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Persona in Progression: A Look at Creative Nonfiction Literature in Civil Rights and Rap

Most of rap's stories are neither incisive social commentaries nor thug fantasies. Like most stories throughout the history of human civilization, most of rap's stories are occasions to imagine alternate realities. To hear rap's storytelling at its best is to experience liberation from the constraints of everyday life, to be lost in the rhythm and the rhyme. Rap's greatest storytellers are among the greatest storytellers alive, staying close to the tones of common speech even as they craft innovations on narrative form. Rap's stories demand our attention not simply as entertainment, but as art. (Bradley 158)

Persona is a narrative creation that paints a picture of a character composed of many elements, and those elements can be crafted by the author, or shaped by the personality of the character that was formed by the forces surrounding them during their development within the story. In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Alex Haley was careful not to go too far outside convention when writing the life story of the civil rights era icon. In and of itself, Malcolm X's life in narration is an adventure and story worth reading. It gained meaning from the struggles he brought forth to the open, in a voice that resonated against the portrait painted of him in the media. People responded by wanting to know more about the man. In the same way the civil rights era frames Malcolm's story and gives credence to his persona, the popularity of rap plays a similar role in shaping the autobiographical persona in the memoirs of two popular hip hop artists, Jay Z in *Decoded* and Questlove in *Mo' Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove*.

What ties these three nonfiction narratives together is that their lives portray aspects of the effects caused by the African slave trade to America. It was through the suppression of creativity and human dignity that the ancestors of these men provided them with the internal motivation to push forward and break through the barriers that have held back African Americans for so long from living a life not as the outsider, but as a member of the society that built this country and created an abundance of its cultural legacy. These memoirs, written by two famous artists in hip-hop, represent the genre from two divergent backgrounds. Under the banner of hip hop, Jay Z and Questlove have shown that rap is more than a one dimensional genre, relegated to the harsh realities in the confines of ghetto literature, and interpreted as a bastion of immoral social upheaval by the upper echelons of class. Clearly this discussion must, on a larger scale, acknowledge the distance between the writer and his co-author as these narratives seek to create personas separate from the men themselves, but this consideration is the role of public vs. private persona in popular culture memoirs, particularly those of black men.

Jay Z frames his success story by giving the reader a glimpse back to when things were not so great for him. In addition, he gives readers the words that he used to elevate his mind and teach his audience what it means to see the world from his point of view. He offers these lessons in clever rhyming metaphors that contain past and present elements to which the reader can relate, especially because he takes the time out to define the content of his poetry in footnotes, an important melding of rap and literature. Questlove's approach to the genre is a chronological jukebox, expressing the ups and downs of his personal life, as well as those of his family and band members. Adam Bradley in *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* takes into context the myriad of viewpoints that sum up the rap artist's experience:

Between the street life and the good life is a broad expanse of human experience.

Rap has its screenwriters, making Hollywood blockbusters in rhyme with sharp cuts, vivid characters, and intricate plotlines. It has its investigative reporters and conspiracy theorists, its biographers and memoirists, its True Crime authors and

its mystery writers. It even has its comics and its sportswriters, its children's authors and its spiritualists. It is high concept and low brow; it has literary hacks and bona fide masters. It has all of these and more, extending an oral tradition as fundamental to human experience, as ancient and as essential, as most anything we have. (158)

Malcolm X didn't speak about success in the way the rap artists have been known to define it in the popular culture; the persona of success essential to these narratives shifted between Malcolm's autobiography and Jay Z and Questlove's memoirs. The real success in Malcolm's view was rising above the labels put upon black men and to not allow another culture to define their role in the world. The link back to the African continent is the unifying thread in their personal history, strongly influencing their individual personas. Somewhere these men knew that the spoken word along with the written word would add important artifacts to the intriguing history of an entire race of people, and enrich and influence the history of the world.

