

# **Made in America**

## **Jay Z and the Trouble with the American Dream**

An Honors Thesis for the Department of American Studies

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Tufts University, 2014

*We tell ourselves stories in order to live*  
- Joan Didion, *The White Album*

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## Personal Note | Where I'm From

*Cough up a lung, where I'm from, Marcy son, ain't nothing nice  
Mentally been many places but I'm Brooklyn's own  
(So where you from?)*

I am from Brooklyn. Nominally, Jay Z and I are from the same place. Like Jay Z, when people ask me where I'm from, I always specify Brooklyn, not just New York. And, though Brooklyn is a big place, there isn't a significant geographic distance between Jay Z's origins and my own. His childhood home is just under three miles from mine, a long walk but an easy bike ride. In terms of lived experience, however, Jay Z and I are from two different galaxies.

Like many rappers, Jay Z devotes much of his early music and storytelling to the rich and detailed descriptions of his hometown, framing his origin story within that physical urban context. On the song "Where I'm From," he raps:

*I'm from where the hammers rung, news cameras never come*

*You and your mans hung in every verse in your rhyme*

*Where the grams is slung, niggas vanish every summer*

*When the blue vans would come, we throw the work in the can and run*

His picture of Brooklyn could not be more different from my own, defined by gunshots, drug dealing, and constant police presence. Jay Z grew up in the Marcy Projects in the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Overwhelmingly Black and extremely poor, Marcy houses more than 4,200 residents in its 1,705 apartments, split among 27 six-story buildings.

In his biography, *Decoded*, Jay Z describes being a kid growing up there, in language as rich with detail as his rap verses. "For a kid in the seventies, it was mostly an

adventure,” he writes. “When you jumped the fences to play football, you might find the field studded with glass shards that caught the light like diamonds and would pierce your sneakers just as fast.” He adds, “Heroin was still heavy in the hood, so we would dare each other to push a leaning nodder off a bench the way kids on farms tip sleeping cows.”<sup>1</sup> Jay Z’s writing is nonchalant because what he describes are just facts of life for children in Marcy. But this particular passage—comparing himself to rural kids tipping cows—constitutes a powerful acknowledgement of the many other versions of childhood more privileged than his own.

Like mine for example. In my neighborhood, Park Slope, Marcy’s sheer population density is unthinkable. My four-person family had (and still has) a whole five-story Brownstone to itself. I grew up on a quiet, tree-lined street just a half a block away from Prospect Park, a sprawling green space with room enough for hundreds of football games without risk of shattered glass. The presence of a drug addict on a street-bench would likely cause a mass hysteria among Park Slope parents.

In this scholarly exercise, I come to Jay Z’s body of work from a privileged background and from a place of power—the majority White academia—which has traditionally excluded the voices of the Black underclass and undervalued or denigrated rap as an art form. Rappers like Jay Z constantly establish their authenticity and rap credibility through the telling and re-telling of their inner-city origins. The themes, vernaculars, sounds, and signifiers of rap music constitute a form of resistance, coming together to designate an in-group among those who have been excluded—from cultural institutions, from history books, and from the chance at economic advancement. I have

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<sup>1</sup> Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011). 4.

described my own background here to acknowledge that I am an outsider.

It would be irresponsible and even offensive for me to approach this subject matter without first acknowledging my privileged context and my outsider status, especially if I plan to take a critical look at Jay Z's work. In the song "HAM" off the 2011 album "Watch the Throne" Jay Z makes it clear what he thinks about those who criticize his music and his lifestyle:

*Fuck y'all mad at me for? Y'all don't even know what I've been through  
I played chicken with a Mack truck, y'all muthafuckas woulda been moved  
I swam waters with Great Whites, y'all muthafuckas woulda been chewed  
I hustled with cultures late nights, y'all muthafuckas woulda been food  
Fuck wrong with these dudes? Try to walk around in these shoes*

The verse defends Jay Z's right to own, rap about, and take pleasure in his material gains, given the violence and desperation that he has lived through. But more pointedly, Jay Z is calling out his critics' privilege. He is talking specifically about people like me.

Jay Z is right to be sensitive. There is a large body of hip-hop criticism, within and without the academic sphere, whose criticism of hip-hop materialism, violence, and misogyny is only a thin veil for the writer's racial prejudice. With this paper, however, I am not really analyzing or criticizing hip-hop, as such. Rather, I am identifying the ways that Jay Z's music operates within a broader political and economic system that enforces racial inequity. I demonstrate how Jay Z embodies the American Dream narrative and the many ways the American culture industry has shaped Jay Z's music to validate neoliberal values and obscure racial injustice.

## Prologue | Marginal Origins

Jay Z's life is a classic tale of rags to riches. He was born Sean Carter in 1969 in Brooklyn, New York, which means he was growing up at the same time and place as the music and culture he would come to represent. Rose notes that hip-hop's earliest practitioners "came of age at the tail end of the Great Society, in the twilight of America's short-lived federal commitment to black civil rights and during the pre-dawn of the Reagan- Bush era."<sup>2</sup> Though he couldn't have known it at the time, Jay Z's youth (and hip-hop's) was defined by a marked decrease in federal funding for social services, an evolution of cities away from industrial economies and into information services, and the steady gentrification of urban centers that squeezed out low-income housing. All this left lower class communities—mostly Black and Hispanic—with limited housing and job opportunities, and no federal support to ameliorate these issues.<sup>3</sup>

The roll-out of neoliberal policies in the Reagan era led to a growing stratification and unequal wealth distribution in urban spaces, coupled with a severe housing crisis. In New York City, between 1978 and 1986, (when Jay Z was between the ages of 9 and 17) those belonging to the bottom fifth of the income scale experienced an absolute decline in income, while the top 20 percent experienced economic growth. In that same time period, 25% of Black households lived at or below the poverty line.<sup>4</sup>

This is the economic and political environment out of which hip-hop arose. It grew out of those communities in New York at the greatest risk and with the smallest safety net, crowded out of sight into ghettos of anonymous tower blocks. I recount this history here

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<sup>2</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan University Press, 1994). 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

because, as Tricia Rose writes, “life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip-hop style, sound, lyrics, and thematic.”<sup>5</sup> More concretely the marginality of hip-hop—its lack of capital (instruments) and economic resources—actually necessitates its fundamental makeup. Recording sessions, instruments, and live musicians are all quite expensive. Early hip-hop DJs created music with the resources that were available to them: new cheaply available technology, which allowed them to build whole tracks using fragments of pre-existing music. Thus the hip-hop sample represented the music’s negotiation of urban poverty. Today, due to tighter licensing laws, the hip-hop sample has grown quite expensive. Thus when Jay Z and Kanye West sampled “Try a Little Tenderness” on their album *Watch the Throne*, the Otis Redding sample actually represented the structural and economic resources now at the two rappers’ disposal. Following the sample’s progression from a cheap and pragmatic means of expression to a dearly expensive commodity, we see how hip-hop’s story is also one of rags to riches.

Jay Z’s biography *Decoded* begins recounting the “rags” half of his story in 1978. The first chapter opens by giving the reader a picture of his youth on the margins of post-industrial New York: the Marcy Projects in Brooklyn. “Marcy was my world,” he writes. “The shadowy bench-lined inner pathways that connected the twenty-seven six-story buildings of Marcy Houses were like tunnels we kids burrowed through.”<sup>6</sup> In 1978, he is just a little too young to fully appreciate the desolation of his neighborhood, but he writes, “When I got a little older Marcy would show me its menace.”<sup>7</sup> That menace would come with the rise of crack cocaine. Both hip-hop and crack were infiltrating young Sean Carter’s

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<sup>5</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Jay-Z, *Decoded*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



neighborhood at the same time. “By the time the eighties came along, rap was exploding,” he writes. “I remember the mainstream breakthroughs like they were my own rites of passage.” But in the same chapter he also recounts:

No one hired a skywriter and announced crack’s arrival. But when it landed in your hood, it was a total takeover. Sudden and complete. Like losing your man to gunshots. Or your father walking out the door for good. It was an irreversible new reality.<sup>8</sup>

The arrival of this new drug ushered in a new kind of economy, which transformed life in neighborhoods like the Marcy Projects. “Authority was turned upside down,” he writes. “Guys my age, fed up with watching their moms struggle on a single income, were paying utility bills with money from hustling”.<sup>9</sup> This new source of income came with a price, however, and youth violence shot up. “Outside in Marcy’s courtyards and across the country, teenagers wore automatic weapons like they were sneakers,” Jay Z recalls. “You could get killed just for riding in the wrong train at the wrong time,” he recalls. “I started to think that since I was risking my life anyway, I might as well get paid for it. It was that simple.”<sup>10</sup>

So, in the face of crippling poverty and daily violence, Jay Z went to work. He became, at age 15, an entrepreneur in the narco-capitalist economy. This is the story that Jay Z likes to tell. He starts here in Marcy, on the margins, below the poverty line, and then tells us on track after track, how the young hustler entrepreneur transcended, using his business sense, to become a hip-hop legend and business mogul.

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<sup>8</sup> Jay-Z, *Decoded*, 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

# **Introduction**

## Theoretical Framework | Made in America

Jay Z stands on the roof of his old apartment building at 560 State Street, an address the rapper refers to as a former “stash spot” in the song “Empire State of Mind.” From there, he has a perfect view of the Barclays Center, Brooklyn’s hulking new basketball stadium. “Oh Shit. Now you trying to make me cry, man?” he asks the celebrity filmmaker behind the camera. Jay Z has been the face of the stadium since early in its development, drumming up popular support and helping to rebrand its team, The Brooklyn Nets, when they relocated from New Jersey. Today, many view the Barclays Center as one of Jay Z’s personal victories even though his involvement was largely symbolic. This rooftop scene unfolds at the climax of the documentary film “Made in America” directed by Ron Howard. It is a powerful visualization of Jay Z’s biography, symbolically tracing the rapper’s evolution from drug dealer to superstar and business mogul.<sup>11</sup>

The phrase “Made in America” has become central to Jay Z’s storyline and personal branding in recent years. It is the name of a song off the rapper’s 2011 collaboration album with Kanye West, *Watch the Throne*. It is also the name of a Budweiser-sponsored music festival in Philadelphia that Jay Z curated and headlined in his capacity as the beer company’s co-brand director. And now it is the name of a documentary, which aired on Showtime in 2013. Ostensibly the film is meant to document the music festival but, using concert footage and interviews with artists, fans, and festival crew, Howard guilelessly created a piece of neoliberal propaganda. At the center of this film’s optimistic ideology is Jay Z himself. “Made in America is a bigger idea than just the concert,” he tells us in the

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<sup>11</sup> Ron Howard, *Made in America on Showtime*, Documentary (Showtime, 2013), <http://www.sho.com/sho/reality-docs/titles/3394200/jay-z-made-in-america#/index>.

backseat of his luxury vehicle. “After these great tragedies, creativity is born and I feel we’re in that period right now where people are pulling themselves up by the bootstrap and saying I’m going to go out and do this and we’re gonna do it our way.”<sup>12</sup>

In analyzing Jay-Z’s music and his American Dream narrative, this documentary is a remarkable supplementary text. Rarely do musicians so explicitly tell their audiences the intention or ideology behind their art. In “Made in America” Jay Z makes both very clear. He is a role model. “There’s a lot of variables that get in the way of tapping into this thing that you’re really good at,” he says. “Once you see someone’s tapped into theirs you’re like ‘Ok maybe I should really apply myself to it and see what happens because that guy is from Marcy projects and that place is fucked up so if he can do it then, you know, maybe I can do it.’” Jay Z is modeling the American Dream. And if he can make it, so can you.

The fact is, Jay Z’s success is not indicative of a broader change in the social position of most African Americans. Like the heroes of Horatio Alger, Jay Z’s story has become weaved into the national folklore, which celebrates rags-to-riches success. But all these stories represent exceptions to the American fact that the overall class structure remains the same from generation to generation.<sup>13</sup> Our culture industry celebrates stories like Jay Z’s because they are a testament to the American Dream ideology—that anyone can succeed through individualism and hard work. Meanwhile, our culture selectively ignores the existence of America’s permanent underclass because it is a living contradiction to that ideology.<sup>14</sup> Though the “Made in America” brand is new, the American Dream narrative has been embedded in Jay Z’s music throughout all seventeen of his albums. Indeed, the

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<sup>12</sup> Howard, *Made in America*.

<sup>13</sup> Jay MacLeod, *Ain’t No Makin’ It: Aspirations & Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009) 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

rapper's lyricism is thematically circular, constantly retracing his biography and linking his drug dealer past to the present, which grows in opulence and prestige with each album. In this paper, I will analyze the way that the culture industry perpetuates the American Dream narrative through Jay Z's music. But to understand the significance of Jay Z's narrative, we must first understand the values that shaped the American Dream in the first place.

The following section provides the broader theoretical background for my work, analyzing the cultural, political, and economic factors, which define the American Dream. Using the work of literary scholar W. T. Lhamon, Jr, I will investigate the transcendent after-life of the Horatio Alger myth in American Popular culture. I will show how Jay Z's narrative perpetuates the illusion of American egalitarianism which A. A. Akom, terms "Ameritocracy." Using Akom's work, together with Lester K. Spence I will demonstrate how racism has justified the neoliberal shift away from progressive social programs meant to ameliorate inequality. Finally, through the rhetorical analysis of Barack Obama's speeches, I will argue that the American Dream is not just a narrative, it is an active agent which performs political *work*—to elect a candidate, to garner support for economic policy, and to conceal inconvenient truths.

### **Horatio Alger and the American Dream**

Scholars of rhetoric Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones define the American Dream as a romantic narrative that "depicts America as a place of unbridled opportunities where anyone with will and gumption can make a better life."<sup>15</sup> It's heroes are ordinary

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<sup>15</sup> Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, "Recasting the American Dream and American Politics: Barack Obama's Keynote Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93, no. 4 (2007): 427.

men made great by their American values. This romantic narrative is embedded in the American cultural consciousness by what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer term the culture industry—the interweaving structures which produce and reproduce dominant social values through film, television, music, literature, advertising, etc.<sup>16</sup> The author Horatio Alger is perhaps the individual producer most responsible for encoding the American Dream formula into the culture industry's machine. Furthermore, if Jay Z is now considered the embodiment of the American Dream then he is the inheritor of Horatio Alger's legacy. Alger was an incredibly prolific novelist in the late 1800s. He published 107 books in his lifetime and 118 more were published in his name, all with the same formulaic story about a young man who successfully emerges from poverty to achieve middle class success. Alger's narrative has enjoyed a transcendent afterlife, not just in American literature but throughout popular culture. Today, Alger's name is essentially synonymous with any American success story.

Of course, the reason Alger's formula enjoys such a strong legacy is because it was tremendously popular in its time. Literary scholar W.T. Lhamon jr. writes, "He gave youths agreeable images of what they could expect. He defined the sense of what was plausible in America." The problem, of course, is that Alger was writing fiction, not fact. Moreover his storylines actually contradicted the values, Alger meant to espouse. Alger's characters all emphasize the idea that America is an "open society" in which anyone may succeed with pluck and virtuous strivings. But in fact, Alger affirmed a very limited kind of hero, a young white man with bourgeois aspirations. Societal structures seem to favor this hero's ascent rather than hinder it. For example, Lhamon notes, "the police and the author always agree

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<sup>16</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

on who is good and who is bad.”<sup>17</sup> So, though Alger’s narrative insists on the heroism of strapping young men who make their *own* way, “the obvious plot formations show that society promotes certain boys.”<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that immigrants and people of color in Alger’s stories never emerge from poverty and most often they are crooks, antagonistic to the hero’s story. If, for example, one of Alger’s heroes were Black, he would most likely have a very different relationship with the American police force. Alger’s message is that class divisions in American society can always be overcome. But his privileging of a certain kind of hero actually demonstrates that class divisions are quite rigid. Hortatory heroes already belong to the bourgeois class by virtue of their values and skin privilege. When they succeed they are just assuming their rightful place.

