All My Friends Are Dead: Listening to Trap

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

Middletown, Connecticut

April, 2019
Abstract:

Trap music, despite prevailing as the most influential genre of rap music in the last decade and portraying the excessive violence experienced by Black youth, has not been given a full account in hip-hop scholarship or critical Black study. The first chapter of this thesis explores the origin of this omission, by analyzing the disciplinarian strategies implicit in recent hip-hop scholarship, which presumes that social inclusion is a primary goal of Black representation. To exemplify this oversight, the chapter examines the discographies of conscious rapper Kendrick Lamar, whose music conforms to the inclusionary narratives of hip-hop scholarship, and trap artist 21 Savage, who describes the lasting effects of antiblack violence and submits extravagance, rather than respectability, as a guiding value for Black life. The second chapter explores Black fugitivity, and critiques aesthetic analyses of fugitivity that do not engage with commodified music, such as trap, despite a supposed interest in Black art that resists classification. The third chapter concludes the inquiry by demonstrating how trap music frequently rejects utilitarian valuation of work, embraces the freedoms offered by leisure, portrays the diffusion of antiblack violence, and reproduces exclusionary biases. Rather than claim that one of these various aspects as emblematic, I argue that the intractable variability of trap music reflects the undecidability of blackness, which cannot be decisively articulated. (cw: excessive and gratuitous violence).
Table of Contents

Introduction: “Turn It Back Up” 4

1. A Mendable Wound? 22

2. Commodified Fugitivity 51

3. drip-drip: Amorphous Dissolution 88

Conclusion: To Be Everything Other Than Citizen 118
Introduction: “Turn it Back Up”

When Black seventeen-year old Jordan Davis stopped at a gas station in Tallahassee with his friends, the car he was in was playing a trap song called “Beef.” There was a 12-inch subwoofer in the back. The music was so loud that the car shook with bass.


Then, a monotone speaker takes center stage, and raps:

300, b--tch, that’s the team
In the field, we play for keeps
300, b--tch, that’s the team
OTF and GBE. ¹

A truck pulled up to the car Jordan Davis was sitting in, driven by a white man named Michael Dunn. When Dunn heard “Beef,” he told his girlfriend “I hate that thug music.”² He demanded that the young men in Jordan’s car turn it down. After obliging momentarily, Jordan said, "I'm tired of people telling me what to do,” and turned it all the way up again.³

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¹ Fredo Santana, "Beef," It’s A Scary Site (Savage Squad, 2012). I will be omitting “bitch,” from the lyrics I quote, in recognition of my positionality as a man, and this word’s specific ties to practices of misogynoir.


Then, Dunn took a handgun out of his glovebox, and fired ten rounds into Jordan’s car, hitting him in his legs, lungs and aorta. Jordan once said that he and Trayvon Martin, “kinda looked alike.” Two years after Trayvon was killed for wearing a hoodie, Jordan was killed for playing loud trap music.

To be murdered for refusing to turn down music constitutes a “problem for thought.” As Black philosopher Calvin Warren says, one “lacks a coherent grammar to make this suffering legible.” One cannot attempt to rationalize such an incident without losing an aspect of its visceral brutality.

If you tried to make sense of it, where could you start? With the rhetorical violence of the word “thug,” incessantly circumscribing Black teenagers like Jordan? With the white vigilantism enabled by Florida’s Stand Your Ground laws? With the media’s sustained portrayal of rap music as explicit and violent, leading to the common equation of trap music and “thug” music?

For Warren, the violence splinters in so many directions that it is impossible to account for exhaustively. None of the questions above could lead to a resolution. Instead, they work to minimize the violence at hand. They presume that modifying policy, or “shifting culture” could lead to restitution. Restitution, however, requires a conception of harm that rests on an individual aggressor. This cannot account for

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Jordan’s murder, because his killer’s actions are justified and reproduced daily. They are reinvigorated every time another Black seventeen-year-old, like Antwon Rose Jr., is shot under the same circumstances. They are tacitly endorsed when the officers who shot Antwon three times in the back are acquitted on all charges.  

Antwon and Jordan’s murders are examples of a violence where the “assaulting party is more like a structural phenomenon, and the fatality is a precondition of the world itself.” In the absence of accounting for this violence, queer Black scholar Christina Sharpe offers an indefinite, yet protean practice: “wake work,” defined as “a mode of attending to Black suffering and Black life that exceeds that suffering.” Wake work is not conclusive, but speculative; not redemptive but attentive. It does not seek to deliver blackness from this violence (a fruitless effort), but instead looks to attend to this violence and expose its entangled logics.

1. The trunk of the car Jordan Davis was murdered in, including the 12-inch subwoofer (Evidence Photograph of Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office, 2015).


Defining Trap Music

The following essay is an attempt to attend to Jordan’s death, by tracing the violence both reenacted and transfigured in the song that marked his passing: “Beef.” It is an attempt to give a wakeful hearing to this song, and other songs like it. In other words, it is an attempt to listen to, or attend to trap music. Despite its precise origin in the Chicago drill scene, a subgenre of trap music, “Beef” is an exemplary trap song: the stuttering double-time hi-hats; the menacing lyrics, discussing gang life; the strange sound effects, conjured out of nowhere; all of these elements merge in into the genre of rap music known as trap.

Trap music is commonly traced to Atlanta, Georgia, pioneered there by southern musical artists of the early twenty-first century, like rappers T.I., Young Jeezy, and Gucci Mane and producers including Shawty Redd, Zaytoven, and Lex Luger. Its beats are filled with cavernous 808 bass drums, rattling hi-hats, and razor-sharp snares. These skeletal productions are frequently supported by synthesizers that take the shape of orchestral instruments or abstract electronic timbres. Its lyrical themes are commonly related to the practice of trapping or selling drugs, and buying material goods, such as jewelry and cars, with the procured funds. Yet, as “Beef” already demonstrates, these characteristics are fluid. In 2012, when “Beef” was released, it joined a nascent subgenre of trap burgeoning in Chicago: drill music. While trap often dwells on drug-trafficking, drill instead often focuses explicitly on gang violence.

11 Some hip-hop scholars archaically refer to rappers as MCs. While I appreciate the gesture that this terminology makes to hip-hop’s origins, to maintain accessibility and reflect current parlance I use “rapper.”
Drill’s discussion of violence is multilayered. The specter of violence is both wielded and feared by drill artists, as Fredo Santana illustrates on “Beef:”

Fuck n-a, don’t want no beef
300, we in them streets
Bodies droppin’ like every week
We ain’t frontin’, we buckin’ heats
In the field duckin’ the police.12

Santana’s lyrics, merging with the sonic artillery generated by Young Chop, suggest that this violence is not just quotidian but immersive. When he says “bodies droppin’ like every week,” Santana’s upbringing in Chicago’s “O Block,” a single city block where nineteen people were shot between 2011 and 2014, comes into focus.13 With this knowledge, the survivalist instinct that marks “Beef” is revealed. In this newfound lens, the opening lines of the song, expressing loyalty between Santana’s gang, and his later provocation “fuck n-a, don’t want no beef,” register as fraught acts of intimidation.14 “Beef” accumulates even more weight due to Santana’s recent death, resulting from a compound overdose of Xanax, a common benzamine prescribed to relieve anxiety and lean, a popular mixture of the opiate codeine and soda. Santana was an open user of both drugs, who never feared explaining the reasons for his self-medication. Responding to faux-intellectual rapper Russ, who wore a t-shirt shaming drug users, Santana explained that he won’t stop using either drug “until I can stop thinking bout my dead homies an the trauma that I been thru in my life.”15

12 Santana, “Beef.” I use “n-a” in place of the n-word here. I will be omitting the n-word, following other non-Black academics, which I discuss in more depth on page 17.
14 Santana, “Beef.”
In just “Beef,” one can spy a multitude of problem spaces. In these fields of existence, violence is so immense that it cannot be articulated concretely. The suffering experienced by Jordan Davis and Fredo Santana exceeds any straightforward description. “An overdose due to addiction” or an “argument over loud music these encounters” fails to represent their brutality. But “Beef,” through its tapestry of reproduced and experienced violence, offers a way to begin to attend to this suffering. One would expect that, in the aftermath of the Movement for Black Lives and the renaissance of critical Black study, trap music would be a key site of academic attention. One would expect that the layered artistic composite made by those who have lost siblings, friends and cousins to police violence and drug overdoses would be one of the precise areas of interest for this new scholarship. One would also expect that the

2. Russ’ T-Shirt, reading: “How much Xans and Lean do you have to do before you realize that you’re a fucking loser?” (@russdiemon, 2017)

3. Fredo’s Response (@FREDOSANTANA300, 2017)
dormant field of hip-hop studies would begin to erupt with new, extended examinations of this phenomenon, attending to the notorious entanglement that is trap music.

Yet hip-hop theorists and scholars of critical Black study alike have been remarkably silent. The field of hip-hop study, pioneered by foundational authors like Tricia Rose and Imani Perry around the turn of the century, has been close to dormant in recent years. Moreover, the scant academic scholarship published on rap music in the last decade has failed to innovate beyond the insights of Rose and Perry, who wrote their defining studies far before the dawn of the Movement for Black Lives and the parallel ascension of trap music. Following the lead of these influential theorists, most recent studies continue to focus on the perseverance of the radical origins of rap music articulated in Rose’s work, focusing on artists such as Kendrick Lamar. Other texts explore other well-worn themes, such as the global diffusion of hip-hop culture, or the intersection of hip-hop and religion. Amongst music criticism, Hanif Abdurraqib’s collected essays They Can’t Kill Us Until They Kill Us (2017) offers a faint guiding light. They Can’t Kill Us covers many genres of music, including punk rock and indie-pop, but a few of its essays on rap discuss trap music’s current significance.

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16 Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Imani Perry, Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). These two studies, released ten years apart, have been lauded, appropriately, for their foundational investigations of poetics, production, race and gender in rap music.

17 For instance, renowned writer Jeff Chang’s recent book Jeff Chang, We Gon’ Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation (2016), explicitly addressing the Movement for Black Lives, takes its title from a Kendrick Lamar song. Trap music is not mentioned once.


19 Abdurraqib’s essay “Lil Boosie, ‘Wipe Me Down,” and The Ballad of Baton Rouge” is particularly luminous. It should be noted that Abdurraqib’s recently acclaimed work Go Ahead in the
Although aesthetic criticism is not always employed in critical Black study, a few prominent theorists such as Fred Moten and Jared Sexton explicitly work in the intersection of Black studies and cultural studies, including music and film studies. Moten, who often utilizes music to support his philosophical claims, almost always discusses radical traditions in jazz music.\textsuperscript{20} Although his recent trilogy, \textit{consent to not be a single being} infrequently discusses hip-hop, it focuses on historicized, underground acts such as the Wu-Tang Clan. Two very recent entries in critical Black study, published just last year, have explicitly discussed trap music, and helped sharpen my questions regarding trap’s significance. Jesse McCarthy’s “Notes on Trap (2018),” explores the scattered signs of trap music through the form of many, short memos, while Simone White’s \textit{Dear Angel of Death} (2018) bookends its critical evaluation of Black aesthetic tradition with an experimental narrative on trap’s omnipotence. Although both works offer critical insights (that will be explored in the third chapter), only one focuses on trap for more than a few pages, and both suggest that trap is an immense cultural force, that must be covered with more depth.

\textbf{A Personal Confession}

Although I wish I could say that I always agreed with their suggestion, I cannot lie. I too, was overlooking trap for far too long. In fact, for many years I was an outspoken antagonist of the genre. To explain this transformation and even more importantly, contextualize my perspective, let me tell you a story.

\textit{Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest} (2019) fits squarely in hip-hop studies’ tradition, focusing on a foundational alternative rap group that preserved the radical origins of hip-hop.\textsuperscript{20} Jazz was the critical foil used in Moten’s first book \textit{In the Break} (2003), and was also a main topic in his pivotal essay “The Case of Blackness.”
I grew up in white affluence in a residential neighborhood of San Francisco. Like most of the upper-class white kids at my private grade school, I was captivated by Lil’ Wayne, T-Pain, and Kanye West. Rap music, nearing the end of its bling-era, was incredibly off-limits and extremely popular, a perfect mix for sheltered white adolescents. Following white consumptive patterns of past eras, from Harlem jazz to Detroit Motown, I found myself in a web of identity formation and racial fetishization. I loved rap because my parents didn’t, and then loved it more because it was coded, according to racist essentialisms, as cool. For many years, although I started to dig into hip-hop history, and listen to underground ‘conscious’ classics by Common and Mos Def, my relationship to rap music did not change. Even as the Movement for Black Lives began to ignite, during my later years of my time in high school, I remained an incredibly hypocritical listener, engaging in classical white cognitive dissonance. I knew Chance the Rapper’s words on his song “Paranoia,” were crucial, but never considered implicating myself in them. I would hear Chance rap “They murkin’ kids, they murder kids here / Why you think they don’t talk about it? They deserted us here,” and later argue that the police were impartial.21

Then *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), Kendrick Lamar’s sophomore album, dropped. The album ends with a sample from a 2Pac interview, that haunted and galvanized me. Pac, in a fictitious interview with Kendrick, says:

Next time there’s a riot there’s gonna be bloodshed for real. I don’t think America know that. I think America think we was just playing and it’s gonna be some more playing but it ain’t gonna be no playing. It’s gonna be murder. It’s gonna be like Nat Turner. 1831. Up in this motherfucker.22

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21 Chance the Rapper, “Pusha Man / Paranoia,” *Acid Rap* (Savemoney, 2013).
22 Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*.
Listening to this track, as Freddie Gray was murdered in Baltimore and riots broke out, pushed me to a crossroads. I could either acknowledge that I didn’t care about rap music’s implications, and seek refuge in the illusions of whiteness, or start a long, ongoing process of introspection and self-criticism. Over the next years, as I began to critically evaluate my perspective on rap, I became intrigued and disturbed by the original motivations of my consumption. Soon, I was mapping out my original plans for a senior thesis on white consumption of rap music. Through Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010) and Tricia Rose’s *The Hip-Hop Wars* (2008), I saw a guidebook to a polemical takedown of racist cultural commodification and pathologies of white identity. Simply put, commercial rap music was a racist sham sold to white audiences, replicating our ancestors’ obsession with minstrelsy, jazz, and rock-n-roll. So yes, I wasn’t just ignoring trap, I was planning a long-form condemnation of it.

As Rose, most incisively, has demonstrated, white consumption is clearly a large factor in the hypervisibility of trap music and previously, gangsta rap. In the conclusion of *The Hip-Hop Wars*, she shows that the role of white consumption in gangsta narratives has been obscured for decades, ignoring the clear relationship between stereotypes of Black criminality and commercial popularity. Although a few scholars have written essays on the topic of white consumption, the only book written on it, by Bakari Kitwana, innocently holds that commercial hip-hop will enable cross-racial coalitions.²³ Despite the dearth of research on white consumption in hip-hop

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study, as I began to study white spectatorship more, I found excellent, precise analyses of previous consumptive patterns.

bell hooks, for example, exposes the centrality of racial fetishization in the fashioning of white identity in her essay “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance (1992).” In the essay, hooks outlines countless examples of white people “eating the other,” from consuming hip-hop to fetishizing sexual partners, to satisfy a desire for self-transformation. Rooted in narcissism and racist essentialism, hooks reasons that this consumption rarely, if ever, results in any active participation in antiracist efforts. In his historiographical study Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and The White Working Class (1993), Eric Lott similarly reveals that white consumption of blackface minstrelsy is a dynamic case of desire and fear, in which white audiences distinguish themselves from blackness even as they envy and appropriate aspects of Black culture. Another even more scathing critique of white consumption can be found in Spike Lee’s fearless film Bamboozled (2000), centered on an updated, revived minstrel show that gains a huge white following. Each of these texts point to a still largely hidden, yet quite apparent practice in white consumption of rap music: white people listen to rap to explore a sensational racialized notion of danger that rarely develops into any solidified commitment to racial justice.

4. In Spike Lee's Bamboozled, a new minstrel show becomes so popular that white audiences begin to dress up in blackface. (Matt Barone, 2015)
Despite the critical insight of these texts and the importance of recognizing this exchange as a key reproductive practice of antiblackness, I concluded that an essay on white consumption of rap would essentially rehash these arguments, and moreover, lose the nuance implicit in trap music. While any trip to a college fraternity will show you that there are droves of young white men rapping along to songs like “Beef,” and participating in antiblack cultural tourism, to say that this practice robs commercial rap of its sociopolitical potency is incredibly myopic. For one, this continues to perpetuate a model of analysis that centralizes white conceptions of Black identity. One could similarly analyze white hysteria over Duke Ellington in the 1920s, but to centralize only white racialized desire would be to lose out on his contributions to foundational structures of jazz. Relatedly, and more importantly, a study of white consumption can also paint Black artists as static, immobilized figures in their own creative productions. While one should of course acknowledge the influence of commodifying forces and white supremacist hegemony in the production of trap music, this should never be noted at the expense of acknowledging an artist’s own role in their cultural products.

However, many hip-hop theorists, and even critical Black theorists, still cling to neo-Marxist analyses of cultural commodification, characterized by Frankfurt School critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s essay “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception (1944).” In this antiquated, alarmist essay, Adorno and Horkheimer conclude that all commodified cultural products represent “recurrent and rigidly invariable types,” that can “be slotted in anywhere” to sedate mass populations into the capitalist (or, in later interpretations, white supremacist) logic
of dominant culture.\textsuperscript{24} Although this analysis is vital bedrock for modern critical theory, the customary lack of scrutiny brought to its claims, made seventy-five years ago, is astonishing. Within this framework, hugely successful albums, like Ms. Lauryn Hill’s Black feminist tapestry \textit{The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill} (1998), or Missy Elliot’s womanist, sex-positive \textit{Miss E...So Addictive} (2001), would be reduced to creations of white supremacist capitalist hegemony. Similarly, the entangled combination of antiblack stereotyping and insurrectionist militancy that makes up N.W.A.’s \textit{Straight Outta Compton} (1989), would be essentialized as antiblack caricature.

Additionally, though N.W.A.’s work should be held accountable for the profound violence it inflicts against Black women, Black LGBTQ+ people, and other marginalized groups, to overlook the role of white supremacist patriarchal institutions in N.W.A’s replication of such violence would also be reductive. In a more nuanced framework, the derogatory, violent language of “Gangsta Gangsta,” reproducing damaging systems of misogynoir, can be analyzed alongside the radical potential of Ice Cube’s conscious choice to sardonically exaggerate and subvert archetypes of Black masculinity. The untimely death of flawed, homophobic rapper Nipsey Hussle, demonstrates that the hypocrisies of ‘antiracist,’ yet exclusionary rap artists bring up critical, supercharged topics of discussion, necessary for the future development of hip-hop culture. If anything, this essay is attempting to continue that discussion with its complexities intact.

What I cannot condone, however, is a willful ignorance of trap music. To simply overlook it would be to overlook the music that has defined our present, through

its layered representations of trauma, violence, desire, and profligacy. Again, I say this with a sincere acknowledgment that I did just this, for many years. When Rasheed, a friend of mine who does hip-hop restorative justice work on the North Side of Chicago (and is also an openly affiliated gang member), would play me trap innovator Playboi Carti’s songs, I would enjoy them, but never listen again. When Mark and James, friends of mine and students at Wesleyan University’s Center for Prison Education in Cheshire Correctional Institution, would tell me to listen to a new trap record by Meek Mill, I would turn it only once, and listen without much thought. This essay is an attempt to listen to music that dominates the Billboard charts, and even finds its way inside prison walls, but doesn’t make it into new hip-hop studies. Music that is all around us, but rarely attended to in the academy.

Before tracing my argument, a few more digressions regarding my identity are necessary. As shown above, this analysis is founded in radical insights brought into the academy by critical Black theorists, many of whom respond to or form their arguments around key, controversial principles of critical Black study. As a white person, my relationship to any Black study is necessarily peripheral, and in the context of the radical claims of recent critical Black study, this is even more critical to acknowledge. The many arguments I outline in the chapters below are founded in fundamental critiques of respectability politics and liberal progressivism, while others demonstrate the limits of representation, or question the validity of Black citizenship. Each of these claims are powerfully articulated by Black authors including Ronald Judy, Simone White, David Marriott, and Fred Moten. It is my aim to apply these analyses to trap

25 In 2018, six of the top ten most played songs of the year were trap songs. An archive of the Billboard charts can be accessed here: https://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/2018/hot-100-songs.
music, to illuminate how it exemplify these traps and paradoxes of antiblackness. In my analysis and in my citations, I will be omitting the n-word, instead using “n-a,” a neologism that non-Black academics have used to recognize their positionality and yet not draw unnecessary attention to such omission.26 Despite my best efforts to amplify and apply the arguments offered by trap artists and critical Black theorists, this effort is certainly not final. For white academics, I would argue that this task never is. Additionally, as a heterosexual man, I recognize that acknowledging the thorough impact of trap music’s violent rhetoric against those who identify as queer, trans and femme, is extremely necessary. Attempting to ignore this element of trap is not only tacitly supporting violent rhetoric, but also doubting the reader’s ability to hold the damaging elements and affirmative potential of trap.

**Surveying the Discussion**

With that said, I hope that you, like me, are willing to attend to the jagged duality of “Beef.” If so, I can now move on to a brief outline of the rest of the essay. Chapter one begins by tracing the historical neglect of commercial rap music in hip-hop studies. By reading Tricia Rose’s anti-commercial argument in *The Hip-Hop Wars*, through the lens of Ronald Judy’s “On the Question of N-a Authenticity (1994),” I indicate that recent hip-hop studies have attempted to assess rap according to its utility for an inclusionary political framework. To demonstrate the dichotomy often developed between rap music deemed useful, and that which is discarded as self-

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26William Nash, Professor of American Studies and English at Middlebury College, has informed me that the term originated with Django Paris, Professor of Multicultural Education at University of Washington.
destructive, I juxtapose the unity narratives that Kendrick Lamar develops on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, with the cynical memoirs of violence 21 Savage describes on *Issa Album* (2017) and *The Slaughter Tape* (2015). Looking at these albums through Jared Sexton’s recent work, I argue that 21 ruptures with the inclusionary politics of previous hip-hop study, which has assessed rap music’s value according to its relative support of progressive democracy. 21 instead suggests that hip-hop analysis must acknowledge the deep-rooted nature of antiblackness, and question the sociopolitical assumptions guiding its past criticism.