Persona in The Autobiography of Malcolm X

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm X asked, "Why am I as I am?" Malcolm answers the question: "To understand that of any person, his whole life, from birth must be reviewed. All of our experiences fuse into our personality. Everything that ever happened to us is an ingredient" (Haley 150). By the will of a biographer's hand, this oral testimony as told to Alex Haley is the purest source from which a strong and vibrant narrative persona comes to life on the page. Early in the autobiography, organization of key life events assist in forming an impression of Malcolm X different from the media depiction during his time as a key member of the Nation of Islam. Carl Klaus, in his book *A Self Made of Words: Crafting a Distinctive Persona in Nonfiction Writing*, writes that a persona is an identity crafted from words. The biographer and autobiographer's job is to project the image of his or her subject in a way that

best represents the voice and spirit of the person. Klaus goes on to argue that persona is a byproduct of numerous decisions made in the process of writing – decisions about what to say and how to say it (Klaus 42). Every nuance of vocabulary and grammar crafted in the story of an individual's life is carefully planned and thought out to give the reader the most up-close and personal experience next to speaking to the subject in the flesh. Though an autobiography is an account of a person's life written by that person, Haley was given the task of penning the words spoken to him by Malcolm X, much in the way of a ghostwriter. In the epilogue of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Haley discusses some of the difficulties he faced in the telling of Malcolm's story:

I sent Malcolm X some rough chapters of the book to read. I was appalled when they were soon returned, red-inked in many places where he had told of his almost father-and-son relationship with Elijah Muhammad. Telephoning Malcolm X, I reminded him of his previous decision, and I stressed that if those chapters contained such telegraphing to readers of what would lie ahead, then the book would automatically be robbed of some of its building suspense and drama. Malcolm X said gruffly, 'Whose book is this?' I told him 'yours, of course,' and that I only made the objection in my position as a writer. (Haley 414)

Haley conducted a series of interviews over a two-year period, giving him plenty of material from which to portray the controversial Malcolm X. Haley then had to compile and sort this information to show Malcolm's development from boyhood to martyr. Organization is an element of style that Klaus says is necessary in creating a believable persona. The way you arrange things will lead readers to form an impression (Klaus 361).

Individuals clearly grow and change throughout a lifetime based on their experiences. The media created a persona for him that he was controversial, radical, angry and violent based on the rhetoric he used while he was a minister for the Nation of Islam. By organizing the facts of Malcolm's life in a

chronological manner, readers could easily see from where his hostility first spawns. Haley organizes the book to create a persona of a man who, like anyone else in life, sought to be understood and respected. Thus, Haley gives a historical account to the reader that creates empathy for Malcolm as more of an intelligent, fearless and charismatic individual who uses any means necessary to gain that understanding and respect.

While it is important to relate personal background information to create a persona, the telling needs to be fully enhanced by elements of structure and style that also add dimension and bring the persona to life as vividly as possible (Klaus 257). A fine example of this is the first paragraph of the autobiography. Haley describes an event that has an acute effect on Malcolm before he is out of the womb that gives credence to his adopted hatred of white people:

When my mother was pregnant with me, she told me later, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our home in Omaha, Nebraska, one night. Surrounding the house, brandishing their shotguns and rifles, they shouted for my father to come out. My mother went to the front door and opened it. Standing there, they could see her pregnant condition, she told them that she was alone with three small children, and that my father was away, preaching in Milwaukee. The Klansmen shouted threats and warnings at her that we had better get out of town because the good Christian white people were not going to stand for my father's spreading trouble among the good Negroes of Omaha with the back to Africa preachings of Marcus Garvey. (Haley 1)

Klaus argues that if you are telling the story of a personal experience, the best way to start organizing facts is to put them in the order that first comes to mind as being most true to the subject itself (396). Giving the reader such a lively description of an event that affected Malcolm prior to his birth sets a tone for the book that suggests that Malcolm's story is an unhappy one. Even though Haley opens the book with an

event that Malcolm had no recollection of, it shows how Haley uses organization to foreshadow the tone of the book and Malcolm's emerging persona, this one created by himself and not the media. This moment of reflection utilizes organization to tell Malcolm's story, a story of triumph in the face of social, cultural and structural adversity from the very start of his life. As noted in the passage above, Malcolm's life was foreshadowed with violence and discrimination prior to his birth.

