

CAN'T TAKE MY SOUL: EXPLORING AND ILLUMINATING THE SPIRITUALITY AND
SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM WITHIN BRITISH HIP-HOP

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ABSTRACT

Hip-hop is a transnational musical genre that has historically affected the lives of marginalized youth in powerful ways across the “Black Atlantic.” By using a womanist framework of analysis, this thesis illuminates the ways in which three British hip-hop MC’s—Akala, Logic, and Lowkey—employ their music to enact spiritual activism. I explore how their music explicitly and implicitly centers on spirituality and seeks to break down the barriers necessary for spiritual awareness and growth through the awakening and/or transformation of consciousness.

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Introduction

“Music is supposed to inspire, so how come we ain’t gettin no higher?”
–Lauryn Hill, “Superstar”

Hip-hop is one of the most popular, if not *the* most popular, genres of music in the world today. With its humble beginnings during the early-mid 1970s in the South Bronx, New York, hip-hop has expanded and become an integral part of the fabric of the lives of innumerable individuals across the globe. Mainstream views of hip-hop, however, see it as a billion dollar industry and global phenomenon, a genre of music that, in the realm of the mainstream, purports to promote capitalism, consumerism, materialism, and often, sexism and misogyny. Although these themes most certainly do exist within the genre today, genuine supporters of hip-hop know it to be infinitely more than that.

The origins of the term ‘hip-hop’ explicate this point further. In his book *It’s Bigger Than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation*, M.K. Asante Jr. notes

The word ‘hip’ comes out of the Wolof language, spoken by the Wolof people in Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania. In Wolof, there’s a verb, ‘hipi’ which means ‘to open one’s eyes and see.’ So *hipi* is a term of enlightenment. (Asante Jr. 250)

In this view, enlightenment is one of hip-hop’s requisites. Legendary MC and educator KRS-One brings this point home in his song “Hip Hop Lives”: “Hip and hop is more than music/Hip is the knowledge, hop is the movement/Hip and hop is intelligent movement,” (KRS-One, “Hip Hop Lives”). Despite the misappropriation of hip-hop, its intended purpose is to speak truth to power, to speak one’s *own* truth, and to enlighten, empower, and move people in the process.

As both a movement and a genre of music, hip-hop came to fruition in the South Bronx in the 1970s as groups of dispossessed and marginalized Black and Latino youth created and developed an outlet to air their frustrations, feelings, and as a way to escape the realities of everyday life. Sohail Daulatzai elucidates that “hip-hop’s emergence from urban America in the 1970s was a result of a host of political, economic, and racist state forces that can be traced back to the rise of Black Power in the 1960s and to the profound shifts in the U.S. economy that began at roughly the same time” (Daulatzai 91). These conditions were forced into existence in part because of the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway, which uprooted and eradicated families, businesses, and jobs. It was also during this historical period that music education programs were cut from many schools, instead focusing on eradicating “crime” in the city, which in effect engendered the production of music in the streets as a means of resistance and upliftment for people of color in the face of racism and injustice. Daulatzai explains that “it was New York, specifically the Bronx, that came to represent a kind of national symbol of urban decay, the ashes from which the phoenix of hip-hop would arise” (Daulatzai 92).

The commercialization of hip-hop records in the capitalist-driven United States, however, would transform the content of the music, marking a shift from being a means of empowerment to a means of material profit. In the essay “Money, Power, Respect: A Critique of the Business of Rap Music,” Yvonne Bynoe makes an important distinction between the hip-hop industry and the hip-hop community. She argues:

[the hip hop industry] is comprised of entities that seek to profit from the marketing and sales of rap music and its ancillary products [and includes] record companies, music publishers, radio stations, record stores, music-video shows, recording studios, talent bookers, performance venues, promoters, managers, disc jockeys, lawyers, accountants, music publications, and music/entertainment websites. (cited in Asante Jr. 104)

Hip-hop music moved away from being a creative genre of music produced by Black and Latino youth to becoming an industry largely owned by white men who control the record labels that many artists are signed to. Given the long and violent history of racism and oppression in the United States, the plight of this musical genre as no longer controlled by people of color despite its origin is a central concern of mine.