Not only do Alger’s stories contradict his own message, they also conveniently disappear those individuals who don’t fit the formula. The protagonists are always exceptionally clever, resourceful, and hard-working. Once they emerge from poverty, their former peers—the ones who are not exceptional—simply disappear. “The streets are purified,” Lhamon writes.<sup>19</sup> In this way Alger’s narrative magically erases any social ill that cannot be solved by one virtuous man’s personal success. The author sold as many as four hundred million copies of his books by constantly retelling this rosy and illusory story about American society. Lhamon suggests that Americans bought so many copies of Alger’s formulaic books because “they needed to be reminded over and over again, as if the clarity he provided did not last long and soon left them confused again in a world resistant to his

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<sup>17</sup> W.T. Lhamon jr., “Horatio Alger and American Modernism: The One-Dimensional Social Formula,” *American Studies* 17, no. 2 (October 1, 1976): 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

formula.”<sup>20</sup> This must be precisely why Alger’s legacy is so long-lasting. As consumers, Americans still wish to be reminded of a story that isn’t true. Alger’s narrative pervades movies, TV shows, advertising and, of course, music. We might see Jay Z’s discography as similarly formulaic, constantly retracing his own trajectory from drug dealer to rap mogul.

### **The Myth of Meritocracy and Infra-racial Racism**

Scholar A. A. Akom would view Jay Z’s story as one among many Hollywood stories which emphasize the meritocratic myth that individuals “do not inherit their social status, they attain it via their own ambition and ability.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike in Horatio Alger’s day, these stories now include Black heroes but, Akom argues, they are produced and reproduced “without a discussion of the complex interplay of United States’ racial hierarchies on social class formation in the Black community.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the culture industry produces and reproduces stories like Jay Z’s in order perpetuate the myth of meritocracy and to keep racial injustice invisible. The pernicious effect of these stories becomes clear when we understand the systematic way in which legislators have encoded racial inequity into our laws and economies, what Akom refers to as infra-racial racism.

Akom uses this term to describe a private and state policy of racial injustice that “makes no mention of race yet reproduces a system of racially structured inequality.”<sup>23</sup> Far more pernicious than a burning cross in the front yard, Akom argues that this racism operates like infra-red rays: “It penetrates beneath the skin, to such an extent that it negatively impacts the health, wellbeing, and social mobility of Black people/people of

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<sup>20</sup> Lhamon, “Horatio Alger and American Modernism,” 15.

<sup>21</sup> A.A. Akom, “Ameritocracy and Infra-racial Racism: Racializing Social and Cultural Reproduction Theory in the Twenty-first Century,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 11, no. 3 (2008): 207.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.



color beyond the visible end of the spectrum.”<sup>24</sup> He points to a number of examples, including the 1935 Social Security Act, to demonstrate this phenomenon. Passed in 1935, the Social Security Act guaranteed an income to millions of workers after they retired. Akom notes, however, that the act specifically excluded agricultural workers and domestic servants, low-paying occupations held predominantly by people of color. In practice, this legislation denied coverage to three quarters of the Black workforce, people who often did not have the financial means to save for retirement on their own. Meanwhile the act gave a financial security net to the predominantly White class of workers who already received higher wages.<sup>25</sup> In this way the Social Security act helped encode the “current pattern of white accumulation and Black disinvestment.”<sup>26</sup>

Once enacted, a piece of legislation is invisible to the majority of Americans even as they feel its effect in their lives. Laws like the Social Security act imposed permanent poverty on generations of African Americans who are unable to save for their futures or pass money along to their children. It is logical for such populations to question *why*. Why do so many Blacks remain in a permanent underclass while Whites enjoy more financial stability, success, and comfort? The truth, encoded in laws like the Social Security Act, will not readily reveal itself. American systems of government and economy cannot continue to promote White power unless their racisms remain invisible.<sup>27</sup> The solution, then, is to blame Blacks for their own disenfranchisement. In academic fields, this mode of thinking is called the culture of poverty thesis, “the notion that the attitudes and behaviors of Black people/people of color are responsible for large disparities in the realms of education and

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<sup>24</sup> Akom, “Ameritocracy,” 210-211.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

employment.”<sup>28</sup>

When a Black man like Jay Z succeeds he becomes the exception that proves the culture of poverty rule. In Howard’s “Made in America” documentary, Jay Z implies that if he made it, anybody can. “I believe that every human being has genius-level talent,” he says. “There is no chosen one. You just have to find what it is that you’re great at and apply yourself.” It sounds like an empowering and rosy statement but it actually serves to reinforce the culture of poverty thesis. If Black people don’t follow in Jay Z’s footsteps it is simply because they did not *apply* their genius level talent. It is not because of the infra-racial racism, which enforces a permanent Black underclass. Ron Howard’s documentary constantly reminds us of Jay Z’s individual success and in this way the film reproduces the culture industry’s myth of meritocracy, obscuring the fact that there *is* a “chosen one,” called White America.

### **Neoliberalism**

By analyzing legislation from the post-war era, Akom illustrates how White privilege and power sustains itself through the invisible racism of American legal and economic policies. Hip-hop scholar Lester K. Spence provides a similar racial critique of the more contemporary Neoliberal policies of the Reagan era. Neoliberalism is a policy and ideology that finds its roots in the writing of F. A. Hayek. He argued in 1944 that socialist leaning governments actually reduced individual freedom by forcing citizens to rely on the state. Instead, governments should empower citizens “to make their own choices within the marketplace.”<sup>29</sup> This ideology is carried forward in the economic theory espoused by

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<sup>28</sup> Akom, “Ameritocracy and Infra-racial Racism,” 206.

<sup>29</sup> Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 12.

Milton Friedman's Chicago School and the policies of Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. It still dominates political discourse today.

Neoliberal thought assumes that the market is inherently apolitical and therefore neoliberal policy will be based on the rational rather than ideological. Instead, Lester K. Spence argues, this simply disguises the interests of the business-class as objective and "market-based." Spence identifies two different means by which governments enact neoliberal policy: technologies of subjectivity and technologies of subjection. The former are deployed for "the purpose of inducing self-animation and self-government in citizens, institutions, and spaces." In other words, technologies of subjectivity turn people into productive *subjects* that will work within and for the market. Pro-business policies like deregulation or tax-breaks for entrepreneurs would fall into this category. Technologies of subjection control and punish those populations that do not work productively or independently within the market system. This means rolling back welfare programs for the poor and unemployed along with increased police surveillance and incarceration.

Spence argues that Neoliberalism is not merely an ideology but also a governmentality—a system for directing and managing human activity. This governmentality divides populations and institutions into three groups: "those perfectly formed according to market logic, those able to be re-formed according to that logic, and the exceptions unable to be re-formed."<sup>30</sup> Horatio Alger's heroes would fall into the second category, they start out poor and unemployed but because of their ability and predisposition toward *work* they are able to succeed and become successful subjects in the market system. As in Alger, those populations who work in the system and those who do

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<sup>30</sup> Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 15.

not are broken down by race. In fact, conceptions of race are central to the legitimization of the neoliberal turn, for Blacks largely constitute the population of exceptions.

With Akom's scholarship in mind it becomes very clear that the market is not an objective space, rather it reinscribes racial inequities. He demonstrates that Black people are unable to work within the market system, not because they lack the virtues of an Alger hero, but because of legalized racism, which denies them access to fair pay, economic security, or adequate education. According to market logic, the neoliberal government must then punish these populations for the conditions it created. Here, again, the culture of poverty thesis is instrumental. Spence argues, "The turn toward neoliberalism is not possible without the use of ideas about race—about racialized bodies and racialized spaces."<sup>31</sup> In order to justify the exception—or the presence of losers within the neoliberal system—Black communities must be framed as an inferior population. Spence notes, "They are routinely depicted as lazy, sexually libidinous, crime prone, and culturally dysfunctional."<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that this kind of rhetoric did not die with Reagan. Rather the culture of poverty thesis continues to dominate political discourse, often in veiled infra-racial language. In March of 2014 the Republican House representative Paul Ryan told Bill Bennett on his *Morning in America* radio show:

"We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning

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<sup>31</sup> Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

the value and the culture of work. There is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with."<sup>33</sup>

There's no question that when Ryan discusses men in the "inner city" he is referring to Black populations whose poverty, he argues, is the result of their own cultural dysfunction rather than centuries of racist oppression.

As failed subjects of the market system, these populations must be managed and, where possible, disappeared. They are pushed out of sight into ghettos and housing projects, subjected to intense police surveillance, and confined in American prisons. This neoliberal governmentality is rife with parallels to Horatio Alger's flawed formula. The core ideology certainly reflects Alger's assertion that "boys make their own way" and succeed without help from their communities or governments. Also like Alger, neoliberal policy works to erase those who don't fit the formula, disappearing them from view so that the story of an objective, virtuous market system rings true.

In the introduction, I argued that Howard's "Made in America" documentary operates as a piece of neoliberal propaganda. Indeed it reproduces rhetoric central to the neoliberal platform, as when Jay Z celebrates people who are "picking themselves up by their bootstraps." By way of example, the film follows the story of a young woman who works as a food vendor at the festival and is saving up to start her own food truck business. In an early scene, the film provides a plug for the virtues of Reagan's trickle down economics. In a radio interview, Philadelphia's Mayor Michael Nutter acknowledges the hardships of a recession economy, noting that people have lost their jobs, homes, and healthcare. He goes on to frame the corporate-sponsored music festival as an economic

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<sup>33</sup> Arthur Delaney, "Paul Ryan Laments Inner-City Culture Of Not Working," *Huffington Post*, March 12, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/12/paul-ryan-inner-cities\\_n\\_4949165.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/12/paul-ryan-inner-cities_n_4949165.html).

stimulus. “People are going to come here,” he says. “They’re gonna go to restaurants. They’re gonna shop. They’re gonna spend money.” What he presents is a market-driven solution to Philadelphia’s social ills, somehow intimating that in one weekend, Budweiser and Jay Z will help ameliorate unemployment and homelessness. Finally, the film is baldly patriotic, peppered with American Flag imagery and optimistic platitudes. At the film’s end, Jay Z tells us in a voice over, “We all have that belief that we can make it here in the land of the free and the home of the brave.” This is a remarkable change of face for a rapper who once believed, “America hated my Black ass.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Barack Obama and the Rhetoric of the American Dream**

In *Decoded* Jay Z describes the “twisted” relationship that poor people have with the government. They live in government housing—projects or prisons—and they work government jobs. They use government issued EBT cards to purchase food. “But for all this involvement the government might as well be the weather,” he writes. “A lot of us don’t think we have anything to do with it—we don’t believe we have control over this thing that controls us.”<sup>35</sup> Growing up with this relationship to the government, Jay Z never thought of himself as patriotic. “The words ‘proud to be an American’ were not words I’d ever thought I’d say,” he writes. “I’d written America off, at least politically.”<sup>36</sup> But Jay Z did utter those words—perhaps for the first time—on the day of Barack Obama’s inauguration in Washington D.C. at a concert for campaign volunteers.

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<sup>34</sup> Jay Z, *Decoded*, 154.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

Barack Obama's presidential campaign was Jay Z's turning point, the moment that he became invested in American politics. In *Decoded* the rapper openly admits that his support for Obama had more to do with the candidate's biography than his politics.

He was black. This was big. This was a chance to go from centuries of invisibility to the most visible position in the entire world. He could, through sheer symbolism, regardless of any of his actual policies, change the lives of millions of black kids who now saw something different to aspire to....No other candidate could promise so much.<sup>37</sup>

Jay Z campaigned hard for Obama and the two men are now good friends. Ideologically, they make an intuitive pair, both drawing on the American Dream narrative to define their image. In fact, the American Dream was central to Obama's persona long before he was running for president.

Scholars of political rhetoric have pinpointed two speeches in particular as fundamental to Obama's rhetorical use of the American Dream. The first is his keynote speech from the 2004 Democratic Convention. The speech catapulted Obama from an unknown State Senator to a darling of the Democratic Party and presidential hopeful. In their essay, "Recasting the American Dream," Robert Rowland and John Jones argue that the speech was so successful because Obama rhetorically reclaimed the American Dream narrative for liberalism. Since Ronald Reagan a very individualistic understanding of the American Dream has served as the rhetorical underpinnings of Republican Party policy. In his speech, Obama rewrote the dream as a collective goal – a vision of success and prosperity for American society as a whole rather than an individualistic Horatio Alger tale.

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<sup>37</sup> Jay Z, *Decoded*, 168.

Roland and Jones argue that this shift in narrative is the single most important rhetorical goal of contemporary liberalism, necessary to enact legislation aimed at social justice. In fact, in the scholars' view, this narrative is more important than political reality:

It is common for liberals to criticize contemporary American society as fundamentally unfair to people of color, women, the poor, and others. While such a social critique undoubtedly has merit in policy terms, this approach negates the American Dream narrative, thus cutting liberals off from a source of great rhetorical power. Obama, in contrast, embraced the American Dream, labeling this nation as a place of infinite opportunity.<sup>38</sup>

It is far more politically appealing to celebrate America's fundamental goodness than to criticize its many injustices. Thus, like Horatio Alger, Obama insisted upon a story that isn't true. Rowland and Jones' writing indicates that the American Dream is not just a narrative. It is functional. It does political *activity*. And politicians on both sides of the political spectrum regularly use this powerfully functional tool to obscure unsavory realities about American inequality.

As a rhetorical tool, the American Dream was central to Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign. It played a particularly crucial role at a moment when Obama's association with Reverend Jeremiah Wright threatened to fully derail his presidential hopes. So far in the campaign, the candidate had been skirting the discussion of race and racial injustice. However, Reverend Wright made some particularly inflammatory anti-racist statements which placed race at the center of Obama's campaign, whether he liked it or not. In response to the controversy, Obama made a speech in Philadelphia which, Rowland and

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<sup>38</sup> Rowland and Jones, "Recasting the American Dream," 435.



Jones argue, rescued the entire campaign. Unlike in 2004, Obama directly and honestly addressed racial injustice, contextualizing current race politics in the legacy of slavery and (boldly, for a presidential candidate) acknowledging that Black anger is legitimate. Rowland and Jones argue that the speech succeeded so spectacularly because Obama “incorporated an honest discussion of race into the progressive myth at the core of his presidential campaign.”<sup>39</sup> Obama proposed that the problem of racial inequity could be solved by banding together as a society to make the American Dream attainable for all Americans. He called on the African American community to strive for justice by “binding our particular dreams...to the larger aspirations of all Americans.”<sup>40</sup> His speech performs two key political tasks at once. First, as in 2004, he deconstructs the individualistic narrative of the American Dream. In doing so he works to undermine the neoliberal agenda that enforces racial inequity. At the same time, however, he also moves toward a kind of post-racial rhetoric—encouraging a unified American mindset rather than political activity focused on the special interests of the Black community.

Obama pointed to his own biography as proof that his vision of American unity and opportunity could be reality:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas....I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations....I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. It's a story

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<sup>39</sup> Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, “One Dream: Barack Obama, Race, and the American Dream,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 145.

<sup>40</sup> “Transcript: Barack Obama’s Speech on Race,” *NPR.org*, accessed April 16, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>.

that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts - that out of many, we are truly one.<sup>41</sup>

Here, Rowland and Jones argue, Obama “personifies the possibility that race may be transcended, not merely because of his genetic makeup, but because of his story, a story that enacts the American Dream.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, Obama’s individual success remains very salient even as the candidate attempts to deconstruct the American Dream’s individualism. Akom would likely argue that Obama’s story performs the same kind of obfuscation as a Horatio Alger story. No matter the progressive narratives that Obama attempts to tell, every time he appears on TV his individual story as a successful Black man can still be framed by the culture industry to reproduce neoliberal, meritocratic values and obscure racial inequity.

The Reverend Wright scandal clearly demonstrated mainstream America’s intolerance for Black anger. The nation was (and still is) unable to honestly confront the fact of racial injustice. As filtered through the culture industry, Obama’s Philadelphia speech constituted a reassurance that Americans need not confront this specter of race looming over American society. In fact, they may ward it off with the rhetorical power of the American Dream, which he himself embodies. This reassurance may be precisely why Americans put Obama in office. As Jones and Rowland repeatedly note throughout their scholarship, narrative rhetoric is significantly more important to the voting public than actual policy. Using his American Dream rhetoric, Obama told the most compelling story. I

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<sup>41</sup> “Transcript: Barack Obama’s Speech on Race,” *NPR.org*.

<sup>42</sup> Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, “One Dream: Barack Obama, Race, and the American Dream,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 136.

propose that the American Dream is the star-spangled bed-sheet that Americans have pulled over their collective head so they need not see the monsters lurking in the bedroom. Yes, it is a rhetorical tool, which Obama put to use for his own campaign and to gain support for progressive politics. But it must also be something greater because Obama is under the bed-sheet with the rest of us. I argue that the American Dream uses Obama right back to perpetuate the very values he aims to undue. The culture industry spins Obama's personal success—and Jay Z's—into a narrative that obscures the fundamental injustice of our racist legal code and our neoliberal market system.

