

# Contextualizing Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose in Late Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Rap Music

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“Cool is so individual that one man’s cool won’t work for other men”  
—Guthrie Ramsey

“You might think we all beats and rhymes . . . but you don’t hear me”  
—Lil’ Flip, “Game Over”

In considering the cultural significance of rap music in (mis)conceptualizations of American identity, it is important to point out commercialized rap’s attachment to notions of blackness that are presumed irrefutable. Likewise, constructions of racial discourse in popular culture cannot be divorced from the effects of capitalism and enterprise on the framework of a twenty-first century black American experience. While it would be overly simplistic to dismiss commercial rap music as socially and ethically bankrupt due to the mass consumption and (over)production of corporatized black narratives, it is important to identify rap’s corporatization as a mutual investment by both record labels and artists themselves. Employing regurgitated and thus normalized scripts of blackness and black manhood is rewarded by monetary gain and popularity. The artists’ investment in such scripts sustains public visibility and thus relevance. The commercialization of rap music simultaneously enables rap to become a gauge of the post-Civil Rights experience while it becomes commodified and stereotyped. Thus, hip hop is important in providing alternative forms of negotiating the manifestations—visual, sonic, and political—of blackness that are mass consumed by a multi-ethnic audience. One way we can complicate our understanding of the impetus behind rappers’ performance and identity politics is to examine their negotiations of “black cool.” Of particular interest to this essay are the intersections of enterprise and sonic manifestations of black masculine cool in commercial rap music.

Arguably, the most visible script of popular black masculine performance is *cool pose*. Cool pose, the performance and positioning of the black male body as a symbol of coolness, in its present form leans heavily upon stereotypical and often uncontested expectations of black masculinity. A litany of scholarship has theorized how black cool establishes the visible significance and presence of black men in American popular culture. Richard

Majors and Janet Bilson's seminal study *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (1992) broke ground for teasing out manifestations of cool pose in a post-Civil Rights American cultural landscape. Todd Boyd (1997) reads cool pose as a survival mechanism and the antithesis of white masculinity, opining that "cool is about a detached, removed, nonchalant sense of being. An aloofness that suggests one is above it all. A pride, an arrogance even, that is at once laid back, unconcerned, perceived to be highly sexual, and potentially violent" (118). Bell hooks asserts in *We Real Cool* that black cool "was defined by the ways in which black men confronted the hardships of life without their spirits being ravaged . . . it was defined by black male willingness to confront reality, to face the truth, and bear it . . . it was defined by individual black males daring to self-define rather than be defined by others" (138). Donna Britt renegotiates cool as a collective response of black men within this contemporary moment of history, coining the term "brothercool." "Brothercool is demonstrating black men's increasing diversity in income, interest, and attitude. The 'new cool' that black men are forging could be more like the old: deriving its edge from the risks that accompany growth, expansion, the embrace of other culture, the hot breath that signifies *life*" (author's original emphasis). Rebecca Walker, editor of *1000 Streams of Black Cool*, situates black cool as both a gauge and limitation to understanding a contemporary African-American experience: "black cool can be emulated, co-opted, and appropriated, but its ownership can't be denied . . . it's our language of survival. It's our genius . . . Black cool is forever."

Still, composing a working definition of cool pose as it has presented itself in rap music of the last twenty years proves to be an arduous and complex task, considering the numerous, often conflicting intersections of blackness, masculinity, and enterprise that frame commercial rap music. Greg Tate points out the complexities of hip hop, while acknowledging that the convergence of enterprise and hip hop culture construes it as a "hip-hop marketplace":

The omnipresence and omnipotence of hip-hop, artistically, economically, and socially, have forced all within Black America and beyond to find a rapprochement with at least some aspect of its essence. Within hip-hop, however, as in American entrepreneurship generally, competing ideologies exist to be exploited rather than expunged and expelled—if only because hip-hop culture and the hip-hop marketplace, like a quantum paradox, provide space to all black ideologies, from the most antiwhite [*sic*] to the most pro-capitalist, without ever having to account for the contradiction. (7)

The lack of accountability in commercial rap that Tate points out is interpreted through a gender-dominant lens in hooks' discussion, where she argues that "[in] hip-hop packaged for mainstream consumption, many of its primary themes—the embrace of capitalism, the support of patriarchal violence, the conservative approach to gender roles, the call to liberal individualism—all reflect the ruling values of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, albeit in black face" (142).

