Life Writing in Hip-Hop:

How Open Mike Eagle Resists Performative Acts of Masculinity and Race through Rap

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Introduction

Chicago native Michael W. Eagle II (born November 14, 1980), better known by his stage name Open Mike Eagle, is an American hip hop artist. In 2010, after being active in the hip-hop scene as part of the collective Project Blowed, he released his debut solo album: *Unapologetic Art Rap*. With the title of this album, Open Mike Eagle established the self proclaimed subgenre of 'art rap', which he would go on to embrace on many of his later albums. In a write-up on 'art rap' for *Bandcamp Daily* titled "A Walk Through the Avant-Garde World of 'Art Rap' Music", Max Bell argues that the term 'art rap' is a reactionary phrase that responds directly to the subgenre of 'art rock', and implies that the existing set of sonic or lyrical conventions for hip-hop do not suffice for the message 'art rappers' tend to communicate. Moreover, it opens the way for Open Mike Eagle to distinguish his music from the music that falls under the broad and nebulous umbrella of 'hip-hop', especially since that implies a certain hip-hop *persona*. When asked about the term by Jeff Weiss of *LA Weekly*[1] in 2010, Open Mike Eagle defined 'art rap' as follows:

> 'Art rap' [...] is the continuation of the lofty concepts embodied by Jean-Michel Basquiat, K-Rob and Rammellzee (RIP) back in '83 — hip-hop as high art. After all, TV on the Radio makes art-rock, and No Age can make art-punk.[2]

[1] Weiss, Jeff. "WTF is Art-Rap?!" *LA Weekly*, 8 July 2010, http://www.laweekly.com/music/wtf-is-art-rap-2165868.

[2] Basquiat, who died in 1988, was an American graffiti artist who became famous for appropriating techniques of poetry, drawing, and painting in his art, uniting text and image, abstraction and figuration, and historical information mixed with contemporary critique. He used social commentary in his paintings as a "springboard to deeper truths about the individual", as well as attacks on power structures and systems of racism, while his poetics were acutely political and direct in their criticism of colonialism and support for class struggle. K-Rob and Rammellzee were hip hop artists who were active in the same era in which Basquiat produced his art. Alongside rapper, Rammellzee was a visual and performance artist, as well as a 'graffiti writer' like Basquiat.

'Art rap', then, as defined by Open Mike Eagle, is not merely a subgenre of rap that aspires to be 'high art', i.e. institutionally recognized, highly valued cultural-artistic artifacts; but moreover as a space for autobiographical acts, an artform through which the artist can share deeper truths about the individual. Without getting wrapped up in a discussion surrounding the notion of 'high art', I intend to argue that Open Mike Eagle's aspirations toward 'high art' are not to be interpreted as an egotistical declaration of superiority, but rather as a message to those who stigmatize rap music, or view rap as a lesser art-form, or believe that all rap is fundamentally the same or about the same themes.

In this thesis I aim to argue that 'art rap' is a contemporary form of life writing as conceptualized by Marianne Gullestad in the 2004 book *The Ethics of Life Writing*. Gullestad discusses several cases of young people who fell victim to color-coded discrimination (217). She analyses their writings as forms of life writing through which they express their fight against an imposed self-image. She discusses these examples of life writing as a "countermeasure, as a disclosure of self that seeks to correct the negative stereotypes encountered in the public realm without revealing too much about their families" (216). I will argue that Open Mike Eagle's lyrics fit within this tradition of life writing as a fight against a form of dictated subjectivity in terms of gender and race, while also acknowledging the fact that he *does* reveal some things about his family. I will define the notion of imposed selfhood using Judith Butler's theory of *performativity*, which argued that gender roles are not fixed concepts, but constructs of stylized repetitions of performances[3]. I will draw on this concept and apply it to performances of masculinity and race, the two main themes in Open Mike Eagle's work I will be analyzing by means of close readings of the lyrics of a selection of songs taken from his last three albums, in order to demonstrate how he uses rap to critique the

[3] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–531.

performances of gender and race that reinscribe negative or stereotypical versions of African-American men.

In this thesis, I intend to explore the position of 'art rap' as a contemporary form of life writing. I will first offer an overview of the history of the study of hip-hop culture and its intersections with life writing in order to situate Open Mike Eagle's work within a broader theoretical framework. Subsequently, I will establish the key themes of masculinity and race that run through his work by means of an analysis of songs of his 2014 album *Dark Comedy*. In the ensuing two chapters I will show how and where he changed or consolidated the way in which he addresses these two main themes in the two albums he made after *Dark Comedy*, *Hella Personal Film Festival* (2016) and *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream* (2017). Mostly, I will be interested in revealing the ways in which Open Mike Eagle uses his songs as a space for resistance; both musically, by responding to and resisting current hip-hop conventions, as well as politically, through his engagement with current political situations. The research question I intend to answer through these analyses is as follows: How does Open Mike Eagle use his songs as a space for resistance against performative acts of masculinity and race?

In the following chapter I will establish the current state of hip-hop studies and uncover the points of intersection with life writing studies.

Chapter 1: existing scholarly debate

Hip-hop culture has been studied extensively, with broad methodologies of research incorporating elements from sociology, politics, religion, economics, urban studies, journalism, communications theory, (African) American studies, transatlantic studies, postcolonial studies, feminism, black studies, history, musicology, English, linguistics, comparative literature… the list goes on and on. A genealogy of the field will reveal the development of the studies and the ways in which various disciplines have been used in researching hip-hop culture. Moreover, it will show the ways in which hip-hop evolved - as Katina Stapleton put it in her article 'From the Margins to Mainstream: The Political Power of Hip-Hop' (1998) - from 'black noise' to the cultural and political voice of an entire generation of youth (219).

1990s

The publication of Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* in 1994 was a landmark moment for the study of hip-hop culture in America. It put hip-hop on the map as an artform as well as a cultural force to be reckoned with, and paved the way for serious scholarly discourse on hip-hop. While most writings on hip-hop in the early 1990s, especially in generalist and popular-culture magazines, focussed mostly on *gangsta rap*[4], Rose's *Black Noise* was the first comprehensive and copiously documented work on the cultural implications of rap music, incorporating reflections on song lyrics and music videos as well as interviews with musicians, producers, and other people

[4] A subset of rap music characterized by themes and lyrics that generally emphasize the 'gangsta' lifestyle, leading to it being the most controversial and most written-about element of hip-hop culture. Gangsta rap experienced its peak popularity in the period between 1988 and 1998, years in which popular magazines wrote about it extensively. Because of this, gangsta rap became a symbol for all rap music in general and an agent for national debates on race, crime, and urban violence.

involved with the industry. It was without peer among other scholarly works because of its historiographical approach, detailed analysis of hip-hop culture's evolution, and its extensive bibliography. In the foreword to *Black Noise*, Rose sets out the work as an examination of "the complex and contradictory relationships between forces of racial and sexual domination, black cultural priorities, and popular resistance in contemporary rap music" (xiii). She defines hip-hop as "a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community" (21). According to Rose, hip-hop emerged at a critical moment in history for many young people in urban communities in big cities in America, especially in New York, where the situation was nothing short of a "deindustrialized meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect" (21), enabling youth in those areas to create their own cultural space with their own artform. Her research on the notion of sexual and racial domination and that of rap music as a form of resistance are interesting in the context of this thesis, since it paved the way for scholarly debate around contemporary artists such as Open Mike Eagle who use their songs as a space in which to resist the imposed image of black masculinity.

Many scholars have written about the sociohistorical implications of rap music as a contemporary form of 'black music'. According to Henry Edward Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music* (1914), African-American folk songs were developed out of the experience of slavery, resulting in reflections in the music of the times. Krehbiel writes: "as a rule, the finest songs are the fruits of suffering undergone and the hope of deliverance from bondage" (26-7). In her 1972 article 'The Soul Message', an examination of soul music as a form of protest, Rochelle Larkin ratified this view by arguing that the historic conditions of African-Americans will always serve as a basis for their protest music.

As in Open Mike Eagle's work, race has always been a decisive theme in music made by African-Americans. In this light, music has traditionally been employed by African-Americans as a space of resistance, with the songs as autobiographical acts: "presentations in a medium, with a motive, conveying a judgment of the author's life".[5] Musicologist Jon Spencer added to this line of thought in his 1996 work *Re-Searching Black Music* by stating that African-Americans have always used secular music as a means to reflect upon the dire situations they were living in, in songs "that reveal the nitty-gritty details of life as it is lived at the underside of society and in the underbelly of history" (xiv). Tricia Rose was the first scholar to introduce this train of thought in terms of hip-hop in the second chapter of *Black Noise*, ''All Aboard the Night Train': Flow, Layering, and Rupture in Postindustrial New York'. In this chapter, Rose introduces hip-hop culture's urban contexts, explaining that "hip-hop is propelled by Afrodiasporic experiences" and stating that "stylistic continuities in dance, vocal articulations, and instrumentation between rap, break dancing, urban blues, bebop, and rock 'n' roll move within and between these historical junctions and larger social forces, creating Afrodiasporic narratives that manage and stabilize these transitions" (25). In *What the Music Said* (1999), Mark Anthony Neal affirms that an accurate understanding of black music, rap included, is grounded in the diversity of the Afrodiasporic experience: "I maintain that the black popular music tradition has served as a primary vehicle for communally derived critiques of the African-American experience, and that the quality and breadth of such critiques are wholly related to the quality of life within the black public sphere" (xi). More important, however, is his understanding of hip-hop as a urban youth culture: "Hip-hop music and culture emerged as a narrative and stylistic distillation of African-American youth sensibilities in the late 1970s. Hip-hop differed from previous

[5] Levy, D. *The Philosophy of Autobiography*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

structures influenced by African-American youth in that it was largely predicated and driven by black youth culture itself" (136). This, together with Rose's call for an interdisciplinary approach to hip-hop studies, seems to be the most significant idea that emerged from hip-hop studies in the 1990s: the fact that hip-hop culture, while it developed as an alternative youth culture, incorporates many elements of the larger African-American culture. Both aspects, then, make up a workable definition of hip-hop culture and its participants: young African-Americans. Moreover, it establishes hip-hop as an artform that not only serves as entertainment, but as a space of life writing in which its producers can react to and resist issues of race.

