

The Authenticity of a Rapper:
The Lyrical Divide Between Personas and Persons
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Abstract

“Good” rap music, besides for containing an infectious and danceable rhythm, must include entertaining and marketable content: rappers must speak to a common audience about stories or issues that engage the audience. In order to accomplish this need for theatrical entertainment, most rappers establish a persona in order to fabricate drama and caricatured characters in their rap lyrics. Simultaneously, rap history and audiences also call for authenticity on part of the rapper; rappers must remain as sincere, real, and honest as possible in order to “keep it real.”

This thesis explores the concept of authenticity as to how it pertains to rap and “confessional” lyrics, raising the question, how do we separate a rapper’s persona from his *person*? Using theories of sincerity, authenticity, and authorship from Susan Rosenbaum and Michel Foucault, the thesis investigates why rappers feel compelled to create personas and how they create them despite a need for honesty. The first section focuses on these theories, bringing into question their relevance to rap and emceeing history. In the next section, these theorists help frame analysis of Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Eminem’s persona developments, all of which are dissected via their lyrics and album narratives. This second chapter features heavy evaluation of Kanye West’s and Eminem’s personas, in particular, looking at poetic and semantic analysis of their rap styles.

After examination, these three rappers represent an array of persona functions. Jay-Z’s persona is static, secure, yet he doesn’t experiment with fiction or fabrication; his persona of a “self-made man” is tied closely and authentically with his “real” person. On the other hand, Kanye West and Eminem experiment with concepts of fiction within persona in different ways from one another. Kanye’s persona constantly evolves and develops, forcing his audience to question where the line exists between fiction (a hyperbolic, extremely caricatured persona) and reality (is Kanye like this in real life?). Eminem raises the same question in a different way: he introduces three different characters of Eminem, Marshall Mathers, and Slim Shady, asking the audience to figure out where one starts and the next begins. By the conclusion, it is clear that authenticity constrains rappers in their experimentation with fiction in personas, forcing them to remain “real” in some aspect of their rap.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of a hip-hop persona is not a new notion. Jay-Z is associated with the persona of a self-made man; Kanye, a narcissistic self-proclaimed genius; Tupac, a “gangsta” or thug. Like these icons, most rappers have a distinguishable image, similar to a brand. These unique personas apply not only to rappers, but also to poets, to artists, to actors, and others. Identifying oneself with a single detail or storyline makes it easier for an audience to digest one’s work, seeing as it all falls under one common idea or label.

While the creation of a persona may depend on a rapper’s artistic reasoning, persona creation generally also depends heavily on appealing to the market and, on a commercial level, working as a gimmick. The commoditization of the hip-hop culture has resulted in more and more of these promotional tools. Some rappers market themselves as a certain character in order to appeal to a corresponding audience, creating difficulty for the audience to understand what’s true about the rapper and what’s not. In Paul Edwards’ How to Rap, he distinguishes the division between rap based on truths or rap based on fiction: rapper Andy Cat claims in the book, “Many classic hip-hop artists, they used to make [their autobiography] all up. They weren’t going out killing people every night—it’s called creativity” (Edwards 9). This speaks to a mixed agenda in rap, in which rappers want to seem authentic, but also want to retain a level of artfulness. With this in mind, some rappers, like Lauryn Hill or Kanye West, rely on fabricated settings¹ to help further a message or persona development within an album.

¹ Lauryn Hill used sound effects and lyrics to create a fictional setting of a school for her album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Similarly, Kanye West has used these techniques

With the concept of a “created persona” in mind, there are several words to describe a rapper: “author,” “persona,” “speaker,” “person,” and “narrator.” These identifications must call for a range in the personal to the impersonal, as illustrated in Figure 1. I take “personal” to mean what is “real,” true, or sincere to that person’s autobiography and beliefs, and *not* interested or made a product of commerciality; in this sense, “personal” correlates directly with authenticity, where something is personal if it is *true* to his or her autobiography. “Impersonal,” then, means what is not directly related to the author’s autobiography and/or beliefs; if something is “impersonal,” it retains a tone of objectivity and almost loses its sense of the author and his or her personality.

Figure 1. Identifications ranked in personality, starting with the most personal and ending with the least personal.

Person	The human being who creates the work and identifies himself or herself as the author, yet existed before the work itself.
Author	The originator, creator, and/or writer of a work who only exists because of the work and is associated interchangeably with the work and its ideologies.
Narrator/Speaker	The person who delivers the text to an audience via written word or performance. Both of these identifications (narrator and speaker) can work synonymously.
Persona	The performed, self-produced character that addresses a “prescribed role,” theatrically and/or textually—an alter ego that distances itself from the speaker.

All of these identifications can fall under the title of “rapper.”

A rapper’s persona creation happens in marketing strategies: interviews, public appearances, and the performance itself. However, rappers must also intricately weave their persona into their lyrics, almost as if they are developing themselves as a character throughout their work. Rap is a both a narrative and lyric form and, as Adam Bradley

and skits in many of his albums, but most notably in *The College Dropout*, in order to convey his fictional scene of a university graduation.

explains, can be compared to the dramatic monologue, which is a “poem spoken by a character through a persona (Greek for ‘mask’), rather than by the poet or an unidentified speaker” (*Poetics of Hip Hop* 164). So, in lyrics, rappers attempt to establish whatever persona they have performed for the public: presumably, their words must match their actions.

Yet, beneath these carefully crafted personas is an underlying tension, beginning with the general audience’s desire for sincerity from an author. For hip-hop, this desire stretches back to its birth and the concept of “keepin’ it real”—a phrase that was reiterated in rap lyrics, graffiti, fashion, behaviors, and art. For example, in 1995’s “R.E.A.L.I.T.Y.,” KRS-One raps, “So when I kick a rhyme I represent how I feel / The sacred street art of keepin’ it real” (KRS-One). The concept of “keepin’ it real” found itself in rap lyrics much like these, where the rapper explains how “keepin’ it real” means he’s not lying or full of ulterior motives. In Kembrew McLeod’s discussion of authenticity within hip-hop culture, he dissects the notion of reality in street culture. He claims that the phrase of “keepin’ it real” embodies a yearning for an honest and sincere rapper, one who is not artificial, or “soft, following mass trends by listening to commercial rap music, and identifying oneself with White, mainstream culture” (McLeod 174). Thus, “keepin’ it real” for a rapper means being true to oneself (his or her origins) and creating rap lyrics that exemplify this ideal, instead of succumbing to a “white mainstream culture” that appropriates and exploits truth for money.

An authentic rapper must also stay true to his or her biography: Jay-Z cannot (and does not) lie about his rise from rags to riches, and equally, Eminem does not lie about his upbringing in a trailer park. In seeming honest and vulnerable in one’s lyrics, rappers build

credential and simultaneously subscribe to the concept of authenticity. For instance, Vanilla Ice serves as an interesting counter-example of this. Alongside the Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice (Robert Van Winkle) emerged as one of the first successful white rappers with his popular hit from 1990, “Ice Ice Baby,” and was able to turn his position as a white rapper into a marketable trait. However, his record label, SBK Records, described Vanilla Ice as having a “colorful teen-age background full of gangs, motorcycles and rough-and-tumble street life in lower-class Miami neighborhoods, culminating with his success in a genre dominated by young black males” (Hess 373). For someone who had been rapping through a “real” hip-hop image in his lyrics, this biography temporarily lent him credibility, making him appealing to the hip-hop audience. However, when Ken Perkins of *The Dallas Morning News* discredited Vanilla Ice’s entire biography, revealing he grew up in a wealthier Dallas suburb, Ice’s rap career plummeted. People referred to him as “a travesty” and “a one-man joke,” and Ice quickly became a disgraced figure among rap celebrities (Hess 373).

Vanilla Ice’s story is rife with racial implications concerning appropriation of black musical forms by whites. Yet, it also reveals the importance of autobiography within rap lyrics, differing from other genre or art forms where an artist doesn’t necessarily feel directed or controlled by his or her personal past (in terms of their persona) when creating their work. “The majority of MCs like to write from real-life experience—either autobiographical lyrics about things they have actually experienced or lyrics at least generally inspired by situations they’ve encountered” (Edwards 5). Rappers do this for many reasons, but speaking truthfully about autobiographical experiences lends them a credibility that’s difficult to build in other ways.

As Vanilla Ice's story shows and Mickey Hess argues, "hip-hop lyrics are rooted in autobiography" (374). Thus, it becomes close to impossible to completely disregard the rapper as an author, i.e., to take the rap as its own entity separate from the rappers' beliefs, thoughts, or life. Yet, is this only on a superficial level? Rap sometimes relies on autobiographies, but rappers sometimes take creative liberties in developing their personas. By this, I mean that, in some cases, a rap persona may take shape on its own *separate* from the person, asking the audience to understand the rap lyrics as read by a speaker who is acting as a character distinguishable from the rapper. This reverts to the concept of personas as their original, Greek meaning of speaking through a mask² rather than by the poet or rapper. Do audiences immediately see the persona as different from the person? And if so, do they associate the persona with the work *less* than they would if the person had acted as the speaker? These questions begin to set up binaries, obscuring the gray matter in between from "persona" to "person." Further, this authenticity, or "sincerity," creates confusion about who is actually speaking within a text, whether it's a poem or a rap (or a rap read as a poem). When Eminem raps about autobiographical events that have happened in Marshall Mathers' life, how are we supposed to separate the persona from the person? Further, why do we feel a *need* to distinguish the separation between "persona" from "person?"

In the same way audiences of poetry have different expectations than those of fiction, audiences of rap come to expect that rap lyrics are truthful—and if the author/rapper is *not* telling the truth, then the rapper makes that clear.³ Rappers,

² Mentioned in the reference to Adam Bradley (page 2).