Similarly, John L. Jackson observes the conflicting and blurred lines of reality and relevance in rap, noting how "hip-hop is considered a rendition of performative blackness with roots in everyday urban struggles against marginalization" (177). If we read Jackson's discussion of authenticity and blackness as a demonstration of black male cool, it appears that commercial rap music situates black men's coolness in a vacuum of violence, materialism, and apathy. The lack of discourse and space available to complicate black men's experiences creates a limited range of experiences by which to "stay black" and "stay real." In keeping with Tate's observations about the hip-hop marketplace, it is important to note that male rappers' and consumers' mutual investment in coolness and black manhood pivots upon restricted access to experiences believed to occur within the black working class.

In a scene from Paul Beatty's novel *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), a satiric coming of age story about a black boy growing up in 1990s California, a fictitious rap group named Stoic Undertakers records a music video to accompany their album, *Closed Casket Eulogies in F Major*. Beatty's narrator Gunnar observes the video shoot:

Carloads of sybaritic rappers and hired concubines cruised down the street in ghetto palanquins, mint condition 1964 Impala lowriders, reciting their lyrics and leaning into the camera with gnarled intimidating scowls.

"Cut!"

The curled lips snapped back into watermelon grins like fleshy rubber bands. "How was that massa? Menacing enough fo' ya?" (77)

Aside from the tensions between black youth and the "just the way it is" mentality Beatty addresses as a problematic gangsta rap aesthetic, even more problematic is the commodification and consumption of such an aesthetic as an uncontested reality in one's daily life. Beatty subverts Mark Anthony Neal's observations about hip hop's initial purposes—that it "allowed [African American youth] to counter the iconography of fear, menace and spectacle that dominated mass-mediated perceptions of contemporary black life" (138). This passage highlights the romanticized inner city aesthetic within

mainstream American popular culture, which creates a fetishistic bubble of black poverty within which African Americans and, specifically, black men are forced to exist. Removal from that commercial bubble of poverty voids one's blackness and manhood, to which Tupac Shakur retorts "they ask me if I'm still down/I move up out the ghetto so I ain't real now?" Gunnar, with his actual experience of residing in the same 'hood where the video was being produced, was dismissed by the video's casting director as "too studious." His lack of a "menacing and despondent" appearance strips him of his visibility, blackness, and, ultimately, masculinity. Because Gunnar does not satisfy expected performance scripts of black masculinity, relevance is forcefully taken from him. This passage not only highlights the pathological implications of gangsta rap, but shows that such pathological performances are, in fact, performances. The rappers' exaggerated "minstrel" response, though satiric, forces the reader to confront his investment in the exaggerated realities of black cultural consumption, and their own investment in such pathological peculiarities. Gunnar, aware of the awkwardness of the video shoot's fetishizing of 'hood life and its parlaying of "hood cool" masculinity, is still invested in the Stoic Undertakers performance.

In part, this is because of the *sound* of the music video itself, the instrumentals inducing Gunnar to "reflexively" vibe to the song: "eyes closed halfway, my shoulders hunched toward the ground, my right foot tapped softly on the stair, and my head began a faintly perceptible bob" (78). At play here is not only the projection of black male coolness by the Stoic Undertakers, but Gunnar's responding cool pose, in which he demonstrates a grimacing authentic black masculinity that is left unavailable to him. Gunnar renegotiates Boyd's definition of cool, detaching himself from his lived experiences in order to sustain the arrogance and menace needed to survive. The disjunctive and peculiar reading of black masculinity Gunnar attempts to negotiate is embodied in his response to sound. His angst about the dismissal of his manhood and the blackness attached to it is lessened through Gunnar's head bobbing to the music. While the rappers' lyrics and bodies may not speak to Gunnar's experiences or anxieties, the sound itself provides him an alternative reading of his blackness, as he falls in rhythm with the music and becomes aware of the commodified worth of his manhood.

Both Gunnar and the Stoic Undertakers' anxieties reflect a dilemma that successful commercial rappers face in balancing lived experiences with expected performance. Jackson argues that such angst is an example of how "hip-hop artists attempt, however fleetingly and unsuccessfully, to challenge external categories of social authentication (2006:177)." He acknowledges a complex and often unarticulated angst that simultaneously fosters and

resists popular conceptions of black manhood. A dearth of traditional race and gender scholarship addressing such anxieties points towards a need for a more unorthodox method of analysis. One pivotal and underutilized approach to such analysis is through sound.