Another interesting chapter in *Black Noise* is the fifth, 'Black Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music'. This chapter opened up the field of scholarly discourse about the "ways black women rappers work within and against dominant sexual and racial narratives in American culture" (147). In the chapter, Rose borrows theories and ideas from feminist studies, creating an intersection between feminism and hip-hop studies, suggesting that "women rappers cannot be situated in total opposition to male rappers; they support and critique male rappers' sexual discourse in a number of contradictory ways", and that just as "male rappers' sexual discourse is not consistently sexist, female sexual discourse is not consistently feminist" (150). In this way, Rose opened up a new field between these various subcultures within the African-American culture at large, cautioning readers and fellow scholars about narrow-minded views on hip-hop culture, rap music and feminism. Moreover, it exposed hip-hop's hyper-masculinity, as well as the potential for it being a space of resistance against this. It is precisely this element of hyper-masculinity that rappers such as Open Mike Eagle subvert themselves from through their lyrics.

2000s

Drawing on the groundwork done by scholarly hip-hop pioneers such as Tricia Rose in the 1990s, by the turn of the century hip-hop had been widely accepted as a serious discipline worthy of academic discourse. This resulted in a wide variety of books and articles on hip-hop culture. One of the most comprehensive looks at hip-hop is Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (2005). The main themes in this work are race and the intersection of race with various other aspects of hip-hop and urban youth culture. This subject is most significantly set out in the eighteenth chapter of the book, called 'Becoming the Hip-Hop Generation'. Chang discusses hip-hop's crossover appeal in the context of the omnipresence of race and racial issues in hip-hop culture on the one hand, and the simultaneous 'urbanization' of popular culture in America. He cites an article by Chicago graffiti writer William Wimsatt, who (quite prophetically) posited that "one day the rap audience may be as white as tables in a jazz club, and rap will become just another platform for every white ethnic group - not only the Irish - to express their suddenly funky selves" (421). Hip-hop culture in the 2000s had reached the point at which it entered the public realm and became part of popular culture. Ironically, this strengthened the notion of racial performativity that is linked with rap music, since the performative hip-hop persona became more commonplace.

Tricia Rose added to this notion of the commodification of hip-hop culture in her second full-length volume on hip-hop culture, *The Hip-Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-Hop - And Why It Matters* (2008). It is a polemic work on the new state of the hip-hop culture, in which she presents a set of arguments on each side of some highly polarized debates that challenge "excesses, myths, denials, and manipulations" about hip-hop culture (5). Rose puts her readers right in the middle of some of hip-hop's dualities,

arguing, on the one hand, that hip-hop promotes violence and degrades women, while claiming, on the other hand, that hip-hop is not responsible for violence and sexism and that its performers are just narrating their lives. She discusses the commodification of hip-hop in the chapter 'Hip-Hop Hurts Black People', in which she argues that "the worst of what we find in the music and imagery is commercially promoted, encouraged, produced, and distributed by major corporations" (78), while "images and ideas that reflect good will, love of community, and a diverse range of black experiences are relegated to the underground or to the commercial margins of youth culture" (79). As the next chapter will show, this relates to the notion of racial performativity, where rappers act in line with the broader expectations surrounding masculinity in hip-hop culture.

2010s

Current debates in hip-hop studies have become even more focused on the points of intersection between hip-hop culture at large and popular culture; in fact, the border between the two has become increasingly vague. An important theme is still the way in which race defines and shapes hip-hop's cultural politics. However, gender has become more important in the context of subverting hip-hop's hegemonic structures and performativity.

One rapper has been written about more than any other in the 2010s: Kendrick Lamar. With his work and overall positive hip-hop persona, he is a popular object of scholarly discourse, in a way similar to Tupac - one of the symbols of gangsta rap - in the 1990s. Kendrick Lamar is seen by many devotees to hip-hop culture as one of the best of his generation (if not ever). His significance reaches beyond hip-hop culture, leading to many writings, scholarly as well as non-scholarly, about his work and his importance within hip-hop culture and popular culture. An example of this is the article Casey Michael Henry

wrote about Kendrick's album *To Pimp a Butterfly* in relation to postmodernism for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 'Et Tu, Too?: Kendrick Lamar's "To Pimp a Butterfly" and the Revival of Black Postmodernism' (2015). Moreover, Kendrick Lamar recently won the Pulitzer Prize for Music for his 2017 album *DAMN.*, the first non-classical, non-jazz artist to win the prize.

While many writings on hip-hop culture and rap music have focussed on aspects of subjectivity and the lived experiences of specific rappers or hip-hop performers in general, less so have directly considered life writing studies in their investigations. In 'Keepin' It Real: Black Youth, Hip-Hop Culture, and Black Identity', Andreana Clay focuses on the relationship between black youth and hip-hop culture in terms of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. By focusing on how black youth interact with one another, the article examines how this particular form of cultural capital may be used to authenticate a black identity. Finally, the importance of traditional gender roles in the articulation of this identity is explored.

A long tradition of scholarly writings on the intersection between hip-hop culture and feminism and sexuality exists, dating back to Rose's first landmark work *Black Noise*, as well as on the intersection between hip-hop culture and race. The following chapters will consider the work of Open Mike Eagle as an act of life writing in which he subverts hip-hop's boundaries, especially focussed on masculinity and race as key themes.

For those who haven't heard of me

I'm bad at sarcasm so I work in absurdity

On that laugh to keep from crying tip

(Open Mike Eagle - Dark Comedy Morning Show)

Chapter 2: *Dark Comedy*

In this first chapter, I will establish the key themes that run through Open Mike Eagle's work and that help shape his unique autobiographical act. Through an analysis of two of the songs of his 2014 album *Dark Comedy* I will consider the literary techniques he employs on the album and point out how he uses these to speak out about masculinity and race. In order to do so, I will draw upon Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's theory of autobiographical acts, in which they argue that an autobiographical act is always an occasion in which the subject is coaxed or coerced into "getting a life" (64).

Dark comedy

Dark Comedy is an album by Open Mike Eagle, released in 2014. The title of the album refers to a comic style that is defined in the online version of the Oxford Dictionary[6] as "a film, play, or other work that deals with tragic or distressing subject matter in a humorous way". Dark comedy[7] (or black comedy, or gallows humor), then, is a comic style that makes

[6] Found on: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/black_comedy (20 May 2018)

[7] The concept of dark comedy was first coined as the term black humor by the French surrealist writer André Breton in his Anthology of Black Humor (1940). In this comprehensive anthology of black humor, Breton credited the Irish satirist Jonathan Swift as the originator of this specific subgenre of comedy. The concept of black humor made its way into the American consciousness in 1965 when a mass-market paperback titled Black Humor, edited by novelist Bruce Jay Friedman, was published. This book was one of the first anthologies devoted to American authors labeled by Friedman as important producers of black humor as a literary genre. Among the authors added in the edition are J.P. Donleavy, Edward Albee, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Louis-Ferdinand Celine, and Bruce Jay Friedman himself. In the introduction to the volume, he describes black humor as "a nervousness, a tempo, a near hysterical new beat in the air, a punishing isolation and loneliness of a strange new kind" (2). The main motive for Friedman for mentioning these particular authors as producers of black humor was that they all wrote novels, poems, stories, and plays in

light of subject matter that is generally considered tragic, particularly subjects that are usually considered serious or painful to discuss. Comedians often use it as a tool for exploring distressing issues, thus provoking discomfort and serious thought as well as amusement in their audience.

In an interview with Noisey's Max Bell in 2014, Open Mike Eagle describes his musical style, which Bell called 'hilarious and thoughtful', in a way that is very much in line with this definition of black humor or dark comedy. Many of Open Mike Eagle's songs offer observations on subjects such as masculinity and racism, which he addresses in a comical, light-hearted manner. Analyses of several songs in this and subsequent chapters will show exactly how Open Mike Eagle uses humor as a literary device. In the interview he explains the function humor holds in his lyrics as follows: "If you take a lot of the overt humor out of the way of stuff that I'm saying, you might see somebody that's really scared of something, or really disappointed about something, or really disappointed in myself. [...] Part of what makes it easier to express those things when I'm not feeling my strongest is to couch them in something humorous".

The title *Dark Comedy* is also an intended double entendre referring to Mike's African-American heritage. The title refers to both his use of comedy in his lyrics and the color of his skin. In the opening song of the album, 'Dark Comedy Morning Show', he clarifies this double meaning by stating "It's dark comedy, I would've called it black / If another dude calls me a racist, I'mma snap". Mike is aware of the negative connotation of darkness and blackness as a racial identifier, evoking race and racism. At the same time he jokes about how he chose not to call the album 'Black Comedy', since that might have as a consequence that people would regard him as a racist. The song is an introduction to the

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which extreme or eerie events were portrayed in a light-hearted, comic manner; something considered new at the time.

"laugh to keep from crying tip" style that Mike uses to handle harsh realities. He would rather make his audience laugh than cry, but he still wants to address serious topics.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider the song 'Qualifiers' as a prime example of the various ways Open Mike Eagle uses his songs to construct an autobiographical act. I make use of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's theory of autobiographical acts as a framework in which to analyse the various aspects of the song. In particular, I consider the song's lyrics as an autobiographical text in which the narration is often influenced by the flesh-and-blood author, or historical "I" (72), that wrote the text, being Michael Eagle. According to Smith and Watson, there are traces of this historical person in the song's lyrics through which his existence can be verified by the audience, yet this "I" is unknown and unknowable by readers and is not the "I" that we gain access to in an autobiographical narrative (72). I will attempt to lay bare the implications of this gap between Open Mike Eagle's narration and the historical Michael Eagle in relation to the recurring themes of masculinity and race throughout his career in the remainder of this dissertation.

Qualifiers

'Qualifiers' is a testimony of a young black father, dwelling in the complexity of life itself. On the one hand, Mike raps about the daily routine of changing his son's diapers, the video games he plays, and dad jokes; on the other, he addresses how it upsets him to be framed by white people as a black man, either as the voice for all black people or as being unable to speak about black people. Moreover, the song is a subtle, yet powerful commentary on rap's characteristic love/hate relationship with self-declared microphone sovereignty, called *braggadocio*.