## **Lit Review | Hip-hop's Politics as Usual**

Having laid out the political and ideological backdrop for my work, I will now situate my subject matter within the context of hip-hop scholarship. How, exactly do the political and economic factors, detailed above, relate to hip-hop as a culture and musical form? The existing threads of discourse in hip-hop scholarship can illuminate the ways rappers like Jay Z both resist and perpetuate racist neoliberal values in their music. I will start by complicating the scholarly narrative about the “death” of hip-hop politics. Lester K Spence, Tricia Rose, and Imani Perry highlight the political value of hip-hop as it gives voice and visibility to the Black underclass. David Wall Rice’s scholarship illustrates how rap lyricism gains further political value where it affords rappers a process of identity construction beyond stereotype. Spence’s scholarship on the Black parallel public demonstrates the ways that neoliberalism has shaped hip-hop thematic. Finally, Christopher Holmes Smith argues that the hortatory figure of the hip-hop mogul actually exemplifies the contemporary discourse of Black political advancement. Taken together, these scholars reveal a culture and musical form that *is* politically vital—full to the brim with counterhegemonic stories and sounds—but ultimately driven and limited by our country’s racist structures.

### **Narratives and Counter-Narratives in Hip-hop Scholarship**

At times, in the combined realm of scholarly and journalistic music criticism, there emerges a consensus that becomes engrained in the record of music history. This process is a collective storytelling and the result is a convenient tale, which fits easily into an already established narrative. Hip-hop criticism is no different in this regard, and no one story is more engrained than the story about the rise and fall of hip-hop politics. This story is most

neatly encapsulated by Ernest Allen Jr. in the chapter he wrote for the well-known hip-hop reader *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-hop Culture*. In the essay, which Allen wrote in 1993, the scholar hails early “consciousness rap” as a “resurgence of a nationalism and political progressivism reminiscent of African American popular culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s”<sup>43</sup> Allen was writing at the tail end of an era of great optimism among music scholars, reacting to artists like Queen Latifah, Public Enemy, and A Tribe Called Quest, whose explicitly political music seemed to implicate hip-hop as a culture of resistance.

*Droppin' Science* was not actually published until 1996, however, at which time a new slate of hip-hop artists had gained prominence. Allen appended a post-script to his essay noting that in the three years since the essay’s writing, the “political” artists he discussed had “disappeared from public view.”<sup>44</sup> Gangster rap had emerged in their place, becoming wildly popular and drastically shifting the paradigm for thematic in rap lyricism. Frustrated with rap’s new emphasis on violence, crime, sex, and materialism, Allen notes, “An artistic movement that gave birth to African American political consciousness in the eighties has also served as an obstacle to its further development.”<sup>45</sup> Allen was just one of many critical voices dismayed at Hip-hop’s thematic shift. Scholars like Todd Boyd declared “The Death of Politics in Rap Music and Popular Culture.”<sup>46</sup> Thus emerged a consensus, which quickly became an established *story*: the 1980s and early 90s were a Golden Age of conscious, politically engaged rap, while Gangster Rap ushered in a descent

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<sup>43</sup> Ernest Allen Jr., “Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap,” *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-hop Culture*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 159.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Todd Boyd, “Check Yo Self Before You Wreck Yo Self: The Death of Politics in Rap Music and Popular Culture,” *Am I Black Enough For You? Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond*, (Bloomington: Indiana, 1997) 38–59.

into violence and materialism, a dark age out of which hip-hop culture has yet to emerge.<sup>47</sup>

Over a decade later, hip-hop criticism (both scholarly and journalistic) still operates under the thrall of this story's rigid binary: Golden Age and Dark Age, consciousness and nihilism, political and commercial, music that is worthy of acclaim, and music that is not. Those rappers who seem to transcend rap's permanent "dark age" can only be understood as exceptions proving the rule of rap's apolitical and violent messaging. Instead of recognizing these rappers' current influence and context, critics invariably greet them as a welcome throwback to an earlier better time. Such critics would likely consider Jay Z, with his conspicuous consumption and glorification of drug dealer narratives, an excellent example of commercial rap in the ongoing Dark Age. Jay Z addresses this fact himself on the 2003 track, "Moment of Clarity:"

*If skills sold, truth be told, I'd probably be*

*Lyricaly Talib Kweli*

*Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense*

*But I did 5 mill' - I ain't been rhyming like Common since.*

Here Jay Z implies that politically oriented rap (represented by "consciousness" rappers Talib Kweli and Common) just does not sell.

This engrained narrative in hip-hop criticism ignores the many modes of political activity beyond lyrical protest. Rap does valuable political work when it represents and celebrates the voices and cultural practices of underrepresented peoples. Drawing on psychological theories of identity orchestration, David Wall Rice presents a more nuanced understanding of contemporary rap than the Golden Age/Dark Age binary would allow,

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<sup>47</sup> Erik Nielson, "'My President Is Black, My Lambo's Blue': The Obamafication of Rap?" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* vol. 21, no. 4 (2009): 344–363.

finding political value in individual rappers' "doing" of identity. This activity, Rice writes, "sees the artist adapting his presentations of self to his expectancies relative to affirmation given his contextualized experience."<sup>48</sup> In other words, the rapper is negotiating his identity relative to dominant notions of race and Blackness. Rice demonstrates how visible rappers like Jay Z can use autobiography to express the full complexity of their selfhood in rap lyrics, thus complicating and contradicting mainstream rap's limited representations of blackness. Rice highlights the album *Watch the Throne* as an example of this psychological process. A collaboration between Jay Z and Kanye West, the album operates as "a thesis on what success means, or can mean, for Black men in America as they think and are active beyond limited popular themes set for them."<sup>49</sup> By constructing complex and contradictory identities for themselves in the context of their stardom and wealth, Kanye and Jay Z present a nuanced alternative to racial stereotypes. In my analysis of "Otis," I will demonstrate the limits of such an individualistic mode of political resistance.

Rap scholar Imani Perry argues that there is political value even where rappers reinscribe stereotype. Rap music is an emphatic expression of Blackness and by extension otherness. She writes, "It centralizes a realm of black existence and yet commits to the otherness of that location with respect to the larger society."<sup>50</sup> In other words, rap music insists upon an image of blackness that is not deemed acceptable by mainstream white values. Hip-hop's Jack Johnsonism is a strong example of this phenomenon. Some rappers (including Jay Z in his early career) emphasize identities of black masculinity and excess

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<sup>48</sup> David Wall Rice, "Rakim, Ice Cube Then Watch the Throne: Engaged Visibility through Identity Orchestration and the Language of Hip-Hop Narratives," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 182.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 183.

<sup>50</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 47.

that, Perry argues, “frighten the mainstream, exploiting its fears and simultaneously challenging the economic disenfranchisement plaguing black American communities.”<sup>51</sup> In this way, rappers appropriate stereotypes of Blackness and exaggerate them to create counter-hegemonic identities.

Rap does not only represent Black identities, it also represents and illuminates the environment of poor urban blacks through realist lyrics. Perry and Spence identify two frames of realist rap, descriptive realism and argumentative realism. The former “creates a world for the listener in which he or she can experience the neighborhood on its own terms, through the eyes of the MC.”<sup>52</sup> The latter frame goes a step farther, not only describing but also critiquing the rappers’ political reality. Argumentative realism represents the kind of political engagement celebrated in the golden age/dark age binary. But Perry and Spence both argue that descriptive realism alone also carries political significance. Spence notes that the communities described in realist rap are the Black ghettos, spaces most likely to be treated as exceptions by the neoliberal governmentality. When rappers tell the stories of these “exceptional” communities, they give voice to people not traditionally heard either within black discursive spaces or in broader mainstream society.<sup>53</sup> Like Spence, Tricia Rose explicitly connects rap to neoliberalism in her book *Black Noise*. She writes, “Rap music articulates the chasm between Black urban lived experience and dominant, “legitimate” (e.g., neoliberal) ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, Rose believes that realist rap makes infra-racial racism visible, thereby launching an assault on neoliberal structures.

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<sup>51</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 209.

<sup>52</sup> Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 102.



While Rose's thesis may be true in some capacity, she does not take into account the fact that rap is also a product of the culture industry and therefore perpetuates neoliberal structures even as it critiques. This kind of contradiction is central to the formulation of a Black parallel public, which Spence defines as "the space in which blacks come together to articulate and debate their interests, needs, and identity."<sup>55</sup> This space may be separate from—and even resistant to—mainstream white society but it remains constrained by societal norms. This is certainly true for hip-hop. For all its celebration of otherness, Imani Perry notes that hip-hop is still a commercial product "marketed through the channels of American Imperialism."<sup>56</sup> As such, the music cannot help but be shaped by the racial biases and market imperatives of American society.

Indeed, Spence argues that as an arm of the Black parallel public, hip-hop politics "both mirror and reproduce...the neoliberal narrative."<sup>57</sup> Specifically, Spence points to realist rappers like Jay Z who glorify the figure of the hustler. The ghettos they rap about are spaces which neoliberal thought would consider exceptional—they don't function properly according to the mainstream market. Spence notes, however, that rap reorients these neighborhoods according a different market logic, which he terms narco-capitalism. The drug dealer is an entrepreneur, he argues, the perfect neoliberal subject within the narco-capitalist market. Spence writes that the hustler "exhibits discipline, a desire to improve himself through human capital, and the willingness to compete."<sup>58</sup> Drug dealers-turned-rappers like Bun B, Master P, and Jay Z, constantly refer back to their former occupations, especially emphasizing "the hustle" or "the grind." In other words they glorify

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<sup>55</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

the kind of individualistic hard work that drives the neoliberal market system.

Spence notes that their drug dealing background likely helped such artists get ahead in the rap game because, “the business models they employed while involved in drug selling...reflect the primary business model employed in selling records.”<sup>59</sup> These rappers were already successful neoliberal subjects. When they became successful rappers they simply began working for a different market system. Though the other rappers Spence mentioned have not achieved similar levels of success, Jay Z’s biography would seem to support Spence’s argument. Alongside his successful rap career, Jay Z is now a media mogul, presiding over a business empire including a clothing line and a talent management agency. The rapper has long attributed his business acumen to his experience selling drugs. Even as he has recently begun deemphasizing his drug dealer background, he still perpetuates neoliberal values by touting his Horatio Alger story. Spence’s scholarship on the parallel public is crucial to understand the political and economic forces that have shaped Jay Z’s life and his music. He is a product of his parallel public, which is in turn shaped by the broader culture industry as it constantly produces and reproduces stories that promote the neoliberal agenda.

### **The Hip-hop Mogul**

Before Jay Z, there were other rappers, like P Diddy and Master P, who ascended to the status of hip-hop mogul. Scholar Christopher Holmes Smith notes that the mogul came to prominence as a cultural figure in the late 1990s, in the rosy days of the dot-com bubble, a particular boom in American economic expansion. It was also a time, during the Clinton

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<sup>59</sup> Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 41.

Era when “social consensus rendered the box-office and the ballot box as one.”<sup>60</sup> In this new political landscape, Smith argues, American politics has shifted away from the model of political action as the physical organization of bodies in public space, to a politics of gestures, which “relies upon virtual, indirect, and asynchronous forms of presence, organization, and participation.”<sup>61</sup> Smith argues that the hip-hop mogul perfectly embodied this new political landscape. At this time he was joined by celebrity CEOs, publishers, and software developers in his lavish and very public personal spending. But the dot-com bubble burst, leaving in its wake an economic recession which soured popular opinion of wealthy businessmen and their conspicuous consumption. Crucially, however, the hip-hop mogul retained his goodwill. In fact, as embodied by Jay Z, the hip-hop mogul has ridden out the longer, bleaker recession of 2008, which Smith argues is due to the virtuousness of his rags-to-riches narrative. After the dot-com era, Smith argues, individual wealth and conspicuous consumption is only palatable if understood as “as a legitimate outcome of strenuous striving to succeed, and representative therefore of an unexpected (almost divinely ordained) social mobility that arose against the grain of conventional wisdom.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, hip-hop moguls remain popular because they are Horatio Alger figures.

Smith’s analysis of the mogul reveals how and why Jay Z’s particular drug dealer-turned-businessman narrative holds so much appeal to American culture. More specifically, however, Smith analyzes the political significance of moguls like Jay Z to the Black urban communities they represent. As a symbol of social attainment the hip-hop

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<sup>60</sup> Christopher Holmes Smith, “I Don’t Like to Dream about Getting Paid’: Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul,” *Social Text* 21, no. 4 (2003): 69.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

mogul exemplifies the shifting discourses of black activism from the civil rights era to today. His emergence and popularity, Smith argues, suggests a normalizing of “growth-mediated forms of uplift” as black political discourses.<sup>63</sup> In addition, as a Horatio Alger figure, the mogul’s social uplift is extremely individualistic. Through individual hard work and perseverance he escaped the hood and accrued personal wealth. His success does not advance the wider community, however, extending only to his family or crew, just enough people, Smith notes, to fit on a private yacht.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the mogul’s embodiment of black politics and black advancement is entirely at odds with the Civil Rights model of “supported community development.” In the place of community organizing or symbolic marches, the mogul models consumption as a “viable mode of civic participation and personal fulfillment.”<sup>65</sup> In this way, Smith argues, the mogul becomes a social mediator. He both represents the black urban community to popular culture, and encourages those communities to “buy-in” to American capitalism. In doing so, the mogul becomes a tool, not only of the white-dominated music industry, but of the American neoliberal market as a whole.

As if foreshadowing Jay Z’s “Made in America” documentary, Smith notes that the hip-hop mogul thinks of himself as an activist, “an example to others of what they could make of their lives if they would simply seize the right opportunity when the time comes.”<sup>66</sup> What allows moguls like Jay Z to retain their hold on popular imagination is that in this political moment, which privileges virtual presence over physical activism, they are not expected to “make good” on the possibility of attainment they promise. Instead, Smith

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<sup>63</sup> Smith, “I Don’t Like to Dream,” 71.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

notes, “they can continue to be representative of mass expectation of the good life without being responsible for its fulfillment.”<sup>67</sup>

Politicians, on the other hand, are supposedly responsible to their constituents and expected to serve their interests. But in *Decoded* Jay Z writes that Obama’s symbolism is more important than his policies. Certainly in the context of Smith’s politics of gestures, Jay Z may be right. Or, I should say, Jay Z’s statement is merely an accurate representation of contemporary politics, in which Obama’s American Dream narrative becomes just another part of the culture industry’s machine. Perhaps in this current landscape the mogul and the President operate similarly, at least in the cultural consciousness. They are symbols of Black advancement but neither will truly be expected to ameliorate racial inequity at the societal level. In fact, their stories, as filtered through the culture industry, serve to further entrench racist structures and protect White power. That being said, an analysis of Jay Z’s music might be just as politically vital as an analysis of Obama’s campaign rhetoric. Either endeavor will find the scholar deconstructing the untrue stories we tell ourselves as a nation and, ideally, learning to see beyond them.

With this goal in mind, I have analyzed three songs off each of Jay Z’s three most recent albums—all of which he released since Obama’s election in 2008. In the next section I analyze the politics of the pop crossover in “Empire State of Mind,” demonstrating how the Horatio Alger narrative has shaped Jay Z’s music, not just in terms of lyrical thematic but also at the layer of musical sonics. I also analyze “Otis,” a collaboration between Jay Z and Kanye West. Here I demonstrate the resiliency of the American Dream narrative even as it comes under attack in the two rappers’ racial critique. Finally, I analyze “Picasso

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<sup>67</sup> Smith, “I Don’t Like to Dream,” 80.

Baby,” in which Jay Z invades the social sphere of the elite art world and ultimately demonstrates the conditional nature of a Black protagonist’s success in the American Dream narrative. Taken together these three songs illustrate the many ways that the culture industry shapes Jay Z’s storytelling to perpetuate the American Dream narrative. But ultimately, with “Picasso Bay,” I argue that Jay Z successfully resists this narrative revealing the racist cracks in the American Dream formula.