### Theorizing Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose

While numerous studies of cool pose have relied on visual and (popular) cultural interpretations of black manhood, there is a paucity of scholarship that addresses the sonic implications of black masculinity. Considering black male coolness as a fulcrum of realness and performance, this article furthers discussion of black male performance by positing a concept of “Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose,” (hereafter HHSCP)—a sonic redressing of black masculine performance in the hypercommodified and commercial space of rap music. HHSCP is the relentless grappling and maneuvering of the type of hip hop Richard Schur (2009) defines as “the world of sounds, images, texts, and commodities through which African Americans and others experience contemporary life” (47). Building upon Schur’s definition of hip hop, HHSCP negotiates complexities of black masculinity through presenting sonic signifiers of black manhood, experiences, and coolness. The crux of my theorizing HHSCP lies in an understanding of sound as musical and nonmusical, and posits a sonically manifested space to interpret and explore aspects of black identity unavailable in other mediums. Framing black men’s narratives through a combination of instrumentals, vocals, and other relevant sounds like grunts, laughter, and wails—HHSCP negotiates signifiers of black male life through a sonic framework. It is the improvisation of black masculinity through sound, making space for the performance of otherwise silenced, supposedly non–normative feelings and expressions. Take, for example, the laugh of Tupac Shakur. Throughout the track “I Ain’t Mad at Cha” Shakur frequently chuckles, at times forcefully. While the expectations of his youth and black manhood at the beginning of the song—“heard ya’ll tearing up shit out there/kicking up dust/giving a mutha fuck”—Shakur gives a subtle but powerful laugh. It embodies the conflicts of Shakur’s reality, pathological impositions, and static performances of his manhood. Because Shakur grappled with and was frequently engulfed in the West Coast gangsta rapper mentality milieu during his career in the early and mid 1990s, he frequently used laughter as a signifier of the peculiarities of commercial black masculinity. Shakur’s laugh simultaneous marked his imposed cool and inability to fully articulate his angst as a black man.

A sonic cool pose framework makes room for teasing out conflicting and peculiar dimensions in which black men exist in the United States.

## Current Musicology

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Thus, HHSCP offers a discursive space of varying and frequently conflicting performances of cool and its attachment to blackness as commodity and lived experiences. One immediately acknowledgeable restriction, however, to the development of HHSCP in this context is its limiting heteronormative approach to black masculinity that frames commercial rap music. Still, HHSCP is useful in troubling commercial rap music discourse, because it denotes enterprise as unrestricted to visual and narrative expressions of black manhood. Tricia Rose's discussion of commodified rap is particularly useful in addressing HHSCP's poignancy as an alternative frame work for gender expression. Rose writes: "hip hop has always been articulated via commodities and engaged in the revision of meaning attached to them" (41). By regarding sound as a commodity, HHSCP identifies the commodification of black masculinity through sound and what black masculinity culturally and sonically represents in the American popular imagination.

HHSCP is in conversation with Michael P. Jeffries' theorization of complex cool, an application of cool pose that speaks specifically to a post-Civil Rights black (masculine) experience. Jeffries defines complex cool as:

more transparent than previous manifestations of black coolness. It openly foregrounds and sustains the *conflicts* of black American masculinity rather than concealing them, saturating these struggles in an appealing marinade of pride in one's hip-hop skills and sensibilities. That is, hip-hop's complex coolness is what allows commercially successful representations to simultaneously contain narratives about collective racial identity, political injustice, God and the afterlife, Cadillac Escalades, strip clubs, and drug money. (60)

In addition to the literal reading of lyrics as an indication of coolness, HHSCP adds complexity to the conflict Jeffries' calls an "appealing marinade of pride" through instrumentation, sampling, and other sonic markers of black masculinity found in commercial rap music. Rapper Rick Ross, for example, heavily grunts "UGH" as an introductory ad lib during his raps. This sonic signifier alerts the audience to his identity and "brand," establishes a steady tempo for his lyrical delivery, and sustains expected performances of black masculinity as forceful and hard hitting. Ross' grunting is accompanied by similar hard-hitting beats grounded in crashing symbols, synthesizers, and sonic booms, signifying not only the bass of the instrumental accompaniment but the low register and therefore menacing markers of his own voice. Arguably on the opposite end of that spectrum is rapper Drake, whose sing-song lyricism is frequently interrupted with an emphatic "Ah!" Drake's vocals are accompanied by a staple blend of strings, piano, and "soft" instrumentals, drawing attention to a vulnerability often lacking in commercial rap narratives. Both rappers manipulate sound to construct a

discourse that simultaneously engages their (materialistic) privilege while addressing the limitations of their experiences within rap as a corporatized space. The polarity of Ross' and Drake's performances of HHSCP is in fact representative of the complex and frequently conflictive range of cool that HHSCP encompasses as a sonic site of expression.