According to Smith and Watson, an autobiographical act is always an occasion in which the subject is coaxed or coerced into "getting a life" (64). This coaxer/coercer is, in Plummer's terms, any person or institution or set of cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes people to tell their stories (21). The sites and possibilities of coaxing and coercing life stories are near endless, and are discerned in different categories. In the case of Mike, two cultural implications are important. One the one hand, his life narrative in 'Qualifiers' fits in a long tradition of African-Americans and other immigrants, responding to the need to affirm their legitimate membership in the nation by telling stories of assimilation. On the other hand, Mike responds to the hip-hop culture - a culture in which certain rules seem to apply with regard to the acceptable/accepted ways of narrating lives. Traditionally, an important trope and style in rap music is *braggadocio*; a style of rapping in which the MC professes his physical, lyrical, artistic, or sexual prowess. The technique is heavily relied on in battle rapping, a type of rapping in which bragging, boasting, and insulting content is performed, often in the setting of a live battle with two rappers facing each other. Open Mike Eagle started his career in the underground hip-hop scene in Los Angeles, where *braggadocio* played an imperative role in his freestyle-rap-repertoire (hence the play on *open mic*[8] in his rap-alias). In the chorus of 'Qualifiers', he contrasts his current rapping style with his former style from his days as a freestyle battle rapper, as well as with the boastful style of rapping that is prevalent in hip-hop today:

> We're the best, mostly
>
> Sometimes the freshest rhymers

[8] An open mic or open mike (derived from the expression "open microphone") is a live show at a coffeehouse, nightclub, comedy club, strip club, institution or pub where audience members who are amateur performers or professionals who want to try out new material or plug an upcoming show are given the opportunity to perform onstage.

We the tightest kinda

Respect my qualifiers

He deliberately lessens his brags of being “the best”, “the freshest rhymer”, and “the tightest” by adding the qualifiers “mostly”, “sometimes”, and “kinda”, and demands to be respected for these qualifiers he adds to the brags. Qualifiers, also called modifiers, are optional elements in phrase structures that change the meaning of other elements in the structure on which they are dependent. By adding the qualifiers in the chorus of the song, Mike resists the typical rap *braggadocio* and the hyper-masculinity that hip-hop traditionally relies on.

Moreover, in the first verse of the song, Mike responds to the cultural implications that he experiences as a black man in America: “Fuck you if you're a white man that assumes I speak for black folks / Fuck you if you're a white man who thinks I can't speak for black folk”. Mike raises the problem of people assuming he is a spokesperson for the African-American community based on the color of his skin and his being a rapper, while at the same time also raising the problem of being treated as being outside of the African-American community because he doesn’t fit the stereotype of a black male, which involves, among other things, the *braggadocio* he resists in the chorus. And while Mike states he doesn’t want to be a spokesperson for black American males, he does, however, voice the desire to be acknowledged for his work, as expressed with the words that follow: “let that soak in your rap quotes”. Rap quotables are famous and memorable lines that have been used many times in different songs throughout the history of rap music. It is an unofficial list of the most iconic lines that have been used in the art of rapping, an example of which is the phrase “yes, yes y’all, and you don’t stop”, which has been a staple of rap ever since its first uttering at old-school block parties, to its first use on a rap record on Grandmaster Flash and

the Furious Five's single 'Superappin'' in 1979.[9] By stating that his observations about his experience of being a black male, implicating he belongs to the African-American community while at the same time not wanting to be a spokesperson for black people, should be added to the curriculum of rap quotables, Open Mike Eagle indicates that this observation is important for hip-hop culture. Not only does he use his songs as a personal autobiographical act, he sees them as part of his legacy for the hip-hop community.

In contemplating the meaning of this specific style of toning down the expected rap braggadocio and responding to cultural and racial expectations that surround hip-hop in general, it is important to create a framework which can explain how it is that Open Mike Eagle feels the need to respond to these themes; why it is that he attempts to "fall out" of the usual way of narrating life through hip-hop and how it is exactly that he does so.

Hip-hop appropriateness and breaking expectations

Open Mike Eagle subverts the appropriateness and assumptions that underlie the performances of hip-hop based on the particular sociopolitical site of Mike's narration. In this case, that occasional site is 2010s American hip-hop culture. As Smith and Watson discussed, every cultural context establishes expectations about the kinds of stories that will be told and will be intelligible to others (69). The autobiographical act Open Mike Eagle presents in 'Qualifiers' definitely does not meet the expectations of the general rap music audience today. Whereas many rappers in the 2010s still employ braggadocio as a starting point (and as a final point) for their songs, 'Qualifiers' departs from this staple of hip-hop and instead delves deeper in the subtle awkward acts of being a *father* alongside being a rapper. The

[9] Emcee Melle Mel (one of the Furious Five) mentioned how much he loved the phrase in Adam Bradley's 2010 book, *The Anthology of Rap*: "[…] They used to say things like 'And yes, y'all, the sounds that you hear …' They were always saying, 'and yes, y'all.' We really liked that, so we [took] that and [lengthened] it to, 'A yes, yes, y'all, to the beat, y'all, freak, freak, y'all.'" (62).

following phrase is particularly significant in that respect: “I w-w-wipe my son's ass and get shit on my hands”. It is about the daily tasks involved in raising his son, yet it also references the underlying theme of the whole song, which is having to take care of the new generation and educating them in the right way. With two common idioms, ‘getting his hands dirty’ and ‘going through a lot of shit’, used as a simile, he powerfully contemplates his daily job as a parent to his son. Moreover, he posits himself as a mentor for future generations of rappers, showing them that rap music is an artform that should not be bound by rules and expectations, but rather a space in which subjectivity should be encouraged. It evokes theories on voice as discursive mode in feminism-oriented life writing studies, such as that of psychologist Carol Gilligan. She raised the notion of ‘coming to voice’, which Smith and Watson paraphrased as articulating an emergent subjectivity outside or against the repressive constraints of asymmetrical gender relationships (85). In this case, the repressive constraints can be reinterpreted as the coercive restraints of hip-hop expectations, which largely involve the same asymmetrical gender relationships in which the man is expected to be hyper-masculine. I will show how Mike problematizes this discursive mode further by complicating the relationship between the narrating “I” and the narrated “I”, creating a heteroglossia within his autobiographical text.

Voice

In the second verse of ‘Qualifiers’, Open Mike Eagle does an interesting thing to enrich his autobiographical text. Instead of merely offering relatable quips, he references a past experience he had in Africa[10], where he was confronted with the expectations about American rap songs held by people far away from America:

[10]In May 2012, Mike and producer Ras G took a trip to Uganda to work with Ugandan emcees Mon MC and Cyno. The result was an EP titled Kampala Blackouts along with a music video for one of the tracks.

I went to Africa, they played me on the radio

And did I weird the people out, yeah, maybe so

Cause all they knew was jive

And all I do is vibe

And 'Bright Green Light' made the program director lose his mind

He said "What type of rap is that? Ain't no bitches, hoes"

And I ain't even being funny, homie didn't know

Shoulda said it's whimsical

Like Serengeti taught me

My thoughts are very lofty

Response time is very faulty

With this technique of weaving together the voices of the narrating "I", the narrated "I", and the African program director, Mike assembles a pastiche of voices that turns the song into a lyrical polyvocal space. By alternating between his own voice(s) and the voice of the program director, he creates a complex autobiographical act. Literary scholar James Phelan in *Teaching Narrative Theory* (2010) argued that such a complex relationship between different voices create questions of distance (3), where the narrating "I" expands the distance between himself at the moment of narration and the narrated "I" that is being reflected upon. This is the case in the second part of the fragment cited, where Mike reflects upon the confrontation he had with the program director, who clearly was thrown for a loop upon hearing Open Mike Eagle's song 'Bright Green Light', which didn't conform to the expectations he had about American rap songs, spurring him to ask "What type of rap is that? Ain't no bitches,

hoes". First Mike refers back to the very first phrases on the first song of the album, 'Dark Comedy Morning Show', in which he added a 'lol' because otherwise nobody seems to understand his sense of humor. In this cause though, he feels the need to add that he is *not* joking. He then goes on to state that he "should've said it's whimsical, like Serengeti[11] taught [him]". However, with reflecting back upon this situation he admits he missed the opportunity to actually give this answer at the time, since his "response time is very faulty". This, together with the previous phrase, "my thoughts are very lofty", seem to suggest that Mike over-thinks things, which explains why he can only adequately reflect on the situation when he reconstructs it at a later point in time, in this song.

This chapter established race and masculinity as two key themes in Open Mike Eagle's *Dark Comedy* and has shown several acts of resistance against the performative acts involved with hip-hop.

[11] Referring to Mike's friend and fellow-rapper Serengeti. They made an album together in 2015 under the moniker Cavanaugh, called *Time & Materials*. Moreover, 'Whimsical' is the name of a song Serengeti made.

Chapter 3: *Hella Personal Film Festival*

In this chapter, I will further analyse the ways in which Open Mike Eagle addresses the two key topics that I established in the previous chapter: masculinity and race. In order to see what has been changed and what has been consolidated since his album *Dark Comedy*, I will analyse songs of his 2016 album *Hella Personal Film Festival*. This is a collaborative album by Open Mike Eagle and British music producer Paul White, who was responsible for the instrumental production on all fourteen songs on the album.