Chapter two moves into an evaluation of aesthetic criticism in critical Black theory, which already expresses a severe distrust of historically assumed ideological goals, such as the attainment of citizenship or the realization of American democracy. It first explores theorist Fred Moten’s landmark essay “The Case of Blackness (2008)” which, after acknowledging the long history of antiblack mythologies assigned to Black people, argues that authentic blackness is *fugitive* blackness, or that which evades any static classification. To support this concept of Black fugitivity, Moten provides an analysis of bebop pianist Cecil Taylor, who refused to be defined by racist conventions or musical standards. Then the chapter examines David Marriott’s response to Moten, “Judging Fanon (2014),” which argues that Black fugitivity is too limiting a viewpoint, because it only authenticates Black representation that successfully resists antiblack stereotypes. Marriott instead attempts to create a theoretical approach that embraces the unintelligibility of blackness and expresses distrust of any form of sovereignty. The chapter concludes by arguing that trap music, like Moten argues, subverts its racist classification, and, like Marriott contends, is skeptical of any possible sovereign power.
However, I also end noting that both essays refuse to investigate how Black commodified identity might demonstrate this subversion and aporia.

After examining past aesthetic inquiry in the first two chapters, chapter three demonstrates why trap music, and commodified art in general, must be attended to. By reexamining Ronald Judy’s “On the Question of N-a Authenticity,” and interpreting David Marriott’s more recent “bling bling: On Decadence (2017),” I demonstrate how the excessive commodification and decadence present in trap music signifies its embrace of leisure and its rejection of puritan ethics of work. Eschewing a progressive framework that demands that Black people work hard, even though such work does not afford them material or civic benefits, trap explores the immediate possibilities that profligacy can offer in a plutocratic, antiblack world. Recognizing trap as an unmatched cultural force, that has succeeded past signs of excess described in Marriott’s essay, in terms of its cultural reach and its material extracts, I argue that trap represents a more scattered and more nihilistic sign that doesn’t fall into a mimetic idealization of power: drip-drip.27 Drawing on Jesse McCarthy’s “Notes on Trap,” and Simone White’s Dear Angel of Death, I hold that trap music does not embrace decadence, or any other value, as a form of sovereignty, and instead operates in a constant state of alteration, never able to be defined by its violence, commodification, or excess alone.

If one overlooks the uncompromising multiplicity of trap music, as I did for so long, one loses a critical opportunity to attend to “Black suffering and Black life that exceeds that suffering.”28 One sacrifices a pivotal opportunity to approach the

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27 I use “drip-drip” as a more aporetic offspring of Marriott’s earlier term bling bling, which he uses to describe the anti-work politics of previous transgressive black art, such as blaxploitation film.

28 Sharpe and Terrefe, “What Exceeds the Hold?: An Interview with Christina Sharpe.”
profound, indefinable violence that Jordan Davis experienced, and the incomplete triumph over such violence in Fredo Santana’s music. If one overlooks trap, one may not hear the vivid duality in Santana’s lines on “Beef:” “Bodies droppin' every week, We ain't frontin', we buckin' heats.” Perhaps even more importantly, one might not be able to attend to what Jordan said right after telling his friends "I'm tired of people telling me what to do:” “Fuck that N-a, turn it back up.”

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29 Fredo Santana, “Beef.”
30 Julia Dahl, “Teens testify shooter Dunn said "Are you talking to me.”
1. A Mendable Wound?

You wanna love like Nelson, you wanna be like Nelson
You wanna walk in his shoes but you peacemaking seldom.31
-Kendrick Lamar, “Mortal Man”

I'm in savage mode, shit can get tragic.32
- 21 Savage, “Savage Mode”

“This can’t be all there is to want in or of or for the world,” says Jared Sexton in his Society and Space interview with Daniel Colucciello Barber, explaining his commitment to scholarship that moves beyond traditional struggles for justice and equality.33 There must be more to expect, says Sexton, than equal rights under law, or forty acres of land. A similar declaration could be made about academic conversation of rap music today. Decrying the sexist, antiblack stereotypes present in trap music and lauding the lyrically-dense, sociopolitical efforts of a marginal group of conscious rappers, hip-hop scholars of the past two decades have infrequently thought outside of the ruse of equal rights that Sexton describes above.

Again, one could say, “This can’t be all there is to want in or of or for the world.”34 There must be more to imagine, than a moral critique of trap music and an uncomplicated admiration of conscious rap. To extend just two examples: What if conscious rap’s interest in cultivating propriety was questioned? Likewise, what if trap music could be evaluated by something other than its failed propriety?

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31 Kendrick Lamar, “Mortal Man.”
34 Ibid.
This chapter will explore the questions above, by engaging with texts by Jared Sexton, Ronald Judy, and Tricia Rose, and music by rapper Kendrick Lamar, trap artist 21 Savage. I will first examine the moralist impulse of hip-hop theorist Tricia Rose’s *The Hip-Hop Wars* using Ronald Judy’s essay “On The Question of N-a Authenticity.” I will then evaluate the role of moral uplift in Kendrick Lamar’s widely-renowned *To Pimp a Butterfly*. After that, I will then attend to the hyperbolic, excessive violence in of 21 Savage’s *Issa Album* and *The Slaughter Tape*, utilizing an important interview of Jared Sexton in the journal *Society and Space*, as well as his book *On Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing* (2017). I will argue that Lamar’s record advocates for communal unity and forgiveness to end antiblack violence while Savage’s albums explore alternative forms of endurance, that acknowledge the dehiscent and, systemic grounds of antiblackness. Ultimately, I seek to trouble what I perceive to be facile and reductive conceptualizations of trap music as self-destructive, and conscious rap as politically radical.

**Hip-Hop is Dead**

At the start of her second book, *The Hip Hop Wars*, Tricia Rose declares that “hip-hop is in a terrible crisis,” overtaken by “distorted, antisocial, self-destructive, and violent portraits of Black masculinity.” 35 Rose, the author of *Black Noise* (1994), a groundbreaking book that pioneered hip-hop studies and defended rap music as an

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35 Rose, 1. Note that Rose uses hip-hop to describe rap music in these citations from *The Hip-Hop Wars*. For the sake of precision, I will use the term rap or rap music, recognizing hip-hop as a signifier for an urban culture that includes graffiti art, DJing, breakdance, and rapping (and often more, such as criticism and activism). When describing theory on rap music, however, I will label it as hip-hop theory, considering it as one of the elements of hip-hop culture.
authentic expression of Black culture, experienced a change of heart in the decade-and-half before her next book. Nostalgic for the earlier era of rap that she examined, Rose conceived of The Hip-Hop Wars as a dynamic, yet nuanced critique, hoping to usher in new formations of rap that resembled the music she discussed back in ’94. An admirable project, surely.

Yet, early in her introduction, Rose reveals that her goals are intentionally not to discuss what rap music might illuminate about Black life, antiblackness, or American society, but instead to change “a conversation that has never been just about hip-hop.”\(^\text{36}\) This critical choice reveals that her critique stems from a theoretical position that relies on “morality as a governmental habit of thought.”\(^\text{37}\) With this articulated, Rose is no longer discussing rap music, but discussing how one might change rap music to reach normative goals of democracy, justice and equality in the United States.

Commercial rap music, as she sees it in 2008, is reprehensible, inauthentic, quite essentially vermin, because rap music should be assessed according to its merits for creating a moral-based, progressive Black community. This framework typifies the approach taken in many other landmark texts of hip-hop criticism, from Jeff Chang’s Can’t Stop Won’t Stop (2005) to Imani Perry’s Prophets of the Hood (2004), which similarly explore rap music’s knowledge production, and discuss its relevancy for upholding the Black community’s moral and political legitimacy. “If hip-hop is going to get well,” writes Rose, “we need to arm young Black men and women, and everyone

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\(^\text{36}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^\text{37}\) Judy, 230.
else, with powerful critical tools so they can expose and challenge the state of commercial hip-hop."\textsuperscript{38}

In Rose’s theory, gangsta rappers, and other commercial artists are quite literally a virus. With their seductive “playground for caricatures of Black gangstas, pimps and hoes,” these artists threaten the moral standing of African-American society, endangering the community’s possible ethical and epistemological unity.\textsuperscript{39} Of course, Rose is correct when asserting that these caricatures, often charged by racial stereotypes and hypermisogyny, can support antiblack, sexist conceptualizations of the African-American community. Yet, her reliance on this likelihood as a universal standard for measuring the supposed integrity of rap music introduces a delimiting, startlingly disciplinarian model for assessing cultural works by Black artists. This model, as Rose herself describes, is built to achieve intracommunal and intercommunal unity in America. As younger generations become increasingly infatuated with gangsta rap, Rose, older Black people, lose a chance to sculpt their youth in accordance with their values. This ideological discord, just as importantly for Rose, then sets “destructive and illiterate terms for cross-racial community building.”\textsuperscript{40} Thus, Rose’s critique of rap music is a critique of its ability to create alliances, within the Black community, and within American society at large.

Rose’s model also brings up another question: whose conceptualizations of the Black community will be affected negatively by immoral rap? At least according to somewhat dated statistics on consumption of rap, that answer is overwhelmingly non-

\textsuperscript{38} Rose, xii.
\textsuperscript{39} Rose, 1
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 11.
Black, and principally white.\textsuperscript{41} If one takes these frequently uncertain statistics at face-value, Rose, at least in part, is critiquing commercial rappers for not appearing more acceptable to non-Black audiences, for not offering an image of blackness that directly combats antiblack types. Again, although these stereotypes may also affect Black audiences negatively, both directly and through non-Black (extra)legal power, centralizing rap’s role in their creation narrows the field of antiblackness to one of personal prejudice and public opinion, as if rap music is responsible for centuries-long characterizations of Black masculinity as criminal and Black femininity as licentious. In Rose’s framework, the reader is led to believe that a more palatable, less stereotypical genre of rap would convince white supremacists to actively disinvest in their forms of hierarchy.

As my reading of Jared Sexton will demonstrate, given the history of antiblackness in America, such an agenda is both useless and worthlessly agonizing. No matter the face of blackness, be that the perfect class of the Obama family in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, or the threatening, libidinal ethos of Jack Johnson in the 1920s, antiblack policies persist, and even similar antiblack stereotypes persevere. Whether existing as the exact replica of the stereotypical Black male sexual threat, like Jack Johnson, or cultivating the high elegance of Michelle Obama, white supremacist ideology remains the same, demanding that Black people be “let loose in the outback of Zimbabwe,” no matter their etiquette.\textsuperscript{42}


Despite the ahistorical roots of her prior analysis, Rose openly frames and legitimizes her argument by stating that rap fuels conversation regarding “the value of Black culture’s role in society.” Rap music, apparently guiding sociopolitical conversations regarding race, across the country, must therefore be used as a teleological tool, aimed solely at elevating Black culture’s worth in (white) American society. Within this teleology, rap’s creators have an individual responsibility to create more progressive music, and rap listeners have a responsibility to listen to that music. If one makes, or is even listening, to music that is deemed immoral or stereotypical, one is actively supporting the cultural hegemony’s antiblack narratives. The nuance implicit in the act of creating, say, hypersexual art as a woman, or, insolent art as a Black man, disappears. One might question if recent rap songs that have been categorized as protest art would fit into Rose’s strategy. Cardi B’s “Bodak Yellow” discusses her past as a stripper: Does this feed into damaging ‘ho’ narrative, or offer valuable insights for new feminisms? Ice Cube’s “The N-a Ya Love to Hate” exaggerates the archetype of the criminal Black male: should he be disciplined for playing into damaging pathologies, or commended for his rebellious display of their irrationality?

To heighten the stakes, Rose makes an even more indicting claim, stating that, if rap music continues to be dominated by the rappers above “our nation will not overcome its racial Achilles’ heel; the American democratic promise, as yet unfulfilled, will end up an irreparable, broken covenant.” Rap music, it seems, has the ability to

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43 Rose, 5.
44 Ibid., 11.
create equal rights under law in America, to offer Black folks an opportunity to transcend antiblackness and join the hallowed halls of white American society. Thus, Rose’s interest in rap is not only focused on its ability to inform a moral Black community, but to allow a moral Black community to harness its knowledge in hopes of achieving the “right to participate in the general community of America.”

This objective, recognizable in Rose’s book and in the majority of 21st century hip-hop theory, necessitates a scholarship that distinguishes between the majority of commercial rappers, who produce self-destructive, sexist, racist rap, and the few rappers that could help constitute “a progressive vision” of rap music that could improve African-Americans’ status in American civil society. Certain icons, frequently labeled as conscious, underground, or simply political (whose music fairly often possesses similar, sometimes subtler qualities of sexism and racism) must be chosen to represent possible futures of transcendence, while the rest of the genre, labeled as trap, “gangsta”, ignorant, or hardcore (to name only a few signifiers for a genre that frequently eludes a common trait), must be condemned and dismantled.

More than fifteen years before the publication of *The Hip-Hop Wars*, Ronald Judy knew the logic of this forced dichotomy well. In “On the Question of N-a Authenticity,” he describes the choice that Rose describes above as one between “morally legitimate” rappers “and those who are amoral or nihilistic.” Theorists like Rose must, to use Judy’s phrase, distinguish between the *badman* and the *bad n-a*. Judy describes the *badman* as a civic leader who possesses a “knowledge of self,” that can

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46 Rose, 27.
47 Judy, 218.
serve as “the basis for a type of morality,” and instructs other Black citizens on how to comport themselves. Oppositely, he conceives of the bad n-a as a lawless historical figure that challenges all civic regulations, including “the very virtue of morality on which community survival defended.” In hip-hop study, and Black aesthetics altogether, Judy spies a persistent defense of the badman figure, who can demonstrate rap music’s “historical and ideological significance for African-American society,” and create knowledge useful for goals of improving intracommunal unity, increasing cross-racial alliance, and supporting campaigns for democratic inclusion.

While the badman attempts to unify the Black community against outside oppression by adopting the role of a civic leader, the bad n-a seeks a more comprehensive freedom, defying the fundamental rules of American society. In Rose’s model, the badman must be lionized to encourage a virtuous, healthy rap tradition that supports a Black “respectability politics” and a path toward social inclusion, while the bad n-a must be recognized as a threat to such movement. Identifying the “downward continuity” of the badman, who can model the ideal reputable Black citizen and mold communities, families, and individuals who will then do the same, Judy understands the moralistic agendas of hip-hop theory as a normative mechanism that endorses self-policing. Although Rose may understand the latter to be “taking cultural control” rather than self-policing, the framework nonetheless calls for the formation of a disciplined community that could be included in white American society and fulfill

48 Ibid., 219.
49 Ibid., 221.
50 Ibid., 216.
51 Ibid., 219.
America’s democratic promises.\textsuperscript{52} This pedagogy, although focused on constraining the “depths of self-destructive iconography, language and action” in the African-American community, contains an internal logic that calls for the disposal of rap artists that don’t create culturally normative, assimilative narratives.\textsuperscript{53} Ironically enough, Rose is asking for rappers who can destroy those she labels as self-destructive.

Thus, in \textit{The Hip-Hop Wars}, Rose is praying for the Barack Obama of rap music.\textsuperscript{54} Rap needs an icon that may marginally critique antiblack laws and institutions, but must, as an imperative, help “young African-American men feel that they’re a full part of this society.”\textsuperscript{55} To attempt this, in the wake of Trayvon’s Martin’s Murder, Obama started the My Brother’s Keeper program, an organization specifically intending to improve the civic and economic status of young men of color. In \textit{Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing}, Sexton envisions Obama as the badman-par-excellence or, in his more polemical moments, as “the perfect slave” who can maintain and advance, more than any other Black person, “the dream-work aimed at participation in slave society.”\textsuperscript{56} Obama, “whose \textit{character} is held up as a perverse ideal for so many urban Black youth whose masculinity is said to be in acute crisis,” is Rose’s godsend – a perfect badman who can lead the moral reconstruction of Black men necessary to cure commercial rap of its threatening disease.\textsuperscript{57}

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\textsuperscript{52} Rose, 27.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{54} Keep in mind that Rose published \textit{The Hip-Hop Wars}, her first book on rap music in 10 years (after her landmark \textit{Black Noise} (1994), less than a month after former President Obama was elected.
\textsuperscript{55} Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin,” White House Archives, July 19, 2013, \url{https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin}
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., xi.
\end{flushright}
instructed Black men to “pull up their pants” and stop “acting like boys instead of men,” in the run-up to his election, anticipates Rose’s disciplinary framework, which criticizes Black male representation and obscures structural antiblackness.\(^{58}^{59}\) Obama’s indicting moralism, mirroring Rose’s ethical interventions, implies that authentic Black expression, and the Black community’s civic value, are endangered in the absence of a Black male role model able to embody appropriate moral behavior, and train rappers to act more respectably. The badman rapper, in the shadow of Obama’s example, must rise to discredit more vitriolic Black male representations, encourage proper comportment, and ensure the Black community’s entrance into American democracy.

**The Messiah**

Six-and-a-half years after *The Hip-Hop Wars*, and well-in to President Obama’s second term, Rose’s appeals may have been answered. A conscious, Pulitzer-prize-winning rapper named Kendrick Lamar struck gold when he produced *To Pimp a Butterfly*, a record that could be harnessed for marginal institutional critique and large-scale communal revitalization. Lamar appears defiant, even revolutionary, on the front cover of *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Surrounded by Black men with 40 oz. bottles and stacks of cash, on the front lawn of a seized White House, a dreadlocked Kendrick smiles, shirtless.\(^{60}\) The photo exemplifies an ongoing mimetic phenomenon in popular rap and R&B music, in which Black artists circumvent direct social critique in their songcraft

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60 In promotional performances, Lamar even sported half-braided hair, paying homage to the incredibly profane Ol’ Dirty Bastard of the Wu-Tang Clan, one of the pioneering groups of hardcore hip-hop in the early ‘90s.
and instead radicalize their visual and symbolic statements. Establishing interpretative ambiguity and allowing for plausible deniability of partisan intention, *visual radicalism* aligns with Rose’s ethic, through its external reproach of white institutional power and its concealed moderatism. While the visuals ensure that the badman will be acknowledged as critical or anti-establishment, the veiled moral conservatism implicit in the project’s actual music and lyrics can safeguard the civic community’s values and goals. Reaching new heights since the reemergence of the audiovisual album, popularized by Beyonce’s *Lemonade* (2016), visually-radical artistry presents a perfect opportunity for Rose’s inclusionary framework for rap music, which can balance radical images that suggest incisive institutional critique, with lyrical narratives calling for cultivation of respectable virtues.

The central poem of To Pimp a Butterfly, presents the most suitable opportunity for Lamar’s artistic statement to be absorbed into a narrative of moral cultivation. While the poem is slowly unraveled through several repeated recitations that gradually extend in length, its significance only becomes clear when it’s delivered in full on the last track “Mortal Man.” The last stanzas, previously unheard, advocate for unity and common respect within the Black male community:

Just because you wore a different gang color than mine's  
   Doesn’t mean I can’t respect you as a Black man  
Forgetting all the pain and hurt we caused each other in  
these streets, If I respect you,  
we unify and stop the enemy from killing us.62

Through its advocacy of “unity over disunity” and its suggestion that “knowledge, and only knowledge,” has the power to overcome the divisions within community, Lamar’s poem fits perfectly into the tradition of the badman.63 Establishing himself as a pedagogical figure, Lamar advises other Black men to maintain an “internal harmony and solidarity” as “a form of protection against the law of the state.”64 Although aspects of the poem speak to Lamar’s realization of a greater war, a war “based on apartheid and discrimination,” his main advice, and the advice that the inclusionary framework can absorb, is the elimination of intracommunity division and violence.65 The internal logic of the stanza suggests that the only way to stop antiblackness is to cultivate and perform unity, to end Black-on-Black crime and other

61 I italicize significance to return to Judy’s articulation of a significance ‘for African-American society’ and its goals,’ and suggest that the significance that hip-hop study would derive from “Mortal Man,” is not necessarily that which all people, myself included, would find ‘meaningful’ about the song.  
62 Kendrick Lamar, “Mortal Man.”  
63 Judy, 219.  
64 Judy, 221.  
65 Kendrick Lamar, “Mortal Man.”
internal ethical contradictions and achieve agreement, both psychologically and socially.

While Lamar never explicitly suggests that this unity will lead to civic incorporation, he argues that “forgetting all the pain and hurt” is key to authentic self-knowledge and community self-determination. Lamar further suggests this belief through his many references to Nelson Mandela as a model for clemency, and a figure that other Black men should weigh themselves against. First Lamar compares himself to Mandela, telling his listener, “Don’t let me resent you / that’s not Nelson-like;” yet, in the next verse, just as the badman’s pedagogical leadership requires, he turns the question on his listener, asking, “Do you show forgiveness?” Lamar, quite like Rose, who implicitly holds Barack Obama as the ideal of Black masculinity, uses Mandela as a tool for measuring the mercy and compassion of Black men, to imply that forgiveness and respect are the cardinal virtues that could lead to the survival of the Black community and, perhaps, self-determination. In Rose’s inclusionary framework, Lamar’s internal psychological struggle and moral resolution represents the most applicable significance of the album. For Rose, Lamar produces knowledge that can be conveyed from his position to his listeners and the rest of the moral community, to encourage internal harmony, collective forgiveness, and moral refinement.

“The Blacker the Berry,” perhaps the most discussed song from To Pimp a Butterfly, must similarly be interpreted as a model for moral cultivation transferable from Lamar’s psyche to the greater Black community. In the song, Lamar ruminates

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66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
on his own social and moral hypocrisy, and ends asking his listener, “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street / when gang banging make me kill a n-a blacker than me?” Again, what begins as an internal conflict becomes the significance of the song, the knowledge that can be shared across the moral Black community. If Lamar is read as the badman, *To Pimp a Butterfly* is about Lamar achieving an understanding of the power of forgiveness and inspiring his community to do the same.

