Pastoral Psychology (2021) 70:315–334
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00957-2

Spitting Rhymes 'til Mourning Comes: an Exploration of Hip-Hop, Suicidal Thoughts, and Spiritual Lament

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Accepted: 4 May 2021 / Published online: 24 June 2021
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Abstract
This essay explores how the poetics of hip-hop—spitting rhymes—gives form to spiritual lament. Hip-hop is criticized, and rightfully so, for promoting misogyny, greed, violence, and nihilism—but does it do something else? Using hip-hop artist Biggie Smalls's song "Suicidal Thoughts," the author argues that spitting rhymes is a way that African Americans salvage lost aspects of the self, that is, parts of the self that have been silenced and, at times, terminated—by the self—because of trauma. He engages in an interdisciplinary study of African American history to discuss the ways in which the Sambo figure was constructed and utilized to deny the reality of Black suffering; sociologist Émile Durkheim's *On Suicide* to delineate the various forms of suicide, some of which are the direct result of social regulation; biblical scholarship, for example, the work of Walter Brueggemann, to demonstrate that spiritual lament functions to protect a community from overwhelming despair; and psychoanalysis to address how the loss of ways to creatively confront our sorrow is harmful to the self.

Keywords Biggie smalls · Suicide · Lament · Sambo · Spitting rhymes · Mourning · Creativity

Introduction: The Notorious B.I.G. in Seminary

I teach an introductory pastoral theology course every year. For many students, this class is the first time they are learning about this unique theological discipline, which, according to pastoral theologian Robert Dykstra (2005), "never finally arrives at some fixed body of knowledge for understanding or action" (p. 8). Therefore, it is challenging, every year, to decide on the essential topics for an introductory course. What are the essentials? Should I start the course by discussing the history of the discipline? It seems *essential* to discuss foundational figures such as Anton Boisen or Seward Hiltner. And what else is deemed necessary in an introductory pastoral theology course? What about, say, the psychotherapeutic theories that pastoral theologians and pastoral caregivers utilize? Family systems theory and object relations theory, to name but two, are necessary for an introductory

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course—aren't they? Given our current sociopolitical climate, isn't it necessary to point out how pastoral theologians examine the effects of neoliberal politics and laissez-faire economics (e.g., rising economic inequality)? Besides deciding on the essentials, there is another problem that I often confront. What are the touchy, troubling, or, better still, thorny issues that, though painful to discuss, must be touched on in such an introductory pastoral theology course? Mental illness, addiction, sexual abuse—these are difficult and complicated topics. An additional concern is that I, the professor, often find that I am not *the* expert, not at all the most qualified, to lead a discussion on these issues. At such times, I must admit, I feel I have nothing to say.

I vividly recall feeling this way the first time I was preparing to teach a class on suicide. Of course, this was the wrong class in which to feel voiceless. My own experience with suicide is scarce at best. I myself have been fortunate to have avoided the torment of suicidality, and I have not known anyone personally who has committed suicide. My overwhelming lack of personal experience with the topic at hand made me believe my leading a discussion on suicide, in effect, would be inauthentic. What right did I have to talk about suicide?

The night before class, I fumbled about, trying to put a lecture together. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to work. And the pressure kept building as the hours passed by. Hour after hour passed, slowly, and things didn't get any better. I couldn't find anything to say. I decided to put things off until the next morning, the morning of the class, thinking that, just maybe, sleeping on it would do something. I hoped to rise the following day to find that, through the night, I had been infused with some much-needed inspiration. But, alas, when I awoke, nothing had changed—the void remained. Nothing. In "Schopenhauer as Educator," philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (2007) laments the fact that educators are "obligated to think in public about predetermined subjects at predetermined hours," even, he says, on those days when they say to themselves, "I can't think of anything today, at least not of anything worthwhile" (p. 186). Maybe, what I was thinking was correct, that is, that I was ill-equipped to say anything worthwhile about the predetermined topic for this class discussion: suicide.

In preparing for the class, I was alarmed by the degree to which suicide is a covert but potent dilemma in our society, particularly amongst young people in minority communities. A detailed account of this is given in a *New York Times* piece, "Rise in Suicide by Black Children Surprises Researchers." The journalist, Sabrina Tavernise (2015), reports that "the suicide rate among black children has nearly doubled since the early 1990s, while the rate for white children has declined." Researchers have been shocked by these findings because it has long been held that Whites have been more affected by suicide than African Americans. The current data shows, however, that this is not the case. Researchers are finding growing suicide rates in a specific demographic of African American youth.

Sean Joe (2008), a scholar of suicidal behavior among Black Americans, contends that the primary reason for the increase in suicide numbers for African Americans is the rise in suicidality amongst African American young men (p. 220). An alarming statistic provided by Joe is that "[s]uicide is now the third leading cause of death for black males aged fifteen to twenty-four" (p. 220). How can this be? It's sad to read that these young men are killing themselves during the most exciting years of their lives. These are the years, supposedly, when young men experience many of the "firsts" in life, including but not limited to first love, first car, first job, first time away from home. But for these African American men, sadly, according to Joe, that is not the case. Rather, these years are consumed with terror, fear, shame, anxiety, disappointment, and hopelessness. Sociologist Elijah Anderson (2008) states:

> Living in areas of concentrated ghetto poverty, still shadowed by the legacy of slavery and second-class citizenship, too many young black men are trapped in a horrific cycle that includes active discrimination, unemployment, poverty, crime, prison, and early death. (p. 3)

Sean Joe was interviewed for the above-mentioned *New York Times* article, wherein he claims that "what it means to grow up young and black has changed" (Tavernise, 2015). Increased isolation is a central problem. Decades ago, in *Race Matters*, philosopher Cornel West (1993) had the foresight to highlight the negative effects this change would have on future generations, saying,

> [A] pervasive spiritual impoverishment grows. The collapse of meaning in life—the eclipse of hope and absence of love of self and others, the breakdown of family and neighborhood bonds—leads to the social deracination and cultural denudement of urban dwellers, especially children. We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks—family, friends, school—that sustain some sense of purpose in life. (p. 5)

West's diagnosis is supported by Dr. Christine Moutier, chief medical officer for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, who, when interviewed for the *New York Times* article, claimed that "traditionally lower rates for blacks has often been attributed to strong social networks," and she added that "something in those protective factors... may have shifted in the wrong direction over [the] last two decades" (Tavernise, 2015).