³ The ways certain rappers introduce different voices, characters, or skits that make a clear distinction between reality and fiction.

generally, must cater to their audiences' expectations in order to be commercially successful. In this way, sincerity and authenticity become not so much a choice as an expectation. This is why the most commercially successful rappers have a well-formed persona that does not contradict their person, unlike the way Vanilla Ice's persona was entirely disproved by his true autobiography. Successful rappers are able to maintain an interesting person that fuels their persona; they maintain an impeccable balance of authenticity and drama. This is perhaps made even more interesting in the tension between the persona and the person.⁴

But, to call a rapper an author immediately brings several issues into question: the fact that rap isn't always a written work, the fact that rappers sometimes don't even *write*⁵ their raps, and the fact that "author" brings some sense of literariness along with it. What one typically associates with authorship is contained in its dictionary definition, where an author "originates or creates," or exists as "the writer of a literary work" ("Author"). These definitions hold contrasting concepts in the realm of rap—the first explanation holds a vague notion of authors purely as creators, while the second explains authors as tied to literature. As a compromise, I will understand "author" to describe one who creates a work that can be understood as written text. By defining authorship in this way, I allow "rapper" to equate itself with "author."

Instantly, this may seem inaccurate or overly tolerant, as if this definition was made solely to allow a rapper to be understood as an author—my definition *does* allow for this

⁴ With this, I'm thinking about Tupac. As a person, he thrived intellectually, performing Shakespeare plays at his high school. However, he created a rap persona of being a thug who partakes in criminal and violent acts.

⁵ As in physically write their lyrics on paper. Some rappers, like Jay-Z, gain street credibility for freestyling or keeping their rhymes in their head.

categorization. Undeniably, rappers are the creators, originators, and in some form, the writers of rap, despite its written value. Rap is performed, yet it is not exclusive to performance, as Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois demonstrate through the publication of the Anthology of Rap. When placed in a literary context—an anthology, poetic analysis, etc.—rap can be understood as a written work. Jay-Z even goes so far as to claim, “rap is poetry” (Jay-Z 18). Regardless of rap’s literary merit, rappers create rap, and thus, are authors of the rap.

These issues of authorship become increasingly relevant when considering rappers’ creation of personas, and how their lyrics reflect contrasting personalities from the person who actually utters the words. We see this happen countless times in great icons of rap. Tupac, for example, becomes an increasingly complex example of a persona countering a person when “his sometimes misogynist lyrics are contrasted with his odes to women in some of his songs and poetry” (Hess 403). In cases like this, the sheer intricacy of Tupac’s personality can itself become the focus of interest and celebrity, while the rap talent and lyrics fall secondary—similar to how the poet Sylvia Plath’s suicide increased her work’s popularity.

At points throughout hip-hop history⁶, listeners begin to value the creation of a persona over the content the author has created. Kanye West, for instance, receives attention from the media, cited by CNN in an article regarding a “paparazzi attack” as “a pop culture legend for his outsized behavior, whether it’s in his professional life, his personal life or both at the same time” (Duke). This means the author has created a tension

⁶ In fact, this may have immediately began with NWA, when the lifestyle of gangsta rap became analogous to the rap itself, and people listened because of the novelty of its proclaimed “thug life.”

in his lyrics through the representation of the rapper or the speaker. This can be purposeful, like when Jay-Z claimed in his book, Decoded, “There are sometimes two Jay-Zs when you look at my music” (Jay-Z 129). In other times, the persona can develop throughout albums, as seen in Kanye West’s or Tupac’s works. Thus, we must begin to examine the point where we equate the speaker of each rap—the “nigga” who “had to strong-arm a ho”—with the author: Jay-Z (if that connection happens at all for the reader).

We can turn to Michel Foucault, as well as Roland Barthes and even T.S. Eliot, who speak directly to the connection between the author and his or her works. Foucault, in particular, discusses the personal pronouns and other grammatical signs that are impossible to ignore; how is one supposed to avoid associating Jay-Z with the narrator of “99 Problems” when he uses “I” and “myself”? Foucault answers:

Everyone knows that, in a novel offered as a narrator’s account, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly to the writer or to the moment to which he writes but, rather, to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance (Foucault 385).

Foucault addresses the distance between alter ego⁷ and author, yet in terms of definition and relation to the “personal,” his use of “author” (in this quote) feels particularly liberal in the sense that “author” refers purely to the person writing the work—there is no division between “author” and “person.” In doing this, he unintentionally creates a scope of authorship in regard to how “personal” the content is. However, this “division” between speaker and author that Foucault mentions becomes muddled when we’re not speaking to a blatant fictitious character located in an obviously fictional work. Rap, generally, isn’t

⁷ This works synonymously with “persona” in the sense they’re both fabricated and distanced from the author. The definition and synonyms are addressed in Figure 1.

thought to be fictional, so the distance between the fictitious speaker and the author function isn't so clear. This is partially what makes the idea of persona within rap so intriguing: rappers' personas can sometimes feel fictionalized or exaggerated to the point of caricature, yet they must somehow maintain a sense of realism.⁸

Foucault further complicates the idea of authorship in his description of characteristic traits; his fourth description claims that the author function "does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals" (Foucault 386). In this discourse of authorship, the "selves" refer to the various characters that can be inhabited by voices (an authorial voice or any other kind) during a song or album. Thus, one is left with the possibility that "several selves" may be speaking at once during a rap, even though the rapper uses these selves under the same "I" or "myself." Eminem addresses the concept of several subjects/selves by offering three different names, and consequently, three different identities: Marshall Mathers, Eminem, and Slim Shady.⁹

For both Foucault and T.S. Eliot, "author"¹⁰ constitutes "not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium" (Eliot 42).¹¹ In this way, the author detaches himself or herself from the emotions or events expressed in the work. If we take Eliot's definition of "personality" to include the "person," then along with it comes the person's autobiography and their confessions. With rap's braggadocio and dependence on autobiographies in mind, to separate the "personality" from the rapper, as described by Eliot, would in most cases

⁸ This idea will be discussed in later chapters in the analysis of several rap personas.

⁹ Eminem will be discussed in Chapter 2.

¹⁰ In Eliot's case, he speaks of a poet, which assumes the same title of author, yet speaks particularly to poetry, the same way "rapper" speaks particularly to rap.

¹¹ Personality, for Eliot, means personal emotions, the measure of how "interesting" someone is, "Having 'more to say'" (Eliot 42).

result in falsified content in a rap. So, Foucault and Eliot's concepts of authorship may not necessarily apply to rap, at least in the sense of "personality" and the author's detachment from the work. Even when rappers like Kanye West and Lauryn Hill produce albums with heavily staged and performed songs, most audience members begin to read past the production and performance aspects of it, noticing that the "person" is, indeed, blatantly wearing a "mask". Do these creations of fictional settings and characters depict them as authors of their work? Further, does the creation of fiction within rap separate the person from the persona within the identification of "rapper?"

In order to respond to these questions of authenticity within rap, I frame these questions in the first section of my thesis by starting to answer the theoretical questions regarding authorship, sincerity, authenticity, and the divide of persona versus person. By using Susan Rosenbaum's ideas of sincerity¹² to frame my discussion of rap and hip-hop culture, I am able to address the smaller intricacies that appear within the bigger question: identities shaped by lyrics, personas, and confessions. In order to understand character development of a persona through lyrics, I use some of Rosenbaum's, Foucault's, and Eliot's ideas of sincerity, authorship, and personality as a framework, distinguishing how lyrics alone can begin to shape a persona separate from a person. This both supports and is supported by the claim that there would be no persona if there weren't the actual rap¹³ (its words, phrases, pauses, rhythms, tonalities, song structure, et cetera). This section also discusses rappers' stage names, how these names relate to a rappers' persona and the history of rap personas.

¹² As understood in Rosenbaum's Professing Sincerity.

¹³ Also supported by Judith Butler's theory of performativity, where "performative" is "the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed" (Ugwu).

The next section exemplifies precisely *how* rappers develop their personas, as I simultaneously address issues of sincerity and how these lyrics should be read. However, instead of addressing rappers, in general, I analyze the lyrics of two rappers who have created unique yet iconic personas through their lyrics.¹⁴ Kanye West and Eminem find their place within this section as I pay careful attention to the persona development and their use of confessional lyrics in order to illustrate the conclusions that were reached within section one.

As we follow the persona developments of Kanye West and Eminem, it's worth remembering that these rappers are generally regarded for their personas alone. In the same way most associate Sylvia Plath with her suicide instead of her poetry, most also associate these rappers with parts of their person that have been exploited or confessed sincerely in order to create a persona. We must note that there are differences between the persona and the person, and these differences tie into how the rapper toys with the concept of authenticity throughout his work.

¹⁴ In addition to their performances, marketing strategies, interviews, and celebrity, yet I will mainly focus on the lyrics.

CHAPTER ONE

Understanding Rappers' Persona Creations and Purposes

Rap is a performance; its primary function as a musical genre is to entertain. So, the creation of characters, skits, and theatrics in rap makes sense, since part of the human condition is to find enjoyment in plot and character development. Rappers include fictionalized settings, characters, and personas in their albums as a part of entertainment and keeping up with the theatrics.¹⁵

This tension of authenticity and fiction reveals difficulties that rappers face in their technique. A rapper must strike a balance between appearing authentic and trustworthy, and simultaneously, entertaining his or her audience with interesting narratives and characters. “Performance” and “authenticity” work as paradoxes in this sense: performance indicates “acting” for an audience, while “authenticity” implies a sense of “realness,” with which the speaker doesn’t feel the need to perform for an audience.

As a response of these challenges, and sometimes as a strategy, we often see the collapse of the persona unto the rapper¹⁶. This means a rapper’s created persona, based on fabricated settings, skits, characters, etc., blurs with his or her “person”— his or her real self, or his or her work. At some points in a rapper’s work, we see the creation of the persona represented in a narrative arc or meta-narratively in lyrics. So, how, in their lyrics,

¹⁵ The majority of this constraint of fiction and creation finds its roots in the packaging and marketing in the consumerist society—rap music is, after all, a way for rappers to make money. Nonetheless, I do not want to fully ignore these issues of commodification, consumerism, and cultural appropriation; instead, I’d like to focus solely on the idea of personas, fiction, and character development based on the lyrics.