Lamar’s debut Reebok sneaker, designed to promote unity between gang members in Compton, represents the culmination of this message of forgiveness and uplift. Merging the ambiguity of visual radicalism with the communitarian conservatism of his lyrical message, the $143 shoes display “Red” on one sneaker, and “Blue” on the other. The sneakers indicate that the key to ending the crisis of Black masculinity, beyond emulating Mandela, beyond finding psychological freedom, is decrying gang violence and promoting moral cohesion. Overlooking the mechanized violence that constantly initiates such division, the shoes suggest that, with just an extra bonus and some common sense, Black men in Compton could end gang violence tomorrow.


In the wake of the murder of Trayvon Martin, Lamar critiques Black-on-Black violence, while President Obama creates an educational program focused on increasing Black male employment. In their responses to the pernicious structures of antiblackness, Lamar and Obama align under Rose’s dream of moral uplift and politics of inclusion. I have attempted to articulate how such normative politics inform various indictments of the gangsta (or trapper) as an individual rather than as a complex agent, informed by his or her conditions. Considering Rose’s comment that rap music determines “the value of Black culture’s role in society,” the gangsta rapper may be even more condemnable than the gangsta. For Rose, the gangsta rapper’s artistic products encourage the proliferation and the commodification of destructive cultural standards. Instead of valuing communal unity, the gangsta rapper actively resists it, often professing direct ties to a gang. Instead of cultivating respectable virtues, the gangsta rapper presents a world of excessive profligacy, saturated by androcentric and materialistic portraits of life. Instead of resisting antiblack stereotypes, the gangsta rapper performs and caricaturizes them.

If one assesses rap music’s worth based on its ability to establish a more reputable image of blackness in American popular culture, and its potential for advancing the Black community’s incorporation into American civic society, gangsta rap is the chronic issue-at-hand, the problem that must be solved if popular rap music is ever going to have a constructive influence on African-American society. Rose’s

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70 Although the gangsta is usually cast as male and indicted as a misogynistic exaggeration of Black male criminality, female gangstas, criticized for their complicity in hypersexualization and objectification of Black femininity have also been present in current and past eras. While this chapter will focus on many male figures, including Ice-T and 21 Savage, many femme gangsta rappers and trap artists deserve more thorough examination, including Lil’ Kim, Cardi B and Young M.A.

71 Rose, 5.
model attempts to create an exposé of gangsta rap, that can reveal the racist, capitalist patriarchal foundations of its commercial success, and convince listeners to stop listening. Instead of ignoring the gangsta rapper due to his or her commodification or immorality and holding the gangsta rapper as unworthy of critical study, Rose attempts to cultivate renunciation through exposé.

Yet, if one disengages with the moral imperative of respectability and the goal of inclusion, that rigidly distinguishes what can be conceived of as authentic rap music with what must be understood as regressive and self-destructive, the problem that gangsta rap poses can be identified as far beyond the realm of the personal, moral, or even physical. Judy articulates this possibility by conceiving of gangsta rap as an “emergent utterance” that does not function in accordance with the “liberal knowledge” that grounds the Black moral community and its fight for inclusion.72 Instead, Judy identifies the gangsta rapper as the creator of a pattern of thought “at the end of Black morality,” 73 The gangsta rapper, divested from morality, rejects a knowledge-based model for civic engagement and redress. Reframing the problem of gangsta rap from the moral to the epistemological, Judy engages with the art form as a problem that can trouble normative understandings of progressive knowledge production, and even modern conceptions of the human subject. Judy recognizes that gangsta rap does not expose a recent, singular crisis of Black masculinity, but rather, the existential crisis of Black masculinity.

72 Judy, 217.
73 Judy, 230.
The Antichrist:

Illuminating similar problems, with perhaps even greater bluntness, is trap music, the most popular progeny of gangsta rap, and the most popular genre of rap, as of the late-2010s. The difficulty of analogy Judy notes in the case of gangsta rap, which can often make one artist the “synecdoche of a loosely knit collection of rappers,” also exists in the case of trap music, which is now so pervasive that almost any new recording that employs a TR-808 drum machine exists would be identified with the genre. Trap, rather than existing within particular constraints of region, lyrical content, or even musical style, has become a metaphorical catch-all for nearly all popular rap music. Although I have already discussed the basic sonic and lyrical qualities of trap music in the introduction, due to the saturation of trap as a popular commodified genre, it will be important to define what trap music I will focus on, or what I mean when I say trap.

Trap music is perhaps most known for its dark instrumental sound, employing divided hi-hats and heavy 808 kick drums. As Simone White points out, the music centers the “masters of the machine,” who create the skeletal atmosphere that is distinctly trap’s own. But lyrically, rather than cultivating self-knowledge or consciousness, the genre explores the external and internal problem of the trap. Although now considered almost only in its narrower connotation of the trap house, the location of drug production and distribution, trap music, in its genesis, describes not

74 Spotify’s year end charts offer another example of trap’s preeminence. In 2018, six of the top seven most streamed songs on Spotify are listed as trap music. Seven of the artists featured are specifically, singularly associated with trap music, while the other artist, Drake is affiliated with trap-influenced R&B as well. See the introduction for an archetypal example of trap music’s sound and lyrics.

75 Judy, 218.

76 Simone White, Dear Angel of Darkness (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2018), 142.
just the dealer but a looser confederation of individuals trapped in cyclical hustles. The trap, rather than depicting a community collected under morality, centers a community impacted by generational poverty—a community painstakingly redlined and redistricted, a community that has been rigged by the powers that be and continuously forced into the traps of antiblackness. Trap then, is not just a signifier for trapping, for producing and selling narcotics, but for being entrapped in a web of antiblack institutions, and perhaps even beyond these institutions, being entrapped in one’s own antiblack psyche. Trap is then not just an exploration of external manifestations of antiblackness, but also an exploration of one’s own internalized antiblackness. As Jared Sexton notes, this internal struggle is even more sinister because it brings up the impossibility of moving “against yourself,” of fighting against the antiblack conceptualizations that “constitute us.” Trap is thus an articulation of many nearly impossible battles with other trappers, with the system of the trap, and with oneself. Although many popular artists from around the nation provide insights into this entrapment, just as Kendrick Lamar provides a particularly demonstrative contemporary example of the conscious badman artist, rapper Shéyaa Bin Abraham-Joseph, known professionally as 21 Savage, may be a demonstrative entry point into trap, or entrapped, music.

21 Savage’s childhood and adolescence almost too perfectly exemplify what dehiscence, or what the “wounded, disseminative vertigo that is blackness,” looks like in antiblack world. The details of his upbringing in Atlanta (after his departure from London at age seven) present several fundamental issues and offenses that, like

77 Sexton and Colucciello Barber, “Black Negativity, or the Affirmation of Nothing.”
78 Ibid.
Trayvon Martin’s murder, cannot be adequately addressed by a political agenda intending to make “young African-American men feel that they’re a full part of this society.” 79 21 was expelled from all schools in his home county of Dekalb by the 7th grade. He lost his best friend in a shootout at 19 years old. And on his 21st birthday, his brother was killed and he was shot six times.

An adequate description of this violence can only be approached by a description of universal dehiscence. In his interview with Daniel Colucciello Barber in Society and Space, Sexton explains that the term dehiscence, unlike terms such as violence or oppression, can more adequately speak to the “inextricable and inescapable nexus of sociopolitical problems” that Black studies addresses. 80 Rather than simply representing a static physical or material condition, dehiscence signifies many distinct, yet interrelated phenomena in different academic disciplines. While French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan uses it to refer to “the abolition of access” to “a real relation to being,” in otology, it instead signifies a puncture causing “chronic disequilibrium or vertigo.” 81 While the anatomical definition can be spied in his description of the “wounded, disseminative vertigo,” of blackness, Lacan’s description is implicit in Sexton’s frequent advocacy for “the position of the unthought.” 82

Thus, for Sexton, antiblackness operates on physical and ontological levels. It cannot be approached through a laundry list of violent acts of white supremacy, because the violence of antiblackness is just as present (in just as potent, if not more potent, ways) in one’s own self-concept and existence. When engaging competently with

79 Obama, “Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin.”
80 Sexton and Colucciello Barber, “Black Negativity, or the Affirmation of Nothing.”
81 Ibid. Otology, for those as unfamiliar with anatomy as me, refers to the study of ear.
82 Ibid.
Sexton’s concept of dehiscence, one understands that 21’s expulsion in seventh grade is just as violent as the bullets that hit his flesh as he turned 21. Just as his brother’s murder should be understood as one of the many perforations causing “chronic disequilibrium or vertigo,” his expulsion must be recognized as a Lacanian sign of “the abolition of access” to being. To be banished from the theoretical foundation of democracy—the school—at age twelve, cannot be adequately addressed through a customary language of harm or inequity. This exile is not just a sign of the failure of desegregation or the triumph of the carceral archipelago; above these material analyses, it must be recognized as a process of dehiscence—a process that constantly reinstates one’s status as non-citizen and non-being.

Even the acts of material violence described above, such as the murder of 21’s brother, must also be reevaluated to approach a more comprehensive understanding of the sundry wounds that such acts instigate. Witnessing such violence would clearly generate unbearable trauma, but the quality of such suffering may be more profuse than what the term ‘trauma’ can hold. Beyond the horrors of seeing a loved one killed, one is faced with an excessive illustration of the fungibility of one’s life. As Calvin Warren argues in “Black Care,” such violence damages more than just one’s body. It harms one’s spirit and psyche – it is a violence “without end, without reprieve, without reason or logic.”

Although many interviews with 21 attempt to contextualize and describe his violent upbringing, few have recognized the concise analysis of dehiscence present in

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83 Ibid.
84 Calvin Warren, “Black Care,” liquid blackness 3(6), 36.
his very name.\textsuperscript{85} Abraham-Joseph’s frank choice to name himself 21 Savage implies the interminable duration, and pervasive effects of the violence that Warren and Sexton describe. By choosing to identify himself as “21 Savage,” he suggests that witnessing his brother’s death was a viscerally transformational act, as if on that day Abraham-Joseph died and a new being, 21 Savage, was born. The violence of his brother’s death is thus more than just a physical or emotional scar—it is an ontological scar—permanently changing the nature of his being. In this act of becoming *savage*, one can espy both Warren’s description of violence that harms not only the body, but the “spirit or psyche,” and Sexton’s description of dehiscence as an “abolition of access” to being.\textsuperscript{86,87}

In trap music, from 21’s catalog and elsewhere, a similar moment of dissolution and reinvention, in which the trapper retells their own transformation, is common. As the lyrics below illustrate, 21 is one of many trap artists who have been scarred by moments of immeasurable violence, that do not only leave trauma or increase anxiety, but profoundly alter one’s state of being. Both 21 and Chicago drill rapper Lil’ Reese, who collaborated with Fredo Santana on “Beef,” align in their lyricism regarding this transformation. While 21 raps, “All that backstabbin' turned me to a savage,” on “Savage Mode,” Reese states, even more hauntingly, “I lost so many n-as, turned into

\textsuperscript{85} Amos Barshad, “Savage World,” November 21, 2016, *The FADER*, https://www.thefader.com/2016/11/21/21-savage-cover-story-interview; “21 Savage Interview With The Breakfast Club (8-4-16)” *Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM*, August 4, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJkFaFi2fFk. In many interviews, especially early in 21’s career, the effects of gang violence on 21’s music are a main topic of discussion. Yet none of these interviews discuss such violence in a way that departs from an account of the physical violence 21 has experienced (his blood loss, tattoos commemorating dead friends, etc.).

\textsuperscript{86} Warren, “Black Care,” 36.

\textsuperscript{87} Sexton and Colucciello Barber, “Black Negativity, or the Affirmation of Nothing.”
a savage,” on “Traffic.” On his song “Not a Regular Person,” Bronx trap artist A Boogie wit Da Hoodie explores the wounds of antiblackness in even more detail, rapping:

I can tell you what happened
The streets turned me into a savage
I started off juggin’ and trapping
Watch a couple a n-as get blasted
Way too much blood for a napkin
Won’t nobody tell you what happened

A Boogie, writing these lyrics at just 21, describes a similar process of disintegration and rebirth through violence. His opening statement, “I can tell you what happened,” exemplifies the self-knowledge that each of the three artists above possess regarding their existence in a dehiscent reality, where they no longer have access to being. 21, Lil Reese, and A Boogie’s concise memoirs of these moments of rupture suggest that they live and create within the “tear in the world” that Sexton describes, approaching their art from the position of one who has not just experienced severe violence, but been forcefully remade as savage.

Reassessing strategies for Black endurance from a position which acknowledges the diffuse, external and internal effects of antiblackness, 21’s music, rather than addressing such widespread violence through self-criticism or communal uplift, presents an intense nihilistic affect, which threatens notions of civic responsibility and proposes alternative methods for achieving possible authority. “Numb” from 21’s debut album Issa Album, provides a stark example of such affect,

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88 21 Savage, Savage Mode, Savage Mode.
89 Lil Reese, Traffic, Traffic (The Island Def Jam, 2012).
91 Sexton and Colucciello Barber, “Black Negativity or the Affirmation of Nothing.”
through its dark instrumental atmosphere that evokes dread, and its stark lyrics that submit expenditure as a form of perseverance. Arranged with deep, penetrating bass that rumbles through speakers, and high-pitched synths that resemble a toy piano, the instrumentation intimates the ominous forces that surround its composer. In the first verse, 21 lists out the many ways that terror from his past continues to follow him even as he gains fame, from remembering days “on the corner with the robbers and the d-boys” to “having nightmares that the feds listening.” 92 Mirroring his own act of self-naming, which draws a direct lineage between 21’s past and his present, “Numb” demonstrates that 21’s “trapping days” will never be over, even if he never sees Dekalb county again. “Numb” displays the ensnaring, tenacious afterlife of 21’s vertiginous upbringing, and implies that the implacable wounds of his past will always return in another form, even if he gains fame. Denying the transcendent hope of Lamar’s record, which suggests that the antiblack enemy would be defeated (or at least impeded) if gang violence was ended and unity was achieved, 21 instead suggests that such violence cannot be so easily vanquished.

Recognizing that antiblackness cannot be ended by a transcendent doctrine based on respectable presentation and proper comportment, 21 instead argues that expenditure offers the greatest prospects for perseverance. After recalling his past trauma, he raps “Now it's Louis rags when my nose runnin' / Got it out the mud, I don't owe nothin',” thus advocating for decadence and rejecting any moral debt one may impose on him. 93 To those demanding that he cultivate a more reputable image to uplift Black communities, 21 responds with a brutally realistic counter. For 21, spending

93 Ibid.
power, rather than respectable virtue, is the necessary attribute for enduring within a
system and psyche that hates you. Rather than blindly clinging to the false opiates of
moral restitution or political inclusion, 21 argues that the best choice is to:

Numb the pain with the money, numb the pain with the money
Numb the pain with the money, numb the pain with the. 94

Moving beyond the confines of the Black moral community that envisions
salvation in eventual inclusion into American society, 21 instead advocates for
expenditure and demonstrates that owning Louis Vuitton garments offers far more
tangible benefits. The money, crucially, does not save 21. It does not offer him equal
rights or land. The money only nумbs the pain, a pain that can never have a pronounced
end. Proposing a framework for (in)action that does not hold faith in the telos of
progressive politics, 21 explores what his current assets can offer. 95 Directly breaking
from the ideological traditions of the moral community, built on the singular desire to
“participate in the general community of America,” 21 refuses to have any faith in
transcendent politics fruitlessly working towards equality. 96

In this regard, “Numb” marks the first process of resistance, according to
Sexton. 21, famous and rich, yet still wounded, is forced to conclude that his suffering
is not “from the world alone,” but also present within himself. 97 Advocating for
excessive leisure and expenditure in the now, 21 explores the possibility of creating a
Black identity that opposes the very restraint, respectability, and exertion that the moral
community holds as an ultimate key to end suffering and achieve freedom. With that

94 Ibid.
95 Sexton and Colucciello Barber, “Black Negativity or the Affirmation of Nothing.”
96 Judy, 221.
97 Sexton and Colucciello Barber, “Black Negativity or the Affirmation of Nothing.”
said, 21 does not progress into the next phases necessary for Sexton’s resistant politics, that express “no (final) recourse to foundations of any sort.”

Rather than continue “to watch the dissolution of the truths that he has worked out for himself, one after another,” which Sexton argues is necessary for revolution, 21 remains in the antagonistic sign of decadence, critiquing moralist impulse through his own uplift of decadence. For Sexton, 21, by rejecting the myth of progressive moralism, reaches a necessary point of progression toward an affirmation of nothingness, but does not yet approach the most crucial step: repeating this rejection over and over—never falling into the trap of a reactionary, new ‘truth.’

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7. Album cover of 21 Savage’s first mixtape, "The Slaughter Tape." (Slaughter Gang, 2015.)

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98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
Regardless, as “Numb” indicates, 21 creates music that tests and transgresses the constraints of what Black representation should look like according to Rose. Moving from a representational model based in cultivating images that could dispel antiblack stereotypes and promote intracommunal unity, 21 instead utilizes a formula for artistic representation that demonstrates the limits of representational political resistance, and explores the possibilities of hyperbolic, caustic art. In his interview with Colucciello Barber, Sexton thoroughly explores the exact dichotomy between Rose, advocating for progressive cultural representation, and 21, who concludes that such representation will not alleviate the entrenched wounds of antiblackness. In the Trump era, however, Sexton argues that something in between these two imperatives, for passivity and action, may be most appropriate. Recognizing that political narratives of “white victimization and oppressive Black power” are a key tool of white supremacist cultural hegemony, used to fuel antiblack anxiety, Sexton examines the possible benefits of more sardonic, oblique critique. Rather than contribute to Fox News’ constant barrage on the “cancer” of identity politics, Sexton suggests that the practice of parodying antiblackness by “taking it over and enforcing it hyperbolically, satirically, even vindictively,” may be especially attractive and useful for Black artists.¹⁰⁰ Rather than see your own resistance used against you, as Kendrick Lamar did when Geraldo Rivera said his anti-police violence song “Alright” “is exactly the wrong

message," hyperbolic, bitterly sarcastic art can allow one to critique the absurdities of antiblackness without facing the same backlash.101

“Skrrt Skrrt,” the first song on 21’s first mixtape, *The Slaughter Tape*, explores the possibilities of hyperbole, to shock listeners with heightened, cartoonish descriptions of violence, but also subtly implicate listeners in such spectacle, by relating these exaggerations to material experiences of antiblackness. Over splintering drums and a pitched-down piano loop, 21 observes “Stray bullets hitting kids while they playing hopscotch,” before then rapping “I'll slaughter your daughter then send her to church.”102 Pushing the gangsta archetype to its limits, 21 juxtaposes scenes of the highly profane with senseless murders of children. Riffing on antiblack male stereotypes of sexual deviancy and violent inclinations, “Skrrt Skrrt” simultaneously conjures up and destabilizes the antiblack mythologies deemed off-limits by the Black moral community. The lyrics anticipate and function via shock-and-awe, through the disgust and disapproval of audiences, both Black and white, that are unwilling to reflect on the most licentious articulations of Black masculinity. Taking over these antiblack stereotypes and bringing them to even more hyperbolic, frightening places, “Skrrt Skrrt” exposes the irrationality of antiblackness while simultaneously indicating how close we are to such circumstances. When Black kids are killed for playing with toy guns, or policed for selling water, “Skrrt Skrrt” seems to ask, what is a stray bullet “hitting kids while they playing hopscotch?”103

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103 Ibid.
Although the song would never be featured on a Fox News takedown, it nonetheless challenges its listener to rethink what protest art may look like. Despite the shock-value style of most of the lyrics, 21 also raps “Took the stand on your right hand man, so you had to die / Lost a lot of my real n-as so I had to cry,” comingling his overstated parody with unaffected grief over lost friends and blurring the line between exaggeration and experience.\textsuperscript{104} Sardonically indicating that exaggeration, when it comes to antiblackness, is never exaggeration, 21 Savage forces the listener to consider a question that they may not want answers to: How could someone make such upsetting music?\textsuperscript{105}

In “A Question of N-a Authenticity,” Judy indicates that gangsta rap induces similar questions. Both genres, existing as the most hypercommodified form of rap in their times, and expressing excessive desire for luxury commodities, also unite in their exploration of existence and commodity—of how “a human is really among things.”\textsuperscript{105} The questions that trap brings up, then, are questions of what “being” looks like for Black men like 21 Savage. If authentic existence and exaggerative metaphor cannot be distinguished, if the commodified and the authentic aspects of 21’s life are intertwined, it is impossible to tell when he stops being a commodity and starts being a person. Gesturing toward the “groundlessness of the sovereign individual,” which was constructed through a fundamentally baseless conflation of whiteness with humanity and blackness with commodity, 21 and trap generally, questions the possibility of “being among things,” not just in the case of creating commodities, or desiring

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Judy, 230.
commodities, but being a commodity oneself. Rather than attempt to assimilate into the false, constructed ideal of the human, trap openly considers the prospects of life-as-commodity. Such scandalous music could only come from such a place. From the place of a “being-thing” that disrupts the authority of both the antiblackness and Black moral communities.

\[106\] Judy, 225-6.
2. **Commodified Fugitivity**

Think about the slave trade when they had boats with thousands of us on board And we still was praising the Lord, now you ready to die over a coat, a necklace round your throat, that's bullshit Black people y’all better realize, We losin, you better god damn fight and die If you got to get yo’ spirit and mind back And we got to do it together, Goodie Mob means ‘The Good Die Mostly Over Bullshit.’

-Cee-Lo, “Fighting”

On “Fighting,” Cee-Lo holds that “The good die mostly over bullshit.” Forming a genealogy through spoken word, he traces Black being from the Middle passage to the dawn of the “gangsta”. His message is clear. The good, exchanged as goods, must recognize their original state. They must recognize that no matter the conditions, the goodness of the good triumphs over their historical status as goods.

