BELLRINGER:

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC HOMECOMING

TO HIP HOP AS SCHOOL-ABOLITIONIST PRAXIS

by

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(Under the Direction of RUTH HARMAN)

ABSTRACT

This three-part, creative dissertation charts my homecoming to Hip Hop as a means to disrupt and escape the carceral logics of schooling (Love 2019; Meiners & Winn 2010; Rodriguez 2008; Stovall 2018). It is the fruit of a recursive, three-year songwriting, and production, recording and reflection process that enabled me to both interrogate my experiences and their animating conditions and connect these to the forces of neoliberal capitalism and the prison industrial complex. Chapter one, "The *Bellringer* Palimpsest," distills findings that emerged over the course of writing and recording *Bellringer,* an autoethnographic Hip Hop album I released in April 2022. Through the lenses of the Black ratchet imaginary (Love 2017) and arts-based research (Cahnmann-Taylor 2018), I write my way to understanding the album as scholarship and describe the process of audiokinetic play, revision, production, recording, and reflection I underwent in the album's creation. As well, I situate the album sociohistorically and filters its insights through the lenses of Hip Hop feminism (Lindsey 2015; Brown & Young 2015 Morgan 1999) and abolition feminism (Purnell 2021; Davis et. al. 2021) to further concretize

findings drawn from writing the album itself. I locate Hip Hop songwriting and my insights within the terrain of liberation movement pedagogy, as found in the work of Black educators in the post-Reconstruction South (Givens 2021) and the Mississippi Freedom Schools (Cobb, Stembridge, Samstein & Day 1964) as well as school abolition (Stovall 2018) and the theory and practice of Hip Hop-based education (Hill 2009). I then pinpoint directions for future research that examines the community impact of Hip Hop produced within this liberation movement pedagogical paradigm. Chapter two, "*Bellringer* Lyrics, Annotated" contains an annotated transcription of the album's lyrics. Chapter three, *Bellringer*, is the album itself. I present these with the goal of increasing empathic understanding of the animating conditions and possibilities for life as queer Black femme in liberation struggle in the American South and a school-abolitionist understanding of Hip Hop as a practice that keeps alive the spirit and pedagogical lineage of movements for collective liberation.

INDEX WORDS: Hip hop songwriting, Hip hop-based education, Fugitive pedagogy, Abolition, Autoethnography, Arts-based research

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DEDICATION

To the street linguists who go unseen.

And the generation who will finish what we've started.

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All labor is social and so all wealth should be.

This work belongs to Athens music: Montu Miller, Wesley Johnson, Louie Larceny, Karica Smith, Curtison Jones, Kevin Boyd, Imorie Curry, Gordon Lamb, and Sam Lipkin.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

THE BELLRINGER PALIMPSEST: REFLECTIONS ON SONGWRITING AND ARRIVAL AT HIP HOP AS SCHOOL-ABOLITIONIST PRAXIS

Introduction

I did not set out to write Bellringer as a form of scholarly inquiry. Lowkey, in the months leading up to the album's completion, wherein I spent untold hours writing, recording and mixing songs and coordinating their release, the psychic weight of all the research I should be doing but wasn't was colossal. I had so deeply internalized cisheteropatriarchal, white supremacist beliefs about "knowing" through nearly two decades of schooling that, despite an extensive body of arts-based research and writings on its capacity to render understandings inaccessible by other research means (Cahnmann-Taylor 2003, 2008, 2018), I could not imagine the album as counting to the academy. Despite Hip Hop feminism's longstanding call to interrogate and refuse respectability politics and embrace contradiction (Lindsey 2015; Brown & Young 2015), my own contradictory experiences as a ratchet, Black queer femme (who is also a doctoral student and a local elected official) were something to be hid from other academics, never spoken of and much less the subject of scholarly inquiry. Though autoethnographers have long journeyed toward new knowledge of the self and society through the writing of personal history (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2014), I hadn't realized that that's what I'd been up to. But, Halberstam (2011) suggests in The Queer Art of Failure, "under certain circumstances… not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the

world" (p. 2). "Failing to do research" was a generative precondition for engaging in rigorous reflection on taboo realities which traditional methods and school's decorum have never allowed me to do.

From my cyclical three-year process of writing-recording Bellringer, new insights emerged about my experiences and their relationship to the larger sociopolitical context that I can't say I'd have come upon otherwise. In this chapter, I write my way to understanding this work as scholarship. I describe this writing process and link it to existing methodological frameworks, particularly Love's (2017) Black ratchet methodological perspective as applied to autoethnography and arts-based research. I ground the songs in the social, historical, and emotional context in which they were written to reveal insights about larger social phenomena. This acts as an additional round of analysis of the data I processed through writing the album. I put my findings into conversation with the work of Black educators in the post-Reconstruction South (Givens 2021), the Mississippi Freedom Schools (Cobb et. al. 1964), abolitionist imaginaries (Meiners & Winn 2010; Meiners 2011; Love 2019; Stovall 2018; Davis et. al. 2021) and the theory and practice of Hip Hop-based education (Hill 2009) to reconceptualize Hip Hop as a fugitive, school abolitionist educational practice. Based on these interwoven insights, I close by suggesting potential ways forward for Hip Hop as liberatory education.

Braiding Methodologies

You will hear me introduce and describe the lived experiences that animate the album in pretty grim terms. In a sense, beginning this way indexes where I began emotionally and psychologically in writing the album. As I filter these experiences through songwriting and, here, through the lens of scholarship, a complex personhood (Gordon 1997) emerges. In this section, I

discuss the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this journey as "scholarship." I also detail the concrete songwriting processes that brought me to my revelations.

Situating the Work

Critical to this reframing of my experiences as not statically negative but complex, contradictory, and agentive, is Stallings' (2013) concept of the Black ratchet imagination. Stallings and, later, Love (2018), conceive of the Black ratchet imagination as a space in which Black queer youths "perform their failure to be respectable" (Stallings 2013, p. 136) and undo anti-Black, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist self-conception. In understanding Bellringer as scholarship, it occurs to me that, in my late youth as a Black queer femme, I have lived Black ratchet imagination on smoke hued bar patios, on stumbling walks home arm and arm with Tinder matches, in gyrating movements on the stages of dive bars. A textured understanding of these experiences requires a fluid and dynamic methodological perspective capable of humanizing and struggling with the hypocrisy, contradictions, instability, precarity, and specificity of Black queer Hip Hop identity construction, as offered by Love's (2018) concept of a Black ratchet methodological perspective. Methods flexible and responsive enough to accomplish these ends necessarily lead to messy, irreplicable, hyperlocal, incomplete research findings, but nonetheless offer readers and participants themselves a powerful snapshot of what oft-invizibilized, Black queer youth do with and through Hip Hop.

Drawing on Ruth Nicole Brown's (2009) concept of Black girlhood as "the representations, memories and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful," through Bellringer I have examined memories, lived experiences, and here re-examine my representations of my living Black and queer in my early twenties through a fluid and dynamic methodological perspective. Rather than begin with concrete questions, I have run

knowledge and memories through the machinery of songwriting to produce new knowledge. The results of this process, and the spontaneity of this process itself, have often surprised me. In this chapter, I synthesize and refine these products in the hopes that they may be operationalized as relevant to the contexts in which we teach, struggle, and live. Though my revelations similar others to understand their own identities and choices and, alternatively, for unlike folks to consider a variation of being Black, queer, and Hip Hop.

Writing one's way to new understanding of self and society is one such fluid and dynamic form of inquiry, and I suppose I did this with Bellringer. Since the 1990s, scholarly writing on Hip Hop has served as a site of critical resistance to dominant discourses around Blackness, Hip Hop, and femininity, from historical and textual analyses (e.g. Smitherman 1997; hooks 1994; Pough 2004; Dyson 1996; Kelley 1998; McLaren 1999), social commentaries (e.g. Kitwana 2003; Chang 2005) and "grounded" studies focus on the lived experiences and practices of folks within Hip Hop culture (e.g. Dimitriadis 2001; Petchauer 2007b). Joan Morgan's (1999) Chickenheads Come Home to Roost charted her personal journey toward a feminist ideological stance capable of grappling with the complexity and contradictions of Black femmehood in Hip Hop and the world (Morgan 1999). In her wake, Hip Hop feminists wrote extensively on the role of Black femme kinetics and expression in Hip Hop cultural and identity construction and Black femme resistance to dominant discourses (Keyes 2000; Pough 2004; Gaunt 2006; Pough, Richardson, Raimist & Durham 2007; Richardson 2007; Brown 2009, 2013). As well, scholarship on Hip Hop cultural practices corrected the record on Hip Hop as a heteropatriarchal, Black-dominated space, illuminating the ways that non-Black youth also negotiate identities through Hip Hop (Cutler 1999, Ibrahim 1999; Alim & Pennycook 2008; Hill 2009; Pulido 2009;

Paris 2011, Alim 2009, 2011). This dissertation builds on this lineage of scholarship that challenges, nuances and reclaims the range of identities and practices in Hip Hop.

Similarly, within the poststructural and deconstructionist turn that refuses the limitations of empirical knowledge-making, arts-based autoethnography serves to me as an effective modality to capture insider experience, insights, and knowledge that facilitate vigorous interrogation of commonsensical ways of comprehending the world. The desired outcome is increased empathic understanding of alternative outlooks and perspectives (Barone & Eisner 1997). As well, in facilitating such interrogation, such work aims to reach audiences outside of the academy in a way that more traditional research cannot. Rather than assert final knowledge, it seeks to stimulate dialogue and continued co-construction of knowledge with audiences and communities of interest (Adams, Jones & Ellis 2014).

I draw from several strands of practice well precedented both in the field of arts-based research and among Black feminist researchers and Hip Hop creators. One such strand, autoethnographic poetry, has been taken up in a variety of contexts as a common method of data collection, analysis, and presentation to illuminate aspects of experience that are difficult to capture by other means (Kent; 2007; Cahnmann-Taylor 2016; Walrath 2016; Stone 2019; Zia 2019; Zhang 2021). Though she does not explicitly couch her work within the tradition of arts-based research, Black girlhood scholar Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) uses poetry and poetic analysis, drama, photography, and narrative as both research methodology and means to render her work with Black girls in her Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths program. Similarly, contemporary Hip Hop autoethnographers have used the genre to convey personal accounts that flip the script on static understandings of their identities and the relationship between their experiences and broader structural forces (Lumumba-Kasongo 2015; Warner 2016; Carson

2020). Under the name Sammus, Lumumba-Kasongo uses Hip Hop songwriting and performance to powerfully challenge stereotypes about Black femininity and carve space for Black femmes within video game and nerd culture. Noname, aka Fatimah Warner, paints impressionist portraits of Black joy and struggle in Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago and, in more recent work, has connected these experiences to the forces of imperialism, capitalism, and the prison industrial complex. For me as well, working with the affordances of Hip Hop aesthetics has allowed lived knowledge to surface in novel ways and to cultivate the fifth pillar of hip hop: knowledge of self (Chang 2005).

I also ground this work in Cahnmann-Taylor's (2018) arts-based research principle of "ethical good." In stretching the boundaries of qualitative research, it remains important to attend to questions of veracity, attribution, and confidentiality. On veracity, this chapter interprets life experiences that I relay from memory to the best of my ability. It includes references to supporting documents (podcasts, videos, news coverage, etc.) where possible to provide context and external grounding. The identities of collaborators are matters of public record, published along with the album in April of 2022, as are details about my aunt's death in 2018. The names of individuals involved in intimate relationships however are omitted for their privacy.

In the album itself, I do take poetic and fictive license to imagine or reimagine happenings. Anecdotes like the final verse of "Sometimes I Hate This Town" or the second verse of "The Tree" are imagined, though they are very real and persistent "daymares" that I experienced while writing the album. As well, the opening tracks imagine the day of Latasha Harlins' death based on security camera footage made available of the incident (KNBC 2017). I was not literally raised on "cheap pea soup, Reddit, and television" as referenced on "Growth I" though this does refer to a concrete experience of spending countless hours alone in front of screens in my

childhood. Pleasantly, this aesthetic license and its line-blurring also opens space for dialogue with percipients around the album's content and themes, accomplishing one of the goals of arts-based research. For example, recently, a listener reached out to ask if "I wish I'd never told Marie that I would check the tweets," which opens the second verse on "Sometimes," refers to an episode of my podcast entitled "The Unsent Tweet Folder" (Parker and Mack 2020) where I spill tea on behind-the-scenes drama in local politics. This question occasioned discussion of the real story behind the song, realizing one of the goals of arts-based research as a field.

Methods: Writing the Songs

My method of analysis-through-songwriting is not unlike that of assembling a puzzle. The name of the game is to make pieces of language interlock with their surrounding language-pieces (grammatically, metrically, and in terms of rhyme) to please aesthetically. At the same time, I match the colors-- the content-- to surrounding pieces to tell a coherent story. As I interlock pieces of language grammatically and thematically, the completed puzzle's image-- the findings-- begin to emerge.

My versecraft generally begins with the audiokinetic play. I verbally repeat aloud phrases that have become lodged in my mind, such as "wishing there were six of me" on "Growth II" or "imagine a minute" on "Wurk." I contemplate strings of rhyme animated by the initial phrase ("What rhymes with six of me? Listerine? Kitchen clean?"). I then fill in the content with lines drawn from my life and the world that end with that preselected rhyme (for example, that I sit between Commissioners Dickerson and Link when the commission meets and used to drink whiskey at Little Kings). I toy with lines and couplets verbally and in writing until I discover rhythmic and grammatical coherence. For example, I might swap out *being* for *had been* to ensure both intralineal and interlineal metrical consistency. This process goes on recursively,

with rhymes inspiring ideas of content, the grammatical and metrical constraints shaping their form and delivery, all of these inspiring more content which then must be molded aesthetically. This continues on and on until I have written sixteen bars. Most often, the "jumpstart phrase" is the first line of the verse, but occasionally, seeking to leave listeners with the most resonance at the end of the verse, I will generate fitting lines and organize them in a way that leads to this phrase, which appears last. This was the case with "abolish the police" at the end of Abolition, as an example.

