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Between the Lines: A Hip Hop Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This thesis project utilizes autoethnographic methods of storytelling to explore themes of family, poverty, whiteness, “coming of age”, and the way that hip hop can serve as a guide for young people to navigate their complex lived experiences. Stories are unique teaching tools, and each story has the potential to reveal much about the individual and collective truths that we grapple with as human beings living in modern society. In this project, theoretical concepts such as intersectionality, liminality, and counter-storytelling form a foundation for the autoethnography. The stories contained within are a mosaic of vignettes from my life as a young, white, male hip hop artist navigating relationships and societal pressures on the journey to adulthood. My stories speak to larger truths of marginalized youth in non-traditional family structures, highlighting how hip hop can play a role in providing purpose and fulfillment for young people in similar situations.

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Chapter 1

Preface

Autoethnographic storytelling can show knowledge in motion as it is experienced, but it is challenging to translate complex lived experiences to the page. Lived experience in this context refers to the sum of a person's knowledge about themselves and their world derived from their everyday interactions with the people and environments around them (Chandler & Munday, 2016). Lived experiences also rely on embodied knowing, which acknowledges the body as a source of knowledge in its own right (Ellingston, 2006). When intellectuals define and dissect lived experiences in more traditional academic pursuits, they take this "knowledge in motion" out of its natural context and rely on their own scholarly abilities to connect it back to its source. The more scholars can maintain the natural context of lived experience within their research, however, the more powerful that research becomes. Autoethnography as a form of narrative self-exploration grounded in scholarship gives audiences the chance to accept the nuance that comes with "truth" in all its glorious contradictions. Autoethnographic stories let us flow with the current of life without attempting to impose a sense of artificial control over it (Ellis, 2004). My truth is not one to be known, not to be conquered, pinned on the wall, and "banked" as another accomplishment of intellectualism, but rather one to be experienced (Freire, 2000).

My name is Gene Michael Shott Jr.

I go by Mike, though.

I'm a 22-year-old white man born and raised in the Northeast United States, Berks County, Pennsylvania. My story is a story like many others - unique yet familiar. Reflecting on

my story for this piece has been an enlightening journey. A mentor of mine once said to me that there is a finite range to the human experience. Despite everything in our world, there are only so many feelings we can feel. I didn't quite grasp his meaning at the time, but lessons have a way of sticking around until they are learned. Eventually, that wisdom evolved to a realization that our stories are not necessarily only our own. When we cry or when we laugh, we enter into a chorus of humanity spanning past to present, the world over. Despite how different from one another we are made to feel by societal narratives and modern culture, we share more than we realize. My hope in telling my story is that I won't only be telling my own. This piece is for all the young people like me who are still searching for meaning in this wild, beautiful world.

Chapter 2

Introduction

Before getting to the autoethnography, I'd like to highlight some theoretical concepts that underpin my story. They may not explicitly pop out on the page, but with awareness, one can see them there in between the lines of almost every word. These concepts are *intersectionality*, *liminality*, and *counter-storytelling*. When I learned about these theories as an undergraduate student, I gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of my own story within the larger cultural narrative. They helped me contextualize what I had been through and rationalize those parts of my story that I still couldn't come to terms with. My hope is that by outlining the three concepts in this introduction, the reader will not only be primed to understand my story, but to also take a step further in understanding their own.

To start, *intersectionality* is a theory posited by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent critical race theory scholar whose work on intersectionality is foundational to the discipline. Crenshaw first examined intersectionality in black women who stood at the intersection of the feminist and racial justice movement in the late 20th century. The theory highlights how every individual is an "intersection" of their different identity categories, such as gender, class, race, and sexual orientation (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw elaborates that for some individuals, such as black women, the intersection of their identity can lead to unique experiences of oppression and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). This idea adds complexity to critical conversations on issues such as racism, sexism, and heteronormativity in society. Humans cannot be reduced to one factor of their identity; an ethical scholar seeks to understand how all the pieces of one's identity contribute to the full picture.

I am a white male who comes from a poor or low socio-economic background. Whereas my race and gender privilege me in American society to a large degree, my socio-economic status does not confer privilege in the same way. This complexity doesn't cancel out my privilege in the slightest, but it does add layers of nuance to my story that may go unseen without at least a cursory understanding of intersectionality. Acknowledging how intersectionality adds complexity to conversations of identity is crucial to my story.

Intersectionality can help us understand the different pieces of our identity and how those pieces work together to make us who we are. Determining what categories of identity we inhabit in the first place, however, can sometimes be more complicated than it seems. This is where *liminality* comes into play. Made popular by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner in the 1970s, who himself built off the work of ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep, the concept of liminality refers to a state of being *in-between* recognized structures of culture (Wels, et al., 2011). Structures of culture can be understood in terms of ritual and rites of passage. Van Gennep presented rites of passage in a three-part classification: rites of separation, transition, and incorporation (Forth, 2018). We as ritually separate from one cultural structure, enter a period of transition, and if or when the transition completes, we reincorporate into the new structure. An example could be one graduating from high school and deciding whether to pursue further education or enter the workforce. Graduation is a rite of separation from the cultural structure of high school, the decision process is a rite of transition, and enrollment in college or being hired to a job would be a rite of incorporation into a new cultural structure (Van Gennep, 1960).

Turner focused on the transitional period, the one in-between, and that's what *liminality* refers to. Residing in a space of liminality can be understood as a form of limbo, a transitioning between establishments of age, social status, or identity (Turner, 1967). This sense of limbo can

be disorienting, but it also has the potential to free one from pre-existing notions and allow new insight to occur (Turner, 1967).

I “came of age” in a white-majority culture, but due to my socio-economic background, I did not relate to a large portion of what I understood as white culture. The “white picket fence” ideals of American whiteness – generational wealth, property ownership, a nuclear family unit - do not apply to my story or my understanding of the world. I was always drawn more to alternative sources of wisdom and storytelling, such as hip hop. Where mainstream white media failed to reach me in youth, hip hop spoke to me in a way that truly helped me process my own lived experience and relate to others. Nevertheless, I can’t just step out of my whiteness and its privileges to fully immerse myself into spaces like hip hop which are dominated by cultures of color. As I attempted to separate from my inherited cultural identity, I found that I couldn’t fully reincorporate into one that wasn’t my own. This dislocation left me in a space of liminality where I resided *in-between* the immutable fact of my whiteness and the cultural complexities of my socio-economic background and the society around me. As with intersectionality, acknowledging how liminality plays a role in my story is crucial to understanding who I am and what my story conveys.