¹⁶ Meaning “author.” Refer to past Figure 1 for the definition of these terms.

do rappers artfully create personas that are both marketable and in some cases, entirely fictionalized, yet appear authentic?

One way rappers create personas is through the use of “confessional” lyrics, i.e. words that expose parts of a rapper’s autobiography, in turn, making the audience sense the author’s vulnerability. In these confessional lyrics, we can see a parallel between the confessional poets, whom David Haven Blake defines as the “group of poets who in the 1950s and 1960s began to mine their own lives and psyches as the basis of their art” (Blake 717). In using factually accurate autobiographical experiences, rappers and poets can appear authentic in that they aren’t blatantly *inauthentic*—they aren’t totally untruthful. The poets’ or rappers’ truths about their lives, because they seem to be inextricably connected to authenticity and sincerity¹⁷, include themselves in an artist’s work through confessional lyrics.

Yet, the term “confessional,” as Haven Blake goes on to explain, “has always been vague and raised a number of questions about the authenticity of experience in relation to the poet’s persona” (Blake 717). Because of the vagueness and questions of authenticity, this is where a rapper may struggle to create a persona. For example, if a rapper relies on pure honesty (“authenticity” in that regard) yet has had a fairly uneventful or inexperienced life, then the persona will reflect that. However, if a rapper, has had an arduous and dramatic life, he or she can utilize that drama and make it entertaining without having to necessarily lie. Then, the rapper can exploit his or her own life and exaggerate it for marketing purposes, or use it purely for the rhetorical purpose of authenticity.

¹⁷ Although, we see that “authentic” doesn’t necessarily mean true.

1.1. *The Anatomy of an Emcee Name: Personas Through the Years*

Throughout the history of rap, the function of personas has shifted from didactic purposes, being used as caricatures and fabricated characters in order to convey moral messages in narratives, to more dramatic purposes, being used realistically to express social commentary and critiques. These personas have changed in terms of content, lyrics, and media representation, but we can trace and better understand the transformation of personas' function for rappers by analyzing the progression of emcee and rapper names.

In 1973, Jalaluddin Mansur Nuriddin released *Hustler's Convention* under the pseudonym "Lightnin' Rod."¹⁸ While *Hustler's Convention* "isn't rap by definition, it emerges as a primitive form of rap" as Nuriddin uses rhythmic spoken word and sound effects over live background music (Smith). In fact, Nuriddin's professional website uses the URL www.grandfatherofrap.com, referring to himself and the Last Poets as "the pioneers of today's rap" and "the first rap group to be acclaimed by the people (Nuriddin). *Hustler's Convention* presents a series of rapped skits where Lightnin' Rod never speaks as himself (neither Jalal Nuriddin nor his persona of Lightnin' Rod), rather, he impersonates two hustlers, Sport and Spoon (and others with whom they interact). Nuriddin adopts different voices, using various intonations and tropes in order to convey a change from one character or scene to another. In about 30 minutes, Nuriddin caricatures personas of hustlers and pimps, separating himself from the work so the audience understands the fabricated quality of the characters and further, the moral instruction behind the narrative:

¹⁸ Nuriddin was a member of the Last Poets, a group of writers, poets, and musicians from Harlem Writers Workshop in New York who arose from the black civil rights and black nationalist movement.

at the end of the album, the two hustlers' lives no longer appear glamorous or successful, instead, as the song titles express, the "Shit Hits the Fan Again" and they are "Sentenced to the Chair." (Lightnin' Rod).

Nuriddin's intonation changes suggest a change in *voice* and, thus, a change in *character* and/or *persona*. This technique is mimicked by rappers after *Hustlers Convention*; the same way actors change their inflection when changing character, rappers change voice pitches, tones, and accents in order to convey a switch from one persona/character to the next. The shift not only indicates a change in persona, character, and voice, but also signifies a particular attention paid to authenticity and fiction. When a rapper shifts voices, he calls attention to the fact that he is speaking as a persona or character purposely distanced from the person and/or author. In *Hustlers Convention*, Lightnin' Rod creates an immediate distance between persona/character and author in "Sport," where he says, "They called me Sport" (Nuriddin). In later songs, the audience understands the fictionalization in the work based on Nuriddin's voice changes, assuming he is *not* subscribing to a contract of autobiographical authenticity because he is informing his audience, "This is not my voice." This technique is constrained by the rapper's voice capabilities and is only understood through an aural understanding of rap.

However, voice switches can occur in ways *other* than a change in tone, accent, pitch, and enunciation: when a rapper shifts voices, characters, or personas, their rap style may switch, as well. When Eminem raps in his song "Stan," he emphasizes personal pronouns (when rapping as Slim Shady, switching from rapping as the character "Stan") more than he normally does in other songs, placing extra stresses on the pronouns "us," "me," and "you" in the lines:

“And **what’s** *this shit* about **us** *meant* to **be** together?
That type of *shit*’ll make **me** not want **us** to **meet** each other
 I **really** think **you** and your **girlfriend** **need** each other
 or **maybe** **you** just **need** to **treat** her better” (*Curtain Call*).

These lines contrast with Stan’s lyrics and emphasis, where he stresses first and second person pronouns inordinately. Eminem’s style change indicates a corresponding change in speaker. Similarly, dialectical deviations may signify voice changes. For example, Eminem’s lines in “The Real Slim Shady” indicate a deviation from our speaker, Eminem/Slim Shady, and he’s attempting to speak temporarily as “feminist women:” “I’m sick of him / Look at him, walking around grabbing his you-know-what / Flipping the you-know-who.” “Yeah, but he’s so cute though” (*Marshall Mathers LP*). In the song, Eminem not only changes the inflection of his voice, but if Eminem was speaking as *himself* (whether it’s his persona or his real self, Marshall Mathers), he would have substituted “you-know-what” and “you-know-who” for its profane counterparts.

Moreover, Lightnin’ Rod’s name (Jalal Nuriddin’s pseudonym) emphasizes the didactic ideals he demonstrates in *Hustlers Convention*. “Lightnin’” may be a play on “enlightenment,” highlighting the understanding that Sport and Spoon reach in the lines,

“It had cost me 12 years of my time
 to realize what a nickel and dime
 hustler I had really been
 While the real hustlers were rippin off Bens
 From the unsuspecting mens
 Who are programmed to think they can win” (Lightnin’ Rod).

The hustlers undeniably reach a moment of epiphany or enlightenment, understanding that the glory of a gangster lifestyle is short-lived and comes with a consequence. However, “Lightnin’ Rod” may also refer to the dictionary definition of “a person or thing that attracts negative feelings, opinions, etc., thereby diverting them from other targets” (“Lightning

rod”). In this sense of the word, “Lightnin’ Rod” is drawing negative attention to the hustler lifestyle in order to create a moralizing narrative.

Nuriddin’s caricatured personas of hustlers, who were “running through bitches like rags to riches,” have undeniably affected and inspired the personas of later rappers of pimps and players. Even within the names of the rappers who have adopted these personas, we can detect what type of image or personality the artist wants his name to convey. For example, Grandmaster Caz’s name takes a formula like other old school rappers of the Golden Age; “Grandmaster” is boastful, implying skillfulness and experience with emceeing. “Caz,” on the other hand, is short for “cassanova,” a seductive and promiscuous male figure. However, in most of Grandmaster Caz’s raps, he doesn’t speak to the persona of a hustler or pimp that we may think of today. His raps, generally, boast of his rap technique or, like in the song “Too Much,” offer a moral lesson. He criticizes the danger, violence, and drugs associated with the street life, rapping lines like, “Cause there’s too many shootings and not enough ass kicks / Yeah, too many gangsters, and too many thugs / Too many G’s, too many hoods, and too many drugs” (Grandmaster Caz). His persona, although alluding to street life and house parties in his lyrics, never shows through as an overly desirable life, as conveyed in “Too Much.” Instead, his persona seems to perform a moral function similar to the characters in Lightnin’ Rod’s *Hustlers Convention*. In both of these works, the rapper takes on a persona of a gangster or hustler and eventually showcases the downfall of that lifestyle.

At the start, emceeing, as Jeff Chang mentions in Can’t Stop Won’t Stop, was about “distinguishing yourself and your originality above the crowd. It put you on a relentless quest to prove to them that you were bigger, wilder, and bolder” (Chang 111). Other old

school rappers have names that use simple and bragging tactics but, in their raps, they don't attempt to glorify or glamorize their persona's life on the streets. One can see this in the use of "cool" ("kool" or "ice," as in being "cool as ice") in rappers' pseudonyms, like Kool Moe Dee, DJ Kool Herc, LL Cool J, and Ice-T. The "kool" in Kool Herc refers to the cigarettes, which were typically advertised to African Americans as being "cool," hip, and fresh. Similar to these advertisements and the graffiti culture that came out of the same parts of New York City, Chang claims names were created and used to "be known amongst their peers, to be recognized for their originality, bravado, daring, and style" (Chang 74). In the beginning of rap, names spoke true to this desire: rappers wanted to use hyperbolic phrases in their titles to express just how cool they were.

Melle Mel and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five fall into a similar category of using personas for a moralistic purpose, specifically in the song "The Message." While the group's name didn't contain a blatant hyperbole, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five originally focused on drawing a crowd at their performances. It wasn't until 1982, about five years after the peak of phenomena like the b-boy dance, graffiti, MCing, and DJ Kool Herc, that the group released "The Message." While maintaining their personas of hustlers, they simultaneously offered a conscious and moralistic meaning, rapping about the harsh realities of street life. Their "message" was about condemning the hustler lifestyle, yet it subtly offers anti-authority views, alluding to the failing education system ("Got a bum education"), financial authority figures ("The bill collectors"), and the recession ("double-digit inflation"). Precisely where do the function of personas transform, from serving moralistic purposes of denouncing a hustler lifestyle to serving dramatic purposes, often romanticizing the gangster lifestyle?