As a concrete example of this process, when writing "Overture," I initially penned, "It's a system that hates us and wants all of us to hate us too," (see figure 1). Noticing a breakdown in the meter, I scratched out "it's a" and "that" to create the line, "this system hates us and wants us to hate us too" which had greater metrical coherence. I also tested out various rhyming phrases to potentially add next, as is shown in the phrase "latently racist caucasians" written above "the system hates us." It rhymed and made sense, but it was ultimately discarded.

Note, too, the words "blood and bone" which appear twice. This is an example of how, at times, I'll switch to a different "jumpstart phrase" midway through a verse if I identify a new phrase that fits the content around which I can shape the content to follow. In this instance, I knew I wanted to speak to "falling on the linoleum," imagining Latasha's body falling to the floor after the fatal gunshot. Working backwards, I thought up the phrases "holding on," "stole me one," and "blood and bone," that both match sonically and speak to the desired content,

though only some of these made it into the song's final version.

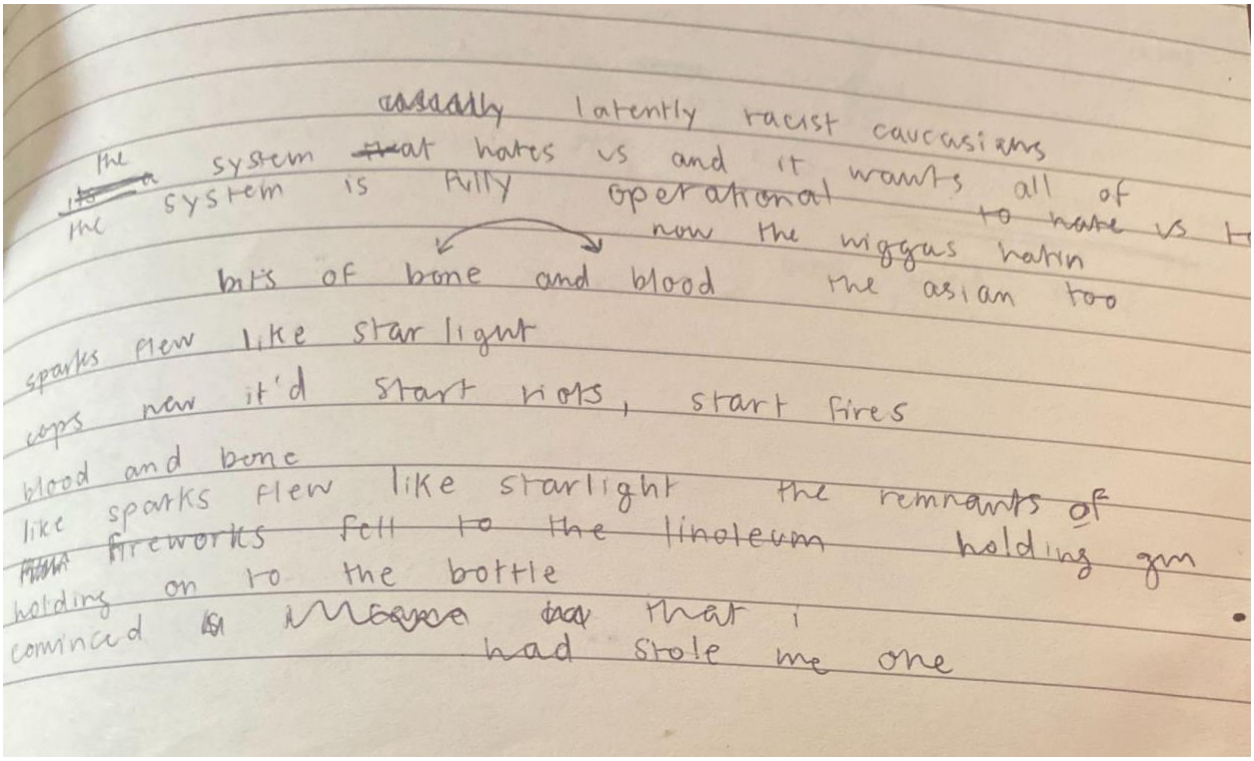

Fig. 1 Journal excerption from writing "Overture"

I also use internet tools like thesauri and rhyme dictionaries to find potential verbal matches with regards to meter and rhyme. As well, I use Google to pull up writing on the topics at hand, such as the Indian Farmers Strike of 2020, for "Til We're All Dead" or Brett Hankison, one of the police officers involved in the murder of Breonna Taylor, also for "Abolition." I scan for details or phrases that might be incorporated into the story, both in terms of useful content and with regards to the sound of phrases themselves. As my rhymes are often multisyllabic, I sometimes write out words that rhyme into two columns and study the columns to see how words in each column may be combined to create a coherent phrase with a multisyllabic rhyme. With "fruitcake" in the first verse of Oh Fxck, for example, I made a column for words that rhyme with "fruit" and a second for words rhyming with "cake." Under "fruit" I'd write out words like "cool, group, choose, cute." Under "cake," words like "gays, days, rain." Once I'd identified

coherent phrases, like “cool rain” and “cute gays” I would return to consideration of how these could be made into full, coherent lines in terms of meter and content. I also scanned for opportunities to use these in revising existing lines to create line-internal rhyme and enhance overall aesthetic appeal. A further example of this can also be found in Figure 1, where I mused on potential uses for the phrases “start fires,” “start riots,” and “starlight” though these did not make it into the final version, either.

Sung hooks (as in Overture, Growth I, Lovetap, Abolition, and The Tree) were also identified through melodic vocal experimentation. I often hum or sing aloud melodies until they summon phrases to mind which resonate with prominent emotions in my life at the time. This process would, in many instances, respond to the sonic narrative of beats. For example, I remember standing by my kitchen window with the sorrowful violins of “Overture” playing in the background and vocalizing abstractly until lines emerged that fit melodically and complemented the beat. From there, the hook-writing process followed the pattern described in the previous paragraph.

Methods: The Role of Collaboration

Collaboration was generative in many stages of this process. Sometimes song-writing was directly prompted: for example, a rap commissioned by the Brooklyn-based composers self-dubbed “Apartment Sessions” spurred research on the murder of Latasha Harlins, which I translated into verses on the opening track, “Overture,” and the title track, “Bellringer.” Sometimes songs were prompted in my work on my weekly podcast (Parker & Mack 2020). I and my co host, Savannah-based rapper and self-taught right-wing media expert Dope KNife (aka Kedrick Mack), open and closed each episode with freestyles about the topic of the week; in the second episode, recorded just weeks into the Uprising of 2020, we discussed COINTELPRO

surveillance of musicians and, braided together with my own experiences of heightened paranoia during this period, these rhymes then became the first verse on “The Tree.”

Collaborating with my executive producers, Joel Hatstat and Ben Bradberry, was also influential. For example, Ben first played me the beat for “Sometimes I Hate This Town” in the green room of a music venue before a show and suggested the hook, around which I built lyrics grounded in my personal experience. The sonic narratives of his beats also shaped the lyrical content; the words to “Sometimes” were informed as much by Ben’s suggested hook as the beat’s lumbering bass and guttural vocal samples, which to me told a story of grievance.

Once songs were written and first drafts recorded, other vocalists and instrumentalists were invited to the studio to add raps, singing, and other elements. As much of the album was written and recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic, stifling potential for in-studio collaboration outside of our immediate team, production also involved sending beats to musician friends who added instrumentation (as with Kishi Bashi’s addition of synthesizers on “The Tree,” Pip the Pansy’s flute flourishes and solo on “Oh Fxck”) or vocals (as with Jeff Rosenstock and Kevin Barnes on the hook for the title track and “Oh Fxck,” respectively).

As well, the project team (Ben Bradberry, Joel Hatstat, and myself) workshopped beats digitally using audio editing software. We manipulated sounds found in the Splice sound library or contributed by instrumentalists, strategically edited out parts of the beats to accentuate moments in the lyrics, and mixed these to achieve results we found aesthetically pleasing. Finally, the album as a whole was sent to Graham Walsh, a Canadian electronic musician and sound engineer, for final mixing.

Finding the Findings

While at times revelations in Bellringer arose upon completing an individual verse or song, the meanings of these songs were not always readily apparent upon the outset of my songwriting process. Often, the "message" of the song would unfurl during the songwriting process. A powerful example of this is "Growth II;" I surprised myself writing the couplet, "If having a clone entails feeling less overwhelmed/but being overwhelmed is the only realm in which you know yourself/then to divide yourself's a suicidal threat/and I wanted to die before but these days I'm not tryna die just yet…" and realizing, through writing it, that I had arrived in a new period of confidence and self-understanding at that point in my life.

With regards to the organization of verses on a single song, often I would write a verse that would then remain in my mind for months or years before complementary verses emerged that, when put together, told a coherent story. Again, the sonic narrative was a source of inspiration for thinking about verses and how, together, a series of verses and the beat could cohere into a message. So it was with "Growth II," written on two separate car trips about a year apart. As we came to the close of recording the album, I ordered the songs on the album to reflect a narrative arc that I sensed but did not fully, consciously understand. Something like: *okay, I start off depressed, but then I get happy. Then Side B starts off songs with songs about love. 13 Weeks is about giving life, so let's put The Tree next, because it's about death. And then let's put the songs about collective liberation last, as a hopeful ending.* The reflecting on this narrative arc has allowed a larger meaning to surface. As in this reflective chapter, recursivity was critical to refining my findings, which I discuss next.

Revelation I: Reactionary vs. Revolutionary Suicide

"I know, I will never see the seeds that I have planted grow" -Track One, "Overture"

Picture this: October 2015. My first ever boyfriend has left me and, having drank a fifth of whiskey, I call his phone relentlessly, shouting into his voicemail. The unhealed emotional pain of adolescence and early adulthood in the crossfire of sexism, heteronormativity and white supremacy have begun to compound to the point where I don't want to live. The romanticization of self-harm and suicide in mid-2000s internet and emo culture and its template for dealing with hardship have inked a persistent but generally mild suicidal ideation in me. It is the answer to my suppressed confusion about my sexual attraction and gender. It is the answer to social and romantic rejection for my non-normative performances of Blackness and femininity as a late-blooming, androgynous kid from the suburbs. I don't succeed in killing myself that evening and afterward decide to start making rap music under the name Lingua Franca if for nothing else than to air my secrets as a form of public self-flagellation.

My relationship with the Athens Hip Hop scene began in the very dive bars where I drank whiskey on the regular in my early- to mid-twenties. One night I notice some dudes walking down the street rapping and, emboldened off a few drinks, I imagine, I decided to walk directly towards them and interrupt their cypher with some freestyled bars of my own. Their response, a mixture of bewilderment and glee, to me captures a quintessential magic of all cyphers: a socio-verbal feat lands that is so delightfully unthinkable that the surrounding participants can't help but whoop and croon and clutch at each other to stay upright. I can't remember clearly what happened next, but when it was done, there was no introduction or exchange of names. We dapped up, praised one another and walked away. A few months later I met them again outside of a popular dive bar a block away from the first encounter. We drank, and I got to know them:

one a Black, middle class son of military parents, aged thirty; one a White night manager at a local supermarket and rapper of ten years; another a Latino transplant from a rural Georgia county to the northeast who had lost his mom at a young age. This racio-economic mixture also captures a snapshot of life in the Athens hip hop scene: working and lower-middle class, racially diverse, but homogeneously male.

I'd developed the audacity to rap like that from attending weekly freestyle cypher nights at a dusty pool hall in downtown Athens throughout that summer and fall. First I tentatively offered up slam poems I'd written in college to the beat of the house band's funk jams. With time, I tried freestyling to the beats, as the show's hosts, two Black working class Athens natives in their mid-twenties, did. The events drew a (small) number of performers, mostly Black, White and/or in their mid-twenties, and served as a space for people to gather and network, building bonds across disparate factions of the Hip Hop scene that lacked a central, respected home. Though internationally celebrated for marquee names in rock music and a continued, robust music culture, Athens had no "rap scene", not since the early 2000s generation of Athens Hip Hop pioneers had settled into family lives and careers and one of the few downtown bars willing to host Hip Hop shows shut its doors.

Outside of freestyle nights, we'd have impromptu cyphers and, later, full on shows at venues on Hot Corner, formerly the bedrock of the Black business community. By this time, Hot Corner had largely gentrified into dive bars for mostly White service industry employees with a penchant for worrisome drinking and students at the University who did not fit into the Greek life mold. The city is roughly 60% white and 40% Black and Latino, with almost a third of its population living in working poverty. You wouldn't guess as much from downtown Athens generally, though. There you'll notice mostly downwardly mobile White twenty-somethings

serving mostly White bar, restaurant, and coffee shop patrons; Black and Latino cooks and dishwashers toil out of sight in hot and humid kitchens and return home to the city's outskirts at clock-out. Under these conditions -- continued racial segregation, worsening economic prospects for working and middle class young folks alike, and a culture of heavy drinking driven by these-- our loose federation of young, racially heterogeneous but mostly male emcees built community. Though Hip Hop's acceptance in the broader music scene has increased dramatically in the years since, this social dynamic more or less remained the same.

