculinity which was traditionally skewed and misrepresented in other films. The use of "nigger/a" then, should genuinely be considered in terms of the ways it directly connects to how masculinity is characterized, established, or eradicated. As such, Blaxploitation-esque films, *Training Day*[64] and *Django Unchained,*[65] are examined in this study. Both films adhere to the formula of a Blaxploitation film while continuously exercising the use of "nigger/a."

Overview of Chapters

This thesis includes five chapters. Chapter one consists of the introduction and literature review while setting up the study's structure and purpose. Chapter two examines the history of the word "nigger/a," providing an overview of common historical and contemporary uses and its evolution within U.S. American culture. Chapter three analyzes how "nigger/a" characterizes masculinity/Black masculinity when used or applied to those who do not identify as Black. Chapter four analyzes how "nigger/a" characterizes Black masculinity/masculinity in general when the word is used or applied by individuals who identify as Black. Within each chapter, I

consider fragmentary texts from each of the three discourse categories listed above. Finally,

chapter five concludes this study and considers its implications.

Chapter Two: Incoherent Truths: "Nigger/a" as a Metaphorical and Literal Construction

As children many of us repeat the saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me," never realizing that the utilization of those few words bolster ideologies that work to alter physical and mental identities in accordance with socially prescribed constructs. We are but a reflection of the words we use to subject others and by which we are subjected, reinforcing ideologies that create a consciousness by and for our social interactions. As such, words are consequential because they are signs of the underlying intransigent systems that empower them.

If the inherent power of a word can change demeanors and the physical being, it is not unfathomable that the commodity forged by humans can subsequently be used to try and sequester an individual's ideologies, persona, and even more, their humanity. The synthesizing of words and phrases results in innumerable possibilities, and still, a single word is capable of both tranquility and disarray, creation and destruction, autonomy and confinement. Jessica Valenti recognizes that "'Ugly' is powerful," specifically when the term is employed in reference to feminism, as it limits the movement, detracts from the purpose and discredits validity.[66] Robert Jensen contends that the deployment of "fuck," in reference to sex, is not only a "testament to the power of patriarchy" but fortifies said system while enveloping notions of violence and "denigration" towards its recipient.[67] Karrin Vasby Anderson explains that the term "bitch" works as not only a "defining archetype of female identity" functioning through interaction, constituting identity, but is also employed as a means of rhetorical "containment disciplining women with power," consequently constituting a specific identity.[68]

Words function similarly in relation to the socially constructed classification of race. Designating a group as "black" is meant to maintain distinct connotations that are otherwise abominable in comparison to "white." As this thesis concerns itself with the word "nigger/a" we must consider the underlying histories and ideologies. David L. Smith contends that Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* addresses racism while illuminating "how racial discourse operates" working to "justify the abuse and exploitation" of particular groups of people, especially as Twain posits many characters with the ideology that "A nigger . . . is not a person."[69] Long before Twain published his work, Josiah Nott's satirical composition, took the racial epithet "nigger" and created his own brand of science, coining it "niggerology" and ostensibly regarding "niggers" as a subject which was not suitable to be examined through the lens of traditional human studies such as anthropology or psychology.[70] Gregory S. Parks and Shayne E. Jones write about a crime in which the perpetrator, a White male, beat his victim, a Black male, with an aluminum bat that may as well been wrapped with the epithet "nigger," as he repeatedly screamed the piercing pejorative in reference to and against his target.[71]

Despite its history as a term of violence, "nigger/a" is also adopted by many individuals who identify as Black. Jabari Asim explains that

> It was perhaps inevitable that enslaved Africans and their immediate descendants—who had English beaten into them—would find themselves as restricted by their oppressors' unfamiliar language as by the shackles and irons with which they were often punished.[72]

"Nigger" has inevitably—over time—become the double edge sword; a tool forged by White, Eurocentric patriarchy, wielded by Blacks to resist and remake itself and brandished by Whites to reinforce the hegemonic foundation and oppress. The hard "r" in "nigger" is dropped to pronounce the word with an "a" sound. "Nigga," then, becomes a schwa, or a changing in the phonetics of the original word, in this case, to create a new word. "Nigga," in comparison to

"nigger," has similar but differing denotations according to dictionaries. Still described denotatively as "disparaging and offensive," it is defined as being employed by many minorities (though its most commonly used by Black individuals), "in a neutral or familiar way and as a friendly term of address."[73] Ultimately, whether insulting or endearing, "nigger" has sustained an extensive history in American vernacular. It works to change everyday words and descriptions—"lover," "heaven," "work," "Arab,"—into insults and malicious derivatives— "nigger lover," "nigger heaven," "nigger work," "sand nigger," while also working to embrace those with familiar backgrounds and traits.[74]

While indeed "nigger/a" is a disparaging term, "nigger/a" is, and should be treated as, a metaphor. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which "nigger/a" works as either a metaphor or a materialization, considering the implications for Black men who are forced to navigate through a system governed by White patriarchy. Ultimately, in this chapter I argue that "nigger/a" is a metaphor with material consequences used throughout history to reinforce the structural constraints of White, heterosexual, patriarchy while also striving to disrupt it, consequently shaping characterizations of Black masculinity. To address this argument I will draw on the history of the word "nigger/a," from its incarnation to current day existence, focusing specifically on the ways in which the term constitutes Black masculinity. After briefly reviewing the scholarly literature on Whiteness, I discuss the ideological underpinnings and rhetorical force of both "nigger" and "nigga" as they have been deployed throughout history.

Whiteness

"Nigger/a," and its associated implications, is compensatory upon the recognition of intrinsic prescriptive constructs and marginalizing systems which govern its roles. The use of

language is not inconsequential to how individuals navigate through certain ideological performances. In fact the use of words works to conceptualize a reality that allows us to "separate things according to gender," amongst other sociological constructs.[75] Regardless of factors negotiated to perform particular gender constructs, society has been understood to privilege particular archetypes: masculinity/being male, Whiteness, and heterosexuality— archetypes which have nonetheless been systematized to shape the meaning of particular metaphors. bell hooks positions patriarchy as "the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit,"[76] a system which assigns "gender roles" and guidelines, insisting upon males being "superior to everything," and "characterized by male domination and power."[77] As such, I find it only fitting to address underlying privileges that resides within specific ideological paradigms, privileges explicitly concerning Whiteness and masculinity.

In her discussion on White and male privilege Peggy McIntosh draws on Elizabeth Minnich contending that "whites are taught to think of their lives a morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow 'them' to be more like 'us.'"[78] McIntosh goes on to declare the privilege upon which Whiteness presides often results in the inability to truly see racism, the way it affects them, or the way it affects others.[79] McIntosh likens that notion to systems that privilege gender as men often times are blind to the impacts of gender inequalities.[80] Additionally, Karen Lee Ashcraft and Lisa A. Flores assert that masculinity "is not a stable or unified phenomenon; its meanings shift over time and in relation to culture, context, and person."[81] Moreover, Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek extend arguments on Whiteness by arguing:

> it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain . . . affect[ing] the everyday fabric of our lives but resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours. It wields power yet endures as a largely unarticulated position.[82]

Though masculinity may be shaped according to its context, it is ultimately influenced by dominant thinking. Jewel Woods discusses the privilege men hold, specifically Black men often "sustaining male supremacist attitudes and actions,"[83] though the reluctance to identify such privilege as a Black male may be a result of a "history of political, economic, and military power whites have historically exercised over black life."[84] This history, then—a history wrought with an imbalance of power and oppression—often functions as the enabler and the rationale of privilege. History has exhibited insurmountable repercussions as a result of the employment of "nigger/a" insomuch as its inception presented problematic ideologies which reinforced certain hegemonic notions of power.

Enslaving "Nigger/a"

Though the exact origins of the infamous epithet are uncertain, most scholars trace its vernacular use back to the 16th century. Jacquelyn Rahman references the *Oxford English Dictionary* as it "cites uses of the English form as early as 1574."[85] Jabari Asim notes that, even though it may not have been employed with malice, an early usage dating back to 1584 by Reginald Scot was not necessarily "sympathetic."[86] Most scholars agree that "nigger" ultimately entered English lexicon from a mixture of Latin, Spanish, and Portuguese roots. It borrows "niger" from Latin and "negro" from Spanish and Portuguese; both terms that ultimately mean "black," a word that has been known to elicit negative denotative and connotative meanings. Typically utilized as an adjective to denote its corrupted or evil noun, it is also a harbinger for harm, ills, violence, dirt, and unsightly appearances, especially in contrast to "white." Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain:

> The paired terms "Black" and "White" easily lend themselves to the Manicheanisms of good/evil; matter/spirit; devil/angel. And since everyday speech posits blackness as

negative ("black sheep," "black day"), and black and white as opposites . . . Blacks have almost always been cast on the side of evil.[87]

Consequently, although it did not originate as a derogatory term, its basic foundation allowed it to flourish as such. Even as the word gained notoriety as a derogatory term, it remained, at best, an arbitrary symbol of the varying degrees of skin complexions of Africans and African descendants.

Asim's etymology identifies the first twenty African slaves, arriving in America—Jamestown, Virginia to be exact—in 1619, being recorded as "negars" by John Rolfe in his diary.[88] In 1837, Hosea Easton wrote:

> Negro or nigger, is an approbrious [sic] term, employed to impose contempt upon them [Blacks] as an inferior race, and also to express their deformity of person . . . they are intended to apply to colored people, and as being expressive or descriptive of the odious qualities of their mind and body.[89]

Easton continues, affirming that the term is sustained through three lessons: first through epigrams—"old nigger will care [sic] you off—secondly through domestic reprimanding—you'll be "poor or ignorant as a nigger"—and finally through institutional conventions—"higher classes are frequently instructed in school rooms by refering [sic] them to the nigger-seat."[90] The systematic perpetuation of denotative and connotative meanings, particularly through the education of youth, results in the persistence of definitions, the construction of confined attitudes, and the reinforcement of ideologies. "Nigger's" colonization is evident in its prolongation. Sally Miller Gearhart discusses how words, a form of energy, can and often are used as a means of violence, used to either conquer (conquest) or convert (conversion). "The act of violence is in the intention to change another. . . In the conquest model we invade or violate. In the conversion model we work very hard not to simply conquer but to get every assurance that our conquest of the victim is really giving her what she wants."[91] Thus if the maintenance of

"nigger" is not conquering or converting the youth being educated, it is certainly preparing them to employ the term for the means of conquering or converting.

If the employment of "nigger" is indeed violent, a means of conquering or converting, than its application as one means for the justification of slavery is certainly comprehensible. "Nigger," in a sense, became both rationale and categorizer for slavery in one word. Furthermore, even though Black men have found privilege over the years in as a result of their genitalia (e.g. the fifteenth amendment that only grants Black men the *right* to vote) "nigger" is arguably fashioned more so for Black men than Black women. Randall Kennedy, examining "nigger/a" and its deployment in court cases, includes an anecdote of the indictment of four men who had murdered and robbed a sixty-seven-year-old Black woman:

> Judge Mulroy had attempted to persuade a prosecutor to accept a plea bargain . . . The judge told the prosecutor that he should not worry about the case since the victim had been just "some old nigger bitch."

Kennedy's example provides an illustration of the way qualifiers are typically utilized to distinguish that the masculinized "nigger" is referencing a woman, constituting a different subject. Peter Kolchin makes the distinction between American slavery and other historical forms of slavery, positing slavery in the Western Hemisphere as valuing male slaves while "in most of Africa and the Near East female slaves were more highly prized . . . because of their widespread use."[92] With "nigger/a" being a product of the Western Hemisphere, the masculine value and identity placed on slavery positions the term as a reflection of a male dominated and valued institution, subsequently characterizing masculinity. Edmund T. Gordon explains that "despite the destructive pressures of slavery, [Black men] were pillars of slave communities and their institutions" exercising their skills and leadership to enhance the wellbeing and "survival of the slave."[93] Consequently, the strongest Black males were the most coveted and simultaneously

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the most fear in a White patriarchal controlled institution typically being positioned as brutes/bucks that needed to be tamed or docile and incompetent beings that needed guidance. Black females were often treated in the same manner as males, performing the labor of "field workers like men" and being "lynched like the men were."[94] As such, to call a Black female a "nigger" was to strip her of her femininity and, in many ways, masculinize her.

Manning Marable asserts that White men were conditioned into believing in at least one of three social constructions of Black males: (1) they are inferior, (2) they are a political threat, and (3) they "symbolize a lusty sexual potency that threatened White women."[95] As such, it was both common for Black males to be a commodity (fetching upwards of $1500 at auctions as compared to $500 for women or $200 for children)[96] and a danger to the structure that is White patriarchy. The Black male was often sexually mutilated, castrated, and put on display, as means for both objectification and reclaiming the phallus.[97] "Nigger," then, serves to further objectify the Black male figure posited as animalistic, sub-human, and menial while also working to exclude from the privileges Whites, and even more, White males experience. Ultimately, "nigger" is more than just a disparaging word; like other epithets, it can work s as a "rhetorical frame" that "governs popular understanding."[98] It does not only say, "You're different from me," it says "No matter what you do, you will always be beneath me." This is just one way the text reads. Essentially, the renaming of an individual results in possession; when *I* rename *you,* you become mine. Mikhail Bakhtin asserts, "Consciousness becomes consciousness only once it has been filled with ideological (semiotic) content, consequently, only in the process of social interaction."[99] A consciousness is gained then from repeated use of "nigger" to classify and brand certain individuals and groups; it is a consciousness that establishes a specific status for

those individuals. When consciousness is distorted then new ideologies are capable of establishing themselves within that consciousness, resulting in material consequences.

Justifications for the enslavement of Blacks included the premises that Blacks were "hypersexual, animalistic, and savage . . . beast[s] who had to be controlled and tamed."[100] In particular, controlling the Black man was important for the safety of Whites and White women, as Black men "were constantly depicted as a threat to White womanhood."[101] The disposition of Black men became that of a violent, incompetent, exotic, buck who therefore required a label to differentiate him from other men as well as the rest of humanity. Ronald L. Jackson II draws from Manning Marable stating that "discursive labels placed on Black male reality characterizes him as a social contaminant."[102] "Nigger" becomes linguistic caution tape, an explicit verbal caveat that blatantly marks Black men as dangerous and volatile as opposed to more prototypical characterizations such as "White," "Black," or even "Negro"—as it was used during slavery.

Kolchin draws on Winthrop D. Jordan in identifying three stereotypes harbored by Europeans towards Africans which "facilitated their enslavement" including: the distinguishing of Black and White with black having "dirty and immoral" connotations, the premise that Africans were "savage" and "inferior," and the notion that they were not Christian and therefore were "heathens."[103] Kolchin alludes to these ideals to contend that, while those stereotypes did indeed help to justify and facilitate slavery, the major factor that fostered the institution of slavery was immigration. While the majority of Europeans who migrated to America did so of their own free will, during slavery, "none of the Africans did," and as such "it was the involuntary nature of blacks' migration to America that dictated their grown separation from the white labor force."[104] Kolchin continues to explain that the forced nature of indentured servitude in America did little to attract European migrants, thus the "status and treatment of European

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migrants improved" as a means of differentiating Blacks from Whites. As status began to change, mindsets began to change, as did the words and truths that behind them. The term "negro" becomes representative of the eloquent locution of higher class individuals, whereas "crude terms such as 'nigger'" were "more appropriately left to the overseers and white men of the working class whose tasks included the punishment and supervision" of slaves.[105] The abrasive epithet became blunt reminder of positionality. The addressed is not only constituted as a subject through its deployment, but also the addressee, where it is a result of "whose word it is and for whom it is meant."[106] Thus the term constructs a reality from which it was also a product. Its inclusion in everyday discourse reflects particular ideologies and constructs within constituted individuals.

The conquest and conversion of Africans led to a stringent cultural reconstruction. Africans arrived to new world, kidnapped or sold into slavery with their cultures and customs slowly dissipating. The acquisition of the oppressor's "language, customs, work habits, and simple obedience" became not just a requirement, but a necessity. [107] The displacement of Africans coincided with the recognition that, while they "had no shared language to talk with one another" they needed "the oppressor's language."[108] Enslaved Africans found themselves "restricted by their oppressors' unfamiliar language,"[109] terrified by the very sound of English, bonded through skin, and distraught that "the very sound of one's mother tongue had no meaning."[110] Henry Louis Gates Jr. poses a potent question, inquiring "What did/do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated, as the enslaved cipher? Nothing on the x axis of white signification, and everything on the y axis of blackness."[111] Acclimation was necessary for survival, as was the ability to unify with other slaves and their traditional African customs. Facilitation of the newly acquired language and

customs fostered metaphysical resistance and liberation. The language of oppression provided a space for, if not actual emancipation, at least promise of such through the restoration of community. bell hooks explains:

> This language would need to be possessed, taken, claimed as a space of resistance. I imagine that the moment they realized the oppressor's language, seized and spoken by the tongues of the colonized, could be a space of bonding was joyous. For in that recognition was the understanding that intimacy could be restored . . . learning to speak the alien tongue, was one way enslaved Africans began to reclaim their personal power within a context of domination. Possessing a shared language, black folks could find again a way to make community, and a means to create the political solidarity necessary to resist.[112]

The obstinateness of certain customs, work habits and ideologies assisted slaves' understanding of moving language to express what they need to say when there are no words available to articulate what needs to be said. Slaves utilized what they were given, rhetoric in its most basic form, to attain what they needed, remaking the language in order to allow themselves the ability to "speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination."[113] Slaves recognized that the construction of a reality conducive to a somewhat progressive existence rested within the language of the oppressor. This meant even the inherent abrasive nature of "nigger" could quite possibly be rasterized to alleviate its own intrinsic sting as Blacks found themselves adopting the racist epithet.[114] However, as Gates Jr. acknowledges, while concepts and definition are reformed overtime, "a signifier is never, ultimately, able to escape its received meanings."[115] Appropriating particular terms becomes somewhat problematic as a reliance on the oppressor becomes apparent. Nonetheless, the appropriation of language and its employment introduce novel potentialities.

Gates Jr. extends understanding of linguistics and vernacular rhetoric through his exploration of Signifyin(g), positing it as a means of creating community, navigating through a

system of White patriarchy and negotiating Eurocentric ideologies while maintaining some sense of an identity that had been stolen from them. The process, Gates contends, finds its roots in slavery where the creation of "neologisms" and phonetic distinction helped to "literally" define identity in and through language.[116] The process of Signifyin(g) possesses the capability of appearing one way yet performing another. bell hooks adds to the discussion of Signifyin(g), characterizing it as Blacks' ability to "put together their words in such a way that the colonizer had to rethink the meaning of English language."[117] The deception, as Friedrich Nietzsche would assert, is fundamental for humans as a means of survival and protection.[118] The execution of Signifyin(g) becomes beneficial in the reclamation of identity and the empowerment of a community under oppression. Certain types of words, spoken in particular ways, become a mode of addressing certain types of people at specific levels of society. "Nigger/a," signified as "nigga" by slaves, serves to legitimize masculinity for those whose masculinity has been compromised under oppressive states. It allowed them to speak themselves into existence. While the oppressor's deployment of "nigger/a" created a particular set of illusory truths for Blacks, "White social participants, see ideology not as a version of truth, but the only truth worth knowing."[119] The "others'" usage created a set of its own truths bestowing agency in its own right. "Nigga" became a way of retaining a material dimension which Whites could not ascertain through the metaphoric employment of "nigger/a." Because "nigger" is a metaphor, it developed material significance for its subject. Since metaphors are words for the idea they represent, when Whites employed the term, they meant it to encompass all Blacks. Conversely, "nigga" is distinctive. When deployed strategically by Blacks, "nigga" can be used to convey a literal sense of value despite its etymological linkage to the dehumanizing label "nigger." Thus, when one identity was taken, a new one was constituted through the available discourse.

The end of slavery brought little change to the implications of "Nigger/a." Though Blacks acquired some notions of citizenship and humanity, sub-human attributions and conditions still very much existed through the establishment of sharecropping, then the Jim Crow Era, and the continuation of discursive confinement through "nigger/a."