The period during which this change occurred was from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. It is noteworthy that this is also the time that is considered the golden age of a nascent art form in the African American community called hip-hop or rap music. For numerous African American youths, the underground reporting provided by hip-hop artists became the means by which daily life in the inner cities of American was documented. If anyone was able to given an account of the changes that were taking place—and what needed to change—for Black youth during that time of social decline, it would be the truth-tellers, the poets and prophets of the inner city, the hip-hop artists. These are the men and women whom historian and music critic Jeff Chang (2005) refers to as "the voices of their generation" (p. 228). It was the hip-hop artists, in essence, who best articulated not only the manifest problems (e.g., poverty and poor education) in America's inner cities but also, and more importantly, the inner turmoil affecting the people in these neighborhoods. In their music, they openly confessed their struggles with fear, shame, and abandonment. Some went further than that, however. Some hip-hop artists used their music for self-analysis, that is, to talk about things considered taboo in the African American community, such as suicidality.

The class on suicide was fast approaching. But now I began to think that it was best to have someone else teach this particular class. So, on short notice, I brought an unusual guest lecturer into class. Was it risky? *Yes*. He didn't have a PhD. He had never gone to seminary. He was not a pastor. He was no pastoral theologian. But he was indeed qualified to tell his story—no, better still, to *spit rhymes* about not only his own suicidal thoughts but also those of other African American youths in the ghetto. I let the class know that Biggie

Smalls[1] (né Christopher Wallace) was the guest lecturer and that he would be allowed to tell his story of suicidality and tell it his way.

I started the class by playing Biggie Smalls's song "Suicidal Thoughts," the final track of his debut album *Ready to Die*. The students had no idea what was about to happen. And so, as you could well imagine, there was a great deal of surprise, a detectable level of anxiety, and, quite possibly, even a tinge of (sanctified) disgust among the students when I pressed play on my iPhone and they heard the following words:

> When I die, fuck it, I wanna go to hell
> 'Cause I'm a piece of shit, it ain't hard to fuckin' tell
> It don't make no sense, goin' to heaven with the goodie-goodies
> Dressed in white, I like black Timbs and black hoodies
> God'll probably really have me on some strict shit

While Biggie Smalls told his story of suicidality, I kept trying to choose a good time to stop the song. I noticed several students growing more uncomfortable, some fidgeting in their seats while others clenched their hands. One person even let out a resounding nervous laugh upon hearing "when I die, fuck it, I wanna go to hell." Maybe it was getting to be too much. Maybe they had already gotten the point. "No, let's hear it all, the whole story," I thought, and so Biggie continued.

> Hangin' with the goodie-goodies, loungin' in paradise
> Fuck that shit, I wanna tote guns and shoot dice . . .
> All my life I been considered as the worst
> Lyin' to my mother, even stealin' out her purse
> Crime after crime, from drugs to extortion
> I know my mother wish she got a fuckin' abortion
> She don't even love me like she did when I was younger . . .

Biggie Smalls kept on confessing his rage, his guilt, and his sorrow through a series of spellbinding couplets until it all stopped suddenly—*BANG*—with the sound of a gunshot. And that was it. His lecture was over.

As unsettling as the finale of Biggie Smalls's lecture was for those listening, *BANG*, its deafening abruptness was soon eclipsed by an agonizing stillness. The class was silent. No one knew what to say. What had happened? Was Biggie Smalls's story too big for the room? Was a seminary class the wrong place to have him talk—like this—about his suicidal thoughts? Finally, after a few minutes, I posed a question to the class: "Does anyone have anything to say about the lecture?" There were sighs of exasperation followed by some faint laughter, but then, after more silence, the students began to respond. "He needs to pray!" shouted one student, and many others nodded their heads in approval. Soon after, another student said, "Yeah, I mean, he wants to go to hell—*what is that about?*—he needs some serious prayer." After the students spoke, I decided to pose another question: "Are you certain that what you just heard wasn't a prayer?" I then went on to ask, "How do you

[1] Journalist Cheo Hodari Coker (2013), in his book *Unbelievable: The Life, Death, and Afterlife of the Notorious B.I.G.*, explains that Christopher Wallace's rap persona went through a series of iterations during his career. His persona of Biggie Smalls, unlike his later persona of the Notorious B.I.G., was the one that garnered Mr. Wallace underground affection, that is to say, the admiration of young urban Blacks whose own lives resonated with the real-life stories depicted in his music.

know that this prayer was not just for himself but also for people in his community who are feeling the same way—that is, suffering from suicidal thoughts?".

Overtly, "Suicidal Thoughts" would never classify as the kind of prayer that would be listed in a church's prayer book. But maybe that is why it upset so many students in the class. It's raw. It's real. It details suffering, particularly the suffering of African American youth, in such an authentic way that it cannot be ignored. Even after the song has ended, its words resonate, leaving one to ponder, just maybe, one's own suicidal thoughts. *BANG.* This experience is analogous to what philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975/2013) refers to as contemporaneity,[2] which is most evident in works of art, "religious rituals and the proclamation of the Word in preaching" (p. 129), in that the poetic words of the Biggie Smalls's lament make his experience, though they were written more than 20 years ago, present for us now. Most of all, by bringing this experience into our presence, "Suicidal Thoughts" invites us to contemplate our personal fears, aggressions, and, most troubling of all, unbelief. In *A Psychology of Prayer: Primary Speech*, scholars of psychiatry and religion Ann Ulanov and Barry Ulanov (1982) observe that the language of prayer is primary speech and, therefore, it "speaks our secrets, even those we keep from ourselves" (p. 3). Prayer provides a different way, a poetic way, of giving form to what is going on deep within us.

This paper seeks to formulate a new perspective on the recovery of the hidden self—the creative self—in the African American context through the hip-hop ritual of spitting rhymes, a specific form of communal storytelling. I argue that this should be considered a helpful addition to the liberative modes of intrapersonal and intracommunal care. By spitting rhymes, that is, engaging in poetic discourse, one discovers, first, that the lost object(s)—for instance, the creative self—that is causing one's torment and leading to suicidal thoughts greatly weakens one's ability to give form and meaning to one's suffering. Sigmund Freud's (2006) essay "Mourning and Melancholia" is instructive in this regard because within it he explains that for the suicidal person to recover it is necessary to move from melancholia to mourning as the latter is when the lost object—whether "a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of a person"—no longer remains a secret to the self but is brought to consciousness and is known (p. 310). Knowing what one has lost is in itself important to the healing process. Therefore, the focus of this paper is not on Biggie Smalls himself—a psychobiography or the like— but rather on his capabilities as a hip-hop poet to use his story of suicidality for therapeutic ends.