This sonic scripting of the black male body and experience engages Ronald Jackson's related work in which he points out how "script[ing] someone else's body is to actively inscribe or figuratively place one's self, worldview, or ascriptions onto another projected text, which often requires dislocating the original text and redefining the newly affected or mirrored text as counterpositional or oppositional Other" (53). The sonic qualities of rap complicate the static black masculine existence within popular music and culture, sounding what Jeffries observes as a "publicly conflicted discourse of black masculinity, far more complex and far more forthcoming about vulnerability and connectedness than cool pose theory allows for" (62). The subaltern reading of HHSCP provides a blueprint for understanding the present moment of popular and cultural black manhood. It allows for materialism and resistance, frequently and restrictively regarded as individual and un-touching, to be comprehended as flourishing and colliding in sonic performances of black masculinity. As Jeffries points out, "Even in the context of the restrictive political economy of the record industry, black masculine conflict and vulnerability are exposed in contemporary hip-hop in a way that is not explained by previous theories of black coolness" (61).

"Sounding commodities," a key concept in Fred Moten's theorizing of race and capitalism, is heavily utilized in addressing HHSCP. Moten generally considers the sounds of blackness and black cultural expression as "sound commodities" in American capitalism. Blackness as a performance, he asserts, is "the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing eruption that anarranges every line, a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity" (1). What blackness sounds like in commercial rap signifies its worth. The performance of this expected type of commodified and commodifiable black identity as normal strains any type of black experience outside of this context in the popular imagination. The upheaval that Moten designates as a marker of blackness' performance is shunned if not overpowered by the push for racial ambiguity in public spaces. Situating black performers as a commodity in this current social climate, then, is to speak to how those ambiguities relegate blackness to a position of essentialized discourse tethered to profit. Moten suggests sounding blackness as a commodity in an effort to address these peculiarities. Focusing on black performers' speech, Moten argues "what is at stake is not *what* the commodity says but *that* the commodity says or, more properly,

that the commodity, in its inability to say, must be made to say” (9, original emphasis). In the context of white hegemonic privilege in rap, there are tensions that exist between the ability to speak, forced silence, and power in speaking or lack of power through being silenced. Emphasis is placed on presence and being given the opportunity to perform a rap narrative—albeit manufactured but authenticated through mass consumption. As Jelani Cobb astutely states, “a rapper without a record deal is a commercial without a time slot” (9).

HHSCP extends the vocalizing of black male rappers as commodities to include non-vocal sounds as markers of intersections with corporatization and privilege. A primary catalyst for such intersections is the technological production of sound and, ultimately, blackness, in rap. Thus, one possible way for rappers to overcome the “inability to speak” beyond corporate control is through the distortion of one’s voice through production tools like autotune. Aside from the overt ‘coolness’ of shifting one’s voice electronically, autotune provides a space for black male rappers to distance themselves from the expected “hardness” of a characteristically black masculine sound. Although constituting an innovative niche for alternative modes of black masculine expression, autotune is still nevertheless tied to the commodification of blackness through sound. T-Pain (Tallahassee Pain), for example, branded himself through the nearly exclusive use of autotune in his performances, while also selling cellular phone applications and a microphone that similarly distorts the user’s voice. The use of technology to alter and modify Pain’s voice signifies Ronald Jackson’s assertion that new media and technology have been imposed upon rap as a signifier of the black masculine body. Access to ideas of blackness via the constructed sounds of “Black manhood”—granted by consumer products such as T-Pain’s microphone, and media outlets like YouTube and WorldStar—is given to a wider audience. Public scripts of black masculinity are continuously renegotiated and manipulated to both commodify the (popular) black experience while feeding into static, often one-dimensional representations of black American men.