**A Secret “Thing”**

In “The Case of Blackness,” poet and theorist Fred Moten attempts a similar genealogy, but extends Cee-Lo’s claim. Whereas Cee-Lo rejects the label of the commodity, Moten seeks to reinvent it, transform it by reflecting on “the unfinished victory of things who can’t be bought or sold especially when they are bought or sold.” The good and a good are thus one and the same.

As I discuss in the previous chapter, one antagonizes both antiblack thought, and Black moralist thought, with this claim. All insist that commodity cannot be

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108 Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism*, 50(2), (2008), 204.
salvaged. Philosopher, theorist, and cultural critic David Marriott denies any potential for the life of the commodity, while Rose and other hip-hop theorists, following neo-Marxist critical theory, must decry commodification as the death of creativity or, at the very least, only focus on those artists who remain conscious despite being commodified by the arts’ industry.

By invoking a blackness that is “a fundamental danger—an excluded but immanent disruption—to social life,” a blackness that breathes “in the interplay of sociopathological and phenomenological description,” Moten displays a kinship with Ronald Judy, who similarly finds sovereign power lurking in Black expression usually defined as dangerous and pathological. The danger he evokes is not the danger of a humanized blackness, seizing the citizenship always promised, yet always forbidden. The stakes are far higher. He instead argues that commodified Black being “must be understood in its relation to the inadequacy of calculation to being in general.”

Before moving further into the ensnared logic of “Case,” it will be best to track Moten’s argument from its beginnings. Moten opens the essay tracing a brief genealogy of Black pathology. Black pathology can perhaps be best described as the historical and ongoing representation of the Black person as the figure of perverse decadence, moral depravity, and profligacy. Moten sets up the essay acknowledging that essentially all academic theory that concerns blackness is actively or passively complicit in the perpetuation of the myth of Black pathology. Efforts to address antiblack and racist global practices of the U.S. generally hinge on the treatment of difference between blackness and whiteness as pathology. It is this precise

109 Ibid., 188.
110 Ibid., 187.
understanding of the ubiquity and endurance of narratives of Black pathology that grounds critical Black study’s choice of the term “antiblackness” as opposed to “racism”. Whereas racism could be used to signify the philosophy justifying genocide and imperial exploitation of the Global south, antiblackness refers to the specificity of racialized violence waged against Black people. It refers to, for instance, the delineation of the Black as the most lazy and bestial of the races in Immanuel Kant’s essay, “On the Different Races of Human Beings (1775).”

Academic theories on race, Moten argues, must tackle the question of Black pathology. The question of this constructed yet perniciously material difference often initiates conversation on race (as it does in this thesis). Most interventions do not start from concerns about whiteness’ racism. Much to the contrary, investigations begin with pointed questions at the pathology of blackness. Moten implies this by echoing Black abolitionist David Walker’s question “What’s wrong with Black folk?” Moten polemically contends that Walker’s own question operates within a broad “epistemological consensus” wide enough to include Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the author of one of the most germinal texts of Black pathology. Moten includes The Moynihan Report, which almost single-handedly reinvigorated explicit political rhetoric that blames absent and criminal Black fathers for the impoverished social position of Black Americans in the same discursive genealogy with Frantz Fanon’s anti-colonial work, that exposed the profound effects of racist discourses and practices

112 Ibid., 177.
113 Ibid. 188
on Black people.\textsuperscript{114} In Moten’s framework, then, the works of Charles Murray, author of \textit{The Bell Curve}, and Ralph Ellison, who begins \textit{Invisible Man} by reciting Louis’ Armstrong’s question, “What did I do to be so Black and so blue?” stand on superficially opposite sides of the same discursive record, both contributing to the persistence of racial narratives that nurture Black pathology.\textsuperscript{115}

For Moten, the narrative of Black pathology allows for the configuration of the world as we know it. Black pathology becomes a measuring device according to which one assesses or appraises one’s relative health. While this argument may seem hyperbolic, it is founded in the acknowledgment of the massive diffusion of colonialism. The globe as it is known, for instance, would not exist without the Berlin Conference –a European meeting organized to ease the unmitigated exploitation of the African continent.\textsuperscript{116} Similarly, the United States could not have been founded without a compromise marking Black slaves as three-fifths human.\textsuperscript{117} These fundamental inscriptions of Black pathology lay the groundwork for the condemnation of Black people, both criminal and non-criminal, today. In their essay “Blue Life,” Nijah Cunningham and Tiana Reid discuss the relationship between Black death and white life by examining the Blue Lives Matter movement, launched by white police officers in the aftermath of the Movement for Black Lives. Reid and Cunningham argue that this new “blue life” is “constituted through the anticipation of violence and the projection of criminality” created to protect whiteness from a mythical and

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{115} Ralph Ellison, \textit{The Invisible Man} (New York: Random House, 1952).
\textsuperscript{117} US Const., Article 1, Section 3 outlines the “three-fifths compromise,” which ensured a power balance between Southern slave states and Northern “free” states.
pathologized Black criminal; “blue life” justifies the ritualized murder of Black people. Thus, pathologized blackness, much like the Foucauldian conception of the prison that allows the free citizen to appreciate their freedom, offers a necessary contrast for “healthy whiteness.”

This analysis of Black pathology enables Moten’s critique of social death – a concept that animates much debate in critical Black studies. As shown above, Moten argues that it is the pathologized black, excluded from the white world, that allows white society to flourish. Rather than frame this as simply political exclusion, Moten, borrowing from Frantz Fanon, recognizes that the Black person, who “must be Black in relation to the white,” is excluded from civil society not just socially but psychologically, resulting in a profoundly alienated existence. With that said, Moten, as I will examine later, does not follow Fanon’s rejection of the possibility of Black social life altogether. In fact, “Case,” and Moten’s later essay “Blackness and Nothingness (2013),” are fundamental contestations of Fanon’s understanding of Black alienation. Nonetheless, before dissecting Moten’s revision, it will be useful to explore the psychosocial exclusion of the Black in more detail. A concrete example of such isolated existence is given by James Baldwin in his popular essay “The American Dream and The American Negro”. He writes:

It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you. The disaffection and the gap

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119 As Moten notes in “Case,” this chapter has been infamously mistranslated as “The Fact of Blackness” despite its emphasis on phenomenological, existential description of Black life.

between people, only on the basis of their skins, begins there and accelerates throughout your whole lifetime.\textsuperscript{121}

The alienation experienced in this empty zone, where the Black human is relegated to the status of a negative referent, an object that white people use to animate and understand their lives, is that which Orlando Patterson’s refers to as social death.\textsuperscript{122} As Baldwin demonstrates, this seclusion is more nefarious than just a geographical segregation or a suppression of rights. These material exclusions coalesce with a mythos of Black pathology reinforced through all forms of media and social interaction, fusing into what can only be understood as a psychosocial precarity, marked by an overwhelming feeling of loss.

After initiating his inquiry with a discussion of the totalizing discourse of Black pathology, Moten dedicates “Case” to contesting Fanon’s allegedly rigid understanding of social life. Outlining his subsequent essay “Blackness and Nothingness,” which similarly discusses the life of social death, can help clarify his critique. Here, he responds to an argument that holds that the genesis of the transatlantic slave trade has irreversibly transformed Black being in the modern world.\textsuperscript{123} Responding to critical race theories by the likes of Charles Mills, Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson III and Sexto, who have argued that the reduction of Black Africans to status as property (or objects) is a fundamental and vital foundation of the modern world, Moten both


\textsuperscript{122} Orlando Patterson, \textit{Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study}, Second Edition (New York: New York University Press, 2018). Patterson’s groundbreaking study of slavery contested an understanding of the slave as simply a legal, economic status, and instead outlined the ideological components of enslavement, including branding and renaming, which alienates the slave from history, heritage, and even identity, resulting in social death.

\textsuperscript{123} Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 743.
confirms and denies such conclusions.\textsuperscript{124} Though Moten concedes to their demand that the violent objectification of racial blackness be recognized as an irrevocable truth of the modern world, he nonetheless pushes for more radical conceptions of Black life.\textsuperscript{125}

Moten’s dispute is grounded in his belief in the possibility of fugitive life. To explicate his concept of fugitive life, he attempts a self-proclaimed ‘naïve’ reading of one of Fanon’s most impassioned descriptions of Black alienation, in which he writes “I came into this world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things” but “found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.”\textsuperscript{126} Here Fanon articulates a transformative experience, similar to Baldwin’s, in which a younger Fanon, who presumed himself human, discovers his status as a mere object. Moten argues that this transition from existence to non-existence, or from living thing to dead object, misses the possible escape of something existing neither entirely as human nor as object. In more poetic terms, Moten writes that “Some/thing escapes in or through the object’s vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out.”\textsuperscript{127}

These escaping fragments of life, which he later deems ‘fugitive life’ substantiates Moten’s unorthodox reading of Fanon, which he attempts to frame not as an intellectual disagreement so much as a textual reassessment. Rather than rejecting


\textsuperscript{125} Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” \textit{South Atlantic Quarterly}, 112 (4), (October 2013), 773.

\textsuperscript{126} Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, 77.

\textsuperscript{127} Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 182.
social death completely, Moten repositions (or as he often says, apposes) it, maintaining that one can view Black life through the lens of “this escape or apposition and not the objectifying encounter.” Moten’s interest in fugitivity as a guiding optic for inquiry, rather than a definite, ever-present circumstance of Black life, signifies that his disagreement emanates from an obstinate belief in radical viewpoints, that often exceed rational argumentation and vie for interpretative ambiguity. His understanding of the Black radical tradition as “the performance of a general critique of the proper” further reveals this destabilizing rhetorical strategy, which could be deemed fugitive itself, due to its attempt to trace blackness’ fugitive life.

In “The Case of Blackness,” Moten centers his case on the ‘troubled air’ of the ‘thing’ that escapes in between its original prospective life as a being and its eventual existence in the social death of the object. To approach this elusive breath, Moten employs Martin Heidegger’s portrayal of an empty, yet active jug in his essay “The Thing,” which sets out to demonstrate that ‘thingliness,’ rather than human consciousness, marks the origin of life. To depict the essence of ‘thingliness,’ Heidegger uses the analogy of a jug, which, although it is used purposefully only as a container for liquid, contains something even when it is empty. Even as the jug is empty, claims Heidegger, “the jug is filled with air and with everything that goes into the air’s mixture.” Heidegger plants an air of doubt within the representation of an object solely as an object, recognizing that even given the correct scientific

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128 Ibid., 197.
129 Ibid., 177.
131 Heidegger, 169.
observations of physics, that would represent the jug as empty, the void of the ‘thing’ still exists. Rather than accept the emptiness of the jug as a sign of nonbeing, Heidegger argues that even this emptiness contains an animating force. Moten’s reading maintains that even when the thing is destroyed or annihilated (as Heidegger suggests in his study of the atomic bomb) it is nonetheless still remembered or lamented, and thus given some form of existence.

Moten takes Heidegger’s representation of the content of the empty jug as an emblematic example of fugitive life and fugitive thought. Refusing an understanding of life that starts with existence as an attitudinal, conscious subject, Heidegger instead proposes a concept of life that exists somewhere before, or after, the possibility of perspective and subjeckthood. This liminal zone, occupied by the Heideggerian thing, is where Moten espies blackness, operating in a transgressive excess of static objecthood. Breaking with Fanon’s understanding of the static object, Moten demands an account of the void left by the jug, and by Black fugitive life.

Rather than explore the fugitive life of the thing, operating between object and person, again through a material metaphor resembling the Heideggerian jug, Moten attempts a similar rendering by traversing through the aesthetics of bebop jazz, which he often calls upon to exemplify fugitivity, stretching back to his first book In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (2003). Moten presents revolutionary pianist Cecil Taylor’s sociopolitical approach to art, which challenged the status quo of the New York avant-garde scene, as an example of the outlawed, yet present social life of Black being. Although he doesn’t precisely explain how a

cultural artifact, such as jazz, relates to the Heideggerian thing, in between objecthood and being, one can intuit art’s similar status, as an entity that can be both a static canvas, that acts as a referent for its audience, and a radical, disruptive force, that challenges the preconceived notions of its viewer. Moten’s hasty collation of thingliness and art loses out on a possible exploration of the complex relationship between commodification and artwork, which could lead to serious deliberations, rather than mere marginal considerations, of the fugitive life of cultural commodities.

Nonetheless, Moten continues his aesthetic exploration of the thing by turning to a conversation between Taylor, Ad Reinhart and other abstract painters. Analyzing the heated conversation between Reinhart and Taylor, Moten argues that Taylor’s insistence on a political, community-driven Black art “amplifies and instantiates a Black sociality hidden and almost un reproducible.” 133 Although he does not offer any further artistic examples beyond the transgressive challenges of Taylor, during his description of the fugitivity and thingliness of artwork, he begins to suggest the possible fugitive life of the commodity.

Rather than dwell further on the possibilities of transgressive artwork, Moten moves back into the discourse of Black pathology near the end of the essay. Discussing Fanon’s later thoughts on pathology in his last book The Wretched of the Earth, Moten traces Fanon’s defense of pathological actions. Moten cites a passage in which Fanon contextualizes the supposed “laziness” of colonized people, arguing that “the colonized’s indolence is a conscious way of sabotaging the colonial machine.” 134 Fanon is not supporting the characterization of colonized Black people as lazy, but

133 Ibid., 204.
134 Frantz Fanon, Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 220.
instead recognizing that the choice of a Black worker to disobey his white boss is a righteous act, that disobeys colonial hierarchies, even as it perpetuates antiblack myths that characterize Black workers as lazy and insubordinate. This simultaneous critique and defense of pathology is a key conflict in Fanon’s discourse, a point that exhibits his meticulous, cautious approach to the topic of decolonization. Although he articulates the connection between the construction of Black pathology and social death, he does not prematurely condemn the pathological as such. Moten, however, argues that it is this precise defense of the pathological that prevents Fanon from acknowledging the fugitive social life of the colonized. Moten criticizes Fanon’s support of pathological acts, arguing that Fanon ignores the detrimental effects that acts like refusing to work or stealing goods, have on other colonized people. Moten instead argues that the fugitive resistance of the Black individual must exist somewhere in the space in between pathology and consciousness. Seemingly relating it to the elusive life of the thing, in between the status of object and being, Moten presents a case for an evasive blackness exemplified by the protean transmutations of Cecil Taylor.

**A “Thing” That Is Not Secret**

It will be useful to further consider Moten’s argument that Black being, through its thingness, “must be understood in its relation to the inadequacy of calculation to being in general.”  

captivity in its very confinement, and could lead him to entertain the possible fugitive life of commodified music, Moten pivots into a selective hearing of the avant-garde “social music.”\textsuperscript{136} Rather than explore the legitimately destabilizing potential of fugitive commodities, he moves into a rejection of the social death of blackness, that seems to contradict his remarks on blackness’ indeterminate ontological state.

Instead of answering his own question “what are we to make of the pathological here?” and demonstrating how even pathologized, commodified “things” can be fugitive, he retreats back to the previous question–i.e. the question of social death–and builds a rejection of social death on an exemplar that resembles Rose’s humanism more than the subversive “thing” of Judy.\textsuperscript{137}

Through its focus on social death, Moten’s “Case” loses its potential, and its originality. Before Moten, cultural theorists, including hip-hop theorists like Imani Perry constructed strong arguments that demonstrate the outdated nature of a static, Marxist (or Adornoian) interpretation of cultural commodity. Nonetheless, like Moten, they explored the work of artists who conformed to a progressive appeal. Perry’s shining example of politicized commodity is Lauryn Hill, who maintained a cultural “allegiance to the hip-hop community” throughout her rise to commercial success.\textsuperscript{138} Perry’s argument is succinct and persuasive: Hill opens her eight-times platinum, Grammy-winning record \textit{The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill} rapping “My emancipation don't fit your equation.”\textsuperscript{139} Without dwelling longer in the (im)possibilities of the politics of representation, one can understand that Max Horkheimer and Theodor W.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{138} Perry, \textit{Prophets of the Hood}, 193.
Adorno did not predict Hill’s lyric in 1944. Yet similarly to Moten’s example of Cecil Taylor, Hill does not strictly give way to an account of life-as-commodity, due to her self-imposed departure from the culture industry after the success of her first album. If anything, Hill evades commodification rather than redefining it. Thus, even when hip-hop theorists undermine the obsolete neo-Marxist frameworks of commodification, they still focus on aesthetic expressions which cannot be said to disrupt the ontology Moten invokes.

While Lauryn Hill at least released an extremely-popular record before explicitly leaving the music industry, the same cannot be said about Moten’s paragon, revolutionary bebop pianist Cecil Taylor. Taylor is remembered specifically for his lack of profitability, well-detailed in A.B. Spellman’s *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (1966). As an artist, Taylor can only be assessed as one of the originators of the Black avant-garde, as the foundation of radical artistic structures that quite openly reject and defy definition as “material products.” Taylor’s increasing legend coincided with his cumulative debarment from residency at popular jazz clubs, who rejected his challenging three-hour sets. Thus, Moten’s shining example of liminal-being, between objecthood and humanity, is an anticapitalist artist, whose mythology is built on his intractability in the face of a commodifying jazz. But is this truly a discussion of the potentiality of existing between the commodity and the being, or instead an articulation of those celebrated legends who resisted the label of commodity entirely?

Although Moten represents this anti-capitalist resistance as the culmination of fugitive life, his concept of fugitivity offers too much radical potential, in my opinion,

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140 Moten, 214.
to end with such a prosaic conclusion. To argue that Cecil Taylor’s uncompromising bebop is “the thing whose meaning or value has never been found,” appears disingenuous, given the long history of deep, reflective analysis of Taylor’s work, and the consensus on his revolutionary significance to experimental jazz.\textsuperscript{141}

In the spirit of Moten’s intransigent radicalism, I see more heretical potential in his claim that “some/thing escapes in or through the object's vestibule.”\textsuperscript{142} Moten applies this escape to Taylor, whose entire career was dedicated to resisting commodification, arguing that his evasion of classification signifies the victory of the thing. Taylor’s refusal to be exchanged as commodity, despite the economic forces of popular music and the racist nature of the avant-garde scene, represents fugitive life for Moten. While this fraught resistance could certainly embody a form of fugitivity, Moten’s nuanced description of this resistance, typified by “troubled air” and “unfinished victories” pushes me to consider the possible fugitivity latent in commodities that are bought-and-sold as cultural products, but are still not entirely reduced to exchange value.\textsuperscript{143} Moten’s fugitive life seems to demand a generous analysis of any Black art “operating on frequencies that are disavowed,” or any Black thing currently only seen through “the objectifying encounter,” including and perhaps especially those formations that are usually framed as static or objectified.\textsuperscript{144}

Although Moten identifies Taylor’s evasion of commodification as the location of the thing, his interest in Black representation that escapes objectification, pushes me

\textsuperscript{141} Amiri Baraka, \textit{Blues People} (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963); A.B. Spellman, \textit{Four Lives in the Bebop Business} (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966). Baraka and Spellman’s books are two of the first books to discuss the radical significance of Taylor’s bebop; in fact, both were published before the 1967 interview Moten analyzes.

\textsuperscript{142} Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 182.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 182, 204.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 187-8.
to reconsider and reevaluate the Black art that is considered solely “object,” and look for the escape not yet seen in these cultural products. Thus, rather than just reinforcing the celebrated resistance of anti-capitalist “things,” I would argue that Moten’s generous, anti-normative fugitivity must extend to those genres of music that are currently only seen through the “objectifying encounter.” The seven-times platinum song “XO TOUR Llif3” by trap artist Lil Uzi Vert presents a perfect case for an expanded conception of fugitivity. The song’s potential for escape would be disavowed by traditional critical theorists, due to its promotional release on music industry giant Atlantic, if not for its cliché themes, common to the standard “break-up song.” But if one, like Moten, found an interest in what is “obscured by the fall from prospective subject to object,” then one could attend to the unsettling hook of the song:

Shoulda saw the way she looked me in my eyes
She said, ‘Baby, I am not afraid to die’
Push me to the edge
All my friends are dead
Push me to the edge
All my friends are dead.146

Although the song exists as a commodified, standard “break up song,” through this hook, a stark depiction of the psychological effects of excessive Black death slips out. Faced with the death of countless friends, Uzi expresses an extreme detachment from life, that pushes beyond standard depression into an evocation of the state of social death. Recalling the botanical conception of “dehiscence,” which refers to the involuntary dissemination of a plant’s contents, Uzi implies that the deaths of his friends has fundamentally altered his life and his ex-girlfriend’s life, leading them to

145 Ibid., 188.
146 Ibid., 181.
147 Lil Uzi Vert, “XO TOUR Llif3,” Luv is Rage 1.5 (Generation Now/Atlantic, 2017).
question the value of living with such a profoundly damaged psyche. Even when considering the popular interpretation of the central line of the hook, which implies that “dead friends” refer to “dead presidents,” or money, the profound alienation that the lyric principally indicates is still present. Alone with the profits of his career, Uzi remains depressed, scarred by his failed relationship.

Of course, this is not to say that the fugitive life of Uzi’s song is comparable to that of Cecil Taylor’s. Instead, it is to claim that the song functions within the interdicted, unfinished space that Moten describes. It is a commodified object, expressing consumerist desires (“Stackin' my bands all the way to the top”) and even reproducing sexist narratives of male victimization (“On the real, you should've never lied”). But it is also more than this. It is also an account of overwhelming disaffection with an existence where money is the only friend still around, and death provides an enticing alternative to a life fraught with memories of violence. If fugitivity is a way to move past “the objectifying encounter” to instead see “escape or apposition,” Uzi’s song, mourning countless lost friends, should certainly be at least contemplated as a form of escaping “troubled air.” To act as if there is no thread of disruption in this unfiltered articulation of the violence that Uzi and his partner have experienced, is exclusionary. The naivete of Moten’s fugitive reading of thingness demands that all “things” reduced to the status of the object be given a second chance, including that which actively engages in commodification.