I put out an album in 2018, and it was received with acclaim. I toured the east coast. I won some small accolades. I started making pretty good money selling records and playing shows. But, as I put it on Bellringer's third track, "Growth I," "She could get entered in contests and win awards, still wanna stick a sword in her innards the minute she got stressed." I sought psychiatric treatment in the fall of 2018, at one point the following year becoming hospitalized. But as I wrote shortly after getting out of the hospital, on what would become "Sometimes I Hate This Town": "wellbutrin and gabapentin, lexapro, it hasn't fixed it, doesn't matter if my therapist says he's a grad from Princeton."

What Huey Newton (1973) called reactionary suicide-- a death brought about by despair at one's material conditions-- is a recurrent theme on Bellringer. My obsession with mortality was dramatically widened in scope around the time that I became a county commissioner in 2018. In April, my aunt disappeared, and shortly thereafter was found murdered by my cousin, her grandson. Despite or perhaps because of my grief, I dug into my electoral organizing. I narrowly won the election and was sworn in as county commissioner on The Autobiography of Malcolm X in May. This act unleashed a hailstorm of lynching, arson, vandalism, and rape threats via letters, email, voicemail, and social media from white supremacists around the

country and throughout my own community.

In early summer of 2018, I was introduced to the story of Latasha Harlins by friends in Apartment Sessions, who commissioned a rap about her death and the LA Uprisings of 1992 for their piece “In The Neighborhood” (Krasner, Tyor and McGinnis, 2018). The first verse is written from Latasha’s perspective as a Black 16-year-old, thirsty on a hot day, moments before she is murdered in an altercation with Soon Ja Du, a Korean grocery store clerk (Kashanie 2022). Latasha’s death and her killer’s lax sentencing were catalysts for the 1992 riots, though her death was overshadowed by the police assault of Rodney King just weeks before, and her name, like that of many Black women, is often erased from discussions of that uprising (Smith 2021). These verses later became the second verse of the opening track, Overture and the first verse of the title track, Bellringer.

Hypervigilance about violent backlash has remained my reality throughout my four years as a public servant and grew exponentially during the Uprising of 2020. My platform as an artist and elected official enabled me to mobilize thousands in protest with only few days notice shortly after the Uprising gained steam (Smith 2020; Dowd 2020; Wilkins 2020). Having applied prison abolitionist logic to understand my aunt’s killing, its animating forces, and the criminal justice system’s failure in the years since her death, I felt ready to leap into political education on the topic as the idea of defunding and abolishing the police mainstreamed. I used social media, public speech, and Hip Hop rhymes to present analyses of the current conditions through the lens of prison abolition. I also drew on my knowledge as a government insider and skills developed through electoral organizing to direct local energies toward direct action, postcard writing, texting, email and call campaigns, and public comment at government meetings. Given my heightened visibility as a movement leader, I was once again threatened with vandalism, arson,

and lynching (Ford 2021). I also became extremely paranoid about being arrested or assassinated during acts of mass civil disobedience as well as surveillance and movement infiltration by federal agencies and the local police. These fears "that I'm always being watched by the feds, by the white supremacists, and the cops" were born as music in a short rap for the podcast and later became "The Tree."

As I made sense of these experiences in writing Bellringer I came to new understandings about the role of death in movement-making. I realized that I had begun to funnel my fixation with mortality into service of the movement, as I describe in the second verse of "Growth II." Penned shortly before the pandemic began, it declares that, if I'm gonna die, it is better to be gunned down by "white folks with they eyeholes set, gripping they rifles and they white suprem" for speaking truth to power, in contrast to "Growth I," written in 2018 and in which I describe "[being] tempted by the trigger click, ultimately hung herself." I find strength in remembering the power of coalition ("What these spiteful pests be forgettin' is that it's my whole set" and "my squad will go harder") and solace in recognition that the fight never dies, even if people do. On "The Tree" I follow up a rapped imagining of being kidnapped and assaulted with a hopeful coda, insisting that "it's fine 'cause I know that my time on this earth has been worth getting dragged through the dirt." In essence, I embraced the possibility of what Newton (1973) calls revolutionary suicide: a death brought about by forcefully challenging the material conditions that might otherwise drive one to reactionary suicide. This commitment -- and outcome-- is sadly precedented in liberation movement history, from the assassinations of revolutionary African leaders like Patrice Lumumba and Thomas Sankara as well as more well-known American figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Fred Hampton.

As I played with the melody of Overture's hook by my kitchen window in 2019, lilting

my voice until the melody and then the words came to me ("I know that I will never see the seeds that I have planted grow, but I have seen the guts of the machine that fucks us and it will be dismantled slow…") I did not realize I was beginning to grapple with new understandings of mortality as a catalytic force in life and in movement-making. The hook opens the album, but it also serves as distillation of one of the album's main lessons: though some of us will not live to see our people set free, the folks we lose plant the seeds of struggle that will bloom as liberation long after we are gone. My ideas won't die even if I'm martyred. People may forget Latasha, but they will always remember the riots. In honor of Breonna 'cause they shot her in sleep, we are organizing, agitating, starting to believe.

In reflecting on the album after its completion, I had viewed this shift as a journey from point A to point B. Upon deeper reflection on the album's narrative here, I see that this is not the case. Even after I appear to make peace with my mortality on "Growth II," "13 Weeks" discloses a fear of dying in childbirth. Track eleven describes grief and rage in the aftermath of a police murder, its hook describing suited crooks that won't stop "Til We're All Dead." The closing track, "Abolition," describes the circumstances of the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Rayshard Brooks, and Andres Guardado. Indeed, eight of the song's thirteen tracks make references to death. I see now that these reactionary and revolutionary drives exist in tension within me, channeled at various points into various directions.

As I discuss further in the next section, thoughts and feelings like these are often medicalized as symptoms to be treated and not as energies to be directed into undoing their animating conditions. Even if these energies are "productively" channeled, forcefully challenging their conditions is often met with criminalization or worse. I think of the pain that pooled in collective action in the streets of Athens in late May of 2020 and the Black queer youth

that knelt in the city square as tear gas billowed around them (Aued 2020). Without such pain, such action, and such risk taken on by countless thousands, it is likely that the man that murdered George Floyd would be walking free today, as are the majority of men in uniform that have taken Black lives. All this raises the questions: if educators have long recognized that students need to see themselves reflected in their education (Ladson-Billings 1995; Paris and Alim 2014), what does a pedagogy of reflecting and making space for this look like? How do we enact pedagogy that supports folks in conducting these feelings toward liberatory action and reckons with the associated risk of acting? That not only validates emotion but recognizes criminalized behaviors arising from these emotions as refutation of an oppressive social order?

Revelation II: The Reincarnation of Harm

"For the niggas pickin' cotton fields and often still we sittin' on trial, slave catchers given badges, prisons built all the time…" -Track thirteen, "Abolition"

Picture this: October 2015. My first ever boyfriend has left me and, having drank a fifth of whiskey, I call his phone relentlessly, shouting into his voicemail. Throughout our relationship I've directed unhealed emotional pain outward in condescension, mistruths, and cruelty. It makes perfect sense he'd leave. Nonetheless, I feel like I need him in order to believe I can be loved. An internalized dogma of self-worth as defined by white male approval coerces me to read our break up as my failure to matter. Not long after, this fresh pain will drive me to repeat this pattern of harm with a new partner, and then another, and another. Harm self-perpetuates.

Indeed, the struggles I discuss in the previous section--grief over my aunt's death, paranoia as a prominent advocate for decarceration-- can be situated historically as part of a cycle of political and interpersonal violence that stretches back to Emancipation. Stay with me here. When chattel slaves got free, newly created laws criminalizing free Black people enabled

the state to incarcerate Black people en masse. Their physical and social immobilization and forced labor maintained the structure of plantation capitalism in which the planter class reaps the fruits of a captive and materially precarious Black workforce (Davis 2003, Gilmore 2007). A century and a half later, in the years surrounding Latasha's death, white panic over the advancement of Black freedom drove neoliberal, hypercarceral policies that reinforced the captivity and precarity of Black communities. Drawing from gangsta rap lyrics as partial justification (Harrington 1994), the draconian 1994 crime bill created harsh new penalties that targeted the Black and poor by the millions and poured billions into policing the criminalized (Alexander 2012). Expansions in carceral control accompanied shrinkages of the state social safety net; the same year as the crime bill, Atlanta began to systematically destroy and privatize its public housing projects to "clean up the city" in preparation for the 1996 Olympic Games (Pulver 2016). Having grown up displaced and hyperpoliced, you'll hear today's Atlanta rappers, like Gucci Mane (Davis 2006) and Rich Homie Quan (Lamar 2013) refer to their lived geographies by their police zone. As well, you hear Philadelphia rapper Meek Mill (Williams 2018) subtly indexing incarceration and a commodification of Black labor not unlike chattel slavery, rapping: "How many times you send me to jail…went from selling out arenas, now shit, I'm on sale." I too name this generations-long cycle of deprivation and criminalization on "Abolition" when I describe "the niggas pickin' cotton fields and often still we sittin on trial, slave catchers given badges, prisons built all the time."

The political framework of prison abolition (Davis 2003) helped me understand the varied scales of and relationship between deprivation, exploitation, and carcerality: in my life, in my community, across history and across geographies. Legislative violence can give rise to mass political violence, as in the LA Riots; interpersonal violence, as in my family or with my ex; or

intrapersonal violence, as in my struggle with self-harming thoughts and behaviors. It allowed me to see that the captivity and material precarity that has shaped the history of American Blackness had shaped my cousin's life, too. The pressure of raising him alone on paltry wages and the inaccessibility of treatment for her undiagnosed bipolar disorder spurred my cousin's mother to drug addiction which then led to repeated incarceration. My cousin, too, was unable to access care for a mental illness we'd all suspected in his childhood eagerness to kill animals and his social disinclination. Perhaps drawn in by that proclivity for violence as much as the lure of a stable salary, health insurance, and paid-for college, he joined the military at the age of 18. He later fled, becoming a fugitive in the homes of my aunts, our other cousins, and my grandmother. Under these additional pressures, he snapped completely, allegedly killing his mother's drug dealer shortly before shooting my aunt and disposing of her body. Only after the harm was done did our "public safety" apparatus intervene to dispose of him (the police found him and took him to jail, where he awaits the beginning of his trial in the month of this writing). As it had for our forebears, deprivation had laid a trap for my cousin, his mother, my aunt, and my whole family.

This cycle, as manifest at the community scale, is first addressed on the opening track of the album, Overture. In giving context to Latasha's death, the lyrics of the second verse outline the sociomaterial conditions that fomented the rage that boiled over as mass unrest in the spring of 1992: de facto segregation of residential neighborhoods, grimy schools, crooked cops, the proliferation of street drugs, the indifference and complicity of white juries. The second verse of the title track, "Bellringer," then examines the cycle's impact on interpersonal behavior. Having learned that Latasha's mother had been shot dead by her father's girlfriend in the years preceding Latasha's own murder and imagining her grief, in the second verse I muse on the ways that pain like Latasha's, my cousin's, and mine might manifest behaviorally: hot temperedness ("losing

cool over nothing"), reckless abandon ("downing vodka mixed with jugo de naranja like it's puppy chow"), and antagonism ("please call the police, I dare 'em send a squad of cars in").

Thinking with theory, these narratives suggest something new to me about Hip Hop's complex personhood (Love 2016c). Contemporary Hip Hop is shaped by corporate commodification and colonization as much as it is by its lineage of resistance. Hip Hop cultural producers may be read as resisting and succumbing to white neoliberalism and capitalism in our boastfulness ("I'm losing count of the commas" i.e. "I can't keep track of how much money I have") and celebratory excess (smoking "thunderclouds of ganja" and "downing vodka… like it's puppy chow"). Processing the history of the LA riots, and indeed larger historical cycles of violence, writing the track added a new thread to this knot: that Hip Hop's tendency toward the glorification of such substance abuse and wanton antagonism may also be read as a trauma response to the violence of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and the prison industrial complex. This latter reading felt true when writing track ten, "The Tree," in which descriptions of paranoia and assault bookend the hook: "I drink and I smoke and I chill just to cope with the fear that I will get the rope."

"Abolition," written during June, July and August of the Uprising of 2020, traces the carceral lineage and abolitionist future of Black Americans and honors those we have lost. I wrote its harmonic background and the middle, sung verse during a July getaway to my mother's apartment in another state. After countless hours of direct action, grassroots education, lobbying, national press, and threats of arrest, injury, and assassination, my campaign to fund the creation of a ten-year plan for the city of Athens to divest from policing had been formally rejected in a 7-2 vote. Jerry Nesmith, a fellow commissioner who had supported the plan despite his moderate leanings, had died after falling down the stairs in his home three weeks before the vote. His

contender for reelection, my friend and fellow abolitionist Jesse Houle, won the election by default. As I took time away to process the terror, the failure, the grief, I also made space for hope. I vocalized softly at my mother's kitchen table until a quote by Angela Davis came to me: "Radical simply means 'grasping things by the root.'" I rephrased it to rhyme, sang it until the harmony arrived, and then wrote the verse and developed its harmony. I tasted healing by sonically envisioning a world reorganized around care; the kind of world where my cousin had had access to mental healthcare, a supportive job, healthy friendships, and education. Where, with our allies on the ballot (like Jesse), in the alleys, with the power of the people, we had broken the cycle of harm that stretched back to Emancipation. I tasted healing, but also I rooted deeper into knowing that only with all of our efforts would all of us heal; that true healing must be collective. In the next section, I think more about breaking this cycle, first individually by embracing ratchet feminism, then communally in forms of collective action, and finally, in Hip Hop as school-abolitionist praxis.