# **Song Analysis**

## “Empire State of Mind”

The year 2009 marked a turning point in Jay Z’s career, with the album that catapulted him from hip-hop mogul to international pop star. *Blueprint 3* was a blockbuster record, debuting at number one despite an album leak and complications with the release date. As his eleventh number one album, *Blueprint 3* placed the rapper just ahead of Elvis Presley and just behind The Beatles as the artist with the second most number one albums since Billboard began reporting.<sup>68</sup> All of this is surely remarkable but Jay Z was always a successful album artist. To be a pop star, however, a high-selling album is just not enough. The pop music mechanism is driven by hit singles and that is where *Blueprint 3* sets itself apart from the rest of Jay Z’s discography. The lead single “Empire State of Mind,” was Jay Z’s first (and only) single to hit number one on the Billboard Hot 100—the ultimate indicator of an artist’s crossover success. Ultimately the album sent two more singles to the chart’s top 10 but “Empire State of Mind” is certainly the single factor most responsible for Jay Z’s transformation from renowned rapper to global pop star.<sup>69</sup> The song stayed on the Hot 100 for 30 weeks<sup>70</sup> and held the number one position for five.<sup>71</sup> The Recording Industry Association of America certified the song triple platinum in April of 2010.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Keith Caulfield, “Fab 400: Jay-Z Nets Historic Bow; Beatles Return,” *Billboard*, Sept. 26, 2009.

<sup>69</sup> B.J. Steiner, “Today In Hip-Hop: Jay Z Releases ‘The Blueprint 3,’” *XXL*, September 8, 2013, <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/hip-hop-today/2013/09/today-hip-hop-jay-z-releases-blueprint-3/>.

<sup>70</sup> “Jay Z, Chart History,” *Billboard.com*, n.d., <http://www.billboard.com/artist/304305/jay-z/chart?page=2&f=379>.

<sup>71</sup> Silvio Pietroluongo, “Jay-Z, Keys’ ‘Empire’ Tops Hot 100 For Fifth Week,” Text, *Billboard*, December 17, 2009, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/266366/jay-z-keys-empire-tops-hot-100-for-fifth-week>.

<sup>72</sup> “Searchable Database: Empire State of Mind,” *RIAA.com*, n.d., <http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?artist=%22Empire+State+of+Mind%22>.



So why was this song in particular so commercially successful? In her article “Horatio Alger and Hip Hop,” Kathleen Knight Abowitz asks the same question of the classic Fugees album *The Score*, which experienced significant crossover success in 1996. “The various media representations of this group lend them flexibility to appeal to middle-class audiences as well as street-wise hip hop [*sic*] fans,” she notes. Most crucially, she argues, “The Fugees, like many hip hop artists, are represented in the tradition of the Horatio Alger American myth: African American street kids, against all odds, claw their way out of poverty through work and determination.”<sup>73</sup> Here Abowitz directly links the appeal of the Horatio Alger myth to hip-hop’s crossover success, which would certainly explain Jay Z’s pop appeal.

Countless music journalists have framed Jay Z as a modern Horatio Alger figure. Jay Z has also made this narrative explicit in his own lyrics, and especially “Empire State of Mind.” Though the song makes no mention of Barack Obama—or politics at all—it was released in the first year of the Obama presidency, which in itself represents a Horatio Alger narrative. Furthermore, Obama’s election signaled to many a victory over racism and the heralding of a post-racial era. In other words, Obama’s election represented an affirmation of the American Dream’s reality for *all* Americans. Thus Abowitz’ thesis seems even more apt as applied to “Empire State of Mind” which capitalizes on a particularly hopeful moment in the American cultural consciousness.

I would argue further that the causal relationship between Horatio Alger appeal and pop crossover does not run in only one direction. The two embrace in a positive feedback

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<sup>73</sup> Kathleen Knight Abowitz, “Horatio Alger and Hip Hop,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (1997): 411.

cycle, driven by the capitalist imperative of the American Dream. Before a rapper can embody the Horatio Alger myth, he or she must achieve economic success. This means courting the commercial music industry and cultivating a sound that is compatible to pop crossover. Thus, as a perpetuating agent of country's neoliberal values, the American Dream is at work, not only in the Horatio Alger narrative of "Empire State of Mind" but also in the song's adoption of pop sonics and aesthetics.

### ***Since I made it here, I can make it anywhere – Jay Z's Horatio Alger Narrative***

Perhaps a factor of the track's success, Jay Z's verses are structurally very simple. The rapper's flow almost never varies, repeating the same rhythmic pattern and the same arc in pitch. This rapped pattern parallels the equally repetitive structure of the musical track, which also arcs downward melodically and repeats every two measures. Given this rigid and simplistic structure, Jay Z's verses can be understood as divided into eight 4-line stanzas or quatrains, each of which slot neatly into the track's two-measure pattern. A division of the verses in this way is further encouraged by the lyrics themselves, which seem to move on to a new thought every two measures.

Jay Z's first quatrain, maps explicitly the geographical progression of rags to riches. No matter that today, Brooklyn is significantly gentrified, in Jay Z's lyrical universe Brooklyn represents the rags of his rags-to-riches story. It stands in for "the hood" or life on the margins of post-industrial urban America. As Abowitz notes, the Horatio Alger story involves clawing your way *out* of poverty, which for Jay Z means getting *out* of Brooklyn. In the very first quatrain he raps, "Me I'm out that Brooklyn/Now I'm down in Tribeca/Right next to DeNiro/But I'll stay hood forever." These four simple lines do much to set the tone for the entire song, and neatly frame the tensions of Jay Z's storytelling. The contradiction

of hip-hop's Horatio Alger is that the rapper must get *out* of the hood and crossover to the pop charts while retaining an "authentic" connection to his origins.<sup>74</sup> Jay Z emphasizes these origins in his discussion of his drug dealer past, peppering the quatrains with references to specific geographies. In the third quatrain he tells us he used to "cop"—or sell crack—in Harlem, meeting up with Dominicans at a McDonalds to complete drug deals. In the fourth quatrain he reveals that his "stash spot," was at 560 State Street, an apartment building in downtown Brooklyn.

Directed by Hype Williams, "The Empire State of Mind" video also navigates the tensions between the specifically "hood" and the accessibly pop. On the verses, the video cuts between still images of New York and video footage of Jay Z rapping on various street corners. Just as the lyrics are broken down into quatrains, the video is broken into different series of images, each with its own theme. For example, to illustrate Jay Z's quatrain about "copping" in Harlem, the video cuts quickly to three different images from the neighborhood: a shaved ice cart, a Latino man shouting, and a pair of black men greeting each other in front of a passing bus. Bookending these images we see video footage of Jay Z rapping on a railing by the entrance to a Harlem subway stop. Images like these are meant to further connect the rapper to his "hood" origins and to the urban neighborhoods like Harlem, out of which hip-hop first emerged.

If Brooklyn and Harlem represent Jay Z's "rags" then his current geographical location stands in for "riches." In the first verse Jay Z does not merely say that he's progressed from Brooklyn (on the margins) to Manhattan, the city's geographic and symbolic core. He tells the listener specifically that he now lives in Tribeca, a fact that

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<sup>74</sup> Imani Perry delves significantly into the masculinist constructions of hip-hop authenticity as a marketing category in her book *Prophets of the Hood*, 86–105.

would mean very little for those un-versed in New York City geographies. Jay Z invests the neighborhood with meaning and with a sense of status, by telling us that his neighbor in Tribeca is Robert DeNiro a well-known, successful, and universally revered actor. In the song, the actor's name comes to symbolize New York City's glamorous portrayal in the movies and to represent the set of A-list celebrities, with whom Jay Z must now be rubbing shoulders.

Having "made it," Jay Z does not merely live next door to celebrities, he is a global celebrity in his own right, or so he raps in the second stanza: "I'm the new Sinatra/And since I made it here/I can make it anywhere/Yeah they love me everywhere." Here Jay Z is making reference to the song "New York, New York," made famous by Frank Sinatra. The song, which now plays at Yankee stadium at the end of every game, has taken on a storied aura as the city's anthem. When Jay Z compares himself to the Italian American crooner, he boasts not just of his own talent, but his celebrity, and his status as the pop cultural face and voice of New York City. He reemphasizes this point in the second verse when he notes "I made the Yankee hat more famous than a Yankee can." By his own reckoning, Jay Z is a bigger celebrity than the players on New York's most famous sports team, able to completely transform their logo into a symbol of hip-hop style.

More so than any of Jay Z's boastful lyrics, the music video provides the consummate distillation of Jay Z's Horatio Alger story. Forsaking the earlier quick cut images, the video takes a new perspective on the final verse. No longer is Jay Z down in the streets rapping about various New York landmarks. Instead we see—in a brief wide shot—that he is now standing in a grand corner office and looking out the window. In a close-up we see that the rapper is no longer wearing the more casual baggy jeans and flat-brim cap associated with

hip-hop. He is now dressed in an elegantly tailored three-piece suit. Here the video visually completes Jay Z's progression from the streets of Brooklyn to the executive offices of Manhattan. He is quite literally on top looking down. Moreover we are seeing Jay Z in the same costume and context that we see other celebrated Horatio Alger figures, White men like Andrew Carnegie and Cornelius Vanderbilt, who started from nothing and built business empires. Those with some knowledge of Jay Z's biography will recognize this image of the corner office as a reference to the rapper's successful business career. By 2009, Jay Z's business exploits included co-founding a record label and a successful clothing line, briefly serving as president of Def Jam, and most notably, partnering with LiveNation to create the entertainment company RocNation. Living next to DeNiro, making the Yankee hat famous, having that suit and corner office, all of these signifiers come together to assert that Jay Z has made it, he is living the American Dream.

"Empire State of Mind's" uplifting chorus further underlines the song's celebration of the American Dream, specifically in the context of New York City. Sung by Alicia Keys, the chorus celebrates the city, not only as the site of Jay Z's achievement, but as a place of opportunity for anyone:

*New York*

*Concrete jungle where dreams are made, oh*

*There's nothing you can't do*

*Now you're in New York*

*These streets will make you feel brand new*

*Big lights will inspire you*

*Let's hear it for New York*

By alternating between Jay Z's personal storyline in the verse and Alicia Keys' more universally oriented chorus, the song seems to present Jay Z's success as evidence of the chorus' message: there's nothing you can't do. Jay Z now lives next to DeNiro, proof that anyone can follow their dreams and succeed in New York City. Moreover, the chorus' definition of New York is extremely broad, situating the city as a symbolic site for aspiration rather than a specific locality. This New York is not specific to the experience of marginal communities of color. It is not Bed-Stuy. It is essentially a fantasy space, a blank canvas on which any listener can impose his or her own personal aspirations. Thus the chorus allows the song to become a broader celebration of opportunity in America.

***Let's hear it for New York – Celebrating the city, purifying the “hood”***

As the origin and early epicenter of hip-hop culture, New York is an extremely common subject matter in rap lyrics, as are urban landscapes in general. In her analysis of music videos, hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose argues that location is central to rap thematic and, she notes, rap videos are almost always set in black urban inner-city locations. By way of example, Rose cites West Coast rappers like NWA whose music videos “often capture the regional specificity of spatial, ethnic, temperate, and psychological facets of black marginality in Los Angeles.” Though “Empire State of Mind,” is similarly focused on city life, Jay Z's portrayal of New York City, both lyrically and in the song's accompanying video, is far less rooted in the specifically black urban experience.

In the first verse, Jay Z raps that he will “stay hood forever.” But the song's references to “hood” locations, drug dealing, and other signifiers of hip-hop's origins, are essentially just gestures toward “staying hood” without any substantive discussion of life in the hood itself. Consider this quatrain from the song's second verse:

*Welcome to the melting pot*

*Corners where we selling rocks*

*Afrika Bambaata shit*

*Home of the hip-hop*

Here Jay Z tells us almost nothing about the environment of someone who might be “selling rocks” on the corner. New York City is “the melting pot.” It is the home of hip-hop pioneers like Afrika Bambaata. That is as much detail about city life as we can glean from Jay Z’s lyrics. His earlier albums are richly descriptive of the rapper’s urban environment and the day-to-day experience of crack dealers. Songs like “Where I’m From” and “99 Problems” tell vividly realized stories about life on the margins of post-industrial America, what Imani Perry describes as “rap realism.”<sup>75</sup>

Much of Perry’s scholarship is devoted to the complication of the positive-negative rap binary. She notes that even as hip-hop moves away from the explicitly political themes of rappers like Brand-Nubian and Talib Kweli, it still has political import. This import is embedded in the values, aesthetics, and sonics, which the music celebrates and employs. Perry argues, “insofar as hip-hop embraces ghetto sensibilities and ghetto people, it continues to have an important counter-hegemonic force.”<sup>76</sup> But Perry also notes that the commodification and repetition of rap music dislocates it from its origins. Thematically, “Empire State of Mind” seems a consummation of Perry’s argument. In service to the necessities of pop crossover, Jay Z abandons the descriptive realism of his earlier storytelling in favor of vague shout-outs to his “hood” origins.

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<sup>75</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 86-89.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

The music video similarly de-emphasizes the specifics of “hood” life. The still images which dominate the video during Jay Z’s verses depict more touristy landmarks—like Yankee Stadium and Wall Street—than images of Black urban neighborhoods. Moreover, the images go by extremely fast, in time with the beat. Unless you watch the video very closely and pause regularly, few but the most recognizable images will actually make an impression. In sections meant to illustrate Jay Z’s quatrains about “hood” origins, the images of Black ghettos are skimmed over so quickly they barely have meaning. In the second verse, when Jay Z raps, “Corners where we selling rocks,” there are four accompanying images which depict Jay Z’s neighborhood in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Two of the images are of young black men in baggy pants whose faces have been blurred. The other two simply show empty streets. All of the images speed by too fast to register.

One image, depicting a mural on Marcy Avenue, is actually a repeat from the earlier “99 Problems” video. Directed by Mark Romanek in 2003, the video is based almost exclusively in and around the Marcy Projects. Jay Z raps in front of a looming backdrop of Marcy’s identical apartment blocks. The video takes us into their dingy hallways and zooms in on the sober faces of their residents. Romanek’s vision of Marcy is clearly stylized but it still gets at the neighborhood’s sense of oppression. Most importantly, the video shows that there are people still living there, eking out an existence among the cement blocks. The contrast between these two videos is striking. Whereas “99 Problems” aims to depict life in the hood, “Empire State of Mind,” barely bothers to mention the hood at all—either in lyric or imagery. As in Horatio Alger’s novels, the streets have been “purified,” and the poor all but disappeared. Given the two videos’ very different treatments of urban life, we can also see the crossover process at work. “99 Problems” carries forward the tradition Tricia



Rose identifies in the videos of NWA, leaning on a ghetto aesthetic and depicting the lives of ghetto people. Together, the song and the video seem to emphasize “hood-ness” with little thought for crossover appeal. Meanwhile, the video for “Empire State of Mind,” fully supports the single’s pop chart ambitions.

### ***I’m the New Sinatra – Signifying Race in the Sonic Crossover***

During the chorus, the video takes a different tack. Instead of cutting quickly between stills and video, Williams parallels the song’s musical shift, favoring long, sweeping shots. Here the video stays anchored to one location, devoted almost entirely to shots of Alicia Keys playing piano and singing in the middle of Times Square. As the backdrop for the song’s musical core, Williams has chosen one of New York’s most famous landmarks, far removed from Marcy Projects. Occasionally the video also cuts to sweeping shots of the city skyline at night. These images are not only more sustained but also more recognizable than the quick-cut, still images we see during the verses. Thus, like the chorus’ lyrics, they give the most lasting impression. Taken together the chorus’ broadly inspirational message and accompanying visuals allow the song to take on an almost global reach. New York may be the song’s topic, but its audience could be from anywhere, with any background.

So far, I have identified the way that “Empire State of Mind” crosses over in terms of lyrical thematic and video imagery. But perhaps most important to the song’s pop chart success, is it’s *sonic* crossover. It is a song’s musical elements—catchy riffs, danceable rhythms, and compelling hooks—which generate interest in pop audiences as they listen in their car radios or sing along at parties. Significantly, for artists operating in any Black musical tradition, crossover to the pop charts necessitates an appeal to both wider and

*whiter* audiences.<sup>77</sup> Therefore “Empire State of Mind” sees Jay-Z moving away from hip-hop sonics that signify Blackness.