Masculinity

In the chapter 'B-Boys, Players, and Preachers: Reading Masculinity' in her 2004 work *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, Imani Perry argues that "masculinity in hip-hop reflects the desire to assert black male subjectivity, and that it sometimes does so at the expense of black female subjectivity and by subjugating women's bodies, while at other times it simply reveals the complexity of black male identity" (118). In tracing the origins of this hip-hop masculinity, Perry quotes Ed Guerrero, who noted that there are two images of black masculinity portrayed in the American public sphere to the media: "On the one hand, we are treated to the grand celebrity spectacle of black male athletes, movie stars, and pop entertainers doing what all celebrities are promoted as doing best, that is, conspicuously enjoying the wealth and privilege that fuel the ordinary citizen's material fantasies", while, on the other hand, "we are also subjected to the real-time devastation, slaughter, and body count of a steady stream of faceless black males on the 6 and 11 o'clock news" (121). In hip-hop, these two images of the black male as a superstar and as a thug are

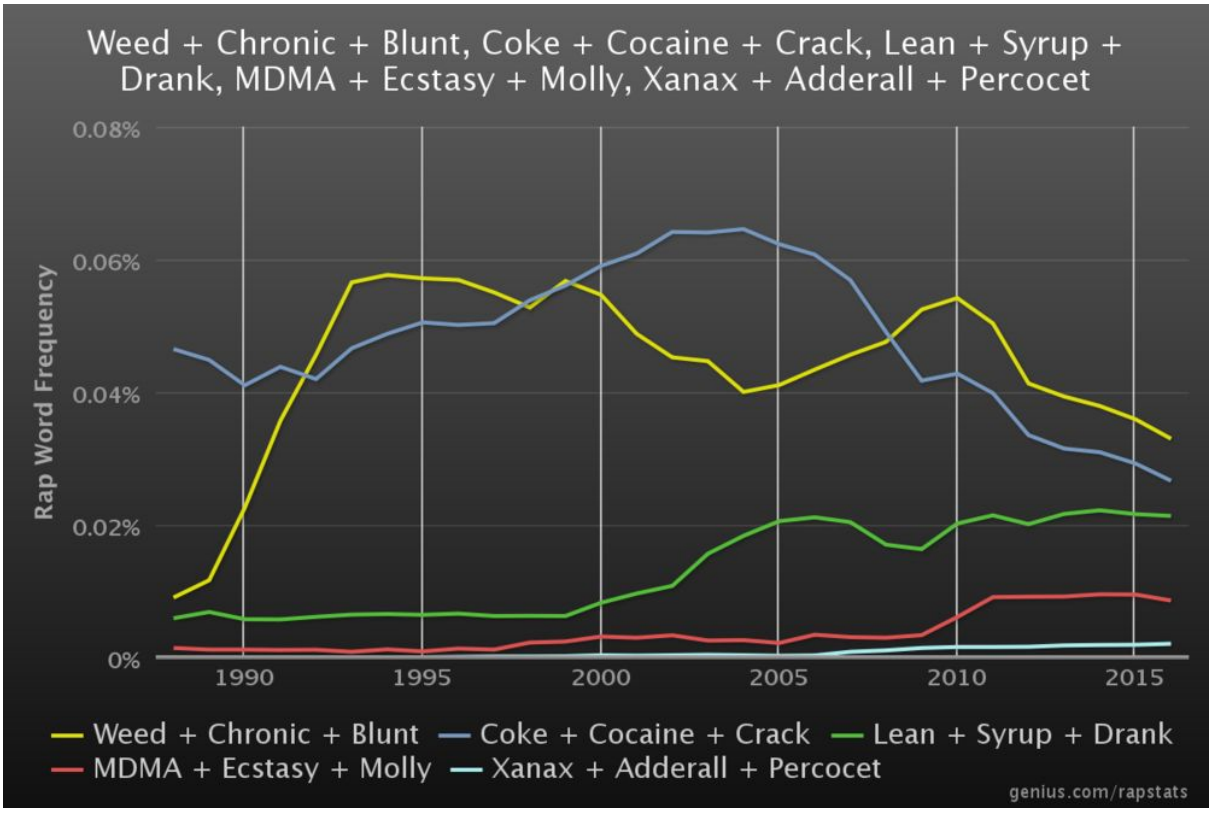
married into one unified picture, and many popular rap songs are by rappers who actively try to engage both of these images in their performative process.[12]

A look at the 'Hot Rap Songs 2016'-list by Billboard (compiled based on combined numbers for radio airplay, sales data, and streaming data collected by Nielsen Music) reveals that the song 'Panda' by Chicago-based rap artist Desiigner was by far the most popular rap song of the year in which Open Mike Eagle released *Hella Personal Film Festival*. With the song title 'Panda', Desiigner alludes to the BMW X6, a luxury car popular among rap artists. [13] Not only is the song a tribute to the car, it is, foremost, an exclamation of Desiigner's newfound success: a young black male's rise to power in the rap music industry, with Desiigner bragging about his net worth, and about how women in different parts of the country fawn over him. 'Panda', the eighth most popular song of the year across all genres according to Billboard[14], is emblematic for popular rap music in the 2010s: misogynistic and irresponsible when it comes to substance abuse. Desiigner's attitude as a rapper is symbolic of the general idea of 'being a rapper' anno 2016: masculine, wealthy, and very willing to flaunt their prosperity. The first lines of the hook of 'Panda' are as follows: "I got broads in Atlanta / Twistin' dope, lean, and the Fanta / Credit cards and the scammers / Hittin' off licks in the bando". Desiigner boasts about a lifestyle involving multiple women ("broads in

[12] One example is the New York-emcee Bobby Schmurda, who rose to nationwide popularity in 2014 after his song 'Hot Nigga' peaked at number 6 on the US Billboard Hot 100. The song's popularity is mainly due to the choreography from the song's music video, which became an instant hype on various social media. It earned Bobby Schmurda immediate superstar-status. This status didn't last for long though, as he was arrested only months after and charged with conspiracy to commit murder, weapons possession and reckless endangerment.
[13] "Black X6, Phantom / white X6 look like a panda". The BMW X6 vehicle is the primary subject of this song. Whereas the white version, as Desiigner explains, looks like a panda, the black version with tinted out windows looks like a shadow, or a phantom.
[14] Found on https://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/2016/hot-100-songs

Atlanta"), the glorification of drugs[15], and generating large amounts of money in illegal ways.[16]

This performance of Desiigner is in line with a long tradition of drug related rap songs. The following chart by Genius shows the frequency of words related to drugs in rap songs over the past 30 years:



Since the late eighties, words related to drugs are a significant proportion of the total words used in rap songs. A study done by researchers at Berkeley University in 2008[17] has shown that the glorification of drugs in rap songs has steadily grown since the emergence of the genre in mainstream culture in the late eighties. In the early years of hip-hop, drug references "often depicted the destructiveness of cocaine and, particularly, of crack, its

[15] 'Lean' is a type of prescription cough syrup containing codeine, often used in a mix with sodas such as Fanta. The main effect is a mild euphoric state.
[16] 'Hitting off licks' is a term derived from robbing liquor stores or 'licks', which in turn became a term for any sort of traditional robbery. 'Hitting a lick' also means making a lot of money in a short amount of time. A 'bando' is an abandoned house, often used as a basis for drug dealing businesses.
[17] Found on https://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2008/04/01_rapmusic.shtml

freebase form." However, this gave way to rap songs in the 1990s that increasingly portrayed marijuana use as a positive activity. The total number of drug references in rap songs grew exponentially in that period: "Of the 38 most popular rap songs between 1979 and 1984, only four, or 11 percent, contained drug references. In the early 1990s, the percentage of rap songs with drug references experienced a sharp jump to 45 percent, and steadily increased to 69 percent of the 125 top rap songs between 1994 and 1997." By the mid-2000s, a study led by Dr. Brian Primack from the University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine, found that "of Billboard's 279 most popular songs in 2005, a staggering 77 percent of the 62 rap songs portrayed substance use, often in the context of peer pressure, wealth and sex. He also found that only four of the 279 songs analyzed contained an "anti-use" message, and none of them was in the rap category."

Whereas many rappers gain popularity by making songs that glorify misogyny, drug (ab)use, and materialism, Open Mike Eagle's oeuvre leans on songs that address personal and relatable 'everyday' themes. *Hella Personal Film Festival* is an album filled with wry social commentary molded into snapshot-of-life vignettes. He mixes passages about anxiety and self-awareness with stream-of-consciousness mockery, all delivered with his usual smooth and relaxed flow. The first song on *Hella Personal Film Festival*, 'Admitting the Endorphin Addiction', is about Mike's own drug abuse, although he approaches the matter from a very personal and realistic viewpoint instead of the prevailing standpoint of glorifying it. While endorphins are a hormone rather than a drug, they share characteristics with opioid drugs such as heroin, opium, and morphine. The principle function of endorphins is to inhibit the communication of pain signals, in the sense that they are able to constrain the feeling of pain. Besides that, they may also produce a feeling of euphoria very similar to that produced by other opioids. Right of the bat, then, Open Mike Eagle seems to indicate that while the song

handles the situation surrounding his addiction, he admits the reason for these problems lays within himself. The addiction he addresses in the song is not a drug problem, he says; it is an emotional problem.

In the chorus of the song, Mike takes ownership of the various harmful aspects related to his addiction: “My addiction, my obsession / my admission, my rejection / I insisted, I accepted / My prescription carried us away”. He discusses obsessive behaviour, which is an integral component of addictions, and rejection of the truth of his addiction. This denial is also an elemental aspect of drug habits, while the admission of one’s powerlessness over their addiction is usually the first real step to overcoming it. To Mike, the addiction to endorphins feels uncontrollable, hence the words “I accepted my prescription carried us away”. Although Mike sings about a “prescription” in the chorus, hinting at an addiction that was not his own choice, he reveals the true cause in the first verse of the song:

> I tried to set them straight
> Tell them I self-medicate
> All they saw's a glitchy video
> But then I never show my cards

He admits to self-medicating, indicating that the addiction he addresses in the song is not to be blamed on anyone or anything besides himself. This is reinforced by the reference to endorphins, which are opioids that are produced by the human body itself. Moreover, the next two lines address a glitchy video, which is a reference to a song Open Mike Eagle released on his 2012 album *4NML HSPTL* called ‘Self Medication Chant’, for which he made a glitchy video. That song roughly handles the same theme, with a protagonist that loses control over

facilities in his life and begins to lean on distracting behavior to temporarily ease his tension. In that song, it remains unclear whether the protagonist involves himself in behavior such as substance abuse, or something as harmless as escaping through song.