> The racial hierarchy, which began during slavery and extended into the Jim Crow period, has been severely eroded by a civil rights movement, landmark Supreme Court decisions, a black empowerment movement, comprehensive civil rights legislation, and a general embracing of democratic principles by many American citizens. Yet, the word <u>nigger</u> has not died. The relationship between the word <u>nigger</u> and anti-black prejudice is symbiotic: that is, they are interrelated and interconnected, yet, ironically, not automatically interdependent. In other words, a racist society created <u>nigger</u> and continues to feed and sustain it; however, the word no longer needs racism, at least brutal and obvious forms, to exist. <u>Nigger</u> now has a life of its own.[120]

"Nigger/a" continued to be a useful means of representing Blacks long after slavery. The many ways of perpetuating the term not only assisted in maintaining justifications for discrimination, but also functioned to ensure the preservation of White patriarchy as central to discourse.

"Nigga" has been employed by Blacks in a neutral or affirming way since the 19th century. In his 1838 book *Peter Pilgrim,* Robert Montgomery Bird exemplifies slave dialect in the 19th century as the character, Old Bob, labels himself "niggah."[121] A slave in George Lippard's 1848 *Paul Ardenheim,* refers to his master as "nigga" while contemplating his murder. "And then the Negro muttered in broken English—'For sixteen—seventeen year, dis nigga watch his time.'"[122] Despite White author's depictions of slave dialect, spelled with the schwa, "nigga" became a vehicle Blacks used to constitute their own masculinity. Asim explains, however, that at times, Whites have viewed "nigga" as a simple consequence mispronunciation:

> The logic behind the new spelling breaks down further when one recalls that racist whites have used "nigga" nearly as often as they've used "nigger." To accept the validity of "nigga," we'd have to forget those lovely "nigga songsters" that used to grace the music parlors of respectable white families in the nineteenth-century America. We would also

have to wink at all those segregationist senators-Helms, Thurmond, Stennis, et al.—who used to insist that "Negro" sounded just like "nigga" when pronounced with a Southern accent.[123]

"Nigga," however, became an instrument for Blacks "rejecting and standing up to White authority" while reaffirming Blackness.[124] The evolution of culture has resulted in much of "nigga's" rhetorical power being established in the pop-culture of the 20th century where the word frequently appeared in film, comedy, and music structuring and repositioning Black masculinity as an authoritative construct equivalent to White masculinity.

Author Mark Anthony Neal contends that there is a difference between "nigger" and "nigga." He proclaims, "nigga" expresses "notions of 'blackness' and an attendant black masculinity more in sync with the flow of global capital . . . Whereas the term 'nigger' references notions of 'blackness' as landlocked, immobile, static, segregated, and an embodiment of black racial subjects in the pre-20th-century South."[125] Neal further defines "nigga" as "mobile, fluid, adaptable, postmodern, urban, and embodying various forms of social and rhetorical flow," essentially everything "nigger" is incapable of being. Neal's sentiments are expressed through compounded utilization of "nigga" either building upon or deconstructing Black masculinity. Compound appellations such as "big nigga," "boss nigga," "real nigga," or "H.N.I.C. (Head Nigga in Charge)" articulate an empowered masculinity while professing Blackness. Likewise, designations such as "punk nigga," "bitch nigga," or "faggot nigga" simultaneously detract from masculinity while challenging Blackness, especially as the "discourse of black racial authenticity" declares that appellations like "faggots" are "utterly juxtaposed to niggas."[126] With or without "nigga" as a modifier, however, labels like "punk," "bitch," or "faggot" are all dehumanizing. Nonetheless, in each of these cases, "nigga" imparts some sense of humanity and Blackness to its subject which "nigger" intrinsically—because of

historical connotations—does not. "Nigga" is an embodiment of masculinity for Black men that "nigger" has not and will never encompass.

"Nigga" emerged as a mode of constituting masculinity in films in the 1970s and 1980s. Eddie Murphy's character Reggie Hammond in *48 Hours* declares his hatred for rednecks in a country bar right before he proclaims himself as their "worst fucking nightmare man. I'm a nigga with a badge which means I have permission to kick your fucking ass whenever I feel like it."[127] The inclusion of "nigga" is empowering for the character and spectators, positioning Hammond above his detested rednecks and establishing Black masculinity a force, albeit a violent one. Blaxploitation films (often written, directed by, and starring Black men) like *Superfly* and *Shaft* would deploy the word as a means of endearment and resistance, further establishing masculinity in a film meant to re-center the Black man.

In the realm of comedy, comedian Bernie Mac proclaimed "It's okay to have that Nigga in you . . . Ain't nothing wrong with bein' a Nigga. There's somethin' wrong with being a 'nigger'—but not a Nigga" making a distinction between the two.[128] He went on to say "Boy white folks bring the nigga out you! That nigga just'll [sic] slide out you. You like, 'What? Man, I'll kick yo' ass!'" as a clarification that not only are "nigger" and "nigga" distinct, but "nigga" elicits a sense of masculinity, creating a reality for Black men that is hyper-masculinized and thus violent.[129] Katt Williams explains that there are several types of niggas, noting that "bitch niggas" do not "fuck" women the way "real niggas" do, constituting masculinity through "nigga," but in a hyper-sexualized approach.[130]

Gangsta rap pioneers N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitude), not only used "nigga" as a political tool, but "their self-promotion as 'niggas'" became a powerful instrument, establishing masculinity while confining and limiting women's "self-realization."[131] Their employments of

"nigga" "construct a distinct Black masculinity that wallows in homophobia, misogyny, and sexual violence but clearly also represents an attempt to locate an authentic self."[132] Rapper Tupac Shakur defines "nigga" as the positive, self-reaffirming acronym "Never Ignorant, Getting Goals Accomplished," further assisting its position as "an important signifier of political dissent and oppositional consciousness that foregrounds its user's social and economic marginalization."[133]

"Nigga's" deployment in pop-culture has ultimately become a source of contention in the debate over its usage where there is an insistence "upon distinguishing nigger . . . exclusively an insult—from nigga . . . capable of signaling friendly salutation."[134] Consequently, the contention and confusion coupled with popular media consumed by diverse audiences has led to attempted appropriation of "nigga" by Whites, especially young Whites, and other individuals who do not identify as Black. As such, the question arises, if "nigga" was initially created as a means of Signifyin(g) within the Black community, does their appropriation impede upon that rhetorical power? "Nigga" initially instituted barriers preventing community trespassing. Conversely, if "nigga" emerged as a means of resisting White oppression its use by privileged Whites is particularly ironic. Instead of functioning as a liberating reappropriation of a racist term and ideology, "nigga" may be simply the repackaged form of an otherwise debilitating word, continuing and reinforcing what slavery mobilized hundreds of years ago.

From early 19th century on, products were created utilizing "nigger," materializing it as a caricature for White consumer enjoyment, becoming abundant in nearly "every aspect of American culture, from literature to political debates, from cartoons to song."[135]

> The negative portrayals of blacks were both reflected in and shaped by everyday material objects: toys, postcards, ashtrays, detergent boxes, fishing lures, children's books. These items, and countless others, portrayed blacks with bulging, darting eyes, fire-red and oversized lips, jet black skin, and either naked or poorly clothed.[136]

Meanwhile, after slavery, Blacks' employment of the term continued to reinforce underlying ideologies, reclaim oppressed identities, and/or resist subjugation. In 1847, the McLoughlin Brothers manufactured a puzzle entitled "Chopped Up Niggers."[137] In 1972, over one hundred years later, Black NFL athlete turned actor, Fred Williamson, starred in *The Legend of Nigger Charley.*[138] Each text had its own promotional artwork, each contained the term "nigger," and yet despite their similarities they function in distinct and sometimes competing ways. Although more than one hundred years separate the two images, they can be productively read alongside one another in ways that explicate how we view and employ the pejorative itself.
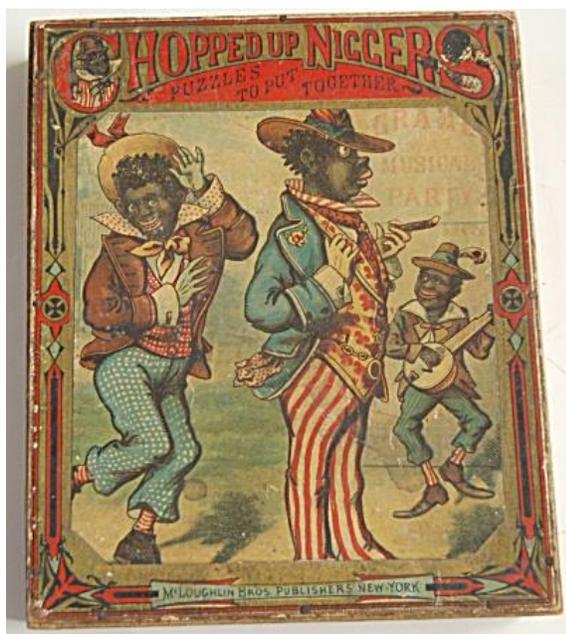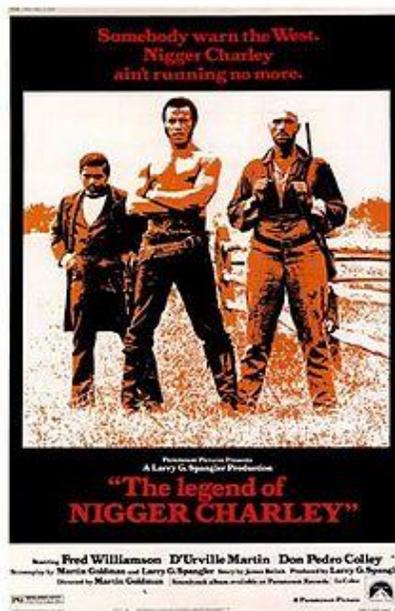
Figure 1: http://www.antiquesnavigator.com/   Figure 2: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Legend_of_Nigger_Charley

At first glance, both images share similarities, as though either *Nigger Charley* was created as a derivative of "Chopped Up Niggers," or the similarities originate in hegemonic stereotypes about what three Black men—or rather "niggers"—standing together are supposed to look like. Both images literally frame the Black men on a field, most likely representative of a

plantation and a confinement that they will never escape. In both texts there is a clear leader positioned in the middle with a demeanor, gestures, outfit, and size, all of which constitute a prominent masculine body in comparison to the other two individuals. The images concern themselves with hand placements, poses, dress, and the objects being held to establish a perception which adheres to White patriarchal ideologies. "Chopped Up Niggers" has its subjects dressed as buffoons, posed as non-threatening, yet still uninviting. Conversely, *Nigger Charley* places its subjects in different outfits. Some are dressed very similar to the images in "Chopped Up Niggers" (as in an unnecessary suit on a hot plantation), while the clear leader has his shirt off as all three men glare directly at the spectator as their attempt to re-appropriate a masculinity taken from them years prior with texts such as "Chopped Up Niggers." Whereas the caricatures in "Chopped Up Niggers" hold docile objects such as a cigar or a banjo, the characters in *Nigger Charley* possess rifles and hand guns, tools with which to recapture a lost masculinity.

In order to fully understand each image's valence, the associated words must be considered. From the titles to their subtitles/captions, the words construct a problematic space for the image. "Chopped Up Niggers" could have simply used "Puzzles" as its subtitle/caption, since everyone knows that puzzles require assembly. Instead, however, the subtitle "Puzzles to Put Together" is used. It is as if the creators are implying that "niggers" are a conundrum—a state of disarray that only a White person could repair. *Nigger Charley's* caption alludes to similar sentiments: "Somebody Warn the West." Unlike "Chopped," *Charley's* caption is a double edge sword. On one hand it reinforces White patriarchal ideologies of the brute stereotype, a derivative of "nigger;" on the other hand it makes another attempt at reclaiming masculinity by putting White masculinity on notice that Charley "ain't running no more."

The titles are especially important, characterizing the images entirely. The title "Chopped Up Niggers," like *Nigger Charley,* functions multiple ways. The name seems to imply some sort of dysfunction or even deadly connotations for "niggers." The title, especially in conjunction with the image, is strictly oppressive with very little room to perceive it otherwise. As stated previously, the use of "nigger," particularly by those who do not identify as Black, extends upon the notion that "nigger" is encompassing and representative of all Blacks. "Nigger" becomes a metaphor lacking a material referent. The representations are at the very least, stereotypical, and at most, unhinged from reality. The title *Nigger Charley,* operates in multiple, sometimes paradoxical, ways. The name implies a subservience and a natural connection to the plantation or a White hierarchy. However, it is also resistive in nature, repositioning the epithet to confront hegemonic White masculinity rather than be emasculated by it. *Charley's* title carries a mobility and flexibility that is unattainable within the confines of "Chopped Up Niggers."

One hundred years between the two images have allowed for changes to take place that encourage reclamation. However, apparent and underlying similarities foster a conjuncture where oppression and White patriarchy are reinforced and Black agency is never truly established outside of the historical ideologies. The discursive material produced by and through "nigger/a," works in metaphorical and literal dimensions depending on intent. Each product maintains the ability to re-center White, masculine, patriarchal ideologies. These images are the visual representations of the verbal moves being made with "nigger/a." Even still, to discredit the ability to de-center those ideologies would be to silence reclaiming and resistive voices. In many ways, a problematic impasse arises. Regardless of the means or motivations, "nigger" implies a presence of Whiteness and White masculinity that is needed for this discourse to exist.

Conclusion

Since its inception, "nigger" has been literalized by racist White people, but Blacks know and understand that "niggers," per se, have never existed. Its deployment, then, becomes a metaphoric category for dehumanizing stereotypes about Black masculinity. However, when Blacks began to use the word "nigga," Whites' unsuccessful attempts to adopt it exercised contingency on its deployment as a metaphor (nigga being a set of characteristics that young white men wanted to inhabit as much as young Black men). If the imitations "suggest it is the speech of those only interested in entertaining or being funny, then the subversive power of this speech is undermined."[139] Nonetheless, Blacks want to retain a material dimension with the term "nigga," with the norm being that only people who have distinguished themselves as or with the racialized Black identity can use the term. As a result, conflict over who is "allowed" to deploy the term "nigga" is broadly based on the consideration of whether it is being employed as a metaphor or a term with a natural referent.

Furthermore, the inclusion of "nigger/a" in cultural vernacular, be it Black or non-Black, maintains material consequences, altering both the addressed and the addressee physically and metaphysically. When bell hooks alludes to the apparent fear, anger, and disarray invoked through the use of the oppressor's language, she underscores the temporal and permanent repercussions on the transformation of Black bodies and the way Black bodies are perceived, particularly the masculinity involved with the construction of Black bodies. Mentalities adjust, whether emotionally or intellectually, to accommodate the perception of the body and its capacity. Social constructs and interactions become intrinsically and acutely defined and yet subconsciously understood if not explicitly. The recognition of these impacts is not inconsequential as it provides an awareness of the complex capabilities of "nigger/a," a word

that, in no way functions monolithically. In the next chapter, I expand on "nigger/a" analyzing its

deployment by non-Black individuals in multiple media texts.

Chapter Three: Niggerish

"Fifty years ago we'd have you upside down with a f***ing fork up your ass." It was these words that opened up the video capturing a comedian screaming at a group of hecklers, who identify as Black, while audience members are heard clapping and laughing in encouragement. "You can talk, you can talk, you're brave now motherf***er. Throw his ass out. He's a nigger! He's a nigger! He's a nigger! A nigger, look, there's a nigger!" The audience's encouragement dwindles, but only a bit. The clapping and laughing lingers and yet one woman is heard responding with "Oh my God."

Portraying the character Kramer, from the popular sitcom *Seinfeld,* made actor/comedian Michael Richards famous. In 2006, however, his antics at the Laugh Factory in West Hollywood made him infamous. Richards continues in the video, captured by an audience member, with more angry barbs and the continued use of the epithet. Every time the pejorative term is spewed, at least one person is heard laughing, instigating. At one point Richards proclaims, "That's what happens when you interrupt the white man, don't you know?" By this time the audience's laughter, clapping, and encouragement ceased as the audience now realized that this is no longer a comedy show.[140]

The tirade went viral and boosted CBS's ratings after Richards appeared on *The Late Show* with David Letterman to provide a public apology.[141] The apology at this point was futile, as it appeared to be a forced public relations strategy. The damage had already been done. The empty, yet racist, threats with historical connotations and the reference to the implicit system of social and racial hierarchy quite arguably could have been swept under the rug. "Nigger" was almost certainly the dagger that carved the unhealable wound for Richards and viewers.

The incident involving Richards offers one perspective on the way "nigger/a" is used and perceived within the entertainment industry. Jennifer Hornsby characterizes derogatory words as "useless" since they are not only taboo, but are applied in place of terms that are better capable of illustrating what is actually meant.[142] A wide array of Black comedians use "nigger/a" in their acts on a regular basis, but what are the implications and ramifications when the epithet is used by someone—comedian, actor, musician, or otherwise—who does not identify as Black? What are non-Black authors and speakers attempting to achieve through the application of the term? Furthermore, when "cultural literacy demands knowledge of it ['nigger']" does the employment of the term carry a different valence depending on the period of time and the industry in which it is used?[143]

This chapter examines the ways in which "nigger/a" is deployed by speakers and authors who do not identify as Black in variety of media industries: film, stand-up comedy, and music. I argue that when media content creators employ the term "nigger/a" it positions themselves, their subjects, and/or spectators within what I am calling a *phonetic gaze*—a type of verbal voyeurism through which sounds and words shape perceptions, frame experiences, and constitute identities. In particular, this chapter will assess the ways in which "nigger/a" constitutes Black masculine identity when deployed by non-Black authors.

When authors deploy "nigger/a," in pop-culture texts they do so intentionally and strategically. Their use of the term can, in fact, serve a variety of objectives, including: *(1) depicting historical context and references, (2) achieving artistic visions, (3) expressing endearment (4) oppressing a population/ reinforcing hegemonic ideologies/systems, (5) resisting hegemonic ideologies/systems, or (6) adhering to or emulating to customary/authentic*

vernacular. This chapter examines the ways in which "nigger/a" operates as a rhetorical text in its own right, one made meaningful by the situation's context, exigencies, and audience(s).

In the preceding chapter, I examined the history of the terms "nigger" and "nigga." This chapter argues that assessing the ways in which Whites deploy the racially charged pejorative helps us better understand the ways in which "the performative construction of white, heterosexual masculinity is often built at the expense of others."[144] Similarly, when "nigger/a" is utilized by those who do not identify as White or Black in public media contexts, a strategic positioning—or re-positioning—of White heterosexual masculinity within society ensues. Consequently, this chapter is interested in mapping the machinations of "ideological colonialism" as it relates to the deployment of "nigger/a"[145]

Insofar as "nigger/a" itself is a fragmented text—an embodiment of multiple, often incomplete, contexts and histories—understanding its rhetorical import requires examination of diverse textual forms. The three textual forms include: film, stand-up comedy, and music as each deploys "nigger/a" in its own right and interpellates spectators in different ways. Film can visually display the verbal moves and implications being made. Stand-up comedy speaks empathically and articulates concerns that are not often voiced publically. Music, specifically hip-hop, is traditionally hyper-masculine and often laced with deployments of "nigger/a."

This analysis examines three cases involving the use of "nigger/a" by those who do not identify as Black—deploying the word in ways that create contention around whether they possess the authority to deploy the word or not. It explores authorship/auteurship, as well as the dynamics that surround public address. Considering the ways in which the phonetic gaze functions, I will begin by discussing authorship, spectatorship, and briefly the concept of gaze. I will then analyze the word within the three aforementioned media texts: film, stand-up comedy,

and music. I begin with an exploration of "nigger/a" as deployed in Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained,* continue with an analysis of its inclusion in comedian Louis C.K.'s stand-up, and conclude by considering the application of the word by rap artists, Fat Joe and V-Nasty.