This conflict is heightened within the sound spectrum, sonically pushing against expectation and profitability amongst rappers themselves. Rapper Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter, for example, sought to attack T-Pain’s autotune modification of his voice and music, releasing “D.O.A (Death of Autotune)” on his 2009 album *The Blueprint 3*. In a looped sample of Janko Nilvic and Dave Sucky’s “In the Space,” Jay-Z dismisses autotune as irrelevant and raps: “this anti-autotune, death of the ringtone/this ain’t for iTunes/this ain’t for sing alongs.” While Jay-Z lyrically decimates auto-tune as an easy cop-out for a lack of talent, his vocal rebuke is re-emphasized by the sample, a deliberately extended horn representing the awkwardness (and



annoyance) of an auto-tuned voice. Jay-Z utilizes sound to ‘trump’ T-Pain’s narrative as the truer representation of acoustic realness while discounting the significance of autotune—and ultimately dissing T-Pain—as an alternate reading of voice and black masculine narratives.

The use of sampling in rap music is a prominent practice in its production and branding. Sampling borrows from previous recordings to create a ‘new’ sonic backdrop. This provides a unique filter for understanding Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose as it allots space for renegotiations and interpretations of black manhood in sound. Joe Schloss’ *Making Beats: The Art of Sample Based Hip Hop* is a seminal text in understanding the craftwork behind sampling as it is used to mark this contemporary moment of commercial rap’s production. “Hip-hop production constitutes an ideal value for developing a tactical sense of when to make knowledge public,” Schloss observes. “The constant struggle that producers face between using their work to display their esoteric record knowledge to each other and making beats that appeal to a broad audience that wants to dance” (81). Sampling allows for the manipulation of sound to create a specific aesthetic, frequently catered to the expectation of the consuming audience. It provides space for both hidden and public scripts of race and gender to sonically parlay, intersect, conflict, and consume. Richard Schur writes that “sampling as a creative method or framework bridges the acts of consumption and production” (46). Both consumers and critics, then, should pay special attention to the hip hop producer who presents any departure from the norm. In addition to establishing and identifying the artist’s work through a unique cobbling of sounds, producers shift negotiations of coolness away from simple beats and accompanying rhymes. “For hip-hop producers—who are highly attuned to the origins of particular samples—the significance tends to lie more in the ingenuity of the way the elements are fused together than in calling attention to the diversity of their origins,” Schloss asserts (46).

Moten’s Marxist reading of the production of black music aptly frames the purpose of sampling in hip hop:

The intensity and density of what could be thought here as his [Marx] alternative mode of preparation make possible a whole other experience of the music of the event the object’s speech. Moving, then, in the critical remixing of nonconvergent tracks, modes of preparation, traditions, we can think how the commodity who speaks in speaking, in the sound—the inspired materiality—of that speech, constitutes a kind of temporal warp that disrupts and augments not only Marx but the mode of subjectivity that the ultimate object of his critique, capital, both allows and disallows. (11)

Sampling, like HHSCP, forms a lens through which to understand intersections of commercial black cultural expression with American (popular)

culture. For the purposes of this paper, the ‘remixing’ and preparation of seemingly unrelated tracks to produce a new framework for black musical expression adds emphasis to the manufacturing and mass consumption of black manhood through sound.

### Hearing Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose in *Watch the Throne*

Sounding and sampling tensions among black masculinity, cool, and enterprise in rap music reflect an unsettled and constantly shifting twenty-first-century social-cultural landscape of racial and gender politics in the United States. In addition to the shifting politics its soundscape represents, Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose pivots on discourses of power and whiteness. In effect, it is the claiming of power on and within the black male body. Of particular interest for explicating the significance of sampling in the construction of HHSCP is Jay-Z and Kanye West’s collaborative album *Watch the Throne* (2011). A tribute to “tight” productive and vocal work, *Watch the Throne* (hereafter *WTT*) is a sonic foray into interventions and limitations of coolness and black manhood within commercial rap music. It is critical to point out the commercial and figurative intersections of both Jay-Z and Kanye West’s masculinity with popular discourse. This is achieved in large part by the unorthodox use of sound throughout the album, which not only demonstrates a form of commercial elitism that both Jay-Z and West have attained but the limitations in which this elitism is (dis)regarded through sound. For example, the brief carnival-esque sounding ‘outros’ of “No Church in the Wild,” “New Day,” and “Welcome to the Jungle” sonically highlight the use of obscure European rock samples to speak to their (global) accessibility to wealth. The sample, taken from the song “Tristessa” originally done by Italian rock band, Orchestra Njervudarov, sonically highlights West’s awareness of hip hop as a global market. The obscurity of the sample signifies not only West’s affinity for European genres of music like progressive rock, but his ability to access, reclaim, and re-contextualize it within commercial rap to speak to their privilege. The spotlight on producers such as Swizz Beats and West himself sonically opens up alternative means of discussion about commercially successful rappers’ negotiations of social-political responsibility and corporatism. To date, *WTT* is one of the most comprehensive representation of Jeffries’ concept of complex cool and HHSCP, utilizing overarching tropes of materialism and capitalist impulse alongside retorts of protest and resistance. The crux of the sonic and lyrical black masculine coolness is situated within a tense tug/pull relationship between status and agency, offering an understanding that both Jay-Z and West are afforded—literally and figuratively—the opportunity to speak about