In the remainder of ‘Admitting the Endorphin Addiction’, Mike elaborates further on the pitfalls of this self-medication. In the second verse he raps:

> You'd really be surprised
> How innovative I can get when left alone
> And once them cravings strike
> I knew I should say goodnight
> Want for them endorphins
> Got me saying everything except for that

In these forthright, introspective lines, Mike acknowledges his problem by stating that even at those moments when he knows he should not indulge in bad habits, he has trouble not continuing to use something that provides him with instant relief and satisfaction, due to the flooding of endorphins. He does this in a consistent iambic meter over a soulful groove that seems better suited to a sleek club song than to a heartbreaking confession. The discrepancy between the vivid sample that Paul White lend from Quincy Jones’ 1975 song ‘Is It Love That We're Missin'’ on the one hand, and admissions like “when you’re in a fucked up space / no one can hear you signal help” one the other, is caustic.

With the song, Mike opposes himself to the glamorizing view on drugs in many popular rap songs. Because of his ability to use the song as a medium to analyse his own addiction to endorphins, Open Mike Eagle definitely does not fit the tradition of rapping

about drugs. Given that many rap songs glamorize drug (ab)use, it seems to be one of the main components of hip-hop masculinity. Open Mike Eagle, on the other hand, turns away from this tendency by taking a more vulnerable position pertaining to addiction.

Another example of Open Mike Eagle turning away from the typical confident hip-hop persona who hides any weakness is found in the song 'Insecurity'. While rappers usually come off as being very self-assured, Open Mike Eagle uses this song to voice his insecurity in relationships with women. The Paul White-produced instrumental of the song is a summery, soulful dance rhythm that adequately matches the light tone of Mike's voice while he pleas for civility and honesty:

> Don't lie to me
> They get exposed so violently
> The pain in her soul won't go quietly
> Do whatever you want just be straight
> Show improve, tell the truth as a whole and don't wait
> Be straight with me

Later in the first verse he says that "the only real truth is butt naked", asking the addressee of the song once again to be as honest as possible with him, telling them "to trust I can take it" and to "give it to me straight, just talk to me". The tipping point in the song happens at the beginning of the second verse, when Mike seems offended after hearing the truth: "You know what I mean / You ain't got to say it like that though / It's about being real and not being an asshole". After going on for a couple more lines about how the addressee shouldn't be rude when telling the truth, the jig is finally up at the end of the verse: "I ain't saying cover, just

butter the truth up / You know I'm sensitive and you came at me too tough". Mike admits that he is insecure and easily offended, asking for only the truths that help his self-esteem, and not those that play to his insecurities. The person he addresses in the song is not the listener, but presumably a female partner of his. The literary technique of addressing a second person that is not the audience as a figure of speech makes the audience into a third person overhearing a conversation that seems not to be meant for them. This diversion from the audience makes the song almost confessional, a peek into the insecurities of the artist.

The last, short verse has Mike going back upon his words. Since the truth is too painful, he asks the addressee to just lie:

> You know what, fuck it just lie
> You ain't got to say shit
> Fuck it just lie
> Don't say shit just hide
> Just fake it, just lie
> I said it but I changed my motherfucking mind
> Just lie

It is very un-hip-hop for a rapper to admit one's weaknesses in such a blunt, direct way. Whereas many rappers have stayed true to the hyper-masculinity common in hip-hop, Open Mike Eagle is more comfortable displaying his weaknesses. In an article on toxic masculinity in hip-hop Ioan Marc Jones wrote for the *Huffington Post* in 2016[18], he refers to the 2001 music video for DMX's song 'Ruff Ryders Anthem' as an example of the hyper-masculinity

[18] James, Ioan Marc. "How Hip-Hop Is Confronting Toxic Masculinity." *Huffington Post*, 22 Dec. 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ioan-marc-jones/how-hiphop-is-confronting_b_13787178.html.

that defined hip-hop from its earliest stages: “The video for ‘Ruff Ryder's Anthem’, for example, came complete with topless men lifting weights, Pitbulls gnarling at the camera and tricked out motorbikes speeding down the street. The lyrics offered an abundance of braggadocio, a rejection of femininity and an absence of vulnerability. The Ruff Ryder's Anthem was overtly masculine, but it was hardly unusual in the context of late nineties hip-hop.” He then goes on by describing the current trend in hip-hop, in which contemporary artists reject this hyper-masculinity. He says “most importantly, contemporary rappers are increasingly expressing vulnerability without redemption.” The vulnerability Open Mike Eagle portrays on a song such as ‘Insecurity’ fits in this new trend of challenging self-assurance; an essential trope of the masculine construct originally found in hip-hop. Mike tells that it is acceptable for men to feel vulnerable, and that is is okay to talk about feeling vulnerable.

Race

Race has been a recurrent theme in Open Mike Eagle’s music throughout his career. Songs such as *Dark Comedy’s* ‘Deathmate Black’ passingly address Mike’s stance on racial issues. However, none of those songs were as direct and articulated in describing Mike’s experiences as a black male as *Hella Personal Film Festival*’s ‘Smiling (Quirky Race Doc)’. According to an interview he did with Bandcamp, he wrote the song when he was already in London to record the album in Paul White’s studio, when he was strolling down the street where he saw a man and woman pass friendly greetings. “I tend to want to acknowledge people when I walk past them,” he explains in the interview. As he passed the woman on the sidewalk, Mike smiled at her as well. However, the woman averted her eyes instead of smiling back, anxiously trying to pretend he wasn’t there. “It hit me in that moment how much that

happens. There are people in my apartment building that don't look at me," Eagle says. "I started writing the hook right there." The hook he wrote would become the candid chorus for 'Smiling (Quirky Race Doc)':

> It's all fine and dandy when the show starts
> Before then, avoided like a ghost fart
> I get "what up"s and nods but for the most part
> Nobody smiles at me cause I'm a black man
> Until the show starts
> Before then, avoided like a ghost fart
> I get "what up"s and nods but for the most part
> Nobody smiles at me cause I'm a black man

Mike ruefully reports about the event and relates it to the observation that people are often racially prejudiced against black people. He notices people like him when he is rapping (or entertaining in any way), because it fits the stereotypical form of entertainment that is deemed acceptable for him, but otherwise people tend to avoid him, much like how people tend to avoid owning up to a fart. Apparently everything is "all fine and dandy when the show starts", implying that the fact that he is a black man is not significant when he is performing as a rapper. Besides these moments, though, he feels he is perceived as merely "a black man". He places extra emphasis on the crux of this hook by stretching out the words "black man", affirming that this is indeed the reason why people seem to avoid him. The song is a strong example of Open Mike Eagle's characteristic style, relating poignant observations

in a humorous manner, sharing a note of levity about something as dire as racism in a soft singing voice. The first verse of the song has Mike continuing in this style:

> I know full well every white's not a racist
> But every black man's not a sex-crazed rapist
> I was good in the hood
> In college I was ruined
> While walking I assumed you acknowledge the other humans
> Try to walk big with my chin bone lifted up
> Overcompensating like I really don't give a fuck

By asserting two opposing viewpoints of white people on the one hand and black people on the other, he stresses the fact that there is a long way to go in terms of racial equality. He addresses this opposition in the context of social interactions in the public space, where he notices the same bias he talks about in the hook of the song, where black people are seen as being dangerous. More specifically, the stereotype Mike raps about is that of the black *male* as a dangerous character. He states that, while he was comfortable with himself in his own neighborhood, he was "ruined" in college, a place usually considered more safe than the 'hood', as more people tended to avoid him there than he was used to. Whereas he was used to acknowledging other people when walking in public spaces, he learned in college that this was not the case outside of his own neighborhood. His reacted to not being acknowledged as much as he was used to was to overcompensate the image that he perceived of himself in the (averted) gaze of the Other, by "try[ing] to walk big with my chin bone lifted up / overcompensating like I really don't give a fuck". This seems like a deliberate way to

measure up to the expectations that people have about black men, i.e. the hyper-masculine hip-hop persona with an abundance of self-assurance and a total absence of vulnerability. It is a manifestation of the hip-hop stereotype revolving around the black urban masculinity that Imani Perry pointed out, which makes it an act that can be interpreted as a performative act. Performativity is a term that was first coined by J. L. Austin and further popularised by multiple theorists in philosophy and gender studies, most notably by Judith Butler in her seminal work *Bodies That Matter*.[19] In her definition, performativity is gender-oriented: in an anti-essentialist way she states that 'man' and 'woman' are no longer fixed concepts, but that these gender roles are constructions. By means of stylized repetitions of performances, gender roles are imposed on subjects:

> Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (95)

The concept of performativity is a continuation of the idea of iterability, a term first coined by Jacques Derrida in his essay 'Signature Event Context'[20]. In this essay he argued that a

[19] Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge, 1993.
[20] Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc*. Northwestern University Press, 1988.

signature, of which the essential feature should be its recognizable and repeatable form, sinks its own well by setting up the possibility of an inauthentic copy. Butler's idea is that gender is essentially a performance; a citation of all previous performances of that specific gender role, rather than a testimony of a subjects innate and natural character as masculine or feminine. Just like Derrida's signature, this makes it prone to inauthentic and parodic repetitions or quotations.

While Butler's concept of performativity is gender-oriented, I believe it can be a helpful theory in trying to understand racial stereotypes and racialized subjects such as Mike chooses as a reaction to his experience he relates in 'Smiling (Quirky Race Doc)'. In another work, *Gender Trouble*[21], Butler wrote the following:

> Gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed .... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... gender is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' which are said to be its results. (24-25)

In a paper for the Institute of Development Studies, Bridget Byrne made an interesting play on this particular quote, by swapping the instances of the word gender for race, resulting in the following:

> Race proves to be performative that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, race is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be

[21] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

> said to preexist the deed .... There is no racial identity behind the expressions of race ... race is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' which are said to be its results.[22]

When Mike states that he chooses to overcompensate his attitude as a reaction to the fact that he gets ignored, or rather, avoided, by a white lady who said hi to a stranger just moments before, he indicates that he is not only aware of the racial prejudices about black males, but also guilty of the racial performances that underlie these preconceptions. He chooses to adhere to these biases as a defense mechanism. He continues his explanation of this sentiment in the following lines:

> Walking past voters in a Democratic blocks that hit
> The windows and the automatic locks if not
> Reparations give me free black therapy
> And tell people you're scared of them it makes them act scarily
> I don't want you, your purse or you pocket book
> Them dumb yoga pants, boots or fur with the octopus
> Trust, I'm not trying to polish your toes
> Take your wallet and phone, or follow you home

Mike remarks that even Democrats, who are presumably more progressive and supposedly committed to social progress and racial equality, have the same prejudices against him as a black male. However, whereas the general tendency in hip-hop is to indulge in this black

[22] Byrne, Bridget. "Troubling Race. Using Judith Butler's Work to Think About Racialised Bodies and Selves." *Institute for Development Studies*, 23 Jun. 2000, https://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/byrne.pdf.

male stereotype, to embrace this image of overt masculinity, Mike actually warns his audience for the effects those racial prejudices have: “tell people you’re scared of them it makes them act scarily”.

