CHAPTER 27

Confessions of a Thirty-Something Hip-Hop (Old) Head

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Confessions are by their very character and function difficult to make. They require strength and conviction on the part of the confessor as well as a sense of faith that the recorder of the confession (that is you) will be charitable. Despite the potential for insult and injury, the confessor must ask for open mindedness and serious thought on the part of the audience. Inspired as I nearly always am by the legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois, I ask, like he did a century ago, that you study "my words with me, forgiving mistake and foible for sake of the faith and passion that is in me, and seeking the grain of truth hidden there" (Du Bois, 1903/1990, p. 3). Unlike Du Bois, however, I know I am *not* prophetic; I merely wish to tell you of my love and of my pain. I wish to tell you of my insideness and of my outsideness. Like the boom from an 808 programmed by my coming up in hip-hop culture, I want to share with you the rhythm of my life's beat. I also want you to understand how, as an African American male, hip-hop culture has endowed me with voice. I desire you to hear how I resonate with its wicked vibe and how as an old head I am distanced from it. To the young brothers, I say please *feel* my words; learn how my confessions can teach you about your own identification with hip-hop culture and with each other. And I want to suggest how to think critically and ethically about your own voices.

I have two confessions to make here; the first one is fairly trivial, the second one is more significant and leads me toward the heart of my joy and pain regarding hip-hop culture. But, first things first: I like the TV show *Frasier*. It bugs me out and, in some ways, makes me think about friendships and family like the show *Seinfield* used to (is this a third confession?). As a pompous, pretentious, lily-white, and self-proclaimed "Anglo-phile," Dr. Frasier Crane tortures and tickles me in a mad way. I find it particularly ironic that Frasier never quite gets his way; he never ends up with the woman of his dreams; he never wins an argument with his father; he cannot keep the dog, Eddie, off his imported leather sofa. As a man of impeccable credentials and "breeding," however, Frasier has his way already. The Seattle skyline twinkling off the edge of his balcony constantly reminds us that Frasier is "on top of the world."

Although Frasier's brother, Niles, loves him dearly, he is just as egoistic as his older brother and, thus, wants Frasier's shine. In an episode I saw recently, Niles schemes for admission into an exclusive all-male club appropriately called "The Empire." Frasier is overwhelmed when he steps into the club. He reverently whispers to himself that the club smells like "power." Frasier and Niles end up competing for the slot that is, in the end, mistakenly awarded to Frasier. Deciding to be the good sibling, Frasier asks the club

president to give his slot to Niles. Stoked by the condescension suggested by Frasier's previous gesture and not knowing that the slot is really his, Niles angrily rushes down to the club to denounce its "elitism." On learning that it is he who was actually admitted, Niles tries to recant his rant, but it is too late. While being ejected from "The Empire," Niles begs for reconsideration, crying, "I am one of you! I belong here!"

It might seem odd to you that I was reminded of my identification with and belonging to hip-hop culture as Niles's screams were muffled by the audience's laughter. I did not laugh because I know what it's like to feel a little homeless ... to feel as though the folks with whom you share a language, customs, and ways of living are somehow kept at a distance. Now, don't get me wrong, I do not feel sorry for Niles. Indeed, we would all be better off without "The Empire." But I understand his loss. I know why his sense of self is threatened by a separation from a valued public identity and consciousness. In the aftermath of this psychic trauma, Niles is forced to make do with where he is in the world; yet, he is still able to cherish the point of contact he had with "The Empire." Membership in the club represents for folks like Niles and Frasier a cultural treasure and a point of view. The premises that guide their thinking and behavior become concrete and justifiable in "The Empire." Acceptance as an "authentic" member allows one to speak as an imperialist. And so, Niles is not only bemoaning the loss of a rich and powerful white boys' club that serves port wine nearly as old as the U.S. Constitution, but his scream enunciates the hurt that occasions an erosion of public voice.

Despite the allusions to white supremacy, I confess that I dig Frasier. I can relate to the moments when Frasier can no longer talk to his father because it seems as though they do not speak the other's language. I can sense a degree of kinship with him when he expresses pride in his academic accomplishments and pedigree. I can relate to his impatience with some of the stuffiest characters that make periodic appearances on the show. But even now as I reflect on family, friendship, and professional activities, I relive the moment that I, like Niles, felt ejected from a prized dimension of myself, a moment that is the subject of my second confession and that brings to light a tension within the black community about language, history, and hip-hop culture.

"Nigga" What? "Nigga" Who?