The concepts of intersectionality and liminality, especially when taken together, show just how complicated it can be to talk about identity. Nonetheless, in our digital era of soundbites and minute-long videos, complexity and nuance aren’t always acknowledged to the degree in which they should be. That’s why stories that refute the dominant societal narratives and highlight the nuance of human identity can be read as a form of *counter-storytelling*. Researchers Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate popularized the concept of counter-storytelling in the mid-90s as a vehicle to address critical race theory in education. For marginalized students

learning about history, art, and society, experiencing stories that resonate with their reality is crucial in their development of self-esteem and identity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016). Even students that aren't marginalized by society still benefit from hearing diverse accounts and seeing what others go through in their lives. Counter-stories are valuable in that they make space for people whose experiences don't necessarily correlate with the dominant narratives of a given culture or society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016).

I view my own story as a counter-narrative in that it examines some of the multi-faceted and often understated layers that surround current understandings of whiteness. I acknowledge that I benefit from privileges due to my race, but the story doesn't end there. As a hip hop artist and scholar, my whiteness and its privileges can be a barrier in terms of engagement and perception within the hip hop community and beyond. I don't say that to complain or bemoan my status, but rather to shed some light on the complexities of whiteness. Breaking down the perception of whiteness as "normal" in American culture is essential for moving towards a more equal and equitable society, but that requires an intentional study of whiteness in different contexts (Bohonos, 2019). Dispelling the hegemony that posits whiteness as "standard" in Western culture takes examination from all angles of the spectrum. My story runs counter to the notion that whiteness is a monolithic cultural force that bestows only privilege and power and overrides all other aspects of identity. The dysfunctional nature of white hegemony clouds our collective understanding of identity and therefore harms all individuals regardless of their race. My hope is that after we dismantle its hegemonic agency, whiteness can one day be seen as but one of many pieces of the beautifully diverse cultural mosaic that is America.

[See [Appendix A](#) for supplementary music materials that accompany the stories contained hereafter. The included songs were written over the span of the past 4 years in my Samsung Notes app, and the lyrics are displayed in the appendix exactly as they were written. The reader is encouraged to follow the links to Soundcloud and listen to each song while following along with the lyrics. To experience the piece as it was intended, listen to “nothing really” and “margins” before reading Chapter 3, and then listen to “manifest” and “down broke” after finishing Chapter 5. When engaged with in this sequence, the songs provide an artistic parallel to the overall story of the autoethnography.]

Chapter 3

Family

This section is dedicated to my kinda-sorta-not-really stepdad.

October, 2013

“You little motherfucker!”

That was the first thing I heard before I was tackled to the ground in the main drive of the trailer park where I grew up.

“So ya smokin’ now, huh?” says Chuck, my former kinda-sorta-not-really stepdad, as he stands over me. I’m shitting bricks at this point.

I eek out a small “Uh... yea,” and brace for impact.

Surprisingly, the anticipated blow didn’t come.

“You better stop that shit, Mike. You’re too young to be doing that.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and tell him that I know. He offers a hand, picks me up off the ground, and says, “Seriously, Mike - I don’t wanna hear about this shit again.”

I mask my grin, assure him that he won’t and keep walking with my neighbor on the way to the basketball hoop, our original destination before I was intercepted by Chuck’s misplaced semi-parental guidance. A buzzing feeling of rebellious excitement, one that I cherished in my youth, spreads throughout my body as the distance between myself and Chuck continues to increase.

Once Chuck was out of earshot, my neighbor and I started laughing uncontrollably.

“Thank God this didn’t fall out of my pocket!” I say as I pull out my bowl and bag of weed, out-of-breath from laughing and still buzzing from the adrenaline. We spark up and shoot

around at the run-down hoop in our trailer park, with Kendrick Lamar's "Bitch, Don't Kill My Vibe" playing out of my phone speakers.

At that point, nothing made more sense to me than what Kendrick was saying. "Bitch, don't kill my vibe!" It didn't make sense why my kinda-sorta-not-really stepdad moved out two years before, and it definitely didn't make sense why he was trying to tell me what to do when he was barely around anymore. It didn't make sense why my mom was struggling, trying to raise me as a single mother with no help. The ONLY thing that made sense to me at that point was music. Hip hop. Kendrick Lamar. It felt like everyone was trying to kill my vibe... but when I shut the world out and turned on the music, my favorite rappers understood exactly what I was going through. They gave me guidance through their words and assured me that the struggles I faced were not something I alone suffered from.

Now, with the perspective I have at 21 years old, I understand why my kinda-sorta-not-really stepdad knocked me on my ass that day. He went through the same struggles I did, even worse, but he had to keep moving forward - every single day. I never realized how much he struggled or how much his addictions affected him. I didn't realize how much he wanted to keep me from making the same mistakes he did. If it weren't for music, I don't think I could have made it through without him.

I did, though. Shortly after this episode, Chuck met a woman who eventually introduced him to heroin (among other things). I lost the closest thing I had to a father over the course of the next year or two. Hip hop was the best replacement I could find. The wisdom and street knowledge of my favorite MCs... Nas, Jay Electronica, Common, Kendrick... It guided me. The bravado and aggression of MCs like Conway the Machine and Freddie Gibbs showed me what confidence feels like. Laughing in the face of even the most imposing threats, remaining secure

in the holy doctrine of “no matter what, keep it moving” - these are things that I needed as a young male trying to figure out what it means to be a man. Despite his shortcomings, I love Chuck for being there when he was & I’m glad he knocked me on my ass all those years ago. Lord knows I needed it..

Summer, 2003

A little child. Someone’s pride and joy. That was me (at least the first part). I was three years old, living in a Mennonite foster home because my biological father had abused my mother to the point that she was physically unable to care for me for a few months. Obviously, a few months is too long for a three-year old to exist on his own, so I was sent to the loving Mennonite family in 2002. I have very vague glimpses of memory from my time there - images of cornfields and playboxes stuffed to the brim (but no TVs). They treated me well, I know that much. They even wanted to keep me as their own. Meanwhile, my mother was fighting tooth and nail to get me back - but CPS was having none of it. Eventually, my mom would get the chance to meet with the late Senator Mike O’Pake and plead her case. It was barely two weeks later that I was back home with my mom in our cozy little row home on the corner on 10th and Pike St. No more cornfields, or so I thought.

This section is dedicated to the strongest person in my life - my mother.

Spring, 2005

“Mike! Mike? Where are you?!”

My poor mother.

I was hiding between the couch and the wall in a very small crevice.

The bus for preschool was outside, and I was playing a prank. Or maybe I really didn't want to go to school that day? I don't even remember why I was back there. If I had to guess, it was a result of my rebellious nature (which never quite went away with age). I was having fun, but I didn't realize how much I was stressing my mom out. That's a common theme of my childhood and teen years. As I got older, the stress I caused her grew more and more severe. It's interesting. As much as I feel bad for it now, seeing her stress was good for me as a kid. It was proof that she really did love me.