There is a history of neglect when it comes to African Americans discussing their sorrow. For one, many outside the African American community viewed such stories as nothing more than a form of entertainment, particularly when expressed through music, as is evident in the wide acceptance of Negro spirituals (e.g., "Motherless Child") and the blues (e.g., "Hellbound on My Trail"). Unfortunately, this has also diminished the reality of Black suffering. For instance, some historians, such as Stanley Elkins and Joseph Boskin, claim that the first public image of the African American male was the Sambo on the plantation. The ruling class didn't believe the Sambo felt pain. In their eyes, the Sambo

[2] Two brief points on contemporaneity: (1) In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer credits philosopher Soren Kierkegaard with introducing the concept of contemporaneity in *Philosophical Fragments*, and (2) in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Gadamer (1977) speaks of the life-changing intimacy that is facilitated through the contemporaneity of a work of art when he remarks that "the intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolition of the familiar. It is not only the 'This art thou!' disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us, 'Thou must alter thy life!'" (p. 104).

was a beast of burden in toto. Providing a brief profile of the Sambo—the personality type, the environment that created it, and so on—is significant as it underscores why it was, and in many ways still is, true that in order to survive and be accepted in various hostile environments African Americans have been forced to deny their own suffering. The reality of African Americans' sorrow is lampooned by minstrelsy.

Sambos and Minstrels and the Language of Black Reality

Who is the Sambo?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Sambo as an offensive term for "a black person." That is certainly an oversimplification of the term. A more comprehensive definition is provided in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, which states that "Sambo was a stereotyped character created by whites to denigrate blacks" (Ferris & Wilson, 1989 p. 1141). It also says that the "Sambo character was probably the most tenacious stereotype of black people in both southern and American culture until the late twentieth century" (p. 1141). Notice that it does not affix the stereotype within the antebellum period or the Jim Crow era but instead sees it functioning well into the twentieth century. Historian John W. Blassingame (1972), in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, shares the following about the Sambo stereotype.

> Sambo . . . [combined] in his person Uncle Remus, Jim Crow, and Uncle Tom. . . . Indolent, faithful, humorous, loyal, dishonest, superstitious, improvident, and musical, Sambo was inevitably a clown and congenitally docile. Characteristically a house servant, Sambo had so much love and affection for his master that he was almost filio-pietistic; his loyalty was all-consuming and self-immolating. (p. 225)

Defining the Sambo, though instructive, is just one piece of this complex puzzle. Understanding the kind of environment or system that creates this figure (or person) is another essential piece.

In terms of providing an overview of the social milieu that produced the Sambo, Elkins's *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1968) is a noted, albeit controversial, text. Elkins's thesis is that the American plantation was a "closed system" (p. 81). Due to being shut within the plantation, the slave developed a specific personality type, which Elkins believes has been engrafted within the African American psyche. Elkins offers his own definition of the Sambo personality, remarking that "Sambo, the typical plantation slave, was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy... his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk flattered with childish exaggerations" (p. 82). He then adds, "[H]is relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment: it was indeed this *childlike quality* [emphasis added] that was the very key to his being" (p. 82).

Centuries prior, philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1899/1956) gave a similar evaluation, arguing that slaves' childishness was due to cultural deficiency, an inescapable and inevitable result of their African heritage (p. 91). Though not referencing the work of Hegel directly, Elkins still conveys the spirit of Hegel's argument by claiming that the ruling class held Hegelian views regarding the Sambo's inherent childishness, stating, "For most Southerners in 1860 it went without saying not only that Sambo was real—that he was a dominant plantation type—but also that his characteristics were the clear product of racial

inheritance" (p. 82). Elkins is not satisfied, however, with simply designating "racial inheritance" as the only reason for the Sambo's childishness. He sees something else having an equal role in perpetuating the Sambo personality type, most notably the aforementioned closed plantation system. "It will be assumed," Elkins says, "that there were elements in the very structure of the plantation—its closed character—that could sustain infantilism as a normal feature of behavior" (p. 86).

The most troubling aspect of Elkins's analysis is that the closed system of the plantation, in his estimation, weakened the slave's ability to resist the plantation's power. For instance, when comparing slavery in Latin America and the United States, Elkins reports that, unlike those in Latin America, the childish slaves in the United States could not view themselves as rebels. They were not able to take on any of the mature and independent roles that could inspire them to reject and overthrow the system. The system was so effective that, in the end, the slave qua Sambo joyfully accepted and lived by the decrees of the plantation. In *Slavery and Social Death*, sociologist Orlando Patterson (1982) speaks to this phenomenon when he shares, "[I]f the slave no longer belonged to a community, if he had no social existence outside of the master, then what was he? The initial response in almost all slaveholding societies is to define the slave as a socially dead person" (p. 38). One must wonder how slaves ever found the courage to fight for their freedom if the closed system of the plantation was so effective, that is, if they were, in fact, socially dead.

Though influential, Elkins's *Slavery* text has its critics. Historians who oppose his views support his central thesis—that is, that the Sambo persona emerged within the closed system of the plantation. For the most part, that cannot be disputed. Where they differ with Elkins, however, is in his assertion that this was *the* and not just *a* personality type found among slaves. Historian Eugene D. Genovese's "Rebelliousness and Docility in the Negro Slave" (1971) provides a counterargument to Elkins's thesis. The primary target of Genovese's rejoinder is Elkins's overstating the Sambo's pervasiveness on the plantation. Genovese says,

> Elkins asserts that the United States alone produced the Sambo stereotype—"the perpetual child incapable of maturity." He does not, as so many of his critics insist, equate childishness with docility, although he carelessly gives such an impression. Rather he equates it with dependence and, with a subtlety that seems to elude his detractors, skillfully accounts for most forms of day-to-day resistance. His thesis . . . is objectionable not because it fails to account for hostile behavior, but because it proves too much and encompasses more forms of behavior than can usefully be managed under a single rubric. (pp. 44–45)

Genovese's point here is that Elkins is so invested in the "closed system" framework that even he himself, as is demonstrated throughout *Slavery*, is guilty of perpetuating the closed system ideology because he is not willing to view the Sambo as anything but a dependent, docile child. "Sambo," states Genovese, "has a much longer pedigree and a much wider range than Elkins appreciates" (p. 50). More is said about the slave's other side(s) (or personalities) in Genovese's masterful text *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1976). Many are already familiar with the often-mentioned rebelliousness of such figures as, say, Denmark Vesey, David Walker, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Nat Turner, to name a few. Rather than focus on the manifest activities of such noted figures, Genovese brings to our consciousness the latent ways slaves created a world of their own within the "closed system" of the plantation. According to Genovese, what is described by Elkins as the slaves' childish submission to oppression was, upon further inspection, really a means of masking subversive behavior that was employed—daily—to maintain their humanity.