148 Ibid., 187-8.
Instead of studying this new form of fugitive life to refute social death, Moten launches a narrative of resistance, rather than rupture, that replicates the elitism of Amiri Baraka. In her poetry essay *Dear Angel of Death* (2018), poet and theorist Simone White asks whether “the Music” that Moten, Baraka, and so many other men build their theory on, “is still able to do that work, and how that work might be done elsewhere.”\(^\text{149}\) Why, White asks, must critical Black studies constantly rely on the enigmatic illuminations of free-jazz or conscious rap? The question, as literary theorist Jesse McCarthy holds in “Notes on Trap,” is critical, a much-needed dagger in a decaying masculinist-elitist tradition. Note that White articulates this genre, crucially, as “the Music,” not necessarily music itself.\(^\text{150}\) The Music, she implies, has been elevated from the low condition of a cultural product, evoked as the illusive key to the impenetrable case of blackness. The Music is not the music of the club or the music of viral music videos, but instead the Music of historic venues like Birdland or The

\(^{149}\) White, 137.  
\(^{150}\) Ibid.
Roxy—the Music that has been elevated to the status of high art. Moten’s use of Taylor provides an archetypical description and application of the Music. Arguing “that finding (the) people and things requires” a “descent into the underground,” Moten delimits a conversation regarding being and commodity to an artistic underground that denies commodification and the accessibility that comes with it.151 For Moten, the Music he calls “social music” is best. It is only exemplified by the uncommodified avant-garde, the bebop pioneers who can depict the ‘blues people,’ who chose, and knew to choose, social music over commercial, popular music.152 Sociality is thus a distinguished secret of the male intellectual tradition.

Moten’s claim that “repercussive revision and a certain inventive discovery are fundamental protocols of Black socio-aesthetic activity” limits his approach of the fugitive life of the object in two ways.153 First, as White holds, it wildly restricts the accessibility of such theory, disregarding musicians who may have approached their artistic craft with similar ideological (and even technical) objectives, but gained a larger audience (Nina Simone comes to mind).154 Moten’s appeal to a “descent into the underground” demands that the reader listen in on “a Black sociality hidden and almost unreproducible,” not Black sociality that is popular.155 Furthermore, by arguing that traditional values of jazz, such as “repercussive revision” and “inventive discovery,” are necessary for Black social life, Moten delimits fugitivity, keeping it within the frameworks of Black aesthetic theories that frequently argue that authentic Black music.

151 Moten, “Case of Blackness,” 203.
152 Ibid., 192.
153 Ibid., 200.
154 Simone’s historical exclusion from ‘the Music’ is an incredibly explicit example of the masculinist tradition of Music scholarship, as many Black feminist cultural theorists, including Emily P. Lordi and Imani Perry point out.
155 Moten, “Case of Blackness,” 203-204.
contains elements of revision, repetition and improvisation. According to Moten, to be privy to the disavowed sounds of The Music, one can’t just listen to music—one must understand the resistance implicit in the improvisational rhythms of jazz, and recognize this as a principal cause of, or protocol for, fugitive life.

Here one must ask why the life of the commodity is so difficult to access. Is it due to the lasting relevance of Adorno’s outdated dismissal of the modern cultural product? Is it because, like Rose or Perry might hold, the ethical commodity is so hard to come by? Is it because one must be able to possess the experience of a Moten, or say, an Ellison, to be able to “slip into the breaks” of Louis Armstrong? None of this is to discredit the value of Black aesthetic theory, but instead to wonder if the improvisational spontaneity of jazz can be appreciated without the guidance of the Music theorist. It is to wonder if the fugitive elements of the trap music of Lil Uzi Vert can be recognized as a thing that exceeds its commodification, even if one is not contextualizing it within Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s theory of signifyin(g) tradition, or analyzing the poetics of its double-entendres with Imani Perry. It is to demand a hearing for songs that, like “XO TOUR Llife3,” are both commodified and yet still

156 Ibid., 200.
157 Walton Muyumba, “Improvising over the Changes: Improvisation as Intellectual and Aesthetic Practice in the Transitional Poems of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka,” *College Literature* 34, no. 1 (2007): 23–51. This article provides just one example of the long tradition of deifying improvisation in Black aesthetic theory. In the piece Muyumba argues that Baraka must received credit for “turning jazz improvisation, into a way of stating poetically the ‘transgressive and transitional truth’ of Black identity.”
159 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988); Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Both these texts have presented enduring methodologies for analyzing rap music. Gates presents a literary theory based in the repeated sign of signifying, trickster character, that hip-hop theorists have utilized to explore “gangsta” archetypes. Perry, draws on this theory, and particularly focuses on the poetic devices utilized by such these outlaw figures, including different types of metaphor.
fugitive, never entirely giving in to the collective standardization that always shadows popular music. In its simplest form, the question may be posed as follow: Can there be space for a social music that is not a secret?

This gate-keeping approach to cultural theory notwithstanding, the focus on Taylor also implies that the “troubled air” of the thing between subject and object is best portrayed not by artists who exist as spectacular commodities but instead artists who have developed a “resistant humanism.”¹⁶⁰ The “resistant humanism” which Taylor presents is similar to the values of Judy’s badman, whose interest in defending the Black community’s “right to participate in general community of America” requires that Black people be recognized as humans worthy of citizenship.¹⁶¹ Rather than seek a fugitivity like that of Ronald Judy’s bad n-a, who rejects both the status of an object and the category of the human, Moten’s use of Taylor implies that fugitive life is portrayed by artists who model the correct form of human comportment and demand inclusion in American society. While Lil Uzi Vert’s nihilistic, amoral drive to be “pushed to the edge,” in the wake of Black death and violence suggests his inclination toward exceeding the categories of human life, Cecil Taylor’s constant defense of the human, communal element of his art betrays his desire to create blackness as human.¹⁶²

Instead of exploring the fugitive gasps of Uzi, existing as commodified, and yet still pushing beyond this classification, Moten focuses on Taylor, who defends his humanistic approach to art in a 1967 roundtable interview that Moten examines. The


¹⁶¹ Judy, 221.

¹⁶² Lil Uzi Vert, “XO TOUR Llif3.”
interview includes Ad Reinhart, who both denies the possibility of political art and subscribes to a reductionist ‘art-as-art’ aesthetic viewpoint, and Taylor who frames his artwork as a reflection of the Black community. In response to Reinhart’s mulish belief in the abstract, aesthetic foundations of fine art, that denies any spontaneous or political element, Taylor holds that his artistic mission is “to make people aware of the Black aesthetic.” More than once, Taylor frames his artistic work as essentially valuable only in relation to “the acceptance” it gets “based on the fact that it is from the Afro-American community.” Reflecting Rose’s belief that hip-hop culture determines “the value of Black culture’s role in society,” Taylor’s comments demand artistic responsibility, arguing that performers must disseminate a unifying knowledge that can aid resistance and contribute to an inclusionary project. For Taylor, “the human element” of the artwork is key for its potential and significance, because only the “human element” can lead to awareness and respect for Black art. Reinforcing a cultural hegemony in which Black artists have a moral imperative to perform humanism, and a rigid goal of political acceptance, Moten’s exemplar appears to confine authentic Black art to the avant-garde, the progressive, and the human, rather than break with such limiting notions.

While Moten may be right to say that Taylor is remaining “inaccessible to all concepts and desires for the racial object,” this does not seem to reflect an intention that necessarily disrupts the relationship between objecthood and being. Instead of

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163 Moten., 197.
164 Ibid., 198.
165 Rose, 5.
166 Moten, 197.
167 Ibid., 205.
demonstrating Black art’s potential to demystify life-as-commodity, to lay bare the case of being “an object in the midst of other objects,” Moten presents an artist rejecting commodification.168 Moten’s deification of Taylor’s resistance proves troublesome not only because of its possible regulatory effects but also because it misses a crucial opportunity to confront the question of being-as-commodity. What does an avant-garde pianist show us about captivity or, as Moten seems to suggest, fugitivity in the very midst of captivity?

Although of course, all Black artforms involve both racial objectification and pathology, I have attempted to show how Moten’s focus on the conscious artist may be disingenuous. Moten is more invested in defending the humanity of the objectified being than he is committed to exploring how the mutated breath of commodified being disrupts the disciplinary appeals of liberal politics.

Moten’s judgment of Fanon’s discourse on conscious and unconscious transgression further indicates his intention to prove the existence of Black sociality, rather than explore the life of commodity. Citing the final chapter of Wretched of the Earth, Moten notes that Fanon believes that the most critical anticolonial agitation is performed by the unconscious, who can transgress in ways that have “been relegated, by the conscious-minded, to the status of impossible, pathological sociality.”169 Thus, in Fanon’s understanding, it is not the conscious practitioner of the Music that undermines the colonial logic of the being and the object, but instead the unconscious thing that has no investment in the standards of the colony. Fanon’s comments point to the revolutionary potential of the transgressive artist, the being that, unlike the

168 Ibid., 180.
169 Ibid., 210.
conscious artist who performs “resistant humanism,” has no faith in “repairing (the truth) of man.”\textsuperscript{170} This faith separates the anticolonial sabotage of Kendrick Lamar and 21 Savage, and the critical works of Rose and Judy. Whereas 21 forces a contemplation of “the tear in the world” that has allowed some beings to be deemed criminal, Lamar attempts to repair such a tear from the inside.\textsuperscript{171} While the conscious-minded individual seeks a universal social framework that could save humanism, the transgressive unconscious brings up more fundamental questions of existence in conditions of colonial rupture.

Though the reader cannot miss Moten’s creative reading of Fanon, one must notice the necessity of Moten’s deliberate misconceptions, which ultimately allow him to argue in favor of “authentic” and conscious Black sociality. Moten contends that Fanon’s insistence on pathology forces him to ignore Black sociality. Recognizing pathology as both a construct of the colonizer, and a disordering, insurrectionist force, Fanon dismisses the Black public sphere. But, to genuinely consider colonial pathologies, Fanon shows that the endeavor must involve considerations of their destructive effects and the validation of their positive political potential. To use Fanon’s own recognition of the possible negative effects of criminality, which “prevents [the colonized] from seeing the national enemy” against his argument in favor of the pathological’s insurgent potential ignores the possibility of recognizing and holding this tension.\textsuperscript{172}

\textsuperscript{170}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} Sexton, \textit{Black Masculinity and The Cinema of Policing}, x.
\textsuperscript{172} Fanon, 231.
As Moten, recognizes, (fittingly) too late, Fanon’s goal is never an approximation of solely the experiential qualities of the pathological or the authentic, but instead an entertainment of “what the vast range of Black authenticities and Black pathologies does.” Unfortunately, in the essay, Moten cannot engage with the question of what pathology does. His prejudices in favor of the conscious and authentic music of Black sociality prevents him from approaching the disruptive existence of “non-sovereign” commodities and their non-normative work of resistance.

An Undecidable “Thing”

In his essay, “Judging Fanon,” David Marriott exposes the inconsistencies of Moten’s concept of Black fugitive life and offers his own uncompromisingly “black” reading of the Fanonian text on Black pathology. Marriott argues that Moten’s argument is unfaithful to Fanon, and presents crucial clarification on Fanon’s post-war views on the goals and possibilities of decolonization. But in his unyielding critique of Black sociality and his aporetic, indefinable definition of resistance, Marriott may lose sight of art-forms that can evoke, if not definitively articulate, the feeling of existing in a state of social death.

Marriott begins by arguing that neither an optimistic nor a pessimistic reading of Fanon is accurate because the logic of the Fanonian text resides “where either becomes impossible.” Rather, the aporia of the Fanonian text exceeds both

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173 Moten., 214.
174 Moten., 204.
175 In fact, the full title of Marriott’s essay is “(A Reading that is Too Black) Judging Fanon.”
176 David Marriott, “(A Reading That is Too Black) Judging Fanon, Rhizomes, Issue 29.”
approaches. Throughout the essay Marriott continuously returns to those aporetic discursive structures to show how Fanon’s reading of Black life can neither be synthesized into Moten’s optimistic vision of fugitive life nor be exclusively read through more pessimistic lenses, which insist on Black being’s mere “objecthood.” Marriott could indeed be placed outside the optimistic and pessimistic divide, for he even holds that the afro-pessimist conception of blackness as objecthood does not yield an adequate expression of Fanon’s reading of Black being.

Nonetheless, Marriott concedes that there can be optimistic and pessimistic readings of Fanon. However, Marriott accurately describes Moten’s optimistic reading in “Case” as a response to (rather than a reading of) Fanon. Marriott criticizes Moten’s choice to justify his essay as a necessary ‘naïve’ reading of Fanon rather than a disagreement. By doing that, Marriott contends, Moten essentially suggests that Fanon should be read less carefully – that is, with less faith and precision—for, according to Moten, Fanon misrepresents blackness. Rather than openly state his disagreement with Fanon, Moten constructs a novel ‘reading’ that implicitly suggests that Fanon must not be taken at his word.

Marriott, indeed, reaches deeper in his critique. He also demonstrates how Moten’s insistence on portraying blackness as fugitivity creates the paradoxical condition in which “blackness is only Black when it exceeds it racist disavowal.” In Marriott’s view, Moten’s emphasis on a fugitive Black life forces him to posit a problematic binary between Black pathology and Black consciousness. For Marriott,

177 Marriott labels “The Case of Blackness” as an optimistic outlook, and Jared Sexton’s “The Social Life of Social Death” as a pessimistic example.
178 Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
Fanon subverts such simplistic dichotomy. To uphold the radical art of Cecil Taylor as an exemplar of fugitive Black life, Moten must create a Fanon that supports Black pathology while refusing to recognize the Fanon who understood the complicated effects of colonial wounds. To support his conception of Black life as fugitivity, Moten posits a fugitive blackness that necessarily escapes antiblack representations. Producing an argument in which only successfully resistant Black art represents blackness, Moten creates a language of “Black authenticity” that definitively casts out presentations of blackness that do not explicitly protest antiblack stereotypes. Thus in his view, blackness is exemplified by the likes of Cecil Taylor. Blackness is only that which escapes racist definition. In his attempt to forge a liberated fugitive blackness, Moten essentially adopts the restrictive strategy of the colony by accepting the binary distinctions that discredit alternative forms of Black dissidence as pathological.

Marriott points to many flaws in Moten’s depiction of Black fugitivity. Referring to Moten’s depiction of blackness as “an ensemble always operating in excess of” objecthood, Marriott argues that such language obscures Moten’s precise claim regarding Black fugitivity.179 If blackness is always defined by escape, Marriott asks, does this signify a Black fugitivity that is always in the process of escaping, yet never entirely free? Or, Marriott continues, does Black fugitivity entail that which has “always already” escaped its confinement as an object? If indeed an escape continues infinitely, is one ever closer to freedom? Or, rather, is fugitivity always in a prolonged state of delay and deferral and, hence, never fully fulfilled?

Perhaps even more incisively, Marriott argues that Moten’s reading of Fanon assumes that his theory is an “aberrational consequence of” the pathologization of blackness, “rather than one of its sharpest critiques.” As I said earlier, Moten’s unforgiving opinion of Fanon’s treatment of colonial wounds places Fanon’s work in the same discursive genealogy with The Moynihan Report. But Moten sorely ignores Fanon’s critique of the conditions that created Black colonial pathologies. Take for instance, Fanon’s first-hand account of self-hatred near the beginning of Black Skin, White Masks’ fifth chapter. He writes:

My blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered me. Negroes are savages, brutes, illiterates. But in my own case I knew that these statements were false. There was a myth, of the Negro that had to be destroyed at all costs.

After articulating the complexity of ‘the lived experience of the black,’ Fanon condemns antiblackness. To argue that his autobiographical description of Black pathology belongs to the same genealogy as The Moynihan Report is a severe misreading. Regardless of how critics may interpret Fanon’s impassioned articulation of self-hatred, his discourse on pathology must be recognized for enabling the questions pertaining to Black being which Moten and Marriott continue to investigate.

Marriott then considers Moten’s distinction between derailed, affective protests and authentic anticolonial resistance. Moten cites Fanon’s defense of the colonized’s insubordination to argue that Fanon’s valorization of the pathological makes him lose touch with “the way the colonized look at themselves,” and overlook the possibility of

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180 Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
181 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 117.
Black fugitive life and resistance. Therefore, subscribing to a vision of resistance as a definite telos rather than something that “exceeds all such narratives,” Moten deems Fanon’s argument in favor of affective, impulsive resistance unconstructive. By recognizing the positive elements of petty crime or other small acts of antipathy, that would be characterized as indolence by the colonizer, Fanon allegedly obscures the detrimental effect that such activities have on national unity and movements for independence. Rather than support resistance, Moten argues that these derailed activities prevent other colonized people from “arriving at a political consciousness.”

In Moten’s view, petty theft, for example, must not be prized as a destabilization of property relations organized but instead as a discordant force that obscures “the national enemy,” and focuses attention on criminal activity within the colonized community. Thus Moten must discard Fanon’s concept of resistance, which defies any progressive logic, for the sake of Black fugitivity. Because Moten positions Taylor, the conscious artist par-excellence, as the exemplar of fugitive blackness, the former must disavow Fanon’s articulation of the “healing wounds” that the unconscious inflict. Although he ultimately recognizes that the distinction between the pathological and Black authenticity should be discarded in favor of a question regarding “what the vast range of Black authenticities and Black pathologies does,” Moten does not provide a generous reading of those actions codified as pathological. Despite his change of heart, the petty criminal and the unruly worker are hardly

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183 Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid., 210.
187 Ibid., 214.
redeemed—they’re not granted that optimistic reading which Moten valorizes so highly.

In contrast, Marriott demonstrates that Fanonian resistance should not be understood as the redemption of the “truths of man.”188 Citing Fanon’s essay, “Medicine and Colonialism” in A Dying Colonialism, Marriott offers a key example of Fanon’s concept of resistance. Here Fanon recounts the story of a colonized individual who chooses to forgo a cure for a life-threatening disease. Thus, Marriott explains:

By refusing western medicine, by making western therapy into a clandestine struggle over life and death, the colonized know that it’s through the promise of the cure that the law of colonialism reaffirms itself.189

Marriott argues that Fanon’s understanding of resistance disconnects from the laws of the colony. By refusing the life-giving supplement of the colonizer, the colonized refuses the narrative of colonial benevolence and therefore throws the material and ontological violence of colonialism into sharp relief. The story seems to ask: if one would rather die than receive life from the colonizer, what must the colony symbolize?

The liminal state of the colonized, existing somewhere between life and death, forces one to acknowledge the internal and external violence of colonization, in which one would choose death over a compulsory cure. Invoking Sexton’s incisive critique of the “dream-work aimed at participation in slave society,” Marriott indicates that rupture from the colonial narrative of inclusion and goodwill forms the basis of the Fanonian resistance.190 Indeed, Fanon pushes the thought of resistance far past Taylor’s

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188 Ibid., 210.
189 Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
190 Sexton, Black Masculinity and The Cinema of Policing, x-xi.
“political commitment” to represent blackness and demands a far more radical act. More specifically, Fanon’s resistance exceeds both depoliticized notions of Black art and colonial understanding of life and death. Fanon’s “revolution” – so to speak – does not enlist the orator who speaks for the Black community but the looter, who disrupts colonial theft and property laws.

Considering the origin of this resistance in a refusal of colonial logic, the colonized who resist the cure confirm the worst myths of Black pathology in the eyes of the colonizer. While Moten chooses a new form of the cure by uplifting Taylor’s conscious resistance, Marriott seeks an approximation of blackness that is neither curative nor destructive. In Moten’s representation of blackness, Marriott sees not only a misrepresentation of Fanon as a proponent of antiblack narratives of pathology, but a misconception about the possibility of representing blackness at all. Marriott instead conceives of blackness as the “unnameable event of an infinite postponement.” He argues that blackness’ undecidability is perhaps the definable characteristic of Black being. According to Marriott, a reading of Fanon must engage with his steadfast refusal to define blackness. The reader must recognize that comparing blackness to a void or an abyss does not capture its formation.

Marriott presents his indefinite, aporetic view of resistance very clearly near the end of “Judging Fanon,” when he argues that the Fanon of Wretched of the Earth conceives of Black liberation not “in terms of a sovereign decision or desire, but as the very exercise of a suspicion, or a discomfort, with the traditional discourse or literature

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192 Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
of sovereignty.” Whereas some would argue that Fanon’s anticolonial critique indicates either the possibility or impossibility of liberation, Marriott instead reads Fanon’s later work as an indication of the necessary precautions one must take when conceiving of Black life and liberation. While Moten might take Fanon’s declaration that “the Black is not [any] more than the white man,” as a sign of the possibilities of negation or, as Moten puts it, of “a withholding aligned with refusal,” Marriott regards this passage as a key indication of Fanon’s hesitation to name blackness. Although Moten rebelliously reads this as a theoretical foundation for an elusive blackness unable to be pinned down by objecthood, Marriott returns to this passage, which he refers to in the original French as the moment of the “n’est pas” to suggest that neither evasion nor negation can accurately provide the “truth” of blackness. Though Marriott might be hesitant to name it as such, this identification of a Black being “with a language yet to be written” fits well with Sexton’s analysis of the exhaustive and atmospheric scope of antiblackness, which troubles all revolutionary politics.

Identifying that Fanon articulates the cognitive dissonance between the language of the colonial world and the experience of the black, Marriott chooses to define blackness negatively, as something unable to be definitively represented through language. While Marriott’s negative description of blackness could easily be compared to Moten’s views on blackness as fugitivity, which similarly escapes a singular definition, Marriott envisions a Black formation far less metaphysical. Moten may see Marriott’s interpretation of the “n’est pas” as a reading providing no alternative to the

193 Ibid.
195 Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
pathological definitions of antiblack ideology, but Marriott suggests that Fanon’s fervent refusal to name blackness is exactly what makes his theory so powerful, forcing one to recognize that the dehiscence that marks Black life cannot be properly articulated through a colonized language. While Sexton and Moten utilize the term dehiscence, which, in different academic fields can evoke sensations of endless vertigo or the reopening of a wound, to suggest the dynamic, ceaseless physical and psychological violence that Black people experience, Marriott would argue that even this term cannot comprehensively describe Black suffering.