Growing up as a male with a single mother creates a lot of pressure to provide and "be the man of the house". From a young age, I was acutely aware of that pressure, and I felt the struggles of my mother doubly so. This feeling grew as I got older, but looking back, I can recall that it was even present when I was only five years old. I hated to see my mom suffer and I also felt like I wasn't doing enough. This is a theme explored in hip hop. None of my friends understood what I was going through during my K-12 years, but when I turned on the music, it was like my favorite MCs were speaking directly to me. That helped me to contextualize what I was going through and realize that I wasn't alone. My perspective started to shift from "what's wrong with us to be in this situation?" to "why do so many people suffer the same thing?" This was one of the genesis moments of my political consciousness and awareness of systemic injustice.

My mother did the seemingly impossible to provide me with the best conditions she could, from the time she got me back from the Mennonite foster home to my high school graduation and beyond. After a shooting near our block on 10th and Pike in 2004, she decided it was time to move out of Reading. Although I was young, I was sad to go. There's not a place in the world like Reading with its rowhomes nestled snugly into the hillside while the beaming red

Pagoda stands watch on the mountain. I remember spending night after night on our back porch just looking at the Pagoda. Those memories, those images, they never left me.

Eventually, we ended up in a trailer park outside Leesport, PA, about 15-20 minutes from the city. It was there in the trailer park where the preschool bus came to pick me up that one day and found no one. My mom didn't care as much that I wasn't there for the bus - she was just worried for my safety. Looking back, I appreciate those priorities so much. As I grew up, I missed a lot of school, but my mother always understood that the most important thing was my well-being. She didn't always apply society's standards to my upbringing because she knew firsthand how hostile and alienating society could be. She valued my voice as a child, and when I wanted to stay home, she let me. As I reflect, I'm more thankful for that than almost anything else. It taught me to trust how I feel and value that over the mold that society attempts to make for us. Of course, my mother was never one to fit in, either.

Growing up as a deaf girl in 1960s Pennsylvania was not easy. Although she did attend deaf schools as a child, my mother went to Muhlenberg High as a teenager. The adaptability required to function in a hearing environment as a deaf person with little-to-no accommodation is incredible. There's a lot of subtle discrimination and barriers for deaf people, something I never would have known had I not grown up with a deaf mother. Deafness is a physical/neurological condition - but it's classified as a communication disorder. This makes sense if one has ever tried to communicate with a deaf person while having no knowledge of sign language. Many deaf people never fully learn to speak or write properly, due to misdiagnosis and the lack of understanding around deafness in their formative childhood years. Now, imagine my mother - a lonely island amidst a sea of students caught up in a million things. I get chills when I imagine how much perseverance it took for her to learn the skill of reading lips and verbalizing her words

to a level that she was able to coexist in a hearing society with no hearing aids or constant interpreters. As a child and into adulthood, my mother's life was a constant struggle, and although that struggle might have changed forms sometimes, that struggle never went away.

As much as I wish things could have been different for her, I'm grateful to have a mother who struggled so much. Although it comes with trauma and stress, a long life of struggling can also instill a strength of mind that defies belief. I'm not going to inherit a fortune from my mother, but I did inherit her strength and perseverance, and that's infinitely more valuable to me. Through all her struggles, my mother did her best to keep me safe and provide for me. She kept me fed, clothed, and housed. She enrolled me in association football and made sure I had the latest tech like the Xbox 360, so I didn't feel so alienated from my peers. She had to sacrifice a lot to give me the life she did, and I'll never forget that. Earlier, I said that her stress was proof that she loved me. Truthfully, my entire life is proof of that. If there's anything I would take back, it's the stress I caused her growing up. Lord knows she had enough stress to deal with.

This section is dedicated to the late Coach Clarke - may you rest easy.

Summer, 2009

“Get up, pussy! Let's go!”

I winced in pain as I dusted myself off and got back to the line.

“Down... Set... Hut!”

Adrenaline numbed my sore and bruised muscles as I tore off from the defender and ran a hitch & go route. That was my trump card, and it really only worked once. The idea is that the receiver runs about 5-10 yards, curls back for a feint, then keeps running for a long bomb to the endzone. After the defense sees the trick once, it's hard to pull off again. However, this time, the

route was rather effective. I was going deep as the ball sailed through the air, running full speed to catch it, and all of a sudden - BOOM! I went face-first over a pipe that was sticking out the ground and completely missed the ball.

We were playing in a field at the bottom of the trailer park, where trailers were meant to be installed years ago. The deals fell through so all remained was a few rusted water pipes sticking out of the ground in random spots. It was a non-issue for us trailer park kids who were just looking for fun ways to pass the time. However, every now and then, one of us would trip on the pipes and cause a riot of laughter. That day, the unlucky one was me.

Rusty water pipes aside, football truly was a refuge for me when I was growing up. Beyond the pick-up games at the bottom of the trailer park, I played for my local association team. I played with the same team from 2007-2013, and we became family. My coaches, Clarke, Kenny and Dave, helped to guide me when no one else did. My teammates respected me and taught me how to have self-esteem. I had full reign to let all my anger and emotions out on the field, and I was celebrated for it! It was the first time in my life that I truly felt recognized for something positive - that I was a part of something bigger.

I think back fondly on my time on the field. Football was a huge part of my life until I tore my ACL and meniscus during a pre-season junior high practice when I was 13. Without a doubt, that injury was a turning point in my life. I felt the bones in my knee pop and grind together as my ligaments ripped apart, and I knew things would never be the same for me. Where I used to find refuge in playing the game of football and sharing that with a team that became a family, I started to feel like I had nothing. Not a traditionally solid family life to keep me grounded. Not money to keep me enrolled in other activities that required substantial investments in either equipment or registration fees. Not even the dream of a football scholarship, the only

way I could realistically see myself being able to afford going to college at that point. I only had myself, and the diverse influences in my life that left me at a crossroads between two worlds.

This section is dedicated to my brothers and sisters with different last names.

Spring 2013

My brother. Kinda. Sorta. Not really. It's hard to explain.

Growing up, no one in my immediate family had the same last name. That always confused me as a kid, but one thing it did do was broaden my definition of what the word 'family' truly means. I was already negotiating family-oriented socio-politics from a young age, though I didn't know it myself and would have been scratching my head trying to figure out what that term even meant back then. I had sisters and brothers, but not all of them were "related" to me. Some of them I didn't even find out about until I was 9 years old. I love my siblings. Me being the youngest, all of them provided me with valuable companionship and guidance at some point in my life. We are not all still in touch with each other, but I carry their influences with me.

So - back to my brother. My kinda-sorta-not-really stepbrother: Chris. At 13, months before I had torn my ACL and found myself at a crossroads, I started hanging out with him after he moved to Leesport. He was about 10 years older than me, and we were never really that close due to the age difference.