oppression because of their position within a corporate soundscape. *WTT*'s "protest" discourse is made visible and exists between realities of rap music as a bankrupt resistance discourse and commercial rap as a portal to wealth and opulence. The result is seemingly conflicting narratives and sounds of black manhood, privilege, social agency, and American degeneracy.

As both a rapper and a mogul, Jay-Z's verses on *WTT* signify not only a shifting commercial and cultural production framework for black (male) rappers to maneuver, but also shifting social implications of progress and political agency. He was in the executive board room as well, helping found Roc-A-Fella Records and serving as CEO of Def Jam Recordings from 2004—2008. Jay-Z's position as a hip hop mogul undoubtedly influences the consumption and appreciation of the sonic signifiers of his identity as well as his brand, maneuvering both corporatized and ethnic discourses of black masculinity. Christopher Holmes Smith describes how the iconicity of black hip hop moguls is a gauge of social responsibility for minorities:

[The hip hop mogul] raises the issues of "representation" in both a semiotic sense—as may regard the codes and symbols through which these figures generate social recognition—and in terms of an ethical responsibility to serve as stewards for the thoughtful composition of these codes as they may "stand in for" the desires and values of those individuals who are not eligible to occupy similar positions of mass mediation and discursive credibility . . . the hip-hop mogul is not intelligible without credible accounts of the lavish manner in which he leads his life, nor is he intelligible unless his largesse connotes not only his personal agency but also a structural condition that squelches the potential agency of so many others. (673)

Jay-Z's juxtaposition of performances of power, as a black businessman and rapper, collapses boundaries of (white) power as static and impenetrable by minorities, while remaining hinged to the 'hood aesthetics that helped Jay-Z enunciate and retain his essentialized and visible blackness. His management of image and performance—sonic and textual—must remain aware of expected and often conflicting performances of his own idea of blackness and manhood.

Holmes Smith further observes how Jay-Z's mogul status situates him within the black (popular) imagination as "a visual signifier for the 'good life.'" The hip hop mogul, Holmes Smith asserts, "identifies growth-mediated forms of social uplift as rapidly normalizing black political discourses, as opposed to the support-led communal development blueprints from the civil rights era" (674). *WTT* inundates its audience with social and cultural critiques enveloped within narratives of luxury and (lack of) access. Yet these narratives are accompanied and complicated by samplings of soul music, popular culture, and instrumentation that create a map for maneuvering

what 21<sup>st</sup> century black manhood looks and sounds like in a hyper-commodified and mass-consumed cultural space.

The album's first single, "Otis," samples soul singer Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness." The majority of Redding's sample is limited to a loop of his emphatic "got ta get to her now now now!," derived from the ad-lib that precedes the chorus, "got ta try a little tenderness!" Not only does the sampling of Redding's music place *WTT* into a broader trajectory of black American popular music, it taps into the influence of one of the initial forays into sonic cool pose previously afforded by soul, jazz, and blues singers. This type of cool, which is often considered a resistance to white privilege and oppression, was undeniably imitated by nonblack fans and consumers as the epitome of what Greg Tate calls American discontent:

Once the music of marginalized minorities, they [African-American musicians and music] have become the theme musics of a young, white, middle-class male majority—due largely to that demographic's investment in the tragic-magical displays of virility exhibited by America's outsider, the Black male. This American manhood began to be defined less by the heroic individualism of a John Wayne and more by the ineffable hipness, coolness, antiheroic, antiauthoritarian stances of bona-fide genius black musicians (9).