> The slaves' response to paternalism and their imaginative creation of a partially autonomous religion provided a record of simultaneous accommodation and resistance to slavery. Accommodation itself breathed a critical spirit and disguised subversive actions and often embraced its apparent opposite—resistance. In fact, accommodation might best be understood as a way of accepting what could not be helped without falling prey to the pressures of dehumanization, emasculation, and self-hatred. (p. 598)

Stealing, lying, arson, etc.—these were activities that slaves utilized to rebel against the system, but there were other imaginative and creative ways they rebelled as well.

James C. Scott (1990), a political scientist and anthropologist, observes that, in socio-politically oppressive environments, oppressed persons must contend with what he terms the *public transcript*. The public transcript, says Scott, is "the self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen" (p. 18). The oppressed are expected to saturate their own language with exaltations that extol the virtues of the elites. The oppressed do so, all while finding that this same language does not speak to the realities of their own lived experiences. Scott describes this further:

> For example, even the ideology of white slave owners in the antebellum U.S. South incorporated certain paternalist flourishes about the care, feeding, housing, and clothing of slaves and their religious instruction. (p. 18)

The phrase "good ol' master" is an example. Conversely, you have a second discourse, a subversive discourse, that Scott refers to as the *hidden transcript*. This was the language of the slave quarters and other hidden locations (e.g., hush harbors) beyond the purview of the master, the overseer, and the driver. These were safe spaces where slaves could openly convey the "words of anger, revenge, self-assertion that they must normally choke back when in the presence of master" (Scott, 1990, p. 18). The hidden transcript served not only as the language slaves utilized when in communication amongst each other but also as the means by which individual slaves gave voice to their innermost feelings when alone. Scott identifies a third realm of discourse between the aforementioned two. "This [discourse] is a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place," he contends, "in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors" (p. 19). One finds this third realm of discourse, for example, in the Br'er Rabbit stories and other trickster tales that can be traced back to the folk tales of West Africa.

John W. Roberts (1993), a scholar of African American folklore and folklife, contends that the prevalence of trickster tales among African slaves is an irrefutable sign of their boundless creativity. He explains that

> consequently, in creating animal trickster tales, they repeatedly portrayed the trickster as an actor in types of situations that they were very likely to encounter in the slave system. They also portrayed the trickster as an actor whose characteristic behavior enhanced the possibility of success in dealing with situations peculiar to the slave-master relationship. . . . Although enslaved Africans, like their trickster, depended to a great extent on their own ingenuity to succeed against their antagonists, the slave masters, *they also relied on the masters' perception of them as inferior beings and blindness to their humanity as important aids to success in their on-going struggle* [emphasis added]. (pp. 38–39)

Roberts's claim is another rebuttal of Elkins' "closed system" hypothesis in that enslaved Africans, when needed, intentionally donned the mask of the Sambo to

manipulate the balance of power, at least in terms of who was in control of discourse, and through trickster tales and tricksteresque behaviors were able to tip the balance of power, if only slightly, in their favor. To reinforce this point, it is worth quoting Roberts (1993) once more:

> While slavemasters' paternalism supported their own illusion of the slave system as a cooperative enterprise accepted as legitimate by enslaved Africans, it also left them open to trickster-like manipulation which allowed enslaved Africans to gain an advantage in negotiating some of its harsher realities. (p. 40)

The harsh realities that enslaved Africans endured far exceeded the chance interactions they had with the slave master. There were a host of other situations, from the regulated work of the plantation to informal intracommunal interactions to syncretic religious practices, that forced slaves to draw on a boundless reservoir of creativity. In *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, historian Sterling Stuckey (2013) shares that "for all the comparative leisure available to whites, the African used his imagination to reflect on life in the new land with an originality sufficient to bring indigenous artistic forms into being" (p. 71). The harvest festival, for example, was a ritual that allowed their creativity to be expressed through various dances, such as the Buzzard Lope or the cake-walk (p. 71). A great paradox is that these forms of cultural expression—the songs, the dances, and even the (trickster) humor—helped to connect the individual slave to the wider slave community and, at the same time, were devalued by the ruling class as nothing more than entertainment. Minstrelsy is the name that came to designate the entertainers—such as Thomas D. Rice, Bert Williams, and Al Jolson—who, for fame and fortune, gave a stereotyped depiction—often by engaging in Sambo-like behavior—of African American life.

Cultural critic and philosopher Sylvia Wynter (1979), in an essay titled "Sambos and Minstrels," contends that the minstrel stereotype was used by the South's White elite to transform "the complex popular tradition of satire into *harmless* [emphasis added] entertainment" (p. 155). Furthermore, she adds, "[T]he marginalization of *creative cultural activity* [emphasis added] was therefore carried out through... the Sambo/minstrel stereotype" (p. 155). Wynter's argument is that the creative energies previously used to create culture, inspire rebellion, and form modes of being that exceeded the boundaries of the plantation are redirected, in minstrelsy, towards a new goal: to entertain the ruling class. The creativity of African Americans becomes a product for sale. And the minstrel, with his joyful song and dance routine, greatly devalues this precious resource. The downside of this, of course, is that the minstrel gains recognition only by making a mockery of Black suffering. For example, in "Jump Jim Crow," the most famous early minstrel performance, the main character depicts an elderly, crippled African American stable hand who, despite his sad condition, always remains joyful, always ready for a song and dance for good ol' master.

A hypothesis could certainly be offered that over time the reservoir of African American creativity has steadily dried up. Far too many have come repeatedly to this hallowed well only to take something that can be used to entertain the ruling class, leaving little to help the African American community to engage in what Wynter (1979) calls the "social revolution needed in America today" (p. 156). This restriction of creative energies has another effect, however, one that is far more pernicious. For, as I shall discuss in what follows, it is an impeded ability to express one's true self creatively, especially in an overregulated or, as Elkins put it, closed environment, that makes life downright unbearable—and, in extreme cases, leads to suicidal thoughts.