Not knowing much about him, I had always heard from other folks in my family that Chris would act like a "wigger". In my community growing up, that word was used as an insult aimed at "white people who act black" that compounds the racism associated with its etymological source. The association of illicit behaviors and disrespectful attitudes with

blackness is a long-standing form of racist prejudice which informed tangible discriminatory practices such as redlining and de facto segregation in the 20th century. I didn't realize all that back then. I didn't pay their talk much mind either. I was curious about Chris, and for more reasons than one, I was happy to finally be able to build a relationship with him.

“Yo, we got a fat ass blunt rolled, bro. Come through.”

“Word? I'll be there in 15.”

It wasn't often Chris offered to smoke me up, so I really was there in 15 minutes. At that point, 13 years old and broke, I had to take the chances I could get. Smoking was more than just a way to get high - it was a way to bond with others and share a communal state. The rituals, norms and distinct language of marijuana use make it a culture in its own right, and it felt good to be initiated into that community space. However, I was in for a surprise that day.

“You feel that shit, bro?”

“I'm fucking stoned.”

“There was coke in the blunt!” Chris bust out laughing. “Mikey, you just did coke, bro!”

“Nahhh, bro. Stop playing.”

The group confirmed that he was indeed not playing.

While I tried a fair amount of different substances in my teenage years, that day was the first and last time I ever got high off of cocaine. To be fair, smoking it doesn't really give the same effect as snorting it, but my 13-year-old body was hyper-sensitive. That was one episode in a long line of situations where I felt betrayed by a community to which I thought I belonged. I did a lot of stupid shit for acceptance in those days. I fought, I partied, I sold drugs - mainly Adderall at that time. Still, I didn't see the signs until it was too late; until things had already been stolen from me, until people already wanted to jump me for things I didn't even do. That's

how it goes for young, vulnerable individuals in a den of predators trying to get their next meal. I had to cut them off, even my own brother. Well - my kinda-sorta-not-really stepbrother - but still. It hurt. I was about to be on my own once again. I didn't realize my whole life was going to change again in six months and that my football dreams would die too. More importantly, I didn't see just how much of a role hip hop was about to play in my coming of age.

Chapter 4

Hip Hop

This section is dedicated to my first mic - a Blue Snowball.

Winter 2016

I remember when I got my first mic.

It was a Blue Snowball USB microphone. The mic was small, made of hard white plastic, and mounted on an unstable tripod with a metallic accent like a fake chrome grill on a car. I had just turned 16. After writing rhymes for three years in study hall and after school, this cheap plastic mic plugged into my mom's computer in the living room was a dream come true. I sat there mesmerized, playing instrumental after instrumental on Youtube until I found one that stirred something in me. I remember "Kamaal" by J Dilla in particular, the purple-orange Yancey Boys album cover and hypnotic instrumental acting as a window into a world completely new to me. Despite how new it was, I felt at home in the music.

There's something to be said for art that can make you feel like you are exploring a new place, yet at the same time, coming home to something familiar. That's the feeling I always got from hip hop, ever since I became an enthusiast at 13 years old. I wasn't born into hip hop - at least not the music. However, I was born into poverty and abandonment - the same conditions into which hip hop was born. Though it took me years to see it in these terms, I sensed in hip hop a sort of kindred spirit. Not one album, not one artist, but *hip hop itself* was speaking to me. That's why the moment I got my first mic is so important. It was the day I truly started to speak back with hip hop.

This section is dedicated to my friend Steph - may you rest easy.

Summer 2016

A breeze rolling over the piney green mountainside, the warm yet distant Vermont sun casting rays through the breaks in the canopy... that's how I remember the first time I met her.

“Hey! You look familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?”

I looked up, confused but excited at the sight of this woman with beautiful black hair and a big smile on her face standing in front of me. We were two of thousands from around the nation camping in the Green Mountains of Vermont for the 2016 National Rainbow Gathering. The pungent, earthy smell of burnt weed floated on the breeze while an eclectic orchestra of handmade instruments set the rhythm in the background. I was a young 16-year-old kid looking for more from life, which is why I was there at the gathering in the first place. The woman in front of me introduced herself as Steph from New Jersey. She was 22. So, naturally, I told her I was 18. We spent a minute trying to brainstorm where we might have known each other from, but it was a futile attempt. I still wonder even now if she actually thought she recognized me or just used that as a conversation-starter. Either way, I'm glad she came up to me that day.

We spent the rest of the week running into each other here and there, taking part in some of the things going on at the gathering together. From angel walks to massage circles to yoga lessons in a giant tipi tent, there were a lot of interesting activities taking place. Between those types of activities and the amazing food being served by different kitchen camps, one could easily get lost in the flow of moving from one new experience to the next. Still, there was an interesting force of attraction between Steph and me. Amongst thousands of people sprawled across miles of forest, we just kept finding each other.

After we went our separate ways one night, under the influence of a single tab of acid, I found a new level of peace and understanding that I had never previously felt while sitting by the drum circle. The community at the Rainbow Gathering showed me what community really meant. The suffering I felt as a child was finally starting to crystallize into purpose and understanding. I was on top of my world, higher than I had ever been, and I was ready to receive whatever blessings (or curses) the universe was sending my way. Turns out, I didn't have to wait long.

The night before I left Rainbow, I ran into Steph again at Granola Funk (the name of an impromptu stage at the Gathering where talent shows, plays, and other events take place). She was also planning on leaving the next day, but the people she rode with decided to head north to work on a marijuana farm in Maine for the rest of the summer. I offered to see what I could do to provide her with a ride home. Where she lived in New Jersey was only about two hours from my home in PA, so it wasn't a big deal. I had to beg my friend who drove to let her come with us, but he eventually caved. I was on Cloud 9. I had asked the universe for a blessing, and here it was. The more time I could spend with Steph, the better. I really felt like we had a connection. Of course, my sister (who had also attended the Gathering but drove separately) and my friend were warning me that these "hippie girls" were bad news and would only lead to trouble. They saw me as a naive kid who had a one-sided crush. However, I felt genuine interest from Steph, and I was willing to risk it all. Try telling a 16-year-old boy not to listen to his feelings while he's sitting next to a beautiful woman encouraging him to keep going. Good luck getting through to him!

The plan was for Steph to come back to my house and then get picked up from there to go home. She was not able to secure a ride for a couple days, and at this point I didn't even have

my driver's license yet. So, we spent a few days together at my house. It was a beautiful week.

Thinking back, I was in a mental space that seems so foreign to me now. I couldn't believe what life had put in my lap. We enjoyed each other's company, we had a movie marathon, we discussed our takeaways from the mind-altering week we just had in Vermont, and we made love. When she finally left, I was truly sad to see her go. We planned to keep the connection alive and see each other when we could. I still missed her.

This episode was probably the first time I ever made a song specifically about someone close to me. After Steph had left, I felt an incredibly potent swirl of emotions. I decided to turn to my writing to make sense of things, and before long I had a song called "Missing You". At that point, I had been writing songs for three and a half years but only recording for about 6 months. Still, this song had more of an emotional impact on me than any I had written or recorded before. I was proud of my work. I sent it to her, but I never heard back.