Picture this: On a warm spring day, two friends are standing in the parking lot of a reception hall preparing to watch one of their best lifelong boys get married. As cars roll in and latecomers hurry into the hall, the one with the cigarette turns to the one in the blue suit. "Man, I never thought I'd live to see this day. Girlfriend must be blackmailing his ass to get him down the aisle."

"Well," blue suit replies, "that nigga ain't here. So let's not call this a done deal yet."

The groom finally pulls up and bounces out of his rental. "What y'all niggas doin' out here?"

"Waitin' on yo' silly ass," cigarette says.

"Well, my nigga," blue suit asks, giving the groom a pound of love, "you ready to do this shit here?"

"Yeah," the groom smiles, "Let's go get me linked up."

Putting myself in this above is easy. I was there. Because I do not smoke and I am already married, I was the guy in the blue suit that had the honor of toasting the newlyweds at the reception. And it was among the elders and the children and the champagne that I was jarred outside of myself. Jay-Z's latest joint, "Nigga What, Nigga Who," was setting the dance floor ablaze when I suffered (and enjoyed) a sort of epiphany. Jay-Z was barking about how no one can "fuck with" him and his crew; a spunky chorus of women punched up the back beat, echoing the rhetorical question (Nigga what? Nigga who?) Jay-Z scripted as a boost to his ego, for the answer each and every time is that the "nigga" Jigga must be recognized (Carter, 1998). I had been mouthing the words and hadn't realized it. Jay-Z's bravado about not getting played like a fool and commanding respect (and fear) from "wannabe playas" hyped me. Jay-Z's track represents, like other public anthems resonating in hip-hop, the ever-present need to "campaign for respect" (Anderson, 1994, p. 3). I felt like Frasier, on top of the world. But only for a moment, because suddenly the world flipped upside down and I didn't know what Jay-Z was talking about. I heard my wife's voice in my head lamenting

what she sees as excessive "nastiness" in rap music, and I saw a circle of kids holding hands and swinging to this "nasty" beat. Time was telescoped forward and I envisioned my son, "pimpin,'" "mackin,'" and "flossin.'" The image was laughably surreal and all too real. Jay-Z's words were now crashing onto the floor like bricks, breaking up at the feet of those children and my elders. And I needed to get some air.

In a way, I still need some air. And so, I confess that my (infrequent) use of the "N-word" had never really bothered me before that night. When I was coming up, the word was sprayed in the air like the mist from our neighborhood water gun fights, playfully and competitively. While in college, I trimmed its usage due to changing contexts, relationships, and social expectations. As a university professor, it's an even more highly guarded utterance. Ice Cube has summed up my feelings; it has been a symbol of my "ghetto pass," denoting membership in the 'hood—a membership that can always be revoked (Ice Cube, 1991). But lounging in the parking lot with one of my boys from around the way, it seemed all good. And yet, the anxiety I experienced tells me that it is not all good.

My anxiety about the word *nigga* (*nigger*—traditional usage) is animated by current debate that centers on the character of black American history and the status of language. It seems as though popular culture in the 1990s has taken the "N-word" from private in-house dialogues between the "fellas," and has mass-produced, marketed, and distributed it in easy-to-open packages of hip.[1] As early as 1993, major media outlets were asking why rap music in particular was "embracing" what was referred to as hate speech.[2] We need to note how my anxiety can be dealt with on two intersecting planes: First, as a part of "private" discourse, the "N-word" splits the black community along class and generational lines. C. Delores Tucker, for example, has consistently argued that kids today have forgotten the lessons of the civil rights era and, thus, have no real sense of the pain of the "N-word" as a racial slur (Dream Hampton, 1993, p. 64). As a part of the "lexicon of the cool" (Varner & Kugiya, 1998), however, *nigga* signifies close friendship, cultural awareness, or fearlessness (Smitherman, 1994). I attended the March on Washington as a 2-month-old infant, and I look up to Chuck D. of Public Enemy and KRS-One like big brothers. Therefore, I feel as though I straddle the line between those who share Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, dream and those who mourned the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. I also feel that through me the two planes interpenetrate one another and can be made to dialogue about history and language.