The Author, the Spectator, and the Text

Jack Stillinger characterizes the nature of an author and their role in the construction of a text. In its most rudimentary sense, Stillinger asserts that an author "gives existence"[146] to a text. The author's production of textual "existence" helps to structure a reality for the reader, and as such, an author's presence is an indispensable element of the human experience. Authors, then, help to shape an individual's thought processes, directly and indirectly influence behavior, and, consequently, co-create reality with their audiences. An author's influence on spectator behaviors and views, however, is contingent upon the remanufacturing of ideological and cultural meanings, making the author "an ideological product."[147] Thus, when we consider how a particular author impacts our perceptions, it is important to recognize the ways in which they become entrenched in the discourse they have crafted, becoming a part of the discourse. Michel Foucault states, "The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning."[148] Discourse, while operating in multiple facets, ultimately functions in ways that keep it linked to the "juridical and institutional systems" which produce its underlying ideologies. However, the fashioned discourse contributes to an expansive constitution of behaviors and experiences and therefore, as Foucault adds, "must be received in a certain mode," perceived by a "given culture," and be assigned "a certain status." [149]

Although Foucault and Stillinger's discussion of authorship are primarily concerned with the written domain, their insights are not confined to the realm of written discourse. Authorship

extends beyond the printed form. The notions Foucault and Stillinger introduce remain true and can be intertwined within public address or other modes of authorship such as film or music, especially since the author "is a projection from the text that we see or read, rather than a historical reality."[150] If it were to be contended, "only words constitute the text," certainly impact would be diluted and the reason why the text resonates so deeply with an audience would go overlooked.[151] The combination of the discourse, the context, the mode of address, and their relationship to the audience or spectator alters the way an author—and ultimately discourse—is received. Oral discourse presents capabilities that extend beyond the written presentation of particular text. As a discourse, the author, the message, and the purpose work in tandem and have the potential to subjugate audiences, readers, or spectators in particular ways. Foucault explains, "In short, it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as variable and complex function of discourse."[152] The discourse then, constitutes subjects while inconspicuously constraining the subject's agency to delineate context.

An author's ability to constitute a subject directly coincides with notions of interpellation, a rhetorical process that is closely related to spectatorship. Utilizing Althusser's notions of interpellation, Judith Mayne posits spectatorship as not only "the acts of watching and listening" nor the act of "identification with human figures" but instead the process of identifying with the "values" to which a work is "invested" which involves the "pleasures and dangers" associated with it.[153] Jaqueline Stewart explains that spectatorship is usually seen as "an activity fraught with social, psychological, and political contradictions for black viewers who are subjected to films that privilege white (racist, hegemonic) values and perspectives."[154] The way a White woman may watch *The Birth of a Nation* then, is immensely different from the way a Black male or Black female views it. While a White woman may imagine how she can be a victim of Black

'savagery' and how Black males probably have an insatiable appetite for sex, brutality, and destruction, a Black male may watch that same movie and see the vast discrepancies and misrepresentations that will destroy his identity before he even has a chance to establish it. Diawara uses Laura Mulvey's argument on spectatorship to prove this point, saying:

> Laura Mulvey argues that the classical Hollywood film is made for the pleasure of the male spectator. However, as a black male spectator, I wish to argue, in addition, that the dominant cinema situates black characters primarily for the pleasure of white spectators (male or female). To illustrate this point, one may note how black male characters in contemporary Hollywood films are made less threatening to whites either by white domestication of black customs and culture—a process of deracination and isolation—or by stories in which blacks are depicted playing by the rules of white society and losing.[155]

Ultimately, just as Mulvey—and scholars who follow suit such as bell hooks—argues that women become objects in film and media, Diawara makes the claim that the exact same thing happens with Black men. Black men and women become just as much of an object of gaze, if not more so, and are usually placed in roles inferior to or subservient to Whites regardless of gender, in a way that is used to enhance the credibility and strength of their White counter parts. Black masculinity, to the spectator, is inadequate "in competition" for the "authority figure" positionality is at stake in a discourse.[156]

Regardless of the power dynamics at play, the "gaze" has always been a source of fascination by spectators. Robert L. Jackson II draws on Robyn Wiegman in defining "gaze," which he asserts is a "specular event" used for the purposes of "examining sites of obsessive desire that admit the visibility of difference, but remain troubled by it"; ultimately, the gaze proposes the "presence of an Other."[157] Traditionally, the concept of gaze is attributed to—more or less—tangible figures for the means of objectification. Spectators look upon bodies for the means of pleasure, opposition, or reclamation. Mulvey positions the gaze as a means of pleasure, while scholars such as bell hooks or Diawara constitute it for Blacks as a means of opposition or

resistance. All three scholars implicitly or explicitly adhere to the notion that gaze serves as a means of reclaiming: reclaiming the phallus, reclaiming Black femininity, reclaiming Black masculinity, reclaiming independence. I contend that the deployment of "nigger/a" by individuals who do not identify as Black is in itself a "specular event" enacting a specific form of gaze, a *phonetic gaze*—a gaze through the use of words and sounds rather than images. The phonetic gaze enacts voyeuristically through both the strategic and superfluous deployment of particular words. As such, it works not simply to pleasure, oppose, or reclaim, but also to engage at least one of the following six objectives: *(1) adhere to historical context and references, (2) achieve artistic visions, (3) express endearment, (4) oppress a population/reinforce hegemonic ideologies/systems, (5) resist hegemonic ideologies/systems, or (6) adhere to or emulate customary/authentic vernacular.* The model of the phonetic gaze can be utilized to explain the way the deployment of a word—in this case "nigger/a"—constitutes its subject—in this case their masculinity/Blackness.

Given "nigger/a's" history, the assumption that an author is simply reinforcing White patriarchal ideologies would be easy to accept. Since "nigger/a's" is a fragmented text, however, examining it as a tool of the phonetic gaze is useful. As authors' who do not identify as Black execute the phonetic gaze through "nigger/a," some are able to pass it off ambiguously with little to no opposition. Others, however, create more controversy. In the analysis that follows, I examine three pop-culture texts: the film *Django Unchained,* the stand-up comedy of Louis C.K., and the music of rap artists Fat Joe and V-Nasty. Writer/director Quentin Tarantino stands out as an author who deploys "nigger/a" in his films for a variety of purposes and with a range of sometimes-controversial results. Focusing on the film *Django Unchained* (2012), I assess the deployment of "nigger/a" as it relates to the phonetic gaze. Although the frequent appearance of

"nigger/a" in the film may illustrate Tarantino's intentions to appeal to history, it also constitutes a specific artistic vision that reinforces hegemonic White masculinity.

Django Re-Chained

Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained* tells the story of the freed slave, Django Freeman, and his quest as a bounty hunter to take down slave masters and save his wife. As a nod to the traditional spaghetti westerns, the film is a homage to old *Django* films, which followed a White cowboy drifter seeking to avenge his wife's death. Tarantino's *Django,* however, cast a Black man as one of the main heroes. *Django* was well received by critics and audiences alike. The film won 64 of the 95 awards it was nominated for, including Oscars for "Best Performance by and Actor in a Supporting Role" (Christoph Waltz) and "Best Writing, Original Screenplay" (Quentin Tarantino); the film also generated over $162 million.[158] David Denby of *The New Yorker,* proclaimed it was Tarantino's "most entertaining piece of moviemaking since 'Pulp Fiction'" explaining the use of "nigger/a" as employed "in a way that whites normally can't use it."[159] Denby goes on to say it is used "functionally, as a descriptive term, and contemptuously, in order to degrade," however, "By the end of the movie, the n-word loses its didactic value as a sign of racism."[160] Renowned film critic Roger Ebert considered the film "brilliant entertainment."[161] When addressing Tarantino's use of "nigger/a" he stated, "I understood it as a word in common daily use through the antebellum South. In context, there was a reason for it."[162] Randall Kennedy, himself, asserts that attention is placed on his "race rather than the character of his work—brilliant work that allows the word nigger to be heard in a rich panoply of context and intonations."[163]

Not all critics, however, reacted positively to the film. Writer/director Spike Lee objected strongly to the film, echoing his earlier objections to Tarantino's work. Kennedy's observation that Lee "has taken exception to Tarantino's playfulness with nigger" is, to be sure, an understatement.[164] Jalani Cobb took issue with the liberties Tarantino took in depicting history, defending his stance against the fictional depiction by stating "the entire appeal of the former [fiction] is its capacity to shed light on how we understand the latter [reality]."[165] Historian and *Ebony Magazine* journalist, Blair L.M. Kelley, echoed these sentiments stating, "Ironically in the effort to defend the language, Tarantino has clung tightly to claims of historically accuracy [sic]. . . I wished that Tarantino sought the same kind of accuracy in his larger depiction of the institution of chattel slavery."[166] Tarantino has a history of inserting the pejorative into films, some of which resemble, or are replicas of, Blaxploitation film. In *Django Unchained,* however, the deployment of "nigger/a" is so abundant that, as Cobb suggests, it raised "the epithet to the level of a pronoun."[167] Regardless of the race of characters uttering the term, the author of the text is the film's director because he determines the artistic vision.

As previously noted, the film revolves around a Black slave named Django (Jamie Foxx), rescued and freed by a White, albeit German, bounty hunter, Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz). Initially, Schultz sets out to free Django to help him find fugitive White slavers who only Django is familiar with, but in exchange for Django's help, Schultz trains Django as a bounty hunter and helps him find his sold love interest Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) being held by the films antagonist Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his right hand man Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson).

The word "nigger/a" appeared over 100 times in the film, but the instances can be grouped into a few categories: artistic vision, reinforcement of ideologies, resisting ideologies,

and depicting historical context. The analysis that follows assesses representative occurrences in particular scenes. Arguably, every application of "nigger" attends to the antebellum historical contexts presented in the fil; similarly, many inclusions are arguably a result of Tarantino's artistic vision. The adherence to historical context throughout, however, has the additional function of reclaiming the White patriarchy and White masculinity of the past through the deployment of "nigger." "Nigger," then, is itself reclaimed. In the analysis that follows I suggest Tarantino employs "nigger/a" throughout the film *Django Unchained* both strategically and superfluously as a means of facilitating a gaze that artistically and mundanely reinforces ideologies that subjugate Black masculinity. His facilitation of the gaze also places spectators within a historical context renewed by the word where it was normalized. Most, if not all, of the deployments of "nigger/a" can be attributed to historical context—which is arguably uncontestable—and yet "nigger's" placement functions as oppressive and objectifying to both Black men in the film and Black men who are spectators. Tarantino is able to operate with an apparent freedom in his deployment of "nigger" mostly because of the historical context and his own history of including the word in prior films. Conversely, many of the instances of Tarantino's pejorative inclusion appear to be more trivial, facilitating a gaze that reinforces ideologies that exist today rather than simply reflecting a detested past.

The opening scenes of the film introduce Django being freed from two slave traders by Dr. King Schultz, who subsequently shoots and kills one trader while killing the horse of the second. As a result, the horse violently falls on top of the trader. Schultz then suggests several options to Django: 1) that Django take the clothes of the dead trader so that he can stay warm and that the remaining slaves decide whether to free themselves and take action upon their remaining captor, or 2) help him up and continue their journey into slavery. The former of these

suggestions, at the moment, is most important to both the film and this discussion. As Django begins to take the clothes the wounded trader yells, "Nigger, don't you touch my brother's coat."[168] The implementation of "nigger" in this situation not only serves as an explicit interjection to call attention, but also to call attention to the fact that despite the slave trader's current physical, mental, and emotional condition, a "nigger" is incapable of existing within the same status of the White man, dead or alive, able or disabled. White man's clothing becomes a token of a humanity a "nigger" cannot and should not ever achieve. The utterance reinforces White patriarchy serving, momentarily, as a pleasurable morphine for the wounded trader reminding him of his status through an attempt to oppress.

White patriarchy and oppression through epithetical exertion continues throughout the film. Schultz and Django travel to a local pub for a beer and they are greeted by a bartender who immediately cries, "Get that nigger out of here," once again implying the sub-human status of a "nigger."[169] The bartender runs out to get help from the sheriff, who, because he is an outlaw posing as a sheriff is shot by the bounty hunter Schultz, triggering the arrival of the marshal. When the marshal arrives he calls out "You and your nigger come out with your hands in the air."[170] The placement of the possessive pronoun indicates that Django is akin to a pet, an object, or a piece of property. The characterization of Django follows this approach in following scene in which the White slave owner, Big Daddy, asserts "It's against the law for niggers to ride horses," as if even horses are superior to the position of a "nigger."[171] The assertion of the Black man as no more than property, a possession of White men, proceeds as the exchange between Schultz and Big Daddy continues. Big Daddy proclaims, "I don't like you or your fancy pants nigger."[172] Schultz, positioned as the "White knight," also seemingly re-positions White patriarchy as he claims—posing as a slave owner—that he wishes to purchase one of Big

Daddy's "nigger girls." The ease in which Schultz employs the term calls into question his

integrity and ability to recognize Black individuals humanity. Additionally through his

qualifying use of the word "girls," he indicates there is an understanding between individuals

who utilize the term, that "nigger" specifically encompasses Black men. As Gloria Naylor

explains, "A woman could never be a "nigger" in the singular, with its connotations of

confirming worth. The noun girl was its closest equivalent."[173] Tarantino's conscious decision to

include the qualifying designation is a reflection of the way Black men, specifically, are

characterized and re-positioned by the epithet and the way it re-centers White masculinity and

patriarchy.

Django and his antagonist, a Black character named Stephen, deploy the epithet many

times over throughout the film, but particular instances stand out among others. In one scene,

before Django and Schultz meet the main antagonist, Candie, the two engage in conversation

with Candie's lawyer, Leonide Moguy, a man who contends that he was "raised to be Calvin's

lawyer."[174] Django responds to Moguy with the quip that, "One might almost say you's a

nigga."[175] Django's defiant proclamation uses the position of "nigger/a" as a "you are no better

than me" equalizing statement. The statement resists White masculinity and patriarchy and

artistically inverts the power dynamic. However, since "The politics of slavery, of racialized

power relations, were such that the slaves were denied the right to gaze," the artistic inversion is

also Tarantino's creative way of having Django accepting his position as a "nigger" as well. [176]

Django acknowledges that the role Moguy maintains is no different than the role Django has

played his entire life. Furthermore, positing Moguy as a "nigger" puts the onus on Moguy, but it

is Django who draws attention to himself following the White men—ingeniously arranged on a

staircase forcing Moguy to look down upon Django and Django up to Moguy—who would

otherwise characterize and gaze upon him as though he were an animal or possession. It is

unacceptable for Django to have facilitated or engage in a gaze, as a result, resistance is

reinforcement.

Posing as a Black slaver under the supervision of his master Schultz, Django's

disposition becomes even more complicated when he deploys the epithet. As the group of men

(including slaves and other White slavers) traveled back to Candyland (Calvin Candie's

plantation) Django exchanges words with a slave whose facial expression clearly displays

disdain for the Black slaver Django is playing. Django responds to the slave's contesting glares.

> Flash them eyeballs at me again I'll give you a reason not to like me, now move nigga!
> You niggas gonna understand something about me, I'm worse than any of these White
> men here, you get the molasses out ya ass and keep them god damn eyeballs off of me.[177]

Tarantino uses Django's deployment of "nigger" to stand against Blacks and Whites alike, but

his defiance against other Black males—and subsequently against his own Black identity—in

many ways aligns him more with Whites than Blacks. It is Django's tirade then, with the slave(s)

that displays Tarantino's way of distinguishing Django from the other White men, despite him

riding alongside them on horseback while the Black men walk.

As the story continues it becomes clear that his "true nemesis is not the slaveholder

[Candie] . . . but Stephen, the house slave devoutly allied with the slaveholder" and who

ostentatiously employs the epithet just as much, if not more, than the Whites presented in the

film.[178] Tarantino's placement of Django and Stephen—Black characters who both utilize

"nigger"—creates a conflict between two characters who are easily in the same position: two

Black men—a "nigger brute" in Django and a "nigger coon/Uncle Tom" in Stephen—under the

direction of White superiors in search of their own sense of agency and worth. Regardless,

Stephen and Django's usage of the epithet becomes justification to be dehumanized and

emasculated. Throughout the entire film, there is only one instance where Django identifies Stephen as "nigger/a." In that case it was deployed as a means of mocking Stephen for his ignorance of Django's available weaponry:

> Stephen: I count six shots nigga.
> Django: I count two guns nigga.[179]

The pejorative is unnecessarily included in the exchange, but serves as a reminder of Stephen's regard for Django's intellect. Likewise, Stephen only refers to Django by his actual name five times in comparison to the myriad of times he could have used his actual name. Additionally, there are numerous times Stephen refers to Django as a "nigger." "Nigger" nearly becomes pronoun for Django in Stephen's vocabulary. It is this epithetical usage that exemplifies Tarantino's intentionality to constitute Django's masculinity and Blackness as compared to Stephen's masculinity and Blackness. In each scenario in which Stephen labels Django as a "nigger" it appears both as oppressive for Django and pleasurable for Stephen. Despite delivering Django from being physically castrated, his marking of Django as a "nigger" is, at the very least, an attempt to verbally castrate Django. In the final scene, as Stephen lies on the ground wounded from Django's gunshots, he's heard screaming in agony:

> Sweet Jesus let me kill this nigga, they gon catch yo black ass, you gon be on the wanted posters now nigga. You can run nigga but they gon find yo ass . . . They ain't just gon kill you nigga . . . This Candyland nigga.[180]

Again, the presence of "nigga" is superfluous as though Tarantino wanted to engage in as much of the phonetic gaze as possible before Django's adversary was killed. Tarantino's use of the phonetic gaze, in the instances of Django and Stephen employing "nigger," can in many ways be seen as intentionally artistic, however, they do little to resist or disrupt systems of White patriarchy/masculinity, and rather, reinforce those systems. The phonetic gaze, in these cases,

functions to oppress and objectify them. The characters exist as little more than a tongue for Tarantino reclaiming masculinity for Whites.

Tarantino's utilization of Calvin Candie, the "main" antagonist and the film's embodiment of White patriarchy, helps position "nigger/a" in provocative ways. Just as with most characters within the film, Candie employs the use of "nigger" as a designating substitute for actual names, thus taking away agency, humanity, and masculinity. Candie's position enables the appropriation of "nigger" to formulate a congenial paradox. At one point, Candie refers to Schultz as a "nigger loving German."[181] The appellation works to "deride" Schultz as a White man compromising his masculinity and Whiteness through "confronting anti-black practices."[182]

Continuing his impertinent word pairing, Candie, unlike any other character in the film, is found embarking upon an encomium, through which he praises "exceptional niggers":

> I believe there is a level above bright, above talented, above loyal that a nigga can aspire to, say one nigga that just pops up in 10,000. The exceptional nigga. I do believe that given time, exceptional niggas like Bright Boy [Django] here, become if not frequent, more frequent. Bright Boy, you are that one in 10,000.[183]

It appears that Tarantino positions Candie as one of few characters who not only applies qualifiers to adapt the constraints of "nigger," but whose soliloquies—which are comprised of "nigger"—seem to directly constitute the masculinity of Black men, particularly Django. The qualifier of "exceptional" establishes anyone identified as a "nigger/a" as still less masculine and human than Whites, yet deserving of more respect than a typical "nigger." It is indeed Tarantino's artistic way to simultaneously reinforce White patriarchy and masculinity, while soliciting the second persona.[184] It is as though Tarantino crafted Candie to be the one character whose monologues speak, not to the films characters, but in actuality to an "implied auditor." The character, at times, speaks for spectating White men, by aligning them with such positions as

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"nigger lovers," and at times speaks for spectating Black men through particular employments of "nigger/a."[185] Many of Candie's tirades implore gazing spectators "to fulfill its blandishments" through their own adherence.[186] This particular declamation calls for spectating Black men to be that one "exceptional nigger" if they seek to possess any sort of legitimate masculinity while maintaining their Blackness. Candie's constitutive rhetoric is bolstered through Django acknowledging his own masculinity and Blackness through Candie's lens. In the final scene, as Django is on the verge of defeating his true adversary Stephen (Candie is dead at this point) he begins a monologue of his own:

> Seventy-six years, Stephen. How many niggas you think you see come and go, huh? Seven thousand? Eight thousand? Nine thousand? Nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine? Everything single word that came out of Calvin Candie's mouth was nothin' but horseshit. But he was right about one thing: I am that one nigga in 10,000.

Django not only accepts his role as this "exceptional nigger"—a role ascribed to him by a White man—but does so through reinforcing Candie's claims, legitimizing nearly every other "nigger" uttered by other characters, and perpetuating White, masculine, patriarchal ideologies.