Haley continues to make this point relevant as he describes how the early life of Malcolm and his family influenced his later decision to work towards gaining a sense of acceptance in a system that did not treat his race equally in America, as illustrated in this passage:

My father was a big, six-foot-four, very black man. He had only one eye. How he had lost the other one I have never known... He believed, as did Marcus Garvey, that freedom, independence and self-respect could never be achieved by the Negro in America, and that therefore the Negro should leave America to the white man and return to his African land of origin. Among the reasons my father had decided to risk and dedicate his life to help disseminate this philosophy among his people was that he had seen four of his six brothers die by violence, three of them killed by white men, including one by lynching... It was always my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared. (Haley 1-2)

It is important for Haley to establish that Malcolm sees his fate being the same as his father and uncles early in the book to set a foundation for Malcolm's story. Writing about this early exposure to the Black Nationalist teachings explains to the reader the impetus behind Malcolm X's persona that appears in later chapters.

Malcolm underwent what Haley describes as "the first major turning point" of his life when his eighth grade teacher asked him what kind of career he had in mind. Malcolm stated that he was thinking he'd like to be a lawyer. His teacher tells him "A lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to

think about something you can be” (Haley 36). Haley organizes Malcolm’s subsequent thoughts in a way that conjures up the feeling of a kettle about to explode, as Malcolm has a startling epiphany when he learns that the white kids in his class were encouraged to proceed in pursuing their chosen professions:

It was a surprising thing that I had never thought of it that way before, but I realized that whatever I wasn’t, I *was* smarter than nearly all of those white kids. But apparently I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever I wanted to be. It was then that I began to change – inside. (Haley 37)

A form of self-education supplanted the formal education that was cut short after that incident. Eventually, Malcolm found the only way he could survive and thrive in society was by illegal means, and through the realization that no matter what he did, he would never fit into the white man’s world. Summarily, Haley depicts Malcolm going through a progression of odd jobs, which eventually led him to meet his partners in crime and imprisonment. In prison, he embraced the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, spawning the persona the media described as “the angriest black man in America.”

Through organization, a writer is able to develop a credible character of the person being discussed, thus leading to a better understanding of this individual. In this case, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is an example of how a personal narrative, organized chronologically is the most natural way to present it for two reasons. One, not only are we so accustomed to the chronological passage of time when telling others about a personal incident (Klaus 368), but because it also fit the personality of the man who was always conscious of time, or what little of it that he had on Earth. There are moments when Haley breaks this rule.

Persona in Rap Narratives

Sometimes a writer doesn’t know which direction he or she is going when trying to answer the question *Why am I as I am?* Often these narratives are written from the point of view of one who has a

solid foundation in creative nonfiction, and the output is often a linear chronology of events in the life of an individual. Sometimes, however, the chronology of an event, era in history, or growth of a movement is the backdrop that creates key moments or themes in a creative nonfiction piece.

Rap's tendency to leave an imprint on the mind because of its lyrical nature and its degree of telling wild, outrageous stories or teaching a valuable history and/or social lesson associated with street life. Blacks and rhythm have been linked for decades, and while it may sound like a stereotype, I can attest to the feeling in my own soul of the rhythm of the universe pulsing with every beat of my heart and bat of my eyes. The songs and chants that theoretically kept alive the spirits of enslaved Africans, the beats pounded out on the wood derived from the Old World—crafted into the vessels that brought them across the ocean to the New World—aided in keeping alive the memory and traditions of Mother Africa. Undoubtedly, there were horns and percussion and stringed instruments onboard these slave ships that the crew used to entertain themselves on those long voyages, and the music from those instruments reached the ears of the human cargo below, just as the chants and beats could be heard above deck. The amalgamation of what would later become the roots of American music was in progress without anyone even knowing it.