The key to the song’s chart-topping appeal lies in the soaring, anthemic track. Produced by Al Shux, the track is characterized by a slow tempo and a complex beat, crisp rather than booming, and not conducive to dancing. It feels highly produced and glossy with no indication of what Perry calls the “compositional aesthetic.” Though contemporary hip-hop is far removed from the hardscrabble production values of the music in its early stages, producers and rappers still tend to make aural reference to those values with spoken mic-checks, samples, and mixing techniques which acknowledge and reveal the seams of a song’s compositional process.<sup>78</sup>

On “Empire State of Mind,” however, the production is seamless. The song’s core track is not a sample. Rather it is a very polished musical reproduction of a disco song, The Moments’ “Love on a Two-Way Street,” performed by studio musicians. The mix is dominated by synthesizers and a chiming piano’s treble rather than the traditional hip-hop bass. All of these elements combine to make the song fully appropriate for stadiums, and certainly pop radio, but not the hip-hop dance club. Toward the end of Jay Z’s verse the track builds in tension toward the song’s soaring hook with the addition of pulsing cellos. On the chorus, the cellos are joined by a full, sweeping string section. Shux’ use of instruments from the western classical cannon gives the song a sense of status and economic means which is far removed from early hip-hop production.

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<sup>77</sup> Deena Weinstein, “The History of Rock’s Past Through Rock Covers,” *Mapping the Beat*, ed. Thomas Swiss, John M. Sloop, and Andrew Herman, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 140.

<sup>78</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 201-202.

The choice of Alicia Keys to collaborate on “Empire State of Mind” is a shrewd one. She is, herself, a crossover success. Her own music emphasizes R&B’s gospel influence with heavy use of piano and constant upward motion. She is therefore well situated to provide the song’s inspirational tone. Keys’ melody on the chorus is incredibly catchy and uplifting. She arcs upward to the highest notes of the melody on the phrases “Where dreams are *made*” and “There’s nothing you *can’t* do,” thus emphasizing the chorus’ broadly inspirational platitudes. One of the song’s defining factors is that Keys’ melody seems to eclipse everything else. In rap music the sung hooks do tend to be the catchiest and most memorable part of a song but rarely do they stand on their own. In this case, however, Alicia Keys actually spun out her chorus into it’s own independent single, “Empire State of Mind Pt. II.” Considering the dominance of the song’s melodic chorus, “Empire State of Mind” is paradigmatic of rap’s structural shift towards pop. At its origin, rap music was largely unstructured. Rap verses rambled onward for minutes without any kind of break or structural definition. Since the 1980s, rap has been in the process of popification, moving towards regular, structured verses alternating with a singer’s hook or chorus. With its regularly patterned verses and irrepressible chorus, “Empire State of Mind” seems a consummation of this process, appealing to those listeners who don’t usually like rap.

Even when Jay Z *is* rapping his delivery is very simple. It is slow and easy to follow. There is no rhythmic variety or dynamic range. He maintains the same smooth timbre and rhythmic pattern throughout. This simple flow also helps make the song accessible to listeners who are not used to rap music. Often, rap lyricism is complex and even virtuosic, defined by syncopated rhythms and varying flows. This complexity along with rap’s sheer wordiness makes it very difficult for listeners to participate. As Perry notes, difficulty is

often a *strategy* in hip-hop lyricism, to express skill and Black masculine authenticity, thereby *excluding* outsiders from hip-hop's discursive space.<sup>79</sup> "Empire State of Mind," however, is aiming to achieve a very different goal. It is structurally and lyrically *easy* and it invites listeners to rap along.

Once again it is instructive to compare "Empire State of Mind" with a song like "99 Problems." It is aggressive in both instrumental and vocal delivery. Musically the song is characterized by loud guitar blasts. Their attack is mirrored in Jay Z's flow as he powerfully spits consonant words like "bitch" and "zapatos." Thus, "99 Problems" recalls the aggressive gangsta rap of NWA in both imagery and sonics. On the other hand, Shux' production on "Empire State of Mind" places far less emphasis on blasts of sound or heavy drum beats. Instead he leans into the pleasant, non-aggressive timbres of the piano and strings. Meanwhile Jay Z's flow is relaxed and amenable in its regularity. He doesn't spit or startle. Certainly this style of rapping matches the song's thematic. "Empire State of Mind" is a celebration of Jay Z's success, not a political critique nor a realist depiction of hood life. This is not to suggest that all *real* hip-hop must be like gangster rap—loud, angry, and aggressive. But the comparison does illustrate how "Empire State of Mind" works to make itself appealing, pleasurable, and *safe* for pop audiences. In doing so, it moves away from both sonic and aesthetic signifiers of Blackness.

### ***Now I live on Billboard – Horatio Alger and the Pop Crossover***

In the first verse, Jay Z actually makes explicit the connection between his rags-to-riches story and pop crossover. Recalling the geographic trajectory of the first quatrain he raps:

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<sup>79</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 50.

*Me I'm out that Bed-Stuy*

*Home of that boy Biggie*

*Now I live on Billboard*

*And I brought my boys with me*

Here the American Dream does not merely entail crossing over the river from Brooklyn to Manhattan. It also means moving up the Billboard pop charts. Far earlier than 2009, music critics and scholars like Imani Perry were despairing over hip-hop's crossover, perceiving a decrease in quality in more mainstream rap. "There can be no doubt," Perry writes, "that it constitutes a more simplistic, less innovative, and softened version of hip-hop, meant to cater to a broader listening audience."<sup>80</sup> Whether or not Perry's judgment is exactly fair, it does seem to mirror a phenomenon in Horatio Alger's work. Literary scholar W. T. Lhamon notes that in the novel *Ragged Dick*, the young protagonist must perform another kind of crossover. "To succeed is to become middle-class, and that necessitates effacing the features that made him interesting all along," Lhamon writes. He notes that *Ragged Dick* must progress from a boy with colorful diction to "a man of correct rhetoric."<sup>81</sup>

Understanding rappers like Jay Z as *Ragged Dicks* reveals the crossover process as an effacing of hip-hop's "hood" origins in favor of a "correct" musical rhetoric that will appeal to a wider and whiter audience. Here again, we see the intertwining nature of crossover appeal and the Alger narrative.

Lhamon argues that Horatio Alger's main bequest to American culture was a "complacent plot of the outsider breaking into society's structure."<sup>82</sup> "Empire State of

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<sup>80</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 191.

<sup>81</sup> Lhamon, "Horatio Alger," 24-25.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Mind” explicitly expresses this plot, celebrating Jay Z’s progression from street corner to corner office. Not only that, with Keys’ uplifting chorus, the song assures listeners that they too can achieve such success. “There’s nothing you can’t do,” she sings. Carrying forward Lhamon’s logic to Jay Z’s music, I argue that “Empire State of Mind” was so successful because Americans “needed to be reminded over and over again” to believe a story about American class mobility that isn’t true.<sup>83</sup>

Lhamon argues further that the ideological premise behind Alger’s plot “was that the only valuable life was within society.” Beyond its obvious application to Jay Z’s rags-to-riches autobiography, this premise is also at play in the politics of the crossover. At its root, hip-hop is the musical expression of those outside society. In order for this music to have both cultural and monetary value, it must reshape itself to be compatible with the White mainstream. White American society. In “Empire State of Mind” this means deemphasizing Jay Z’s “hood” origins to project a purified image of New York without social ills. It also means forsaking hip-hop’s bass-heavy sonics and compositional aesthetic in favor of slick production and western orchestral instrumentation. When understood in the context of Alger’s legacy, “Empire State of Mind,” reveals the limits of the American Dream. It is not a multi-cultural or pluralistic dream. Those who would emerge from poverty to “make it” can only do so by effacing their outsider identities and assuming new “correct” selves.

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<sup>83</sup> Lhamon, “Horatio Alger,” 15.

## Chapter 2 | “Otis”

When Jay Z made “Empire State of Mind” in 2009 his performance of the American Dream was fully optimistic and uncritical of the dream’s many contradictions and racialized biases. Two years later, Jay Z returned with a new album that shone a very critical light on the oxymoron of Black wealth in a racist society. *Watch the Throne* was actually a collaboration with longtime friend and competitor Kanye West. As a producer West had worked with Jay Z for years, producing some of his biggest hits. By 2011 Kanye West was also a rap super star in his own right, closer than any other rapper had come to Jay Z’s levels of success. This all-star pairing was a big enough sensation that the album’s surprise release could be an instant media event without any former promotion. *Watch the Throne* sold 436,000 copies in its first week, debuting at number one on the Billboard Hot 200, and staying on the chart for 62 weeks.<sup>84</sup>

The album did not have the same kind of pop cross-over appeal as *Blueprint 3*, with only one single cracking the Top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100. Still the album was a commercial success by any rubric, certified Platinum by the RIAA.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps more notable than the wealth generated by “Watch the Throne” was the wealth it expressed, not just in the lyrics but in the musical production and the physical product. For example, the album’s gold gilt cover-art was designed by Riccardo Tisci, chief designer for the French fashion house Givenchy. Upon the album’s release, critics remarked especially on the album’s

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<sup>84</sup> Keith Caulfield, “Jay-Z And Kanye West’s ‘Watch The Throne’ Debuts At No. 1 On Billboard 200,” Text, *Billboard*, August 17, 2011, <http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1174987/jay-z-and-kanye-wests-watch-the-throne-debuts-at-no-1-on-billboard-200>. AND “Kanye West, Chart History,” accessed April 21, 2014, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/276709/kanye-west/chart?f=305>.

<sup>85</sup> Adam Fleischer, “Watch the Throne, A Year Later: By The Numbers,” *XXL*, August 19, 2012, <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2012/08/watch-the-throne-a-year-later-by-the-numbers/>.

samples, which *Pitchfork* writer Tom Breihan speculated must be “absurdly expensive.”<sup>86</sup> *Time Magazine* critic Claire Suddath wrote, “I don't even want to know how much it costs to sample Otis Redding's “Try a Little Tenderness.””<sup>87</sup> As producer, Kanye West used multiple extremely prominent soul samples, which given today's stringent copyright laws would have cost many thousands of dollars. In 2008, *SPIN Magazine* estimated that sampling a popular artist like James Brown (which Kanye West does) would cost about \$20,000.<sup>88</sup>

Critics also noted how, with *Watch the Throne*, the two rappers had taken conspicuous consumption to new extremes. Kanye West and Jay Z have grown so rich that, critics noted, listeners might well need to Google-search the brand names they reference. Alongside the more common name-drops like Mercedes-Benz and Hennessy, come references to the watchmaker Audemars Piguet and the French fashion line Maison Martin Margiela. Coincidentally, *Time's* Suddath noted that the album's release coincided with the Dow Jones' worst single-day performance since 2008. So the critical backlash to the album revolved not just around the two rapper's outrageously capitalistic lyrics but specifically their timing, extolling their personal wealth at a time of major economic depression across the country. Bloggers and critics called the album “insensitive,” “chillingly out of step,” and “out of touch with the streets.” American Studies professor and *Grantland* writer Hua Hsu called Jay Z and Kanye West's music “income gap raps.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Tom Breihan, “Jay-Z / Kanye West: Watch the Throne,” *Pitchfork*, August 11, 2011, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15725-watch-the-throne/>.

<sup>87</sup> Claire Suddath, “Watch the Throne Review: A Gold-Plated Luxury Vehicle, with a Message,” *Time*, August 9, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2087509,00.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Matthew Newton, “Is Sampling Dying?,” *SPIN*, November 21, 2008, <http://www.spin.com/articles/sampling-dying/>.

<sup>89</sup> Hua Hsu, “Watch the Throne: Let Them Eat Cake,” *Grantland*, August 24, 2011, <http://grantland.com/features/let-eat-cake/>.



Certainly the rappers have made wealth the album's central focus. *Watch the Throne* might be considered a concept album in its devotion to a central set of themes best set out by Jay Z on "Murder to Excellence:" Black excellence, opulence, decadence. However, in their indictment of the album's conspicuous consumption, critics often overlooked or deemphasized the very sharp criticism Kanye West and Jay Z perform about race and class prejudice in the United States. In their discussion of conspicuous consumption both rappers illuminate the oxymoron of Black wealth in racist America. "We ain't even supposed to be here," Jay Z raps on "N----s in Paris," noting the improbability that two Black men would even survive and escape prison much less achieve such levels of wealth and success. You could consider that line from "N----s in Paris" as the central thesis of *Watch the Throne*. It is an expression of Black wealth in a culture where such a thing is not *supposed* to exist. In this way, the album actually points to the racism, which is inherent in the American Dream. It is not meant for all Americans, certainly not for Black men like Jay Z who grow up in the housing projects of America's Black ghettos. In other words, Jay Z and Kanye West are deconstructing the Horatio Alger myth, which only allows for a strapping white protagonist.

*Watch the Throne's* lead single "Otis" is the most succinct distillation of the album's musings on race and wealth in American culture. In it, the two rappers explicitly re-frame conspicuous consumption as racial critique. They confound racial prejudice by purchasing Maybachs, watches, and jets, belongings which Black men *shouldn't* be able to own. Couched as it is in the language of consumption, however, their criticism poses little threat to the American Dream narrative. In fact, the song reveals the remarkable and infallible thrall that the American Dream holds over our pop cultural consciousness. Jay Z and Kanye

West may criticize American racial inequity, but they fall short of criticizing the American Dream itself. Instead, “Otis” represents a reproduction of the culture industry’s American Dream with Black characters, ultimately reinscribing the Dream’s narrative as virtuous and accessible for all Americans.

### ***Luxury Rap – Conspicuous Consumption and Status***

The song opens with an extended sample of Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness.” As producer, Kanye West leaves the song entirely untouched for almost twelve measures. This choice is an unusual one. Unlike most rap samples that are chopped up and manipulated to serve a new purpose in a new song, Kanye West allows Redding’s track to exist by itself. It is an independent prelude to the rest of the song, which is far more upbeat. It is also a very expensive choice as the price for a sample increases with prominence and duration.<sup>90</sup>

The sample itself is pulled from the middle of “Try a Little Tenderness,” when Redding sings:

*It makes it easier, easier to bear*

*You won’t regret it no, no*

*Some girls, they don’t forget it*

*Love is their whole happiness.”*

West then begins to chop up the sample, cutting to a later portion of the song, when Oits sings, “Squeeze her, don’t tease her, never leave her.” At this point Jay Z addresses the audience. “Sounds so soulful don’t you agree?” he asks. It is as though, by sampling such a large chunk of the song, he and Kanye West have been spinning Redding’s record for us.

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<sup>90</sup> Newton, “Is Sampling Dying?”

This impression is underlined in the song's music video when, at the beginning of the track, we see Jay Z squatting near the camera and singing along with his eyes closed and we, as the viewers, are sharing his listening experience. Finally, after forty seconds, the main body of the song begins. Kanye West's track is extremely minimal, composed mostly of an isolated measure from "Try a Little Tenderness" in which Redding briefly bursts into a string of grunting, nonsensical syllables. Kanye West cleverly loops this measure, transforming Redding's percussive vocals into the song's rhythm track. For each verse the measure is looped six times, building tension until the track finally resolves once again into Redding's refrain: "Squeeze her, don't tease her, never leave her."

At first the quotation of Redding's classic love song, seems thematically divergent from the rappers' actual verses, which they trade back and forth over West's track without a hook or chorus. Lyrically the song deals most explicitly with conspicuous consumption or as Jay Z raps, "looking like wealth." In the track's first verse Jay Z alerts us to his new watch collection, including the very high-end brand, Hublot and two "big face Rollies," or Rolexes. In the second verse Kanye West raps, "They ain't seen me cause I pulled up in my other Benz/Last week I was in my other other. Benz." The implication of course, is that the rapper owns at least three Mercedes-Benzes. These boasts are not far beyond typical hip-hop braggadocio. Other references, however, are a little more upscale and exclusive. In the third verse, Jay Z tells us he's performing "live from The Mercer," a very expensive and fashionable boutique hotel in SoHo, one of New York's high-end shopping districts.