Marriott, in the same line of thought, also emphasizes the impossibility of approaching the essential formation of Black being. In this critique of Black fugitivity, Marriott claims that blackness can be best analogized as an abyss but cannot be “propositionally named as such.” He also further insists that most readings of Fanon that attempt to approach this ‘n’est pas’ of blackness reduce it to a fungible thing or identity that can be solved according to traditional discourses of redemption and restitution. By remaining skeptical of any definition, his reading escapes the compulsory demand to (mis)represent blackness through comparison.

A “Thing” That Is Undecidable

By inflexibly resisting analogy, however, Marriott’s argument demands an impossible task. Even Fanon employs analogy, with extreme precaution, to imply the unintelligibility of blackness. Indeed, the very title of Black Skin, White Masks’ fifth chapter, “The Lived Experience of the Black”, gives way to Fanon’s descriptions and

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196 Marriott, 9.
methodology to assess Black being. Although Fanon holds Black being as unintelligible, he attempts to allow its aporia to speak, to translate the unintelligible while still recognizing its recalcitrance. Fanon’s personal memories of the aporia of social death gain their most vigorous power and deploy their most damning indictment of colonialism while still showing that the wounds of antiblackness are without reprieve. No passage does this better than that which closes the chapter:

Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.¹⁹⁷

Fanon clearly engages with an allegorical representation for the expanse between nothingness and infinity in which he exists. He describes its nowhere, poetically, as an inverted sky. Holding the ‘n’est pas’ of blackness alongside this diaristic, illustrative memory, Fanon verbalizes a tension between analogy and imperceptibility, approaching the sign of blackness without conclusively naming it. Fanon’s tears suggest the possibility of evoking the incommunicable experience of blackness while still holding it as more than any one analogy or any single thing. His memory is not reducible to an experience of violence, psychosis, or escape. Despite its description of existence between a nothingness and an infinitude, the passage’s affective power exceeds any single definition of Black being. Yet, Fanon’s utterances offer a marginal rendering of blackness. It speaks–albeit obliquely–of the lived experience of blackness. Marriott’s position, however, resists such a possibility. This “naked declivity” he says, cannot be “rendered,” and constantly evades any evocative

¹⁹⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 140.
Thus Marriott, in his own refusal to name blackness, departs from existentialist methodology of Fanon, which the latter uses to approximate blackness. Although perhaps Marriott would consider this existential description as something other than representation, as a (non)signifier parallel to the story of the soldier refusing medicine, his rejection of any ‘artistic’ representation of Black resistance is more definitive. Indeed, Marriott argues that if one cannot understand that Black resistance exceeds all narratives of pathology, one cannot understand what Fanon “means by the permanent hemorrhaging of this Black body which ultimately no art or politics can stem.” All art, he argues, fails when it attempts to represent this hemorrhaging, because such no aesthetic form can trace it without becoming “dirty or hysterical.” If no art or politics could possibly originate from the wounded colonized being, what does Marriott make of Fanon’s constant use of literature and poetry of the négritude movement, that frequently launches his critique of Black bondage? Take for example, Fanon’s invocation of Aimé Césaire’s Return to My Native Land (1939):

My blackness is no drop of lifeless water
On the dead eye of the world
My blackness is neither a tower nor a cathedral
It thrusts into the red flesh of the sun.

Fanon studied with Césaire. Here, he uses Césaire’s poetic masterwork to articulate how blackness refuses all analogies. To argue that such aesthetic representation defines blackness would be disingenuous, especially given Césaire’s oscillation between what blackness isn’t and what it does. Césaire does not define what

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198 Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
201 Aimé Césaire, Return to My Native Land (Brooklyn: Archipelago, 2014), 78.
blackness is. This directly aligns with Fanon’s ‘n’est pas.’ Fanon’s reverence of Césaire clearly defies Moten’s specious negation of Fanon’s interest in poetry. It also problematizes Marriott’s denial of art as a method for reading blackness.

Moreover, even in the art that directly reflects the view of the colony, Fanon finds a partial, indelible allegory for Black being. In *Home of the Brave* (1949), when a Black soldier is told by a disabled veteran, “resign yourself to your color the way I got used to my stump,” Fanon sees himself, but nonetheless attempts to shatter this typing, and “expand without limit.”

In his earlier work *On Black Men* (2000), Marriott finds *Home of the Brave* to perfectly reflect Fanon’s inner psychic war. Even Marriott’s own employment of Fanon’s memory of the colonized soldier, refusing the cure of the colony, registers as both an articulation of blackness and a demonstration of its excessive character. Would Marriott argue that this example is somehow less feverish than Césaire’s poetry? While none of these aesthetic portrayals of blackness can tell us what blackness is, “the lived experience of the Black” lays bare some of its manifestations, while still offering its undecidability and its constant deferral.

Perhaps Marriott is too quick to condemn art. However, in the last section of “Judging Fanon”, he also acknowledges Fanon’s description of the imaginative possibility of Black aesthetics, which Fanon describes as a possible zone where “the imagination is let loose outside the bounds of the colonial order.” This concession, however, receives less than a paragraph of analysis at the end of the essay and appears to contradict Marriott’s assertion of the inadequacy of art to read blackness. In this case,

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203 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 53.
Marriott’s fear of naming blackness sidesteps a precise reading of Fanon, whose work clearly demonstrates the ways in which Black art can illuminate the ineffable colonial wounds blackness sustains.

When one considers the widespread artistic representations in Black Skins, White Masks and recognizes the tension between blackness’ undecidability and Fanon’s attempts to approximate it, then one can move into more specific analysis of how various artists have tried to give an account of blackness. While Marriott holds that Fanon’s “object is neither simply represented nor simply fugitive to the languages of law, ontology, or difference,” Fanon’s attempts provide the possibility of articulating a “Black being” that exists beyond the confines of undecidability that Marriott propounds and the telos of Moten’s fugitive blackness.204

Here lies Ronald Judy “gangsta,” the Black formation that embraces commodification, subverting both the moralist resistance of Moten’s fugitivity and the inertia of Marriott’s object.205 Judy’s gangsta, consciously performing pathological affects for capitalist exchange in a transnational capitalist economy, challenges the avant-garde consciousness of Moten’s blackness and the unrepresentable postponement of Marriott’s blackness. As Judy demonstrates, the gangsta, perverting the capitalist exchange of the colony for its own benefit, exposes the groundlessness of the colonial subject, and indicates that “a human really is among things.”206 The gangsta does not elude commodification, like Moten’s fugitive-thing, but instead initiates the

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204 Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
205 In his essay “On the Question of N-a Authenticity,” Judy represents the gangsta through the rap music of Ice-T, who consciously embraces commodification and performs affect. Judy sees the gangsta as a transgressive figure, consciously breaking with the moralist impulse of Black inclusionary politics, and instead exploring the prospects of being a commodity.
206 Judy, 230.
possibility of life-as-commodity. He or she signifies a new artistic form, beyond pathology and authenticity. That said, by focusing on the formation of subversive gangsta rap and valorizing life-as-commodity, Judy’s argument rests on the teleological aspiration of a sovereign commodity. While acknowledging the gangsta’s ability to demonstrate “the groundlessness of the sovereign individual,” Judy almost positions the gangsta as a sociopolitical movement for a new form of sovereignty, even if this movement directly attacks moralist tradition.\textsuperscript{207} The newest form of rap music, however, does not express such virulent antihegemonic aspirations. In fact, rather than attempting to establish commodity as sovereign, it both reanimates and revises Black being within the traps of commodity, dehiscence, and non-meaning. This ambiguous commodity, known as trap music, presses against the normative \textit{telos} of resistance while still eluding passive commodification.

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid.
3. *drip-drip: Amorphous Dissolution*

The only answer is to dispose of that which will not save you.  
-Hanif Abdurraqib

In July of 2014, a twenty-year old Black boy who calls himself Bobby Shmurda stood in the executive offices of Epic Records. Shmurda, a resident of East Flatbush, found himself at the center of the music industry, just a subway ride away from his own neighborhood. Shmurda’s hit song “Hot N-a” had been recorded earlier that spring, and gradually gained hits on YouTube and Instagram largely due to its unforgettable video. The video starts in a similar fashion to low-budget rap videos of past eras, with Bobby and many of his male friends posing in different parts of East Flatbush, leaning on Mustangs and mugging at the camera. But then, two minutes in, Bobby hits one of his favorite lines in the song, throws his Knicks cap up in the air, and in jubilant celebration, starts to move his hips side to side, arms flexing in sync with the bright lead synth of the song. His friends start to mime his dance, and for a second, they create a moment of unadulterated mirth, all spawned from a line that is nothing other than an admission of violence: “Mitch caught a body ‘bout a week ago.”

![Image of Bobby Shmurda doing the “Shmoney Dance”](image-url)


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At Epic, with all eyes on him, Shmurda blasted “Hot N-a,” and rhymed along with the lyrics. A grainy iPhone video captures his performance from the side.\textsuperscript{209} As the Epic staff sits idly in the conference room, Shmurda effortlessly glides through the same dance move, now known nationwide as the “Shmoney Dance,” hips moving in perfect time with the beat. As “Computers,” a song he features on, picks up, Shmurda pushes the intensity of his performance further, running quickly across the room, slamming his hands on the table, and pointing trigger fingers, forming two pistols, at his potential benefactors. When Bobby’s own verse comes on, he moves slowly back and forth, waiting for a moment to strike. And then, as if he has rehearsed the move dozens of times, he slides onto the conference table, and jumps around on it, fanning his hat out in front of his audience, as his own recorded voice yells:

\begin{quote}
I’m sliding over cars while I shoot
I think that I’m Tom Cruise
But, b--tch I’m bobby with that tool\textsuperscript{210}
\end{quote}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image178x171.png}
\caption{Bobby Shmurda jumping on the table at Epic (Visable Sound, 2018)}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{210} Rowdy Rebel, “Computers,” \textit{Remain Silent} (GS9, 2015).
Less than six months later, Shmurda would find himself in Rockland County Correctional Center, indicted on charges of illegal gun possession, and many counts of conspiracy tied to the hip-hop collective he helped found, GS9.

In Bobby Shmurda’s incredibly short career, one can find the origin of more than one element of trap. His “Shmoney Dance,” performed by the celebrities including Rihanna and Beyoncé, was the most viral hip-hop dance since Soulja Boy’s “Crank That.” Years after the goofy innocence of Soulja Boy’s ringtone raps had been mocked and then forgotten, Shmurda brought back the joy of dance into rap music, creating a Janus-faced persona marked by both mean mugs and jovial smiles, trigger fingers and moving hips, caught bodies and shared joy.

Shmurda’s pioneering status does not stop with his mixture of ecstatic dance and eviscerating lyrics. Instead, his celebrity also marked the return of a well-worn tactic of city policing, that one might call the trap-to-prison-pipeline. In their press release on the charges held against Bobby, born Ackquille Jean Pollard, the NYPD revealed an interest not just in Shmurda’s crimes, but his rap career. Rather than relying solely on phone taps and search warrants, the NYPD turned to Bobby’s lyrics, finding evidence demanding his incarceration in his art. As they said in their press release, Shmurda’s lyrics were “almost like a real-life document of what they were doing on the street.”

According to the NYPD, the trapper had trapped himself, confessed to his own crimes on wax. This tactic, once utilized against the likes of N.W.A, and now

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commonplace in cases against artists like Meek Mill, and many Londoners in the drill scene, reignited with the case of Shmurda.²¹²

More than five years into Shmurda’s sentence, his dance at Epic Records has resurfaced on YouTube. On online forums, and even Donald Glover’s visionary television series Atlanta, Shmurda has become a kind of pariah, an Icarus figure who blew up too fast, too close to both the streets and the charts. Now, in message boards revisiting his performance for Epic, Shmurda is regarded as nothing more than a minstrel figure, a naïve young man who performed as “thug” for his white corporate audience. Of course, if one looks at the transfixed faces of the white staff as Bobby dances on the table, one can note the well-worn parallel between minstrelsy and rap. But what if, after acknowledging the gaze of whiteness, and examining the economic exploitation Shmurda would have faced if he stayed signed to Epic, one looked further? Would one hear the shouts of encouragement, the “AYYY’s” of the GS9 crew, as Bobby jumps on the table? Would one marvel at his rendition of the “Shmoney Dance” destined to be remembered as the singular dance of trap music—a three-point movement that sparked a tidal wave? If one hears these shouts in the video, perhaps one could spy a young man choosing to operate in excess of any moral conscription, a young man choosing to dance, rather than constrain himself to any code of civility. For this viewing to be possible, however, one must return to Ronald Judy’s “On The

Question of N-a Authenticity” and subsequently move to David Marriott’s “On Decadence: bling bling.”

**Rebellious Property**

In his essay Judy shows us that exploring gangsta rap, in good faith, leads to an unavoidable question: i.e. “Can a commodified identity be authentic?” Whereas authenticity is almost always associated with art that directly subverts commodification, à la Taylor in Moten’s “Case,” gangsta rap troubles such rigid conception of “authenticity.” Using the example of Los Angeles rapper Ice-T, Judy explains how authenticity, in the gangsta’s imaginary, is linked to commodification rather than incompatible with it. According to Judy’s Ice-T, realness is not related to ideological rejections of free-market capitalism. Rather, it is dependent on an understanding “that all possibility converts from capital, and capital does not derive from work.” For Judy, this is not just a recognition that ‘selling out’ might actually be worth it—that embracing profit-making enterprise might be a thoroughly valid way of approaching Black artistry. It is instead rebellious Black life in the face of ongoing antiblack violence. Gangsta thought is thus tied to a reimagined understanding of Black being and its relationship to commodity.

To contextualize such thought in ways that may grant it more validity, Judy offers a linguistic and historical analysis of Black life during racial slavery. To interrogate the material realities of enslaved life, Judy moves past accounts of slavery that focus mainly on human emancipation and instead reflects on what the slave

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213 Judy, 214.
214 Ibid., 212.
signified, both economically and colloquially, in the United States’ antebellum era. As any candid historiographical exploration of slavery demonstrates, slaves were designated as nothing more than exchange value, laboring property to be traded at the will of white slaveowners. This acknowledgment of the slave as a commodity is key to contemporary understandings of generational wealth and poverty, which recognize that white families accrued wealth by exchanging slaves. Exploring the colloquial use of the n-word, from George Eliot to Mark Twain, who once wrote “He laid into his work like a n-er” Judy further argues that blackness was semantically constructed in a constant relation to “exceptionally hard work,” and thus essentially represented “productive labor and value.”

Judy explores this not to argue that Black slaves always existed within these confines, but instead to demonstrate that, in the white supremacist context that persists in the United States today, Black people are constantly demanded to work (exceptionally hard) to survive at all. Thus, Judy demands that his reader recognize that the structures of enslavement and their material conditions still directly relate to the status of African-Americans today.

To begin to approximate the ideological position of the gangsta today, Judy moves into an analysis of the “bad n-er” of the plantation—that is—the slave who refused to be a slave. For Judy, the “bad n-er,” mythologized as the slave who walked off the plantation, who refused to work as slaves are required to, is essentially a paradoxical being: i.e. “rebellious property.”

Defying the economic laws of the slave plantation, the “bad n-er” demonstrates that the rigid boundaries between life as a slave

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216 Judy, 223.
217 Judy, 225.
and life as a human are unstable. For Judy, the rebellious slave demonstrates that life labeled commodity can exist as more than an object. The rebellious slave defies the material and ideological limits of enslavement; he or she “indicates the identification of human with thing.” Some may interpret the “bad n-er” as a liberal moral figure who shows that the enslaved are just as human as their masters. However, Judy reads the “bad n-er” in a far more destabilizing and uprooting fashion. The “bad n-er”, according to Judy, does not claim the rights of the white individual. Rather, he or she indicates that rights decreed by law are only as strong as the coercive apparatus imposing them. Thus, the “bad n-er” is the figure that lays bare the “open-ended possibilities of being-among-things,” and suggests that the category of the human and the category of the commodity are far more amorphous than most are willing to concede.

Aligning with Moten’s understanding of “troubled air,” Judy envisions the formation of a “willful thing,” existing somewhere between life and commodity. However, where Moten’s reading focuses on the anticapitalist and communitarian music of Cecil Taylor to represent such fugitive air, Judy turns to the commodified form of the gangsta. This suggests the different intentions of their respective approaches. While Moten conceives of blackness as that which resists objectification and maintains sociality in the face of morbid subjugation, Judy looks to create a blackness that is not tied to a resistance based in community uplift. In the last pages of “N-a Authenticity,” Judy returns to the formation of the gangsta, and attempts to

218 Ibid.
219 Ibid, 226.
221 Judy, 225.
distinguish its modern formation from its antecedent, the “bad n-er” of the plantation. Although they align in their rejection of work and similarly exhibit the possibility of life-as-commodity, Judy argues that in our current stage of transnational capitalism, the gangsta’s key insight is “in the exchange of experience for affect.”222 Judy claims that this choice to sell affect globally indicates the gangsta’s understanding of what the “bad n-er” originally demonstrated: that “a human really is among things.”223 Returning to the question of authenticity and commodification, that he posed at the beginning of the essay, Judy argues that the gangsta “defines authenticity as adaptation to the force of commodification.”224 Rather than attempt to resist the global reach of the transnational economy, the gangsta chooses to create an artistic formation that embraces the reality of life-as-commodity, and sells basic, fungible affects, that do not require the exceptionally hard work that has always been demanded from those enslaved. As David Marriott shows in “bling bling: On Decadence” this pivotal choice to use market-based forces, rather than be used by them, is particularly profound for Black people, constantly demanded to work, for either white superiors or Black community leaders.

With that said, following Judy’s reading and thus viewing Bobby Shmurda’s performance for Epic only through the lens of excess may be reaching too far. Focusing on the gangsta rappers who, like Ice-T, operated as constant contrarians, Judy argues that gangsta rap—like the blues before it—is “symbolic in the face of political domination.”225 Judy’s gangsta rap actively contends with the hegemony of

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222 Ibid., 228.
223 Ibid., 230.
224 Ibid., 229.
225 Ibid., 229
“hypercommodification of cultural production.” In his attempt to authenticate the existential position of the gangsta, and empower the gangsta’s articulation of life-as-commodity, Judy proposes that the gangsta is a new sovereign figure, seizing control of the transnational economy that exchanges their affect. I thus side with Marriott in “Judging Fanon,” and argue that such a representation of commodified gangsta rap, and blackness in general, may immobilize what, as both Marriott and Moten show us, is by nature elusive, unable to be described through the referent of an object or sovereign being. By any means, trap as represented by the likes of Shmurda and 21, does not possess the same contrarian tendencies of the gangsta rap that Judy depicts, even as it does mirror the gangsta rap’s embrace of commodification. It instead may demonstrate a commodified thing that exists between the mythologies of excess, violence and self-destruction ascribed to blackness, and the material representation of such phenomena, to a point where neither viewpoint can define it propositionally.

In an essay clearly inspired by Judy, Marriott conceives of a commodified blackness that defies its definition as a laboring being and explores the immediate possibilities that a lifestyle based in expenditure, rather than accumulation, offers Black being. First, Marriott offers a historical characterization of blackness and pathology that almost mirrors Moten’s introduction to “Case.” Arguing that Black identity is always represented in direct contrast with the “the virtues of restraint, industriousness, thriftiness,” Marriott demonstrates that blackness is always followed by a notion of excess. As conservative media outlets show, blackness’ ties to excess are not limited to certain representations of blackness. Operating within an antiblack hegemony that

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226 Ibid.
falsely equates whiteness with politeness, discipline, and frugality, all Black people are contorted to fit the signifier of licentious decadence. In this regard, consider how Barack Obama, the paragon of the restraint mentioned above, is mocked for his fancy and indulgent choice of Dijon mustard, and how Serena Williams, arguably the greatest tennis player alive, is caricatured as a depraved and sore loser for an occasional display of distress.  

The shadow of excess that follows blackness binds almost too perfectly with the claims of omnipotence made by rappers of all sorts. Take Kanye West, who hyped up his second-in-command by saying “Everything is Pusha T.”  

Take Drake, who is obsessively concerned with being everywhere: “The way you’ve got your hair up, did you forget, that’s me, and the voice in your speaker right now; that’s me.”  

Even more persuasively, take Soulja Boy: “I started this internet. I started the wave. I’m the reason why these new artists are getting signed.” As Marriott shows, such far-fetched and excessively solipsistic claims are far more accurate than one could ever believe. The excessive sign of the rapper follows Black bodies everywhere. For Antonio Delgado, a Rhodes scholar and Harvard Law graduate, the sign followed him into the United States House of Representatives. In an unsuccessful smear campaign launched by his

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Republican opponent, Delgado’s brief career as a rapper was used to suggest his incompatibility with the white virtues of his New York district. In an interview with the New York Times, a supporter of the Republican incumbent asked: “Is a guy who makes a rap album the kind of guy who lives here in rural New York and reflects our lifestyle and values?”

The answer is, of course, no. As Moten and Marriott agree, blackness-as-excess (and thus blackness-as-rap) is the “organ always eliciting rejection.” Blackness must be “made to respect force.” Without a delimited and regulated existence, the excessive sign of blackness is far too dangerous. In Marriott’s oppositional framework, one can understand why the declaration that “Black Lives Matter,” must be understood as a decadent claim, asking for too much in the rigged court of white supremacy. By demanding “value” that antiblackness refuses to grant it, blackness provokes the restrictive claim of “all lives matter,” and the even more sinister, deathly call for “blue life.”