In this research, I propose to study three such London-based MCs—Akala, Logic, and Lowkey—whose music, I argue, both reflects and promotes spiritual activism. Spiritual activism is defined by womanist scholar Layli Maparyan as “a set of practices designed to change ‘hearts and minds’ in ways that promote optimal well-being in individuals, communities, humanity as a whole, all livingkind, and ultimately Planet Earth” (Maparyan 117). In Lowkey’s song “My Soul”, he demonstrates a desire to maintain his individuality within the music industry while at the same time, encouraging listeners to assert her/his agency in their everyday life. For example, he states:

Whether I’m number one, number two, or number three/I’m unique and there will never
be another me/And there will never be another you/Be proud of who you are, don’t copy
what the others do/They are not superior, you are not inferior/When we realize that,
there’s gonna be hysteria. (Lowkey, “My Soul”)

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins explains how “speaking for oneself and crafting one’s own agenda is essential to empowerment” (Collins 36). Viewed in this light, it is clear to see how young people might rely on hip-hop to negotiate crises in identity formation, emotional turmoil, insecurity, vulnerability—Hip-hop feminist Makiba J. Foster brings our attention to the striking similarities among oppressed and marginalized youth across the world, especially those who express themselves through art. She argues that “despite different regions of the globe, certain themes

reoccur when poor disenfranchised youths try to create a space for themselves, especially when voicing their opinions about crucial topics such as poverty and injustice” (Foster 451). For Lowkey, empowerment is central to his music: “The one feeling I hope to give any listener is empowerment. I hope my music can empower people to realize their own potential and take pride in themselves,” (Lowkey, “Lowkey: Only You Can Represent Yourself.”).

The process of empowerment entails self-actualization, an awakening/transformation of consciousness, and recognizing/remembering one’s true essence—their soul. As a global phenomenon, hip-hop offers a means by which youth find support, upliftment, and encouragement. This, I argue, is “the stuff” of spiritual activism—the platform from which these three MCs operate. In this thesis, I explore and illuminate the ways in which Akala, Logic, and Lowkey’s music centers on spirituality, thus partaking in a kind of spiritual activism which seeks to break down the barriers necessary for spiritual awareness and growth through the awakening and/or transformation of consciousness. Through the examination of their lyrics using textual analysis, I aim to examine how their music is designed to promote the well-being of individuals, communities of people, and humanity.

Feminist Epistemology

This thesis is guided by my personal experiences and perspective as a young, white, American woman who was only exposed to U.S. hip-hop at the age of thirteen and was not exposed to British hip-hop until 2009. My spiritual journey and growth through British hip-hop is ultimately what led to the creation of such a thesis, and as an American white woman and anti-racist ally, my engagement with British hip-hop intends to serve as an exploration into the possibilities for spiritual awareness and growth that hip-hop provides. This is in direct opposition to the white supremacist narrative that hip-hop merely perpetuates sexism, violence, misogyny,

and crime. Hip-hop can be/is such a powerful tool to speak to and positively affect people's lives, and Akala, Logic, and Lowkey's implicit and explicit engagement with spirituality within their music has immense potential for facilitating spiritual awareness and growth among listeners.

My understanding of spirituality, which informs my conception of spiritual activism, is that it is the awareness that we are more than just human bodies. We are souls undergoing a human experience—not the other way around. This awareness is caused by the awakening and transformation of consciousness that can happen in innumerable ways, but for me, it was primarily through listening to Akala, Logic, and Lowkey's music, along with reading spiritual-centered books and asking questions concerning the nature of my being. It is out of this consciousness that I'm able to understand why I incarnated as a white, American woman in this world; why anyone incarnates in the bodies that they do—to gain experience and learn the lessons that can and will assist in their evolution. For me, I've learned (and am still learning) about white American privilege and how it affects people who suffer precisely because of it. It is because I was born into a white body that, as much as my soul wants to, I can't even begin to, and won't ever fully understand the oppression and injustice people of color face on a daily basis—experiences that have given birth to womanism, among many other worldviews, ideologies, and means of survival and resistance amidst oppressive forces. I respect and appreciate womanism's roots in black women's lives and experiences and, while I do not want to co-opt or claim Black American and African cultural creations as my own, I do position myself as a womanist because of the inclusive, all-encompassing, and metaphysical nature of its worldview. As Layli Maparyan notes in *The Womanist Idea*:

The womanist worldview and its associated social movement is rooted in the lived experience of survival, community building, intimacy with the natural environment, health, healing, and personal growth among everyday people from all walks of life, and articulated primarily but not exclusively by women of color from around the world, and now a gift to all humanity. (Maparyan 33)