Perry notes that conspicuous consumption has long been a focus of rap lyricism, with an emphasis on fine alcohol, platinum jewelry, and fashion—from Nike sneakers to haute couture designers. *Watch the Throne's* critics are certainly not the first to indict such

crass consumerism. Conscious rap purists and moralizing white critics alike, have framed this preoccupation in rap music as destructive and irresponsible. Still, Perry points out, consumerist tendencies are certainly not unique to hip-hop culture. “This kind of excess celebrated elsewhere in American life is deemed disgraceful when associated with poor Black people,” she notes.<sup>91</sup>

Perry argues further that hip-hop’s sometimes-excessive consumerism is not new. Style has always played a significant part in African American culture, from the hipster garb of bebop musicians to the pristinely tended afros and combat boots of Black Power followers. Furthermore, Perry notes, “Style, particularly that acquired at great expense, has always made for an in-your-face challenge to the powers that be.”<sup>92</sup> This is, of course, the crux of Jay Z and Kanye West’s performance of wealth in “Otis.” Perry would argue that the two rappers are not mimicking white privilege when they attach status to their watches and sports cars. Rather, they are recasting status. The act of self-adornment, she argues, “subverts the image of low status associated with black bodies.”<sup>93</sup> So when Jay Z hangs out at the Mercer Hotel or when Kanye West rolls up in his *other* Benz, the rappers are assigning value to their bodies—and to their *presence*—in a society that devalues Blackness.

On “Otis,” both rappers perform Perry’s notion of subversive Black style, invading white spaces and confounding racial prejudice through their success and the consumption of high fashion. In the fourth verse Kanye West recasts the status afforded rap lyricism when he raps:

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<sup>91</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 197.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

*Luxury rap*

*The Hermes of verses*

*Sophisticated ignorance*

*Write my curses in cursive.*

Here Kanye West asserts that his lyricism is as valuable as anything sold at Hermes, a high fashion boutique. At the same time he subtly calls out those who disparage rap music for its profanity and “ignorant” language. He creates a powerful juxtaposition in his rhyming of Hermes/Verses and Curses/Cursive, setting a signifier of whiteness and wealth alongside the language of rap music, with all its populist appeal and representations of Blackness. The irony of these lines is further underlined by the fact that he purposely mispronounces the word “Hermes.” The juxtapositions within Kanye West’s verse create a strong oxymoronic tension, epitomized by the phrase, “sophisticated ignorance.” The whole quatrain is oxymoronic because, as Jay Z asserts on “N----s in Paris,” Kanye West and his music aren’t *supposed* to exist in these contexts of high fashion and high culture. His lyrics thus reveal the cultural dissonance that occurs when a Black man invades spaces formerly reserved for the White and wealthy.

Jay Z continues this thread of argument in his final verse, when he raps, “Viva Mexico, Cubano, Dominicano... Driving Benzes with no Benefits/Not bad huh, for some immigrants.” Of course Jay Z is not an immigrant himself but he aligns himself with Latino populations who are generally considered to be immigrants or interlopers. As marginalized populations, neither Blacks nor Latinos are expected or “supposed” to be driving sports cars. Thus Jay Z’s boast is meant to fly in the face of white racist assumptions. He further underlines the audacity of Black or Latino wealth when he raps,

“Build your fences, we diggin’ tunnels/Can’t you see we getting’ money up under you.” This gleeful line epitomizes Jay Z and Kanye West’s message on *Watch the Throne*. By their own reckoning, the two rappers’ wealth and success is actually a political coup. By making so much money, they have found ways around barriers to Black success and thus thwarted racist white America. In other words, Jay Z and Kanye West have achieved the American Dream despite American racism. Perry’s use of the verb “to recast” is very useful in this context. When Jay Z and Kanye West perform racial critique through conspicuous consumption, they do not simply recast status, they change the cast and color of the American Dream narrative. The Mercedes Benz and the Hublot watch operate much like Jay Z’s three-piece suit in the video for “Empire State of Mind,” situating the two rappers as the new protagonists of the American Dream.

### ***Sounds so soulful don’t you agree? – Blackness and the Soul Sample***

The question remains, how do these arguments connect in any way to “Try a Little Tenderness?” And why would Kanye West and Jay Z name the track after Otis Redding himself? The connections are multifold but often quite subtle. The cost of the sample, for example, is another way that Jay Z and Kanye West flaunt their wealth, although only those listeners with an understanding of licensing laws would be aware of the sample’s monetary implications. At the same time, Redding’s song is actually a love song for those in poverty. At very the beginning of the verse, Redding describes the weariness of young women with only one dress to wear. In this way, the Redding sample serves to remind the listener of the poverty which still defines large swaths of Black America, further underlining the oxymoron of Jay Z and Kanye West’s success. Furthermore, Otis Redding was one of the

first and only Black artists to retain publishing rights to his own songs.<sup>94</sup> Thus, Redding's sample also subtly represents Black enterprise. By connecting themselves to Redding, Jay Z and Kanye West are placing themselves within a rich tradition of Black popular music and Black enterprise. Moreover, scholar David Wall Rice argues that, as a Black businessman, Redding paved the way for the two rappers' successes:

Lyrics of hyper-materialism become more palpable in the knowing of Redding's contribution to the legacy of Black people in the music industry...Redding's example is linked to the entrepreneurship that has afforded Jay-Z and West material gains.<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps through his sampling choice, Kanye West is acknowledging that the two rappers achieved the American Dream by walking in Redding's footsteps.

Kanye West further folds Black histories and traditions into the sonics of "Otis," through his very precise production choices. His looping of Redding's percussive grunts reflects a tradition of hip-hop production which extends as far back as the music's origins in the 1970s when turntablists would build entire songs by isolating and looping the break-beat from old funk records.<sup>96</sup> In this way, "Otis" very much reflects the "compositional aesthetic" which Imani Perry identifies in *Prophets of the Hood*. Given the obviousness of Kanye West's sampling, we can hear the *seams* of the production process.<sup>97</sup> This affect is underlined by Jay Z's adlib at the beginning of the song: "Sounds so soulful, don't you agree?" Like a mic-check or a shout-out to the producer working the boards, Jay Z's casual aside allows us to imagine ourselves into the booth with him.

But Jay Z's introduction also reveals something significant about the intentionality

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<sup>94</sup> Rice, "Rakim, Ice Cube, then Watch the Throne," 183.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>96</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 51.

<sup>97</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 201.

of the single's sonics. Why is it important for Jay Z to note that the sample sounds *soulful*? Perhaps it is because soulfulness is very often a descriptor for sonic Blackness. In the essay "Sold out on Soul," scholar Mark Anthony Neal argues that the word "Soul" is not only associated with the genre of music which bares its name. Throughout the 1960s, he notes, "Soul became primarily linked to evocations of Black communal pride." Moreover, the measure of "Try a Little Tenderness" which Kanye West has chosen to isolate is emblematic of the guttural tonalities in sanctified singing, an expressive vocal tradition which extends through Black gospel, blues, funk, and soul. In fact, that one measure could be considered an intense distillation of vocal texture as a signifier for Blackness. Sonically and compositionally, "Otis" is thus worlds away from the pop crossover of "Empire State of Mind." As producer, Kanye West is not courting the "wider and whiter" audience. Rather he draws on Soul and traditional practices of hip-hop composition to signify Blackness in every aspect of the song's production. In this way, the sonics of the song serve to underline Jay Z and Kanye West's imposition of their own Blackness on white spaces and, more pointedly, on the narrative of the American Dream.

Finally, "Try a Little Tenderness" is paradigmatic of Soul music as it draws on Gospel's ecstatic, upward motion to imply sexual climax. Redding's vocal performance grows wilder and more impassioned as the song progresses. Indeed, the measure which Kanye West loops to form the rhythm track comes at the song's climax. At the very end of the track he appends another sample of ecstatic screaming which layers over Redding's voice. The combination of these two samples transfers the music's spiritual and sexual ecstasy to Kanye West and Jay Z's words as they celebrate their own wealth and success.

***Looking Like Wealth – Images of Excess as Racial Critique***



This sense of jubilation is the main focus of the “Otis” music video, directed by the independent filmmaker Spike Jonze. Though the video certainly flaunts the rappers’ wealth—a Maybach sports car plays a focal role—it is not the blinged-out display of riches you might expect. In fact the visual is quite simple, set in an industrial yard surrounded by hulking grey warehouses. The two rappers are dressed simply as well. They are matching in baggy jeans and white t-shirts. The bulk of the video features the rappers spitting their verses directly into the camera and goofing off with each other, all while sporting the widest possible smiles. When they aren’t mugging for the cameras, the two rappers are driving around the yard in the Maybach, doing donuts with four models in the backseat. This is no normal sports car, however. In the beginning of the video we see a team of jumpsuit-clad mechanics partially deconstruct the all-black vehicle. They remove the car’s doors and back windshield and affix cantilevered wings to the back end.

The car is a clever visual expression of Kanye West and Jay-Z’s invasion into White wealthy space. They have they gained symbolic entry to that space through ownership of a high-end German sports car and now they are also behaving “inappropriately” with it. Instead of simply showing off their expensive purchase whose design supposedly holds tremendous value, they hack the sports car’s form, updating it to their outsiders’ tastes. Their transformed Maybach is an upscale version of the customized cars featured in the mid-2000s MTV series “Pimp My Ride.” In this way, the Otis video is a nod to the creative and resourceful tradition of hacking and customizing cars, bikes, sneakers and stereos that has always existed in hip-hop culture. Not only do the two rappers hack the Maybach’s form, they behave raucously and recklessly with it. Jonze affixes a camera to the inside of the car so we can clearly see the two rappers smiling, screaming, and holding on tight as

they take their breathtakingly sharp turns. The jubilation only heightens at the end of the video when we see the two rappers throwing their heads back to scream along with the track's sample. Hands in the air and smiles wide as ever, they howl with pleasure, not just at their wealth and personal success, it seems, but at the audacity of the stunt they have just pulled off.

In both lyrics and visual imagery, "Otis" uses excess as a rhetorical tool for the rappers' racial critique. In this way the song recalls F. Scott Fitzgerald's celebrated novel, *The Great Gatsby*, whose scenes of outsize wealth express a profound ambivalence toward the capitalistic American Dream. The protagonist, Jay Gatsby is another famous rags-to-riches figure and has made an indelible impression on American culture. It is hard to look at Jay Z and Kanye West in their Maybach and not also see the ghost of Gatsby, careening around West Egg, Long Island in his convertible full of beautiful women. In one scene, stunningly reproduced in the 2013 film adaptation, we watch as Gatsby gleefully pulls elegant silk shirts out of a closet and showers them on the head of Daisy, the beautiful young woman who knew Gatsby before he was a millionaire. Underlying Gatsby's extravagant behavior is the same "look at me now" attitude we see expressed in the video for "Otis."

*Gatsby* is meant to complicate and criticize the American Dream of wealth and success but since Fitzgerald first penned the novel in 1925, pop cultural references to *Gatsby* often retain the images of opulence without any of the original story's critique. This subversion of anti-capitalist criticism recurs across the history of American pop culture. Consider the infamous and fictive trader Gordon Gekko from the film "Wall Street." The film's writer and director, Oliver Stone, meant to portray Gekko, and the entire trader

culture, as villainous. Instead the white-collar criminal is now idolized by countless young traders as they climb the ranks of Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan.<sup>98</sup> The works of Fitzgerald and Stone demonstrate that the culture of American capitalism is too engrained in the minds of American audiences to suffer attacks on its public image. Instead the culture industry simply manipulates those attacks—in the form of literature, film, or hip-hop—until they seem to celebrate the very culture they criticize.

What, then, will the American public make of the conspicuous consumption as racial critique that “Otis” expresses? In their verses, Jay Z and Kanye West use conspicuous consumption to make very powerful statements about American racial prejudice. They assign status to their own bodies and to the history of Black musical traditions in ways that might be considered radical given American culture’s constant devaluation of Blackness. But in the context of American capitalist culture it is unlikely that such nuances will be legible to the average fan listening to the radio or watching the video on YouTube. In her discussion of subversive Black style, Perry acknowledges this disconnect between the artist’s intent and audience interpretation:

The integration of hip hop [*sic*] into the mainstream means that such ideas become virtually indistinguishable from celebrations of the American capitalist practices integral to the economic devastation of black communities and the enormous wealth disparities in US society that disproportionately affect black people.<sup>99</sup>

As modern Horatio Alger figures, Kanye West and Jay Z are modeling the American Dream for others. If, as Perry suggests, their nuanced critique gets lost in the context of

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<sup>98</sup> Tim Arango, “Greed Is Bad, Gekko. So Is a Meltdown.,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 2009, sec. Movies, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/08/movies/08stone.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 196.

mainstream music, then what does “Otis” seem to advocate to its listeners? As with Gatsby and Gekko, the message becomes unquestioningly capitalist: Buy another Benz.

### ***Everything’s For Sale – Buying the American Dream***

In songs like “Empire State of Mind” the capitalist imperative of the American Dream remains subtextual. Instead such pop cultural texts emphasize loftier ideals of “opportunity” and “following your passion.” “Otis,” however, is baldly realistic about the monetary requirements of the American Dream. It has to be *bought*. Not only that, in a legal system that criminalizes Blackness, personal safety and freedom of movement must be bought as well, and at prices only someone like Jay Z can afford. In the third verse, Jay Z raps:

*Political Refugee Asylum can be purchased*

*Everything’s for sale*

*I got five passports I’m never going to jail*

This is perhaps the song’s most outsize boast of wealth. It paints a picture of a man who can go anywhere—in his G450 Gulfstream jet—and do anything with political and legal immunity. This verse is particularly striking given Jay Z’s drug dealer past and his earlier albums, which often explicitly address run-ins with law-enforcement.

A song like “99 Problems,” which details a case of racial profiling, would have resonated deeply with Jay Z’s former neighbors in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Their lives are highly policed and they live under the thrall of America’s disproportionate incarceration rate for Black men. A 2013 study by The Sentencing Project determined that one in three

Black men would go to Prison in their lives.<sup>100</sup> In 2008, 58% of the incarcerated population was Hispanic and Latino even though those groups only make up one quarter of the total US population.<sup>101</sup> When Jay Z brags so blatantly, “I’m never going to jail,” he creates a significant distance between himself and those who still live under constant threat of incarceration.

This verse illuminates the central flaw in *Watch the Throne’s* thesis on Black wealth and success: it ignores the barriers to Black advancement still in place and assumes that Jay Z and Kanye West’s individual successes will result in community uplift. They make this thesis very explicit in “Made in America,” another song on the album. The song is reminiscent of “Empire State of Mind” in its instrumentation, uplifting tone, and most notably, its hopeful chorus provided by the singer Frank Ocean:

*Sweet King Martin, sweet Queen Coretta*

*Sweet Brother Malcolm, sweet Queen Betty*

*Sweet Mother Mary, sweet Father Joseph*

*Sweet Jesus, we made it in America*

To whom, exactly, does the chorus refer, when Frank Ocean sings “*We made it in America?*” Does “we” simply encompass Jay Z, Kanye West, and Frank Ocean? If so, the statement “We made it in America” would seem to be an accurate assertion of the three performers’ success. On the other hand, the chorus also invokes Martin Luther King and his wife Coretta, Malcolm X, and Betty Shabazz. These civil rights and Black Power activists all

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<sup>100</sup>*Report of The Sentencing Project to the United Nations Human Rights Committee Regarding Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System* (The Sentencing Project, October 4, 2013), [http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd\\_ICCPR%20Race%20and%20Justice%20Shadow%20Report.pdf](http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd_ICCPR%20Race%20and%20Justice%20Shadow%20Report.pdf).

<sup>101</sup> “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>.

fought for a much broader “We:” African Americans and similarly disenfranchised people of color. The chorus of “Made in America” seems to be invoking the Civil Rights anthem “We shall overcome.” The song implies, however, that we *have* overcome.

In this way, the racial critique which Jay Z and Kanye West perform on “Otis” falls short. Using the context of luxury consumption as a backdrop, the two rappers demonstrate that Black people aren’t *supposed* to make it. Their argument implicates the American Dream as inherently racist, only allowing for the success of White Americans. But they propose that political victory occurs by *achieving* the American Dream despite this racism. Thus their thesis ultimately reaffirms, rather than deconstructs the culture industry’s American Dream narrative. Emulating Jay Z and Kanye West will not solve the problem of America’s anti-Black policies, now sustained, naturalized, and obscured by neoliberal thought. For most Blacks living in state-imposed poverty, buying the American Dream is not a feasible option. When they impose their own Blackness on the American Dream, the two rappers perform a racial critique but they also play into the culture industry’s infra-racial racism, which holds up Black success stories to obscure racial inequity. As with *The Great Gatsby* and Gordon Gekko, the culture industry will inevitably manipulate “Otis,” this time to assert that capitalist consumption is *the* affective and virtuous route to Black political advancement.