In addition, Tarantino made strategic decisions when it came to the involvement (timing) of "nigger." At times, he indeed unnecessarily employed the epithet, yet its unnecessary employment functioned just as much within a phonetic gaze as when it was seemingly necessary or more calculated. Tarantino engages in a realm he knows is troublesome, nevertheless in doing so, he engages in voyeuristic activities with and through the fragmented and repressive appellation. Given the historical context of the film, the author's past inclusion of the pejorative in films, and his relatively imaginative commission, he was able to "pass" on many instances of the term. However, ignoring the consequences of the epithet on the basis of these three criteria would be wholly irresponsible. In fact, thorough analysis considering those criteria would

indicate not only the possibility of alternative intentions, but also inconspicuous implications, unintended ramifications, and the disposition of the term itself. Deployments of "nigger/a," are ultimately masked in a historical context, though the implications and ramifications continue to reverberate through current power structures. Many, if not all, the inclusions of "nigger/a" reinforce ideologies positioning Black characters and spectators as subservient, even when deployed by Black characters. Tarantino's attempts to utilize "nigger/a" as a form of resistance is strategically artistic (Django's interaction with Moguy, Django's acceptance of being the "exceptional nigga"). However, the attempts fall short of truly resisting White patriarchy. Django's acceptance of the "exceptional nigga," especially in conjunction with him killing another Black character, places him in a reality that accepts the subservient position to White patriarchy and complies with the emasculation of the Black male. Django's interaction with Moguy, again, draws attention to his inability to gaze into a separate, liberating reality. Tarantino may be able to operate with a freedom, but most of his deployments of "nigger/a" maintain an existence that, when examined, are far from emancipating, and Black masculinity is left chained.

Laughing With or Laughing At

The case of Michael Richards recounted at the beginning of this chapter presented an example of an overtly oppressive deployment of "nigger." Richards deploys the phonetic gaze in a way that is undeniably problematic. His engagement with the gaze is one dimensional in comparison to employments of the term by different authors. There is an understanding that his inclusion of the epithet in his set reinforces racist messages, and operates with such little ambiguity that it denies propensity for any other justification for its presence in that particular context. Conversely, comedian Louis C.K. employs "nigger/a" in an ambiguous and arbitrary

approach. I contend that Louis C.K.'s arbitrary deployment of "nigger/a" enables a disruption in the historical implications that link the term to Black masculinity and produces a varying use of the word. C.K. employs "nigger/a" in an way that facilitates the phonetic gaze fulfilling the objectives of an 1) artistic vision that appears to 2) reinforce ideologies associated with the word but actually makes attempts to 3) resist those ideologies and appeal to endearment.

Examination of a non-Black's deployment of "nigger/a" in a comical/satirical setting shows how fragmented the use of "nigger/a" is. The ambiguous nature of intent as to whether it falls under comedy or simple racism wrapped in a more or less humorous veil and the immediate audience engagement and response leaves the epithet fragmented and the audience at an impasse. The ambiguity also requires effort on an auditor's part to "recognize and understand the irony"— if there is underlying irony—"within a message for it to offer any rhetorical significance."[187] The auditor's obligation to recognize irony and differentiate "between the literal and actual underlying messages within the comedy" further complicates the presence of "nigger/a."[188] John C. Meyer explains that ironic humor functions by "dividing one group (those who communicate and appreciate the humor) from another (those who would be expected to disagree with the perspective creating the humor)," but simultaneously uniting "group's members…serving as a form of identification through mutually acknowledged differentiation humor."[189] The ironic deployment of "nigger/a," then, creates diverse and differentiated realities for spectators, influencing how auditors participate within the gaze, especially when there is an unintentional reinforcement of "the idea that was originally meant to be subverted."[190]

Comedian Louis C.K's inclusion of the epithet in his comedy illustrates the ways in which "nigger/a" constitutes masculinity within the phonetic gaze. Like many comedians, C.K.'s performance is consistent with the way comedy "serves multiple purposes, from entertainment to

social critique."[191] His utilization of stand-up as a platform for social and political commentary positions him to address issues that individuals would otherwise avoid in other, specifically public, settings in ways that blur lines of discretion and etiquette. C.K.'s cynical humor encompasses the otherwise challenging and complex topics of gender, sexual orientation, and race. Born in Washington, D.C., C.K. spent the first few years of his life being raised in Mexico, home to his paternal family, and then moved to Massachusetts around the age of seven.[192] Despite spending time in Mexico and speaking Spanish as his first language, C.K came to recognize the extent to which his White complexion, red hair, and lack of a "Spanish" accent was not only advantageous to his experiences but shaped his perspective on race. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, he explained:

> I was a little kid, so all I had to do was completely reject my Spanish and my Mexican past, which is a whole lot easier because I'm white with red hair. I had the help of a whole nation of people just accepting that I'm white. Race doesn't mean what it used to in America anymore . . . Is black your experience or the color of your skin? My experience is as a Mexican immigrant, more so than someone like George Lopez. He's from California. But he'll be treated as an immigrant. I am an outsider . . . I won't ever be called that or treated that way, but it was my experience.[193]

C.K., then, has been able to consciously and unconsciously indulge many of the privileges associated with a Eurocentric appearance and White patriarchy, despite his ethnic background. Identified by many and identifying at times as a White man, C.K. and his work are empowered by underlying White privilege, effectively complicating many of the challenging and complex messages he extends to his audiences. These ideas along with his camouflaged intentions, make C.K. a compelling subject for analysis in terms of his deployment of "nigger/a." A comedian like Michael Richards is blatant in his objectifying and disparaging use of "nigger/a." C.K.'s ironic employment is meant to subvert "nigger/a's" underlying ideologies, however, when coupled with

the White patriarchal privilege from which he personally benefits, C.K.'s use of the term yields divided and sometimes contradictory effects.

Like any skill that has the appearance of being "effortless," comedic ingenuity is often underappreciated. Audience members come away from a performance feeling like the comedian articulated insights that they always knew but never bothered to say. In fact, it is the means by which such complex topics are discussed that displays innovation, an innovation often associated with other arts. C.K. manipulates the employment of "nigger/a" with an artistic vision and a sense of endearment that allows him to phonetically gaze. On April 20, 2011, HBO aired a one time talk-show entitled *Talking Funny* which showcased four comedians—Ricky Gervais, Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, and C.K. himself—discussing comedy, their views on comedy, and their journey through the industry. As comedian Chris Rock discussed why some jokes fail and others transcend time, C.K. brought up an example of one of Rock's jokes. In response, Rock claimed C.K. is "the blackest white guy I fucking know, of all the negative things we think about black people . . ."[194] Before Rock can finish his claim, C.K. responds, "So you're saying I'm a nigger."[195] Despite Rock's comical berating of C.K., describing him as the embodiment of everything negative characterizing Black people, C.K. exploited the opportunity to employ the epithet without being prompted to do so. It is C.K.'s exploitation of that opportunity to take Rock's critique and not only flip it on him, but also simultaneously characterize Blacks and "Black traits" in a way that situates both himself and the audience within the gaze. Possibly making reference to Rock's "Black vs. Niggas" routine in his 1996 HBO special *Bring the Pain*, C.K. maneuvered "nigger" in such a way that it didn't necessarily change its meaning, but operated within his artistic vision as a means of endearment with Rock while attempting to resist White patriarchal ideologies. It is because of this intentional employment that Rock's demeanor

and words encourage the pejorative's inclusion. Interestingly, Seinfeld agrees that "nigger" embodies Black negative attributes as he states, "I don't think he could do that, I don't think he has those qualities." Likewise, when Gervais asks the rhetorical question, "Who says 'nigger' on stage? We don't [Seinfeld and Gervais]," C.K. replies by stating that they say "nigger" in private, Gervais's head nod and encouraging laugh subtly support "nigger's" usage in private.

While the joke and the use of the epithet could have easily ended with Rock's encouraging laughter and response, it appears C.K. attempts to make the most of the opportunity. Though the discussion was not headed in that direction, C.K. takes the chance to move the conversation towards discussing his use of "nigger" on stage. "We can say 'nigger' on stage and you guys don't."[196] Seinfeld makes the claim that he's never found the humor in the word, whereas C.K. acknowledges that he has found the "humor" in the word, justifying its employment, and confesses to using it off stage as well. C.K. goes on to declare that it would be hilarious if Seinfeld (who refuses to use the word) were to have a bit which included it. In many ways, C.K. draws upon the opportunity to use "nigger" within comedy as a way to elicit "control" of its "subversive potential of ridicule and mockery when it is directed at those in power" particularly when he calls upon others to utilize the epithet.[197] Explicitly, his usage is resistive; he reclaims the word, satisfies his own, as well as, audience members' pleasure through his version of humor, and opposes a power structure. What is not as explicit is whether or not it is resisting racist/White patriarchal ideologies or it is seeking to resist the notion that Blacks authorize usage of the term.

C.K. deploys the term often as a form of resistance, flipping the word on authoritative structures. C.K. makes an attempt to reverse what Simon Weaver describes as the "savagery" which is "often constructed in embodied racism" and attempts to invert stereotypes connected to

particular races.[198] In a later segment during the *Talking Funny* special, C.K. admits he wants to take you, the auditor, to the place where you have "fear and foreboding," essentially re-establishing or challenging what spectators view as "right" or "appropriate."[199] An example of this can be seen in his 2008 stand-up special *Chewed Up.* C.K. begins a bit in the stand-up by explaining the nature of words:

> No words are bad, but some people start using them a lot to hurt other people and then they become bad, they become hard to use. There's words that I love that I can't use cause other people use them wrong to hurt other people.[200]

C.K. is very much aware of the power words can have, though he places the onus of the impact on the people who use them rather than on the words, themselves. However, his belief that people fuel the connotations of words is reinforced through his negative associations of "nigger" such as in the aforementioned example when he connected the word to negative Black traits. Lacy Lowrey posits this strategy as an effort to "minimize the significance of social topics," that leads to "self-reflection among the audience" and actually works to emphasize the significance for spectators.[201] C.K.'s usage operates through the phonetic gaze, resisting structures that dictate the way particular words should function and who is capable of utilizing them. C.K.'s performance, however, is further complicated through the ironic persona by allowing simultaneous resistance and reinforcement of the same ideologies.

There are difficulties in identifying irony within C.K.'s comedy given the apparent superfluous employment of "nigger." Nonetheless, its inclusion in his comedy purposefully sets up the gaze, allowing himself and auditors alike an opportunity to partake in the voyeuristic performance. C.K. facilitates an exploration of authorization of Blackness and Black masculinity from an implicit White patriarchal standpoint. As such, if Black men transform "nigger/a" to reclaim their own masculinity, C.K.'s gaze promotes Blackness and Black masculinity as a

construct that does not need to be legitimized by Blacks. The irony, then, is not with his employment of the word, but rather his intent. C.K.'s bit in *Chewed Up* continues as he explains what "offends" him most:

> Everybody has different words that offend them, different things that they hear that they get offended by. To me the thing that offends me the most is every time that I hear the "n-word." Not "nigger" by the way, I mean the "n-word." Literally, whenever a white lady on CNN with nice hair says "the n-word," that's just white people getting away with saying "nigger" that's all that is. Just say it, don't hide behind the first letter like a faggot, just say "nigger" you stupid cunt . . . It's bullshit cause when you say the "n-word" you put the word "nigger" in the listeners head, that's what saying a word is. You say the "n-word" and I go, "Oh, she means 'nigger.'" Why don't you say it instead and take responsibility . . .[202]

C.K. previously alluded to the notion that people empower words, they do not inherently have the power to hurt. Thus he embodies an ironic persona to insult—using "faggot" and "cunt"—anyone who would use "n-word" in place of "nigger." Even though the preceding does not present "nigger" as an insult, his use of "faggot" and "cunt" demonstrates his awareness of the negative connotations embedded within particular words. It is clear then, that C.K. understands the significance of "nigger." His employment of "nigger," again, is certainly intentional. His propensity to deploy "nigger," in this case, is remunerative of discerning "n-word" from "nigger," yet C.K. also wants spectators to embrace the gaze, a gaze he understands many vehemently deplore. As comics connect, often through empathy, the audience's laughter displays some sense of agreement and encouragement for C.K.'s perspective and, simultaneously, a desire to engage with the gaze the way C.K. does. It is through the engagement of the gaze, then, that a repositioning of power is facilitated. Where "n-word" is typically regarded as an agreeable term to use in public, C.K. attempts to position "nigger" as the "agreeable sound" as a means of silencing the "opposition's voice" or those who oppose the explicit use of "nigger" over "n-word."[203]

As the bit continues, C.K. embarks upon a story about his experience at a local coffee shop where the barista meticulously made him a cup of coffee. His response was to call him a nigger.

> … and I was just blown away and for some reason as I left there, the thought in my head was, "That nigger made the shit out of my coffee." He wasn't black, that's just what was in my heart for some reason, was "That nigger made the shit out of my coffee."[204]

Again, C.K. invites the audience to gaze with him and challenge the "traditional" use of the epithet, yet C.K.'s own positionality, and that of the barista, calls into question the seemingly innocuous nature of C.K.'s thought. Would C.K. still find it "in his heart" to call him a "nigger" if the subject had not been servicing him? Attributing "nigger" to a service worker evokes ideals of an intrinsic hierarchy C.K. is conscious of and follows. C.K. encourages the audience to view this as an expression of endearment, yet once again, his ironic persona leaves the situation fragmented, fostering the opportunity for it to be perceived as a reinforcement of dominant ideology and an elision of the barista's masculinity.

C.K.'s irony works to reinforce ideologies traditionally placed on "nigger" through the acknowledgement of animalistic traits. In *Chewed Up*, C.K. expresses his hatred for deer and describes a deer that hit his car and ran away. C.K. responded through the use of epithets. "'You broke my mirror you faggot, cunt, nigger deer.'"[205] Again, while the audience is invited to gaze with the author, they are also left to negotiate the double-edged intentions C.K. places upon epithets. On one hand, he is utilizing the pejoratives in connection to an animal, which is reflective upon the way pejoratives—especially those used to describe women and Black men—historically carry animalistic connotations to metaphorically describe a subject. On the other hand, the deployment also functions as resistive in the assumption that anything could be a "nigger" and "nigger" can mean anything.

C.K.'s banal employment of "nigger" undermines its capacity to be perceived as provocative. In 2010 C.K. appeared on *The Opie & Anthony Show* with Black comedian Patrice O'Neal. As O'Neal explains the origin of the anti-Semitic slur, "kike," C.K. again exploits the opportunity to deploy "nigger" unsolicited.

> You know where "nigger" came from originally? There was some black guy being a nigger, so they called him a nigger. He was being a real nigger so they said "What a nigger!" and that's where it started.[206]

The laughter of O'Neal and the host encourages C.K., constitutes agreement, and silences any opposition. The underlying negative connotations of the story's context implies negative connotations for the term itself which in many ways negates C.K.'s belief in the innocuous utilization of the word and instead reinforces notions of White patriarchy.

The inclusion of the epithet in comedy complicates its usage for both author and spectator where definitive lines are blurred and fragmented natures are further disoriented camouflaging his intentions. The offensive nature of "nigger" is both challenged and sustained. What is evident is that C.K. intentionally deploys the word frequently as well as deploying it seemingly superfluously and as such further contributes to the phonetic gaze. Spectators, while encouraged to partake in the gaze, are required to navigate an unmapped course of irony while negotiating not only appropriateness, but also constructed identities. C.K. tries to make it clear that any word has the potential to be harmless, yet his inclusion of negative associations further convolutes any employment. However, C.K. purposefully convolutes the functionality of "nigger," so much so that masculinity and any other socially constructed identity are actually left fragmented, disoriented, and quite possibly dismantled as a means to be reconstructed. The ironic persona implemented within comedy disrupts the functionality of constructs, thus C.K.'s usage is strategic insofar as it maintains its comedic guise despite intentionality.

Keepin' It Real: "Another Wild Nigger from the Bronx"—or Oakland

"Nigger/a" functions in a variety of ways within film and comedy when employed by non-Black authors. However, its inclusion in music—specifically the hyper masculinized hip-hop genre—facilitates a space for a particular agency in the establishment or repositioning of masculinity and Blackness. As a fragmented text, "nigger/a" is a composition of many histories, stories, and meanings where a single deployment in a specific instance is not explicatory of everything the word encompasses. Hip-hop is representative of another fragment of "nigger/a's" multiple dimensions. It is often deployed as a means of endearment or artistic vision, but also can be used to resist or reinforce ideologies, and to establish authenticity in the author's vernacular. As such, hip-hop has been a genre in which artists frequently and adamantly declare their independence—from mental constraints, societal norms, economic reliance—and their self-made nature where the deployment of "nigger/a" becomes representative of liberation and resilience. I further suggest that non-Black authors in hip-hop deploy "nigger/a" as a means of establishing an authenticity in connection with Black masculinity as it carries a privileged association in the hip-hop world. It is, for them, a declaration that their gaze also constitutes their genuine reality. In the context of hip-hop, the phonetic gaze facilitates appeals to the objectives of 1) reflecting an artistic vision, 2) establishing endearment while also attempting to 3) resist or reinforce ideologies, and signaling an 4) authentic vernacular.

Kennedy recognizes the "bracing independence" exhibited by rappers' mobilization of "nigger/a."[207] Such deployment displays an author's exclusive care of and for themselves and is "a foundation for the expression of a proactive and independent attitude."[208] Vershawn Ashanti Young considers such notions to be "synonymous with the very masculinity that constitutes nigga-gender," sentiments that I suggest are more pronounced in hip-hop than any in other genre

of popular media.[209] Furthermore, embedded in the roots of hip-hop are hyper-masculinized

ideals and sentiments of exuberant "authenticity" imploring artists to always consistently "keep it

real."[210] Non-Black authors in hip-hop tend to follow these ideals more closely and more

frequently than non-Black authors in other media realms. It is a genre in which the maintenance

of an author's status is dependent on "'authenticating' their self-presentations."[211] While most

non-Black hip-hop artist avoid the use of "nigger/a," the epithet can be one of the quickest ways

of distinguishing oneself, especially as it is reminiscent of "the pure essence of manhood" and a

"past history of struggle and present survival against odds into a victorious statement of

being."[212]

The employment of "nigger/a" in hip-hop often plays a significant factor in repositioning

Blackness and masculinity, allowing the artist to assert "control of himself" and pronounce his or

her authenticity. Bronx raised, Puerto Rican rapper Fat Joe frequently utilizes "nigga" in his raps

and yet, interestingly, rarely—if ever—raises any questions or concerns about his inclusion of

the term despite him not being Black and identifying as a Latino male, admirably expressing his

Latino pride at any given opportunity. His roots in a primarily Black and Latino community

undoubtedly influenced his love for and creation of music regularly featuring both Black and

Latino artist in his songs, factors that certainly are not inconsequential in relation to his

employment of "nigga." On his 1993, debut album *Represent*—another indication of the

importance of "authenticity" in hip-hop—Joe utilizes "nigger" within the title his song "Another

Wild Nigger from the Bronx."

> Runnin' with the Latins and the Blacks from Uptown
> It's a damn shame, you better maintain
> I'm causin hysteria blowin niggas out the frame . . .
> Carbon copy you're sloppy, see Joe ain't the one
> I'm beatin bootleggers down with King Sun
> Rollin over niggas like a truck . . .

> I'm known from state to state, for shoot down punks
> I'm another wild nigga from the Bronx[213]

The song acknowledges Joe's roots and upbringing and establishes masculinity through violence, placing "nigga" as both the subject and perpetrator of violence. Engaging in the phonetic gaze, it is the inclusion of "nigga" that constitutes masculinity for author and spectator. Both Randall Kennedy and Jabari Asim discuss the backlash artist Jennifer Lopez received when she, in 2001, was "accused of bigotry on account of lyrics in one of her songs that referred to niggers."[214] Both Lopez and Joe identify as Puerto Rican, both are from the Bronx, both take pride in their heritage and their neighborhood, yet Joe excessively uses "nigga" without chastisement while Lopez is "accused of bigotry."[215] Ultimately the main reason for this inconsistency is the way "nigga" is used—especially in hip-hop culture—to constitute masculinity. Naylor explains that "nigger/a" serves as a means of not only validating but privileging masculinity. Consequently, further solidifies constructs of masculinity embedded in "nigger/a."