As writer with a 13-year career as a journalist in the hip-hop community, I have interviewed many rappers, both young and old and listened to their stories. In my first published interview for a local hip hop magazine called *No Sellout* in 1991, a well-known Los Angeles DJ named Michael Mixxin Moor said that rap is a black thing, but everybody is invited. At this stage in the history of hip hop, most popular rappers were black. The roots of rap are undeniably tied to the poverty stricken and crime ridden neighborhoods from which hip hop culture evolved, where the grandchildren of the grandchildren of slaves live. Some of the lyrics of a violent or sexual nature would attest to that; however, in this digital age, where rap has replaced the spotlight that once shone on traditional popular poetry, even to seeing an evolution into slam poetry. However, what is particularly interesting to me in this discussion is how the history of that

evolution is being recorded now, not on digital tape or poetry, but in the annals of long form prose literature.

Rap, represented in a genre like creative nonfiction, is a natural progression. Most rappers construe their rhymes from the street life they lived. Theirs are often colorful tales, sometimes exhibiting a darker tone, full of violence and other illegal activity, often based on real life occurrences. The rapper Jay Z, born Shawn Corey Carter, in his memoir/autobiography titled *Decoded*, describes his first exposure to rap in the very beginning of the book, setting up the time and space for his introduction to rap in one short paragraph:

I saw the circle before I saw the kid in the middle. I was nine years old, the summer of 1978, and Marcy was my world. The shadowy bench-lined inner pathways that connected the twenty-seven six-story buildings of Marcy Houses were like tunnels we kids burrowed through. Housing projects can seem like labyrinths to outsiders, as complicated and intimidating as a Moroccan bazaar.

But we knew our way around. (Jay-Z 81-83)

Jay Z's approach to memoir so far is straightforward, but it doesn't delve into family life as most autobiographies do in the beginning. He gets straight to the topic of what brought him to prominence without a tragic, inciting incident that illustrated the perils of living in the projects of which he raps about in his earlier rhymes. He sticks with a narrative of how as a child he educated himself in the art form by watching other rappers who were starting to gain prominence in the 1980s, as hip hop culture began to expand into the mainstream. Around the same time, crack cocaine began pouring into impoverished neighborhoods all over the nation, and young Shawn fell prey to the lure of making fast, illegal money.

From this point on, Shawn develops the separate persona of Jay Z, the name derived from a childhood friend under whom Shawn learned and crafted his rhyme style. He creates a basic philosophy of how his business was slowly transforming the subject matter of rap: "Just like beats and flows work

together, rapping and hustling, for me at least, live through each other. Those early raps were beautiful in their way and a whole generation of us felt represented for the first time when we heard them. But there's a reason the culture evolved beyond that playful, partying lyrical style (186-188). At times Jay Z pursued the hustling aspect with more fervor than the rapping, but more and more, rappers who were topping the record charts rhymed about the lifestyle that he was living. Ironically, Jay Z makes reference to a rapper who doesn't share the same lifestyle in the memoir. Lyrics to some of his most prominent hits that have a special place in his repertoire of rhymes, and have been included within the context of his memoir. Here is the chorus and verse of a song called "I Know":

[Chorus] / And I know and I know / I know what you like / Everything you love /
 [repeat] / Baby you love... HOV / Uh- / She wants that old thing back / Uh-uh-uh- / She
 want those heroin tracks / She likes me / She fiends for me nightly / She leans for me /
 Morning she rush for my touch / This is about lust / Cold sweats occur when I'm not with
 her / My presence is a must-must-must / Bonita Applebum, I gotta put you on / If I
 didn't when we cutting the feeling would be too strong / In any form, I'm giving you sweet
 dreams / That Sugar Hill, she call me her sweet thing / That Black Rain that take away
 your pain / Just for one night, baby, take me in vein / Now that feeling got you tripping /
 You no wanna feel no differently / Said lust has got you itching / Nose wide open and it's
 dripping eh-eh-eh-eh / I know what you like, I am your prescription / I'm your physician,
 I'm your addiction // (Jay-Z *Kindle Locations* 3470-3487).