In the progression of rap from early emcees to gangsta rap, the hip-hop culture was looking for voices for their generation—voices that were found in rappers, who commoditized hip-hop culture. Run-D.M.C. had emerged as an influential rap group, popularizing hip-hop culture and rap for white people: rapping about street life and representing street style in their clothing. However, their lyrics in their first single, “It’s Like That,” followed the conscious rapping tradition of “The Message;” the lyrics had moral instructions and messages about social injustice, following the ethical reasoning behind Run-D.M.C.’s name: “Run” comes from Russell Simmons’ pseudonym, Rev. (short for Reverend) Run. Even though some of Run-D.M.C.’s lyrics condemned the hustler lifestyle (and, in a way, so did their name), their clothing, on-stage and performed personas did not correlate. They commoditized street clothing and style synonymous with the hustler lifestyle not only in their manner of dress, but also in songs like “My Adidas.”

Following Run-D.M.C. and subtle tendencies toward anti-authoritative views, gangsta rap started with Schoolly D and Ice-T but was popularized in groups like Public Enemy and N.W.A. Unlike Run-D.M.C.’s name (or early emcees names), the names of Public Enemy and N.W.A. adopted punk ideals. Bill Stephney, who worked with Def Jam, believed “Public Enemy” “perfectly fit their underdog love and their developing politics” and expressed a level of Black radicalism and Black collectivity that had materialized in the ‘80s.¹⁹ Both Public Enemy and N.W.A. (which stands for Niggaz Wit Attitudes) expressed gangsta rap notions within their names as well as in their lyrics and personas. The group took Run-D.M.C.’s wardrobe and elaborated on preconceived anti-authoritative notions in songs that cemented those ideals, rapping, “Fuck the police coming straight from the

¹⁹ In terms of names, rappers like Afrika Bambaataa, The Roots, and Queen Latifah incorporate African nationalism and Zulu Nation concepts into their rap pseudonyms.

underground / A young nigga got it bad cause I'm brown" (N.W.A.). Songs like "Fuck the Police" from 1988 not only had a harsher and faster tempo, but the lyrics themselves represented a reckless persona of what they perceived as a "Nigga Wit Attitude." They cursed without reconciliation, glorified drugs and crime, and rapped against authority.

Not long after, 2Pac and The Notorious B.I.G.²⁰ rose to prominence in the early- to mid-1990s, further exemplifying the gangsta rap lifestyle in their rap and, eventually, in their sudden murders. But after these rappers were living out their persona in reality (making themselves "authentic", in that regard), other rappers weren't taking on personas or stage names—they weren't "speaking through a blatant mask," so to speak. Lauryn Hill, Kendrick Lamar, Talib Kweli, even Kanye West²¹: none of these rappers changed their names so as to take on a persona separate from their person. Seemingly, when Lauryn Hill raps, her lyrics and conveyed personality stay true to her *real* beliefs, opinions, and mannerisms.

Perhaps these later artists saw the issues of authenticity that arise with taking on a stage name and, eventually, persona: for example, 2Pac (a play on his name, Tupac Shakur²²) grew up studying acting, poetry, jazz, and ballet, and even in his rap albums, often revealed a sense of vulnerability in songs like "Dear Mama" and "Changes." But, these moments of exposure contrast starkly with his pure gangsta rap songs, like "Str8 Ballin'" and "Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z." Notoriously, Tupac was shot and killed in a gang-related battle. Did Tupac/Lesane, the previously intellectual and artistically curious persona,

²⁰ While 2Pac and Notorious B.I.G. didn't have outlandish names, Notorious B.I.G.'s pseudonym spoke to his true physical size: he weighed as much as 300 to 380 pounds.

²¹ Kanye West is a complicated example of this, and he will be discussed in more detail later on.

²² However, his given name was Lesane Parish Crooks, according to several coroner reports after his death (1996).

undertake the gangsta persona of “2Pac,” leading ultimately to his death? Perhaps his story, much like Notorious B.I.G.’s, served as a warning to later rappers: the persona shouldn’t be dangerous, nor should it conflict with your *real* person.

From there, rappers like Lauryn Hill and Talib Kweli unabashedly rapped as themselves, forgoing any blatant caricatured personas and, in the meantime, remained as transparent as possible. Similarly, rappers like Nas, Eminem²³, Dre, and Andre 3000 didn’t necessarily rap as themselves and keep their name, but they didn’t take on full-fledged alter-egos, either. Along the same lines, rap names like “Lil Kim,” “Lil Wayne,” and “The Fat Boys,” which are self-deprecating and non-boastful, follow performance traditions where the name is modest but the performer goes on to pleasantly surprise the audience. These artists may have understood the need to still act in a persona, but ensured that it stayed close to their person, blurring the lines between persona and person. When we hear Dr. Dre rap, is he rapping as Andre Young (his given name), or is he acknowledging the fact that most of his raps are ghostwritten, even though he retains control over lyrical themes? Choosing a stage name that closely resembles one’s real name allows a rapper to preserve a part of her true person and thus, maintain a level of authenticity.

1.2. The Story of a Hustler: Jay-Z

Although Tupac and Notorious B.I.G.’s deaths were catastrophic in the hip-hop community, Jay-Z (Sean Carter) emerged on the scene with *Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life*, cementing his status as a rags-to-riches story in hip-hop. Jay-Z’s other moniker, “J-Hova,”

²³ Eminem is another complex example, because he has several other names he uses to act as other characters while rapping. He will be discussed in chapter two.

“Hova,” or “Hov,” refers to Jehovah, implying Jay-Z²⁴ is the self-proclaimed god of emcees and rappers. His pseudonym imitates his persona—that of a self-made successful man whose priorities have rightfully shifted from drug hustling to his family and entrepreneurial ventures. In a way, the story of his persona echoes the early emcees’ caricatured moral narratives: you can work your way up on the street but at the end of the day, drugs, hustling, and “running through bitches” don’t measure up to a successful and happy life. Jay-Z’s song “30 Something” from 2006’s *Kingdom Come* demonstrates his maturity: “Y’all roll blunts, I smoke Cubans all day...Y’all go to parties to ice grill / I go to parties to party with nice girls” (*Kingdom Come*).

Relative to the gangsta rap image, Jay-Z’s current persona exemplifies a greater level of maturity and refinement. On his earliest 1996 album, *Reasonable Doubt*, Jay-Z rapped, “I talk jewels and spit diamonds,” boasting of his rapping skill and “cashmere thoughts,” but also possibly calling attention to the fact that, just a year or so earlier, he was selling CDs out of his car (*Reasonable Doubt*). But, in his 2013 album, *Magna Carta Holy Grail*, Jay-Z raps, “spent all my euros / on tuxes and weird clothes...I don’t pop molly / I rock Tom Ford,” clearly bragging of his wealth and success (*Magna Carta Holy Grail*). Jay-Z’s albums highlight his rise from rags to riches, bragging about everything possible along the way: if “Hova” can’t be a God of money, then he is a God of rap technique, and vice versa.

However, Jay-Z’s persona addresses the complications between two very different worlds: the world on the streets, living with violence, drugs, and other crime, and the world of Tom Ford, diamonds, and Maybachs. Thus, Jay-Z’s (persona’s) story is that of the hustler

²⁴ The name “Jay-Z” comes from members of his community referring to Carter as “jazzy.” This leads to the question: are stage names given or chosen? If they are given, how does that affect the rapper’s identity and persona?

who did it right—the self-made man. “We heard Melle Mel’s hit “The Message...” and we heard about Run’s *big long Caddy*, but what was missing was what was happening in between those two images—how young cats were stepping through the broken glass and into the Caddy. The missing piece was the story of the hustler” (Jay-Z 10). From having only “cashmere thoughts” to owning actual cashmere and things of value, Jay-Z acknowledges the hard work involved in getting to his financial status in lyrics like, “That’s why they call me ‘Hova’ / I’m far from being God / But I work goddamn hard” (Jay-Z 144). So, although Jay-Z insists on braggadocio, he also focuses on legitimizing his boastfulness and success in his lyrics.

Further, at rare points, Jay-Z utilizes “confessional” lyrics, revealing the gap between his persona and his person (Sean Carter). In “Moment of Clarity,” he raps, “So Pop I forgive you / For all the shit that I live through / It wasn’t your fault / Homie you got caught / And to the same game I fought / That Uncle Ray lost” (Jay-Z 134). Unlike his less personal lyrics that mention the materiality in his life (brand names and other references to his lifestyle), these lines feel exceptionally personal and confessional because of their content and sentimentality. Jay-Z reveals himself in a more vulnerable light by describing a natural hardship of the human condition: death of a family member. Additionally, these lyrics feel choppy and more hard-hitting than other lyrics from the same song where the content reveals less of his personal life: “We as rappers must decide what’s most important / And I can’t help the poor if I’m one of them / So I got rich and gave back / To me that’s the win-win” (Jay-Z 136). In comparison, the previous lyrics discussing Jay-Z’s (Carter’s) personal experience with his father’s death have sharper rhymes (you/through and fault/caught/fought/lost) and carry a severity in the consonance. In a way, these rhetorical

techniques help convey Jay-Z's vulnerability by using hard rhymes to convey emotional pain and loss. In moments of exposure like this, Jay-Z uses confessional lyrics to demonstrate authenticity.