In this thesis, I apply a womanist framework to analyze the spiritual themes in Akala, Logic, and Lowkey's music. The term womanism was first invoked by Alice Walker in her 1979 short story that was published in *Ms.* magazine, but the most well-known invocation came from her 1984 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, where she presents a dictionary-type definition of womanism with four distinct variations. Walker states that a womanist is "a black feminist or feminist of color" and thus, womanism is essentially rooted in black women's experiences and culture (Maparyan 17, 20). However, Maparyan's analyzes Walker's famous statement—"womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender"—by suggesting that womanism is "a more comprehensive vision of human liberation than feminism, lesbianism, or even humanism" (Maparyan 21). Womanism, as articulated by Maparyan, is an amalgamation of Walker's womanism, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's African womanism, and Clenora Hudson-Weem's Africana womanism, who are the "three weight-bearing pillars of the womanist idea" (Maparyan 29). Maparyan goes on to state that "womanism in its wholeness cannot be apprehended unless all three 'versions' of womanism are *simultaneously* maintained" (Maparyan 29). What is important to note here is that womanism as employed by Maparyan is a new embarkation from already established versions of womanism. She elucidates:

Situated here, in *The Womanist Idea*, it [womanist origins] serves as a point of departure for a completely new take on womanism, womanists, and the womanist idea—one that continues my quest to go beneath and beyond the manifest surface of womanism to discover its metaphysical depths and mystical possibilities for social/ecological change on a global level, and to capture and convey what I see (and feel) as the spirit of womanism, that fundamental animating impulse that has captivated and motivated the hearts of so many people worldwide. (Maparyan 17)

Maparyan states that “it [womanism] proceeds directly from the recognition of humanity’s basic commonality and fundamental, if not woefully underrealized, oneness” (Maparyan 21). I argue that Akala, Logic, and Lowkey are conscious of this ‘oneness’ of humanity, which will be elucidated in the textual analysis of their music. The spiritual elements in their music, such as recognizing the soul, *being* one’s true self, critiques of the ego and the ways in which it manifests itself, and recognizing the sacredness in humanity serves as an important contribution to a womanist framework.

I also seek to illuminate male voices work to resist oppression, promote self-development, self-actualization, and healing within their music. bell hooks has elucidated that regardless if they are a woman or man, anyone who resists sexism and sexist exploitation are considered comrades in the feminist struggle. Layli Maparyan, in an article titled “Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop”, discusses the dilemma that arises when reducing hip-hop music to being solely misogynistic. She states:

To assume that women have been the only feminist voices or influences within Hip Hop and rap is to negate the contributions of progressive, anti-sexist men within the movement. To claim that rap music and Hip Hop culture are purely and simply misogynistic is to view rap and the Hip Hop realm uncritically from the perspective of an outsider. In sum, Hip hop, including rap music, is a complex and contradictory arena in which regressive and oppressive elements sometimes complicate and at times even undermine what fundamentally remains an oppositional and potentially liberatory project. (Phillips et al 254)

I will demonstrate, therefore, the gendered ways in which Akala, Logic, and Lowkey have resisted sexism, the ways in which they acknowledge their male privilege and the ways that they potentially rescript masculinity in ways that can contribute to and expand upon feminist understandings of hip-hop.

In coining the term ‘hip-hop feminism’, Joan Morgan states in her book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* that she needs a “feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays”, those areas of ‘truth’ that are neither black or white, right or wrong, areas that are sometimes contradictory, but nonetheless, areas that hip-hop feminists must confront (Morgan 59). Indeed, these gray areas readily exist within the realm of hip-hop. For instance, this means loving music that’s not necessarily fully inclusive or that always reflect feminist sensibilities. As Morgan put it, “The gray area includes the contradictions of loving an art that is reluctant to include you; loving men who, at times, refuse to portray you in your totality,” (Ofori-Atta, “Hip-Hop Feminism”). Mainstream hip-hop tends to place women in a box, much like society, in placing them in a binary of virgin/whore, angel/devil, good/bad, when in reality women are much more complex than that. Indeed, it is necessary to be mindful of these things when listening to hip-hop from a hip-hop feminist perspective. In other words, when analyzing hip-hop music, Morgan emphasizes the fact that we can love things but trouble them *at the same time*, which I will demonstrate in the conclusion of this thesis.

Methodology

To explore and illuminate the ways in which Akala, Lowkey, and Logic’s music centers on spirituality and spiritual activism, I will conduct a textual analysis, selecting several songs from each artist as well as some songs in which Lowkey and Akala and Akala and Logic have collaborated on, respectively. Textual analysis will enable me to break down the themes and messages in their songs, highlighting the instances where the focus is on transforming consciousness using womanist methods. As it pertains to hip-hop, Maparyan noted the methods used by womanists to utilize dialogue and other types of speech. She states

Womanists who are dedicated to positive social change know the power of dialogue as well as other forms of speech and steward them consciously in order to harmonize and

coordinate humans from diverse backgrounds and of diverse interests in the service of universal peace and optimal well-being for all. (Maparyan 60)

Many of the themes I will illuminate include: self-love, equality, being true to and honest with oneself, confronting privilege and oppression, critiques of the ego, and recognizing and developing one's true self. Along with textual analysis, I will also use many of the artists' interviews in which they've discussed the content of their music and their intentions in creating music with such themes and messages.