As many of Fat Joe's songs—as well as other hip-hop songs—are similar in intent and content, "nigga" is purposed for both endearment and ideological reinforcement. However, the deployment also intends to represent customary or authentic performance, a purpose typically not seen in other realms of media. While the use tends to reinforce masculinity while also functioning as a term of endearment, two apparent objectives of Joe's usage, promoting his own authenticity is another important goal. Joe employs the words as way of saying "I'm keepin' it real," or "I'm staying true to what I know and how I was raised." In a 2011 interview on VladTV, Joe explained a time he was questioned by someone who identified as Black on his usage of "nigger/a." In his story he explains that, during a live interview, a Black radio host in Chicago, asked given Latino heritage, why does he use the word "nigga." Joe responded by saying "Maybe it's because I am that nigga."[216] As he tells the story he screams out "I don't give

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a fuck!"[217] As the "I don't give a fuck!" reflects a nature of hip-hop which Kennedy explains as rappers caring "principally, perhaps exclusively, about what they themselves think, desire, and enjoy," his acceptance of the "nigger/a" and what it embodies is indicative of its authenticity in his vernacular.[218]

As Joe continued his interview with VladTV, he explained his views on the usage of "nigger/a," in particular its endearing and authenticating value:

> Can't nobody tell me, they know how I mean it. My whole theory about it is I'm Latino I can't say 'nigga?' Blacks and Latinos is the same shit . . . if you look at hip-hop music it was created by Blacks and Latinos, the nigga next door to you is Julio so where's the difference? . . . I'm just as Black as any Black nigga. There's some Black niggas Blacker than Akon that talk Spanish all day and you can't tell him he ain't Spanish . . . If everybody else got it then we would be unified, that's how I always felt.[219]

Joe's thoughts express ideas that the employment of "nigger/a" is reliant on more than just skin color. Usage is incumbent upon experience and context as well. However, Joe is eliding the history of slavery that is endemic to Black experience in the U.S. Joe further expressed his thoughts stating, "How can we tell everybody hip-hop is for everybody . . . and we say nigga all day . . . you know they don't really mean it racist [if they repeat it]." It is encompassing of endearment as it adheres to the pleasures and reclamation of community and opposes ideas of separation. As such, Fat Joe's employment is more often accepted than contested and yet his proclamation that he is "as Black as any Black nigga" or that he is "that nigga" suggests the vicarious nature of the phonetic gaze. Its deployment can both explicate experiences and be the manifestation of an experience, lived or unlived.

While Joe engages the gaze with intentions of endearment and authenticating customs/realities, his deployment, like that of Tarantino and C.K., also works to reinforce and resist ideologies. In a song entitled "The Fugitive" from his 2008 album *Elephant in the Room,* Joe employs the word through his lyrics to challenge any opposition:

> When it comes to Latino MC's there's none bigger
> Now who's gonna tell me that I can't say nigga?
> Nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga bitch hoe[220]

It is through these lyrics and lyrics like them that Joe—and other artists—are able to reinforce ideals of masculinity. Joe faces contentious criticisms but he also resists authoritative voices "sanctioning" employment of the word. Yet again, auditors witness the "I don't give a fuck!" attitude entrenched in Joe's rap and revealing of parts of hip-hop culture. At the same time, it is this defiant disposition that reflects masculinity and fractional aspects of Black masculinity. While non-compliance is often compensatory to "keepin' it real" within hip-hop culture, which in turn facilitates an author's masculinity in the eyes and ears of spectators/auditors, it is the implicit notion that Fat Joe now takes ownership of "nigger/a" that further constitutes the author's and the spectator's masculinity.

Fat Joe's declaration of ownership is not unlike other appropriators of the word. In 2011, Oakland, California based female rapper V-Nasty, debuted her mixtape, *Don't Bite Just Taste*. The mixtape gave V-Nasty notoriety because the proclaimed White rapper laced her lyrics with the term "nigger/a." A White female rapper deployed "nigger/a" which became a source of contention. This led to a series of interviews by VladTV with more established hip-hop artists (such as the aforementioned interview with Fat Joe). Many hip-hop artists argued in support of her usage—including Fat Joe—such as veteran rapper Too Short who declared that he calls his White friends "nigga" and vice versa. Too Short argued that V-Nasty is a product of the cultural environment she was raised in:

> There are White people in Oakland that don't know they're White . . . if you put it in your music people are going to call you a wigga, 'you trying to be black' they're not going to know that that's your culture, they're going to think you're faking it.[221]

Other artists shared similar sentiments, including Akon who stated, "The more people that use it…the weaker it gets."[222] There were, however, many artists who disagreed with V-Nasty's deployment of the word including White rapper Yelawolf who adamantly stated that no White rapper should use the "n-word."[223] Even more pronounced was rapper David Banner's stance on the issue:

> No white person calls me "nigga," I don't care who you are. One of my best friends in the world could be white, don't call me "nigga." Don't ever feel like you comfortable or close enough to call me "nigga." What's funny with me … now that I'm getting older, I feel a certain way about Black people calling me "nigga"… I'm not really comfortable with Black people calling me "nigga," especially someone outside of my culture … Honestly in my music now, when I say the word "nigga," I mean the word "nigga." It's not a term of endearment in my music no more, when I say you're a "nigga" I mean you're a "nigga."[224]

There are, then, those who disagree with the appropriation and those who defend the appropriation of the word. The defense further empowers V-Nasty's lyrics and appropriation by other Whites and enables the gaze. V-Nasty stated in an interview that "This is the way I was raised… I didn't even know it was a problem anywhere else."[225] As Tricia Rose explains, "the ghetto is a source of fabricated white authenticity" where "ghetto blackness" become a "model of 'authenticity' and hipness in rap music."[226] As such, in analyzing V-Nasty's lyrics, this analysis will be concerned with the songs from her mixtape *Don't Bite Just Taste,* specifically the songs "Cooking," "Psycho Bitch," and "Bitch Anthem," as each song deploys "nigger/a" in distinct ways.

V-Nasty deploys "nigga" towards women and men, ascribing masculinity to the feminine and emasculating the masculine, reinforcing the intrinsic ideologies underlying "nigger/a." The deployment of "nigger/a" elicits the aforementioned considerations of Naylor's proclamation that "nigger/a" possesses an ability to validate masculinity.[227] If "nigger/a" is capable of validating

masculinity, then, it also must maintain a capacity to emasculate either the subject or the addresser. V-Nasty rhymes in "Cooking":

> I think yo bitch like me, the nigga wanna fight me
> Yeah I got that chopper red beam on his head though
> Nigga talkin' shit but I push his shit back though[228]

Historically, "Black males were castrated for having an association with White women."[229] Ironically, here a White woman purposefully emasculates Black males while willingly associating with them. Additionally, Rose posits the "ghetto badman posture-performance" as a "protective shell against real unyielding and harsh social policies."[230] Rose goes on to explain, "public attention is more easily drawn to acts, images, and threats of black male violence than to any other form of racial address."[231] The violent tones of the lyrics, then, insinuate the brute mentality associated with Black masculinity and because of "nigger/a," V-Nasty is able to gaze into that reality. Furthermore, the gaze V-Nasty experiences through employing "nigger/a"— especially in conjunction with violence—is directed as a defense against those who oppose White appropriation of rap as it may appear inauthentic.

As she deploys "nigger/a," violence becomes V-Nasty's primary vehicle for transporting the epithet in her attempt to establish a sense of authenticity. Any of V-Nasty's endearing deployments of "nigger/a" are juxtaposed almost instantly as her lyrics from "Psycho Bitch" state:

> Disrespect us and we gonna pull the pistols out
> I heard you niggas ain't bout what you be talkin bout
> But I come into your house and leave you leaking on the couch
> Now a nigga can't speak[232]

V-Nasty's violent lyrics become even more problematic as she explicitly states, "I kill niggas,"[233] dismissing any doubt that her verbal violence is connected to "nigger/a" while simultaneously feeding into the notion that "black people are a threat to social order."[234]

Additionally, as Rose explains, "Black urban youth are stigmatized, vilified, and approached with hostility and suspicion."[235] V-Nasty, whether brought up in an environment where she was conditioned to say "nigger/a" or not, is capable of gazing through "nigger/a," in a specifically, and significantly, violent way. As such, the gaze allows her to deploy "nigger/a" just as violently, and yet never be stigmatized the way Black males with parallel expression are stigmatized. Nonetheless, she recognizes that "hip-hop articulates a sense of entitlement and takes pleasure in aggressive insubordination."[236] Authentic or not, V-Nasty's employment of "nigger/a" places her within a reality she will never truly experience and a reality others will find hard to acknowledge. Blackness and Black masculinity, then, will always be distant for V-Nasty, despite the number of times or different ways she deploys "nigger/a."

In her song "Bitch Anthem"—a song that employs "bitch" 107 times in its less than four minute run time, almost as many times as "nigger/a" is said in the entire film *Django Unchained*—V-Nasty maintains the misogynistic, sexist, patriarchal ideologies embedded throughout rap. "Bitch," then, is not inconsequential to "nigga's" deployment in the song. "Bitch" works to establish "nigga's" position as masculine and dominant, but also constitutes a masculinity for both the addresser and the addressee when deployed:

> Nigga talkin' shit, and you know where I be at
> Nigga, I don't give a fuck, man I'll make your mind flap
> Bitch, you a bitch and your mommy is a hoe too. Seen her on E before
> Nigga, do what I do

For the amount of times "bitch" is stated throughout, these three deployments of "nigga" are the only ones in the entire song. Possible explanations for this are as follows: 1) the song mainly refers to women by calling them "bitch" yet at the end, V-Nasty switches her attention to men in an attempt to emasculate them through "nigga"; 2) the song's intent is to emasculate men; or 3) the song emasculates men, but utilizes "nigga" to interpellate women through modes of

masculinity. I argue that due to the ambiguity of this epithetical employment, V-Nasty intends to accomplish all three objectives. Her deployment of "nigga," once again, situates her within a gaze, not one that constructs her reality as a "nigga," but one that further distances her from "nigga," Blackness, and Black masculinity.

V-Nasty continues to allude to authenticity through deploying "nigger/a" as a term of endearment. In her song "Psycho Bitch," V-Nasty begins the song by saying, "Look at me I'm on the block with my niggas now." [237] The use of the possessive pronoun "my" places ownership over her group, however, it is also indicative of her congenial presence amongst "niggas" as she deploys "nigga" through an endearing approach. If this is indeed her true position, the term "niggas" does ostensibly, authenticate her causal presence among them. However, the deployment, by a female—a White female—implies that her presence is more than just a mode of authentication; it suggests that this is also the way she sees herself, thus a gaze is enacted. At the end of "Psycho Bitch" V-Nasty states, "Come back to a nigga like my name is Karma,"[238] further establishing a belief that she believes she is a "nigga."

In each deployment of "nigga," whether appealing to authenticity or attempting to express endearment, V-Nasty is consistently reinforcing White patriarchal ideologies that detract from Black masculinity. If "keepin' it real" is a pillar in hip-hop culture V-Nasty's deployments are a constant appeal to fulfill an authenticity that is lacking in one way or another, regardless of her upbringing or the culture where she was raised. Furthermore, the deployments situate her in a gaze to experience Blackness and Black masculinity, even though it is a reality she does not authentically experience and will never truly comprehend. When the employment by non-Blacks is challenged, the question emerges: Is "authenticity" being stripped from individuals and does this perpetuate a cycle which hip-hop seeks to dismantle in the first place, which gives agency to

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the disenfranchised? Nonetheless, when V-Nasty's employment (or that of other White artists) of "nigger/a" is defended, that defense empowers appropriation—of the term, Black cultural practices, and even of Blackness and Black masculinity, itself.

Conclusion

The deployment of the phonetic gaze is complex due to the multiple possible motivations for particular utterances. The six sub-objectives mentioned at the outset of this chapter illustrate the myriad motivations animating particular words and expressions—both intentional and conditioned. Where some channels might not appear to conform to the standards of "gaze," such as adhering to historical context, each channel, in one way or another, is consistent with each of the three mentioned objectives of traditional gaze (pleasure, opposition, reclamation). For example, deployment for the purposes of adhering to historical context and references reclaims the past, a past imbued with detestation and anguish that is traditionally oppressive and, as such, positions one group over another participating in pleasure. This is seen through the deployments in *Django Unchained.* Furthermore, the means of achieving an artistic vision works to satisfy pleasure while opposing and/or reclaiming conventional notions of appropriate aesthetics. Louis C.K.'s stand up artistically pleasures his audience while seeking to reclaim a word lost in detrimental ideologies and oppose those who disagree with the word's usage. Other intentions may be a bit more evident, such as the way expressions of endearment aim to please or the way the emulation of authentic locutions reclaims identity. Fat Joe and V-Nasty continually attempt to express endearment through their deployments, further justifying their usage as authentic to their vernacular and environment. It is this justification that allows them to feel a sense of a reclaimed identity.

It is the words, not necessarily the images or the images that accompany the words, which often result in guiding an author's work, their agency, and the gaze of both author and spectator/auditor. Juhani Pallasmaa states, "Sight isolates whereas sound incorporates; vision is directional, whereas sound is omni-directional . . . the eye reaches, but the ear receives."[239] An author's ability to coax spectators and allow them to be immersed in the reality of a work relies in part on the way particular words are deployed. When "nigger" is exercised by non-Black authors, a gaze positions those in contact with the text in a way that works to comply with, reify, and reposition White patriarchal masculinity. The inclusion of "nigger" fosters a phonetic gaze that reclaims a past orchestrated under White patriarchy, opposes resistive actions seeking to appropriate, re-appropriate or exterminate the epithet, and pleasures identities that perpetuate hegemonic ideologies or seek to cultivate an idea of community. The engagement of the gaze is also the insistent reminder that an author or addressee may continually deploy words within their own realm of comfort, while escaping reality and never truly finding themselves bound by social perceptions of a label's attributes. Regardless, it perpetuates objectification. Auditors who engage with the text are subjected to gaze that not only involves the images present, but the sounds and words also included. What is significant in this discussion is not the consideration that phonetic gaze has either positive or negative implications or intentions, but that the implications and intentions are as omni-directional as the compensatory sound vital to their induction.

Chapter Four: H.N.I.C.

I find some sort of twisted pleasure in one specific instance of death. The corners of my lips defy gravity and my lungs begin to expel air as I find myself chuckling at this instance of death, this futile attempt to murder, conduct a memorial service, and bury an immortal. Not just an immortal, but an intangible immortal. I find myself chuckling at this instance of death. A piece of me finds myself in solidarity with the persons attempting to execute the illustrious existence of an infamous master, overseer, catcher, and reminder. Another piece of me feels as though the effort is fruitless and trivial. Sorrow was never a response. The first line from a *Washington Post* article regarding the event reads, "There was no mourning at this funeral."[240] I was not alone.

My struggle of amusement and lack of lamenting arrives courtesy of a 2007 funeral in Detroit, a funeral held for the word "nigger." The headline from the *Washington Post* article reads "NAACP Symbolically Buries N-Word," and so while hundreds look on at the pine box blanketed with black roses and pulled by horses, I find myself chuckling at this instance of death. The irony in the proposed positivity that was supposed to emerge from a funeral is delightful in a multitude of ways. The conceptual bereavement that occurred during the NAACP's annual convention considers ideological systems that have all but ceased to exist as it lays to rest the "n-word" and its underlying racist ideologies. Black male community leaders were in attendance to provide their input. Then Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick declared "'we're not just burying the N-word, we're taking it out of our spirit.'"[241] Rev. Otis Moss III backed supporter sentiments as he was quoted saying, "'This was the greatest child that racism ever birthed.'"[242] The elusive epithet that has become a manifestation for millions became personification of death at its own

funeral. It was a death symbolic of the dissolution of a piece of every Black person (Black males especially)—for better or worse—who has ever used the word or been a victim of racism.

The aforementioned example is representative of how ideological systems are entrenched within the moniker, ultimately sustaining it, and how those systems have consequences for Black masculinity. Notions of strength, authority, power, and brotherhood all lay a foundation for the construction of masculinity. Black male identity, then, is an identity which has been convoluted by competing notions of both race and masculinity and fabricated through culture, economic and social institutions and interactions, media, and the perpetuation of stereotypes. It is, in essence, a "manifestation of complex sociocultural processes rather than . . . the aggregate of individual actions and intentions."[243] Thus, Black men are caught in a racial-gender bind often dictated by processes and symbols that simultaneously work to resist and conform. These complex sociocultural processes include the complex use of "nigger/a," which is often employed within the Black community and implicates masculinity.

This chapter explores "nigger/a" as it is deployed by Black males in selected film, comedy, and music texts. I argue that, in these diverse contexts, "nigger/a" strategically constitutes the disposition of Black masculinity and enables the facilitation of the phonetic gaze. Its deployment both constructs and deconstructs Black masculine identity. Further examining the fragmented nature of the word, its iconicity, and its contribution to the establishment of Black masculinity requires analysis of its employment within multiple contexts. The previously outlined definitions and analysis of the word facilitate additional investigation into its conflicting, complex, and paradoxical functions. "Nigger/a's" underlying ambiguity indicates endless possibilities, yet its transparency assists its functionality as a significant element in the composition of the controversial glass box to which Black masculinity is often confined. The

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recognition of the word's complexity renders it problematic to establish usage as good or bad, right or wrong.

Mirroring the analysis conducted in chapter three, this chapter examines multiple artifacts in order to illustrate the fragmented structure of "nigger/a." After briefly revisiting Black masculinity, I analyze the word within three different texts, each of which pertains to a different realm of media: film, stand-up comedy, and music. I begin through exploration of "nigger/a's" deployment in the 2001 film *Training Day*, progress to an analysis of its utilization in comedian Chris Rock's stand-up, and conclude by considering its application in rap artist Y.G.'s music, specifically songs from his 2014 album *My Krazy Life*.

Black Masculinity

Definitions of Black masculinity are often shoehorned into a uniformity that depreciates its multidimensional and sometimes paradoxical character. Edmund T. Gordon argues that Black masculinity exists within a dialectical tension created by opposing forces of respectability and reputation:

> "Respectability" is accommodationist in the sense that it serves to perpetuate racist institutions. It is doubly so because the styles employed by Black men within these institutions perforce are more "Anglofied" as they try to and/or are forced to "fit in." . . . "Reputation," whatever else we might think of it, is deeply resistant. It rejects the hegemonic model of male culture as practiced by the White middle class and posits a cultural practice emanating from the Black community, which enables its practitioners both to exercise their creative abilities and to achieve status, identity, and dignity . . . "Respectability and "Reputation" are ideal type sets of practices and ideas which occupy opposing poles of the cultural range that composes the African American male cultural repertoire.[244]

This tension has the potential to undermine Black male agency.[245] Conversely, however, a masculinity which is established with "Black" utilized as the signifier may create "performative

agency" by uniting and "organizing Black people."[246] Thus, Black masculinity can function both

a mobilizing and an immobilizing prescription. Continuous efforts to resist Whiteness and

maintain a recognizable version of masculinity constitutes a Black male identity which is in

constant dissonance. Herman Gray echoes these sentiments stating, "Self representations of

black masculinity in the United States are historically structured by and against dominant (and

dominating) discourses of masculinity and race, specifically (whiteness)."[247] The product of such

efforts is not only a "powerful symbol of the masculine," but also a perceived threat to

hegemony and structure.[248]

The conflicting nature and perceptions of Black masculinity resonates with W.E.B

DuBois's thoughts of an inevitable dilemma, which posits that "everything Negroes did was

wrong. If they fought for freedom they were beast; if they did not fight, they were born

slaves."[249] Furthermore, Black masculinity has been illustrated in the through media channels

as—if not instinctively docile and ignorant—a sex crazed, dangerous, uncivilized beast

characterized as the Black brute or buck. The caricature became associated with the

Reconstruction era but has been strategically re-appropriated since, re-centering Whiteness and

producing a better camouflaged brute or buck.[250] As Natalie Hopkinson and Natalie Y. Moore

assert, "We're stuck either 'correcting' old images of black masculinity or remaking them for

profit."[251] bell hooks further contends, "black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes

to the way they are represented."[252] Black masculinity, then, is constantly in jeopardy of being

inconspicuously demonized, particularly where White patriarchy compels its scripting. The

analysis of this chapter expands the scripting of the masculine as it relates to Black individuals'

deployment of "nigger/a." In chapter three, six objectives pertaining to the phonetic gaze were

introduced insofar as how "nigger/a" functions to constitute masculinity when deployed. These

objectives include intentions to: *(1) adhere to historical context and references, (2) achieve artistic visions, (3) express endearment (4) oppress a population/reinforce hegemonic ideologies/systems, (5) resist hegemonic ideologies/systems, or (6) adhere to or emulate customary/authentic vernacular.* The Black authors of the three analytic texts discussed in this chapter fulfill one—or more—of the six phonetic gaze objectives outlined when they employ "nigger/a."