In moments of confession within Jay-Z's lyrics, his case of persona versus person can be compared with Sylvia Plath's, raising the question: how does the audience differentiate between Sylvia Plath's person—one that is typically associated with (and romanticized as) a manic depressive, suicidal poet—with her work as a poet? As Plath "confesses" raw emotions and moments that can be directly related to her autobiography (and, ultimately, her suicide), readers begin to read her poetry strictly through her *person*. Within Jay-Z's rap, as he "confesses" (like in the lyrics about his father's death), he "establishes a contract of factual accuracy...a moral contract he must uphold" (Rosenbaum 198). The audience, then, expects a high level of truthfulness and authenticity in Plath's poetry and Jay-Z's rap, void of dramatization and exaggeration, so they begin to read her poetry in terms of Plath's suicide and they begin to listen to Jay-Z's music according to his hardships.

Yet in comparing the two, there arises the lens of the personal and confessional and how they relate to sincerity—all of which are ideas that have been discussed in poetry since the introduction of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell, yet has not been explored in rap to this point. Between fictionalizing one's autobiography and staying entirely true to it, there lies the issue of exploiting parts of one's life in order to create a greater appeal to an audience (which, undeniably has positive commercial consequences). Further, exploitation of one's life and creation of personas creates a confusion, intentional or not, between the public persona and the artist as a person.

In her book Professing Sincerity, Susan Rosenbaum argues that “sincerity in the romantic and postromantic lyric in many ways was a product of commercial culture: poets who made a living from their writing sold the moral promise that their lyrics were sincere, and engaged this conflict in their work” (Rosenbaum 4). This commercial rise of sincerity carries over to rap, as well, creating anxieties about the commercial nature of sincerity within rap lyrics: audiences are unsure what is actually sincere and what is professed as sincere purely for the sake of money. The work, i.e. the lyrics and rap themselves, seemingly become synonymous with the lifestyle of the rapper, yet audiences may question whether that “collapse” is sincere or motivated by money.

Essentially, Jay-Z’s persona manages to remain authentic—he doesn’t lie about his past—however, his lyrics never feel extraordinarily personal. That, for Jay-Z, has acted as a point of success: his lyrics mainly discuss his lifestyle and his life story, but all of it from a safe distance. His former “street self” is referred to by a now wiser Jay-Z in lines like, “I felt like life was cheating me, for the first time / in my life I was getting money but it was like my conscience was eating me / Was this a lesson God was teaching me? Was he saying that?” (Jay-Z 124). His hustler persona is discussed from a distance as if he’s a character used for moral purposes, similar to Lightnin’ Rod’s *Hustler’s Convention*, exemplifying the moral hardships of a hustler’s life. This is only made possible by his poetics; Jay-Z keeps his audience interested stylistically, making it possible to keep the distance between the persona and the person. By keeping the audience involved in the lyrics’ style, flow, rhythm, and rhymes, the listener focuses on the formal aspects of the rap rather than the content. Thus, Jay-Z doesn’t require an inordinate amount of confessional lyrics or personal information relayed through his lyrics; the audience intrigue happens at a poetic and

stylistic level. They focus less on the message than the way it sounds. Jay-Z doesn't need to resort to dramatic or theatric gimmicks because his flow remains in tact and, as a result, so does his authenticity.

CHAPTER TWO AUTHENTICITY IN PRACTICE

2.1. The Crux of Multiple Characters: Eminem

Eminem is a unique representation of mixed personas, created purposefully and cleverly. Perhaps he is most interesting because he has three carefully crafted personas, whereas most rappers merely have one main persona (i.e. Kanye West) or one main persona separated from their person (i.e. Jay-Z separated from Sean Carter).

Eminem is the stage name for Marshall Mathers, a white rapper from Detroit, and it also tends to be the main persona or identity that the rapper uses in his albums. Eminem's alter ego, Slim Shady, appears in nearly every album by Eminem, and acts as an overtly fictionalized version of Eminem. If we rank these personas or identities in the matter of authenticity or "realness," Marshall Mathers is the most "real" version of the rapper: he has not even changed his name, and identifies with the biographical history of the person (i.e. grew up in Detroit, has a daughter named Hailie, etc.). Eminem, then, is a less realistic version of the rapper, since he changed his name from his original. Lastly, Slim Shady exists as the most fictionalized version of the rapper; when rapping as Slim Shady, Eminem tends to rap with a different style and about darker, more violent, and more twisted subject matter.

In all of Eminem's albums, the rapper includes multiple skits involving other artists; the skits act as introductions or disclaimers regarding his characters and personas. In fact,

on Eminem's first album, his first track is a skit introducing his material,²⁵ claiming the content on the album is not Eminem's, nor is it Marshall Mathers: "This is a public service announcement brought to you in part by Slim Shady. The views and events expressed here are totally fucked...Slim Shady is not responsible for your actions" (*The Slim Shady LP*). He sets the album up to be a work by Slim Shady, although he refers to himself in third person—a total twist on what the audience may expect, leaving the listener unsure of who is actually rapping. His skits, like this brief one, often introduce fictional scenes or characters to the song or the whole album, creating a sense of uncertainty when he is wearing the mask of Slim Shady, or exposing himself as Marshall Mathers. On *Slim Shady LP* and *Marshall Mathers LP*, he even introduces a separate fictional character of Ken Kaniff in his skits (titled "Ken Kaniff" in both albums). In these skits and in other songs, Ken²⁶ appears as a homosexual who mocks Eminem's songs.

With these skits in mind, Eminem proves to be an intriguing investigation into *voices* and how they shape our idea of personas. As mentioned in Chapter One, Eminem manages to make a voice change—and thus, a character switch—on several different levels. He can change his style, as expressed in the lyrics in "Stan" where he places different stresses on various words. He also changes his pitch or accent, playing with the idea of characterization and fiction within rap. The audience understands, upon hearing these voice changes, that Eminem (or Slim Shady or Marshall Mathers) is purposely alternating characters,

²⁵ Many rappers use skits as introductions to their albums, acquainting their listeners to the content on their album, using the skit as an opportunity for a disclaimer or to set the scene (fictional or real) for the album.

²⁶ In *Slim Shady LP*, Ken is played by Detroit rapper Aristotle. In *Marshall Mathers LP*, Ken is played by Eminem.

performing a one-man show. By acknowledging this, Eminem manages to remain authentic while simultaneously channeling fabricated aspects in his songs.

So, despite the titles of some of his albums' that reference his personas (*Slim Shady* in 1999, *Marshall Mathers* in 2000, *The Eminem Show* in 2002, and *Marshall Mathers 2* in 2013), Eminem rarely stays in one character or persona for the entire album, which complicates an understanding of Eminem, Slim Shady, or Marshall Mathers as developing characters. In fact, sometimes it is challenging to keep track of Eminem's personas within songs. In his debut album, *Slim Shady* (which implies he will be rapping as that particular persona), his song "My Name Is" has the lyrics, "99 percent of my life I was lied to / I just found out my mom does more dope than I do / I told her I'd grow up to be a famous rapper / Make a record about doing drugs and name it after her" (*The Slim Shady LP*). These lyrics, because they match biographically with Marshall Mathers', confuse listeners: he calls himself Slim Shady, a fabricated alter ego, yet Slim Shady identifies with Marshall Mathers. For Eminem, the collapse of the created persona upon the rapper happens immediately: listeners cannot separate Eminem from Marshall Mathers, or separate either of these from Slim Shady.

In this scenario, it can allow Eminem more freedom in the media to waver between intensely personal and incredibly offensive.²⁷ In his more serious moments, he reminisces on his abusive past, while in his more lighthearted moments, he insults celebrities and jokes about homosexuality. This strategy also gives him freedom in marketing and from critics: if his lyrics offend people or do not contain artistic merit, Eminem can merely blame his alter ego, Slim Shady.

²⁷ Or he may believe it allows him this flexibility. In actuality, the media does not relieve him of his responsibility to not offend others.

With all the mixture of personas within songs and albums, it is difficult to distinguish Eminem's identity as a rapper or individual. In countless songs, Eminem attempts to blatantly identify himself, expressing his likes (and dislikes), his actions, and who he is as a person/rapper/individual. He raps in "The Way I Am", "I'm not Mr. N'Sync, I'm not what your friends think / I'm not Mr. Friendly, I can be a prick...And I am, whatever you say I am / If I wasn't, then why would I say I am?" (*Marshall Mathers LP*). In this song, Eminem implies that despite his attempts to identify himself, his identity ultimately depends on his listeners. He questions listeners, and very blatantly uses the language of identification "I am" to force readers to question his character.

However, in "Without Me," Eminem raps, "Everybody only wants to discuss me / So this must mean I'm disgusting / But it's just me, I'm just obscene / No I'm not the first king of controversy / I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley / To do black music so selfishly" (*The Eminem Show*). This song surfaces in the next album nearly two later and there is a change in Eminem's rapping style between the first passage from "The Way I Am" and the second passage from "Without Me." Eminem's rhymes in "The Way I Am" aren't perfect: "N'Sync," "think," "Friendly," and "prick." Yet in "Without Me," he seems to be emphasizing rhymes, using more internal and perfect rhymes (rhymes are shown in matching boldface, italics, or underline):

Everybody *only* wants to discuss **me** / So this must **mean** I'm **disgusting** / But it's just **me**, I'm just **obscene** / No I'm not the first **king** of **controversy** / I am the worst **thing** since Elvis **Presley** / To do black **music** so **selfishly**."

This increase in rhymes makes his tone more aggressive, assertive, and confident: he's able to establish his identity via his content, and identify his content via a strong, emphatic form.

Further, Eminem is able to distinguish his identity from other rappers not only in the *content*, but in the *form*, as well. Adam Bradley claims, “Eminem, for instance, had to conceive a bunch of new rhyming words to describe the experiences of a working-class white kid from a trailer park in Detroit who rises to superstardom. Who else would think to rhyme ‘public housing systems’ with ‘victims of Munchausen syndrome?’” (*Poetics of Hip Hop* 56). In unique rhymes, rappers create an identity for themselves based on style and technique. This distinction of one’s style and the strengthening of one’s rhymes can affirm their content. So, in Eminem’s case, if he is attempting to overtly identify himself as “not the first king of controversy” and “the worst thing since Elvis Presley,” his rhymes help uphold and sustain these claims.