Revelation III: Healing is Collective

"Always remember the millions are mightier." -Track eleven, "Til We're All Dead"

Picture this: October 1991. In their music video for "Expression," Salt n Pepa rap to the camera in oversized Zoot suits; in the next frame, they're popping their hips in low-cut crop tops; in the next, they're rapping to smiling children sitting in their laps; in the next, one appears unhoused, kneeling on the sidewalk. Foremothers of Hip Hop feminism as a theoretical frame and pedagogical stance, Salt n Pepa use their rhymes, fashion, dance and kinetic skills to complexify the possibilities of Black femmehood in defiance of dominant and controlling media images (Rose 1994). Uplifting the fluidities and contradictions of Hip Hop spaces and identities, particularly the voices of femmes deemed hood or THOTs, contemporary Hip Hop feminists

have used the term ratchet to interrogate and describe the refusal of heteropatriarchal respectability politics and the embrace of sexual freedom found in the performativity and creativity of women and femme creators within Hip Hop spaces (Lindsey 2015; Brown & Young 2015), As Louisiana rapper Lil Boosie proclaimed on his 2014 single "Do Da Ratchet," everybody got a lil ratchet in them. He saw, as Hip Hop feminists do, that bein' ratchet (lascivious, wanton, free) can be at once reactive and agentive and exist alongside myriad identities (Cooper 2012, Boylorn 2015).

Rereading a song like Bellringer's track seven, "Necessity" through the lens of Hip Hop feminism helps me understand the experiences described in the song in a new way. Written in 2019, Necessity recounts my first years in Athens, in which I clung to bad relationships that gave me a sense of security and self-worth. When I first moved to Athens, I'd never been in a relationship and, as had become my habit, I immediately latched onto this young man emotionally, desperate to prove I fit into the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal order. We started dating, and despite realizing early on that it was not a good fit, I stayed with him for many months, growing cruel towards him near the end when our differences became stark but my self-worth and material stability still hinged upon his affirmation and support. When he left first, I left him the voicemails.

In contrast to those desperate pleas, Necessity's hook rebukes him and vengefully twists the knife with confessions of infidelity and material exploitation ("so if you could spot me two-hundred dollars and buy me food then maybe we can try to make it work"). The first verse also describes the conditions I distracted myself from with his company: a house full of fleas from a neglected tabby cat; kitchen cabinets left bare as depression decreased my appetite and willpower to grocery shop; bills accruing unpaid. Compounded by my lover's recent departure

and my putative failure to properly assimilate into heteropatriarcal society, bitterness bubbles up in hateful words. In the second verse, I describe dressing myself up as a mannequin and bearing the November cold of a dive bar patio in the hopes of finding a replacement that would "make the pain stop."

Though I once thought of Hip Hop as a form of self-flagellation, reflecting on my early Athens years through a Black ratchet lens and processing them in penning and performing Necessity, I found that Hip Hop has been a space to reclaim dignity from dehumanizing logics and fighting back against heteropatriarchy by naming unspoken interpersonal and material realities that we're taught to hide to preserve the social order. Openly admitting this history, setting it to a playful beat, and delivering its confrontational hook in a lilt reframed these experiences as humorous, innocent, and whimsical and allowed me to exhale the weight of experiencing ratchetry as sin.

Many scholars have sought to shed new light on how artists like Cardi B, Trina, Meg Thee Stallion and others who refuse respectability politics are engaging in resistance and exhibiting agency. Diana Khong (2020) highlights Cardi B's and City Girls' "aesthetics of scamming" as refashioning Black women's access to power and privilege by claiming money and other material objects for themselves and their communities. While in the music, such Hip Hop feminist icons push back on their cultural stigma and material deprivation while, in other contexts, express remorse for behaviors labeled criminal. In 2019, Cardi B was met with a deluge of backlash to a video in which she admitted to drugging and robbing men. The video was recorded in response to an individual who had said she didn't deserve success because she hadn't put in any work. While, in line with Khong's analysis, Cardi B used admission of "scamming" to assert her access to power, privilege, and material wealth, she responded to widespread criticism

with an apology. “Whether or not they were poor choices at the time, I did what I had to do to survive," she wrote in a since-deleted Instagram post.

“I'm a part of a hip-hop culture where you can talk about where you come from, talk about the wrong things you had to do to get where you are,” Cardi B added in the original video. In doing so, she articulates a gendered pathway to behaviors deemed criminal. Gross (2015) refers to the “gendered pathways to crime” as the physical, mental, and sexual abuse, poverty and other factors come together so that young girls and women end up as “criminals.” As well, she traces the history of an exclusionary politics of protection whereby Black women were not entitled to the lawful avenues of address. When put into conversation with Khong (2020) and insights developed here, we begin to see cycles of harm as they manifest within Hip Hop feminist performativity.

Not all crime is harm and not all harm is crime. Alec Karakatsanis (2019) incisively names myriad kinds of “crime” -- environmental pollution, wage theft, tax evasion-- perpetrated by the rich that are never met with arrests and prosecution. Looking at gendered crime specifically, Leigh Goodmark (2018) explains that certain types of domestic abuse, such as financial or verbal abuse, are rarely met with criminal action. In some places, they are not crimes at all; for example, isolation and control tactics such as limiting contact with friends and family members or withholding shared assets from one’s domestic partner are completely legal (Goodmark 2020, p. 221).

Songwriting and filtering its results through Hip Hop abolition feminist lens creates space for novel understandings of the gendered pathways to harm, not just crime. Its complexity opens space for discussion of the organized abandonment of Latasha’s neighborhood. This community’s material deprivation was harmful but not criminal. Similarly, the criminal legal

system meant to bring justice to this community instead let Latasha's killer off easy; though her killing was a crime, it did not merit punishment. The songwriting process and its results open space for discussion of interpersonal harm, like the kind flaunted on "Necessity," that fall below the standard of criminality but are nonetheless reprehensible. And it opens space for discussions of self-harm, like the imaginings of reactionary suicide on "Growth I" or substance abuse on the title track "Bellringer." And to name these harms can act as a powerful precursor for the formulation of healing and liberation work at all three levels.

In penning and rapping songs like "Necessity," it feels like maybe I'm breaking the cycle and healing. That I'm free. But, as is the case often with individualist pursuits of freedom, my liberty comes at the expense of another-- in this case a hapless ex. Writing the album's final songs and reflecting upon its early individualist themes reveals that liberation of self is a starting point-- but *not* a substitute-- for collective healing and liberation.

The theme of individualism's failure is recurrent early on in the album. For example, "Sometimes" decries the medicalization of personal thought patterns and behaviors that arise from collective problems and require community attention. I wrote its first verse after my 2019 stay in the loony bin, where I'd been prescribed four or five different medications to take daily. While stuck there, I resolved to pretend to be well enough that they would release me to the care of my girlfriend and family, who were only allowed to visit for an hour a week. The first verse on "Sometimes" unrolls a laundry list of pharmaceutical trial-and-errors and spouts anger with their failure and the sterile demeanor of a highly educated psychiatrist. Looking back I see that, even if one is fortunate enough to be able to access care in our byzantine, extortionate American insurance system, healing isn't instant-- nor is it individual. Naming-off friends who would be devastated if I pulled the fictional trigger, the final verse concludes that we live for and need

others and that community can sustain us where individualist solutions fail.

I also touch on the ways that celebrity, sold to us as the apex of individual accomplishment and the panacea to all personal ills, actually deepens social alienation. My second verse on Sometimes decries the social atomization of viral internet success and the toxicity of online culture, which I encountered acutely after my 2018 swearing-in. My then-manager encouraged me to check Twitter, which was flooded with tens of thousands of responses to photographs of the ceremony. I checked them, and once I began, I could not stop. The depravity of the harassment I encountered in the online deluge was worth the tandem rush of the adoration. It was exhilarating and deeply sickening at once.

I remember sitting on a bar patio in the Normaltown neighborhood of Athens a few days after the ceremony. My mom was there with me. I don't remember a word of our conversation except her calling me back to the patio, attempting to snap me out of an apparent reverie. What I do remember clearly is an all-consuming compulsion to check social media. It was not unlike the familiar ache for speed or the itch for a cigarette. My mind swam and swam against the pull but still I could barely pay attention to our conversation. I now see that my fifteen minutes of famed "connection" with millions came at the cost of connection with one of my most trusted loved ones. On "Sometimes" I warn of the sudden sense of nakedness one feels under the internet's spotlight, rapping, "the trek is treacherous, to trend is to undress yourself." As well I vent my hostility toward anonymous, far-flung "neckbeards" who swarm in virality's undercurrents and are gone the next day, "with all the permanence of an etch a sketch." Contrary to the notion that the internet brings us together, often touted by the very corporations that engineer addiction to their platforms, internet celebrity poisoned my tributary to the real social world and fostered hundreds of alienating and dehumanizing encounters in a fabricated, digital one.

I also lament the failure of acclaim to bring about true healing on Growth I, penned shortly after my first album's release. I reference the deprecating self-talk that remained mental habit even as I found artistic success; that if you "give her half a blink… she could massacre a total masterpiece, convince the whole academy that it's actually a catastrophe.. and she did this to herself, over and over, even as the townies came to know her as the Athens rapping queen." Together these songs point me toward an understanding that personal fortune is not the easy fix that it seems.

I muse on the power of intentional connection on track five, Oh Fxck and track six, Lovetap, both written about a queer romance buoyed me through my hospitalization and, later that spring, fell apart. On Oh Fxck, the opening verse celebrates political and lyrical power, not to mention flirting prowess. Joyful chants then describe (me and/or my former girlfriend as) a boss bitch ballin' the fuck out, bewitching lovers, and entrancing everyone they meet, even as they secretly self-doubt. The hook on Oh Fxck, "You love me like I'm good, you love me like you're sure, you love me like I should but I'm not ready to," invites the kind of relationship we deserve as means of teaching ourselves self-love. As well, the coda is a gentle reminiscence on the time that my then-girlfriend "called me in the hospital to tell me that she love me more than popsicles," saving me more than the hospital's medication and therapy did. Some forms of connection shatter us; others make us whole. Here, forceful (if playful) rejection of heteropatriarchy indexes the kind of intentional connection that can ground transformational healing.

"Lovetap" slows me to meditate at the crossroads of harm and care in our relationships with others. "Lovetap" is a quiet lullaby to a relationship that's outlived its functioning. In it, listeners encounter a pendulation between a desire to harm ("this is my blade tip") and a desire to

repair (“this is my olive branch”). That tension itself gives rise to the song’s name, a reference to striking something-- gently. Truthfully, Lovetap does not describe the dissolution of my 2019 relationship as it was-- as on Necessity, our real-life romance was made toxic by material instability and its breakup was rife with cruelty. But as Kelley (2002) insists in Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, “surrealism recognizes that any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships” (p. 136). In this spirit, the song muses on how things could have been. I describe growing thin with exasperation but imagine finding more patience than I realized that I had. Though in reality I reactively declared our relationship unsalvageable, here I acknowledge that hope may spring from even the grisliest situation (“the beasts in the deep”). I imagine that, instead of dredging up past harms (“I don’t need to read receipts”) I insist on parting with care (“don’t think for a second I won’t sing you to sleep”). In reflection, the (fore)telling of these caring and reparative possibilities marks an emerging appreciation for healing and being healed through intentional social connection.

While many Side A tracks map the personal impacts of individualist social alienation, and the middle ones begin to sense intentional connection’s place in healing, the album’s last three songs recommend collective political action as a means of healing societally. On Side B, I first address the impacts of trauma as channeled in a liberatory direction on “Til We’re All Dead.” The first verse impressionistically renders the way trauma is felt in sensation and action: one’s head spinning until you throw up (“yaking like Shakira on the stereo”), the smell of kerosene-soaked air, as well as a bereaved mother “sobbing like the bottom octave of a baritone.” The second verse then imagines a community that channels collective rage into organizing. The imagined collective creates a cop watch program (“we keep ‘em monitored, pass

the binoculars and drop the periscope") not unlike that of the Black Panthers. They elect a Leslie Knope-like figure to act as Robin Hood and agitate for the redistribution of wealth. The collective, at the verse's end, takes direct action as well, "marching it to Congress, tak[ing] it all across America." The second verse on Til We're All Dead connects the American struggle for Black liberation to other freedom movements around the world in a call for international solidarity. I shout out mass movements against police brutality in Nigeria; for political independence in Hong Kong; and against the military dictatorship in Burma, tipping my hat as well to Cuba's Ernesto Guevara; leader of the Haitian slave revolts, Toussaint L'Ouveture, and to the former president of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara. Unconsciously, I answer a question raised at the outset of the album in describing Latasha's fatal conflict with Soon Ja Du: if interracial hatred is white supremacy functioning exactly as designed, then undoing that well-oiled machine will require solidarity with our neighbors both local and global.

The theme of solidarity manifests, too, on "Wurk", written as businesses prematurely reopened early in the pandemic, endangering the health and wellbeing of those forced back to work. "Wurk" uplifts the potential for collective bargaining to free the workers who "keep our kitchen fridges stocked and our financial markets solvent" and calls on workers deemed disposable to collectively demand the return of the full value of their labor.

Though these calls are explicit, I did not realize that choices I made in other musical elements made subtler attempts at nudging listeners toward solidarity: the opening, the hook, the chants, the very nature of the song as Hip Hop. The song opens with a shout out to my union, drawing a parallel between union affiliation and affiliation with a gang in a nod to folks familiar with the street and young Hip Hop heads. The hook calls to an older generation of white and rural union sympathizers with an adaptation of a folk song popularized by striking miners in

Harlan County, Kentucky in the 1940s and since covered by rock musicians like Pete Seeger. Often chanted at protests, the central refrain, “el pueblo unido jamás será vencido,” acknowledges our working class Latine brothers and sisters. Though I wrote the hook in response to the song’s key, unaware of its historical significance, and the chant in response its clattering percussion, having heard it at rallies, looking back they show me that groups framed as oppositional-- Black, white, and Latine; old and young, urban and rural-- share a common oppression and common goal of economic freedom.