On Suicide

Suicide is distressing on so many levels. To begin, there is the act itself. No scientific data, no philosophical theories, and not even a note declaring a reason for the act can explain why a person decides to take their own life. It's a mystery. What is obvious, however, is that suicidal people believe themselves enshrouded in darkness. All light ceases to shine. According to the World Health Organization's data on suicides across the globe, "[C]lose to 800,000 people die to suicide every year, which is one person every 40 s" (World Health Organization, 2018). It is truly frightening to consider that, in the short time it took you to read the last several sentences, a suicide has occurred. Data reporting incidents of suicide here in the United States paint an equally disturbing picture. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2016) reports that suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, with an estimated 48,344 suicides committed in 2020. The CDC also discovered that 9.8 million American adults have seriously thought about suicide. (I'm sure these figures underrepresent the number of persons who have suicidal thoughts.) In *The Suicidal Mind*, sociologist Edwin Shneidman (1996) claims,

> Suicide haunts our literature and our culture. It is the taboo subtext to our successes and our happiness. The reporting of a suicide of any public figure disturbs each of us. Amid our dreams of happiness and achievement lurk our nightmares of self-destruction. Who is not mindful of the potential self-defeating elements within our own personality? (p. 3)

Further angst is caused by the fact that conflicting opinions influence how we think about our suicidal thoughts, and it has been this way throughout history.

Historian Jacob Bruckhardt (1998) argues that ancient Greek culture embraced suicide. For instance, rather than face political shame and societal hardships, such as those caused by the loss of the Achaean War in 146 BCE, which led to the enslavement of some of Greece's inhabitants, countless Greeks committed suicide.

> After the general defeat of the Greeks by Roman armies in the last Achaean War, despair turned to madness and caused countless suicides; everywhere people plunged into the reservoirs or threw themselves from cliffs, so that it was heartrending even for the conquerors, who intended no harm to most of them. (p. 122)

Furthermore, the idea of suicide (or voluntary death) was woven into the fabric of Greek philosophy as "philosophers claimed the freedom to die that they had in life, and voluntary death gradually became part of their systems of thought" (p. 122). Several modern philosophers have followed the philosophy of the Greeks when it comes to suicide. Their opinion, however, is more concerned with the *right* we have to deny providence and terminate our own lives as an act of free will. Enlightenment philosopher David Hume (1998) argues that providence has endowed humans with the ability—i.e., reason—to choose for themselves the best time to escape the miseries of life. "I thank providence," proclaims Hume, "both for the good which I have already enjoyed, and for the power with which I am endowed of escaping the ills that threaten men" (p. 320). Nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1970), in arguing that suicide should not be a crime, holds the view, like Hume, that "there is nothing in the world a

man has a more incontestable *right* to than his own life and person" (p. 77). And this inalienable right, according to these influential thinkers, guarantees that we can end our life on our own terms.

There are, of course, negative views about suicide. In *City of God* (2003), St. Augustine condemns the act, particularly by Christians, whom he declares have no authority, under any circumstance, to commit suicide. "It is significant that in the sacred canonical books there can nowhere be found any injunction or permission to commit suicide either to ensure immortality or to avoid or escape any evil," writes Augustine (p. 31). Augustine's repudiation of suicide, informed by his interpretation of holy writ, is also found centuries later in the writings of Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1951/2004), who in *Church Dogmatics III.4* avers that our life is a loan gifted to us by God, and we therefore do not have the right to dispose of it as we wish (p. 405). Barth's views on suicide are more tempered than Augustine's in that he does not view suicide as an unforgivable sin (p. 405). Barth's opinion, instead, is that the suicidal person "is always in some way in the darkness of affliction" (p. 406). And when things have become this dreadful, when the "abyss of divine rejection," as he calls it, is engulfing the individual, suicide, although not acceptable, is the only way such a person finds relief. As shown, philosophers and theologians have differing opinions about suicide. Nevertheless, there are fields of study that have researched suicide from a scientific—reportedly fact-based—perspective. Since the nineteenth century, suicide has been a topic of interest for sociologists, and sociologist Émile Durkheim's *On Suicide (*2006*)*, to this day, remains the pivotal sociological study on the subject.

The following texts shaped the field of sociology: Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* examines the social and economic elements of capitalism; Max Weber's *Economy and Society* provides an overview of his theories of rationalization and how this relates to social action and social structures; and Émile Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society* explores the reasons why individuals, even as they are becoming more independent due to industrialization and secularization, remain dependent on social structures (e.g., family, religious communities, the state). Durkheim's research interests, as was the case also for Marx and Weber, were shaped by the sociopolitical climate in which he lived. Sociologist Ken Morrison (1995) informs us that, during the mid- to late nineteenth century, France was in a "deep political crisis which had led to a decline in national unity" (p. 120). In response to this, the French citizenry hoped recent discoveries in the natural sciences, supported by the scientific method, would turn things around by ushering in an era of social progress. A specific alarming social issue in France was the rise in suicides. Durkheim, believing that the recent breakdown of social bonds was due to hyperindividualism, which caused a rise in social isolation, sought to provide scientific evidence that suicide was not an act only of the individual but that it had a social dimension as well. Durkheim scholar Steven Lukes (1972) states that the central thesis of Durkheim's research, throughout his oeuvre, was to better understand "the [social] bonds that unite one man to another" (p. 194). Personal reasons also fueled Durkheim's desire to prove the value of social bonds. Due to his being part of a Jewish family in 18th-century France, and the son and grandson of rabbis no less, Durkheim was a child and adolescent during a time of increasing anti-Semitism throughout Europe. In the introduction to Durkheim's *On Suicide*, sociologist Richard Sennett writes, "[T]he Jews [were] being blamed for the French defeat at the hands of the Germans in 1870, the growth of urban capitalism, the diminishing hold of Catholicism on the population, and modern art" (p. xiii). This oppressive environment led (or forced) the Jewish community to form strong communal bonds, bonds that could, at times, shield the individual from the dangers of social aggression. Maintaining this group cohesion came at a cost, however, as is evident in Durkheim's theory outlining different forms of suicide.

Durkheim asserts that there are four types of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. *Egoistic suicide* speaks to the breakdown of social ties, whether familial, political, or religious, due to excessive individualism. It is the process by which individuals detach from the social group (and/or society at large) and retreat within themselves. Durkheim explains:

> Egoism is not simply an auxiliary factor, it is the productive cause. If in this case the link that attaches a man is loosened, it is because the link that attaches him to society has itself been relaxed. As for the incidents of private life that appear to be the immediate motive for the suicide and which are presumed to be its determining conditions, they are in reality only incidental causes. If the individual gives way to the slightest adversity, it is because the state of society had made him an easy prey for suicide. (pp. 231–232)

Altruistic suicide is caused by an excessive amount of social integration, that is, an individual's being overly attached to a group. This is a feature of tribal societies wherein the individual's ego is overwhelmed because it is not allowed its own individualized forms of expression. Within such societies there is an overdependence on authority figures or centralized forms of power (i.e., the state). In such cases, according to Durkheim,

> we see the individual aspiring to cast off his personal being in order to be swallowed up by this other thing that he considers his true essence. No matter what he calls it, it is in this and this alone that he believes himself to exist, and if he attempts so ardently to merge with it, it is in order to be. So he considers himself to have no individual existence. (p. 243)

Anomic suicide underscores a decline in the regulatory powers within a particular society. Put another way, the moral fabric of society is showing signs of decay. Overconsumption, for Durkheim, is the primary cause. He focuses on the manner in which the growing desire for wealth, prestige, and power is not moderated within French society and other Western nations. When left unchecked, consumption creates a false sense of self-sufficiency in us, so much so that we feel overly threatened when an impediment prevents the fulfillment of our unquenchable desire.