In addition to printing the lyrics, Jay Z includes footnotes that explain the significance in some of the lines in the verse, which offers a clever shift between the persona and the man. For example, in the footnote about the line "Bonita Applebum, I gotta put you on," he writes:

This is the chorus to A Tribe Called Quest's classic song "Bonita Applebum."

That song begins with Q-Tip's spoken-word intro... "Do I love you? Do I lust for

you? Am I a sinner because I do the two?”... a sentiment that fits perfectly into this song. I played with the last “must” from the previous line to make it sound like “Miss,” as in Miss Bonita Applebum. (Jay-Z 5492-5495)

Also, in the line “She want those heroin tracks,” Jay Z explicates:

This is the first drug/music/love double entendre. “Heroin tracks” are the scars left behind by dirty needles; they’re also a way to describe addictive music.

Rappers use the drug/ music metaphor all the time... Kanye has a song called “Crack Music,” for instance... but I wanted to push the metaphor as far as I could here. I chose heroin because it’s the most addictive of all commonly sold street drugs. Also: this was on my American Gangster album, inspired by the movie about the life of heroin drug lord Frank Lucas. (Jay-Z 5478-5481)

He is very aware of the complexity of his musical craft; the song is even part of an album that ties in commercially with a motion picture about the subject of heroin dealing. However, as a memoir writer, he uses the movement between text and footnote to offer the reader a workshop on how to delineate the metaphors caught in his rhyme scheme. They are based on street culture and references to other poets within the genre. This is particularly interesting as it supports his views on rap as a legitimate literary art form by describing it in terms of craft, i.e. the use of consonance with “must” and “miss” in the former line and the use of double entendre and metaphor in the latter. At the same time it reinforces aspects of his own persona, making it unique to his point of view, and taking the discussion of the artist’s intention to a level of social awareness and consciousness to the conditions in the urban environment.

Persona of the Beat

Malcolm X historically stood up against the barriers of racism, and he uses Alex Haley as the conductor to orchestrate the details of his volatile life and divergent beliefs, into a sober, nonthreatening voice that tell

the story of a man blatantly subjugated by an unjust system. Jay Z roots his story in rap. Everything that makes him one of the most successful rappers in history is owed to the environment of the subculture of crime and punishment that feed the rap narrative. Growing up poor and disenfranchised inspired him to greatness, and so Jay Z's book is more than a linear history of his struggles. It is a book that defines the meanings behind his rhymes, a discourse on the social quilt of society, and the actions in his own words, of how he rose above it. Questlove's romance with the culture of music throughout his lifetime is revealed in the way his memoir pinpoints particular albums and artists who at pivotal moments in his life influenced him. The book reads as if we are watching the biopic of a rock musician, with interviews and side conversations included by the coauthors. It is a unique technique, which defines him in terms of a hip-hop personality, since part of the allure of celebrity is wondering what other people are saying about the celebrity.

Mo Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove is the memoir of the current bandleader for *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson. The notable difference when comparing Questlove and Jay Z is that Questlove is not a rapper: he is a drummer who provides the beats, which by definition as beat provider, fit him within the parameters of the definition of rap. Jay Z's memoir, from the perspective of the rapper, translates his life in words provided with a beat that parallel the rhythm and flow of hip hop. Questlove's talent is in providing a beat that inspires the poet to perform his art. Each artist retains his style or flow to create a persona that is reflective of his or her roles in hip hop.