In the next section, I speak some of how we might operationalize these and other insights to dream up a new practice of Hip Hop education that makes space for ratchetry, is capable of grappling with the sources and impacts of harm at varying scales, and, I hope, ultimately aids us in building a movement for collective liberation.

Future Visions

Picture this: April 2022. Writing Bellringer has enabled me to recognize the complexities and contradictions of my experience, connect these experiences to political and social phenomena, reclaim these experiences from dehumanizing logics, and envision a path forward for collective healing. Still questions remain: how can an abolitionist framing of Hip Hop as pedagogy help we as educators grapple with contradiction, harm and ratchetry present in *Bellringer* and in the lives of countless Black, queer, femme, and/or Southern youth more broadly? A pedagogy that also responds to the impacts of schooling that I felt and educates toward the collective action we need to get free?

I look to fugitive pedagogy (Givens 2021) for one answer. Fugitive pedagogy describes the embodied and intellectual acts of covert educational disobedience employed by Black educators in the ante- and postbellum South in resistance to physical and curricular violence

(Givens, p. 6). Pre-Emancipation, slaves snuck away after nightfall to study covertly, going as far as to clamber into holes in the ground where they would not be found engaging in the criminal act of educating themselves (p. 28). Post-Reconstruction, the public education of Black people was violently suppressed and starved of adequate state funding. Black schoolteachers took covert action to resist white supremacist curricular control and supply their students with an education that uplifted stories of Black genius and righteous struggle. They covertly disposed of literature with racist depictions of Black people and deviated from the assigned curricula to read from Black texts under their desks while evading the gaze of authoritarian administrators, as examples (Givens 2021). While these served as anchoring traditions for the historical throughline of fugitive pedagogy, handed down from African captives to their great-great-grandchildren, it is the act of creating our own pedagogical spaces that I think is most helpful.

As well, fugitive pedagogy is a narrative throughline in the history of Black freedom struggle. The schoolteachers that threw out the racist textbooks were the children and grandchildren of the slaves who learned by night. Students then inherited these practices over generations and were molded civically by the educational content. In the mid-20th century, such students became leaders of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Givens 2021). Many students taught by early fugitives within the public school system went on to found organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who then enacted their own forms of fugitive education. In 1964, SNCC leaders, fed up with the irrelevant curricula and under-resourcing of their children's schools, turned church basements, homes, and backyards across Mississippi into temporary, alternative "Freedom" schools that encouraged "exposing feelings, bringing them into the open where they may be dealt with productively" (Cobb et. al. 1964, p. 1178) and taught youth the skills of voter registration, leaflet and flyer creation, public speaking,

organizing political rallies, and canvassing for Black candidates for office. Having fled the confines of the school regime, they worked to free youth from the repression that defined their schooling and tooled them to carry that work forward in their communities in the name of liberation.

While some chose to fight the system from within, others chose to escape its domination and create their own educational spaces. I take from this history that, in pursuit of a pedagogy capable of grappling with taboo emotion, their liberatory redirection, and its risks, our movements must also be willing to break from schooling as we know it, ideologically and physically.

Applying the analytical framework of prison abolition to the realities of state schooling, and others have challenged educators to face the role of American public schooling in the broader projects of white supremacy (Meiners & Winn 2010; Meiners 2011; Love 2019; Stovall 2018). Much as prisons do, the school regime maintains its order, and indeed the broader white supremacist social order, through constriction of bodily autonomy, the proliferation of surveillance agents (police) and technologies, and response to noncompliance with physical isolation and social exclusion (Rodriguez 2008). Much as policies of prison supremacy deprived my cousin and waited for harm to justify his disposal, the material deprivation of students, both in their underfunded schools and their surrounding communities, drives acts of student resistance-- so-called “behavioral issues”-- that are then met with punitive response. Black children are disproportionately placed in special education, tracked into lower-level courses and ability groups, and expelled, suspended, and forced out of schools (Linton 2015; Love 2016b), reproducing socioeconomic inequities within the school and without.

In many ways, the fugitive pedagogy of the early and mid-nineteenth century enacts principles and tactics of school abolition, answering the call for educators to disambiguate schooling -- which reproduces inequality-- and education-- which breaks harm's cycle (Stovall 2018). Understanding this difference enables educators to ask ourselves, how can I ensure that I am humanizing students, disrupting domination, and tooling them to determine their own future-- in essence, truly educating and not just schooling?

The terrains of struggle-- within the system and without-- are the same as they ever were. Within the school regime, abolitionist educators often agitate for policies that minimize the violence of schooling and support student thriving: they may refuse to comply with zero tolerance disciplinary policies, fight for the incorporation of restorative justice practices, confront fellow educators who display anti-Black behaviors and attitudes, and oppose standardized testing (Love 2019). As well, they may attempt to enact critical pedagogies (Freire 1970; Ladson Billings 1995; Paris & Alim 2014) meant to support students in imagining and co-creating a new world rather than simply assimilate into our existing one. Though at times hampered and put at risk by authoritarian school policies, as I'll later detail, these are nonetheless urgent and necessary responses to the immediate needs of students.

Drawing from critical pedagogies, practitioners of Hip Hop-based education ("HHBE"; Hill 2009) have long attempted to bring elements of Hip Hop culture into the school regime Early on, Hip Hop based educators most often used Hip Hop as a bridge to canonical understandings of literature and English language arts content (Bruce and Davis 2000; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade 2002; Cooks 2004). Educators have also used Hip Hop texts to teach history and social studies (Stovall 2006; Dobrick 2018) and stimulate interest in science and technology (Emdin 2010, 2011, 2013b; Cummings et. al. 2019; Adjapong 2021) as well as mathematics

(Lutes 2021; Teel 2021). Studies have tended to focus on secondary education (Stovall 2006; Mahiri 2008; Hill 2009; Love 2012; Turner 2012; Kelly 2020a); reports back on Hip Hop's use in primary education (Love 2015; Broughton 2016, 2017; Lutes 2021) have been less common, however. Recent years have seen an increase in scholarship focused on higher education (Akom 2009; Petchauer 2010; Green 2017; Oliver 2017; Shelby-Caffey, Byfield & Solbrig 2018). In addition to rap texts, teacher-scholars have brought beat production, music videos, CD cover design, dance, film, freestyle and battle rap, and zinemaking into their work (Christen 2003, Mahiri 2006, Norton 2008, Akom 2009; Turner 2012, Emdin 2013b; Love 2014).

This body of work offers substantial evidence that Hip Hop based education can enhance student outcomes not only in the classroom but in their overall sense of self and sense of self-efficacy in tackling issues in the community. For example, students have demonstrated engagement with issues of social justice that were relevant in their lives and the use of multiple literacies, both spoken, written, and multimodal, in analyzing and expressing ideas around social change (Turner 2012). Kelly's (2020) study of diverse suburban youth bolsters scholarship that sheds light on how Hip Hop pedagogy can also support students' understandings of themselves. Students in Evans' (2021) program expressed newfound confidence in their ability to excel in schoolwork because they felt their interests were taken seriously by adults with whom they interacted. Additionally, scholars have reported that such interventions bolster student engagement with teachers and with academic content, improve student-teacher relationships and school climate, promote critical literacy (Hill 2009; Love 2016c).

However, Love (2016c) notes that HHBE does not always necessarily center knowledge of self and critical analyses. Indeed, early conceptions of HHBE (as using rap lyrics as bridge to canonical content) are still pervasive in popular understandings of HHBE. Additionally, having

been raised within a regime of constricted bodily agency, students may struggle to see the physical spaces of classrooms as a place that can be made transformative (Shor 1996; Kelly & Sawyer 2019). Accustomed to conceding power to their teachers, Kelly (2019) also notes that students may feel reluctant to take on the responsibility of co-constructing knowledge within HHBE classroom. Student practices of refusal (Tuck & Yang 2014), cultivated in resistance to the school regime, may persist even when teachers attempt to share power. Complicating this work as well are the bureaucratic constraints of the public school system; work is scrutinized and delayed, squeezed in "if there's enough time" after prescribed curricular activities, and fearfully censored. And as state legislatures across the South move to ban frank discussion of antiblack racism in public schools entirely (Blake 2021), steps to resist the school regime and affirm and support marginalized students, through HHBE and other means, will likely be further stifled.

Abolitionist educators within the school regime craft urgent and necessary responses to the immediate needs of students, but a diversity of tactics and terrains of struggle are necessary to the project of collective liberation, including radical demands for structural and ultimately revolutionary change (Davis et. al. 2021; p. 20). One such demand is that access to resources be decoupled from regulatory bodies that condition care and inflict punishment (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020). To this end, abolitionists have long created networks of mutual aid and transformative justice strategies that operate outside the purview of the state (Kaba 2021). This abolitionist logic of delinking animates demands to "defund the police" and invest in community wellbeing. Similarly, a school abolitionist imaginary seeks to wrest the concept of education--which is liberatory-- from schooling-- which isn't necessarily. An important aspect of this liberation project is also physically disambiguating education and schooling by teaching outside the school's brick and mortar; for dreaming up and creating community-centered pedagogical

sites that make the school regime obsolete (Stovall 2018).

Hip Hop, in and for itself, has long existed as a fugitive space for collective resistance and abolitionist teaching. Fighting the powers that be, Hip Hop's architects filled the streets of New York with call and response chants and elaborate, griot-inspired lyrical performances over extended soul and disco drum breaks (Kelley 1998; Poulson-Bryant 2013). Centering self-celebration and joy, early Hip Hop block parties served as a space in which marginalized youth wrestled their self-conceptions away from dominant media's negative portrayals (Rose 1994). Hip Hoppers teach themselves and one another, co-constructing new verbal, visual, musical, and kinetic skills in freestyle cyphers, DJ contests, tagging rivalries, and breakdance battles (Christen 2003, Foreman and Neal 2004) and through electronically-mediated self-study (watching YouTube videos and listening to albums, as examples). Applied linguists of the streets like Salt n Pepa put their knowledge of language science to work schooling folks on the contradictory and complicated space that Black women occupy within both Hip Hop culture and American society at large (Rose 1994). The mainstreaming of rap music through commercial distribution of Hip Hop records has also allowed these messages to circulate (and educate) internationally. Hip Hop is education delinked from schooling in that it was only ever linked after the fact.

As in the Freedom Schools, where art, drama and singing were employed to educational ends, within Hip Hop spaces freedom of artistic expression is central to the co-construction of knowledge. Such pedagogical sites make space for dialogue around ratchet truths that the schooling often cannot. Hip Hop does not demand that mental health confessions must be medicalized; that discussions of racial violence must be sanitized; or that political contest be confined to safe, sanctioned activity. All kinds of facts and feelings are allowed to surface and all kinds of possibilities for remaking our social conditions can be considered. For example, though

educators push to center Black joy (Love 2019), black joy and rage are sometimes married. When folks in the A bum rushed Lenox Mall after Rayshard was killed and made off with what they could carry, was it rage or fear or joy or all three that they felt as they dashed over broken glass? Schools are not yet designed for that conversation.

Additionally, the aesthetic appeal of the work holds the power to draw in folks to whom the work pertains personally and who might not ordinarily engage with more formal schooling (Adams, Jones & Ellis 2014). The same is true for lay audiences that may not have direct experience of the communities and experiences described; though the genre is still dominated by Black artists from working class backgrounds in major cities, it is consumed by listeners of incredibly diverse races, classes, and geographies.

One powerful potential for Hip Hop as school-abolitionist praxis is that song-engagement lends itself to but does not oblige demonstration of one's learning. As Davis (in McCabe 2022) remarked in response to the album, "Art helps us to feel what we do not yet understand....art itself doesn't change the world, but art changes the people and can give them impulses to go out and transform the world." The hope here is not for these lyrics to be displayed on a classroom whiteboard to be dissected for student discussion, as is common in Hip Hop-based education (Love 2016c). The education I aim for occurs in one's combined experiences of riding to school in the morning with it playing on your stereo, slicing fries to it at work later that evening, and vibin' to it in a friend's basement. For listeners to develop an affective relationship with a song's aesthetics-- a chant reminiscent of protest, a hook that recalls one's grandfather goin' on strike-- and to feel an impulse to do something, even if they do not yet understand what. Just as I'd been drawn in by aesthetic pleasure of a song like, let's say, Aesop Rock's "Button Masher" (2020) and only realized after months of plays that he's describing a space journey on a homemade

rocket, I've hoped to craft songs that are just kinda dope to listen to and whose puzzle-pieced-together picture (and its' personal or civic pertinence) comes into focus over time. If one chooses to respond -- to come up to the edge of the stage and relate a similar story, or remark upon it to a friend on one's drive home, or to start making rap music yourself-- that's great. If you say nothing but muse on it privately, that works. Maybe you google Thomas Sankara, or Andres Guardado, or how to form a union. Maybe you don't. And even if you do: I may never see the seeds that I have planted grow. By merely supposing but not obliging, Hip Hop as education may serve to disrupt authoritarian practices of obligation that are common within schooling environments.

Given that the findings here are highly contingent upon geographic, temporal, and cultural context and my subjective experiences, it has led to a messy, irreplicable, hyperlocal, incomplete snapshot that may help similarly-situated others to understand their experiences in a new way and unlike-others to reconsider what they know. Nonetheless, operationalizing these understandings in outward-facing Hip Hop pedagogy is a crucial next step.