Paradoxically, the classification of blackness as excess, as a (non)life-form always asking for too much, also relies on a belief that this unworthy desire is due to a “sociocultural impoverishment that is morally bankrupt.” The context of moral bankruptcy permits an antiblack reading of the most basic demands as decadent, contemptible, or foolish. How can the claims of blackness be both decadent and morally bankrupt, iced-out but culturally impoverished? As Marriott shows, this simultaneous extravagance and poverty is caused by blackness’ inability to utilize its surplus. From

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235 Reid and Cunningham, “Blue Life.”
far-right pundits such as Geraldo Rivera to famous Black republicans like Stacey Dash, the architects of Black pathology all stress this lack (of diligence and prudence) with the same intensity. One of the most prominent recent examples of such rhetoric took people by surprise last year. Beloved superproducer Kanye West subliminally embraced this stereotype when he said “When you hear about slavery for 400 years. For 400 years?! That sounds like a choice.” West backed up this statement on social media by meeting with Black far-right commentator Candace Owens, who frequently argues that Black people need to reject victim narratives and focus on their futures. Although Owens’ commentary is usually directed at leftist activists who protest antiblackness in America, her rhetoric often veers into criticism of poor Black people in general. Thus, this immoral, wasteful decadence results from blackness’ inability to put its head down and work, to internalize the teachings of whiteness and learn to maintain a frugal existence. Thus, excess is tied to the refusal to work—a seeming incompatibility with an industrious Protestant ethic. This logic forces blackness to prove itself through strenuous moral and material work. The claim posits that only hard work will deliver blackness from impoverishment. The rhetoric of cultural uplift is not exclusive to the slaveowners and industrial magnates. As Marriott reminds us, it is also a key tenet of the respectability politics of Black moral conservativism epitomized by Booker T. Washington.

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In various his speeches, Washington demanded that Black people cultivate virtues which they can never afford to obtain. It is only when Black people discarded their excessive material desires, according to Washington, that they could acquire the promises of the American Dream. Washington demanded that Black individuals commit themselves to labor, accumulation, and thriftiness. He argued, above all else, that the gradual procession up the fiscal ladder was the only route towards freedom. An overlooked orator who has profited immensely by selling very similar logic, is Chris Gardner, the former stock broker who was the subject of the popular film The Pursuit of Happiness (2006). Gardner’s entire career is built on his own rags-to-riches story, from living as a homeless alcoholic to becoming a millionaire stock broker. Gardner argues that his belief in the payoff of hard work, stemming from his mother’s declaration to him as a child, “Son, one day it will be you who'll make a million dollars,” delivered him to his destiny. For nearly twenty years, he has profited off this sanguine account of his life, that convinces others that freedom is only won through hard work and self-confidence.

Marriott shows, however, that mirroring American puritanical values stems from a religious conviction, not a desire for profit. As he points out, one “never accumulates in order to spend, but only ever works in order to sacrifice himself to labor.” Thus Black work must be devotional; one ought not expect anything else from it. One must find the inherent joy of “tilling a field” and become one with existence-as-labor. Relying on Judy’s understanding of “n-er” and “n-a” life,

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241 Ibid.
Marriott examines how blackness will only be recognized as valuable when operating as labor. Drawing also on Hortense Spillers landmark text "Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Marriott sees Black work as a path leading to an existence as flesh. In this framework, Black life will only be recognized as Black life when it is a “captive body reduced to a thing, becoming being for the captor.”

Although few would consider it possible, life-as-commodity—as Judy demonstrates through the gangsta, and Marriott exemplifies through the catch-all sign of bling bling—is not limited to negative existence as labor as unproductive pursuit of propriety. Through the images of bling bling, Marriott interrupts this narrative of labor. Instead, he wonders what celebrating excess would amount to for blackness. This question brings Marriott to his concept of bling bling, inspired by Judy’s theory of “n-a desire.” While Judy limits his essay to the scope of the gangsta, exploring only the questions and possibilities brought up by rappers like Ice-T, Marriott utilizes bling bling in an intentionally indefinite manner; he offers scarce examples of its form and thus suggests that excess follows blackness beyond determinate boundaries of popular culture. This choice strengthens Marriott’s investigation of Black decadence as a metaphysical impropriety, resembling Ishmael Reed’s description of jes grew in his landmark novel, Mumbo Jumbo. Just as Reed uses jes grew as a panoramic label for a mythical plague, inspired by a ragtime tune that “was irresistible, and belonged to nobody,” Marriott uses bling bling as a symbolic descriptor of “a zombie, driven only to multiply itself, whose sheer multiplicity reveals a decadent impropriety.”

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242 Ibid., 7.
243 Ibid., 5.
244 Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo (New York: Doubleday, 1972) 11.
245 Marriott, 3.
plague, or “anti-plague” as Reed puts it, does not necessarily represent a specific artistic field, but instead a larger, more wide-reaching cultural formation.246

The key value of bling bling, like that of Judy’s gangsta symbol, is its subversion of the work constantly lodged between Black people and freedom. bling bling, like the gangsta, reveals itself as “rebellious property,” dedicated to disrupting the link between labor and blackness.247 The freedom that bling bling offers cannot be represented juridically by declarations of independence and civil rights. It is instead a freedom of thought, that is tied to neither a version of racial uplift nor a labor justified as an end. While abstracted notions of self-determination contain obscured whitened virtues of reason and civility, bling bling finds a freedom in direct opposition to such norms. The freedom that bling bling desires is thus not one of the bourgeois sovereign individual committed to the libertarian values of a self-regulating marketplace. bling bling seeks its freedom beyond the market’s regulatory ethos—it finds its freedom in decadence and pleasure rather than frugality and restraint. In this zone, the virtues of progress, work, assimilation, and democracy dissolve. This zone represents, for Moten, the possibility of a new world built in “the social field and social life of an illicit alternative capacity to desire.”248 Even in “Judging Fanon,” Marriott admits that Fanon saw a similar zone of opportunity, where “the imagination is let loose outside the bounds of the colonial order.”249

This fraught, murky zone of dissolution that offers the possibility of Black freedom, calls to mind a current lyrical sign of opulence, mirroring and furthering the

246 Reed, 6.
247 Judy, 225.
249 Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, 53.
claims of blingbling. drip-drip. To drip is to be so covered in the sign of profligacy that you are submerged. Some say that this is a result of the iced-out bling and hot lyrics of an MC fusing, to a point where the icy jewelry melts. As recent trap star Gunna, who has included “drip” in every one of his album titles (Drip Season, Drip or Drown, Drip Harder) explains, drip is a state of supreme extravagance, attainable only through consistent expenditure:

I drip every day, all week, but weekends I’m really putting that shit on. I might wear a $10,000 outfit on a weekend, no cap.250

On the cover of his latest record, one finds Gunna underwater yet fully clothed in designer clothes and accessories, symbolizing the ascension of drip-drip in hip-hop’s current zeitgeist. While one might hold that drip-drip is blingbling by another name, when specifically considering the symbols in the context of rap music, a few key distinctions must be made. If, as Marriott says, blingbling is best understood as the improper, “driven only to multiply itself,” drip-drip could be likened to an even more pernicious, asymptomatic scandal.251 While bling-era rap music (from the gangsta rap of 50 Cent to the crunk music of Lil Jon) was the predominant aesthetic force of rap for more than five years, it did not reached the level of contagion that one observes with trap music today. At the height of bling era rap’s influence in 2006, only one bling-era rap song made Billboard’s American top ten, “Ridin’” by Chamillionaire.252


Last year, six trap songs made the top ten. This is but one example of the mass appeal of drip-drip. Looking at the rest of 2018’s top ten also clearly reveals trap’s influence. For example, halfway through “Meant to Be,” a piano-led country song by Bebe Rexha that charted at number three, an archetypical trap drum pattern marked by double-time hi hats and crisp snares materializes out of nowhere. One can see a similar pattern in pop-country megastar Taylor Swift’s 2017 hit “…Ready For It,” and Ariana Grande’s 2019 single “7 rings,” both of which find the pop singers rapping over trap beats.

The number one single “Old Town Road” by trap artist Lil Nas X, featuring a remix by Billy Ray Cyrus, is an even clearer illustration of drip-drip’s diffusion. Nas X is one of several recent trap artists who have blurred the lines between trap and other genres, including grunge, punk, and country. Although rap music has always

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253 This past year, the list was topped by “God’s Plan,” by Drake.
254 Elias Leight, “How Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ Got So Popular” Rolling Stone, March 26, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/. This article explores Lil Nas X’s genre-clashing success. Leight also mentions Juice WRLD, who has
experimented with other genres, “Old Town Road’s” remarkable success, even on the white-dominated country charts, suggests that trap has officially crossed the color line. Thus, trap music’s recent preeminence suggests a possibly new, even more pervasive mutation of bling-bling. In addition to its incomparable eminence, drip-drip may indicate a slight attitudinal shift from the aspirational decadence of bling-bling, or at least rap’s form of bling-bling. While bling-bling strives towards decadence, with a “menacing, undeserving need to consume everything,” drip-drip is even more self-consciously nihilistic in its expenditure, as if it is already inundated by its own profligacy: drip-drip.

The notion of dripping suggests that one is underwater, drowning in one’s own opulence. It calls to mind the state of “profound dissolution” that Marriott identifies as a key development in blaxploitation film narratives, which similarly advocate for a divestment from white ethics, and display a corresponding fascination with decadence. In this submerged field, the inherent value of work and its linkage to racial uplift disappears, leaving open the possibility of life free from the burdens of dignity. Such burdens receive no critical attention when the virtues of a puritan ethics and incremental democracy are taken for granted. In this zone of being, however, the fictions of democracy are derided; profligacy trumps respectability. Here, the myth of drudgery is recognized as a scam. Trap co-founder Young Dolph tells his own origin in the dripping zone in his song “100 Shots:”

Broke Black n-a, remember me?  
Until I found out that recipe  
Started getting about ten a week

meshed trap and rock on his recent record *Death Race for Love*. Lil Uzi Vert and Lil Peep also come to mind, for their fusion of emo music and trap.

Finger on the trigger when I sleep
Yeah, n-a, I rather you than me
Backseat, smokin’ good weed 256

In remarkably concise lyrics, Dolph relays a saga that begins with the archetypal dissolution that Marriott describes in *bling bling* narratives. 257 Rather than remain broke, working a job that leaves him in stasis, in an illusion of hard work and gradual success, he chooses to become the trapper. The recipe Dolph speaks of is thus a two-in-one. It is a formula for making narcotics and, more importantly, a formula for selling a trap. As Dolph explains, moral work won’t get you to a position where you can be “backseat, smokin’ good weed.” 258 Only a trap can offer such freedom. Through this key realization, Dolph performs enters the *dripping* zone. This void, where Dolph sheds the myths of work and finds the recipe of trapping, can also be espied in Future’s multiplatinum, highest-charting song, that repeats “Fuck it, mask off.” 259 For Future, taking off the mask means facing the reality of the *dripping* zone—it means finding Dolph’s recipe, and pursuing wealth over all else: “Chase a check, never chase a b--tch.” 260 While Future adds an explicitly misogynistic element to this dissolution on “Mask Off,” as *drip* narratives often do, Dolph, in his popular song “Preach,” specifically identifies conventional moral work as the key illusion, rapping “Couldn't get it from my mama, so I got it off the block / Been workin' my whole life, but I ain't never punched the clock.” 261 Thus, in the *dripping* zone one discards the ruse of utilitarian production.

258 Dolph, “100 Shots.”
260 Future, “Mask Off.”
Marriott argues that rather than save or limit itself, *bling bling* spends and explores all immediate possibilities without any “constraint or compulsion to make them profitable or realizable.” By choosing “extravagant expenditure” over accumulation, blackness-as-*bling-bling* is no longer trapped in the logic of respectability. Recognizing the historical existence of blackness as laboring commodity, and following the gangsta’s understanding of life “among things” *bling bling* uses commodification to pursue debtless and willfully unproductive consumption. Far from a doctrine of Black capitalism, such unbounded consumption treats money as a way to explore new forms of freedom beyond lobbying power and frameworks of ‘financial freedom.’ Rather than attempt to gather enough funds to buy one’s place in a rigged American plutocracy, *bling bling* presents a Black formation disinterested in integration and intent on exploring the potential benefits of capital in its radical immediacy. *bling bling* demands a “freedom that is not restricted to an idealized, deferred consummation.” It offers new ways of thinking about Black freedom, which founds its truth in the liberating potential of withdrawal from the normative myths of American democracy. As he finishes the essay, Marriott pushes the concept of *bling bling* beyond the limits of a utilitarian/anti-utilitarian dispute, recognizing it as an “ontological force for unbinding the fetishes and fantasies that impoverish Black mental and social life.” Like the gangsta, *bling bling* demystifies the genuine possibilities of commodification, exposing the life of that which is almost

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263 Ibid., 10.
264 Judy, 230.
266 Ibid.
always figured as dead. As *bling bling* illustrates, even that which is represented as most static, inert, and lifeless in hegemonic discourse, can offer new formations for life.

Now, one must return to that which is always cast as dead, in the critiques of Rose’s *The Hip-Hop Wars* and in Moten’s elitist fugitivity. Both theorists agree that Black music is only transgressive when “on the commercial margins.” Both agree that “a descent into the underground” is necessary to find the fugitive life in Black art, if such fugitivity exists at all. Black authenticity resides beyond the bounds of mass culture. Thus, they conclude it could never come from the location of the commodity. If one put these theories into practice today, it would mean taking up Rose’s fight to “expose and challenge the state of commercial hip-hop.” One would have to look at Bobby Shmurda’s dance at Epic and concur with the views espoused in the video’s comments: “Trading our self respect for stardom one soul at a time;” “This was a slave auction to buy a dancing African.” Or, perhaps, one could agree with Rose’s earlier statement, calling commercial rap “A playground for caricatures of Black gangstas, pimps and hoes.”

In “Notes on Trap,” Jesse McCarthy puts the logical conclusion of this rejection of the cultural commodity in even starker terms:

> Would we accept the view that the white bourgeoisie holds of it? That it is cheap, trashy music, useful for frat parties and little else, the usual jitterbugging of “the

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267 Rose, x.
268 Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 204.
269 Rose, xii.
271 Rose, 1.
blacks” who can’t help themselves, the great sly replacement of minstrelsy by an even better show?\textsuperscript{272}

According to the arguments of Rose and Moten, it is the only possible answer. Trap must be seen as a problem. A troublesome cultural invasion that has spread beyond the boundaries of Black American culture into the Latin trap of Bad Bunny and the UK drill of group 67, to the appropriative pop of Ariana Grande and even the art-soul of Solange. This is the vast, sacrificial undertaking of hip-hop scholarship. One must never be generous when listening to an artist complicit in the hypercommodified depravity that is commercial hip-hop. One should never appreciate the context of a listening experience, differing as it may from the library to the club. Acknowledging the illumination of the commodity would be, as one can only expect, \textit{excessive}.

And yet, \textit{bling bling} and its deviant offspring spawned in trap music demands this excess. The blinged-out sign of trap, named here as \textit{drip-drip}, calls out the false charges of impropriety. Thinking with \textit{drip} means thinking without the constant demand that blackness be productive according to the racial standards of capitalist democracy. The \textit{dripping} zone demands a closer look at trap music, and a legitimate (and therefore, excessive) contemplation of both the values that \textit{trap} subverts and the agenda that it sets forth. In the \textit{dripping} zone, hard work and respectability politics are not granted the first hearing. They are not real traps. In the \textit{dripping} zone traps are the routes to freedom. The real trap, or the recipe, must be attainable, rather than illusory. While respect can be revoked through the color of one’s skin, the trapper recognizes that money can buy you what any degree of respectability cannot.\textsuperscript{273} Thus, thinking

\textsuperscript{272} Jesse McCarthy, “Notes on Trap,” \textit{n+1}, Issue 32 (Fall 2018), Note 33.

\textsuperscript{273} As Jesse McCarthy discusses in Note 5, the list of metaphors for spending power in trap music’s lexicon could extend for pages. Money, signifying freedom, is the subject of trap.
outside the colony, in the trapper’s framework, is thinking outside the false valuation of decency over capital.

The challenge that *drip-drip* poses to conventional representations of commodified rap music demands that one consider that which has been cast as impossible. What if the decadence of Bobby Shmurda’s dance at Epic, and the shout of his friends, and his perfectly-timed slide on to the table is more than just a shameful parade of cheap caricatures? What if the only way to avoid the damning, reductionist conclusion that McCarthy envisages, is to see trap within the context of the *dripping zone*? Alongside these questions of possibility, one must also consider the ramifications of such contemplation. Thus, another question arises: can one affirm the transgressive decadence of the sign of *drip-drip* and the ethos of trap music without tacitly or actively reinscribing the violence that such music displays towards Black women, queer people of color, people with disabilities and so many more marginalized groups?

To argue that one could listen, or attend, to trap, and not be forced to engage with the violence it inflicts is akin to “gaslighting.” Yet to engage with Shmurda in this excessive context is not contingent on rejecting the basis of the critiques offered by hip-hop scholarship. An excessive outlook, as Marriott suggests near the end of “bling bling,” can still recognize the “decidedly masculine form” of the gangsta, or trapper, and one’s own complicity in such masculinism. Indeed, as Jesse McCarthy holds, the transgressive potential of an excessive reading of trap demands an acknowledgement that the trap of 21 Savage and Bobby Shmurda is nonetheless bound to a law that equates authenticity with “hyperbolic assertions of one’s dominance over

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the other sex.”

For newcomers to trap music, who, like Shmurda, dare to push the genre into iconoclasm, mixing trigger fingers and joyful dances, or cartoonish figures and suicidal thoughts, this injurious law is only more strictly enforced. For example, newer artists, pushing the boundaries of the masculine, through their dance moves or feminine appearance, like Young Thug and Lil Uzi Vert, constantly perform and reproduce tropes of misogynoir. Knowing that their deviant gender presentations cast them as soft or non-masculine, these rappers—and even more openly gender-fluid trap stars, such as Bad Bunny—tend to assert their strength through similarly degrading slurs and taunts. However, where the theories above would argue that this immobilizes trap and symbolizes its static presence as hyper-masculinist, over-commodified junk, drip-drip demands a more complicated reading—a reading that neither rejects nor concludes with facile condemnations.

Reading with drip-drip, one can understand the ramifications of this exclusionary rhetoric, and yet still recognize that trap’s hypervisibility in the cultural marketplace is worth investigating—if not for its insights on the ideological force of leisure, than perhaps for its potential to show us where we are, and where we are headed. Rather than create an alternative history, McCarthy asks us what trap “is for.”

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275 McCarthy, Note 27.
276 Mariana Viera, “Bad Bunny's Embrace of Femininity Comes with a Caveat,” Noisey, October, 3 2018, https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/vbky9x/bad-bunnys-embrace-of-femininity-comes-with-a-caveat. This article analyzes the simultaneous gender fluidity and misogyny of Bad Bunny, by juxtaposing his lyrics and videos, that embrace elements of toxic masculinity as often as they reject them. Some of the most open displays of this contradiction arrive when other men question Bad Bunny’s sexuality. In an interview with Rapetón, when questioned about his orientation, he said “Whoever has doubts can bring their woman over to my house.”
277 McCarthy, Note 33.
the sense of illumination.” McCarthy comes to these questions in Note #33, where he is wrestling with Simone White’s indispensable critique of the sexist tradition of Black aesthetic scholarship. In their respective essays, both White and McCarthy attempt to work against this tradition, while conceding that they are nonetheless irrevocably chained to it. White begins her essay with a critical reevaluation of Amiri Baraka’s work. Here, she is specifically interested in the difficult, trapped position of the critical Black theorist in Black musical theory, whose voice is simultaneously in conversation with the brilliance and the violence of Amiri Baraka and other male critics. As she moves into the breathtaking end of her essay, White moves from the elitism of jazz to an experiential account of trap music. Crucially, White chooses to assess trap without an analytical distance. She writes about listening to trap on the subway, talking to her students about it, and the lyrics that continue to get stuck in her head. Despite the sharpness of her insight regarding the damage of trap’s rhetoric, White is hardly unforgiving, never blind to the illuminating power of the music. While theorists fail to mention the pervasive grasp of trap, White is transfixed by it, fascinated by “these twenty-year old women who only listen to rap music.” Like her younger students, she cannot refrain from falling into trap, from listening to it and only it. Rather than focus solely on the bias that it brings with it, White reads it as “a fully developed language of life,” a “beautiful and terrible ‘kind of consciousness’” that she cannot get away from, that “nags in the back of [her] mind.”

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278 Ibid.  
279 White, 142.  
280 Ibid., 142-3.
Trap, White contends, is omnipotent – it is there even when it is not. Trap is there, in the back of White’s mind, as she rides the train. Its hypnotic production and repetitive lyrics, both simple and seamless, stick to her psyche. She is not the only one. The trap artists themselves agree. The irreverent Lil Yachty, for example, went viral when he said, “When it’s quiet all I hear is carti songs in my head.” These comments reveal the distinguishing factor of the *dripping zone*: its inescapability.

The music of Playboi Carti, although unmentioned in *Dear Angel of Death*, epitomizes the nagging, unrelenting stickiness that White discerns in trap. The Atlanta trap artist’s most popular songs, like “Magnolia” and “wokeuplikethis*,” arrive out of nowhere, fully-formed, broken only by main producer’s tag, shouted out repeatedly, like an incessant commercial slogan: “Yo, Pierre, you wanna come out here?” Just when critics thought trap could not get more repetitive, could not get more mindless, than the repetition of Chief Keef’s “I Don’t Like,” “Magnolia” burst through the limits of the repetitive. Carti’s lyrics, if they can be called lyrics, fuse with his ad-libs, as Pierre Bourne’s beat, repeating the same b-minor chord for three minutes, captures the listener in a trance. Carti’s ad-libs never stop. The beat does not progress. How could it, considering Bourne made it in the car, on his way to get dinner? “Magnolia”

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https://twitter.com/lilyachty/status/1093962131526115328


283 While Magnolia’s repetition exists in Carti’s cadence and Bourne’s beat just as much as Carti’s scant lyrics, Chief Keef’s lyrics are more openly repetitive. Just in the hook, he repeats “don’t like” ten times.

284 Pierre Bourne (@pierrebourne). *Twitter*,  
https://twitter.com/pierrebourne/status/869739876463157248.  
Regarding the song that launched his career, Bourne had only this to say: “I made magnolia in my friends mustang on the way to zaxbys.”
should feel unfinished. But instead it is immaculate. It mocks any detractor of simplicity and any virtue assigned to inaccessibility. You hear it once on the radio, and already it is in your head. Nagging. Nagging. Nagging its way to a Jay-Z co-sign and multi-platinum plaques and sold-out fifty-dollar tours.  