## Chapter 3 | Picasso Baby

Inherent in the American Dream is the promise, or at least possibility, of upward mobility. America was established in supposed opposition to the feudal structures of the Old World, where a citizen's class status was decided by the circumstances of birth. In feudal Europe there could be no mobility from the peasant class to the aristocracy. America distinguished itself not just through its democratic systems of government but also its supposed abolition of such rigid class divisions. If today, Jay Z is framed as the embodiment of the American Dream, it is because through his discography and the history of his public persona, audiences can clearly track the rapper's upward mobility. The song "Picasso Baby," off Jay Z's most recent album, *Magna Carta Holy Grail*, makes the discussion of class mobility explicit. The song represents the rapper's (attempted) entry into to an even higher social stratum, a society that expresses wealth, not by brand names but by refined taste and the investment in fine art. As Jay Z performs his own entry into this new social sphere, he illustrates, sometimes unintentionally, the limits of Black advancement, the cultural friction created by Blackness in elite spaces, and ultimately, the limits of the American Dream.

If *Blueprint 3* was Jay Z's embrace of pop crossover, then *Magna Carta Holy Grail* represents in many ways, the rapper's departure from pop. None of the album's tracks could rightly be considered radio hits. They are too long and ungainly, often without any kind of hook. The album's lead single "Holy Grail" did hit the pop charts, likely propelled to its peak position at #4 by the pop appeal of collaborator Justin Timberlake. Otherwise, the Timbaland produced album was an exercise in sonic risk-taking—far from an easily marketable pop commodity. But then again, none of the risks were *too* risky because Jay Z

already had one million album sales guaranteed. If *Magna Carta Holy Grail* is an experimental album, then the first and most important experiment was Jay Z's distribution deal with Samsung. The deal was the first of its kind, a potential solution to slumping album sales in the age of illegal downloads. Samsung bought a million copies of *Magna Carta Holy Grail* and distributed them to smartphone users through a streaming app a week before the album's release date. In practice this means that *Magna Carta Holy Grail* went platinum before the album dropped. This economic security gave Jay Z and Timbaland plenty of room in which to experiment. In fact, one might consider *Magna Carta Holy Grail* to be Jay Z's grand artistic statement and the Samsung deal, a kind of artistic patronage. "Picasso Baby" is one of the first rap songs to operate in conversation with the world of fine art. It also represents Jay Z's submission of his own body (and body of work) as a piece of art.

### ***Marble Floors/Gold Ceilings* – Negotiating Elite Spaces**

In the first verse of the song, Jay Z's relationship to his elite context is troubled. Now that he has everything he could possibly need, Jay Z struggles to express what he might—or should—*want*. First he tells us, "I just want a Picasso in my casa," expressing what seems to be the song's main desire—to accumulate fine art as an indicator of status. But, at least in the beginning, he complicates this desire: "I want a Rothko, no, I want a brothel/No, I want a wife to fuck me like a prostitute." Here Jay Z is doing similar work to Kanye West's "sophisticated ignorance" on "Otis." He is lyrically juxtaposing the desire for fine art, an elite and noble possession, with desires that would be considered crass, improper and dirty. The rapper continues this line of uncertainty when he says:

*Let's make love on a million*



*In a dirty hotel with the fan on the ceiling*

*All for the love of drug dealing*

*Marble floors, gold ceilings*

Where does Jay Z belong? In a dirty hotel? In a grand ballroom with marble floors? For a moment, he is not quite sure. He knows he has millions of dollars, but does that money actually change where he *belongs* as a Black former drug dealer. Does it change what he is expected to desire?

Halfway through the verse, Jay Z's uncertainty seems to dissipate. "Ah fuck it I want a Billion" he tells us, before launching into a list of artists whose work he would like to own (or already does):

*Jeff Koons balloons, I wanna blow up*

*Condos in my condo, I want a row of*

*Christies with my missy, live at the MoMa*

*Bacons and Turkey Bacon, smell the aroma.*

Christies is an extremely prestigious fine art auction house, where the world's most elite bid millions of dollars to take home a masterpiece. Jay Z can now afford the tastes of such elite consumers and he would like some of Jeff Koons' famous pop art balloon sculptures. He would like a row of George Condo's edgy figural paintings. And he would like to enjoy his turkey bacon alongside a painting by Francis Bacon, whose work "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" broke the record for most expensive piece of art ever auctioned in 2013.<sup>102</sup> This verse represents Jay Z's puzzlement over whether or not he is supposed to share the desires and values of those who share his tax bracket. Unlike in *Watch the Throne* Jay Z is

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<sup>102</sup> Allie Malloy, "Francis Bacon Painting Auctioned for More than \$142 Million, Breaks Record," *CNN*, November 26, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/11/12/us/francis-bacon-painting-art-auction/index.html>.

not making the issue of race explicit in this question. However, Jay Z will almost certainly be the only Black man at the art auction. So when the verse reaches its turning point, and Jay Z decides that he *does* want to join in the fray at Christies, he is buying into a pre-established canon, a White and Western conception of what is valuable.

### ***Surrounded by Warhols, My Whole Team Ball – Fine Art as Conspicuous Consumption***

Having made this decision, Jay Z's second verse reads like a continuation of the conspicuous consumption discussed in "Otis." He has parked two Bugatti sports cars outside the Art Basel, an international art show. He and his team are "surrounded by Warhols." By this point his house is like an art museum because, he tells us, "I be goin' ape at the auction." In *Prophets of the Hood*, Imani Perry notes that even before rappers actually had the money to purchase expensive clothes or cars, these items featured heavily in rap lyrics, in the form of "big lies." Call it hip-hop's wishful thinking, rappers bragged about luxury items they didn't have.<sup>103</sup> Underlying these big lies were the rappers' aspirations to achieve wealth and success, to achieve the American Dream. By 2013 it was safe to assume that Jay Z actually owned any of the watches or jet planes he mentioned in songs like "Otis." On "Picasso Baby," however, Jay Z revives the practice of big lies.

The rapper's art auction purchases are well documented. By this point it is an established fact that the Carter-Knowles household is outfitted with highly valuable artwork. Still, his collection includes only a fraction of the artists he name-drops in "Picasso Baby."<sup>104</sup> He is not literally surrounded by Warhols, nor can he possibly own any Jeff Koons balloons. The return of the "big lies" in Jay Z's work is a powerful testament to

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<sup>103</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 195.

<sup>104</sup> Dale Eisinger, "Estimating the Net Worth of Jay Z's Art Collection," *Complex.com*, November 16, 2013, <http://www.complex.com/art-design/2013/11/jay-z-art-collection>.

the capitalist underpinnings of the American Dream. Capitalism requires that its consumers always continue to consume. Therefore “making it” must always be an ongoing process. Satisfaction is stasis, the antithesis of economic growth. Jay Z even acknowledges this fact himself, when he raps “I’m never satisfied, can’t knock my hustle.” This line recalls Spence’s argument in *Stare in the Darkness*, that the hustler is the ideal neoliberal subject.<sup>105</sup> As a hustler-entrepreneur, Jay Z doesn’t simply stop working within the market system once he achieves a certain level of success because, he tells us, there is always more to work for: a Picasso for the penthouse, a billion dollars, or even a trillion, as he suggests in the second verse.

“Picasso Baby” sees Jay Z re-framing the idea of conspicuous consumption. He already has all the watches, cars, and jet planes. Now what he desires is a status symbol that invests the buyer with a little more prestige. Not only does contemporary fine art cost far more than a Hublot watch, it also accords the owner a different kind of social status. Though certainly a commodity in its own right, artwork is considered somehow removed from or superior to crass consumerism. Buying art means buying into a world of high ideas, supporting the underpinnings of civilization, and demonstrating a sense of *taste*.<sup>106</sup> Jay Z actually addresses the question of taste in *Decoded*, explaining why, as a young rapper, he always insisted on drinking Crystal in the club, while everyone else was drinking Moët. Crystal “was a quality, premium, luxury brand known to connoisseurs,” he says. “It told people that we were elevating our game, not by throwing on a bigger chain, but by

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<sup>105</sup> Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 39.

<sup>106</sup> John Ott, “How New York Stole the Luxury Art Market: Blockbuster Auctions and Bourgeois Identity in Gilded Age America,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 42, no. 2/3 (June 1, 2008): 153.

showing more refined, and even slightly obscure, taste.”<sup>107</sup> Here Jay Z is talking about his fledgling rap career in the 1990s. Since then it seems the rapper has always been “elevating his game” and distinguishing himself with products and brands that provide a sense of refinement.

In my analysis of “Otis,” I established that this kind of luxury braggadocio has been a part of Black popular culture since long before hip-hop. Not only that, it is often oppositional, used to establish a Black style and to recast social status.<sup>108</sup> But the consumption of fine art is a new lyrical theme for hip-hop, and it seems to distance Jay Z significantly from his listeners. In his essay on the expansion of the luxury art market in Victorian America, John Ott argues that purchasing fine art was a crucial aspect of identity construction for the entrepreneurial class. These wealthy business elites used the social environment of the art auction to distance themselves from the working class. Auctions were too expensive and exclusive for working class consumers and therefore inscribed more dramatic class distinctions. Meanwhile, increased publicity of art auctions in popular culture “broadcast and legitimated art patronage as the embodiment of a bourgeois class prerogative.”<sup>109</sup> Ott is describing a social phenomenon in the late 1800s. Still, his argument rings true today. More than anything, he argues, “affluent consumers desired both membership in an exclusive club and public knowledge of their rarefied status.”<sup>110</sup> A cynical view of “Picasso Baby” and Jay Z’s real-world art purchases would show the rapper behaving exactly as Victorian Americans of the bourgeois class. “Picasso Baby” broadcasts his rarefied status and his membership in an exclusive club of art-buyers.

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<sup>107</sup> Jay-Z, *Decoded*, 83.

<sup>108</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 197.

<sup>109</sup> Ott, “How New York Stole the Luxury Art Market,” 148.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

In hip-hop rappers have always used brands like Versace and Crystal to signify their wealth and success. For the listeners these brands were also symbols of aspiration. Whether or not this kind of capitalistic aspiration is productive or conducive to economic justice, it is relatable at the very least. Anybody could look up to Jay Z and dream about owning a Maybach. This hip-hop dreaming is part and parcel of the broader American Dream narrative, which is weaved into the fabric of American culture, across race and class boundaries. But as Jay Z seeks ever more refined signifiers for his wealth, the relatability of his American Dream narrative gets stretched thinner. How many music listeners of any genre know the artist George Condo? How many could find Christie's Art House on a map of Manhattan? For listeners to dream about Jay Z's life, they have to understand the story he tells.

At this point Jay Z's fanbase expands far beyond the hood. The rapper now addresses a broad range of listeners with diverse backgrounds, many of which are far removed from hip-hop's origins. Jay Z courted this broader audience with the crossover qualities of "Empire State of Mind." But Jay Z's crossover does not necessarily mean he ceases to speak to his former neighbors in Bedford-Stuyvesant. On "Picasso Baby" however, Jay Z's chosen vocabulary would seem to exclude such communities as listeners. The cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu defines cultural capital as the knowledge and "aesthetic disposition" necessary to succeed academically, socially, and thus economically, in white western society.<sup>111</sup> White children of the middle and upper classes are born into cultural capital, absorbing by osmosis knowledge of Shakespeare, Di Vinci, or Beethoven simply by growing up privileged. Black children or those born into poverty are thus

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<sup>111</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. R. Nice, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

disadvantaged in an educational system which privileges white western values and artistic modes.

Meanwhile hip-hop culture has always operated with a kind of counter-cultural capital for Black people who are generally excluded from the canons of white western culture. In other words, hip-hop is a space where Black people can be insiders. Even when White listeners became major consumers of rap music, Black artists held them at arms length, keeping them out of the loop with vernaculars, histories, and traditions, which are peculiar to the Black experience. On the one hand, it may seem that Jay Z is fully abandoning this idea of a counter-cultural space with “Picasso Baby.” In fact, his lyrics can be understood as a re-inscribing of the White Western canon. Lyrically it privileges artists and institutions of white elite culture over the creative production of Black communities. But “Picasso Baby” is not just a lyrical text. The song’s fascinating tension is that sonically “Picasso Baby” may be telling a different, more complex story. While the lyrical thematic seems removed from hip-hop, the sonics represent a return.

### ***Leonardo Da Vinci Flows – The Art of Rap in “Picasso Baby”***

Timbaland, the song’s lead producer, is thoroughly folded into rap’s musical tradition. He is one of the most highly respected producers to emerge from the southern Trap scene in the early 2000s. Under his creative direction, “Picasso Baby” certainly sounds like a rap song. In many ways it actually sounds like a throwback to earlier rap styles. Like “Otis,” the song is largely composed of a short sample, which is looped to provide the basis for the whole track. It sounds like a 1970’s soul sample but in fact it is from a contemporary album by Adrian Younge, called “Something About April.” That being

said, all of Younger's music is meant to evoke a vintage soul sound.<sup>112</sup> Whether or not the sample is actually retro, it provides the same sonic affect as a Curtis Mayfield sample. Thus, the compositional aesthetic of "Picasso Baby" makes the song feel authentically rooted in the hip-hop tradition.

The two-measure sample consists of a pronounced upward walking electric bass-line and a crisp drumbeat. In the treble there is a high-pitched chord from an electric keyboard with an organ effect. Thus the instrumentation consists entirely of rhythm section. There is no harmonic motion in the sample. It stays rooted in the same single chord. The only melodic motion comes with the arpeggio of the electric bass. Thus, the musical emphasis of the song is rhythmic rather than tonal. This emphasis on rhythm is also apparent in the song's hook. Instead of a pop-friendly sung chorus, the hook merely consists of a rapped call and response between Jay Z and an anonymous male voice. "Oh what a feeling," Jay Z raps. The other voice responds, "Picasso Baby, ca ca ca casso baby." Here the second voice has deconstructed the word Picasso into percussive syllables. Thus, on the hook, the syncopated rhythm of the vocal line seems more important than the meaning of the word itself. The music seems to sublimate all of the social and artistic significations that come with the name Picasso, and instead draws out the musicality of the word. This use of voice as percussion is also very apparent in Jay Z's verses. Like in "Otis," his vocal delivery is aggressive. He spits his words and leans heavily into hard consonant sounds for rhythmic emphasis, a markedly different approach than in "Empire State of Mind."

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<sup>112</sup> Fresh Air from WHYY, "Adrian Younger: Looking Back To Move Hip-Hop Forward," *NPR.org*, accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2013/03/12/174017895/adrian-younger-looking-back-to-move-hip-hop-forward>.

This aggression along with the privileging of rhythmic complexity over catchy melodies or easily rapped phrases certainly removes “Picasso Baby” from the realm of pop crossover. What’s more, throughout the song there are subtle sonic throwbacks to earlier hip-hop styles. Included in Adrian Younge’s sample is a soaring electronic sound-affect, rather like the high-pitched noise children hear right when you turn on a television. Farther back in the mix you can also hear an echoing moaning sound and the occasional siren. All of these added sound affects are reminiscent of the hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaata who used glitchy electronic sounds and echoing vocal affects to create a futuristic space. If you listen closely to the hook you can also hear a chorus of male voices shouting “hey” on every 8<sup>th</sup> note offbeat, another sonic throwback to hip-hop of the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Two thirds of the way through, the track finally changes course and moves on to a new musical thought. The sense of hip-hop throwback remains, however. In fact, Timbaland seems to be referencing an earlier era in Jay Z’s own career. Specifically the track sounds almost identical to the Rick Rubin produced “99 Problems” from 2003. No longer based in the faux-retro sample, this section is dominated by the extended power chord of a booming electric guitar and a classic rock backbeat. Interestingly the lyrical content also recalls “99 Problems,” in its references to law enforcement. “My Mirandas don’t stand a chance with cops,” Jay Z raps, recalling the verse on “99 Problems” which recounts an autobiographical case of racial profiling. Later he says, “Now my hand on the Bible on the stand/ Got your man in a jam again, got my hands in cuff.” This time, the lyrics seem most reminiscent of the song “Izzo” from 2001, in which Jay Z discusses his arrest and very publicized trial after a fight in a club.