In the second verse, Mike stresses the crux of the song:

And to the guys in the flip-flop squad
Nobody needs your patronizing hip-hop nod
Just be a person
That's the bottom line be a person
And fuck the rhyme scheme this time just be a person
And I can be a person too
And we can be people still
The validation and the need to feel equal

He doesn’t want “patronizing” hip-hop fans to only interact with his music. Instead he calls on their humanity and stresses the fact that he wants to be acknowledged as a person. This point is so important that he not only chooses to break with the rhyme scheme to repeat the phrase “be a person” one more time, but actually tells his audience he is doing so. This is especially interesting, because he addresses two forms of performance: bodily and musically. By resisting to follow the rhyme scheme, he resists the power the rhyme scheme has of regulating the rhythm in his musical performance. Moreover, by advocating the importance of “just be[ing] a person”, he also resists the bodily performance of a black male that is implied throughout the song.

In the next line, “I can be a person too”, Mike seemingly mirrors the famous “I Am a Man”-declaration that has been used as a proclamation of civil rights movements for centuries. It had most famously been used as a catchphrase by British and American abolitionists in the nineteenth century, and as a slogan for the Civil Rights Movement in the second half of the twentieth century. He asserts that as a black male he searches for “validation and the need to feel equal”, something he doesn’t find within the public realm. He clarifies this sentiment in terms of racial subcultures, where the African-American community is generally seen as being separate from the dominant culture. Moreover, it relates to the fact that he perceives his individuality as being subservient to his race. He expands further upon this last view in the remainder of the verse:

> The dominating culture gets to choose from many
> Modes of expression and reflection of the path that they done chose
> And my perception is froze
> Like a caveman lawyer advocating for myself
> While trying to seem dumber than I is
> Tired of thinking about this biz
> I'm just trying to build a bridge for my goddamn kid
> So the first time if ever his reputation slid
> It could actually be for something that he did

While the dominant culture has a myriad of ways through which they can express and reflect upon themselves, their perception of black men such as Mike is heavily influenced by this by how they are represented in the media and in the dominant culture at large. It affirms the

notion of racial performances of the black male, as Mike believes he has to be what the dominant culture decides he is. “While trying to seem dumber than I is” is a clever wordplay on the racial stereotype Mike actually want to turn away from. He is tired of having to advocate for himself where members of the dominant culture don’t have to do so, because the most important thing for him is to raise his child. Whereas on his previous album, on the song ‘Qualifiers’, Mike’s lamentations about his being a rapping father were mostly restricted to practical issues, he now talks about “building bridges” for his son. On *Dark Comedy* the observations he made about being a young father were relatable on a very practical, personal level, yet on *Hella Personal Film Festival* he links his fatherhood to broader cultural issues. Mike seems to interpolate Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream”-speech[23] in the last two lines, when he states that if his son’s reputation would ever slid, he should be judged by his actions, not by the color of his skin.

In all the songs I used as examples, ‘Admitting the Endorphin Addiction’, ‘Insecurity’, and ‘Smiling (Quirky Race Doc), Open Mike Eagle uses his voice as a strong device through which he articulates his unique autobiographical act. Even more so than on *Dark Comedy*, he uses his soothing voice to juxtapose the harshness of the realities his lyrics deal with. This juxtaposition is paralleled with the relation between seriousness and humor in the lyrics. The next chapter shall show how he uses the same literary devices and techniques in order to address the same two key topics - masculinity and race - however, on his latest album *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*, he uses these in order to speak out about current politics.

[23] King, Martin Luther. “I Have a Dream by Martin Luther King, Jr; August 28, 1963.” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/mlk01.asp.

Chapter 4: *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*

In the first chapter, I established the key topics that run through the work of Open Mike Eagle by analysing his album *Dark Comedy*. In the second chapter I further analysed the way in which he addresses these two main themes - masculinity and race - in his 2016 album *Hella Personal Film Festival*. An analysis of that album showed what had been changed and what had been consolidated since *Dark Comedy*. In the third and final chapter I will show how Open Mike Eagle uses the same literary devices and techniques on his latest solo album: *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*. This chapter shows the various ways in which he addresses the same topics; however, on this album he relates them more to his personal life and his community in the context of current politics, especially in the context of recent police brutality against black youth and the appointment of Donald Trump as the new President of the United States.

The story on Open Mike Eagle's 2017 album *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream* is heavily influenced by the legacy of the Robert Taylor Homes, a former public housing project in the Bronzeville neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. Ten years prior to the release of the album, in 2007, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development unceremoniously demolished the last of the 28 buildings that made up the Robert Taylor Homes. By then, the real legacy of the project was already history, since the more than 11.000 people that used to live in its buildings had been moved out long ago.

Robert Taylor Homes

The Robert Taylor Homes project buildings, named after African-American activist Robert Rochon Taylor, were completed in 1962. It was part of the State Street Corridor which included other Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) public housing projects. At one time, the

Robert Taylor Homes was the largest public housing development in the United States, offering living space for 11,000 inhabitants. However, problems arose when more and more people came to live in the project. At its peak, around 27,000 people lived in the Robert Taylor Homes. About 96 percent of these people were African-American and at one point 95 percent of the residents were unemployed. 40 percent of the households were single-parent, often female-headed households with very low incomes. Moreover, the concrete high-rises of the Robert Taylor Homes-project sat in a narrow stretch of slum, neglected by the city of Chicago to the point that the streets were permanently littered, the buildings were blackened due to arson fires, building codes were poorly enforced, commercial and civic amenities were scant, and crime was at its heyday. Police officers understandably felt unsafe, as they were often shot at from the high-rises.[24] A survey among the residents of the Robert Taylor Homes showed that the majority either had a family member in prison or expected a family member to return from prison within the following two years.[25]

In 1969 a shift in public housing policy caused the problems in the projects buildings to multiply: tenant screening was almost non-existent and crime became ubiquitous. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) dealt with the project buildings much the same way as they dealt with black bodies: discarding them when they became inconvenient, marking the Robert Taylor Homes and many other CHA public housing projects for demolition. For Michael Eagle, who grew up in the community and whose aunt was one of the many residents of the Robert Taylor Homes that was displaced because of the demolition, the metaphor was poignant: you can erase the project buildings, but you can't erase the souls that lived there. In a short documentary made by AV Club,

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[24] Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi. *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*. Harvard University Press, 2000.

[25] Venkatesh, Sudhir A., et al. "The Robert Taylor Homes Relocation Study." Center for Urban Research and Policy Colombia University, Sep. 2002, http://www.columbia.edu/cu/curp/publications/robert_taylor.pdf.

Exploring the legacy of Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes with Open Mike Eagle[26], Michael Eagle dedicates his album *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream* to all those souls while standing on the barren field that used to be the grounds for the Robert Taylor Homes: "Everybody knows that a lot of negative, terrible, awful things went on here. But for the people who lived here and died here and all that, I do think they deserve some sort of commemoration, you know? Something to note that there was something here." *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream* is, among other things, that commemoration.

Masculinity

Brick Body Kids Still Daydream follows the story of a young child living in the Robert Taylor Homes. It is a record of the daydreams of a kid with an active imagination living in a hardened environment, often hostile towards many things, including creativity. Through this childlike imagination, Open Mike Eagle paints a colorful and multifaceted picture of lives that are often portrayed as one-dimensional. In the AV Club documentary about the inspiration behind the album, Michel Eagle says the following about the opening song on the album, 'Legendary Iron Hood':

> Mythology is a big part of the album, and a song like 'Legendary Iron Hood' is the origin story of a superhero, but it's a traumatic origin story, and I think it's reflective of that environment and what someone who is, you know, introverted and having ideas and being creative in that environment might come up with.

[26] Kaseko, Baraka, and Marah Eakin. "Exploring the legacy of Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes with Open Mike Eagle." *AV Club*, 23 Oct. 2017, https://www.avclub.com/exploring-the-legacy-of-chicagos-robert-taylor-homes-wi-1819728449.