Speaking for the legacy of the civil rights generation, the "N-word" must be understood in terms of its status as a sign of a horrific cultural history. In fact, if Frantz Fanon is correct, *nigger* (despite altered spellings) designates a specific psychology that is rooted in white people's incapacity to cope with the fact of my blackness (Fanon, 1967). Focusing on the linguistic and the historic, being called a *nigger* means being subjected to white supremacist hatred and violence. I want to be clear here, for this is important: From this point of view, *nigger* has only *one* meaning—it means "worthlessness." According to Ray Winbush, director of the Race Relations Institute at Fisk University, "there is no socially redeeming use of the word nigger. None at all" (De Yampert, 1999, p. 1D). It is also important for us to think about what this definition entails for language and history in general. For Winbush and Tucker, the "N-word" has a stable and unchanging meaning. This notion relies on two things: first, on a particular idea of how language works and, second, on a particular perspective on history. The linguistic aspect of this perspective reminds me of my Aunt Mary's shelf of fruit and pepper preserves: Each jar is sealed tightly, what it contains can neither leak out nor can its environment alter it. Likewise, *nigger* is sealed firmly; it always contains a racial slur. But, in terms of theories of language, the *word* itself contains *no* meaning. There is nothing in the jar. We understand that meanings are actually created and held by people (Bakhtin, 1981). And so, the second form this stable and unified definition takes is historical. We can perceive history as a record of the past. Or, we can comprehend it as something that is present with us. Concurring with Hannah Arendt (1994), members of the civil rights era think of history as living memory. The communal act of remembrance reanimates history. If we see the matter in this way, *nigger* refers to people, places, and events that not only document white supremacy, but also

stimulate collective emotions regarding our being-in-time.

Contrary to this understanding, hip-hop culture makes liberal use of the word *nigga*. Rap and hip-hop artists as diverse as Busta Rhymes, Erika Badu, Outkast, and Wyclef Jean use the term *nigga* in recordings and performances. Linguistically, hip-hop artists assert that they have flipped the term and that, depending on the context, its meaning can be positive or negative. Indeed, if one is defined as "in" the community, the use of nigga can even transgress racial lines. I am reminded of an event involving a white former student who, interestingly, converted from Judaism to Islam. He was in my office one day telling me the story of a beef between roommates that he mediated. In the telling, he admitted that he was really pulling for "my nigga" because the other roommate was lame. He must have heard himself say it as clearly as I had because he paused to consider the relational and contextual dynamics present in the room. He knew that in some cases, his speech could be seen as a serious violation of racial territory and could get his "grill" crushed. I simply sat there calmly waiting for him to finish his story; he smiled, recognizing that he was safe here, and continued.

In general, hip-hop vernacular acts like a flat, smooth rock hurled sideways at the surface of a lake. It skips dozens of times across the fluid surface of conversations and locations. The meaning of any particular word or phrase depends on its "velocity" (tone) and where it touches the water (the situation in which people are involved). In terms of language theory, *nigga* is virtually a free-floating signifier obtaining its significance from contexts and usages. I say *virtually* here because everyone knows that *nigga* is a special case. *Wiggers* (the very awkward term for whites who "act black"—"white niggers") use the term carefully and most hip-hop young heads still don't play that. There is a tension here that is helpful for us. As a part of the hip-hop vernacular, *nigga* is lifted out of history. And yet, history reasserts itself in talk about the term. If *nigga* is the flip side of racist oppression, civil rights history is not erased, but kept intact as the underbelly. This is precisely why white kids approach the term like it's a live hand grenade.

Years ago, the original Niggas With Attitude (N.W.A.) contemplated the serious question of "why do I call myself a nigga?" on the album *Niggaz4Life*. On the title track, "Niggaz4Life," the group explored the tension that I just identified. Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, MC Ren, Easy-E, and Yella used the term *nigga* as a "synonym for 'oppression'" (Kelley, 1992, p. 794), and, perhaps, unwittingly demonstrated how being a "nigga" for life is both powerful and problematic (Watts, 1994). For example, 2 years before the Rodney King beating, N.W.A. (1991) depicted the Los Angeles Police Department as a brutal arm of government oppression directed at public enemy number one—the African American male. N.W.A. used the term venomously and hedonistically to call attention to what black males in particular endure in this society simply by virtue of being black. To be a "nigga" is to be profiled by police and subjected to other forms of civil rights violations. N.W.A. also understood that "yo, nigga say nigga, we cool/ But cracka say nigga," and there will be trouble. The organization of community around issues of oppression is a powerful first step toward empowerment; it is also crucial for the cultivation of a public voice. Membership in this community is in part dictated by society, but what one does as a result of racism and discrimination is constituted by the norms and values created by black folk. To speak as a hip-hop head, as N.W.A. pointed out, is to provide an account of one's own encounters with perilous situations. Membership enables the telling of one's own story about love and loss, about thrills and threats. Rap music is, thus, understood as a voicing mechanism for many urban youth (see Rose, 1994). This is no small accomplishment. Speaking (and being heard) provides fundamental human agency in society (Gusdorf, 1965).