Thus, even as McCarthy and White approach trap through different traditions, they unite in an acknowledgement of the lasting victory of the trap, and in an appreciation that trap, for better or for worse or for neither, possesses an inescapable futurity. As White puts it near the end of her essay, trap is: “Possibility—let’s call it now, cracked time of where we are and where we are going now. We don’t have words for how broken. And yet we are warned.” White pushes McCarthy’s question further. She demands that one engages with trap even if it is the broken junk that the white bourgeoisie believes it to be, and even if it is a repetitive sign of self-destruction. Thus, *Dear Angel of Death* asks us a question that none have been brave enough to ask: If

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285 Mr. Carter (@S_C_), *Twitter*, June 15, 2017, [https://twitter.com/s_c_/status/875524516931227648](https://twitter.com/s_c_/status/875524516931227648). In one of his only tweets, Jay-Z shouted out Carti in a list of influential rappers, writing, “Carti (Magnolia incredible).”

286 White, 144.
trap is horrifically, devastatingly broken, what does this tell us about the world? If the brokenness of trap is a pervasive sign of a future tied to blackness, what does it tell us about antiblackness in the world?

Here I must ask one more question, which White brings me to: If trap is broken, can it reveal the brokenness of the world as such? If trap can only be cast as broken, it carries the brokenness of the world. If trap is broken, it is a commodity which sound hides the violence of antiblackness. When one acknowledges that trap reflects the brokenness of an antiblack world, one can see something in trap besides its brokenness. This possible remnant is that which McCarthy points to when he thinks of trap’s revelatory power, its potential for illumination. Though this formation exists peripherally to the sovereign power of the gangsta, it is not its copy. Trap is amorphous to such a characterization, erratic in its viewpoints. It is an excessive formation, that radiates a brilliant brokenness that, as White says, we do not possess the language to describe. Paradoxically, the amorphous illumination offered by trap, fulfills the narrative of escape in Moten’s “The Case of Blackness,” even as it also aligns with Marriott’s description of blackness as an “unnameable event of an infinite postponement.”

Trap’s implication, when appreciated as something other than (or more than) brokenness, is both evasive and unintelligible, fugitive and yet more than fugitive.

Trap may be oxymoronic in its idiomatic nature because, even when it is assessed according to its transgressive embrace of decadence, it is still not sovereign as such. It does not follow the nonconformist traditions necessary for fugitive “Black

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287 Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
socio-aesthetic activity” as Moten would have it.\textsuperscript{288} Yet trap, as a genre, also does not contain the iconoclastic entrepreneurial power of the gangsta, who Judy envisions fighting the “global hypercommodification of production.”\textsuperscript{289} Despite its fluid and broad reach, trap music can be cast neither in the tradition of humanistic resistance nor the transgressive protest of gangsta rap. While Bad Bunny brilliantly subverts gender roles in his “Caro” video, he will likely continue to speak of \textit{las blanquitas} (white girls) and \textit{las prietas} (dark girls) that he utilizes to affirm his masculine sexuality. To pretend that Lil Uzi Vert’s beautifully extravagant, defiant claim that “I cannot die because this is my universe,” does not come along with his subordinating flex that “Your girlfriend call me like, ‘Come on over!”’ would be a disservice to the tenacious ambiguity of trap.\textsuperscript{290} Thus, neither account of trap, as a sovereign sign of fugitivity or a symbol of control of commodification, can hold up, because trap exceeds these perspectives alone.

If one returns to the shaky video of Bobby Shmurda, dancing on the table of Epic Records, one can see as much. Rather than clearly exemplifying commodification as a form of sovereignty, or indicating the possibility of a radical, anticapitalist escape or revealing Shmurda as a corrupted figure performing for whiteness, the video lies in the space between such characterization. At points, when Shmurda jumps on the table, shocking his audience and eliciting shouts from his friends, one can see a \textit{bling-bling} decadence, a choice to think outside of propriety and expectation. And yet, one still sees instead the revelation of the profound brokenness engendered by antiblackness,
illuminated almost too starkly through Shmurda’s performance for marginal ownership of his own music, just months before a half-decade stint in prison. Shmurda is not mending the brokenness that surrounds and envelops him. But he is also defiantly and self-assuredly letting you know that he is not the origin of such brokenness. He is, for this moment at Epic, now codified online, signifying the intractability of trap. He is indicating that trap cannot be definitively classified according to conceptual terms in aesthetic theory, like resistance or commodification. In the video, Shmurda demonstrates that trap, like blackness, cannot be categorically named by this language. Both also exceed the language of excess and brokenness. Trap’s ability to present this indefinability, is perhaps itself a cause for celebration.
Conclusion: To Be Everything Other Than Citizen

Are blackness and citizenship incompatible?

In her famous book of poetry, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine contemplates this question, and concludes with the self-directed instruction below:

This is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on.291

This blunt statement arrives after more than a hundred pages that explain just how formidable such a task is, through personal memoir and creative nonfiction. To let it go, when rival soccer players berate you with racial slurs. To move on, when the words of racist children reappear in your mind.292

Coming after these accounts, that demonstrate the inescapability of antiblackness, her instruction takes a sardonic tone. To be Black and to be a citizen, one must be constantly ready to move on. One must be ready to let everything, up to and including one’s life, go.

Lying under this sarcastic declaration is an even darker possibility. What if, even after moving on and letting go of all this violence, one is still a non-citizen? What if, existing as non-citizen is how Black people “are citizens”?293

In recent discourses regarding American citizenship, the specter of the U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) cannot be overstated. In 2003, the U.S. made this national police department to appease white anxiety over the attacks of

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292 Rankine opens the book with a recollection of racism she experienced in elementary school. Later in the book, she writes about Zinedine Zidane, a French soccer player who was ejected from a 2004 World Cup Final for headbutting a rival player, who insulted his family’s Algerian heritage.
293 Ibid.
September 11. The goal of which was to criminalize and deport undocumented people, although all of the people responsible for the 9/11 attacks had immigrated legally.\textsuperscript{294} Alongside the Patriot Act, and other sections of the Department of Homeland Security, ICE has been openly contextualized by its own administration as a police force with more authority and less accountability, that is needed “to better protect national security and public safety in answer to the tragic events on 9/11.”\textsuperscript{295}

The ideology of ICE, like that of Blue Lives Matter (as described by Nijah Cunningham and Tiana Reid) is founded on a constructed, surreal threat to whiteness. In response to the terrorism of nineteen men who legally travelled to the U.S. and killed thousands a military body that targets undocumented families of color was born. For whiteness to feel safe, ICE has to eradicate the psychological threat of non-white immigration. This is an unending process. More people must be deported daily to ensure that white majoritarian hegemony is not threatened.

Although much mainstream media coverage has explored ICE’s abusive practices since news of family separation broke in early 2018, public outcry hasn’t extended to another alarming tactic: targeting gang members, and, thus people who know gang members and people who look like gang members.\textsuperscript{296} Although the few news stories regarding this practice have mainly focused on the Salvadorian-American gang MS-13, and followed stereotypical representation of immigration as a (white) Latinx issue, a few groups, such as community organization UndocuBlack

\begin{footnotes}
\item[296] Sarah Gonzalez, “MS-13 Gang Crackdown Relies on ‘Questionable’ Evidence From Schools,” \textit{WNYC News}, August 7, 2017. This WNYC article explores a case regarding the targeted deportation of MS-13 members.
\end{footnotes}
have worked to remind people that racial profiling, and especially racial profiling of
gang members, always targets Black people.

If one recalls that Black people make up 34% of the American prison
population, it’s easy to understand why Black people similarly comprise only seven
percent of undocumented Americans, yet twenty percent of those facing deportation.297
Black people are still the enemy of the state. Any and all state apparatuses formed to
incarcerate, deport or execute individuals, are necessarily apparatuses to be deployed
against Black bodies. Deportation, just like incarceration, concerns the eradication of
illusory enemies, and thus, Black people fit the profile, even when they do not fit the
profile.

Take, for example the subject of my first chapter, Shéyaa Bin Abraham-Joseph,
known as 21 Savage. When I began writing this essay in September of 2018, 21 Savage
had not yet released his sophomore album i am > i was. The record, dropped without
promotion in late December, shocked listeners in both familiar and novel ways. The
album had songs that mirrored his previous records, starkly describing the
pervasiveness of violence in 21’s current and past life. On “good day,” 21 updates Ice
Cube’s utopian “It Was a Good Day,” rapping “Today was a good day, ain’t have to
spray the K.”298 But then alongside these frank reflections, came even more
introspective realizations. On songs like the opener “a lot,” 21 rapped:

My brother lost his life and it turned me to a beast

298 21 Savage, “good day,” i am > i was (Slaughter Gang/Epic: 2018).
My brother got life and it turned me to the streets.²⁹⁹

Juxtaposing the childhood traumas with his elegant lifestyle today, 21 concludes he has “a lot” of everything: expensive cars, bullet wounds, haters, and fans. The song’s theme echoes David Marriott’s concept of *bling-bling* in more ways than one. Everything 21 possesses, be they horrific memories or million-dollar contracts, is present in excess. Despite the bright, mesmerizing vocal sample of soul group East of Underground’s “I Love You,” the song feels incredibly heavy, as if 21 is still holding each car, bullet, and break-up on his back. When he performed the track on *The Tonight Show*, 21 seemed to be holding even more weight. His record had gone platinum, exceeding commercial and critical expectations. He was on primetime national television for the first time. In many ways, on that night, it seemed like 21 was carrying trap music itself on his shoulders. During a surprise third verse, he moved closer to the crowd, and rapped two lines that made the weight he was carrying clear:

Went through some things, but I couldn’t imagine my kids stuck at the border
Flint still need water, people was innocent, couldn’t get lawyers.³⁰⁰

By applying his perspective to a crisis that even he couldn’t imagine experiencing, 21 explicitly demonstrated what was implicit on earlier trap records, from his song “Numb,” to Young Dolph’s “100 Shots.” Trap music could indeed be illuminating. It could be more than “cheap, trashy music.”³⁰¹ For once, his keen observations were not lost on his audience, or obscured by his bars about being

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²⁹⁹ 21 Savage, “a lot,” *i am > i was*.
³⁰¹ Jesse McCarthy, “Notes on Trap,” Note 33.
unfaithful to partners or committing violence. Trap listeners and hip-hop scholars both lauded his progression. He was greater than before.

Yet despite this success, 21 fits the profile of the enemy. In fact, one could say that because of this success, 21 fits the profile of the enemy. On Sunday, February 3, 2019, with the Super Bowl, the most expensive and profitable sporting event just hours away, 21 found himself in a car with his cousin, fellow Atlanta rapper Young Nudy. It had been three days since his live performance on The Tonight Show, debuting his third verse to an audience of millions. It had been two since the release of his “a lot,” music video, now boasting nearly one hundred million views. Both videos were publicly acclaimed, the music video for its poignant display of loss and prosperity, the live performance for its inspired use of a gospel choir.

Then, while in the car with his cousin, 21 saw guns and lights and heard three words: “we got Savage.” Within minutes, breaking stories streamed in with one of the most perplexing headlines in the last decade of hip-hop history: “ICE Arrests Rapper 21 Savage, Says He's From the UK.” The information was difficult to grasp. Some Twitter users resorted to comedy, imagining 21 as a soldier of the British commonwealth, redcoat and all. A few considered this news to be a sign of fraudulence, arguing that 21 must have lied about his upbringing in Atlanta.

Others, however, began to contextualize 21’s detention within a long history of symbolic punishment and targeted arrests carried out by ICE. When one looks at ICE’s

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press release, the emblematic aspects of 21’s arrest are apparent. ICE admits that 21, rather than entering detention through criminal activity, was arrested in a targeted sting aimed at his cousin Young Nudy.\textsuperscript{304} This critical admission combined with 21’s own recollection of ICE officers saying “we got Savage,” comes into line with federal and state police’s consistent, systematic surveillance and targeting of successful Black rappers, who have often had no criminal record for several years.\textsuperscript{305}

One of the key subjects of the last chapter, Bobby Shmurda, is one recent example of such practices. In a long, investigative article for \textit{GQ}, Scott Eden casts doubt on the charges against Shmurda, that have kept him in prison for over five years on several counts of drug conspiracy. Although he was described by the prosecution as “the driving force behind the GS9 gang,” Eden notes that “no narcotics inventory, no packaging, no cash” were presented as evidence against him in court.\textsuperscript{306} One of his charges for illegal gun possession seems similarly orchestrated, as police apparently “found the door open” to his apartment during a search for narcotics, but actually found no more than a marijuana joint.\textsuperscript{307} Trap eccentric Young Thug’s recent arrest reveals similar deceptive search tactics. In early 2017, he was charged with eight counts of drug possession, resulting from a routine traffic stop due to the tinted windows on his Mercedes-Maybach. Each of these practices align with the FBI’s historical surveillance

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{305} 21, for example, had only previously been arrested on drug charges.
\item \textsuperscript{307} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
of Black musicians, from the defiant gangsta rap of N.W.A., to the incisive spoken-word of Gil-Scott Heron.  

ICE’s intentions became even more clear in their press release regarding 21, due to their unnecessary, vitriolic assertion that “his whole public persona is false. He actually came to the U.S. from the U.K. as a teen and overstayed his visa.” This false statement, a clear attempt to delegitimize 21’s account of his upbringing in Atlanta, exhibits the values that ground ICE’s operation. It doesn’t matter that 21 originally immigrated from the United Kingdom at age seven. It doesn’t matter that this makes him an archetypical “DREAMer,” a child with almost no recollection of a home beyond the United States. The goal instead, is to make 21 into a fraud, to eliminate any sympathy for a child who “didn’t know what a visa was,” and feed into tabloid coverage, that labels 21 as no more than a hoax.

The statement tries to breed a broad distrust of 21 and rappers like him, feeding into false, outdated notions of authenticity. If 21 isn’t literally from Dekalb County, where he says he grew up, then he is another example of the cheap trifle that is trap music, overpopulated by fake trappers, lying to sell records. This notion, beyond its blindness to the realities of low-income Black life, which is fraught with institutional


309 Levinson and Valencia, “ICE arrests rapper 21 Savage,” CNN.

310 The “DREAMer” term derives from the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, a congressional bill attempting to secure citizenship for undocumented children, that has been introduced in the Senate many times since its conception in 2001.

violence whether in Dekalb or East Brixton, completely disregards any possibility that 21, on songs like “a lot,” and “good day,” is almost surely combining personal memories, passed-down stories and cultural allusions to craft his lyrics and persona. Yet, even as ICE attempts to smear 21 and delegitimize his outlaw persona, they also simultaneously reinscribe his criminal identity, referencing his one “felony conviction,” which resulted from possession of marijuana in the press release as well.312

This feverish, paradoxical effort to both affirm 21 as public enemy and discredit his cultural identity symbolizes new territory in the fight to criminalize trap artists in America. ICE could have presented a cautionary tale of crime and punishment, following the formula of the arrests of Bobby Shmurda and Young Thug. They could have just shown Black kids that incarceration is always a possibility, no matter one’s status or class. But instead, they attempted to break 21 into even more pieces, to shatter not just his safety but his livelihood. This fate is reserved only for those who, like 21, become the trapper instead of the trapped. Those who, in their defiant multiplicity, reflect the unabashed profligacy, the universal violence and the radical dissolution of drip-drip. Many have wondered whether the same events would have transpired even if 21 did not perform his updated third verse on The Tonight Show. If ICE still would have tried to not only criminalize but slander him. Regardless, one can revel in his choice to recite the lyrics of that verse on live television, that mark him as a witness of the violence of ICE (“I couldn’t imagine my kids stuck at the border”), even as he remarks on his own history of violence (“before the fame, Plan B was robbin’ banks”).313

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312 Levinson and Valencia, “ICE arrests rapper 21 Savage,” CNN.
313 21 Savage, “a lot,” i am > i was.
If we learn anything from 21’s detention, it is that his citizenship, despite his status as a popular artist, is free to be revoked at any time in a matter of seconds.

If this is true for someone who has reached the heights of 21 Savage, then one is forced to return to Rankine’s piercing instruction, that brings one to the question: Is it possible to be Black and be citizen?

For the sake of hip-hop culture, and Black aesthetic scholarship altogether, this question must continue to be rigorously investigated, and never taken as a matter of fact. 21’s case, and others that have gained exposure since the conception of the Movement for Black Lives, demonstrate that the previous assumptions made by hip-hop scholars, about the inherent virtues of inclusionary politics and the security of democratic citizenship, need to be reassessed. The overrepresentation of rap music that upholds these assumptions in the field of hip-hop studies must also be questioned. While further writing on the achievements of these artists should be welcomed, they should not be assessed without an acknowledgment of their ideological shortcomings or disciplinarian tendencies. Alongside more nuanced studies of liberal, progressive rap, trap music, by the likes of 21 and so many more, must be given a fuller hearing. Expressing profound misgivings about the possible merits of respectability, depicting the long-lasting effects of antiblack violence, and demanding opportunities that could aid Black communities today, trap reflects young Black disillusionment with the progress narratives championed by hip-hop scholars and the rappers they write about today.

Rankine’s question, that demands a reassessment of the relationship between blackness and citizenship was born during the emergence of critical Black study.
Despite this origin, aesthetic analyses in the field of critical Black study have failed to think outside of the elitist constructs of such commodification. Some, like Fred Moten, reserve reappraisal for artists that fit into progressive, humanist narratives and argue that these uncommodified artists represent the possibility of Black art in the afterlife of slavery and in an age of hypercommodification. Others, like David Marriott, instead argue that all current cultural representation fails to capture the problematics of Black revolution, which exceeds the constructs of any narrative of resistance. Critical Black study, nonetheless, provides an entry point for hearing trap, introducing approaches that are by nature skeptical of politics fighting for inclusion, and instead consider the liberating potential of more holistic abolition. To entertain trap’s narratives, and not simply reject them based on their cultural commodification demands that one break from the confining practices of Marxist analysis, and recognize the many artists who, despite (or even because of) their commodification, find new, immediate ways to conceive of Black life under white supremacist conditions.

By following transgressive theories that entertain the potential liberation offered by commodification and leisure, the door to hearing trap, and other commodified forms of art, opens. Within this theory, the most commodified forms of Black art, codified by David Marriott as bling bling, are contextualized within the historical imperatives of Black labor and Black morality. Recognizing that work and respect are bankrupt, the signs of bling bling instead align under a pursuit of decadence, excess, and expenditure, the exact reverse of the productivity always commanded of them. While some, like Ronald Judy, see this extravagant expenditure as a bona fide form of sovereignty, that allows the artist to control and direct forces of
commodification, trap music’s constantly expanding forms, and frequently apathetic attitudes, suggest that it cannot fit so easily within a sovereign body. Instead, listening to trap reveals its key skepticism to any fixed identity, be that excess or resistance or violence, and suggests that blackness exceeds any such narrative. This insight mirrors those of critical Black study. Within this aporia, one can spy both the violence of trap and its evasion of responsibility; one can recognize it as a polymorphous form, that exists dynamically, despite constant attempts to classify it.

As I write this, 21 awaits his deportation trial, set for April 11. Yet his fate in the only country he knows is still unknown. As I write this, bodycam footage of Vallejo police executing rapper Willie McCoy, known as Willie Bo, found asleep in his car at Taco Bell surfaces. The footage is slowed down to demonstrate that the 15-degree movement of Willie Bo’s left hand, in the general direction of the gun on his lap, justifies firing 25 rounds into the car. These murders pile up. Every day, another public enemy is eliminated. Another (non)citizen, taken away. As I write this, the flawed, yet celebrated Los Angeles rapper Nipsey Hussle is shot at his own clothing store in Crenshaw, at age 33. But others look to his past views and find horrors. He justifies his homophobia, writing, “I don’t look down on gay people” but there is “AN AGENDA.”

Trap music is the bridled air between these brutalities. It projects the ineffable dualities of blackness—its misdemeanors and accomplishments, its gloss and

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roughness, its romance and bile. As I write this, Florida upstart YNW Melly awaits trial for murdering two of his best friends. Just months before his arrest, he practically confessed to the homicide in his hit song “Murder on my Mind.” In the very next song, “Mind on My Murder,” he expressed an unadulterated, obsessive fear of death. Despite their content, the songs gleam with the exact same bright piano keys. If anything, trap is this reversal, giving you murder and anguish together.

Murder on my mind. Mind on my murder

“Murder on My Mind:”

He grabbed me by my hands and said he was afraid to die
I told him it's too late, my friend, it's time to say goodbye
And he died inside my arms, blood all on my shirt

Wake up in the morning,
I got murder on my mind

“Mind on My Murder:”

Never thought a home invasion would've costed me my life
All I wanted was a mouth full of golds and my neck and my wrist with ice
But now I just got murdered while I go in paradise

Just sing this chorus with me twice:
Mind on my murder, murder, murder

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317 YNW Melly, “Mind on My Murder,” I AM YOU.

15. Mind on my Murder (Gabriel Hart, P2018).
Acknowledgments

Thank you to the students who I call friends at Cheshire Correctional Institution, for pushing me to listen to the music I never got around to. Thank you also to the circle-keepers who exchanged songs with me, either as a direct offering, or simply when we were hanging out. You know who you are.

Thank you to Professor Axelle Karera, for introducing me to these topics, holding me to the high standards I strive to meet, and always pushing me to ‘fail better,’ even when classes are cancelled, or conferences are held, or friends and family members are sick.

Thank you to my colleague, Keith Mundangepfupfu, for being open to a conversation on Fanon in September.
Thank you to Harrison Nir for leading by example, with care, always.
Thank you to James Scott for being a passionate, free loving individual.
Thank you to Kyllian Pather for pushing me into the breaks, or falling in after me.

This is for those who listen to trap music and hear something that goes beyond words. And for all those who trap ensared for a moment in time.

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