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Go Craft Yourself:
Conflict, Meaning, and Immediacies Through
J. Cole's "Let Nas Down"

"The past is always up for grabs"
—Dan McAdams

It begins when it gets back to you that your idol heard your first radio single, and he said the song was "shit." This same idol, Nas, once met you, J. Cole, when you were underground, putting out mixtapes, and he actually said he was a fan of *yours*, of *your* work. But with your greatest triumph, finally understanding radio well enough to put out a song commercial enough to greenlight a studio album, you suffer the paradoxical reality that with triumph comes tragedy. You have choices still, of course: you could act out, speak out, make your idol your rival and potentially damage the relationship forever, or you could do what artists do, what life writers do—let this new intense reality, this conflict, with all its biting potential meanings, so marinate in and around you that you come to such *eventual* immediacy that you put out a song, "Let Nas Down," that so defines who you are that you write, "If I should pass, please let this be my last essay." It seems J. Cole knows what all life writers know, or should know: if triumph can beget tragedy, then surely, in this world of multiple meanings, of crafting words and worlds, tragedy can beget triumph as well.

As I bring "Let Nas Down" into my introductory writing classes for us to study, I find myself wondering about the role of the life writer in a world where people seem so entrenched in and by their own ideologies. Anyone with a watchful eye and a social media account can see how divided most of us are. It feels, at times, that the world is stuck in J. Cole's phase one of immediacy: each of us saying wild things in defense of ourselves, our interests, our own hurt feelings. Twitter, as well as other forms of social

media, has fostered this cult of immediacy as well as asked us to consider modes and forms of what constitutes personal life writing. Thus, one role of life writing may be to remind each of us that a first impulse is not the only impulse, a first immediacy, no matter how seemingly pressing, is not the only immediacy. When we feel trapped in conflict, as life writers, we can be reminded that the other side of conflict is meaning, is triumph, is the power to define our lives and thinking. With life writing, there are always potentials to be explored. There are nuances to be known. In being life writers, we learn that some emotions are meant to be owned, some to be tried on, and some to be passed over altogether. Our stories, though impacted by the tragedies around us, remain ours for the telling. That is empowering. But it doesn't start on the page. It starts with crafting our lives, with what we believe life to be *and* what we believe life *could* be. And when it seems easier to live and write out of our worst impulses? We must remember the fluidity of life writing, where we can listen before we speak, consider and craft, listen again, *reconsider*, *recraft*.

For the last three years, teaching college-level English, I've found myself standing in front of groups of eighteen-year-olds, in the second week of the semester, breaking down J. Cole's "Let Nas Down." We get into some basics of writing, like why J. Cole begins a song called "Let Nas Down" by saying, "I used to print out Nas raps and tape 'em up on my wall" (to show he was a fan, to demonstrate the longevity of that fandom, etc.), but then we move to a part that I like to tease out, to get them, these potential life writers, in rhythm *saying* and *understanding*. I reveal a list of J. Cole quotes about Nas, all in this single song, and I read a line, "Long live the idols may they never be your rivals," and ask students if this is positive or negative towards Nas. Hesitantly, they say "positive."

So the teasing out begins.

"Well, if this line is positive, it means all the lines about Nas are positive, right? So we can quit now?"

Slowly, a few say, as if asking, “No?”

I foreground some information before I read another line. It’s become my favorite line to read because, one class, one semester, after hearing the background and then the line, let out a collective “ooh” that you just can’t script. While Nas is known as a conscientious rapper, he did put out a song in 2000 called, “You Owe Me,” that critics panned as pandering to the lowest common denominator to try to get a radio hit. Then I ask, “Is this line positive or negative towards Nas: ‘I couldn’t help but think that maybe I had made a mistake. I mean, you made “You Owe Me”...I thought that you could relate.’”

Someone in the class yells, “Hypocrite.”

Ooh.

In an interview with *Fuse*, J. Cole talks about what it was like writing “Let Nas Down” and it’s a useful exercise to get deeper. I divide the class in half and ask the students on my left to write down every word or phrase they hear that sounds meaningful, like triumph. Students on my right write down every word or phrase they hear that sounds like conflict, like tragedy. Students on my left, my triumph and meaning people, call out words and phrases like, “I felt like I beat the game” and “When I made that song, it felt like a triumph,” and people on my right, my tragedy and conflict people, shout out phrases and words like, “We put out the single, and it was the worst response” and “It hurt really. On the inside. Because I idolized Nas.”