A few days later, I learned that Steph had died of an overdose. I was devastated. I remember walking from my house and just crying my eyes out. I stayed out for hours, until it felt like I didn't have any tears left to cry. Grief doesn't work like that, though. Tears flowed for a while. Sometimes they still do. I didn't have Steph anymore, but I did have our memories, and the song I wrote for her. The instrumental's poignant guitar melody punctuated by the funeral march step of its drums was a perfect soundscape for my grief.

This was the start of my realization that hip hop is way more powerful than it is often given credit for. It's more than just music for the sake of music - it's a way to crystallize our experiences, to immortalize ourselves and our peers and share that with the world. It took a deep loss for me to realize what that truly meant. Facing death, I came out on the other side, reborn in my purpose and passion for music.

This section is dedicated to my teacher and early mentor, Mr. Mogford.

Spring 2017

Lights on the stage. Too bright. An endless darkness in front of me, where my mind tells me the audience should be, but my eyes can't confirm as they struggle to adjust to the harsh lighting. This was my first time performing on stage. I had a captive audience of about 600 high school students as the talent show was a mandatory assembly. I could feel my heart pumping in my eyeballs at this point. Stage fright? Yeah. I was about to spill my heart out rapping to hundreds of kids I grew up with since elementary school. The thought was terrifying to me. Still, I had to do it. Even if my legs didn't want to carry me, I would have dragged myself on that stage. As I came out from left stage and took the mic, the anxiety melted into something different. I yelled for the audience to make some noise, and when they roared their response, for a second, I was taken back to the football huddle. That familiar feeling helped me find an anchor. After that, I just about left my body until the song was over and I was backstage. I was focusing so hard on getting my verses right that my mind shut out just about everything else. It was a surreal experience. I was pretty mad at first that I couldn't recall the experience in clear detail, but I learned to accept that. I performed, and the school loved it. That's all that mattered.

In the last weeks of school following the talent show, I got more respect and appreciation than I ever expected from my peers, teachers, and staff. I had kids who I didn't even know coming up to me and asking for a mixtape. I had teachers pull me aside in class just to tell me how impressed they were with my raps. This blew my mind because until then, I had felt like I was operating in an environment inhospitable to hip hop. To see such a positive reaction was puzzling at first, but I was on too much of a high to question it. This was the first time I took my art public.

This section is dedicated to my brother Julian - I miss you bro.

Summer 2018

I stepped out of the car onto the blistering hot asphalt as the swaying palm trees above offered a tease of shade here and there. I was in West Palm Beach visiting my sister. I had just graduated high school, and I felt amazing. This Florida trip was one stop of many that I had made up and down the East Coast that summer. I felt like my 18 years of life were finally starting to come together. I had dealt with the grief of Steph's loss. I had established myself as a hip hop artist in my small community. Now, I was traveling and seeing the world for the first time as a legal adult.

Whenever I came down to visit, my brother-in-law Julian and I always got into great conversations regarding hip hop. He was from Yonkers in NYC and grew up around some of the artists that I considered legends. He told me stories, put me on to older artists I never heard of, and gave me a lot of positive reinforcement that led me to continue with my craft. Thinking back, Julian's support was instrumental in me taking the stage at my high school talent show in the first place, which was really the moment I felt I had become a full-fledged artist. Now, he was taking that support to the next level.

He had some connections in the area with local rap artists and wanted to introduce me. I was nervous but excited. Obviously, I had recorded songs and performed on stage before, but the idea of collaborating with artists that had radio placements in Miami and the rest of South Florida was daunting. Still, Julian trusted in my ability and didn't hesitate at all to set something up. After smoking an expertly-rolled blunt - he only ever used Dutchmasters - we got in the car and headed to downtown West Palm, where his homie's studio was.

At this point, I was going through verses on my phone in the passenger seat and trying to get myself into a mind-state of confidence. I rapped some of my verses for Julian, and upon hearing his approval, I settled into a semi-comfortable state of readiness. As we entered West Palm proper and the huge high-rise condos started to tower over us, the nervousness I felt earlier had all but dissipated. I was hype. Years of dedication, from lunchroom cyphers to cheap plastic USB mics in the living room to high school talent shows, had prepared me for this moment. I was ready to drop the verse of the year. I was ready to make an impression and really put my name out there beyond the borders of Berks County. However, I didn't realize what was coming next.

We pulled up to the studio, which was in a sandy first-floor apartment, and knocked on the door. A few seconds passed by until the door opened, revealing a tall black man with a white tank top, cargo shorts, and locks hanging down to his mid-back. He and Julian dapped up, and Julian said, "This is my little bro, Mike, the one I was telling you about. He can rap, bro." His homie said, "Word," and asked him to come in for a second, so I went back to the car to wait. I understood that some folk can be weird around new people, and I didn't take it personally. Certain activities necessitate such caution. That was nothing new for me.

However, when Julian came out and got back in the driver's seat, I was a bit confused. I asked him what happened, and what he said took me by surprise.

"Basically... He said he doesn't work with white boys, bro."

In that moment, I felt years of experience in hip hop shrink beside a more visible aspect of my identity: my whiteness. I was pissed, but I also understood where the guy was coming from. So much for being "ready". It didn't matter how ready I was if I couldn't even get in the door.

Chapter 5

The System

This section is dedicated to my mentor, Dr. De Senso.

Fall 2018

Against the odds, I made it to college. With the help of an incredibly supportive mentor from my high school, I was able to navigate the college application process I once balked at and got accepted to a few local universities. I chose Penn State Berks, and although the campus was dead in the middle of the place I had lived my whole life, it might as well have been a thousand miles away from where I grew up. It was a sanctuary from the futility and lack of purpose that I felt so acutely in my teenage years. One of the only things keeping me anchored to my “pre-college” life was the fact that my best friend since middle school, Jimmy, came to Berks with me.

Just about every morning, we would carpool, smoke before class, and then go home after class was done. That was about it. Although I was slowly making connections and meeting people, I didn’t expand too far beyond my established network (ie. Jimmy) because I was comfortable. Jimmy and I had been friends since 5th grade. We shared a lot of experiences, and this college thing was just next on the list. That’s what I thought, at least. It shook me pretty badly when he dropped out of school and cut contact with me in early winter before our first semester was over. Just like that, I had lost my best friend and I didn’t know why. Maybe it was the fact that we were both at a crossroads in life, and we simply chose separate paths. All I knew was that I was on my own in this new environment. I couldn’t let the pull of my past stop me from pursuing the dream of my future. As much as it hurt back then losing my best friend, I know now it was a blessing for me.