Even in terms of linguistic and grammatical content, Eminem claims his identity by subjecting himself to a conversation. These matters of identity and individuality that Eminem attempts to claim for himself, “are constituted as subjects through the discursive formation, a process of subjection in which the individual is identified as subject to the discursive formation in a structure of misrecognition” (Hall 20). Literally, in terms of grammar, Eminem subjects himself to discourse, attempting to recognize and misrecognize himself: he claims what he is “I’m disgusting...I’m just obscene,” yet, he also claims what he’s not, “I’m not the first king of controversy.” In these lines, Eminem talks about himself as a subject, inviting discourse to identify himself as a subject.

Nonetheless, in terms of his persona, he also identifies and subjects himself by naming himself three times: Eminem, Slim Shady, and Marshall Mathers (and in some cases, a fourth: Ken Kaniff). In naming himself three times, Eminem supposedly brings up

three different personas, all presumably classified within a single identity, subject, or author.

Foucault discusses author's names in "What is an Author?," claiming, "an author's name is not simply an element in discourse (capable of being either subject or object, of being replaced by a pronoun, and the like); it performs a certain role with regards to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function" (Foucault 381). This "classificatory function" means to designate all works under a certain name, identifying them with the author. An "author" (or "rapper"), then, doesn't necessarily connote a specific individual, and instead, it can connote several narrators, selves, and subjects, which may be internal (within the speaker) or external (the context or environment of the speaker). All of these confuse the description between the author and the individual. However, how does this change in Eminem's case, where he has three different names? Does this assume three different authors, selves, narrators? Or three different individuals? How do we organize his works, where they are all labeled under "Eminem," yet he adopts different names throughout the works?

Perhaps it is it most logical to start answering these questions in the particular case of Eminem by analyzing his persona throughout his work, looking for a creation of a character, persona development, and consistency of scenes, skits, or personalities throughout his albums. As stated before, Eminem's persona collapses immediately onto his self as a rapper—the designation between author and individual collapses based on lyrical representation. However, as with any artist or writer, the author's identity builds based on his work: changes in style and content can reveal maturation, changes in philosophy, and development of the author's role, let alone the characters that he, himself, has created.

In his book, Eminem addresses his three personae, claiming, “Let’s Just say ‘Just Don’t Give a Fuck’ is Slim Shady. Eminem is ‘Lose Yourself,’ and ‘Mockingbird’ is Marshall. I think those are the most blatant, extreme examples” (Eminem 36). Interestingly enough, these songs happen sequentially: “Just Don’t Give a Fuck” was released in 1999 (*Slim Shady LP*), “Lose Yourself” was released in 2002 (as a single for Eminem’s film, *8 Mile*), and “Mockingbird” was released in 2004 (*Encore*). This seems to show an eventual progression from Slim Shady to Eminem, to Marshall Mathers. Yet this dictates not only a progression in the name, but also in persona: from an “outrageous and antic voice, filled with pop cultural references and descriptions of absurd indulgence,” to “a hungry battle rapper voice,” to his given name and more confessional voice” (*Anthology of Rap* 611).

While each persona (and the development itself) requires analysis and understanding, the word “confessional” seems striking, mainly in its relationship to confessional poetry and poets, i.e. Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell. The issue of persona and authorship is not specific to rap; in confessional poetry, the collapse of a poet’s persona unto their work is utterly unmistakable and unavoidable. This connection seems increasingly interesting, too, based on the parallels between rap and poetry.²⁸ The differences between persona and person, author and individual, or persona and individual, become increasingly important when analyzing confessional works.

Both poets significantly affected the movement of confessional poetry, but Plath’s relationship of author to individual are uniquely relevant to the concept of persona and character development. In the preface to Plath’s *Ariel*, her daughter writes:

²⁸ This clearly leads into a bigger discussion about “what is poetry?” and “what is rap?,” as well as the conversation about rap’s merit to claim a literary classification like “poetry.” I want to avoid these discourses because I am not arguing, necessarily, that rap is literature—instead, I’d like to simply point out the similarities between the two art forms.

It was as if the clay from her poetic energy was taken up and versions of my mother made out of it, invented only to reflect the inventors, as if they could possess my real, actual mother, now a woman who had ceased to resemble herself in those other minds. I saw poems such as “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” dissected over and over, the moment that my mother wrote them being applied to her whole life, to her whole person, as if they were the total sum of her experience (Plath xvii).

Here, not only do we see the creation of persona by the author, but we also see the creation of the author’s persona from the audience and critics, as well. These “inventors,” by perception and analysis of lyrics,²⁹ have the freedom to shape a persona based on biological events or actions—for Plath, that event is her suicide.

For readers of Plath, to separate her work from her suicide can, at some points may seem impossible. In “Daddy,” she wrote, “I was ten when they buried you. / At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do” (Plath). While blatantly dark and despondent, as readers who know Plath *did* try and to die and was eventually successful, it may feel ignorant to not take Plath’s suicide into account.

Similarly, we see the struggle in separating Marshall Mather’s tumultuous early life from these lyrics when Eminem raps, “Mom, I love you, but this trailer’s got / To go, I cannot grow old in Salem’s lot / So here I go—it’s my shot, feet fail me not / This may be the only opportunity that I got” (*Anthology of Rap* 621). These lyrics may flagrantly mention his past, allowing Eminem to rap as “I”—the subject. Here, we identify Marshall Mathers with Eminem, the speaker who claims, “I cannot grow old in Salem’s lot.” This undeniably forms his identity, acting similarly to confessional poetry: readers/listeners cannot separate the confessions within the lyrics from the biography of the author.

²⁹ And, naturally, the media and representation of the author in the public sphere. Again, this takes away from the power of the lyrics themselves and lends itself to a sociological or cultural analysis, instead of an analysis focused on the lyrics.

With this in mind, despite his fabricated persona of Slim Shady, even when he falls into this persona, he raps, “Admit it, fuck it, while we coming out in the open / I’m doing acid, crack, smack, coke, and smokin dope then / My name is Marshall Mathers, I’m an alcoholic (‘Hi, Marshall’) / I have a disease and they don’t know what to call it” (*Slim Shady LP*). By openly classifying himself as Marshall Mathers and claiming alcoholism (which, at some points, Mathers has struggled with), it becomes more difficult to separate his confession, albeit aggressively worded, from the individual and the biography of the author.

Eminem’s struggle for authenticity exists on a level other than his alter egos and various personae; as a white man in a genre that is a “black form,”³⁰ he needed to prove himself racially and socioeconomically, too. Yet, Eminem defied these racial barriers because while hip-hop originally emerged as a strictly black form, he was able to confront the concepts of authenticity that are tied to African American rhetoric “in which the authority to speak is negotiated through claims to knowledge gained through lived experience” (Hess 375). Thus, in his *actual* authenticity of his claims and beliefs in his lyrics, he was able to bypass the original standard of race in order to gain authority and credentials as a white rapper.

These truly authentic claims in his lyrics are those concerning Marshall Mathers’ life: his upbringing in a trailer park, his difficulties raising his daughter, his relationship with his mother, his drug addictions, and other struggles. Even though Eminem creates layers of masks and personas atop his real person (Marshall Mathers), he is able to

³⁰ Mickey Hess, in “Hip-hop Realness and the White Performer,” claims “Hip-hop music is a black form, given the involvement of African Americans in its creation, and because its concepts of authenticity are so tied to the roots of its culture” (375).

successfully create a fabricated persona because of his sincere person. When he raps as Marshall Mathers (or from Marshall Mathers' experience), the audience doesn't question the autobiographical events or claims because they are proven to be true. Similarly, when he raps as Slim Shady, the audience understands that Marshall Mathers has put on the mask of his alter-ego. And, when these personas are not entirely clear in his rapping, the audience still doesn't question his authenticity; instead, the audience understands it as Eminem's complex character displayed in the rap.

2.2. "I Am the Nucleus:" The Persona of Kanye West

The description of a Kanye infatuated with himself, his money, and his status shouldn't strike his listeners—or any hip-hop fan, for that matter, as a new concept by 2013. Braggadocio has remained one of the most prominent topics in rap lyrics. Yet, Kanye has brought a new twist to the idea of self-inflation—one of a complex speaker who is aware of political and social issues. But Kanye presents himself as much more than a conscious yet self-aggrandizing rapper: he purposely toys with the concept of masking himself, forcing the inability of his audience to tell where his person ends and his persona begins. Unlike other rappers who find a persona to convey and stick with it, as Molly Lambert from Grantland claims, "Rather than getting stuck in any one static Kanye persona, he's allowing the "Kanye West" persona to continually evolve" (Lambert). So, the main questions for Kanye are: *what* is Kanye's persona, *how* can we understand its evolution, and *is* it authentic³¹?

³¹ Or, *where* can we find the separation between his persona and his person?

When audiences first met Kanye West (his 2004 debut album, *The College Dropout*), he immediately rapped his intentions on “All Falls Down,” saying, “We all self-conscious, I’m just the first to admit it” (*Anthology of Rap* 706). Yet underneath this self-consciousness lies a hyper-self-awareness, one that understands the irony in his messages. As Bradley states, “the irony of these comments is apparent in light of Kanye’s notoriously outsized ego, and yet he does project a common *persona* in times in his rhymes, even if he as a *person* is far from it” (*Poetics of Hip Hop* 706). From Kanye’s first album, then, audiences begin to credit him with authenticity because he has appealed to the audience’s expectations of authenticity and sincerity. In revealing himself as self-conscious (with the formal elements to vouch for his insecurity³²), Kanye presents his vulnerability.