The superhero that is introduced in the song is Iron Hood, the alter ego that Open Mike Eagle plays on the album. Iron Hood is based on Juggernaut from the X-Men, one of the superheroes from the famous Marvel Comics. Through this character, Open Mike Eagle refers to the theme of black urban masculinity that he also addressed on *Dark Comedy* and *Hella Personal Film Festival*. Through the simile with Juggernaut, he invokes the attitude of being a 'tough guy', an perspective related to racial performativity. The choice for the Juggernaut, however, is intentionally ambiguous: while Juggernaut is one of the strongest characters of the X-Men, with superhuman strength powerful enough to move mountains and lift buildings, he is still prone to mental weakness. This mental weakness is embodied in the comics by Juggernaut's stepbrother, Charles Xavier or Professor X, the founder and leader of the X-Men who is repeatedly mentioned throughout the song. Professor X is an exceptionally powerful telepath who can read and control Juggernaut's mind. In order to protect himself from mental attacks, Juggernaut wears a dome shaped helmet with a metal skull cap, or 'iron hood', inside of it. This can be read as a simile with the way in which vulnerability is often shielded in hip-hop. Open Mike Eagle alludes to the Juggernaut's mental vulnerability on several occasions in the song, which itself is full of similes with the Marvel comics. By means of intertextually referencing the intricate plotlines of a series of comics, something usually associated with a young readership, Open Mike Eagle manages to powerfully retelling an existing story through the troubled imagination of a young boy growing up in a tough environment. The first verse of the song starts as follows:

> Black Tom got style, Erik can pull shit
> Got a brother named Charles that be on that bullshit
> I protect my neck with some magical jewels

And can't none of y'all can take 'em from me, yeah, yeah

In Cortez 'cause I feel like Fabian

My fit got a head like the dome of a stadium

You think it's all good but it's a really a gradient

Bag of Now and Laters and a Clearly Canadian, yeah

The first two lines in particular serve to establish the allusion that will run through the song: both Black Tom and Erik (Magneto) are characters from the X-Men, and Charles is Professor X, Juggernaut's stepbrother. The third and fourth line are especially interesting, because they no longer only reference the comics, but place them in the context of hip-hop culture and Michael Eagle's own attitude in the Robert Taylor Homes. Open Mike Eagle employs several literary tropes in order to deliver his message. Juggernaut got his superhuman powers from a magical jewel, known as the Crimson Gem. However, in this case the reference to jewels is a poetic device that Open Mike Eagle employs to address the power of thought and imagination. Whereas people would usually try to 'protect their necks' *because* of the jewels, Open Mike Eagle here paradoxically says that it is precisely those jewels that protect him. The type of jewels that Open Mike Eagle is speaking of are not the physical jewels that could be stolen from him by thieves in the projects, hence the follow-up line "and can't none of y'all can take 'em from me, yeah, yeah". Rather, these jewels are the precious gems of his mind, made up of wisdom and knowledge. He uses them as a guide that lead him through the obstacles life in the hood[27] offers. He uses the typical hip-hop "bling-bling", the often seen hip-hop-specific performative act of wearing flashy, decorative jewelry in order to promote an appearance of wealth and/or importance, as a metaphor for his mind. He specifically

[27] Slang word for 'neighborhood'.

mentions his neck as being worthy of protection, which potentially separates his mind from his body. In another sense, if his body would become detached from his mind, he could lose all knowledge of self. Growing up in the Robert Taylor Homes, as in any public housing project in America, his sense of self is constantly under siege by a wide array of outside influences. It is not easy to avoid falling into the trap of performing the dangerous acts that masculinity in such a hardened climate presupposes, where the harsh conditions of life may steer one into a superfluous world of homogenized individuals. Hence, Open Mike Eagle poses that his most effective defence against the lure of living up to this image of masculinity is to keep his mind sharp. Furthermore, the line is also a reference to one of the most famous hip-hop quotables (see previous chapter) "protect ya neck"[28], enhancing his position as a hip-hop artist. Moreover, the paradoxical reference to the jewels that protect him are characteristic for Open Mike Eagle's humorous style as has been discussed in the previous chapters.

In the last two lines Open Mike Eagle makes an interesting first move towards a new theme that runs through the album: the recent killings of black youth in America. "You think it's all good but it's a really a gradient" refers to the mathematical concept of the gradient, which describes the direction and steepness of a slope, and color gradients, which are a blend or transition from one color to another. In this line then, Mike says that things are never all good or all bad, but that they fall somewhere on a spectrum. The line is complicated by the next phrase: "bag of Now and Laters and a Clearly Canadian, yeah." Now and Laters is a brand of widely available fruit flavored candy, particularly cheap and often found at the counter in small convenience stores. They are also mentioned on Kendrick Lamar's song 'm.A.A.d City', one of the songs on an album[29] about growing up in the projects, similar to

[28] Famous song by hip-hop collective Wu-Tang Clan.
[29] Lamar, Kendrick. *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012.

Brick Body Kids Still Daydream. Clearly Canadian is a brand of flavored sparkling beverages. Together, the candy and soft drink are reminiscent of the bag of Skittles and the can of Arizona watermelon fruit juice cocktail that the 17-year-old Trayvon Martin had just bought from a 7-Eleven on the night that he was notoriously fatally shot by George Zimmerman in 2012. The murder of Martin and the criminal prosecution of George Zimmerman that followed led to many protests, in which bags of Skittles and cans of Arizona drinks were used as protest symbols.[30] In the public debate around the incident people on the one hand saw Martin as completely innocent, while another camp felt that he was not as innocent as perceived, given that he had been suspended from school at the time, and had traces of cannabis in his blood. Open Mike Eagle seems to feel that in the end this is an irrelevant discussion, since nothing and no one is ever all good or all bad, everybody always takes a position on the gradient.

The song, then, can be thought of as an allegory for the mentality Michael Eagle and the other people who grew up in similar conditions are forced to have. They often don a "tough guy" persona in order to protect themselves, but in reality they stay vulnerable to emotional pain. This is strongly reflected in the chorus of the song:

> I'm big as hell, I can't fit in my fit, my sleeves ripped
> I'm a king so my ring is legit
> I bring shit to your front door, ringing your bell
> My eyes glow in my hood like a demon from hell
> My old self locked away, no key to the cell
> They shooting spells at my head, it's up to me to repel (yeah)

[30] Benedictus, Leo. "How Skittles became a symbol of Trayvon Martin's innocence." *The Guardian*, 15 Jul. 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2013/jul/15/skittles-trayvon-martin-zimmerman-acquittal.

(one two, one two)

Ain't nothing gonna stop me now

Ain't nothing gonna stop me now (now now now now now now)

Ain't nothing gonna stop me

The parallels with the X-Men comics are still apparent, since Juggernaut is “big as hell”, made his first appearance in the comics when he visited the mansion of the X-Men to defeat them (“I bring shit to your front door, ringing your bell”), and gets his superhuman powers from the Crimson Gem, which used to belong to a demon who relishes violence. However, that line, “My eyes glow in my hood like a demon from hell”, could also easily be interpreted as Mike saying that he regularly used to get high when he was living in the hood, which would be in line with his confessions on ‘Admitting the Endorphin Addiction’. The most interesting line of the chorus, though, is the next one: “My old self locked away, no key to the cell.” Here he reflects on the discrepancy between his “old self”, which is locked away, and his current self, which has supposedly been formed under the impact of the many negative influences of the harsh world he grew up in. However, the contrary could also be true, which would give the song a positive spin: the old self that has been locked away is the “tough guy” persona Mike measured himself, implying he freed himself from that. The last lines of the chorus, “ain’t nothing gonna stop me now”, seems to support this latter interpretation.

The importance for Mike of the “tough guy” persona, in line with the hip-hop masculinity and racial performativity that I discussed in the previous chapters, culminates in the fourth song of the album, ‘No Selling (Uncle Butch Pretends It Don't Hurt)’. According to Open Mike Eagle’s personal Twitter feed, the Uncle Butch he mentions in the title of the song is his real life uncle that served in Vietnam:

'Selling' is a term derived from professional wrestling, a form of sports entertainment that Open Mike Eagle has mentioned in many songs throughout his career. 'Selling' is the exaggeration of the impact and pain inflicted by the maneuvers of the wrestlers, often used in order to make the matches more believable and exciting. The act of 'no selling', then, is the absence of any reaction that demonstrate pain or weakness. It is a clever play on the expectations that are considered masculine in hip-hop culture, where men like Open Mike Eagle are expected to maintain their composure at all times, even through physical and psychological trauma. In 'No Selling (Uncle Butch Pretends It Don't Hurt)', Open Mike Eagle mentions several situations to show just how tough he is. The second verse is emblematic for the style of the whole song:

I won't sweat it, it happened to brothers every year

I hit my thumb with a hammer and wouldn't shed a tear, yeah

Still waters, I'm running real deep

Airplane hit turbulence, shit, I'm still 'sleep

I hit my knee on the bed corner and run a sprint

I cried once, but haven't for every summer since

For those of you that's doubting, I take it that far

I had an asthma attack during the last bar

While the song lacks a tipping point where Mike says the attitude he is describing is not desirable, there are some elements that point towards an ironic reading of the song. The end of the cited verse for example has Open Mike Eagle saying that he is so talented at hiding his pain that he can even rap through an asthma attack without anyone noticing. The upward inflection in his voice at the end of the last three lines support the interpretation that Mike ironizes the stoicism that the lyrics articulate. The timbre and tone of his voice embody the pain that the words deny, creating a contradictory tension between the two. Another sign indicative of irony is the reference to professional wrestling in the song's title and its chorus, since professional wrestling relies heavily upon theatrical performance. Like Open Mike Eagle does in this song, this element of theater, while a widely accepted open secret, is never openly discussed by the performers to sustain and promote the willing suspension of disbelief for the audience by maintaining an aura of verisimilitude. Moreover, the hyperbole in a line like "tryna write fire, my pen full of flame / that shit burned my hand, I'm in a ton of pain" underscores the fact that the pain comes with disclosing psychological processes. This symbolizes the gist of the ironic approach in the song, because the "fire" he tries to write is in fact the critique of the denial of vulnerability as a trait of black masculinity.