One of the few extracurricular activities I took part in during my first semester were impromptu rap cyphers in the Freyberger Art Gallery at Penn State Berks, hosted by my critical race theory professor, Dr. De Senso. Like me, Dr. De Senso was a white academic who loved hip hop and wasn't afraid to stand tall in that aspect of his identity. Before I got to campus, De Senso - who we called JD - had identified and collected an informal group called the "Hip Hop Alumni" made up of students who made and engaged with hip hop music. I was shocked when I learned about it. I thought I would be in strange territory, but I was wrong. At that moment, I remember feeling like I had made the perfect decision in coming to Penn State Berks. The group held public cyphers on campus where the student body was invited to attend and participate. More frequently, we held sessions in empty classrooms or on the benches outside the library where we rapped amongst ourselves and processed the "jungle" of life together. Jimmy and I attended a few of these cyphers together, but when he left, I stayed and found a community of support that grounded my love for hip hop in new ways. I was no longer just rapping with kids that I grew up with around my area - now I was interfacing with a group of MCs and producers from all over the US that bridged a variety of different cultures, languages, and places of origin. The *feeling* of community was the same, but my sense of it deepened immensely when I realized just how vast hip hop culture can be when considering who it reaches, and more important, who it *connects*.

This section is dedicated to my friends in the Berks Black Student Union.

Spring 2020

So, after finding my spot and establishing my foundation with the Hip Hop Alumni group on campus, I started to expand my network. I was amazed by the amount of resources and

opportunities just floating around at Penn State, waiting to be claimed by students willing to go the extra distance. If I had gotten this far, why stop now?

During my second semester, Spring 2019, I started attending Black Student Union (BSU) meetings on Tuesdays at 9pm. I made some friends and learned a lot about Black issues to which I had been completely oblivious before as a white male. My hip hop roots helped me relate to the culture on some levels, but I was still a fish out of water in those meetings. I had never before been so aware of my whiteness, even when I was denied entry to the studio in Florida. I could relate to stories of injustice and poverty. I could understand the pain of growing up with a single mother on welfare. However, I had to learn that these things are neither white nor black. Me experiencing them didn't change the immutable reality of my whiteness, even if it did allow me a window into the systemic challenges faced by my brothers and sisters of color. I was grateful to be welcomed into that space, not only as a passive listener but as an active contributor to the conversation. That my voice was acknowledged gave me refuge from the idea that I wouldn't be able to reconcile my whiteness with the fact that hip hop is rooted in blackness. There was a possibility for these facts to coexist in mutual benefit. From that space, my opportunities only kept growing.

One night in BSU, I met one of my future mentors: Dr. Joe Webb. He was the Director of Student Affairs at Berks, and he came to announce a new club that was being formed called Men of Excellence (MoE). MoE was a club focused on providing positive male guidance, leadership, and role modeling to the Penn State Berks community. Dr. Webb spoke about the importance of establishing this group considering that black males have some of the lowest retention rates of all subpopulations in higher education. These rates are not due solely to faults of their own, but rather are attributable to a failure in the system to meet them where they are. Dr. Webb's remarks

resonated with me deeply, and I made sure to get connected with him and Men of Excellence as soon as I could.

Before I knew it, I was a Student Government Representative for the Men of Excellence club. My network was expanding, and my roots were growing deeper at Berks. We held events like interview prep workshops and info sessions where we went over the fundamentals of how to leverage the professional environment to our advantage. We also established Mondays as a day that we would all dress up in suits. It truly surprised me how much that made an impression on campus. No matter where I went, people recognized me as one of those dudes always wearing a suit every Monday. I was getting a taste for public influence, and honestly, I wanted more.

After consulting with Dr. Webb for a while, I chose to run for University Faculty Senator of the Student Government at the end of the spring 2019 semester. I won, and I served the term my sophomore year. I learned so much about the Penn State system during that year, but I also began to face challenges. My vision was not aligned with the student government administration under which I served, and I dealt with a lot of personal conflict trying to reconcile that. How could I truly be the best representative of my constituency if the board on which I served wasn't tuned into the issues students were facing on the ground level? How could I truly back up my ideals of justice and opening the system to those it has historically excluded if my board didn't even recognize issues of social justice as serious or relevant? I went through a lot of stress trying to find these answers until I found a solution. It was pretty simple. If I didn't like how things were being run, maybe it was time to consider running it myself. So, I decided to run for Student Government President in the 2020-2021 elections during the Spring 2020 semester.

It was a highly contested campaign against the incumbent vice president and chief of staff. My roots kept me grounded the whole time as I spoke with my fellow students, *my people*,

to learn what their needs were. In terms of campaign spending, we had only purchased about \$100 worth of yard signs. Our opposition spent over \$400 on twice the amount of yard signs, along with t-shirts, pins, gear, and all kinds of campaign materials. It made me a little nervous, but I remember saying that we didn't need shirts or pins. We had our character, and people would see that above all else. That's a lesson I learned time and time again in my young life, whether in the streets, on the football field, in school or on stage. It's a lesson I learned from hip hop itself. Despite my confidence in that lesson, I was still astonished when the ballots came back. We had won the election by 16 votes. Despite my idealism, I learned that sometimes you have to play the game if you want to win. The little boy from way back then in the trailer park had officially proven himself in the crucible of the system, becoming Student Government President of a Penn State Campus. Damn, did it feel good.

This section is dedicated to the folks who run the Erickson Grant program - thank you!

Spring/Summer 2021

My presidency was not how I expected it to be. The incumbent administration we ran against offered us very little assistance in terms of transition. We didn't even get a congratulations from them. Not that we had much of a chance to see each other after the election; the next week was when Penn State transitioned to remote learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Just like that, our campaign plans and promises went up in virtual smoke.

Despite everything being flipped on its head in a matter of two weeks, I learned the ropes of the Student Government as the one at the helm. I met people, gave speeches, held meetings, hosted events, and did all I could do from the confines of Zoom. Still, it wasn't fulfilling me the way I hoped it would. I wanted to be a leader so I could reach people and affect change just like

how my favorite artists had done for me when I was growing up. Now, it felt like I was just talking to a computer screen trying to convince myself I was doing something important. That's when an interesting opportunity fell into my lap.

Through some close faculty connections, I had heard about something called the Erickson Discovery Grant. It was a stipend of \$3500 meant for students interested in conducting research beyond the purview of their regular classwork. As someone who had applied and been denied for this type of thing too many times to count, I was understandably skeptical. I didn't really see myself being chosen, but my mentors pushed me to submit a proposal anyway. My project was a self-produced hip hop album connecting themes of hip hop to the larger cultural narratives that dominate our modern experience. I had done academic projects on hip hop before, but I just couldn't imagine that the university would put thousands of dollars behind me to make hip hop and practice the craft I love. The ivory tower elitism of academia was something I saw as at odds with the subversive nature of hip hop. However, against the odds and my own self-doubt, my proposal was accepted. This moment was truly the genesis of my identity as a hip hop scholar.