Training Gaze

Masculinity and patriarchy reveal themselves early as a major element in the insufficient glue that bonds Officer Jake Hoyt (Ethan Hawke) and his training officer, narcotics detective Alonzo Harris (Denzel Washington), in 2001's *Training Day*. The film, directed by Antoine Fuqua, won multiple awards with its controversial portrayal of crooked police officers—only a month after the September 11th attacks—and its evocative Blaxploitation undertones. Washington's depiction as a stereotypical Black brute character, which depicts Black men as "innately savage, animalistic, destructive, and criminal . . . a sociopath, an anti-social menace," justifiably has been a subject of contention.[253] Less disputable is the fact that, unlike Tarantino's *Django,* the deployment of "nigger/a" in *Training Day* makes few appeals to the historical context of the period. Instead, its use underscores the resistive, reinforcing, and even artistic aspects of the phonetic gaze. Because of this, I assert that the application of "nigger/a" in *Training Day* not only represents the phonetic gaze, but also negotiates the positionality and limitations of Black masculinity. As Fuqua deploys "nigger/a" in his script, he does so in ways that fulfill the objectives of 1) fostering endearment 2) creating an artistic vision and 3) reinforcing patriarchal ideologies.

Waking up to his wife breast feeding his nine month old daughter at five in the morning in an apparently tranquil, Los Angeles, suburban home, officer Hoyt's life appears to be a stark contrast to the realities he will experience over the course of the day in the film. Jake's desire to someday achieve the rank of detective situates the beginning of his journey as Alonzo's trainee, following Alonzo throughout the course of the day. The patriarchal macho nature of the relationship exposes itself initially as Jake cannot so much as finish his sentence on the phone with Alonzo without being cut short. Minutes later, Alonzo coerces Jake into entertaining him with a story during breakfast, berates him for not having sex with his female training officer, and forces Jake to pay for his meal. Alonzo's authoritative, hyper-masculine nature is indicative of his belief in the mentality needed to survive as a detective in these streets. The nature of the trainer/trainee relationship is illustrated by this exchange, early in the film:

> Alonzo: Why do you want to be a narc?
> Jake: I want to make detective.
> Alonzo: Unlearn that bullshit they teach you at the academy though. Don't bring none of that shit in here, that shit will get you killed out here.
> Jake: I will do anything you want me to do.
> Alonzo: My nigga.[254]

This is the first time "nigger/a" is deployed in the film. This initial deployment is both endearing and possessive. Though the phrase has the potential to indicate loyalty in a relationship—as we will see with rap artist Y.G.'s "My Nigga"—in this exchange the "my" is an assertion of Alonzo's "control" over Jake, "much in the manner of a pimp who frequently reminds a prostitute: 'You're my bitch.'"[255] This deployment is apparent multiple times throughout the film.

After Jake's unaided bout with two drug addicts, saving a young teenage woman from being raped, Alonzo congratulates Jake with a "My nigga." After Jake howls like a wolf at the request of Alonzo and takes a beer offered to him by Alonzo he receives an affirming "My

nigga." After Jake runs down a crack dealer, Alonzo asks him if he wants to collect the evidence—which at this time is in a puddle of vomit—accompanying Jake's refusal is a supportive "My nigga" from Alonzo. After Jake has finally recognizes Alonzo's corrupt disposition and turns a gun on him, Alonzo responds with an encouraging "My nigga." The employments communicate functionality, reserving the word for particular individuals at particular times. Each of these deployments is representative of "nigger/a's" endearing nature, reaffirming the relationship between the two as one that is inherently sincere, though each context implies a subtle reinforcement of patriarchal ideologies. Because Jake is White, however, Alonzo is also making an attempt to decenter or emasculate White masculinity, a direct charge to the preeminence of White patriarchy. Each time Alonzo responds "my nigga," his masculinity is asserted, but Jake is emasculated. Thus, although "my nigga" initially suggests endearment, its repeated deployment serves as an incessant reminder of positionality, who is the bully and who is the bullied, who is the master and who is the slave.

Alonzo's smile and charm embody "nigger/a's" deceptive appeal, displaying affection but intrinsically reinforcing patriarchal ideologies. "Nigger/a's" presence informs a hierarchal existence in the relationship, based not on occupational rank, but rather on masculinity. When Jake is forced by Alonzo to smoke confiscated drugs and subsequently begins to cough, Alonzo responds critically stating, "Man up now, man up nigga, man up!"[256] Alonzo's seemingly playful "Let's go nigga, let's go" at the end of scene yet again masks the callous underlying intentionally in his deployment of "nigger/a." This exchange directly attaches "nigger/a" to the masculine dynamics it intends to detract. Repeatedly, the inclusion of "nigger/a" emphasizes an oppressive and merciless mentality Alonzo insists is necessary to survive in this environment (which is reminiscent of those traits). Alonzo's methodical and patriarchal approach is representative of

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"nigger/a's" capacity to be meticulously masked and epitomize particular masculine traits, though "nigger/a's" intentionality is always so carefully camouflaged. As Jake acted as a buyer within a sting operation, before eventually running down a drug dealer, the dealer's apprehension in the situation led him to recognize the undercover operation. In response he tells Jake, "What I look like a sucka to you nigga? Fuck you rookie."[257] The dealer's inclusion of "nigger/a" is possibly a result of an appeal to authentic or customary vocabulary where the words he uses are a result of his upbringing, context, and syntax. However, the usage implies another reinforcement of patriarchy and oppressive nature underlying the term. As such, while the deployment may adhere to the objective of emulating a customary or authentic vocabulary, it ultimately satisfies the objective of reinforcing particular ideologies.

"Nigger/a's" oppressive presence throughout the film is in many ways a paradox. Deployments are historically disparaging for Blacks, yet it is significant to note, of the multiple times "nigger/a" is utilized, only twice is it not directed towards Jake, one of arguably two significant White characters in the film. Perhaps Blacks are either not the "true nigger/a's" in the film, or the appellation is implied. The only times "nigger/a" is directed at a Black person is once when a bystander comments on Jake and Alonzo's final fight by shouting "Hey these niggas over here trippin' blood."[258] The second time Alonzo fails to camouflage the intentions of "nigger/a," scolding bystanders for not helping him and stating, "You mother fuckers will be playing basketball in Pelican Bay when I get finished with you. SHU [Segregated Housing Unit] program nigga. Twenty-three hour lock down,"[259] in conjunction with how he intends to punish them. Undoubtedly, in that particular context "nigger/a" maintains its racialized and demeaning connotation. Consequently, "nigger/a's" inclusion further fragments and complicates its own existence and therefore Jake's presence. "Nigger/a's" predominant application to Jake's

disposition constitutes Black masculinity for the addresser, specifically Alonzo. Alonzo's use of the word is both a reflection of his own character and a deflection of the historical nature of the word. Jake spends the day being berated by Alonzo. He is patronized, often humiliated, and threatened as Alonzo turns a gun on him multiple times. When Jake finally turns the gun on Alonzo, Alonzo's responds saying, "That's what I'm talking about Jake! My nigga!"[260] Alonzo's response suggests the type of character Alonzo intends to reflect on Jake. Spectators see this early on in the film; after Jake's fight with the drug addicts, Alonzo's congratulatory "My nigga, you got mad squabbles boy,"[261] subtly implies that Jake is a reflection of Alonzo.

If the intention of "nigger/a" is to reflect and deflect a particular disposition, it is only a superficial objective as the deployment is a display of the phonetic gaze in operation. Alonzo deploying "nigger/a," primarily towards Jake, is his attempt to immerse Jake into the environment. Director Antoine Fuqua artistically and strategically positions "nigger/a" as an interpellation for Jake. Alonzo spends the day explaining the significance of having a particular mindset in order to survive and succeed as a detective in the streets, the mindset of a brute, or as Alonzo explains, a "wolf."[262] Subjugating Jake through "nigger/a" is one means of immersing him into an environment in which "nigger/a" is intrinsically representative of. "Nigger/a" is a significant element in the film, mirroring themes throughout: camouflaged intentions, masculine undertones, patriarchal reinforcement, and the capacity to alter a perceived reality. Throughout the entire film, Jake maintains his integrity, his desire to be an upstanding officer, and his perception that he can make a difference through this approach. "Nigger/a" facilitates a gaze for Jake enabling him to experience a reality outside of the serene world of wife, daughter, and suburban home and the perceived reality of righteousness defeating injustices. As Jake gazes,

then, spectators are implored to gaze along with him and experience Alonzo's premise that it takes injustice to defeat injustice.

Insofar as masculinity and patriarchy are incessantly reinforced throughout the film, "nigger/a" provides a viable foundation on which to establish and reinforce those ideologies. However, the decision to predominately subject Jake through its usage communicates director Fuqua's strategic placement and acknowledgement of "nigger/a's" capacity to limit and liberate. Because "nigger/a" often carries an intrinsic sting with its deployment, Fuqua's choice to aim it primarily at the White male character is hugely consequential to the dialogue and experience of both the characters in the film and the spectators engaging the film. Jake is constantly positioned to gaze through "nigger/a." His return to the initial virtues he struggled to maintain, however, indicates a capacity to return to a more comfortable or familiar reality. Furthermore, it suggests his denouncement of the authenticity of the reality he experience. To Jake, "nigger/a" is not a reality he is willing to commit to nor appreciate. It is, for Jake, a reality that is not authentic. This denouncement is the metaphorical defeat of "nigger/a" and Black masculinity as Jake is established as the hero of the film literally defeating the Black brute Alonzo. The defeat of the Black brute, then, establishes the white male character as a hero and a champion of masculinity. At the same time, the film also identifies Whites as conqueror of "nigger/a." The refusal to embrace or acknowledge "nigger/a" as a legitimate reality is fundamental to the hero's success, re-centering normative constraints that enable White patriarchy and decenter or delegitimize notions of Black masculinity. "Nigger/a's" presence, then, is representative of the gaze while simultaneously facilitating the gaze for spectators of the film. The deployment fosters a distinct reality pertaining to, but not dictated by, perceptions of Black masculinity.

Rock Solid Reinforcement

While "nigger/a" subtly facilitates the phonetic gaze in film contexts, it functions more explicitly in other contexts such as stand-up comedy. Comedian Chris Rock declared his love for Blacks and his hate for "niggas" in a bit from his 1996 stand-up, *Bring the Pain.* The joke underscored a recognized contention within the confines of Black masculinity. Rock asserted, "There's a civil war going on right now and there's two sides. There's Black people, and there's niggas, and niggas have got to go."[263] Rock's emblematic "civil war" application is evaluative of the community, immediately generating distinction and separation. The analogy connotes division, separation, and disarray where there should be unity and harmony. In his 2008 stand up, *Kill the Messenger,* Rock notes that despite his declared hate for "niggas" in 1996, authority on who says "nigga" comes from Black people. It is Rock's deployment of "nigga" in these stigmatizing approaches from his stand ups *Bring the Pain* and *Kill the Messenger* that differs from the way most Blacks deploy the word. His utilization is vastly different than most Black comedians' usage. Typically "nigga's" employment by stand-up comedians is an interjection. Many times it appeals to the objectives of 1) endearment, 2) authenticity, or 3) an attempt to resist ideologies attached to the word. Often times the attempt to resist underlying racist White patriarchal ideologies is intended to empower themselves and their spectators/subjects. However, said resistance simultaneously reinforces those ideologies; Rock's application deviates in this regard as he does not attempt to resist. Rock only satisfies the objective of reinforcing ideologies.

Scholars such as Jabari Asim, Randall Kennedy, and Vershawn Ashanti Young have discussed the "Blacks v.s. niggas" bit in Rock's performance. Each scholar presents Rock as problematic. Asim contends, "Rock's roster of 'nigga' misbehavior could have come right out of *Notes on the State of Virginia.* Rock argued that 'niggas' are violent, lazy, ignorant, prone to

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theft, and suffer from a perverse lack of ambition."[264] Asim's comparisons critically assess Rock as "troublesome," though he also makes a comparison to Booker T. Washington who similarly denounced that kind of behavior as detrimental to the race.[265] Young argues that Rock's performance "supports racial discord between whites and blacks and provokes blacks to abhor other blacks."[266] Essentially, the scholars position Rock's deployment as disenfranchising and not empowering. I contend, however, that when viewed as polyvalent texts, Rock's routines both reinforce the racist, White, patriarchal ideologies which underlie "nigger/a" and constitute an empowered Black masculinity, ultimately placing Blacks and Whites in a position to gaze in a more complex reality.

Rock initially begins his segment in *Bring the Pain* by asking the question "Who's more racist, Black people or White people?" He subsequently answers his own question, "Black people, you know why, cause we hate Black people too. Everything White people don't like about Black people, Black people really don't like about Black people."[267] The proclamation is by no means inconsequential to the Rock's later employment of "nigger/a." The rhetorical question and subsequent answer positions the rest of the joke within the confines of racist White patriarchal ideology. Irony, however, lies within Rock situating Blacks as racist towards other Blacks, a position which is not traditionally ascribed to Blacks, especially by an in-group member. Essentially, Rock relies on "juxtapositions of potentially conflicting images that are mad to occupy the same filed of vison" to establish his argument through an ironic persona.[268] Rock continuously reinforces the idea with multiple examples of the differences between a Black man and a nigga, incessantly making proclamations such as, "I love Black people, but I hate niggas,"[269] and "I'm tired of niggas!"[270] The continuous use of "nigga" to declare his disdain further dehumanizes, emasculates, and stigmatizes "niggas," evoking a traditional utilization of

the term and deviating from a more resistive approach other Black individuals take. Irony is further established as Rock, who identifies as Black, is able to speak as an insider in the Black community as he simultaneously makes the performance palatable for non-Black spectators. However, it is Rock's contempt and separation of "niggas" and Blacks that functions as means of empowerment for Blacks.

Unlike the appeal to resistance that unintentionally allows for the reinforcement of ideologies, Rock blatantly baits Black spectators—and White spectators—to consciously reinforce the underlying ideologies of "nigger/a" with him. In a segment from his 2008 stand-up *Kill the Messenger,* Rock seemingly contradicts his plea to reinforce ideologies as he states, "Now they're trying to get rid of my beloved 'nigga.' The NAACP had a funeral for the word 'nigga.' Well tonight is Easter."[271] Rock continues this time, through a sense of irony that appeals to White spectators, proceeding to provide an answer to his own proposed question again.

> Can White people say "nigga?" The correct answer is not really. You have to check with your nigga consulate, talk your nigga representative, and they will tell you the nigga rules where you are at that particular time.[272]

Rock's irony is "liberatory" while maintaining some sense of "political engagement."[273] Rock's question and answer establishes his recognition that "nigger/a" reinforces racist, White, patriarchal ideologies. Because his implied subjects of "nigga" are Black males—which will be further addressed later in the analysis—the reinforcement, then, is detrimental to Black masculinity. His subsequent answer, "not really," while establishing the authority of Blacks is a recognition of those ideologies as it empowers and masculinizes Blacks.

In each instance, "nigger/a" is utilized to establish the phonetic gaze. In *Bring the Pain* Rock empathizes and identifies with Black spectators utilizing multiple examples. "Every time

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Black people want to have a good time, ignorant ass niggas fuck it up."[274] The audience explodes

in affirming laughs and claps in response to this quip, which functions polyvalently, causing the

joke to resonate differently between White and Black spectators. Everyone who would identify

themselves within Rock's definition of a Black person is situated within the gaze of a "nigga,"

while White spectators are positioned within the gaze of Black people. On one hand Rock is

informing Whites that there is a difference between Blacks and niggas; on the other hand he is

reinforcing what most Blacks already know and understand, therefore placing them in the gaze

of an identity they may not necessarily ascribe to themselves—especially during Rock's bit. The

gaze empowers Blacks as they understand that they are not only capable of escaping the reality

of a "nigga," but there is also potential for distinguishing themselves from the ignorance and

negative connotations many have attributed to being Black. White spectators engaging in the

gaze, then, are positioned to feel and understand the reality of being Black and its association

with such negative connotations. As such, Rock sets up parallels to allow others to gaze into the

reality of a "nigga."

When Black women are brought up, instead of referring to their antithesis as "nigga," the

word "bitch" is employed. He never uses the word "nigga" to describe Black women as it may

compromise some notions of femininity. Recognizing this, Rock alludes to the analogy that

Black women is to her antithesis "bitch" as Black men is to his antithesis "nigga." One

appellation works to take away femininity while simultaneously addressing it; the other takes

away masculinity while simultaneously addressing and acknowledging it. Consequently,

"nigger/a" is arranged as a masculine term through Rock's performance.

In *Bring the Pain,* Rock proceeds to place Whites in the same parallel relationship he has

just applied to "Black people" and "niggas." This move fosters the phonetic gaze by stating,

"Black people are [only] ten percent of the country . . . the whole rest of the country is filled up with broke ass White people. Broke ass, living in a trailer home, eating mayonnaise sandwiches, fucking their sister, listening to John Cougar Mellencamp records."[275] The parallel serves as Rock's definitive statement implying that all the negative connotations attributed to niggers could easily be attributed to many Whites who, incidentally, outnumber Blacks and "niggas." Furthermore, the statement also enables Whites to gaze empathetically into the dehumanized, stigmatized, and emasculated reality of a "nigga" and understand that it is by no means encompassing of the Black community as a whole. As a result of each spectator engaging in the gaze, masculinity is established for Black men as Rock reinforces that there is an emasculating, immobilizing nature underlying "nigga," but it does not pertain to Black men. As such, while it appears that Rock's "complicity with White patriarchal inscriptions" will eventually "lead to the negotiation of the palimpsest Black body, which paradoxically pays dividends while paying debts," the "dividends" surpass monetary value as Black masculinity is re-centered through the same ideologies by which it was initially detracted.[276]

Rock establishes the gaze in *Kill the Messenger* by deploying a joke that pertains to Whites but recognizes Black presence. There is an underlying sense of irony in Rock identifying with Whites for that particular moment, utilizing "nigga," because he knows the "missing piece" for those audience members that they assume he does not know:

> What are the Dr. Dre rules? What are the rules when a Dr. Dre song comes on the radio or plays at the club? . . . there's a lot of "niggas" in a Dr. Dre song and they want to enjoy it but they can't really enjoy it around me. So they start taking out the "niggas" or mumbling the "niggas" and it's just a sad sight to see. It's just sad to see some White person trying to do a "nigga-less" rendition of a Dr. Dre song . . . But I know when I'm not there, they lean into that shit.[277]

The declarative "I know what you're doing when I'm not around" statement places Rock in identification with White experiences, not only allowing him to gaze through "nigga," but also

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allowing other Blacks to gaze and White spectators to gaze into their own gaze. The audience's

laughter and applause confirms Rock's statement as a presumptive truth. Furthermore, Rock sets

himself—and other Blacks—up to take back authority, and subsequently masculinity, from

Whites who do participate in this act. He essentially asserts "I know what you think about me

and because I know, I'm allowing this to take place and I have more power than you think."

Rock follows up his claim of admission of clairvoyance by asserting authority:

> Don't worry White people, get your Dre on. Get your Dre on, get your Jay on, get your
> Kanye on, it's alright, it's all good, it's okay it's got to be in the song though. So the
> question remains "Can White people say 'nigga?'" and the answer remains the same:
> "Not really." There's some exceptions . . .

As Rock reinforces "nigger/a's" underlying ideologies while facilitating a gaze for spectators, he

continuously constitutes himself and other Blacks as the authority on the word, consequently

instituting masculinity and power where it was previously stripped. Additionally, though it

appears Rock is regressing from his 1996 claims that distinguished Black men from "nigger/as,"

his assertion of himself and other Blacks as the authority provides space to declare the term

repugnant.

To close his bit, another gendered arrangement is established in *Kill the Messenger.* Rock

contends that one exception to Whites being allowed to say "nigger/a" without Black

authorization is when the statement is "Fuck me harder nigger."[278] Robert Jensen's bold claim

that "Sex in patriarchy is fucking" is immediately evoked.[279] Rock constitutes Black masculinity

but does so at the expense of women and the humanity of Black men, enabling the "buck"

disposition often attributed to "nigger/a." A hyper-sexualized Black masculinity occurs as a

result and Black men are further exploited as fetishized objects of sex. These final few words to

end this bit in 2008 re-inscribe White patriarchal ideologies and dehumanize Black men at that

particular moment after he set up to establish authority and masculinity for Blacks. By inhabiting

the role of a man being told to "Fuck me harder, nigger," Rock embodies what bell hooks has described as Black men's ostensible "insanity informed by their inability to fulfill their phallocentric masculine destiny in a racist context."[280] Stereotypes emerge that position Black men as "psychologically 'fucked up,' dangerous, violent, sex maniacs."[281] Even so, Rock's reinforcement of White patriarchy is indicative of his consciousness of "nigger/a's" complexity and functionality. It maintains the capacity to alter the disposition of the most respected of Black men, turning them into sex crazed brutes.