Redding's agency for love and acceptance geared towards his lover is redressed by Jay-Z and West to boast about their acquiring of wealth, privilege, and judgment through their utilization of hegemonic privilege. The discontent Tate acknowledges as a sort of black masculine 'crossover' into a mainstream white American public is thrust into this contemporary moment of consumption and commodification in which Jay-Z and West perform a subversive script that collides black and white male privilege. The still prevalent connection of the white middle class' and, more specifically, white middle class youth's embrace of commercially successful rappers like Jay-Z and Kanye West speaks to the viability of profit and black popular discourse in which Jay-Z and West cohabit. The murkiness of race and identity politics that resonated and framed scripts of black cool amongst black musicians of previous eras is no longer concrete. The antiestablishment agenda that resisted white privilege, thus pushing it on the radar of white consumers, is no longer the primary focus of contemporary black popular music. The agency, vulnerability, and political prowess of black male performers like Otis Redding, Curtis Mayfield, and Isaac Hayes, among others, is subverted to represent the collapse of historicized black cool to current, more capitalistically implied constructions of black cool. This shift is slyly and cunningly acknowledged by Jay-Z, prompting the reader to consider the changes in black music soundscapes with his lyric, "sounds so soulful, don't you agree?"

Carter and West's cognizance of rap as an industry, and their participation in commercial black masculinity, are blended through sound and lyricism. One of the most engaging aspects of *WTT* is how the complexity of black masculinity, often underplayed or overlooked by a track's lyrical delivery and content, are sustained through their sonic markers and accompaniments. On the track "Niggas in Paris," an initial listen can be interpreted as a celebration of excessive spending and luxury. Jay-Z questions his audience: "I ball so hard muthufuckas wanna fine me/first niggas gotta find me/what's 50 grand to a muthufucka like me please remind me." His aggressive delivery is a literal challenge to his audience: who can stack up enough authority and has enough stacks (money) to challenge his power or wealth? Jay-Z's lyrics and their belligerently sonic delivery reflects his ability to expatriate himself in Paris—a nod to the similar actions of preceding expatriate black male artists like James Baldwin or Richard Wright. Jay-Z's cool lies in his ability to self-define—make his own rules—via the ability to literally and figuratively remove himself from American scrutiny.

Aside from the subversion of expatriatism as a lap of luxury instead of a form of social protest and agency, "Niggas in Paris" samples a scene from the comedy *Blades of Glory*, which features primarily white actors. Sampling this movie is an acknowledgement of commercial rap's intersections with mainstream and, in effect, white popular culture. Whiteness' connection to rap music is brazenly present in this song, offering tense and often subverted markers and performances of white male privilege by West and Carter. The song opens with the lines "We're gonna skate to one song and one song only," while the instrumental track plays in the background. An awkward yet humorous sampling of Will Ferrell's lines, the opening could be heard as using Ferrell's voice and lines to poke fun at the misconception of commercial rap music as a white corporate entity. Sampling Ferrell, then, gives whiteness a tangible and culturally recognizable voice. In this respect, Ferrell's demand for "one song and one song only" sonically signifies the monolithic and corporatized manufacturing of rap music, thus pointing out the awkwardness of the lack of creativity in rap music that Carter and West seek to rectify throughout *WTT*. After West delivers a verse about buying luxury labels, world travel, and "suffering from realness," the second *Blades of Glory* interlude resituates the audience with a satirical interpretation of rap as a black-white cultural production. West's affirmation of his associates "going gorillas" in Paris is interrupted by sampling Jon Heder's character's response to Ferrell's initial demands with a high and awkward "I don't know what that means." Ferrell responds, "no one knows what it means, but it's provocative . . . it gets the people going!" Heder and Ferrell's "private" exchange signifies Carter and West's awareness of commercial rap music as a sustained produc-

tion of white voyeurism. If West introduces “going gorillas” as a new slang term for excessive spending or “balling out of control,” for example, it sustains West’s popularity as a black rapper, while “authenticating” his blackness to a white and multicultural audience. Situating Heder and Ferrell’s exchange in this sonic moment reintroduces Carter and West’s intent to highlight multiple layers of consumption, production, and associated privileges.