Simply, Questlove's memoir is about a young man who came from a musical upbringing. His parents, being musicians, recognized his talents early and they encouraged him to pursue a career just as they had done for themselves. They worked hard to steer him in the direction of being an academically trained musician who could earn a respectable salary being a studio drummer. Questlove tells the reader that he has no preconceived notions about how he will go about crafting, nor what type of content that will fill the pages of his memoir:

So what's this gonna be, Ahmir?

A memoir.

The fuck does that mean?

You don't know what memoir means?? A life story, told by the person who lived it.

I know what the word memoir means. But what about the idea?**What does it mean to you?**

Well, that depends. This book should be different. I don't want it to be your average book.

What does that mean?

I don't know yet. Maybe it's just an ongoing process of questions leading to more questions. I'll say this: as a reader of music memoirs, I never begin where I'm told to start. As a rule I find myself starting at chapter 3 or 4, because before that, every music memoir has the same shape. It starts off with a simple statement about childhood: "I was born in this city, in this year. My dad did this." But I don't want to start that way. I can't start that way. I won't. Then, after that, there's a predictable move. The main character discovers music. Dude's walking past a window and hears a symphony that turns his head, or he's at a favorite uncle's house and someone puts Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Sevens on the record player and, just like that, bam, it's like he's been struck by lightning. His life is changed forever. That's an exciting moment, but it's also predictable and oversimplified, for sure. (1-

2)

This dialogue is a reflection of the independent and creative nature of a rap mindset and substantiates Questlove's assertion that this memoir cannot be imitative of the ones he has researched, and it must appeal to the masses. Haley had trouble deciding how best to portray the persona of a man as complex as Malcolm X. Continuing in his consultation with his manager, Rich, on how to build a credible persona, Questlove struggles with some of the same issues that Haley and Malcolm may have encountered while constructing the impression of his life that would be left in the world:

Look, man, I've read plenty of hip-hop memoirs, and most of them have only one story to tell: rise, bling, fall, and lots of debauchery along the way. That's not my story. I haven't lived an interesting life in that sense. I won't pretend otherwise. I haven't had many Motley Crüe evenings... though I know those guys and I hung out with them one night and I saw things.

What kinds of things?

That's another issue. Do I keep certain stories to myself? Do I betray confidences? Does no other musician writing a book struggle with this shit? I don't get it. If I was with someone and I saw something crazy, is it really my job to tell that story and expose that person just to make other people more interested in my book? Let's say I know a juicy story about Singer X. Do I tell it? Do I keep him or her anonymous? Create a composite? Fudge the details? It seems like most of these books are content to be Jell-O from the same mold. So maybe the answer is in some unholy hybrid: some straightforward memoir, some fodder for the recordheads, some tricks and treats, some protecting the innocent, some protecting the not-so-innocent. (Questlove 3-4).

Just as jazz is known for its spontaneity and inventions, rap has also always been a fluid and evocative genre. One device that shows off a rapper's skill is the art of freestyle. Freestyle is a phrase used when a rapper tells rhymes as they come to his head. It is a form of improvisation, which rappers usually employ when battling against each other. It is also competitive in nature, so I can only imagine the pressure Questlove faced to craft a book that would appease his broad fan base while drawing acclaim from the critics, fans and literati. More importantly, the book would have to prove to his peers that he is not so hampered by the rules of a new genre that he cannot contribute the same rhythm and flow to writing his memoir as to his hip hop drum skills:

We had more records than I knew what to do with, an either the radio or the TV was always on, playing music. It was soul and it was rock, and I guess some of it was proto-disco (from the Greek Protos, meaning first, signifying the earliest or most primitive form – so it wasn't disco yet but it was getting there).