> Wealth, on the contrary, by the powers that it confers, gives us the illusion that we depend only on ourselves. By lessening the resistance that things put in our way, it persuades us that they can be constantly overcome. And, the less one feels limited, the more intolerable any limitation becomes. . . . Of course, this is not a reason for preventing mankind from improving its material state. But, while there may be some remedy for the moral danger that follows any increase in wealth, we should not still lose sight of this danger. (p. 278)

Fatalistic suicide is the overregulation of the individual by social forces. "This is one," Durkheim notes, "that results from an excess of regulation, the one committed by those whose future is pitilessly confined and whose passions are violently constrained by oppressive discipline" (p. 305). After confessing that examples of this specific suicide type are hard to find, Durkheim offers the following: "Is this not the kind of *suicide of slaves* [emphasis added] that is said to be common in certain circumstances?" (p. 305). The closed system of the plantation, as discussed earlier, doubtless meets the criteria for being a site of excess regulation or overregulation. Morrison (1995) has an interesting take on this when he mentions that fatalistic suicide occurs because of "an excessive degree of regulation and an overly developed regime" (p. 188). The use of

the word regime is significant, for it speaks to the way that a system, a power structure, a social arrangement (e.g., the master–slave dialectic on the plantation) can become so overpowering that it controls the individual's ability to achieve a sense of authenticity.

In his essay "The Negro and Fatalistic Suicide," sociologist Warren Breed (1970) argues that, since the Emancipation Proclamation, the overregulation of the plantation regime has been dispersed throughout American society. In fact, Breed firmly rejects Durkheim's proposition that one has to go back to slave societies, whether those that existed in the United States or elsewhere, to find instances of fatalistic suicide. According to Breed, although "fatalistic forces may be highly operative in modern urban life, [they are] anachronisms in post-industrial society" (p. 161). But why is this overregulation so pervasive in modern society, particularly in African American communities? Is it because we still fear, above all, the uncanny creativity of African Americans? Are we still, after all this time, tethered to the image of the easily controlled and submissive Sambo/minstrel stereotype? But what about those who refuse to be controlled?

Black Rage, written by Black psychiatrists William Grier and Price M. Cobbs (1968), is an influential study that details how rage becomes the prevailing response to overregulation in the African American community. The authors are especially attentive to how this affect influences the development of young African American men, stating that "throughout his life, at each critical point of development, the black boy is told to hold back, to constrict, to subvert and camouflage" (p. 59). Ultimately, the authors claim, young African American men, because their lives are so regulated, do not possess the power "to understand and alter" their lives (p. 60). This lack of understanding is significant for it speaks to the dearth of meaning these young men are experiencing. For them, there is no reason, no purpose to their suffering, and that is dangerous. They don't see themselves as part of a larger story. Life, for some, is pointless and not worth living. In *Afropessimism* (2020), cultural critic and novelist Frank B. Wilderson III states that, as an African American, he fears something worse than death.

> It was then that it struck me: the thing I had never before been able to get *hold of in words*. I feared a death without meaning. A death without a story to it, a chain of events that would make sense to those who survived me, a clear and logical chain of events that anyone could read, and, when they finished, lift their heads from the page and say, I can see why he died. (p. 86)

Wilderson's confession regarding his need to give his death meaning sheds light on the haunting lyrics of Biggie Smalls's "Suicidal Thoughts." The unrestricted rage being expressed in the song's words, though uncomfortable to hear, does place the suicidal act at the end—the sound of the gunshot—*BANG*—within the framework of a story. And it is his story of lament, his words about the pain of his lived experience, that protects him against the deadly terror of social regulation. There is freedom in this act—maybe even something life-giving, also, in this process of meaning-making.

Whether it is within the closed system of the plantation or the ghetto, there always remains a creative impulse that the regulating regime cannot control. And it is from this impulse that new ways not only of expressing rage and voicing lament are formed but also innovative ways of contending with suicidal thoughts. For the past 30 years or so, hip-hop artists have been castigated as minstrels and Sambos, thugs and gangsters, prophets of violence and heralds of misogyny, and, in many respects, this is true. What is often missed amongst all the criticism, however, is that this mode of meaning-making, spitting rhymes, is an invaluable means by which African American youth

sublimate their pain into a story. Spitting rhymes gives form to their pain, their loss, and, as the lyrics of "Suicidal Thoughts" make clear, their spiritual lament.

Living 'Til Mourning: Prayer, Poetry, and Spitting Rhymes

Is "Suicidal Thoughts" a prayer? *Merriam-Webster* defines prayer as (1a) an address to God or a god in a word or thought; (1b) a set order of words used in praying. For Christians, the Lord's Prayer is the model to follow. After all, according to Luke 11:1–4, it is the prayer Jesus shared with his disciples after one of them requested, "Lord, teach us to pray." Fourteenth-century theologian John Calvin (1536/1960) comments, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that the Lord's Prayer is a gift from the Son of God that "supplies words to our lips that free our minds from all wavering" (p. 898). He suggests also that there is no reason for us to tamper with this model, saying,

> For He prescribed a form for us in which He set forth as in a table all that He allows us to seek of him, all that is of benefit to us, all that we need to ask. From this kindness we receive great fruit of consolation: that we know we are requesting nothing absurd, nothing strange or unseemly—in short, nothing unacceptable to him—since we are asking almost in his own words. (p. 897)

Certainly, when judged against the sublimity of the Lord's Prayer, Biggie Smalls's "Suicidal Thoughts" fails to meet Calvin's standard for prayer. The language is far too vile. There's too much aggression. Worst of all, it is void of praise. "Suicidal Thoughts" is a long lament. It's an earnest expression of grief about Biggie Smalls's separation from community, self, and God. But does that disqualify it as a prayer? In "The Costly Loss of Lament," Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann (1986) mentions the "loss of life and faith incurred when the lament Psalms [or prayers] are no longer used for their social function" (p. 57). Brueggemann warns that the church rushes to doxology and praise too fast, often before a lament is resolved. "In a sense," he says, "doxology and praise are best understood only in response to God's salvific intervention, which in turn is evoked by lament" (p. 58). These laments, however, are more than just an individual's bemoaning a personal misfortune. Rather, they also express a person's identifying and lamenting a communal crisis.