At this point in Jay Z's career these kinds of lyrics seem odd and out of place. It has been many years since he has been under any threat of jail-time. After all, didn't he declare his own political immunity on "Otis?" Likely these references to legal trouble are meant as metaphors to underline the verse's overall narrative—the tide of popular and critical opinion turning against Jay Z. "Even my old fans like old man just stop," he tells us. Still, taken together the constant referencing to earlier sounds, practices and themes from hip-hop's past, and Jay Z's specifically, allows "Picasso Baby" to carry all of hip-hop's history forward into the contemporary space. Moreover all of these references must then interact with Jay Z's current lyrical fixation on fine art.

### ***Live at the Moma – Picasso Baby as Performance Art***

This brings me to the ultimate aspiration expressed in "Picasso Baby," the desire for acceptance into elite spaces. In the last two lines of the song, Jay Z asks:

*What's it gonna take for me to go*

*For you to see I'm the modern day Pablo*

*Picasso Baby.*

This powerful line, clarifies the scope of Jay Z's aspiration. At this point it is no trouble for Jay Z to gain *entry* anywhere. He is certain to raise the profile of any guest-list. But the rapper seeks entry not for his body but for his body of *work*. He wants his art itself to be considered elite. The rapper makes this desire very clear in *Decoded* a book devoted more to the analysis of his own lyrics as poetry than to a meaningful recounting of his life. With "Picasso Baby" the rapper goes further. It is not enough that his rap verses be considered poetry. His performing of rap should be considered fine art as well. "I'm the new Jean-

Michel,” he boasts in the beginning of the second verse, connecting himself to one of the most lauded Black artists to gain entry into elite art institutions.

Though Jay Z is clearly aspiring to recognition within a canon policed by the White and wealthy, he is not doing so with music coded as White. “Picasso Baby” could have had a lush, more melodic track, loaded down with strings and other instruments that imply class and sophistication according to the Western canon. It could have been like “Empire State of Mind,” a song oriented for acceptance by a wider and Whiter audience. Instead he is bringing all of hip-hop’s rich musical traditions and compositional practices to bear on his claim for fine artistry. Here, Jay Z’s reference to Jean-Michel Basquiat is telling. Basquiat’s artwork was closely associated with hip-hop culture. His scrawling paintings integrated the aesthetics and politics of graffiti art, a tradition now considered by academics to be one of hip-hop’s four pillars. Thus, to be the new Jean-Michel is to be the next artist asserting the value of hip-hop—and Blackness—in an elite art space.

If Jay Z is the new Basquiat or Picasso, then his work belongs in an art gallery, or so the rapper believes. He staked his claim to the world of fine art with his performance of “Picasso Baby” at Pace Gallery in New York. The performance was an intentional knock-off of “The Artist is Present” a performance art piece by Marina Abramovic in 2010. Abramovic is likely the most famous performance artist in the world and “The Artist is Present” at New York’s Museum of Modern Art was the biggest pop event in contemporary art that year. Abramovic simply sat, without moving, in a chair at the center of a gallery. Visitors were invited to sit across from her and experience her *presence*. Abramovic sat like this this seven hours a day, six days a week for 13 weeks. The experience was apparently so powerful that some visitors wept or even vomited.

Inspired by Abramovic's work, Jay Z performed "Picasso Baby" on repeat for six hours, rapping the song on a platform in the middle of an otherwise empty white gallery. In this way Jay Z situated himself as the piece of art that visitors had come to see. The conditions were certainly different from Abramovic's performance, however. The rapper took plenty of breaks and the whole event was carefully orchestrated by a group of publicists with clipboards and walkie-talkies. The visitors were not museum-goers come to experience fine art. Some of them were lucky rap fans who had received mysterious text messages about the event. The rest were pop culture journalists, art world fixtures, and buzzy New York celebrities, most of whom had been *invited* to give the event the proper sense of significance and panache.<sup>113</sup>

The whole spectacle unfolded for the benefit of multiple video cameras. The director Mark Romanek would later edit the six-hour event into a 10-minute music video for the song. Thus the performance was not just an art-piece. It was also a *production*. The assembled fans were not really to be treated as gallery-goers but as extras in a film. At the MoMA, every visitor had their chance to sit across from Abramovic. At Pace Gallery a production crew carefully curated a select group of A-Listers (including Abramovic herself) who would enter the center of the gallery to interact with Jay Z as he performed. The Pace Gallery performance was, therefore, a bald publicity stunt. Many in the art world sneered for exactly this reason. One of the event's attendees, the artist Marilyn Minter, told the *New York Times*, "I have no idea why I'm here." It certainly wasn't because she held a deep

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<sup>113</sup> Sarah Nicole Prickett, "Money, Cash, Picassos," *Artforum.com*, July 12, 2013, <http://artforum.com/diary/id=41957>.

respect for Jay Z and his work. "I'm just a fame whore," she explained.<sup>114</sup> One writer went so far as to dub the event "The Day Performance Art Died."<sup>115</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, *New York Magazine's* Jerry Saltz was completely won over, calling the experience positively "tribal."<sup>116</sup> At both ends of the spectrum these critics demonstrate the politics of exclusion and exoticization when Black bodies enter elite white spaces.

### ***It Ain't Hard to Tell, I'm the New Jean-Michel – Race and Art World Exclusion***

What the critics seem to miss is that "Picasso Baby" represents Jay Z's *invasion* of white elite space, centering the attention of the art world around his artistry, his Blackness, and hip-hop tradition as a whole. But I would also argue that Jay Z's performance piece is the biggest of "Picasso Baby's" big lies. The lie is that Jay Z has already been accepted in this art world space, that he and his art *do* belong at institutions like the Pace Gallery. But in fact, the critical response to Jay Z's performance reveals the opposite. When Jay Z wrote these lyrics, comparing himself to Jean-Michel Basquiat, I wonder if he considered the many ways that the art world derided and excluded Basquiat's work, even as he also gained significant critical acclaim. Art Historian Laurie Rodrigues writes of Basquiat, "Many critics and reviewers of his day cited his apparent drug addictions and 'street origins' as license to handle him and his oeuvre in a decidedly exoticized, sensationalist manner."<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, Basquiat's contemporaries chafed at the artist's intentionally untrained aesthetic. Rodrigues notes, "For many, he was merely a black, Warhol-esque

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<sup>114</sup> Guy Trebay, "Jay-Z Is Rhyming Picasso and Rothko," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2013, sec. Fashion & Style, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/fashion/jay-z-is-rhyming-picasso-and-rothko.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Jillian Steinhauer, "Jay-Z Raps at Marina Abramović, or the Day Performance Art Died," *Hyperallergic*, July 10, 2013, <http://hyperallergic.com/75293/jay-z-raps-at-marina-abramovic-or-the-day-performance-art-died/>.

<sup>116</sup> Jerry Saltz, "'Picasso Baby' Live: Jerry Saltz Goes Face-to-Face With Jay-Z," *Vulture*, July 11, 2013, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/07/jerry-saltz-face-to-face-with-jay-z.html>.

<sup>117</sup> Laurie A. Rodrigues, "'SAMO© as an Escape Clause': Jean-Michel Basquiat's Engagement with a Commodified American Africanism," *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 2 (May 1, 2011): 229.

celebrity/artist who incessantly needed to be put ‘in his place.’”<sup>118</sup> Thus, when Jay Z bids to be the new Jean-Michel, he is inheriting the baggage of race-based exclusion and sensationalism in the art world.

When watching the final video, viewers cannot see how it was carefully composed to make the big lie seem real. They do not know about the publicists with their clipboards who ensure that Mark Romanek’s camera captures compelling interactions with these art-world A-listers. In this video, Jay Z is certainly invading Pace Gallery but he is also marketing himself to the gatekeepers of elite white culture. Once again, the song’s final line is instructive here:

*What’s it gonna take for you to see, for me to go*

*I’m the modern day Pablo, Picasso baby*

Both “Otis” and “Empire State of Mind” are definitive statements of having made it. In “Picasso Baby” Jay Z’s entry into this new social sphere is actually quite tentative. He *wants* a Jeff Koons balloon but he does not actually own one. He *wants* to be seen as the modern day Picasso but he isn’t yet. He has to demand. He has to perform an elaborately orchestrated event to invade the sparkling white gallery spaces of the art world. Once again, it is important to note that “Picasso Baby” is not aspiring to pop crossover, nor does the track draw on Western canonical musical styles. Rather it is steeped in hip-hop’s compositional practices and sonic tendencies. It signifies the rapper’s Blackness at every musical layer. Therefore Jay Z is not aspiring to Whiteness when he demands the art world’s attention. Rather he is making the case that hip-hop—a Black populist genre—is a fine art, something to be valued in even the most elite spaces.

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<sup>118</sup> Rodrigues, “SAMO© as an Escape Clause,” 229.

Here Jay Z bumps up against a limitation in his American Dream trajectory. After all, I argue that the American Dream's purpose is to obscure and preserve White privilege. When Jay Z succeeds, his story and his music serve to further this obfuscation. He is a celebrated figure in American pop culture exactly because of the many ways he reaffirms the American Dream. But when he demands acceptance for himself—and for hip-hop—in elite spaces, Jay Z aspires to something beyond the acceptable limits of achievement. He is attempting to invade those canons which valorize whiteness at the expense of Black and Brown cultural production. This invasion is certainly counterproductive to the American Dream's protection of White privilege. It runs entirely against the Horatio Alger formula that requires capitulation and integration into mainstream society.

Because of this, "Picasso Baby's" critique succeeds where "Otis" fails. In "Otis," Kanye West and Jay Z launch an attack on the American Dream's racism but they do so from within acceptable contexts for Black men—namely the activity of conspicuous consumption, which fits the culture industry's racial stereotypes. In this way, their subtle critique is easy to coopt and manipulate until it actually seems to perpetuate the American Dream narrative. In "Picasso Baby," however, Jay Z steps out of his acceptable context. Here, again, the rapper seems to be emulating Basquiat, perhaps in ways he does not even realize. Like Basquiat's purposefully "primitive" artworks, "Picasso Baby" represents a Black man's performing of his own alienation. By inserting his Blackness into this white, elite space Jay Z exposes the contours of racial prejudice and exclusion, which usually remain hidden within the American Dream narrative. Through "Picasso Baby's" big lie, he is telling us a story that is *true*.

## Conclusion

"Poets climb, briefly, off their motorcycles, to find out who owns their words. We are named by all the things we will never understand [and] all the pimps of reason who've ever conquered us."<sup>119</sup> So writes, Amiri Baraka in the short story *The Death of Horatio Alger*. A Black Arts poet, playwright, and cultural critic, Baraka was very aware of the untrue stories Americans tell themselves about race and opportunity. He created artwork that disrupted these stories and, while most Americans hummed along ignorantly on their motorcycles, he kept climbing off. He renamed himself and he constantly worked to steal his words away from the culture industry to which they belonged. Because of this, Baraka was in a unique position to tell Americans a very true story about themselves in 2001.

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Baraka wrote a spoken word poem called "Somebody Blew Up America," in which he stated, quite frankly, that America had brought these attacks upon itself with its violently oppressive imperialism. Outraged conservatives quickly called for his removal from the post of New Jersey's poet laureate. In fact, the backlash against the poem was so intense that today New Jersey no longer *has* a poet laureate. The only way to strip Baraka of his title was to remove the position altogether. I mention Baraka here to demonstrate how risky this storytelling business can be and also to acknowledge that none of us own our words. Not me, not Obama, and not Jay Z.

From a critical distance it might be easy to point fingers at Jay Z (or Obama) for telling the *right* stories, the un-true ones which Americans wish to hear. But this criticism

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<sup>119</sup> Amiri Baraka, "The Death of Horatio Alger," *The Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Press, 2000), 162.

is doubly unfair, first, because those rappers, poets, or politicians who tell the wrong stories face real consequences and second, because Jay Z does not own his words. They belong to the culture industry and the white supremacy it protects. In “Empire State of Mind,” Jay Z capitulates to the Horatio Alger formula but, as the scholar W.T. Lhamon notes, so too, does most modern literature. Lhamon refers to serious literature as “the cultural arm of social oppression” and “war carried on by other means.”<sup>120</sup> Of course this war extends beyond literature to our culture industry as a whole, as it constantly perpetuates the American Dream narrative. Taken together, my analyses indicate that Jay Z is not merely a passive tool of the culture industry’s oppression. Like most rappers, he pushes back using hip-hop’s many tools of political resistance. “Otis” is a prime example of how this resistance fails. Jay Z and Kanye West find themselves telling the right story when they mean to be telling the *true* story, simply because the culture industry has conquered their words and coopted them.

I argue, however, that in “Picasso Baby” Jay Z has stepped, briefly, off his motorcycle. He is acknowledging who owns words like “Picasso” and “Art Basel” and further who owns the canons of fine art from which he is excluded. Having done so, Jay Z begins to tell the wrong story, the story that Americans do not want to hear. Certainly this one truthful story is still couched among Jay Z’s many others, which serve the culture industry’s neoliberal agenda. So consider the alienation in “Picasso Baby” to be a dissonant note in Jay Z’s musical strains. It will not change the world but in revealing the racial fissures of American society, it certainly has made critics and fans uncomfortable. Perhaps this dissonance is now reverberating far louder and farther than Basquiat’s ever could, because Jay Z’s music

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<sup>120</sup> Lhamon, “Horatio Alger and American Modernism,” 11.



is not confined to the art world he has invaded. By making his own alienation visible on such a global stage, Jay Z is engaging in that risky business of truth-telling and, as popular opinion sours, he may already be facing the consequences.

## Acknowledgments

With the conclusion of this project, my academic career careens to a close and I find myself deeply indebted to a number of people. But these are debts that I sincerely look forward to repaying in the next chapter of my own story. It will be a long and joyful process, as my debts are plentiful, but I will begin to scratch the surface here. I would like to begin by thanking my thesis-advisor-turned-life-advisor, Professor Stephan Pennington. Thank you for the first of many hours I ever spent in your office, in which I asked you to be my academic advisor and you said, “No. You really want me to be your *thesis* advisor.” Since then you have completely shaped my academic trajectory and I cannot be more grateful. Thank you for your amazing classes and for investing in me a much more critical awareness of myself, my world, and the music I love. I can safely say that learning to love *critically* has been the most profoundly fulfilling aspect of my academic experience. Thank you for your unwavering enthusiasm and your belief in me and my project. Thank you for your patience and understanding as I let so many deadlines slip by. And finally, thank you for being my therapist before I knew I needed one. Your words of support throughout this semester have meant so much.

Next, thank you to my parents, Tom and Jerri Mayer, who always continued to support me as my academic trajectory took too many left turns to count. Thank you for your love and encouragement. Thank you for always trying to understand what makes me tick, no matter how alien it may be. And thank you for your desire to learn about Jay Z’s music as I have. Seeing him with you at Barclays Center was an entirely fond, and deeply meaningful experience. Your vote of confidence continues to mean the world to me. Thank you.

I could go on forever but I would also like to briefly thank Professor Noe Montez for agreeing to be my thesis advisor during his sabbatical. To Tom Chen and Professor Wu, thanks for shepherding this rogue sheep through the SHT process. To my fellow thesis writers in American Studies, thank you for asking me the tough questions. To my grad reader Jess Pfeffer, thank you for coming on board so enthusiastically and for always making things seem clearer. To Louisa Glor, thank you for introducing me to American Studies and for doing everything one step ahead so I could follow you. I am being very serious when I say your advice has been my #1 guide through college.

Finally, I would like to thank my other nuclear family, the women with whom I have passed these last four years. You are the very best things to come out of my college experience. To Kelly, thank you so much for being my first college friend and my forever life partner. Thank you for knowing me so well and always knowing what to say. For the countless nights of cookie dough and the playlists sent back and forth and for being there with me when everything felt/feels dark. To Hope, I'm so glad I was going through the thesis process with you as an ally and inspiration (damn you are impressive!). Thank you for your amazing hugs, for always offering to listen, and for being the best listener. To Tori, thanks for always being so nice to come home to. Thank you for all the pretzel chips and cheerful banter and especially your smile. To Maggie, thanks for your unfathomable generosity and for telling me "tough titties" when you know I need to hear it. To Katy, thank you for being as bewildered as me, for sharing your coffee, for late-night kitchen talks and thank you, especially, for being angry when I hurt myself. To Laura, thank you for hard ciders and Beyonce and teaching me to recognize the self-hate dance. To Tara, thank you for being my fellow homebody, for the word "shmin" and for always shminning. And

thanks for coming back! I owe you all so much. And I would like to thank you, especially, for your miraculous understanding when I have been too stressed and self-absorbed to be a good friend or a good housemate.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

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