Wait, wait, stop. Let me back it up. First there was African music. (9)

Reading all this dialogue in the beginning of the book sets the reader up for a story that will discuss more than the life and times of Questlove. There is a universal appeal brought upon Questlove, as he is on a quest to figure how to add meaning to his life and present it in an entertaining and engaging way. It is as if he is improvising his way through the dialogue, and getting some assistance from an outside source to sort out the topics that he wants to convey. The reader is immediately drawn into the mix, caring about what he has to say about his life because suddenly the reader is involved in the thinking process as Questlove. Here, a persona is being created by the same means as which a song might be created, and this comes naturally for Questlove. This is another example of how a movement can shape or influence the creation of a persona. He admits to us and to Rich that this memoir can go in any direction at any time. Carl Klaus states:

All of us, in fact, have so many different sides that no single form of writing, no

single style or voice, could do justice to ourselves. Thus, the more versatile we can be in our writing, the more likely we are to be true at least to some aspect or side of our selves at any particular moment in our lives. (85-87)

Questlove questions how to write about his life, tells about snippets from the past that stand out in his mind, then reflects not on the story that begins with his immediate family, but with the ancestral family that passed on the DNA that inspired him to become a drummer.

Questlove is quick to retract writing about his own beginnings as a young drummer to begin a discussion about Africa. The “drums, heartbeats, human clocks, dancing with your knees bent” and “an intimate connection between with rhythm and movement, between time and life” (9). Here, he acknowledges that the origins of the beat from the African continent is the heart of the music that he heard as a youth which inspired his ascension to the drummer in a hip hop band. Without the beat, the words of a rap wouldn’t flow or sound as good as they do; hip-hop moves people because of the beat. You can trace this all the way back to Africa, and the way the sound transformed once we landed in America. The rhythms and chants echoed under the hot sun in the plantation cotton fields, the sweaty Sunday preacher with his fire and brimstone sermons would use call and response to bring unity between himself, the congregation and God, wooing his audience into a frenzy. After emancipation, beat translated to the stage with the blues, jazz, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, funk and now hip-hop, and this progression clearly influences the persona of Questlove.

After much thought and input from his coauthor, Questlove writes his story by recollecting songs from his childhood that held for him vivid memories. It is interesting how he catalogs the moments in his life by the records he remembers, some more so for the cover art work than the music. Poetically, his recollections resemble an ekphrasis when it comes to his interpretations of memories. He says, “when I really like something, I tend to never listen to it again. I want to remember the feeling even more than I want to remember the music. If you get that record back out, you risk learning that it’s not as good in

reality as it is inside of you” (Questlove 36). Music groomed Questlove for a hip hop lifestyle that his parents didn’t understand in the beginning, even though he flourished in a family life that encouraged him to follow his musical talents.

Rap Up

In Terrance Hayes’ poem “Woofer (When I Consider the African-American)” lies a great reminder of the ties that bind black culture together, where the distance between person and persona in black narrative is rooted:

I have been cursed, broken hearted, stunned, frightened
and bewildered, but when I consider the African-American
I think not of the tek nines of my generation deployed
by madness or that we were assigned some lousy fate
when God prescribed job titles at the beginning of Time
or that we were too dumb to run the other way
when we saw the wide white sails of the ships
since given the absurd history of the world, everyone
is a descendant of slaves (which makes me wonder
if outrunning your captors is not the real meaning of Race?).
I think of the girl’s bark colored, bi-continental nipples
when I consider the African-American.
I think of a string of people connected one to another
and including the two of us there in the basement
linked by a hyphen filled with blood;
linked by a blood filled baton in one great historical relay. (Hayes 106-112)

Within the lines of Hayes's poem is the acknowledgement that generation after generation; the image of violence casts a shadow on the persona of black culture. The persona of the black man in the eyes of the world has not changed between the Civil Rights Era and the Age of Hip Hop. Questlove who comes from a nuclear family setting even admits that part of the normal life of a black teenager, is being harassed by the cops. What these three men experienced shaped their determination to be self-defining. Yet each story relies on an aspect of a social climate that directly influences the decisions that make them into the recognizable personas portrayed in their books. As more are emboldened to tell their truths, new ways of self definition, new ways of creating narratives, will emerge as a result of changing social climates.

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