Old Testament scholar Miriam J. Bier (2013) identifies a grammatical shift from the individual to the communal that occurs in Lamentations 4:17–20, wherein the lamenter makes use of the first person plural (e.g., "we"):

> 17 As for us, our eyes as yet failed for our vain help: in our watching we have watched for a nation that could not save us.
> 18 They hunt our steps, that we cannot go in our streets: our end is near, our days are fulfilled; for our end is come.
> 19 Our prosecutors are swifter than the eagles of the heaven: they pursued us upon the mountains, they laid wait for us in the wilderness.
> 20 The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was taken in their pits, of whom we said, under his shadow we shall live among the heathen. (KJV)

This is different from the language used in Lamentations 4:1–16, which is in the third person (p. 30). The purpose of this grammatical shift, notes Biers, is to give form and expression to the sorrow the community is experiencing. According to Bier,

> the Lamenter gathers together the entire community, from the least (the infants) to the greatest (the king), identifying with them in his communal expression. . . . This transition to collective voice extends the scope of Lamentations from individual (yet still representative) expressions of pain, to self-conscious voicing by the entire community. (p. 30)

The importance of lament—whether in the Scriptures or in our daily prayers—is that it protects the community from being overwhelmed by despair. In his essay "The Formlessness of Grief" (1977), Brueggemann informs us that "by the use of the form the grief experience is made bearable and, it is hoped, meaningful. The form makes the experience formful just when it appeared to be formless and therefore deathly and destructive" (p. 265). The pernicious effects of the loss of lament are evident, for Brueggemann (1986), in that our (over-)attachment to praise and doxology instills and reinforces "a practice of denial, cover-up, and pretense, which sanctions social control" (p. 60). It seems that, at a certain level, this is similar to the social control or societal overregulation found in Durkheim's "fatalistic suicide." In the end, when we are not permitted to lament in prayer, we are denied the kind of serious speech that makes known our authentic expression of suffering. We are not able to give meaning to our experience. Our spiritual lives, in this mode, become too formulaic. And ultimately, according to Brueggemann, we are forced into a religion of "coercive obedience" (p. 61). For instance, one is expected to say things are good, say that one feels loved, say that the Lord has delivered one even when this is not what one truly believes. Authorized prayer, even the Lord's Prayer, can do more to enslave than liberate because its language is far too formulaic. It becomes prose—not poetry.

The lament psalms are categorized as poetry in Brueggemann's essay "The Costly Loss of Lament." However, he further expounds upon the need for this form of poetic speech in *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (1989), wherein he argues that our current spiritual malaise is being caused by our use of vapid language. Brueggemann asks, "Is there another way to speak? Is there another voice to be voiced? Is there an alternative universe of discourse to be practiced that will struggle with truth in ways unreduced?" (p. 2). This imaginative, creative, and daring speech is often associated with the prophetic, but, as Brueggemann observes, it is also found within the poetic as well (p. 4). It is worth noting that the word poetry comes from the Medieval Latin term *poetria* based on the Greek *poetes*, which means "maker" or "create" (see *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Cuddon, 1999, p. 682). Rather than remain within the restrictions and rules of prose, poets reshape language to give new meaning(s) to words and, by extension, their experiences. This poetic ability to re-create language is what hip-hop artists have mastered. Literary critic Adam Bradley (2009) contends that the poetic language is the quintessence of hip-hop or rap music. He notes that

> [e]very rap song is a poem waiting to be performed. Written or freestyled, rap has a poetic structure that can be reproduced, a deliberate form an MC creates for each rhyme that differentiates it, if only in small ways, from every other rhyme ever conceived. Like all poetry, rap is defined by the art of the line. Metrical poets choose the length of their lines to correspond to particular rhythms—they write in iambic pentameter or whatever other meter suits their desires. Free verse poets employ conscious line breaks to govern the reader's pace, to emphasize particular words, or to accomplish any one of a host of other poetic objectives. In a successful poem, line breaks are never causal or accidental. Rewrite a poem in prose and you'll see it deflate like a punctured lung, expelling life. (pp. xiii–xiv)

Bradley also sees the poetics of hip-hop functioning, much like the above-mentioned prayers of lament, to give expression to personal and communal sorrow. “Rap [music] gave voice to a *group* [emphasis added] hardly heard before by America at large, certainly never heard in their own often profane, always assertive words,” writes Bradley (p. xvi). He goes on to add that “advocates often cite rap’s stories as proof of the music’s truth-telling capacity, its *prophetic voice* [emphasis added] for everyday people” (p. 133). Another commentator on the poetics of hip-hop is renowned novelist David Foster Wallace and his coauthor Mark Costello and Wallace (1990). They recognize the communal ethos of rap, commenting that for the rap song to be considered “serious rap” it must be both *of* and *for* the community (p. 130). Wallace and Costello make another point, though, that encapsulates why a rap song such as “Suicidal Thoughts” gives form and meaning to the *zeitgeist* of a generation:

> Because of rap’s meteoric rise, though, you’ve got poor kids, tough kids, “underachievers,” a “lost generation” . . . more young people—ostensibly forever turned off “language” by TV, video games, and low U.S.D.E. budgets—more of these kids hunched over notebooks on their own time, trying to put words together in striking and creative ways, than the U.S.A. had probably ever had at one time. That few of these will become “stars” matters far less than the grim stats about, say, the tiny percentage of playground basketball phenoms who actually ride sports out and up from subclass status: the same verbal skills and enthusiasms rap values . . . can obviously be applied in . . . productive ways. (p. 115)

What Wallace and Costello are speaking of here, essentially, is the creative power words have, whether through infinite jests or somber discourse, to change lives. This is related to the African concept of *Nommo,* which historian Janheinz Jahn (1958/1990) explains is upheld as “the word: the life force” (p. 132). Jahn asserts that in African culture the word is held to be of such importance to everyday life that “if there was no word, all forces would be frozen, there would be no *protection*, no *change*, no *life* [emphasis added]” (p. 133). Devastation is what occurs, personally and throughout the community, when the *Nommo*, the creative word—the power to change one’s world—has been lost.