In response, I have begun to freedom-dream Hip Hop as a fugitive and abolitionist pedagogy that is capable of reflecting and making space for taboo truths that the school regime cannot. The idea of Hip Hop music and culture as inherently educational is not new (Rose 1994; Christen 2003; Pulido 2008) but this framing of Hip Hop as school-abolitionist praxis allows us to understand its pedagogical potential in new ways. Here I have posited songwriting and sharing as a means of grounding conversations where new knowledge is co-constructed outside of the classroom. As well, I have discussed the power of Hip Hop created in and for itself but aimed at fostering affective-aesthetic experiences that invite listeners to remix knowledge. The hypotheses I have raised here in reflecting on and reconceptualizing Hip Hop songwriting need testing in the

field in order to explore what impact they may have.

The last decade has seen a dearth of Hip Hop arts programs that operate outside of schools (Brown 2013; Love 2014; Kutner & White-Hammond 2014; Kutner 2016) that center student voice and foster the criticality necessary to challenge the existing sociopolitical order. Building on liberatory potential of these educational precedents, however, I dream of fresh tactics to transfer coalitions built through organic, communal experiences of Hip Hop--on street corner cyphers, in venues, at kickbacks-- into intentionally dialogic educational and agitational work outside explicitly Hip Hop cultural spaces. I think for example of a rapper with whom I played shows in my early rap game. After attending an anti-gun violence event for kids that he organized last summer, he connected me with survivors of community violence that he knew, with whom I began to organize. As he later awaited trial for attempted murder after returning fire at a vehicle that had shot at his home, he spent 45 days in jail. He relayed stories of the inside to me upon his release and brainstormed needed reforms that I now advocate for in my role as county commissioner. Our communal street-based Hip Hop experiences laid the groundwork for knowledge co-construction and ultimately for liberation movement work. Moving forward, I hope to approach such work, particularly in regards to musical collaboration, with greater intentionality and with a school-abolitionist lens capable of spotting, reflecting upon, and changing tactics in order to disrupt schooling logics that may manifest in such work

One avenue for this could involve bringing emerging creators, who may describe themselves as “apolitical,” into collaborative creative projects that center liberatory ideas. The idea is to, as always, make Hip Hop for Hip Hop’s sake-- a beat that goes hard, some stunning visuals, a dynamic studio mix. But what if the song you mix happens to be about debt abolition (The Debt Collective 2020)? What if the music video you shoot is about the Fight for $15?

Through such collaborations, I hope to bring folks into the conversation around these ideas and into relationships with movement-makers and spaces, effectively facilitating the transference of Hip Hop coalitions into ones explicitly agitating for liberation.

Hip Hop is more than just rap texts (Hall 2017), and though my conceptualization of Hip Hop as school-abolitionist praxis acknowledges the importance of both sonic and lyric narrative, there is room for further discussion of other mediating forces-- take, for example, collaboration on visual media, as I suggested above. While here I have mused on song-sharing as a site of school-abolitionist praxis, leaning on this in isolation has the potential drawback of replicating banking models of schooling that I seek to subvert and negate. Private interactions with music foster opportunities for self-determined remixes of knowledge, particularly knowledge of self, but this unidirectional transmission of ideas can situate artist-as-expert just as teachers are situated as authorities in schools. A collectivist ideological orientation requires deeper examination of physical social interaction and connection between Hip Hop creators and listeners, particularly the role of kinetics and physical space play in communicating new understandings and opening dialogue with others. Central to performance are vocal inflection, gesticulation, and physical movement around stages, and crowd participation (laughter, clapping, call and response, interruptions), all of which add contour to the experience of Hip Hop as education. Future investigations should explore performance-as-inquiry, as has been done previously in the realm of theater (Saldana, 2003; McGovern 2018) and dance (Hanna 2008; Blumenfeld-Jones & Carlson 2017), and moving images (Woo 2018).

I learned things through writing Bellringer that I couldn't have otherwise. Since its release, I have shared these insights with folks that I couldn't have otherwise. At the same time, in this chapter I have further distilled these findings and made space to consider their educational

implications in a way I don't think I could have through rap music alone. At least, not at the present moment. For me, the affordances of Hip Hop rhyme writing have allowed unconscious knowledge to surface in novel ways, but the genre also comes with its constraints. There's only so much you can do with thirty-two bars and a hook. A critical next step will involve communicating understandings developed here in ways that this paper alone, and perhaps rap music alone, cannot. My next step is figuring out how to get the sum of these three parts into the hands and minds of the multiracial working class community of Hip Hop practitioners and listeners that I call home.

Here I end where we started: I did not set out to write Bellringer as a form of scholarly inquiry. Dark, messy, bold and contradictory experiences as a ratchet, Black queer femme felt like something to be hid. Thus my knowledge of this experience did not feel as if it counted until now. This comes despite the fact that inclusive pedagogies are often central to the orientation of many graduate education programs across the country-- mine included. I leave with asking: how do we make space for harm, ratchetry, and healing of kinds similar or different than described here and lived by students at the intersection of queerness, Blackness, femininity, and other backgrounds within and without the academy? How do we, in our collegial and pedagogical practice, build the kinds of relationships that welcome students to really bring such facets of their experience into our co-construction of knowledge? What else can a school-abolitionist framing of Hip Hop pedagogy lend us in our concrete practice as educators? In the tradition of arts-based research and, indeed, Hip Hop, this is where our dialogue begins.

CHAPTER TWO

BELLRINGER LYRICS, ANNOTATED

This chapter provides (1) the timeline for writing and recording Bellringer as well as notable sources of data for each of its songs (2) transcribed lyrics that readers may follow along while listening to the audio recordings accessible in chapter 3 and (3) song lyric annotations that add context and link data to specifics parts of each song.

Fig. 2 *Songwriting Timeline*

Track	Written	Influences
Overture	2018	Death threats in the aftermath of my swearing-in as Athens-Clarke County Commissioner, Collaboration with Apartment Sessions that prompted research on the death of Latasha Harlins
Bellringer	2018, 2021	Collaboration with Apartment Sessions
Sometimes I Hate This Town	2019	Inpatient psychiatric treatment in the spring of 2019
Growth I	2018	Continued depression in the wake of positive reception to my first album
Growth II	2019, 2020	A sense of social alienation and frustration found in occupying multiple roles in the community (rapper,

		politician); white supremacist threats of harm in the aftermath of my swearing in
Oh Fxck	2019, 2020	Empowerment found in a queer relationship in 2019
Lovetap	2019	The end of a said queer relationship in 2019
Necessity	2019	Break ups in 2015, 2016, 2019; participation in Athens bar culture from 2014-2018
13 Weeks	2021	Enduring pregnancy in the summer of 2021; meant as sequel to Eight Weeks on first album
The Tree	2020, 2021	Death threats received the summer of 2020; discussion of COINTELPRO on the "Waiting on Reparations" podcast
Til We're All Dead	2020, 2021	Topics discussed on Waiting on Reparations podcast
Wurk	2020, 2021	"Essential workers" discourse in the early months of Coronavirus shelter-in-place; online observation of labor movements and involvement in Democratic Socialists of America
Abolition	2020	Meditations on Are Prisons Obsolete from 2018-2020; George Floyd Uprising in the summer of 2020

Lyrics Transcription

Overture

I know I will never see the seeds that I have planted grow,

But I have seen the guts of the machine that fucks us, and it will be dismantled slow[1]

And I know I will never see the seeds that I have planted grow,

But I have seen our freedom in a dream and trust that this is the perfect overture.

Skin is cinnamon latte, but my talk-ways is chalk white as a dove flock at a cock fight. All my

life gettin' told that I'm choc-late, that I'm Scary Spice,

doesn't even matter if I'm Posh Spice with a dark side.

I be fairly bright, but it doesn't matter still get shot dead under cop lights

like a bad dog, just another case left to suffocate like a tadpole

out of water, a bottom fed parasite left to bake on the pavement in fahrenheit

of a summer day while my mother waits feeling terrified

as she's wondering whether I'm running late,

if my body's traced in a chalk line to be verified.

I heard the shot but I'd never have the chance to see the smoking gun,

t-shirt soaking blood as it's seeping up over the linoleum,

holding on to the bottle still.[2] They could have called the hospital

but they lured the cops, convinced of images of nigga kids as hostile kids.

[1] As I played with the melody of Overture's hook by my kitchen window in 2019, manipulating sounds and melody until these words came to me, I did not realize I was beginning to grapple with new understandings of death as a catalytic force in life and in movement-making.

[2] These lines were inspired rap commissioned by the Brooklyn-based composers self-dubbed "Apartment Sessions" for their piece, "In The Neighborhood" (Krasner, Tyor, McGinnis, 2018) prompted my research on the murder of Latasha Harlins. The first verse on Overture is written from Latasha's perspective as Black 16-year-old, thirsty on a hot day, moments before she is murdered by Soon Ja Du, a Korean grocery store clerk

This nation hates us and wants us to hate us too,

it's advantageous when asians hate niggas and niggas hate asians[3] so

when a shopkeeper fearing robbery ends an innocent teenagerdom

the system isn't broken no it's fully operational

and we've watched it work this way so well since way before that fateful day

in April 1992 when they riot looted when they raised hell,

they were finally through being scapegoats

for the neighborhoods you'd confined us to,[4]

to the grinding lives you'd assigned us to,

with your grimy schools and your crack rocks and your bad cops

and these white juries that blindly choose complicity[5]

who find shootings in this city so commonplace, deciding fates like eight balls

so flippantly. For centuries we've stayed calm,

but a new day has dawned and you best believe it wreaks of napalm.

I know I will never see the seeds that I have planted grow.

But I have seen the guts of the machine that fucks us, and it will be dismantled slow.

And I know I will never see the seeds that I have planted grow.

But I have seen our freedom in a dream and trust that this is the perfect overture.

---

[3] When people of color are driven to hate and harm one another rather than direct their ire toward their oppressors, the system is functioning exactly as designed.

[4] I address the material conditions that help keep the trauma loop intact. The second verse details other environmental catalysts for the LA uprising: underfunded schools, crooked cops, the proliferation of street drugs, the indifference and complicity of white juries.

[5] Soon Ja-Du, Latasha's killer, was convicted of involuntary manslaughter but sentenced to just 400 hours of community service, a $500 fine, and five years probation.

Bellringer

I ain't never cheated or robbed, I ain't never needed a lot of cheese,

but lawdamercy this the hottest heat and I'm about to pop an artery,

lawd I'm thirsty walking in this liquor mart,

Asian lady spotted me like what shit will this nigga start?[6]

Stick a target on me if you gotta, I'm just here to cop a bottle

of that watery concoction by the strawberries,

show me some camaraderie we both have prolly seen some awful robberies

and know that grim reaper keepin' his sickle sharp.

If I die, don't pray, you better riot…[7]

I'm losing cool over nothing,[8] I'm losing count of the commas[9],

jacuzzi pool how I'm rumbling to the sound of the samba,

thunderclouds of ganja gotchu coughin' like where they bury you underground

I'm downing vodka mixed with jugo de naranja

like it's puppy chow and I'm the hunting hound, bark bark bitch,

let me off the leash and take several seats on the park bench,

look me in the eye, what you know about darkness?

Please call the police, I dare 'em send a squad of cars in…

Lawdamercy, you know that grim reaper keepin' his sickle sharp…

---

[6] These lines are also inspired by the story of Latasha Harlins and Soon Ja-Du and told from Latasha's perspective as she entered Empire Liquor Mart the day she was mur

[7] Ellipses denote repeated phrases.

[8] This nods to the ways that trauma like Latasha's manifests behaviorally in hot temperedness, antagonism, substance abuse, and belligerent boasting.

[9] "Commas" in Hip Hop is often used to refer to dollars in the thousands, thus this line brags that the protagonist is so wealthy that they have lost track of the amount of money they own.

Sometimes I Hate This Town[10]

I wish I'd never told the doctors I'm a speed freak[11],

'cause I ain't made it out my bed in three weeks,

the trazodone's delightful however I'm highly doubtful

that anything but amphetamine could make my kite soar

social life's an eyesore, isolated AF, thanks iPhone!

lithium was meant to fix this shit, thanks psych ward!

wellbutrin and gabapentin lexapro it hasn't fixed it[12]

doesn't matter if my therapist says he's a grad from Princeton.

He thinks that it's a game like Bit Brigade[13] hitting these high scores,

every visit he prescribes more candified corn.

I tip it out the bottle into my shaking palm,

I kinda wanna say fuck him like he's my date to prom,

I grab a bottle of moscato just to chase it down

big gulp, deep breath, sometimes I hate this town.

Dope KNife:

I wish I wasn't predisposed to trust issues and seeing foes

and all the friendly peeps I know but enemies I keep em close,

---

[10] Ben first played me the beat for "Sometimes I Hate This Town" in the green room of the 40 Watt Club and suggested the hook, "Sometimes I Hate This Town", which then became the song's title as well.

[11] Despite my manifestations of ADHD-like symptoms, my doctors were hesitant to describe me medication, given my abuse of the drug as an undergraduate, and I found myself wishing I had never told them about that past so that I could get the help I felt I needed.

[12] I was recommended for in-patient psychiatric treatment for worsening suicidal ideation in the spring of 2019, where I was prescribed five different mood-stabilizing drugs to take daily. This list includes a few of those as well as other pharmaceutical interventions that failed before and after my hospitalization.

[13] Bit Brigade is a popular Athens-based rock band whose performances feature an expert gamer who, live onstage, plays and beats classic Nintendo video games that are projected onto the wall behind the band.