WTT’s most telling manipulation of sound and sampling as Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose is the brilliantly produced “Murder to Excellence.” The track bridges commercial rap with an international audience through the sampling of Romanian music. The role and prowess of the producer in “Murder to Excellence” is key to the construction of HHSCP, connecting that “esoteric knowledge” of obscure and unfamiliar tracks with the worldliness and privilege afforded Jay-Z and West through their commercial rap success. Another unique component of the integration of the producer’s sonic cool is the understanding of “digging in the crates” to find the music with which to sample. DJ Kool Herc once emphasized the significance of crate digging as groundwork for branding one’s identity and, therefore, cool with unique music tracks. The choice to sample “Fetele de la Capalna” and Quincy Jones’ “Katutoka Corrine” from *The Color Purple Soundtrack* (1986) demonstrates the blurring of cultural discourses through production in “Murder to Excellence.” The background accompaniment of guitars, percussion, and the sample of the women’s chorus “La, La, La” from “Fetele de la Capalna” is somber and steady, a sonic signifier of the exposition of “Murder.” A crashing cymbal plays consistently on every other down beat in the first half of the song suggests a forceful urgency in the delivery of a critique of the murder of young black men. The crashing cymbal, at this moment, sonically reiterates the agency in addressing black murder. The guitars and percussion of the first half of the track become more sparse during the transition to an accelerated sample of “Katutoka Corrine,” signaling a change to a celebration of “Excellence.” Similar to the changes that occur in the lyrical content of murder to excellence, there is a shift in the seriousness of the track as the crashing cymbal is replaced with an E-flat minor piano sample. Perhaps most penetrating about this transition is the use of sound to grapple shifting representations of agency in rap music. Tensions between the “agency” and significance of materialism—Jay-Z’s description of excellence—and the social-political agency of black America struggle expressed in West’s verses are made visible through sonic reflections of “murder” and “excellence” via the shift from the crashing cymbal to the piano. The children’s chorus of “Na Na, Na Corrine” is accelerated to sound like the progression of the “La, La, La” of the first half of the song. Incidentally, (or a stroke of brilliance), as the sample is sped up, the “Corrine” might sound like “money,” which

caters to Carter's discussion of opulence and wealth. The integration of these two samples blends global culture with local, culturally recognizable ideas of blackness. This negotiation of black and cool in rap is complicated however, because the sampling is embedded in such a way that suggests a full, organically developed accompaniment. As separated tracks, each song does not speak to nor align with the intentions of "Murder to Excellence." The blending of these vastly different songs, however, alludes to not only Carter and West's accessibility to the world, but their own experiences as men of color.

"Murder to Excellence" juxtaposes the social awareness of acknowledging the challenges inner city African Americans face—"I feel the pain in my city wherever I go/314 soldiers died in Iraq/504 died in Chicago" with opulence (personified by Jay-Z). The song's sonic impositions of West and Carter's blackness and masculinity teeter between juxtapositions of black protest and blacks' accessibility to (white) opulence. "It's a celebration of black excellence/Black tie, black Maybachs/Black excellence, opulence, decadence/Tuxes next to the President/I'm present," Carter raps. Here he plays on the multi-dimensionality of blackness through signifying class, "the new black elite," color, "black tuxes," and enterprise "black Maybachs/black excellence, opulence, decadence." This plays on current manifestations of black cool, materialistic attainments that are in conflict with historicized markers of black cool—social protest, resistance, and individualism. West's verse rebukes black cool as pathologically violent and shallow, toying with altruistic intonations of social respectability, while Jay-Z's discussion of blackness ebbs and weaves through materialism and opulence as pliable lenses of cool black manhood. The fluid exchange of discourses through lyrics and background accompaniment reflects the complexity of HHSCP, as well as through this sliding social-cultural landscape that black male rappers such as Jay-Z and Kanye West attempt to maneuver.

Returning to the sonic exchanges between Gunnar and the Stoic Undertakers in the explicated scene from *The White Boy Shuffle*, an overarching trope that connects the men together is performance and reaffirmation of normalcy. While the Stoic Undertakers were infused, performed, and invested in the performance of pathological scripts of black manhood as normal, Gunnar's response to the Undertakers' sonic cool pose reaffirmed the performance's normalcy. In considering Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose as a gauge of normalcy for black masculine performance, the challenge lies in being able to incorporate an understanding of black masculinity as both an improvisational performance and commodity, as Moten argues. While sonic cool pose can be historicized and invoke preceding black male artists like Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, and Isaac Hayes (and undoubtedly

further back), this current moment of Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose is unique in that it attempts to exist between hypercommodification, essentialism, and lived experiences of the last twenty years. The benefit in utilizing Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose as a tool to analyzing constructions of black manhood and ultimately blackness in commercial rap is its ability to adapt to the fluidity of the commercial–social climate landscape in which mainstream rap music exists. There is room for revision of what HHSCP encompasses as a reflection of not only the market, but shifting negotiations of black manhood in the American public and popular imagination. Most importantly, sonically reading commercialized black manhood provides an alternative space for interpretation and execution of black manhood with contributions from the artists—and other black males—themselves.

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