His admittance of his self-consciousness is one of the few places where audiences sense Kanye’s vulnerability and “confessions.” From then on, his confessions come in less “personal,³³” yet more socially- and politically-aware statements. Kanye is able to make this transition, however, because of his immediate authenticity. As Rosenbaum claims, Kanye has established “factual accuracy” within his lyrics because he has used a “biographically grounded voice” (Rosenbaum 198). Thus, even though Kanye isn’t claiming autobiographical events (other than the college drop-out aspect), he conveys sincerity through his exposure to his emotions. Because he creates that standard—the “contract,” as

³² The un-rhyming and rhythmic technique in this line sounds overtly awkward in the song in order to reflect the theme itself, displaying a vulnerable Kanye, because they are not grounded in a strong, rhythmic, rhyme-oriented foundation. These lyrics don’t have the formal strength of perfect rhymes or perfectly metered lines, thus, they can possibly convey Kanye’s authenticity.

³³ Referring to my definition of “personal” meaning “true, real, and sincere to one’s autobiography.”

Rosenbaum calls it—the audience enters the mindset of believability: regarding Kanye’s lyrics as authentic, albeit impersonal.

Kanye represents a complicated and intricate persona, despite its strength in the media; he represents a hypocrite. At times, he uses irony to convey a split message about our society’s obsession with consumerism, materialism and racism. While attempting to display the moral wrongness in consumer culture, he falls into consumerist and materialist conventions in both his lyrics and in his real life. This message spans from his earliest album, 2003’s *College Dropout*, when he raps, “Drug dealer buy Jordans, crackhead buy crack / and the white man get paid off of all of that / But I ain’t even gon’ act holier than thou / ‘Cause, fuck it, I went to Jacob with twenty-five thou” (*Anthology of Rap* 706). And again, in 2013’s *Yeezus*, when he raps, “I throw these Maybach keys / I wear my heart on the sleeve / I know that we the new slaves / I see the blood on the leaves” (*Yeezus*). In both of these passages, Kanye identifies himself as a critic of the consumer culture, while simultaneously buying into it. Hip-hop scholar Tessa Brown asks in her article, “Yeezy Rising,” “He’s still preaching the same song. We’re all participating in the systems that enslave us. ‘Not for sale,’ his video says. Of course he’s for sale. But aren’t you? Aren’t we all?” (Brown). Then, is Kanye the hypocritical preacher³⁴?

If he’s outwardly and obviously hypocritical—which, he absolutely demonstrates in media portrayal, stage presence, interviews, and lyrics—then, is he still authentic? George Ciccariello-Maher claims, “What does West’s approach to this materialism of conspicuous

³⁴ Regarding Kanye’s off-stage representation, Brown goes on to argue, “Richard Roeper told Kanye to “stop bitching....nobody embraces capitalism, consumerism and crass commercialism more than Kim and Kanye.”” Yes, Kim Kardashian’s partner’s new video debuted on Wrigley Field, on a Prada store, on the tony Crown Fountain. But Big Money’s complicity in the debut of “New Slaves” wasn’t ironic, it was the point” (Brown).

consumption indicate? Strikingly, he recognizes from the very beginning the inauthenticity of such a position, the contradiction it entails” (Ciccariello-Maher 387). He purposely creates a muddled persona—one conflicted by his own beliefs, thus making it difficult for others to “label” him or categorize him under a specific identity. Yet, although Ciccariello-Maher claims this tactic to be inauthentic, Brown argues that West “is aware of the dynamics of his celebrity” and the perceived inauthenticity, using this as a tool for what we can imagine will be his persona development — just another reason for his audience to buy into Kanye, who is for sale (Brown).

However, setting and album narratives remain interesting aspects in Kanye’s development of his persona, and they play a large part in the convoluted nature of his character. To begin with, *The College Dropout* initially locates itself at a college graduation: background vocals and strings set the scene, as does a narrator who orders Kanye to sing something hopeful and inspiring for the graduating class. Immediately, Kanye raps “We Don’t Care,” a song with a mixed message about taking pride in a street education, ignoring authority, and instead, becoming a self-made man without a solid education.

In “All Falls Down,” his first verse raps about a woman who drops out of college, and in this storytelling, he adopts an authorial voice. His persona at this part mimics that of Lightnin’ Rod from *Hustlers Convention*: he’s the one telling the story in a didactic manner. West raps, “She had hair so long that it looked like weave / Then she cut it all off, now she look like Eve / And she be dealing with some issues that you can’t believe / Single black female addicted to retail and well...” (*The College Dropout*). Here, Kanye demonstrates a sardonic and critical voice, conveying his contempt for the female college dropout character. We can sense this disdain in his diction and the narrative development from the

beginning of the stanza, but also in the way the word “well” trails off at the end of the verse, suggesting that the audience should have a preconceived notion of Kanye’s disapproving opinion.

Yet, Kanye West dropped out of college, himself, so are we meant to apply these criticisms to Kanye as a *person*, as well? Where do we separate Kanye as a *person* from Kanye as a *persona*? This issue follows a similar literary question of: where do we separate an author’s biography from their work? Bradley claims “rap lyrics are so closely bound to the image and identity of the performer that the very idea of a distinction seems counterintuitive...Perhaps it is the assumption of reality behind the lyrics” (*Poetics of Hip Hop* 76). This assumption isn’t arbitrary; as mentioned before, McLeod proved that rappers tend to refer to themselves and claim to speak from experience, and Rosenbaum argued for the “contract” of authenticity that audiences subscribe to. Thus, Kanye furthers the tension between reality/*person* and fiction/*persona* with the addition of the fictional setting of a college graduation, forcing the audience to make a conscious decision as to whether or not they subscribe to Kanye’s didacticism—or, to Kanye’s message, in general.

Along these lines, Kanye’s next two albums dealt with a theme of education: *Late Registration* released in 2005 and *Graduation* released in 2007. *Late Registration* incorporates fictional skits involving a fake black fraternity, “Broke Phi Broke.” Kanye creates fraternity brothers who enjoy living without money or consumerist possessions and, eventually, they expel him from the fraternity for indulging in these “luxuries.” This fictitious group is meant to highlight Kanye’s socially competitive “mad grab” toward material things, a feature that typically defines “success” in our society. Kanye plays with the fictional scenes in order to display his own authenticity in contrast; he demonstrates

the mask of fiction that overlays the album, yet simultaneously speaks without a mask, addressing beliefs that, presumably, are his own.

Unlike *Late Registration* and *College Dropout*, *Graduation* is completely devoid of skits and instead, delves into introspection. Each song carries a unique narrative in which Kanye fits, either directly as the protagonist, or allegorically, like in “Barry Bonds,” where Bonds serves as a metaphor for Kanye’s ability to create hip-hop hits. Kanye directly addresses his creation of his persona in “Everything I Am,” rapping “I never be as laid back as this beat was / I never could see why people reach a / Fake ass façade that they couldn’t keep up... Everything I’m not made me everything I am” (*Graduation*). In these lines and generally throughout the album, Kanye’s introspection, revelatory personal narratives, and use of emotion blend his *persona* with *person*, blurring the lines between Kanye as a created character and Kanye as a person. These lines feel particularly confessional for Kanye (especially compared to his later, more political work). They hint at sincerity because they express emotions in a less declarative and aggressive manner than what the audience is used to, relative to his other lyrics. Again, in moments like this, he reclaims his authenticity, aware of the audience’s expectations and the contract of factual accuracy to which he had submitted himself.

Assuming Kanye’s use of fictional settings is deliberate, we must turn toward Kanye’s most recent album, *Yeezus*, where he again abandons the use of fictional skits and settings. However, Kanye creates a less overt setting with his use of music and sampling; his album seemingly takes place in a dark, industrial, and electronic musical background. With this in mind, Kanye’s lyrics in this context liken him to a hostile, underground leader. Because of this (his mysterious and outlandish setting), his persona development feels

entirely blatant and theatrical, toeing the line between inauthentic and authentic. The audience cannot separate Kanye's farcical performance from what should be perceived as authentic or sincere.

His previous solo album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, displayed seemingly authentic, confessional, and vulnerable lyrics like, "I'd rather be by my fucking self / Till about two a.m., and I call back / And I hang up and I start to blame myself / Somebody help" (*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*). In an interview with the New York Times, Kanye later referred to this album as his "long, backhanded apology...I was like 'Let me show you guys what I can do, and please accept me back'" (Caramanica). If it was backhanded, most listeners and fans didn't care or didn't understand; we agreed to the contract of authenticity. Kanye *felt* authentic in his confessional lyrics, so we accepted his apology and signed the contract once again.

In 2013, Kanye West (sometimes referred to as "Ye") released the album, *Yeezus*. The album title immediately sparked controversy because of its religious implications, and this attention eventually drew a large amount of critical analysis on his lyrics and rapping technique. Yet more than that, the title itself accomplished a performative function; the audience began to expect an eccentric and inflated Kanye to work as the narrator. In particular, his song "I Am a God" served as a melodramatic enunciation of Kanye as a narcissistic and greedy caricature. In the song, he raps:

*I am a god
Hurry up with my damn massage
Hurry up with my damn ménage
Get the Porsche out the damn garage
I am a god
Even though I'm a man of God (Yeezus).*

Kanye distinguishes himself as a lowercase-g god³⁵, while still elevating his status above mortal, powerless humans. He demands luxuries toward which he seemingly feels lackluster: his massage, his ménage, his Porsche. The repetition of “damn” and the rhymes of “God,” “massage,” “ménage,” and “garage” are meant to stress feelings of discomfort and confusion among his audience; his debauchery and jaded feelings set him apart from what we’d expect from a God: modesty, patience, and appreciation. In moments like this, the audience may recognize Kanye wearing the mask of his persona, speaking through it. However, this doesn’t feel entirely palpable because, unlike Eminem, Kanye doesn’t change voices, content matter, or names. Thus, the division between his persona and person feels ambiguous, yet the development of his persona is incredibly apparent.