Sometimes spurred by me and sometimes by the students, we get to these marvelous words or phrases that do what our minds tell us can’t be done: they overlap. When J. Cole says about “Let Nas Down,” that it was “a venting song,” is that tragedy or triumph, conflict or meaning? When J. Cole is told what Nas said about Cole’s radio song: “Why’d he do that? Don’t he know he’s the one? He ain’t gotta do that?” is that a celebration of who Nas views J. Cole to be or a source of anger for how Nas judged his

work? And when J. Cole says, “I understood why people [reacted negatively to the radio song], but it still hurt,” he really does understand *why* but it also really does *hurt*.

And this is where I hope to get students, and where I hope to keep myself, understanding the particular place in the world where life writers exist. We are always seemingly living backward in order to understand the paradoxes that move us forward: we let tragedy linger, in all its emotions and challenges, because it leads the way to triumph. In reverse order, we brace ourselves at the moment of triumph, because we know tragedy is on the circular return. We, in living our writing and writing our lives, understand that meaning and conflict are two sides of the same coin, and it is that coin that brings us into our most urgent work. It is this meaning/conflict coin that brings us not just to immediacy, but to a *variety of immediacies*, that we must feel our way through—scribble down or forget, let linger or drown out, construct and publish or wait and see if another, better, more fitting immediacy is still waiting to be turned over.

In teaching life writing, I’ve come to realize that my goal is often opposite the goal of many in English Studies. Many are desperately seeking to lead students to the page, to the essay, begging them to craft something. I seek, conversely, to reveal to them that the potentials of the page are already with them in every moment of their lives, in every choice of thought and action they make. I am not asking, then, that they *do* life writing. I am asking that they *be* life writers. I am not asking them to simply craft the essay. I am asking them to craft their lives. The stories we craft on paper, then, are the ones that have earned their way there. We spend time with them, in multiple forms, from multiple angles, because they gripped us and would not let us go. In this regard, we craft the essay in order to continue crafting our lives, and we craft our lives in order to continue crafting the essays that will become our lives.

This changing disposition, this crafting of a life, was demonstrated by one of my students, who, nine months after she wrote the assignment that follows the J. Cole activity, a “conflict letter” (where

students write a letter about an unresolved conflict as if it is their last chance to address the issue), she sent me a message the following summer. This student, nine months prior, addressed her “conflict letter” to her then-boyfriend, who was soon to join the U.S. Air Force. Nine months later, she wrote to me, saying:

So, remember those letters we wrote? Well, I took some time to rewrite the letter for [my ex-boyfriend] and make it relevant to today’s situation. And since I promised him forever ago that I would give it to him, I grabbed some lunch with him to catch up before he sets sail for the academy. I gave him the letter. Just wanted to send you a note about it in gratitude because he just read it and texted me saying how much it meant to him. Thanks for being the person to show all of us that words are truly special and that *a school assignment isn’t just a school assignment*. Thanks for always being that teacher to *make class relate to real life* because here I am, 9 months later, *still connecting* to our English 101 class...and that I believe is truly remarkable” (emphasis mine).

This student, unbeknownst to her, has adopted what I call *a living composition*, a composition that includes writing but is pushed to continuation by a crafting and *re*crafting of the self. She had lunch with her ex-boyfriend. She could have spoken anything she needed to say. But instead of composing her assignment for class and only for class, she made writing a part of her lived experience. Not only that, but without need of a teacher, she knew that the immediacy of nine months prior was not the immediacy of that summer. She rewrote the letter. She “made it relevant to today’s situation.”

J. Cole, when first hearing what Nas had to say about his radio release, said, “I [was] getting mad defensive. I [was] saying wild things that I ain’t gonna say on camera.” Hip hop has a history of beefs. It is part of the fabric of the music. J. Cole could’ve said those ‘wild things’ over a beat, could’ve started a war with Nas. And yet, it was almost two years after the incident before “Let Nas Down” was released. How many emotions did J. Cole sit with? How many words got deleted? Edited? How many immediacies did he allow to wash over his body, over his mind, over his lived experience, before he wrote the song that so

captured his conflict and meaning? Enough that his idol responded with a song, “Made Nas Proud,” of which J. Cole says to *Vibe*, “[Nas] felt that it was important enough to respond. And to create a moment, like people [were] calling me [saying], ‘When I heard Nas’ part I cried.’”

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