<u>'Brick Body Complex'</u>

The character of Iron Hood makes its appearance throughout the whole album and reaches its pinnacle on the song that was released as the second single in the run up to the release of *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*: 'Brick Body Complex'. In the AV Club documentary, Michael Eagle has said about the song and its title that "complex is a play on words in that

sense [that] there's the housing complex, which is what that was, but then maybe there's a neurosis that comes along with spending too much time there, so maybe you develop a complex that way." The song is a powerful and political proclamation of identity and strength told from the perspective of one of the project building of the Robert Taylor Homes. As discussed earlier, Open Mike Eagle used his songs as a medium through which to actively resist the binds of hip-hop masculinity and racial performativity before, but he has never been as direct about it as he is on 'Brick Body Complex'. He is as frank and unambiguous as can be from the very beginning of the song, which starts with the hook:

> Don't call me nigga or rapper
> My motherfucking name is Michael Eagle, I'm sovereign
> I'm from a line of ghetto superheroes, I holla
> I got something to bring to your attention, attention, attention, attention, attention
> I promise you I will never fit in your descriptions, I'm giant
> Don't let nobody tell you nothing different, they lyin'
> A giant and my body is a building, a building, a building, a building

Open Mike Eagle, or Michael Eagle, requests people not to label him in any way that nullifies the entire person that he is. He demands to be seen as the independent individual named Michael Eagle instead of merely a reflection of his race and his profession: an African-American hip-hop artist. By stating his sovereignty he not only says that he is an autonomous being, not to be placed in any boxes, but he also feeds into the 'brick body complex' theme of the song, meaning he holds supreme power over his own body. The same sentiment is repeated in the second half of the chorus, when Open Mike Eagle promises in his

usual soothing singing voice that he will "never fit in your descriptions". Moreover, he urges his listeners not to believe anything other people might say about him, again feeding into the theme of sovereignty and the 'brick body complex' of the song. In this hook, Open Mike Eagle uses repetition (or *repetitio*) as a literary device on two occasions, twice in the same manner. The first instance occurs when he says "I got something to bring to your attention, attention, attention, attention, attention". It is a simple, yet powerful way of getting his listener's attention and stressing the importance of his message. He makes use of this momentum by getting to the main metaphor of the song in the next three lines. Here, Open Mike Eagle construes the idea that he is as giant and as immovable as a building, specifically one of the sixteen-stories high building of the Robert Taylor Homes. The same technique of *repetitio* is used again to solidify this powerful metaphor and political proclamation of identity and strength. By stating that his body is a building, Open Mike Eagle also draws parallels with the popular saying "my body is a building", which has origins in the Bible, for example in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20[31]: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" The saying is used to express the importance of the human body in one's wellbeing. In the case of Michael Eagle, it signifies the importance his old neighborhood and project building hold in shaping his identity, so much so that they seem to have become one and the same entity. In the documentary AV Club made about him, he goes even one step further in identifying himself with the neighborhood he grew up in when he says the following: "I feel like the entirety of the South Side of Chicago was in my body, so when I think of my hometown I think of a large geographic area versus, you know, just like a block or a home." The Robert Taylor Homes are more than just a collection of buildings at this point; they're tied up in Mike's

[31]*New International Version*. Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.com. Accessed 20 Jun. 2018.

identity, even in his physical self, with the bricks functioning as his armor. However, this is also the downside of his ‘brick body complex’, which implies the belief that he and everything he holds dear, such as the project buildings, are immortal when in reality they are not.

Race

Open Mike Eagle’s ability to address the constancy of racism that he experiences and his effortless flow are sharpest and most poignant on the fifth song of the album, ‘Happy Wasteland Day’. The song expresses Mike’s continued loathing of the American government and police and his desire for change by suggesting a yearly holiday on which the projects will be free of violence. He does this against the backdrop of the election of President Donald Trump and the recent police brutality against young black men. Moreover, he addresses the current state of affairs in which the majority of the nation’s population seems to accept and normalize the dire situation. The song starts with a hook that reflects this attitude:

> This is normal, it's normal now
> (They said it's) Normal, it's normal, it's normal now
> (They said it's) Normal, it's normal now
> (They said it's) Normal, it's normal, it's normal now
> Everybody get involved
> It's holiday in the wasteland
> Quit tripping y'all
> It's holiday in the wasteland

Once again, Open Mike Eagle employs the poetic technique of *repetitio* to underscore the significance of his observation; in this case, the grim realization that the general populace is not as committed to the current political process as Mike feels they should be. In the first verse of the song Open Mike Eagle voices his hopelessness and distress towards the current President of the United States, Donald Trump, whom he refers to as the 'garbage king':

> When the king is a garbage person
> I might wanna lay down and die
> Power down all my darkest urges
> Keep my personal crown up high

However distraught he may feel, though, he finds the mental power within himself not to lower himself to doing things he would possibly regret later. Later in the same verse he repeats the believe that only common sense will be a weapon against the void that he experiences between the government and his own community:

> Now we all in a zombie movie
> Only weapon is common sense
> Zombie sheriffs is tryna to lynch us
> Guess I'll call up my congressmen

These last years, America has seen so many police shootings that the situation reminds Mike of a zombie movie, with the police being the villains of the movie. Lynching was a widespread practice of extrajudicial punishment for presumed criminal offences, performed

by self-appointed commissions or vigilantes. After the American Civil War in the late 1800s, following the emancipation of slaves, the number of lynchings of African-American men in the Southern part of the United States rose as a demonstration of white male supremacy and black male impotence.[32] With Open Mike Eagle referring to lynching in these lines, he implicates the fact that many of the police shootings in the past few years have been directed at African-American people, reminiscent of the political terrorism that was prevalent in the previous century. Many of the victims of lynchings in that time were black people, with secret vigilante and insurgent groups such as the Ku Klux Klan instigating extrajudicial assaults and killings in order to keep whites in power. Mike calls upon the fact that, while history has evolved many decades since then, the judicial system should have evolved alongside it. He ironically presumes that in contemporary United States the government should be able to solve problems like these. He jokingly "guesses" the best thing he can do about it is to call up his congressman. He continues with painstakingly detailing the perseverance of racism in a chorus that alternates the phrases "Can we get one day they don't try us" and "Can we get one day without violence."

The turnover to a more activist standpoint takes place right from the beginning of the second verse:

I was protesting I lost my sign
Standing up cause they crossed my line
Gathered folks and they caught my vibe
If it wasn't for y'all I would've lost my mind

[32] Gonzales-Day, Ken. *Lynching in the West*. Duke University Press, 2006.

Right after another hook in which he refers to the normalization of the political climate, Mike addresses the fact that going to protest marches saved his soul, since it was at those gatherings that he found like-minded people. This militant attitude culminates into the last part of the verse, in which he puts everything on the table:

> First directive's protect your town
> Tell the garbage king "we don't respect your crown"
> Generator, we back online
> No bullshit, we don't have no time
> Storm the castle, that flag don't fly
> Say fuck the king til that asshole die
> Fuck the king, no command, no chief
> Since the man was crowned we ain't had no sleep
> Dare the man to put hands on me
> Or sovereign land that I stand on, B

Open Mike Eagle identifies as a liberal and appeals to the sovereignty of his land. He is fed up with the political situation, and wants to overthrow the king. Mike has so many sobering things to say about oppression that the song ultimately fades out with him still rapping. It reminds of the rhetorical figure *aposiopesis*, wherein a sentence is deliberately broken off and left unfinished, the ending to be supplied by the imagination, giving an impression of unwillingness or inability to continue[33]. It usually indicates the speaker to be overcome with passion, trailing off in thought. In the case of Open Mike Eagle and the views on the current

[33] Lanham, Richard. A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms. University of California Press, 1991.

political climate he voices in the last verse of the song, it seems fair to assume that this is indeed the case.

Conclusion

In this thesis I intended to reveal the ways in which Open Mike Eagle uses his songs as a space for resistance; both musically, by responding to and resisting current hip-hop conventions, as well as politically, through his engagement with current political situations. The research question I intended to answer was as follows: How does Open Mike Eagle use his songs as a space for resistance against performative acts of masculinity and race? In the three albums that I analyzed, lyrics about the oppressing aspects of both masculinity and race run as a thread through his songs. Together, they help form the unique autobiographical act that Michael Eagle builds with his music; an autobiographical act that is constantly being refined. In the three albums, Open Mike Eagle creates a space in which he subverts the toxic hyper-masculinity that has traditionally been a staple in hip-hop culture and rap music. Furthermore, besides this resistance against gender performativity that for years helped to define hip-hop, he uses the space he creates in his songs in order to subvert racial prejudices. On *Dark Comedy* these two topics seemingly went hand in hand in the song 'Qualifiers'. In this song he resists the typical rap *braggadocio* that is such an integral part of hip-hop's hyper-masculinity by showing the insecurity and vulnerability about his life as a father that is usually stoically rejected in popular rap music. At the same time he uses the song to ponder on the cultural implications of being a black man in contemporary America.

In the ensuing chapters, though, I discovered that he increasingly addresses the themes of masculinity and race separately. Instead of addressing both themes within the constraints of one song, he addresses them on seperate songs. In this way, he optimizes the space within his songs as autobiographical acts. On *Hella Personal Film Festival* for example, the admission of vulnerability as a way of subverting masculinity is narrowed down to a dissertation in which Mike opposes himself to the glamorization of drugs that has been

prevailing in many popular rap songs since the 1990s. Instead of following this trend, he deliberately rejects this tendency by discussing his addiction. Moreover, he expresses his insecurity in relationships with women - another way of subverting masculinity. He subverts racial performativity even more powerfully, by addressing the intersection between masculinity and race in the context of public spaces. As a result, his observations are no longer restricted to his personal life, but are linked to broader cultural issues. Since his son is growing up to the tender age at which he will become an active participant in society, Open Mike Eagle feels the need to address his fatherhood in terms of building bridges for his child.

In the last chapter I analyzed his latest album, *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*. On this album, masculinity is addressed through the story of the public housing project in which he grew up, a powerful new device for Open Mike Eagle. On *Dark Comedy*, his observations were severely personal, and on *Hella Personal Film Festival* (while that title may suggest otherwise) they were connected to broader cultural issues, but on *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream* Open Mike Eagle developed his autobiographical space into one in which his lamentations no longer only address his personal life. This album is no longer merely a space for autobiographical acts, but moreover a space for dedication.

To conclude, throughout the course of his last three albums, Open Mike Eagle created a space to speak out about masculinity and race. He has increasingly used this space to address these topics in the context of America's political situation. The appointment of Donald Trump as President of the United States, as well as the recent streak of police brutality against African-American youth has played a crucial role in this development. It facilitated Open Mike Eagle with an extra, powerful weapon: passion.

Open Mike Eagle fits in a new tradition in hip-hop culture and rap music where artists offer a profound introspective and openly vulnerable performance. The autobiographical act

he builds in his songs is complicated, inconsistent and conflicted and addresses many issues mainstream rappers once sought to avoid. In a culture once so entrenched in the hyper-masculine, rejecting this notion of masculinity is very important. Open Mike Eagle is a strong example of a rapper who wholeheartedly embraces his vulnerability, sending an important message to the world. But while hip-hop is certainly making strides in challenging the damaging aspects of gender and racial performativity, there is still a long way to go. The same goes for scholarly writings on these intersections. Because most studies focus on broader themes diffused through the culture, there is still a lack in monograph-length works about individual artists, leaving a space in the field of research which could and should be pursued more ambitiously.

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