It should be noted that I am not arguing Rock's tactics as right or wrong, positive or negative; instead, I am presenting what he believes is an effective means (reinforce debilitating ideologies) to a desired end (empowering Black people). Rock's piercing jokes are resistant through reinforcement instead of a typical reinforcement as a result of being resistant. The audience's reactions legitimized those experiences for most and allowed an opportunity to be subjected to a distinct reality. The veracity—and the audience's affirmations—behind the anecdotes illustrates an acknowledgement of "nigger/a" being a reality many individuals authentically live; it is, indeed, a living manifestation of the metaphor initially fabricated to subjugate and dehumanize. Rock, however, is not simply reciting a joke. He is making a statement: Black is a reality neither I—nor anyone else who identifies this way—can escape. "Nigga," however, is. Anita Henderson states, Blacks are a "stigmatized" race, categorized "as less than desirable in mainstream society," and as such, "nigger/a's," is representative of that stigmatizing marker.[282] According to Rock, "nigger/a" is often an insufficient application based on skin, not character, the distinction is immensely significant. "Nigger/a" facilitates a gaze that potentially alters a subject's reality, and while there is a connection between "nigger/a" and skin color, the discernment between skin color and character is by no means inconsequential.

Furthermore, the connection between "nigger/a" and phenotypical features lead to Rock's assertion that until those distinctions are understood, skin color will determine authority the same way it has throughout American history.

Real Niggas

Rock's use of rap as an example of appropriate contexts in which to utilize "nigger/a" appears altruistic, though it complicates the discourse and further fragments the word, the way we see it deployed, and the underlying intentions. In 2014, Y.G. released his fifth album titled *My Krazy Life*. "My Nigga" was released in 2013 as the debut single to promote the album. By that year, the song's title lacked novelty and shock value; artists have long utilized "nigger/a" in their song titles to elicit emotional responses and promote political statements (e.g. 50 Cent's "Realest Niggas"[283] and Ice Cube's "Nigga You Love to Hate"[284]). It is, however, the prolific presence of "nigga," its utilization, and the popularity of the song which make it consequential to the deployment of "nigger/a" and the constitution of subjects. Immediately gaining popularity, especially among young rap enthusiasts, the song evokes memories of the predominately White and Latino/a high school at which I once taught—during the song's height of popularity, no less. The plethora of students who roamed the hallways egregiously rapped the song word for word—censorship not included. I recall being concerned, not so much because students were "exercising" their first amendment rights but because they chose to do so using a song that involved the casual deployment of "nigga."

This problematic, almost second nature usage suggests that "nigga" can interpellate audiences in ways that transcend race and desensitize auditors. Desensitization, however, is not disruption. If desensitization was the end goal and profuse inclusion of "nigga" the means, Y.G.

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was arguably successful. The song solicits further investigation, however, as to whether or not it results in the disruption of power structures and ideologies—a notion that most people contend is the sole purpose of employing "nigga." "My Nigga" deploys the epithet over 130 times throughout the course of the song. Nearly every line ends with "nigga." In fact, there are only seven lines in the song that do not contain "nigga," three of which repeat from within the chorus. While "nigga's" presence may appear superfluous rather than strategic or clever (especially considering the how "nigga" was changed to "hitta" in the edited version of the song), I would argue that the composition deploys the term in ways that are integral to its interpellative potential. In this portion of my analysis, I contend that the deployment of "nigga" in Y.G.'s songs facilitates a polyvalent phonetic gaze that interpellates listeners of various backgrounds while attempting to constitute authentic Blackness/Black masculinity. Y.G. satisfies the phonetic gaze objectives of: 1) endearment 2) authentic/customary vocabulary 3) adhering to an artistic vision and 4) attempting to resist ideologies while, intentionally or unintentionally, 5) reinforcing ideologies. Y.G.'s deployment of "nigga" situates auditors in a gaze that is endearing, but mainly appeals to authenticity or his inherent vocabulary. Y.G. maintains an artistic vision in his facilitation of the gaze, yet it also simultaneously resists and reinforces problematic ideologies. After deconstructing Y.G.'s employment of "nigga" in "My Nigga," I will assess the ways in which it is deployed in songs "Who Do You Love" and "Really Be," examining the diverse ways in which the term was employed by this artist.

Although Y.G. appears to interject "nigga" into this song's lyrics through seemingly haphazard repetition, careful assessment of those lyrics demonstrates the ways in which his use of "nigga" serves a more strategic role. Y.G. begins his verse:

First thing first, I love all my niggas
This rap shit crack, then I involve my niggas

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> You looking for some lean, let me call my nigga
> He sell it for the high, I need all my niggas[285]

The degree to which "nigga" is incorporated appeals to the use of an artistic vision within the phonetic gaze. The use of epistrophe is well placed, serving as a rhetorical device that reminds auditors of the song's title and the "nigga's" significance. At this particular point in Y.G.'s verse, "nigga" not only communicates Y.G.'s artistic vision, but also is employed as a term of endearment. Words such as "love," "involve," and "need" precede "nigga," working to enhance its significance within the song and in the auditor's perspective. Tricia Rose explains that "rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America," a prioritization that seeks to advance "social status in a locally meaningful way."[286] As such, the affirming terms contend ideals contrary to historical definitions; a "nigger/a" is worth as much as the value established by the author or addresser. Y.G. seeks to position "nigga" not only as an endearing term but as a humanizing, yet culturally distinctive, appellation. However, as is the case with other authors analyzed in this thesis, the deployment of "nigga" becomes dangerous as it simultaneously resists and reinforces White patriarchal ideologies, capable of objectifying and empowering.

Y.G.'s application of "nigga" deviates after those first four lines to a tone less endearing and more dehumanizing. "Nigga's" employment becomes a confirmation that there is a specific brand of individuals. "Nigga," then, describes some auditors but not others and the ones described are various kinds of "niggas." In the first four lines, Y.G. seemingly repositions the way "nigger/a" is perceived, reverting back to a standard aligned with traditionally negative notions of "nigger/a" and the value of "nigger/a's."

> Some niggas smoke, smoke, some niggas drink, drink
> Got niggas on the block with the glock they don't think
> That's a nigga back up, they in the bucket lapped up

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> I got that act right if you niggas wanna act up
> He talking like a snitch, no that ain't my nigga
> He tripping off a bitch, no, that ain't my nigga[287]

The stark contrast in deployment suggests a means to establish distinction amongst "niggas," not unlike the way comedian Chris Rock distinguishes between Black people and "niggas." Y.G. previously included reaffirming statements: "love," "involve," and "need" in relation to "nigga." The departure from those notions, then, indicates a return to traditions of gansta rap in which, as bell hooks has observed, "Black life is worth nothing" and "love does not exist among us."[288] When the author declares "I love all my niggas," the "my" becomes simultaneously objectifying, empowering, and exclusionary. It is the main distinguishing factor and a gratuitous validator for segregation/discrimination. The distinctions made are an announcement that, according to the author, there are indeed different types of niggas. As Rose would argue, it is the author's utilization of his words and performance to constitute "new identities and subject positions."[289] Unlike Rock's distinction between Blacks and "niggas," however, Y.G.'s inclusion declares a vocabulary authentic to his experiences and upbringing. Furthermore, this is the vocabulary he is accustomed to employing in order to explain what he knows; it seeks to legitimize him and his experiences. Still, Y.G. does not implore his audience to critically consider the term. Simply saying "homie," "boy," or "brother" does not convey what he is attempting to communicate. If that were the case the edited version might not have replaced "nigga" with the more aggressive "hitta." This deployment, again, reinforces particular problematic ideologies, yet appeals to authenticity, concepts very much associated with rap music.

The possibility of different types of "niggas" and "nigga" as a vehicle for legitimizing experiences, situates the gaze as not only appealing, but accessible and required for entry into the seemingly inaccessible arena of Black masculinity. Y.G.'s lyrics establish ideals of variation

amongst "nigga." Spectators, then, become capable of positioning themselves as a particular type of "nigga"—not unlike the way Fat Joe proclaimed that he's "that nigga"—consequently, further complicating understandings and fragmenting the text. Due to the prominence of rap music and the "urban life" story it narrates, "impersonators" have become abundant resulting in "bastardized blackness" and a "jeopardized" notion of authenticity.[290] Still, while gansta rap attempts to essentialize authentic Black masculinity, fragments of the story may become lost or exaggerated through "impersonators." The author's distinction challenges would-be imposters' authenticity and makes the declaration that a "nigga" can be a reality and a fabrication. As Asim contends, the proclamation of oneself as a "nigga" to assert authenticity is akin to songs from past day minstrels which sought to degrade and dehumanize Blacks through fabricated Blackness.[291]

The analogous pairing of minstrels with this particular assertion of authenticity (through "nigga" while creating a distinction amongst "niggas"), indicates the discourse's capacity for appropriation and furthermore, an accessible gaze. It is a verbal blackfacing of author and spectator. Blackface minstrels functioned as voyeuristic fantasies for White audiences, enacting Black identity in ways that reinforced the ideology of Whiteness. Conversely, Black minstrelsy could be a means of self-authorization or even an attempt to resist racist ideology by making it the joke. Ralph Ellison declares "We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals."[292] Blacks performed as minstrels sometimes in an attempt to flip the joke on the oppressor—often unsuccessfully. Participation in blackface, at times, involved darkening their skin to appear more "authentic" in a feature, if they were of lighter complexion. Y.G.'s lyrics appeal to authenticity through an

apparent "darkening" of Black masculinity through an accessible performance of "nigga." Karl Hagstrom Miller asserts that "Minstrelsy taught that authenticity was performative," further alluding to notions of the availability of specific realities.[293] Minstrels, additionally, situate spectators with mitigated discernment where "little distinction was made between blackface and black music."[294] Ultimately, minstrels became the sole educator of Black culture for many spectators.

The parallels between minstrels and rap, then, are implicative. The song, like minstrels, facilitates gaze for non-Blacks, enabling them to place themselves within a world where they are capable of feeling—or rather performing—a precarious inherited a sense of authentic Black masculinity. "Nigga" is the one word designation for Black masculinity in this song. As such, the lyrics are indicative of an inherently violent, misogynistic, and sexually goaded nature—lines like "Fuck my first bitch, passed her to my nigga"— attempt to constitute authentic Black masculinity. In doing so, however, the problematic "buck/brute" minstrel character/stereotype of Black masculinity is verbally perpetuated. Minstrelsy guised as rap convolutes assertions of authenticity even further as "hip-hop fans" become more "debilitated with the emergence of each reinvented minstrel figure"[295] and its existence within the genre is often denied.[296] Differentiating between reality and fabrications, authenticity and minstrelsy, becomes an incapacitating task. For instance, while the "buck/brute" archetype is traditionally a perverse being, its ascription by Blacks could be used as a means of repositioning the emasculated Black male as a hero and protector of his community and people.[297] This is why "nigga" is not replaced with "homie," "boy," or "brother" for the edited version but rather the more aggressive "hitta," because the former does not come close to capturing the "buck/brute" nature that "nigga" is meant to encompass in Y.G.'s deployment. Nonetheless, minstrelsy is a justification, not only for

gazing and the subjugation of particular individuals, but also for constituting new realities. Y.G.

closes his verse and further alludes to distinction: "Fuck them other niggas, cause I'm down for

my niggas/I ride for my niggas, fuck them other niggas." The closing line reinforces ideals that

he does in fact consider himself—or rather a "real nigga"—as a preserver of "his people," and

resists some historical notions of a "real nigga." The question then becomes, is the author

attempting to dismiss or flip the gaze and make a minstrel of imposters or is the song simply a

minstrel act in and of itself?

The patterns present in "My Nigga" are echoed in other songs by Y.G. The same album

contains Y.G.'s songs "Who Do You Love" and "Really Be." Both songs maintain the very

interpellative features expressed in "My Nigga," yet "Who Do You Love," appeals to the same

"buck/brute" mentality and distinctions constituted in "My Nigga," alongside numerous

implications that "niggas" also gaze materialistically.

> I'm that nigga, I'm that nigga
> My Bank of America account got six figures
> I'm that nigga on the block
> Police pull up, I'm tryna stash the Glock
> You that nigga on the low-low
> You're the nigga, you're the one that be talkin' to the po-pos
> Porsche sittin' on Forgi's
> Niggas can't afford these

"Who Do You Love" displays the aforementioned destructive attitudes. Additionally, however,

the lyrics further distinguish different "niggas" by positioning material wealth as an indication of

masculine authenticity. "Nigga" is designated as an agent of endearment and disparagement

constructing a juxtaposition—one typical in hip-hop—that positions wealth and brute behavior

together, even as it reinforces White patriarchal ideology. The song "Really Be" similarly

exemplifies those ideals and employs "nigga" to solicit the misogynistic, hyper sexualized,

reckless buck within the song's context.

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> I woke up this morning, I had a boner
> I went to sleep last night with no bitch, nigga, I was a loner
> I be going through shit, losin' bitches and homies
> If I don't make it with this rap shit, nigga, I might be homeless

"Nigga" maintains an association with the misogyny and recklessness it promotes. bell hooks proclaims "Misogynist rap music and the white male dominated patriarchal infrastructure that produces it encourages male contempt and disregard for females" perpetuating a patriarchal "plantation" mentality and propagating a past full of "rage" and "violence."[298] "Nigga's" significance, however, lies in the way it is positioned. The syntax informs a conversation in progress, not just in this song, but quite possibly over the course of the album—especially in the songs discussed. It should be emphasized, once more, that "nigga" is not a simple interjection. It is an interpellative invitation for auditors to participate in the conversation with the author. It is part of Y.G.'s persistent declaration that anyone can be a "nigga," but not everyone is "that nigga" or furthermore, a "real nigga." Y.G. knows and understands he is speaking to a diverse audience, therefore "nigga" maintains a capacity to interpellate individuals outside of the Black community. In fact, although in most cases and historically "nigga" interpellates and constitutes Blacks, particularly Black men, more than one community is being interpellated in these songs. The interpellating conversation facilitates the gaze.

It is undoubtedly advantageous for Y.G. to interpellate multiple individuals and not simply those who identify as Black. Success in this particular industry is more likely when multiple individuals are interpellated; however, the success is also problematic. The success of the interpellative is problematic because it proffers postracialism. Moreover, it adheres to notions of a postracial society. "Nigga's" deployment "reinscribes old racial binaries of white and non-white" promoting "whiteness as normative" and disabling the resistive rhetoric which mobilizes

the oppressed.[299] The interpellation services and camouflages racism, circulating a racist rhetoric that is never actually identified as racist. Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers contend that "postracial rhetoric serves only to silence substantive historical discussions of race and racism in America's history, society and contemporary politics."[300] An endearing—and disparaging—discourse deployed, then, reinforces White patriarchal ideologies and incapacitates "racialized peoples'" abilities to "transcend race."[301] These reinforced ideologies inhibit distinction from the minstrels that precede the text, making them akin to one another in spite of the different time periods. Subsequently, the author is sequestered to a paradoxical state—one seen with many authors who employ "nigga." The author is unable to attain what they want without a surplus of unsolicited and possibly detrimental consequences.

Y.G.'s authorship promotes an anti-hero archetype of sorts. However, this analysis would wholly discredit the work of Y.G.—and, for that matter, many other hip-hop artists—if it did not consider signifyin(g) and the "hidden transcript" within rap.[302] Rose asserts that the genre is often "cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities."[303] This play "between intent and meaning" is not inconsequential. Though understandings may be mutual—where there may be understanding—ambiguities within the works leave much to be interpreted. These interpretations, then, are contingent upon valence. Auditors' "discrepant interpretations" in the "evaluations of shared denotations"[304] result in the presence of polyvalence, representative of "an attitudinal gap" or "breakdown in how two or more readers feel about the text."[305] "Nigga's" deployment, then, has a different emotional resonance for different auditors; however, a comprehensive appreciation of the text is not entirely hindered by interpretative inconsistencies due to the polysemic nature of the discourse. Despite conflicting interpretations of the message, complete recognition of the message is

compensatory upon the embrace of "contradictory themes" and "multiplicity of meanings" in order to "fully appreciate the text's deeper significance."[306] Y.G. speaks to multiple communities. His appeal to Black masculinity, through "nigga," situates him as a cultural preservationist, yet it also reinforces an ideology of postracialism that is detrimental to the same community. His deployment of "nigga" illustrates the paradox inherent to the strategic deployment of the minstrel personas. However, as the Black male body has historically been emasculated, dismissal of his reconstitution and repositioning of Black masculinity undermines the totality of the themes. This reading, though not exhaustive of the author's work nor other texts within the rap genre, should be considered archetypal of the way scholars examine "nigga's" implications and its facilitation of a complex gaze when employed in rap. There is a multiplicity in its deployment which is hugely consequential to the constitution of Black masculinity, but only appreciated when we fully recognize those underlying multiplicities and paradoxical interpretations. "Nigga" in rap appears to be its own antithesis indicative of an acceptance of prescriptions as both advantageous and destructive to cross-cultural development, community disposition, and especially Black masculinity.

Conclusion

"Nigger/a" maintains a duplicitous nature, centering and re-centering Black masculinity. It navigates through the politics of the Black brute while constituting a perception of power which also refutes it. It appeals to authenticity while detracting from fictitious constructions. Black masculine bodies who employ the term engage in a dilemma which positions themselves and their subjects within the phonetic gaze which can be progressive or regressive to assessments of Black masculinity. Furthermore, it appears the continuous deployment of the term—by Black

masculine bodies nonetheless—results in both a detrimental and valuable subtlety with unpronounced implications. History becomes unintentionally repeated (minstrelsy), reinforcing patriarchal ideologies and intentions for deployment are masked in a multitude guises making appreciation and comprehension problematic. Post-racial sentiments are endorsed as subtle and camouflaged intentions bolster oppressive ideologies. Likewise, deployment is also the "challenge" and disruption of "racial and class constructions of blackness," a disruption that is compensatory to redefining Black masculinity and dissociating it from confining White patriarchal constructs.[307] However, disruption of hegemonic power structures may be misplaced on a strategy too subtle and casual for recognition.

Again, it is not the intention, at this time, to determine whether or not the implications are positive or negative. What is significant, rather, is the presentation of artifacts as a means of further depicting the rhetorical fragments that comprise the text "nigger/a" and discussing "nigger/a's" diverse functions within and around Black masculinity. As such, authors and spectators are positioned to experience multiple facets of Black masculinity—fabricated or authentic—in an effort to negotiate definitions of Black masculinity. Furthermore, non-Black authors' deployment constitutes a reality that seems to only mold perceptions of other non-Blacks, whereas, Black authors' deployment and subtlety is consequential to the perceptions of multiple populations of identities. "Nigger/a's" deployment by Black authors, then, is elemental to diverse populations' perception of Black masculinity and as such presents a consequential development in the social progression of this discourse. Black authors' deployment maintains a power that extends "nigger/a's" capacity to limit and constrain identity but also constitutes agency. It is the recognition of "nigger/a's" limitless capabilities, above its morality, that provides the opportunity for action.

Conclusion: "Nigga Please"

In March of 2015, a video was released displaying the Oklahoma University chapter of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity chanting, "There will never be a nigger SAE." National uproar ensued resulting in the university expelling students from the video and suspending the fraternity.[308] Any declarations of a post-racial society were suddenly turned on their head by the contemporary deployment of the six letter word connecting Blacks to slavery, Jim Crow, hatred, and the fraternity's proclamation that "you can hang them from a tree." "Nigger's" deployment elicited thoughts of racist patriarchal ideologies and facilitated such a reality for the auditors of the deployment. Had the word not have been included in the fraternity's chant, arguably, few concerns would have arose. Furthermore, had the group been filmed reciting hip-hop lyrics with "nigga" instead, the outcome would possibly be different, justified as the fraternity simply singing a song.

While story seemed to shock and captivate media outlets and their spectators, somehow I maintain a sense of indifference. I am reminded of Chris Rock's joke about Whites employing "nigger/a" vehemently when not in the presence of Blacks. I am reminded of the fluidity with which V-Nasty articulates "nigger/a" while she strives to maintain an authenticity with the word. I am reminded of Louis C.K. and Quentin Tarantino freely deploying the word within multiple contexts, many time superfluously. I am reminded of the times I am called a "nigger" or "nigga," the times I deploy "nigga," the gaze it implements, and the reality it constructs for me and the individuals I address. Sigma Alpha Epsilon's deployment is nothing new to me; it is neither surprising nor captivating. It is only an indication of a change that is still needed—a change unseen by many, acknowledged by few, but requiring all. This thesis has presented the

potentialities of "nigger/a," analyzing a number of different texts in the process. In this chapter, then, I review the central insights of this project, suggest implications for our understanding of rhetoric, race, and identity, and consider limitations and avenues for further research.