This was yet another turning point for me. I had already penetrated layers of the institution, but now I was finally able to see the potential of it all. I realized that I didn't have to be a robot and conform to the standard in order to thrive within the professional academic ecosystem. There was a spot for me if I was willing to claim it and carve it out for myself. I received \$3500 to make a record that was original and true to myself, not catering to any market trends or consumer demographics. That was sweeter than any record deal.

Fall 2021

In September 2021, I attended the Naylor Workshop for Writing in Social Justice sponsored by York College. The weekend workshop was meant for research projects in-progress. I joined a group of students and faculty from different universities around the nation to share our research and give each other new perspectives and suggestions for improvement. The project I presented was an earlier version of this autoethnography highlighting how hip hop saved my life. For the most part, my research and I received a warm reception. However, there were some exceptions.

A few scholars at the workshop took issue with my whiteness as it positions me in the world of hip hop. The main issue brought up was cultural appropriation. This can be very challenging to engage with due to the potentially hostile nature of political discussions in today's social climate. Sweating, heart beating, pit in my stomach, I do my best to demonstrate good intent and sufficient expertise. I am used to dealing with the complications of my whiteness in context, so I attempted to welcome the objections and challenges raised about my identity as an opportunity to have some important, perhaps necessary, dialogue. One undergraduate scholar explained how she never understood what drew white people to hip hop. I gave her my perspective, that I felt a reality in hip hop that mirrored my own, that there isn't any other kind of music that speaks as well to my experience as a poor, white, young man growing up in a world still dominated by colonial vestiges of hierarchy and hegemony. She said my remark helped something click for her - that it wasn't necessarily *blackness* that drew me to hip hop, but rather the experience of poverty and other structural inequities. She put words to exactly what I was trying to convey, and as she walked away, I felt as if we had both made some progress.

However, the next day, I had an encounter that wasn't so productive. It was the last day of the workshop, and we gathered all our feedback from the weekend to produce a poster presentation of our research given the new insight we gained from the workshop. It was a gallery-style exhibit where half the scholars stayed at their posters while the other half walked around asking questions and giving more feedback. I was approached by another scholar (like me, a student) who asked me how I planned on acknowledging the fact that hip hop belonged to the black community. She told me that she didn't see how my project *wasn't* cultural appropriation. I tried explaining to her my previous research on the history and current state of hip hop, wherein I tried to center black and brown voices. I tried explaining how this autoethnography was just an extension of that research, that I was now taking what I learned and trying to apply it to my own life to understand how I fit into the mosaic of hip hop. I became acutely aware of a creeping sense of futility as I realized this person was not trying to hear me out. I thanked her for giving me something to consider, and as she moved on, I felt the same feeling I felt when Julian's friend told us I couldn't come into his studio. In that moment, I felt my whiteness as an immutable barrier that I couldn't dispel no matter how hard I tried.

I know that neither black nor white culture is monolithic. No one person has the capacity to speak for their entire race. Just because a few select people of color don't see the value in what I do, that doesn't mean that I have been ousted by the entire community. I would have never reached the level that I did without the support I got from my friends, mentors, and comrades of color. The same goes for the other side of the issue. Just because I try my best to educate myself and embody my passion for social justice doesn't mean that I represent the white community. I can't blame the people of color who have written me off after just glancing at my skin color and hearing that I'm a hip hop artist. Our shared history, even though generational, still informs and

impacts us today. I try to meet the resistance I face with understanding and grace. I try to meet the acceptance I'm shown with love and gratitude. I feel that's all I can do as a white man just trying to figure out my place in this thing called hip hop.

This section is dedicated to all that I've been through, and for all that's yet to come.

Winter 2021

As I prepare for graduation, I feel now more than ever that very few worthwhile things in life can be reduced to words on a page or lessons in a lecture. There is a transient element of experience that transforms knowledge into something more - something useful, something beautiful. Writing this piece was no small challenge to me for this exact reason. How does one capture the ephemeral essence of experience in a crystallized shell of words and syntax? The people who have found answers to this question populate the human consciousness as great artists, innovators, and storytellers. In my own story, I found the answer in hip hop. The music, the culture, the philosophy – all as much a form as it is a process. A light that shines as equally on the heights of youthful hope as it does in the depths of forgotten souls. That's what gave me my “something more” as I was growing up. Hip hop didn't shy away from hard truths. I didn't feel the need to regard hip hop's positivity in distrust, as I knew instinctively that it was intended with the same fervor and authenticity as the negativity was. Beyond good and bad, I've learned to value *realness*. Hip hop has taught me a lot, and that may be one of my most valuable lessons. However, as I hope this piece demonstrates, I am still learning.

Appendix A

Supplementary Music Materials

“nothing really” - GMS

<https://soundcloud.com/gms-iv/nothing-really>

{VERSE ONE}

I need something that'll move me

I need something that'll reach me

I need something that'll teach me

Life is more, so the move be

Down with my nieces, chillin, laughin on the beach, see

Came a long way from cold nights on back streets

Throwbacks to no sleep, too close to rap sheets

But I came back, see

Somehow I made it

Thru the valley of the shadow of death, stay shaded

Knowing that we close to the end, they stay faded

Same state of mind depend on new favorites

Every day

Another new job, with better pay

Booked up, no more time to get away

Shook up, like dice on corners

Still saying they happy to see me, man, that's a nice performance

Actors stay plotting for the product like factors

So of course, the mathematics course coming right after

One MC plus one mic and one love

Equal to the fact that Im back where I come from

Out the trap, still boom bap, the kick drum

Knock, up on the block, its a rap, just pick one

Got something thats not on the rack for sale

Yall couldnt put this shit in a box for six somethin'

And whether people wit' us or not, we still bumpin'

So its win win when the record spin, no frontin

I had ten 10s and two 20s up in my wallet

Finna start it up again and turn it in mo hunnids

Dropped zen when I was a novice

Up on the journey, man, sorcerers apprentice master rhymes, dont want it

But really, on a serious note

I know they got dreams of finally seeing me broke

But it aint happening, Im rapping and just being me, hope

Its something that'll pay off in the end, and still be dope

[HOOK]

No, its nothing really
I was just up in it
Let me go my way, Im finna mind my business
Pray the Lord wit me
Everyday Im livin
Like a couple minutes
Might get me into something thats better than this
If the Lord wit me
So I just been working
Or you could say that Im searching
For something that bring a moment of bliss
If the Lord with me
No, its nothing really I just be up in it
Let me go my way, Im finna see the business
Pray the Lord with me

[VERSE TWO]