Po-po gonna squeeze the toast, keep you on that need to know

I'm so sick and tired of saying goodbye in my easter clothes

Keep the dro to keep me focused and blind to my troubled views

See far as the hubble do, got scars well I cuff a few

Uncomfortable in old skin, lose lose, and no win

Just clinic-checked depression, masturbation and adult swim,

My pulse thin, and that is the inception of the pain

and it robs my conscious like an aneurysm in my brain,

I was skiing down the slopes, was a citizen of Kane,

Til my parents went prescribed a nigga Ritalin again,

I remember being young and I was so very coy,

used to dream all day and night to be an ordinary boy

Taking over half the planet but it's gonna get destroyed,

and I hate this fucking town, don't you know that it's a ploy, dope

Linqua Franqa:

I wish I'd never told Marie that I would check the tweets[14]

that I neglected like a nest of chickadees, the slope is slippery,

the trek is treacherous, to trend is to undress yourself and open history[15],

wishing a nigga would like I was hoping hickory or praying for his pecker health,

these neckbeards in my messages compel the help, Schenectady to Bethelhem

[14] Pictures of my swearing in as county commissioner on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 2018 went viral in the aftermath of the ceremony; this line references my then-manager Marie advising me to log onto Twitter so that I would understand the scale of public response.

[15] Here I'm describing the sense of nakedness attached to celebrity, wherein strangers pry into one's life.

With all the permanence of an etch-a-sketch when it's shaken, man,

debatin' em was such a waste of second wind (Fuck, fuck fuck)

I'm closing out the browser, the anger's taking off

I kinda wanna say fuck 'em like they my date to prom

I grab a case of the cerveza just to chase em out

Big gulp deep breath, sometimes I hate this town…

And so I grabbed a scrunchie, put my afro in a bun

and I sat my lil buttcheeks in the bathroom with a gun[16]

and I held it to my temple trying hard not to remember

Midge, Imani, Emma, Tommy, Louie, Charlie and my kinfolk[17]

but I remembered 'em I remembered 'em tenfold,

Vomited in the bathtub, walked away with my chin soaked.

I called the doctor on a follow up to say aloud:

I really love these cats, but I really hate this town.

Growth I

[Hook]

She's[18] so sure the notion of no shame is hopeless[19]

'cause she's not sure that nature has made her a fortune

[16] This scenario, and other portions of the album as well, are fictionalized to make palpable extreme emotions; as well, this is an example of what Huey Newton (1973) called *reactionary suicide*-- a death brought about by despair at one's material conditions, which is a recurrent theme on the album.

[17] This is the first suggestion that we heal through community-building; I realize that friends and family are what keep us alive, and that isolating and individualist solutions fail. This idea, too, recurs on the album.

[18] Though I grew to embrace they/them pronouns over the course of pregnancy, I continue to perform the songs as originally written, using she/her pronouns.

[19] This is to say: the idea of living without shame was unimaginable to me.

where she can take the sensation of pain that comes with growth.

She’s been waiting, been waiting, been waiting, takes no action.

Born and bred and cheap pea soup, Reddit and television[20]

like sweet tooths dreading their dentist visits,

she seemed cool but she'd been dreading getting out of bed a minute

feeling, trapped in a darkened cellar, fattened from thoughts of cheddar[21],

dreams of treading breaded paths with Hansel and Gretel

burning in her head like she had put her plans on a griddle

started running with the boys, had a clan and a little

stamina building,[22] hoping rap would force the sadness to fizzle--

but she lacked the natural scaffolding for happiness,

there's no point in even asking her, give her half a blink

and she could massacre a total masterpiece, convince the whole academy

that it’s actually a catastrophe. And she did this to herself,

over and over, even as the townies came to know her as the Athens rapping queen.

The taste of fame was the uncaging of a parakeet

that had dreamed of freedom but had never made a choice before.

Forsaking therapy as blander than a can of carrot juice:

who needs a therapist when they payin’ me to stare at me?

But here’s the kicker, kiddo: they can pitch you nickles for flippin’ riddles

---

[20] My childhood was screen-saturated; I often spent up to five hours a day on chatrooms and web forums throughout my early teen years. .

[21] This line alludes to financial greed; “cheddar” is synonymous with “money.”

[22] These lines refer to my rise as a prominent figure in Athens Hip Hop in 2017 and 2018; I began making music with a Hip Hop collective called Space Dungeon and played many successful shows; I put out an album in 2018 which was well received, and began touring and winning awards that ought to have alleviated my emotional pain.

but you're still a sicko. She could get entered in contests and win awards,

still wanna stick a sword in her innards the minute she got stressed.[23]

Get her image on a billboard, similar to RZA written film scores:

its the kind of shit a bitch would Kill Bill for[24],

but still she not impressed, fill the building at the Filmore[25],

jimmy-rig refrigerated hot mess.

Swimming in a figure 8 and infinitely underwhelmed,

tempted by the trigger-click, ultimately hung herself.

Growth II

Steady wishing there were six of me,[26]

one to find a husband I could trust to feed me breakfast dinner lunch

and keep his dick hard, mouth shut and the kitchen clean[27]

one to sit between Dickerson and Link when commission meets,

one for giving hickies and swillin' whiskey like listerine

chasin' em down with dark and stormies til the bar is closing up at Little Kings[28]

one to feel my sorrow for me, go depressive manic for me

stand in for me out in Arkansas performing, maybe then I'd get some sleep

speaking of which I prolly need a fifth to live in infamy so I can live in peace

---

[23] Despite this success, my depression persisted, if not worsened.

[24] A reference to The RZA, of Wu Tang Clan, who scored the Quentin Tarantino film *Kill Bill Vol. I*

[25] The Filmore is a renowned music venue in San Francisco, California.

[26] Song generation generally begins with the audiokinetic play of verbally repeating aloud phrases that have become lodged in my mind, such as "wishing there were six of me" at the opening of this song.

[27] On songwriting, I then filled in the content gaps with musings on my experiences (that I sat between Commissioners Sharyn Dickerson and Melissa Link in my first few months at City Hall).

[28] Little Kings is a dive bar in Athens, Georgia.

but if I'm split in sixths which of these is the centerpiece

who the fuck is Mariah and what the fuck is identity?

If having a clone entails feeling less overwhelmed

but being overwhelmed is the only realm in which you know yourself

then to divide yourself's a suicidal threat

and I wanted to die before, but these days, I'm not tryna die just yet

guess I'll just digest it, all of the pieces

some of em savory, some of em garlicky,

all of em part of me, all of em sticky sweet

Savory, garlicky, all of me, sticky sweet…

I see these white folk with they eyeholes set,

grippin they rifles and they white suprem[29]

But what I figure that these spiteful pests be forgettin is that it's my whole set

I'm just a figurehead for generation Y and Zed

I know my ideas won't die even if I'm martyred[30]

My squad will go harder, my movement goes farther,[31] goes viral

I'm proof that any goof with a good heart can finish what I started[32]

Who is Mariah Parker? Man, it doesn't even matter if I'm really being honest

And honesty is the quality we need to lead the charge

---

[29] My swearing in as county commissioner on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* unleashed a hailstorm of lynching, arson, vandalism, and rape threats via letters, email, voicemail, and social media, which I reference here.

[30] First alluded to on *Overture*, these lines, too, I suggest that I've begun to funnel my obsession with mortality into service of the movement,

[31] I find strength in remembering the power of coalition and solace in knowledge the fight never dies, even if people do. In essence, I embraced what Newton calls revolutionary suicide: a death brought about by forcefully challenging the material conditions that might otherwise drive one to reactionary suicide.

[32] Here again I imagine the liberation struggle as a seed planted that may bloom after I am gone.

We need to feed the spark that beats the dark to squeeze complete autonomy

I'm wishing it was Tommy V, I ain't thanking God it's me…[33]

Savory, garlicky, all of me, sticky sweet…

Oh Fxck

[Hook]

Will you love me like you do? You love me like you do?[34]

You love me like I'm good, you love me like you're sure.

You love me like I should, but I'm not ready to,

love me love me good, love me love me good, love me.

My flow disgusting like fruitcake, leave 'em struggling with toothaches

when I rattle niggas like they caterpillars in shallow river of cool rain.

Hey, miss me with that groupthink, I'm city hall every Tuesday,

I'm pissin off all of the power dealers and kissing on all of the cute gays.

If she sad and bitter with an average figure I might shower with her, is that bad to consider?

Isn't it a drag that your girl in my lap again like she a napkin at dinner?

She was a capitalist unattracted to women until I came mackin on Tinder,

now she likes Jacobin[35] and dropping banners from bridges and dunking on fascists with glitter.

[Hook]

[33] This references my friend Tommy Valentine, a fellow rapper and candidate for county commission who inspired my run for office but ultimately lost his election.

[34] Written on various car trips to shows with my then-girlfriend in the passenger seat, this captures my emerging understanding that, contrary to the belief that you must first love yourself in order to find love, healthy relationships and support the development of self-love.

[35] Jacobin is a prominent American leftist magazine.

She[36] dealing with imposter syndrome, ain't knowin' how hot she is

Even though it's fuckin' obvious these niggas steady plottin,

leave 'em salty like they Gosling at the Oscars[37]

Like they lobster bisque, ha, yeah, that's my bitch, that's my bitch, that's my bitch

She batty yeah she wild as shit, she grinchy but she prosperous

Bewitching with her foxiness, she magic yeah she sorceress

She glossy like she phosphorous, I'm fire but she's oxygen

She's marvelous, ha yeah, that's my bitch, that's my bitch,

And back when I went off the pills, she called me in the hospital[38]

To tell me that she loved me more than popsicles

Ha, yeah, that's my bitch, that's my bitch, that's my bitch…

Lovetap[39]

The moose, the aardvark, the pelican,

the starfish, the elephant[40] in my kitchen as I enter

This is my night snack, this is a blade tip

This is my love tap, exasperation,

spreading thin as the gray mist in your telescope

And I am patient-er than I had ever hope…

[36] "She" here can be heard/read as either me, my lover, or both.

[37] This is a reference to the disappointment of the cast of *La La Land,* including Ryan Gosling, at discovering their award for Best Picture at the 2017 Oscars was in error and that the true winners were the cast of *Moonlight.*

[38] This references my then-girlfriend calling me on the phone during my stay in a psychiatric facility after a transition been medications exacerbated my thoughts of suicide.

[39] A "love tap" is a soft blow and here is meant to hold space for both grievance and grace at the end of a romantic relationship..

[40] These lines play on the expression "the elephant in the room" to suggest there are myriad things that the narrator and their lover are avoiding discussing.

[Hook]

springs from the chest of every beast in the deep, I don't need to read receipts

Don't think for a second I won't sing you to sleep, sing you to sleep..

The suitcase confession in a stalled car

The hard-won caresses of a parched tongue in a nightmare about falling out of love[41]

We're prolly holograms, this is a blade tip

This is my olive branch, exasperation

spreading thin as they gray mist in your telescope

And I am patient-er than I had ever hope…

[Hook]

Necessity

[Hook]

Not only do I not love you, you never made me come I just faked it to shut you up,[42]

Not only did I never love you, I fucked your roommate and your bandmate

so hard I couldn't stand straight, not saying it was wise to do

But what I'm tryna say's I kinda hate you

But life's so full of obstacles when you ain't got your pockets full

[41] "Lovetap" was ritten as my queer relationship began to dissolve in the spring of 2019 and describes resolving to have hope for the future and love one's ex from a purposeful distance.

[42] Here, I am expressing how the nhealed emotional pain of adolescence and early adulthood in the crossfire of heteropatriachy and white supremacy has compounded to the point I direct it outward as emotional abuse toward others.

So if you could spot me two hundred dollars and buy me food

then maybe we can try to make it work.

Picture this October 2015, it's an understatement to say that I'm drowning in a sea

of work at the university[43], curves that I'm taking personally

my ex got a new girl but he still pounds it on the sneak

'cause that coochie is juicy as a quarter pounder with cheese

But otherwise I'm pretty worthless, did I mention that my house is full of fleas

from a tabby cat who naps in the kitchen cabinets and he's not fed

so he dreams of catching mouses while he sleeps up in the cobwebs

that formed 'cause even though I got bread I ain't bought bread

ever since I lost the willpower to eat, willpower to clean,[44]

willpower to pay the power, pay the dentist and the hospital,

pay the internet the water bill down at they offices

pay for kitten chow so now this little nigga hostage like he sentenced to what Cosby did,

But it's not no fault of his I just adopted him because I needed a friend,

needed somebody to be with just needed bodyheat in the bed

Oh yeah, and my cat's named Eggs

[Hook]

[43] This alludes to my first semester of graduate school at the University of Georgia.

[44] This crystallizes the chaos of pursuing ill-fitting relationships in lieu of self-actualization that I experienced during that fall of 2015 and for many years after, though to lesser degrees as I found meaning in music, politics, and sought therapy. Drugs, alcohol, and unfulfilling flings drove a depression that causes bills and dirty dishes to pile up which in turn drive reckless escapism in drugs, alcohol, etcetera, all ultimately consequences of emotions that pressurize as they are buried inside oneself.

Picture this, November, three years ago,

I'm bitching on the Max Canada[45] patio because my ears are cold

cheersin' with a can of Schlitz and passing cannabis,

though to be clearer, I didn't hit it, I'm not a fan of it

mo I'm just chillin with these chatty folk because the antidote to being sad as shit

is fashioning yourself into a mannequin,

hoping that some sugar-daddio candidate

with daddy and mommy bucks will make your pain stop.

Here's the game: hey hon! What's your name? Where you from? Oh cool!

Bars close, cars home disregard clothes moan (gasp)

Hoping that the scars don't show

when tomorrow comes give him that parseltongue[46],

give him your card tell him call sometime

and when he calls you sink your claws in him a

nd pretty much force him to adopt you like you's a foster kid

because of poverty, because you hate your body, 'cause you're closeted

and can't find in yourself what you think that you'll find in an opposite.