Knowing what to say and knowing how to say it are different matters altogether. Many African American elders gain knowledge from lives steeped in living history. To my grandfather, history was never simply behind him; it walked beside him and, once in a while, raced out in front to alert him about what might lurk around the next bend in the road. When I was attentive to him on visits to the Mississippi Delta, he would school me on how to hear the wisdom of my ancestors whistling through the winds of time. This communion takes a kind of quiet interest in living history. I have asserted elsewhere that the old heads and young guns have too often parted

company in our communities. The current generation of hip-hop enthusiasts has its back turned away from the source of living history and has trained its face on spectacular paper chases all around (Watts, 1997). For many hip-hop heads, history, quite frankly, is "dead."

Perhaps the vitality of the moment in hip-hop culture helps to explain the potency of language. There are several Web sites and dictionaries that furiously attempt to keep apace of the vigor of rap vernacular (McCormick, 1996). The meaning of any word or phrase can literally change shape and color in the throes of one conversation as someone goes "loco," gets "bagged," and is "put down" to "marinate." This conversational rhythm is frenetic; and so, to talk to someone, you got to know how to dance. This kind of word play is, of course, not new to the black community (Garner 1983), but hip-hop culture has taken it to a new level because it at once samples diverse kinds of cultural knowledge and splices them into linguistic forms that are, in turn, reanimated by the next speaker, and so on. Hip-hop culture has broken down semantic barriers that previously circumscribed other kinds of word games. In short, in hip-hop culture, history might be "dead," but the word (*nommo*) is "live."

This cultural predicament, however, is precisely what troubles folks when they hear rap artists use the "N-word." To someone who chaffs at my utterance of *nigga* in even a truly loving manner, the world is occupied by "dead" languages and "living" histories. To many "ballers" and "around-the-way girls," however, language carries the spirit of the moment and history gathers dust. The problem with nearly every discussion I have heard of either the need to rehabilitate the "N-word" (McClellan-Copeland, 1998) or the need to erase it from the English language (Ager, 1998) centers not on anyone's passion or commitment. Rather, I have a problem with conceptual myopia, with the tendency to see this matter one way or the other. The "N-word" is either a racial slur or it represents artists' attempts at subversion. I am not going to suggest a resolution to this issue in terms of saying that one party is right and the other is wrong. I would not presume to be so bold. Nor am I going to say that both parties are right in a particular way and that both are wrong in a particular way. I do not wish to be so ambiguous. But, I do want to assert an idea, a way to perceive this controversy.

The controversy over the "N-word" is normal and necessary. We should not be surprised by its existence, wondering where we went wrong. This mentality suggests that we should be in total control of the currents of history and that a community's strengths reside in its single-mindedness. Cornel West (1994) tells us that black survival strategies are "improvised." In a truly powerful jazz jam session, there is as much discord in the mix as there is harmony. And as "old heads" (hip-hop or not) we cannot place the blame for its frequent usage at the feet of our youngsters as if they did not come from us. History lives within us and so does the "N-word." It is an ugly history to be sure. Its presence is not pathological, however, simply because it refers to a racist notion. Its presence is humanistic in the essential sense of characterizing the troubles of living in community with (white and black) others. We must convert the terror and anger we experience when confronted with the "N-word" into a passion for confronting and comforting its speaker.

To the young brothers (my "niggas"), hear me as an echo of yourselves. You need not be a "nigga for life." Silkk the Shocker is right when he declares that it "ain't my fault." But he is wrong if he thinks that means he's not responsible for his words and deeds. Hip-hop culture has endowed you with voice. You speak a language and share a fluid world of events and ideas with other "playas" and "gamers." The kinds of lives you construct in your universe of discourse are significant to those coming up behind you. You have an obligation to them to think critically and ethically about your choices. Your "now" will be their history. Consider walking beside them along the road in the decades to come, to alert them to what the next bend has in store for them. History does not have to be "dead"; it is not as N.W.A. claimed, "the way shit has to be." The vitality of your words is a key source of the agency for change. But you need to know what you should say and how to say it. And so, you must do one thing first: Turn around and greet your elders.

ENDNOTES

1. See Varner and Kugiya (1998).
2. See "Sacred Cows; commentary" (1993) and Marriott (1993).