This persona creation, whether it be the Kanye as a god or the luxurious, over-indulgent Kanye, feel theatrical yet purposeful. Yet, his persona creation is not as obvious as the Slim Shady mask that Eminem uses: he doesn’t utilize a stage name or change voices throughout his rap albums. Kanye forces his audience to question whether or not he has put on a mask of an outrageous, fabricated persona. In this way, we understand that his use of the confessional may purely be a device to subscribe to his contract of authenticity—a way to blur the lines of Kanye’s person and persona. He somehow manages to develop an ostentatious persona that is unaffected by whom his “person” is. Kanye’s persona and person fully mesh, seamlessly becoming one and the same for his audience. Because this happens, the audience recognizes the authenticity of his persona through the sincerity of the person.

³⁵ This is not only understood when reading the lyrics, but he is not referring to himself as uppercase-g “God” because he uses the article “a” before the term.

However, during his 2013 tour for *Yeezus*, Kanye donned a literal mask while performing, begging the question: why? Perhaps the mask was an attempt to hide the “person” so that we can only see his persona—that is, force us to see his literal persona of Kanye West, the one who is rapping, and not Kanye West, the person. He understands that, in Greek, “persona” means “mask,” and he is subsequently challenging our expectations, forcing us to question his authenticity. So, when he screams eerily and vulnerably in “Black Skinhead,” we have to make the conscious choice whether we associate it with his person’s cry for help (as he asked for in his previous album) or his persona’s cry for attention. Or, we could associate his screams with his interview with the New York Times, where he claims, “I want to tell people, ‘I can create more for this world and I’ve hit the glass ceiling.’ If I don’t scream, if I don’t say something, then no one’s going to say anything” (Caramanica). So, even though he’s wearing a mask, was his onstage scream a reference to a cry for attention or help? Regardless, whom are we helping: his person (the unmasked Kanye) or his persona (the masked)?

Viewing Kanye develop as a character means to take into account his use of fictional settings and narratives. He has progressed from the leader of a collegiate graduating class to a leader of an underground movement, from a self-deprecating college dropout to an outspoken corporate/anti-corporate king, and from a common man to a self-aggrandizing and narcissistic caricature: a “god.” Kanye’s authentic voice is unwavering throughout each album and if we view his albums from start to finish (from *College Dropout* to *Yeezus*) as a narrative in and of itself, we see the clash of characters—both fictional and real.

CONCLUSIONS

Like most other song traditions, rap isn't categorized as "fiction" or "nonfiction." However, beside the occasional rap album featuring a strongly caricatured persona or fictionalized setting, there has yet to be a rap album featuring purely fictional voices or characters: a dramatic, theatrical rap album. Why is this? Is there truly enough to say based on reality that rappers have no need to delve into explorations of fictional and dramatic characters? Or, perhaps, is there a constraint on their communication: form and/or authenticity? The three rappers (Jay-Z, Eminem, and Kanye West) I have analyzed help clarify potential responses to these questions based on their experiences dealing with authenticity and fiction.

As explained before, Jay-Z's persona has remained fairly static throughout his career. Unlike Kanye's or Eminem's, alter egos or an evolution of character do not complicate Jay-Z's persona³⁶. Rather, the persona of Hova endures as a self-made man concerned mostly with wealth and its correlations; we see that although his persona is sometimes hyperbolic in its braggadocio, it rarely, if ever, discusses conscious or confessional matters. Similarly, his rap technique and style echo his persona: his style is smooth, slow, simple, clear, and ultimately, powerful. His persona is *not* concerned with issues of authenticity: Jay-Z raps in the space between personal/confessional and dramatic/fictional.

³⁶ As mentioned in Chapter One, Jay-Z has shifted his focus from getting rich to being a smart businessman and money manager, even delving into sensitive subjects with his daughter and wife.

Eminem, on the other hand, toys with both spaces of personal and fictional. Although his personas remain steadily angry and rebellious, with three separate characters to “mask” himself, he manages to rap authentically while simultaneously playing with fictional concepts. His lyrics and rapping technique highlights his nuanced performances of his created personas, forcing his audience to question (and pay particular attention to) when and why he switches from Slim Shady to Eminem to Marshall Mathers.

Further, Kanye West provides a perpetually rich and evolving persona who deals steadily with the concepts of fiction and authenticity within that *one* persona. Less blatantly than Eminem, he forces his audience to question where the line exists between fiction and reality, and if it’s possible to remain authentic when exploring both realms. The persona is hard to separate from Kanye’s person—he rarely refers to personal and confessional aspects and, instead, builds his persona around the *impersonal* (yet, not necessarily inauthentic).

However, in terms of an unlimited span of creative possibilities, these persona creations feel particularly limited. There has yet to be an album that fully addresses the line between fiction and reality, completely disregarding any concepts of or contracts to authenticity at all. There is, of course, the probability that, purely in reality alone (in remaining tied to authenticity), rappers have enough material to discuss in their albums. Yet, there are issues with this claim. Firstly, rappers akin to Kanye West and Eminem have already started experimenting with expanding outside of reality, crossing over into fiction. Secondly, Jay-Z, a rapper who does *not* extend into the realm of fiction and, instead, deals solely with reality, has continued to rap similar lyrics year after year. His most recent album, *Magna Carta Holy Grail*, received exceptionally poor reviews from critics and fans

alike, encouraging Jay-Z to return to retirement and stop rapping the same story of a rags-to-riches, self-made man.

These personas, while complex, aren't necessarily unique in their stories, especially Jay-Z's story of wealth and Kanye's story of narcissism. In fact, as a whole, these three have generic personas in terms of their stories. What makes them unique is not only their self-directed irony, but their treatment of their personae throughout their rap career: it's not *what* they're saying, but *how* they're saying it. In their own way, they each experiment stylistically with how to convey their story until, presumably, they run out of ways they can do so successfully and authentically. The personas, then, act as vehicles (based on what's real/authentic in the rapper's experience) from and within which he can rap. When these personas are predictable and formulaic and audiences no longer listen for the message, then, they listen for the flow, style, rhymes, and original expression.

But, how many times can an audience hear the same story in similar³⁷ ways before they become bored of the monotony within the genre? How many times can an audience hear Jay-Z's story of self-determination before it feels trite — likewise with Kanye's narcissism and Eminem's recurring anger that emerges in both Marshall Mathers and Slim Shady, as well? Certainly, if the narrative doesn't change, the lyrics constrained by that narrative³⁸ don't vary much, either. Thus, is it possible that, on some level, rappers are inhibited by the limitations of authenticity? By "limiting" and "inhibiting," I do not intend to set up a binary between authenticity and conventionality. However, this is a question to be

³⁷ Similar in that rappers, generally, do not switch genres.

³⁸ Meaning, in this case, the rapper's autobiographical story; his or her life narrative.

raised when rap albums³⁹ and rappers generally stay away from entirely fictional albums, especially when remembering that rap (or, recorded rap, rather) is tied to primitive forms, like *Hustlers Convention*, where the complete album includes a rapper roleplaying, stepping into roles of various characters in order to successfully convey a narrative. After *Hustlers Convention*, there have been no rap albums that emulate a fictional story with fabricated characters performed by the rapper: why?

Rap albums have, since *Hustlers Convention*, relied on lyric modes rather than dramatic ones, following Aristotle's concepts of narrative, dramatic, and lyric poetry⁴⁰: "*Dramatic* poetry is *never* in the voice of the poet; all of its lines are created to be spoken by actors personifying characters. *Narrative* poetry *may* be told in the poet's voice but may also contain dialogue spoken by characters. *Lyric* poetry—supposedly—is *always* in the poet's voice" (Smith). This may be one reason why rappers have deviated from the Lightnin' Rod convention of fictional narratives told through characters. And it's a possible explanation for why the dramatic mode hasn't been explored much in terms of fabrication and why the role of a dramatic poet, who *never* raps in his own voice, has been ignored. When considering the dramatic possibilities, the next question we must raise is: why was there a switch from a dramatic mode to a lyric mode?

The answer can possibly be found in the investigation of identity and performance, as described by John Brockway Schmor, that happens right around the time of the emergence of hip-hop and rap into a commercialized scene:

"It is this crisis of identity, as an exhausted problem, which forms the common focal point of confessional performance in the 1980s. Combining dramatic confession and

³⁹ Speaking to commercial rap albums. There are incredible amounts of underground hip hop albums that I have yet to discover.

⁴⁰ And following Macklin Smith's application of these modes to rap music.

solo theatricality, confessional performance of the 1980s purposely confuses conventional distinctions between dramatic fiction and theatrical event, between character and actor, but especially between ‘true self and identity’” (Schmor 159). It is this separation and confusion between the “true self and identity” that Schmor references that may have fueled the need for authenticity and lyric mode within rap—the same way it encouraged confessional modes in poetry.

Perhaps it is not a matter of identity crises; it’s possible that rappers are, and always have been, aware that they tie their rap persona tightly to their *selves* and their person. Rap, for the artists making the music, may be entirely about reality, regardless of whether it’s a skewed and warped version of reality that they convey via personas. Rappers may see (and perpetually *want* to see) rap as only a form utilizing purely lyric and confessional modes, keeping it “human,” as Jay-Z writes:

“But this is one of the things that makes rap at its best so human. It doesn't force you to pretend to be only one thing or another, to be a saint or a sinner. It recognizes that you can be true to yourself and still have unexpected dimensions and opposing ideas. Having a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other is the most common thing in the world. The real bullshit is when you act like you don't have contradictions inside you, that you're so dull and unimaginative that your mind never changes or wanders into strange, unexpected places” (Jay-Z 25).
If rap is a way for rappers to stay human and work out the real contradictions inside their selves, then rap may stay authentic, tying personas to persons and confusing the distinctions of the two identities along the way.

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