The thesis project examined the ways in which the words "nigger" and "nigga" constitute masculinity, focusing on the following two research questions:

3. How does "nigger/a" constitute Black masculinity and masculinity in general when used by individuals who do not identify as Black?

4. How does "nigger/a" constitute Black masculinity and masculinity in general when used by individuals who identify as Black?

In order to answer these two questions, I first outlined the history of "nigger/a," assessing the ways in which it functions as a metaphor with material consequences. Chapter three specifically addressed the first research question and chapter four addressed the second. I developed a theoretical construct called the *phonetic gaze*, which helps to explain the interpellative functions and fragmented nature of "nigger/a." "Nigger/a's" underlying history and ideologies cause its deployment to facilitate competing conceptions of Black masculinity for authors and auditors of the diverse texts assessed in this project.

Chapter two, "Incoherent Truths: 'Nigger/a' as a Metaphorical and Literal Construction," outlined the history of "nigger/a," arguing that, when deployed historically and contemporarily, this metaphor both reinforces and attempts to disrupt the structural constraints of White, heterosexual, patriarchy. The chapter examined "nigger/a's" incarnation, from its earliest documented usage in the 16th century, to its intrinsic presence in Western/American slavery and Jim Crow laws, and its usage in contemporary media and speech. Analysis of the term's deployment illustrated the ways in which this metaphor both reinforced and resisted the

hegemonic White patriarchy that gave birth to the term. The chapter closed with the analysis of

two visual depictions of "nigger" separated by over a hundred years, both of which illustrate the

paradoxical ways in which these visual rhetorics interpellate authors and spectators. Chapters

three and four assessed the interpellative objectives of "nigger/a" in greater depth, focusing on its

potential to shape authors' and spectators' construction of their realities and their perceptions of

Black masculinity.

In chapter three, "Niggerish," I introduced the concept of the phonetic gaze and explained

the ways in which the deployment of "nigger/a" satisfies at least one of its six objectives: *(1)*

depicting historical context and references, (2) achieving artistic visions, (3) expressing

endearment (4) oppressing a population/ reinforcing hegemonic ideologies/systems, (5) resisting

hegemonic ideologies/systems, or (6) adhering to or emulating customary/authentic vernacular.

The chapter addressed the first research question through analysis of "nigger/a's" deployment by

non-Black individuals. Analysis in chapter three recognized four non-Black authors who deploy

"nigger/a" in their work: writer/director, Quentin Tarantino, comedian Louis C.K., and rappers

Fat Joe and V-Nasty.

Quentin Tarantino's deployment of "nigger/a" in *Django Unchained* illustrates the ways

in which the phonetic gaze may be deployed to align with a historical context and express an

artistic vision. The film adheres to a phonetic gaze that fulfills the objectives of 1) expressing an

artistic vision, 2) depicting a historical context, and 3) seemingly resisting traditional ideologies

while 4) reinforcing those same ideologies. The deployment of "nigger/a" in the film reinforces

ideologies that constrain Black masculinity. As presented in chapter three, the deployment of

"nigger/a" in *Django Unchained* allows both the author and the spectator to experience a Black

masculinity that undermines the progression of positive perceptions of Black masculinity.

The analysis of Louis C.K.'s comedy in chapter three displays an employment of "nigger/a" that facilitated the phonetic gaze through 1) constructing artistic vision and 2) reinforcing of ideologies while 3) attempting to resist particular ideologies. C.K. seeks to challenge the audience's perceptions about "nigger/a," fragmenting the term more. C.K.'s attempt to complicate the way the word functions becomes problematic, however, when auditors are incapable of recognizing his ironic persona. For those auditors unable to identify C.K's ironic persona, they remain in a phonetic gaze that structures their perception or experience of Black masculinity in a way that perpetuates hegemonic ideologies.

The analysis of Fat Joe and V-Nasty presented deployments of "nigger/a" that satisfied phonetic gaze objectives not seen in the previous two texts: 1) emulating and adhering to an authentic vernacular and 2) establishing endearment amongst auditors. The two rappers, who do not identify as Black, also deploy "nigger/a" in ways that resist and reinforce ideologies. Both rappers appeal to "nigger/a" as a word authentic to their vocabulary which, consequently, is meant to represent an authentic Black masculine presence. This representation of authenticity helps to extend "nigger/a's" endearing capacity, interpellating empathizers, those representative of the expressed population, and those who want to identify within that population. As such, traditional connotations of the epithet are resisted. However, at other times, Fat Joe and V-Nasty deploy the word in ways that perpetuate stereotypes and negative connotations of Black masculinity (such as the brute or buck identity). In those instances, "nigger/a's" deployment reinforces particular ideologies that limit Black masculinity. This deployment, furthermore, distances Fat Joe and V-Nasty from the same masculinity they intend to establish. Fat Joe and V-Nasty's deployment of "nigger/a" then, allows for both the author and spectator to experience an "authentic" Black masculinity, but never have the negative connotations directly associated with

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them. Non-Black rappers only experience a fraction of the associations that Black masculinity encompasses. Ultimately, chapter three presents "nigger/a's" deployment by non-Black authors as constituting fabricated Black masculinity for non-Black authors and spectators who will never fully experience the range of positive and negative connotations associated with that term.

Chapter four responded to this thesis' second research question by presenting the deployment of "nigger/a" by authors who identify as Black. Chapter four mirrored chapter three's presentation, particularly with the utilization of the phonetic gaze to analyze a film text, a stand-up comedian's work, and the lyrics of a hip-hop artist. The analysis focused on three Black authors who deployed "nigger/a" in their work: director/writer Antoine Fuqua, comedian Chris Rock, and rapper Y.G.

Antoine Fuqua's film *Training Day* deployed "nigger/a" with camouflaged intentions, mimicking themes found within the film. The film assessed the ways in which "nigger/a" facilitated a phonetic gaze that satisfied the objectives of 1) fostering endearment, 2) articulating an artistic vision, and 3) reinforcing ideologies. Unlike many of the other texts presented in this thesis, this film's resistance of ideologies did not rely on changing negative connotations to positive connotations. Instead, it attributed those negative connotations to an individual who was not Black. This deployment was not resistive, but rather reinforced "nigger/a's" capacity to debilitate and constrain. The word's deployment in the film was a presentation of the phonetic gaze as it attempted to alter the perception and reality of an individual unfamiliar with a particular space. The film was both a presentation of the phonetic gaze and a facilitator of the phonetic gaze. *Training Day* illustrated "nigger/a's" capacity to enable a subject to perceive or experience a particular reality—Black masculinity—from a distance and then return to their own

reality. Likewise, the film's deployment of "nigger/a" simultaneously facilitated a gaze for spectators.

"Nigger/a's" deployment in comedian Chris Rock's comedy deviates from the way it is deployed in other texts. That deployment is similar to the strategy employed by C.K., insofar as it sometimes requires the acknowledgement of his ironic persona. The deployment allows Rock to position character, not color, as "nigger/a's" defining factor. However, Rock actively satisfies, and only intends to satisfy, one objective of the phonetic gaze: reinforcing ideologies. Rock's deployment of "nigger/a" facilitates a phonetic gaze that positions both author and auditor to perceive "nigger/a" as a detrimental. However, he seeks to empower other identities through recognizing "nigger/a's" damaging underlying ideologies as only consequential to a particular population within the Black community.

Rapper Y.G.'s album *My Krazy Life* includes deployments of "nigger/a" that mirror the deployments seen in chapter three's analysis of Fat Joe and V-Nasty. However, his deployments differ due to context and identity. Y.G. satisfies the phonetic gaze objectives of: 1) soliciting endearment, 2) evoking authenticity, 3) conveying an artistic vision, 4) resisting ideologies, and 5) reinforcing ideologies. Y.G.'s lyrics often appear endearing, interpellating auditors as he appeals to the authenticity of "nigger/a" as part of his vocabulary and, consequently, as integral to his masculinity. Y.G. declares that anyone can be a "nigga," but not everyone is "that nigga" or a "real nigga." Y.G.'s deployment, makes a distinction that there are different types of "nigger/as," fragmenting the underlying constructions of the term. These deployments are meant to resist "nigger/as" underlying ideologies.

Y.G.'s lyrics are congruent with blackface minstrelsy. His positioning of "nigger/a" within the brute and buck caricature, and the declaration of violence against "nigger/as"

reinforces constraining ideologies. The proclamation that anyone can be a "nigger/a" enables non-Blacks to situate themselves within a world where authentic Black masculinity is a fabricated performance rather than a valued identity. The similarities with minstrelsy convolute assertions of authenticity and discredit Black masculine voices. Although blackface minstrelsy has, at times, been used by Blacks to subvert hegemonic structures, this type of resistance requires a sophisticated audience attuned to that type of parodic rhetoric. When spectators' fail to discern the parodic critique, all they are left with is the exaggerated, stereotypical display of Black masculinity.

When spectators' inability to discern ironic or parodic dimensions of racialized rhetoric is accompanied by the assumption that anyone can be a "nigger/a," the logic of post-racialism invades the associated discourse. The deployment reinscribes confining discourses that disable more resistive rhetoric which could be used to mobilize the oppressed. Furthermore, the inscription of post-racial ideologies re-centers Whiteness and inhibits the discernment necessary to distinguish between minstrelsy and camouflaged resistive rhetoric. Nonetheless, Y.G. facilitates a phonetic gaze that allows auditors to experience Black masculinity's paradoxical and fragmented nature. Chapter four, then, presents Black authors' deployment of "nigger/a" as constitutive rhetoric that enables authors and auditors to gaze into various facets of Black masculinity which are typically unseen and are neither always comprehensible to non-Black authors nor necessarily experienced by Black spectators.

This thesis expands upon scholarly conversations about "nigger/a," examining the ways in which "nigger/a" and masculinity interact and considering how "nigger/a's" deployment maintains the capacity to alter the perception and reality of both the addresser and the addressed. Previous research on the term, such as Randall Kennedy's *Nigger: The Strange Career of a*

Troublesome Word or Jabari Asim's *The N Word,* addresses the term's history and prescribes

who should use it and how it should be used. Both Kennedy and Asim have laid down a

foundation for understanding the direct impact of the term. Kennedy contends that the

deployment of "nigger/a" is becoming increasingly prevalent, arguing that:

> As nigger is more widely disseminated and its complexity is more widely appreciated, censuring its use—even its use as an insult—will become more difficult . . . there is much to be gained by allowing people of all backgrounds to yank nigger away from white supremacists, to subvert its ugliest denotation, and to convert the N-word from a negative into a positive appellation.[309]

While Kennedy recognizes the history and the pain that accompany the word, he is among the

population of people who believe that certain deployments of "nigger/a" have the potential to act

as a resistive force for subversion of White patriarchal ideologies.

Contrary to Kennedy's claims, Asim argues that, "'nigger' serves primarily—even in its

contemporary 'friendlier' usage—as a linguistic extension of white supremacy," and unlike other

pejoratives, "endures, helping to perpetuate and reinforce the durable, insidious taint of

presumed African-American inferiority."[310] Additionally, Asim points to some of the most

revered appeals to freedom, justice, and equality—W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Martin

Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—to demonstrate that resistive rhetoric can be just as productive

and constructive, if not more, without the deployment of "nigger/a."[311] Asim, concludes his

argument by stating "I dream of a world where 'nigger' no longer roams, confined instead to the

fetid white fantasy land where he was born."[312] Asim maintains that "nigger/a," as long as it has

endured, will remain attached to the ideologies from which it was conceived, and its deployment,

congenial or malicious, will continue to carry those attached ideologies.

This thesis challenges Kennedy's claims and extends Asim's. Deployment by people of

all backgrounds, again, adheres to post-racial ideologies that assume a level of racial equality not

yet attained in our society. Furthermore, even if post-racialism was a productive goal, the widespread deployment of "nigger/a" is not the first step to reaching a post-racial society. "Nigger/a" will continue to maintain its history and attached confining ideologies. Though I agree with Asim's assertions, I also suggest this thesis shows "nigger/a" can only be liberating for the individual who deploys the word. The movement towards a post-racist—rather than a post-racial—society requires removing the word from our vocabulary and moving the term back to the "fetid white fantasy land where he was born."[313]

In extending antecedent research, this thesis offers its own specific implications. Although "nigger/a" has already been acknowledged for its potential to confine Black identity, some people continue to assert that we can deploy the term responsibly. Responsibility, however, entails acknowledging and appreciating the past from which "nigger/a" is derived and understanding the underlying ideologies which have animated it in the past and which continue to mobilize it currently. It entails recognizing that desensitization does equate to disruption, and understanding is essential to progression. If we truly seek to disrupt a hegemony that perpetually limits and disenfranchises particular identities there must be an accountability for ourselves and others, treating "nigger/a" as the oppressive discourse it truly is.

This thesis builds upon existing research by situating "nigger/a" as an interpellating metaphor with material consequences. Deployment of the word shapes auditors' perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and actions. Additionally, I have demonstrated that the constraining ideologies of White, patriarchal, masculinity—constraints that must be disrupted—are almost always reinforced when the word is deployed. In developing the concept of the phonetic gaze, my research offers a theoretical construct that can be used to explain "nigger/a's" fragmented

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nature and assess its interpellative potential. This research, then, illustrates the ways in which word choice is consequential to the construction of our reality.

Furthermore, by examining "nigger/a" as a masculine term, this research contributes to discussions about the intersectionality of race and gender. This project has illustrated the ways in which the model of the phonetic gaze enables a more complete explanation of "nigger/a's" interpellative functions; the utility of this construct, however, is not limited to my particular topic. My research proposes a tool which can be used to assess the ways in which other terms (e.g. "bitch") constitute authors and auditors through the phonetic gaze.

When I began this thesis project, I intended to maintain a neutral stance on "nigger/a." I intended to present an extended understanding of the word's rhetorical dynamics. I have been called "nigga" and I have been called "nigger." Both have glided through my ears and both have been piercing to hear. I have deployed "nigga" and I have deployed "nigger." Both have slithered off my tongue and both have singed the edge of my lips. Furthermore, my identity as a Black man has been consequential and significant to this study. I began this study feeling neutral on the issue of "nigger/a's" deployment, and regularly deploying "nigga" myself. This research has led me to the realization that I can no longer remain neutral on this subject. Based on this research, I suggest, there is indeed a liberatory potential in "nigga." However, that potential is miniscule. I further suggest, based on this research, that the limited liberatory potential of "nigga" and "nigger" is restricted to its impact on the person deploying the term. "Nigger" and "nigga" are limiting and confining in their reception, not liberating. Consider the history of the word. Slave owners regularly deployed "nigger" and "nigga." Slaves' regularly received those appellations. When deployed by slaves it served to construct a positionality beneficial to the addresser.

As presented in chapter two, the history of the word is consequential to the deployment. Crimes have been justified through the deployment of "nigger/a." Dehumanization has been legitimized because of "nigger/a's" application. These histories are entrenched within the word, but continuous deployment four centuries after the beginning of slavery implies forgotten stories. I refuse to believe we have forgotten injustices done under "nigger/a's" facilitated gaze, but contemporary deployment seems to declare a lack of appreciation for the history from which it is derived. The deployment is a proclamation that the injustices either do not matter or we lack the proper instruments and tools to cope with those injustices. Slave's ingenuity took what was available and expanded its capacities. As Asim explains,

> Our slave ancestors made the most of limited means when they prepared meals from pork entrails deemed inedible by the whites they served; now, in the twenty-first century, to subsist on our former masters' cast-off language—even in the name of revising it—strikes me as the opposite of resourcefulness. Our modern vocabularies, unlike the empty larders of slaves are well stocked.[314]

We can continue to believe that the contemporary deployment of "nigger/a" is resourceful, but its continued use implies that we are incapable of progressing or developing from ideals constructed centuries ago under the pressures of racism and hatred. The ignorance of the past invites regressive attitudes and tendencies, as seen throughout this thesis. We must seek progression through recognizing the past as a platform to build from or build in spite of, but not by leaving it untouched. This progression is necessary if we are ever to right the injustices of yesteryear and prevent the woes of tomorrow. The eradication of the term is one way to accomplish this progression and begin the deconstruction of the barriers placed upon Blackness and Black masculinity erected hundreds of years ago and reinforced each day. Given the ubiquity of the term in contemporary culture, completely eradicating it may not be a wholly realistic expectation; at minimum, we must insist that those who deploy the word should recognize their

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responsibility to know and understand its history and capacity. We must continue to disseminate our knowledge of the word utilizing the many mediums and vocabularies with which this generation has been endowed. This is the true display of ingenuity and resourcefulness our ancestors displayed centuries ago, not the repackaging of antiquated materials. This is the display of our ancestral appreciation. It is these actions that will potentially empower community members as we stand unified and proclaim: "I am a Black man" or "I am a Black woman," but "I am not a 'nigger,'" "I am not a 'nigga.'"

This research aims to foster a critical perspective that responds productively to the deployment of "nigger/a" in popular culture. However, this study has not been without limitations. First, though this study presented "nigger/a" in three different media realms and seven different texts, it was not exhaustive. As such, it is possible that though I have outlined a comprehensive list of six objectives of its deployment, I may not have acknowledged all of its potentialities. Second, with the exception of the V-Nasty discussion in chapter three, this thesis is focused on the male deployment of "nigger/a." Additional implications could be identified if women's deployment of the term was assessed more fully. Finally, considering the nature of this study, it could have benefited from quantitative data as to how diverse populations, given location, background, and identity, deploy the term. To expand this discussion, I suggest 1) building upon and utilizing the phonetic gaze to explain the use of potentially troubling words, and 2) utilizing the phonetic gaze and conduct a quantitative study to contribute corresponding statistics. Despite these limitations, I look forward to the expansion of this discussion. Above all, however, I anticipate and envision the day true progress, as outlined in this conclusion, comes to fruition; I remain hopeful for the day I am recognized as more than a "nigger" or a "nigga."

Endnotes

[1] (With Regards to Karrin Anderson) Karrin Vasby Anderson, ""Rhymes With Rich:" "Bitch" as a Tool of Containment in Contemporary American Politics," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 2, no. 4 (1999): 599-623.

[2] My choice to characterize "nigger/a" as a rhetorical text follows McGee's formulation in which texts are "simultaneously structures of fragments, finished texts, and fragments themselves to be accounted for in subsequent discourse . . . ." Although "nigger/a" is two versions of a single term, it is also a complex text that encompasses a wide range of connotations and power dynamics. This study examines some of those connotations and power dynamics. See Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 279.

[3] Kenneth Burke, *Symbols and Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[4] Sierk Ybema, Tom Keenoy, Cliff Oswick, Armin Beverungen, Nick Ellis, and Ida Sabelis, "Articulating Idenities," *Human Relations*, 62, no. 3 (2009): 299-322, 302.

[5] Burke, *Symbols and Society,* 60.

[6] Burke, *Symbols and Society,* 58

[7] Burke, *Symbols and Society,* 62-70

[8] Burke, *Symbols and Society,* 182

[9] Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis, Sabelis, "Articulating Idenities," 302.

[10] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 171.

[11] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 172.

[12] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 173.

[13] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 173.

[14] Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Quebecois," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 133-150, 138.

[15] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*

[16] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 182.

[17] Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 138.

[18] Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 143.

[19] Helen Tate, "The Ideological Effects of a Failed Constitutive Rhetoric: The Co-option of the Rhetoric of White Lesbian Feminism," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 28, no. 1 (2005): 1-31, 7-8.

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[21] Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 141-142.

[22] Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 147.

[23] Eric K. Watts, and Mark P. Orbe, "The Spectacular Consumption of "True" African American Culture: "Whassup" with the Budweiser Guys?," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19, no. 1 (2002): 1-20, 3.

[24] Watts and Orbe, "The Spectacular Consumption of "True" African American Culture," 7.

[25] Watts and Orbe, "The Spectacular Consumption of "True" African American Culture"

[26] George Yancy, "Geneva smitherman: The social ontology of african-american language, the power of nommo, and the dynamics of resistance and identity through language," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 18, no. 4 (2004): 273-299, 274.

[27] Carter Goodwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 5.

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