Imagine fighting, kicking and bleeding
Right when the odds got tighter, they started to even
My mom was tuckin me in tight, on a lovely evening
Til they came in and took me away, barely breathing
Hyperventilating as a child, dont know what Im seeing
Back of the car, back of the line, Im happy to be in
Until now, thats the world I just started seeing
Like it was the coliseum,
Fighting for my mama, see em want the drama
Me, I want the commas and its not museum
Fees I be collecting, just tryna learn my history
So I can understand myself, the world and how its meant to be
Know it all come down to one thing essentially: heart
They mad that we been had it from the start
Causing static just because we found the spark
Its crazy how the jealousy can turn you to a mark
But its a small price to pay, livin dreams, out the dark

[HOOK repeats]

“margins” - GMS

<https://soundcloud.com/gms-iv/margins>

[VERSE ONE]

Growing up, I had nothing but family
 Had to learn to stay straight when they was talkin insanity
 Wondering can it be
 Something that my son woulda handed me
 In the future, to make up for when my father abandoned me
 Damn I aint tripping
 Its just history, the mystery is how I came to be in this position
 From ridin on the bus to tryna adjust to college livin
 From runnin through the streets to runnin through the books and limits
 I was pushin, sittin, I aint had no cushion, spittin hard shit
 Regardless of double spaced, one inch margins
 Just startin to reemerge, analyze,
 speak the word, and the wise,
 see the third, body mind, soul, hold the key on Earth
 Paradise be nice at first
 But its a pair of dice you rollin everytime you roll the streets and you dont know your worth
 Like tryna quench your thirst with soda, it just make it worse
 Like justifying hatred with a sacred verse
 Make em think they someone different than they is
 Think about what the church done did to the kids
 All that status symbol, jesus piece, pay stub, pay the lease, aint for me
 Look in me in my eyes, tell me what you see
 A real MC or just another enigma
 Encoded into the program, like pixels on a picture
 Or the words of scripture, saluting
 I add my solution to the mixture
 See, its proven
 By peer reviewed study
 But no one approved funding
 So its Nicola Tesla up in the lab, loop huntin
 Livin life, in the sight, said do something, I'm being me
 Look me in my eyes, tell me what you see

[HOOK]

Some cats only gon ride when the sun up
 Fairweather friends who pretend that they gunnas
 To the end, I'm just gonna live my life, try to live it free
 Look me in my eyes tell me what you see
 Some girls only gon ride for the money
 But theyll smile in ya face, leave and laugh like its funny
 In the past, it come from me, but at last, I can finally breathe
 Look me in my eyes, tell me what you see

“manifest” - GMS

<https://soundcloud.com/gms-iv/manifest>

[HOOK]

i been chillin
reminiscin
makin moves
came back with a better vision
to improve
all them ways i was livin, back
in the day
now they say
that i gotta get it
im on the way .
know it pay
just to pay attention
to the little things
a little hope, you never know what it brings
until it manifest
like the angels, I sing
up on the track, we blessed
know thats a fact to stress .

[VERSE ONE]

i aint entertaining that BS no more
rather raise my BS to a masters degree, then its time to go
you know how bad disasters can be
but sometimes they show
a way to change, cuz it just aint like it was before .
and thats a blessing to recognize
the pain could be a good teacher
why you think the OGs is steppin wise?
cuz they went thru it themself
school of hard knocks
college not for the wealth, just knowledge of self

[HOOK REPEATS]

[VERSE TWO]

i brought it back with a second glance
this life dont always give you a second chance
when you chasin dreams, you gotta see how the devil dance
the thing you want the most could turn into a ghost, so make sure you got a plan .
we all in gods hands
i pray for my fam
to make it thru this craziness, so they could see the man
this lil boy grew up to be
crazy how the tables turn, now the next generation look up to me .
so i gotta be the best i can

to pave the way for my nieces, and my people all across the land
steady discriminated, some of em hate it
to see a man with purpose make it, but these verses sacred .
so, i aint trippin on the opinions
the birds on the block flock like pidgeons
thats why i pivot
this my life, ima live it
how I wanna, cold stunner, never do it for the image

[HOOK REPEATS]

“down broke” – GMS

<https://soundcloud.com/gms-iv/down-broke>

[HOOK]

this summer comin, its bout to be ours
 when the team supernova and blow to be stars
 how it feel when you know the odds
 stacked against you
 but you still out here going hard .
 this a testament to all my folks
 that gave me game when i was young, just tryna learn the ropes
 i made it far wit all them lessons
 they was blessings, really shit was all i had when i was down broke .

[VERSE ONE]

now im back up like packs of the loud smoke
 in the safe, but i aint trappin, just craftin sounds for
 this new generation
 youngins comin up, my niece in grade school, learning shit like multiplication .
 thats who inspire me to do what i do
 do it bigger and do it better, but remember stay true
 you started from the bottom, look at you, came a long way
 but what you do to give back? just keep that in your view

[HOOK REPEATS]

[VERSE TWO]

now i ride tracks, tryna get down more
 spent too much time keepin shit on the down low
 ad revenue off of the streams and downloads
 subtract the wack shit and rep my town for .
 the ones who didnt make it
 hella dreams lost but not forgotten
 in fact, they could never die cuz we gon take it
 to the next level,
 hold this sacred and dont forsake it
 this on everybody, feel like Jada when i say that we gon make it .
 broke all the locks, this the key
 dont let nobody put you in a box, keep your mind free
 and your body too if you can
 dont let em lock you up for just flippin a couple grams .
 dont let the neighborhood drama take all your dreams away
 dont get tempted when they talk about the easy way
 just stay focused on your goals, make em manifest
 and thats the gold, me, i never give you nothing less

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Minor: Civic and Community Engagement

HIGHLIGHTED EXPERIENCES

Student Support Services, Penn State Berks

August 2021 - January 2022

Intern

Student Government Association, Penn State Berks

May 2019 - January 2022

President, University Faculty Senator

The Aspiring Scholars Program, Penn State Berks

May 2019 - August 2021

Peer Mentor

HONORS & AWARDS

Dean's List

2018 - 2022

Boscov Honors Scholarship

2020 - 2022

Chancellor's Scholarship

2018 - 2022

Handwerk Renaissance at Berks Scholarship

2018 - 2022

Erickson Discovery Grant

Summer 2021

COLLEGIATE LEADERSHIP & DEVELOPMENT

Councillor, Council of Commonwealth Student Governments

April 2020 - January 2022

Member and University Advisor, Student Conduct Board

November 2019 – January 2022

Campus Inclusion Advocate, Diversity Committee

September 2019 - May 2020

University Student Senator, Penn State Faculty Senate

August 2019 - May 2020

Chairman, Housing & Food Advisory Committee

August 2019 - May 2020

Committee Member & Chair, Student Initiated Fee

January 2019 - January 2022

President, Lambda Pi Eta CAS Honors Society @ Berks

Spring 2020 – Spring 2022

CONFERENCES

Penn State Student Engagement Expo

Fall 2019

HECBC Undergraduate Research & Creativity Conference

Spring 2021

International Conference of Undergraduate Research

Fall 2021

Naylor Workshop for Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies

Fall 2021