In 1970, pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott (1986a, 1986b) gave a lecture on creativity to the Progressive League, a British organization dedicated to social reform. By that time, Winnicott was widely recognized as an innovative theorist and practitioner who “provided an intricate, subtle, and often powerfully poetic account of the development of the self out of its relational mix” (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 188). Winnicott’s poetic disposition led him to alter, at times radically, the prevailing theories regarding the human personality, most notably those put forward by Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein. An overview of Winnicott’s relational/structure model is beyond the scope of this paper, but there is a particular facet of his work that Brueggemann (1986) found germane to the lament psalms: “serious speech.” One’s ability to have transparent dialogue is essential to one’s relationships with others and with God (p. 59). Lauded for his theories about the emergence of selfhood during infancy, Winnicott also had much to say regarding the development of selfhood during adulthood. Transitional experiences, for Winnicott, are the means by which adults preserve the creativity of infancy and childhood. Psychoanalysts Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell (1983) tell us that transitional experiencing “is expressed as a capacity to play with one’s fantasies, ideas, and the world’s possibilities in a way that continually allows for the surprising, the original, and the new” (p. 196). Furthermore, they say that “in transitional experiencing, we maintain access to the most private wellspring of our thoughts and imagery” (p. 196).

Jan Abram (1997), a psychoanalyst and scholar of Winnicott's work, underscores that these experiences are held in a transitional space wherein one's needs can be met (p. 313). Therefore, for Winnicott, the health of the transitional area, which is maintained through creativity, is essential to one's well-being. During the above-mentioned 1970 lecture, he declares that "creativity, then, is the retention throughout life of something that belongs properly to infant experience: the ability to create the world" (Winnicott, 1986a, 1986b, p. 40). The creativity that emerges in transitional experiences also provides us with the cultural resources (i.e., symbols and so on) that serve as the "only medium for self-realization" (Phillips, 1988, p. 119). Moreover, there are limitless ways through which one can create meaning-giving objects, i.e., transitional objects, within the transitional space. As we mature, of course, the blankets, dolls, and other things that we once used as transitional objects will no longer suffice, which is why Winnicott (2005) suggests that, as we mature, words become transitional objects (p. 6).

In an essay titled "Creativity and Its Origins," Winnicott (2005) discusses what happens when our creativity is lost.

> Let us say that in the severe case all that is real and all that matters and all that is personal and original and creative is hidden, and given no sign of existence. The individual in such an extreme case would not really mind whether he or she were alive or dead. Suicide is of small importance when such a state of affairs is powerfully organized in an individual, and even the individual himself or herself has no awareness of what might have been missing. (p. 92)

Let us recall that in "Mourning and Melancholia" Sigmund Freud (2006) says that the melancholic, like the person who is mourning, has lost a beloved love object; however, unlike the person in mourning, the melancholic "cannot consciously grasp what has been lost" (p. 312). But is the problem that the object is no longer conscious or that the melancholic is not able to engage in the kind of "serious speech" that allows for authentic dialogue about what has been lost? In a lecture titled "Delinquency as a Sign of Hope," Winnicott (2005) argues that in order for the delinquent child to feel a new sense of hope, he must be taken back to a memory of a time before the deprivation (p. 98). He explains that "in this way the child has reached back... to the lost capacity to find objects.... The child has reached back to *creative relationship* [emphasis added] with external reality or to the period in which spontaneity was safe, even if it involves aggressive impulses" (p. 98).

I propose that spitting rhymes, as a form of spiritual lament, use the creativity of hip-hop (rap poetics) to help urban Black youth move from the self-destructive effects of melancholia to a healthier form of sorrow—mourning. If nothing else, as "Suicidal Thoughts" demonstrates, spitting rhymes can serve as an SOS, a prayer of lament, that signals not despair but hope in that the person has identified their moment and source of deprivation. The lamenter wants their story of loss to be heard. But, this is not about the individual lamenter's loss alone.

Conclusion: Mourning Ceremony

Hip-hop has been criticized for being filled with hopelessness. But this perspective often misses the other facets of the music. Author and journalist Joan Morgan (2000) mentions that hip-hop must be recognized for "its illuminating, informative narration and its incredible ability to articulate our collective pain.... We are all winners when a space exists for

brothers [and sisters] to honestly state and explore the roots of our pain" (p. 80). Exploratory speech, a speech that searches the depths of the self, is on full display when the hip-hop artist is spitting rhymes. The inner feelings that are being experienced and expressed in this moment of honest dialogue, no matter how painful, no matter how aggressive, no matter how shameful, are projected onto the world and given form. Therefore, spitting rhymes is more than just poetic performance. It's a ceremony of mourning.

As a ceremony of mourning, spitting rhymes facilitates a dialogue about personal loss within a community of trusted others. Anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff (1982) refers to such occasions of exchange as definitional ceremonies. The initial storyteller identifies community members, through the telling of the story, who have similar life experiences and, due to this, can empathize with the storyteller's self-disclosures. In discussing the role these ceremonies have in the African American context, pastoral theologian Edward Wimberly (2008) points out that the definitional ceremony allows for the telling and retelling of stories so that a personal crisis becomes known by others—referred to as witnesses—in the community (p. 9). The upshot of this process, says Wimberly, is that "the original storyteller feels cared for and loved by those who took time to listen and retell the story" (p. 9). The true power and influence of Biggie Smalls's "Suicidal Thoughts," then, is not just his personal lament in the song but also the ways in which he started a dialogue with young African Americans about their own stories of spiritual abandonment.

As a ceremony of mourning, spitting rhymes (qua definitional ceremony) also allows for the emergence and sharing of new meanings. The self that once seemed dead is reinvigorated as one now participates in the constitution of one's own life. In doing so, Meyerhoff (1982) notes,

> [S]uch people exercise power over their own images, in their own eyes and to some extent in the eyes of whoever maybe observing them. Sometimes the image is the only part of their lives subject to control. But this is not a small thing to control. It may lead to a realization of personal power. (p. 100)

The hip-hop artist does this *reimaging* through *reimagining* words. Words are what facilitate the recovery of what has been lost. Words are what help the artist and the community to mourn. Certainly, a number of hip-hop artists, once the ceremony of spitting rhymes has ceased, recognize that this is the first time they have made these feelings public. This might be the first time, moreover, they have experienced the ability to put their sorrow into words. But the social effects of this cannot be ignored, either. So, as Biggie Smalls spits rhymes throughout "Suicidal Thoughts," he is not just speaking of his personal rejection of normative expressions of religion (i.e., the goodie-goodies in heaven), his guilt concerning stealing from those he loves (i.e., his mother), his frustration with how he has been viewed by society (i.e., being considered the worst), but, as the voice of a generation, he is also speaking for countless others who are suffering the same sorrow. He was the ghetto's spokesperson (Coker, 2013, p. 81). And I imagine that for more than a few of Biggie Smalls's witnesses, "Suicidal Thoughts" helps them to spit rhymes whenever the pains of life become too overwhelming.

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