[Hook]

13 Weeks

January, almost a year of being hunkered down

[45] Max Canada was a dive bar in Athens, GA that permanently closed during the pandemic.

[46] Parseltongue is an invented language in the Harry Potter book series which humans use to communicate with snakes, though here it is meant to imply a snake-like movement of the tongue during oral sex.

an aching in my abdomen, perpetually tuckered out

a nagging nausea leaving me kneeling on the crusted tile

a harsher bit of finding out now that I'd fucked around[47]

although I'd found it out before,[48] already knew what was the fuss about

but what about the fuss? I wondered if, I wondered how

muttered aloud the possibility that i could be a mother now

that I'd become functional enough to try run a town,

But still it struck me as a clusterfuck and so I shut it down[49]

that is until I saw the ultrasound, a little paw, the thumb pronounced

the heartbeat's little thumping wow is all I said,

my jaw practically struck the ground as suddenly I really loved the child

But then again, even when you feel your heart fill with a love you've never felt before,

and know that love will sustain you through all the years that come,

all the fears that come are something no one can prepare you for.

But how was I supposed to know?

Then the euphoria faded,

around the time my rent had tripled, all the doctor bills adorning the table.

I tucked my knees up to my navel, wrapped a blanket 'round my face

and squeezed my ankles as I screamed til I fainted[50] for all the things I'm afraid of.

---

[47] "Fuck around, find out" is a catchphrase meant to warn someone of the consequences of one's actions.

[48] I envisioned this song as a sequel to *Eight Weeks* off my debut album (Parker 2018), in which I described my confliction over having an abortion. *13 Weeks* mirrors *Eight Weeks* in both lyric structure and its looped harmonies.

[49] This refers to my beliefs early in pregnancy that I could not handle having a child and thus tried my best to quash thoughts of the possibility.

[50] This, as in the end of "Sometimes," is an imagined scenario.

Picture the doctor saying she didn't make it[51]

Picture my partner driving home alone now he's gotta raise him

And even if I breeze through the labor the best case scenario's exceedingly painful.

Nobody tells you, even if you feel prepared to keep and clean and feed him,

Push the baby carriage, cherish him and barely sleep

Entering parenthood is such a scary thing

Never knowing where the story's going's the only guarantee.

The Tree

Sometimes it feels like I'm always being watched

by the feds, by the white supremacists and the cops[52]

got my personal security people watching my house[53],

got my messages encrypted as if it could even stop em

from listening to the topics I'm whispering in the darkness,

from showing up with the patnas and executing an arson,

the paranoia is constant the scare destroying my confidence,

filing FOIAs[54] to prepare my lawyers with they documents

[51] I disclose fear of dying in childbirth as a further facet of a fixation with mortality.

[52] I was once again threatened with violence the Uprising of 2020 and also became extremely paranoid about being arrested, assassinated, or surveilled by federal agencies and the local police.

[53] During the Uprising, private, armed citizens volunteered to watch my house and serve as first-responders in the event of a violent intrusion.

[54] A reference to the Freedom of Information Act which enables members of the public to obtain government documents and internal communications.

Feeling like brother Malcolm[55] when I'm peaking through the blinds

tryna peer around the street to see who's creeping in they ride,

but if it's one of them I ain't gon' freak or run or hide

I'm finna fight 'em eye to eye until the weaker one has died.

And I drink, and I smoke, and I chill,

just to cope with the fear that I will get the rope

But if these motherfuckers come for me,

I'll be singing swinging from the tree.

Answering a knock to see if my doordash is here[56]

but it's a MAGA hatted kid brandishing magnums with a leer,

so when he grabs me and he drags me to a van and throws me in the back of it

I say a prayed to my ancestors, while he's yelling,

"Shut the fuck up, bitch, you scream and it's bloodshed,

I swear to God, if you even think about running

your guts'll be splattered all over that sundress,

and speaking of which, I'ma need you to undress."

Will they find my corpse freshly dead on my doorstep?

I think to myself as I unzip my orange dress.

"Stay perfectly still or I'ma have to kill you, gorgeous,"

he whispers as he puts the pistol to my forehead.

[55] This conjures a notorious photograph of Malcolm X holding an M1 carbine while furtively drawing back the blinds of his home to monitor outside after his home had been firebombed the week before.

[56] This verse describes a version of an imagined scenario that often returns to me when my policy advocacy stirs the ire of white supremacists.

And I know that it's fine 'cause I know that my time

on this earth has been worth[57] getting dragged through the dirt…

Til We're All Dead

[Hook]

It's the time of monsters[58], goons and imposters in suits with the nuclear launchers.

It's the time of monsters, godless and rotten, Iraq to Jakarta to Gaza.

It's the time of monsters, the truth is assaulted as proof that we lost at the onset[59].

It's the time of monsters, goons and impostors and they won't stop til we're all dead.

My head is spinning round like a merry-go

til I'm yaking sounding like Shakira[60] on the stereo

but it's not that jack and cherry coke,

it's the kerosene, the air is soaked, dropping canaries cold[61]'

'nother brother martyred he was barely grown,

mama sobbing like the bottom octave of a baritone, watching as they bury him,

the cop said that his anger had been flaring up

the block said ay you better prepare yourself

we keep 'em monitored, pass the binoculars and dropping periscope,

[57] This is another elaboration on the theme of revolutionary suicide.
[58] The hook was originally written as an intro to a friend's podcast entitled *A Time of Monsters*. Ultimately the show was discontinued before the intro was ever used but repurposed for this song.
[59] That is to say, in a post-truth society, folks "on the other side" ideologically are able to dismiss our concerns by ignoring the truth.
[60] This is a reference to Shakira's ululative singing which could, in jest, be likened to the sound of someone vomiting.
[61] A play on the expression "canary in the coal mine."

we sending in Leslie Knope[62] under the auspices of Robin Hood,

We got no other option, take our portion of the pot and distribute it to the barrio[63]

Marching it to Congress take it all across America

[Hook]

Wesdaruler:

I asked the prophet, at what age did I become a monster?

buncha middle class bitches playing possum, they gossip to cops

like how you even supposed to make it out the projects and prosper with such limited options?

fucking monster? More like King Kong, Zilla or lochness, I'm a goblin

now I'm running on your fucking doorstep for the warchest

put fear in the people this nigga is evil but never ever see us as equal

so fuck your feelins nigga,

I take your life long dreams and turn it to screams, the scariest scene

this nigga is mean, it seems I've become a product of my environment

devil in my eyes til I show 'em where all the fire went

welcome to my firepit, a demon is born, a baby is torn

From the arms of a crying black mother

They tell us they love us and say they're down to fight no matter what

Unless they have to give up shit then they don't give a fuck, what…

[62] Leslie Knope is a character on the television show "Parks and Recreation." She is a bubbly bureaucrat in the Parks and Recreation department of a small town in Indiana, and many folks ask me if my service in local government is like that of her character.

[63] This describes a community coming together to organize a cop watch akin to those organized by the Black Panthers and engaging in civil disobedience to demand wealth redistribution after a police murder.

[Hook]

This one goes out to Ernesto Guevara,

Toussaint L'Ouverture and to Thomas Sankara,[64]

this one goes out to the Indian farmers

who marched in contempt of a lawless free market[65],

This one goes out to the kids in Hong Kong

and this kids Nigeria fighting the SARS[66]

and the kids being martyred in Myanmar[67]

never forget what they marching and dying for,

never forgive the war crimes of the forces they're fighting off

may all their grave sacrifices inspire us

never accept the injustice societal

always remember the millions are mightier.

Decolonize everything…

Free Hawaii, Free Guam, Free Puerto Rico, Free Palestine…

Land back[68]

Wurk

Communication Workers of America

[64] Here I shout out several revolutionary leaders in the history of the Global South: Toussaint L'Overture, a leader of the Haitian Revolution, and Thomas Sankara, resident of Burkina Faso from 1983-1987.
[65] This refers to the Indian Farmers' Protests of 2020 and 2021.
[66] SARS is an acronym for Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a Nigerian police unit notorious for their abuses of power. In 2020, the movement to End SARS achieved critical mass, resulting in the unit's disbandment.
[67] This references the civil resistance against the 2021 military takeover of the Myanmar government. Several young people were killed by the military during the protests.
[68] Land Back is a movement for indigenous sovereignty that calls for all public lands to be returned to Indigenous control.

United Campus Workers of Georgia 3265[69], bitch.

[hook]

Which side are you on…

Workers ship the boxes, they swiffer and the mop and

look chipper whenever talking and whipping the shopping carts

They pack the beer in the walk-ins and stack the weird little boxes

Keep our kitchen fridges stocked and our financial markets solvent.

They clock in for a pithy fitty bucks and bear the coughing of like sixty thrifty chuds

and get spit on like sitting ducks and they are sick of getting fucked

So you ever wanted to honor them? Here's my ask for all my hominids: collective bargainin'

Amazon and Target and Fedex and Walmart and Instacart and Whole Foods[70]

til we all get what we oughta get

Workers run the company, there isn't any argument so are you with them are you in?

El pueblo unido jamás será vencido…

[Hook]

Imagine a minute, millions of average women and men in the tragic position

Of trading in passion for wages in cash 'cause they shackled by capitalism.

Imagine a minute, millions of average citizens

planting the spinach and waxing the kitchens and

stacking the linens, contractors and renters and tenants, their labor extracted for pittance.

What if they coordinated to address the sordid state of it in an organization?

[69] This is the union I joined as a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Georgia and still belong to and organize beside today.

[70] I chose these particular corporations because they were targets of a widespread boycott during that time.

Guess fucking what! That's what organized labor does,

and not even sort of it's more of the crux:

Taking the power from hoarders of bucks, big bankers offshoring their cuts,

Returning the value of labor to those who create it, the billionaires owe it to us.

So if you jaded and surly 'bout waking up early to earn a bag,

if you sad about Bernie[71], if you've got a curious yearning

and had it with passively lurking, we got your back and we happy to have ya,

out on the picket line actively working going, which side are you on?

[Hook]

Abolition

If being radical is grasping from the root, that's just what I'll do, that's just what I'll do…[72]

They kneeling in Kente handkerchiefs, calling him George Curry[73],

Instead of sending Brett Hankison to jail, judge, jury

Yeah the sheriff steady raking in a whale ton of money

But hey they takin' the golden girls up out your library![74]

Feel like y'all ain't fucking hearing me, have I said it wrong?

Defund the CIA and the cops and the pentagon,

I don't give a fuck

[71] This tips its hat to young supporters of 2020 presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders who, in the aftermath of his loss, struggled to find an outlet for their political energes.
[72] This remixes a quote from Angela Davis, "radical simply means "grasping things at the root."
[73] This references a press conference in which Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi called George Floyd "George Curry" in error.
[74] Here I poke fun at Hulu removing an episode of the show "Golden Girls" that included a character in blackface from their streaming catalog.

Make ‘em raise they money with a telethon

They racism that makes em sick is set in stone so send em off

Spend a billion on keeping our people housed and showered,

An allowance in our pouch and all our kitchen fridges stocked

And you won’t have to spend a dime keeping em prison locked,

I really don’t understand what makes this decision hard

The idea of abolition’s existed a long time[75]

since before the founding fathers penned their documents[76]

ever since they brought us to this continent, a long line

of thinkers pondered it, white and black fought for it,

watching bombs fly for the niggas picking cotton fields

and often still we sitting on trial: slave catchers given badges,

prisons built all the time, envision if we prioritized

strong ties to the neighborhood so that they stabler to stop crime?[77]

That’s the mission of abolition, it’s been this for a minute

in insistence for independence we finna march fight

with our allies on the ballot, in the alleys, with the power of the people

we will finally see freedom for our kind

So in honor of Breonna ‘cause they shot her in her sleep

and in honor of Eric Garner his carotid in a squeeze

---

[75] I wrote the sung verse on “Abolition” during the uprising, when I had escaped to my mother’s house in another state after weeks of leading direct action, strategizing and lobbying with co-conspirators, engaging in grassroots political education and receiving death threats.

[76] This verse connects the current struggle for prison abolition to its roots in the abolition of chattel slavery.

[77] In rest, I dared to dream of a world reorganized around care; the kind of world where my cousin had had access to mental healthcare, a good job, friends, and education as means of securing community wellbeing and safety.

and in honor of Rayshard because he'll never push his daughter

on a swing again cause he was in his car and fell asleep

and in honor of Andres Guardado,[78] martyred in the street,

we are organizing, agitating, starting to believe,

that it might take another winter, nother autumn, nother spring

but no matter how long it takes we will abolish the police.[79]

Angela Davis:

And I can remember seeing the slogan defund the police

which happened exactly when it should have happened

because it meant that we were able to enact a kind of rupture

from the past strategies that have always been focused only on:

prosecuting the individual officers, find the bad apples and and and remove them,

and I think that now we are confronted with real possibilities

of beginning to shrink the power of the police,

the whole notion of police abolition has come to the fore.

I mean it's interesting because I don't think we would have ever imagined

it to happen this way.

[78] Andres Guardado is an 18-year-old Mexican American who was shot in the back while fleeing law enforcement in Los Angeles during the summer of 2020.

[79] My songwriting process of generating rhyme and content based around a central phrase worked backward here, where I endeavored to put the most resonant phrase "abolish the police" last and built the preceding verses so that they flowed toward that conclusion.

CHAPTER THREE

BELLRINGER ALBUM

This chapter provides readers will access to *Bellringer*, the creative basis of this dissertation. The full album, as well as production notes and credits, are available at https://linquafranqa.bandcamp.com/album/bellringer. Readers are encouraged to follow along with the lyrics in Chapter 2 while listening to the album.

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