Since I position myself as a listener/supporter of these MCs' music, I will also include an autoethnographic account of my experience as a listener and as an individual to highlight my personal journey that led me down the path of consciousness awakening and transformation. This way, not only is my position as a researcher understood as subjective rather than objective, but my position will also be understood as a subject with particular insights *within* the research rather than a mere objective observer conducting research.

Limitations

The three MCs focused on in this thesis are not representative of all British hip-hop, but they are a testament to the possibilities for spiritual growth and awareness not just among British MCs but among MCs in general as well as listeners. The scope of this thesis is very small, with only three MCs focused upon out of the innumerable MCs in Britain, and I realize that because of the lack of depth in scope of this thesis, a lot of music will be unaccounted for.

Chapter One

Hip-Hop's Transnational Roots and Flourishing Transfigurations

"Hip hop ain't dead it just immigrated"
–Lowkey, "Hip Hop Ain't Dead"

Reggae legend Bob Marley famously cried out, "In this great future, you can't forget your past," (Ford, "No Woman, No Cry"). I argue we need to contemplate and better understand the historical foundations of hip-hop and its relationship to different, 'greater futures' before we can begin to consider the ways in which Akala, Logic, and Lowkey's music is centered on spirituality, and thus spiritual activism. It is critical to discern the origins of hip-hop music in the black Atlantic context, which I argue exist as a series of complex interconnections instead of as a sole point of origin. In doing this, my aim is not to erase the history and discredit the innovations of hip-hop music in the U.S, but rather to explore the global interconnections among American, African, Caribbean, and British musical traditions and culture in particular. Thus, in this chapter, I will not only explore the interconnections among such musical traditions to point to the intricacies of hip-hop's influences, but I will also provide the individual historical, social, and political contexts in which American and British hip-hop came to fruition.

Section One: Tracing Hip-Hop's Origins & Transnational Articulations

Hip-hop has always been transnational. Discerning its origins reveals its multiple sites of influence across space and over time. The term 'hip-hop' itself has African origins that implies its illuminatory and spiritually liberatory purpose, but there are also many additional elements of

African and Caribbean cultural practices that have influenced both U.S. and British hip-hop. Paul Gilroy elucidates the complexities of Black British culture in his book *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. Gilroy maintains:

Culture is not a fixed and impermeable feature of social relations. Its forms change, develop, combine and are dispersed in historical processes. The syncretic cultures of black Britain exemplify this. They have been able to detach cultural practices from their origins and use them to found and extend the new patterns of meta communication which give their community substance and collective identity. (*Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* 217)

Being fully aware of these elements that paved the way for hip-hop to come into existence as a musical art form is necessary; it is in this understanding that one can both appreciate, acknowledge, and respect the various cultural traditions that existed to serve many similar purposes as hip-hop—to empower, enlighten, preserve cultural heritage, and/or serve as a means of spiritual liberation.

Somali-Canadian MC K'Naan noted in an interview that recitation over a beat is not a new concept. He asserts:

I'm certain that any country, any given country in Africa, you will find an ancient form of Hip Hop. It's just natural for someone from Africa to recite something over a drum and to recite it in a talking blues fashion, and then it becomes this thing called Hip Hop. (Mitchell and Pennycook 34)

Similarly, in an article Akala wrote for *The Guardian* in 2011, he notes:

Contrary to popular mythology, the art of rhyming rhythmically over the beat of a drum (rapping) was not invented in 1970s New York. The cultural wellspring from which hip-hop was drawn, goes far deeper, making it all the more powerful. It can be traced through reggae, jazz, blues, and ultimately back to the African griot traditions of the medieval west African empires. (Akala, "It's a hip hop planet")

These same ideas are conveyed by Akala on his song "Knowledge Is Power" which is part of a mixtape of the same name released in 2012. While hip-hop is an innovative means to empower individuals and communities of color in the face of particular histories of anti-black racism, Akala urges listeners to understand its entire context in order to grasp its capacity for

enlightenment. He maintains that, if understood “in its fullest context, rather than as a misogynistic, materialistic handmaiden of American capitalism, it is easy to see why hip-hop has such power” (Akala, “Knowledge Is Power”). In this view, I argue, hip-hop can be understood as both a continuation and modification of African practices—centuries old oral traditions that laid the cultural foundation for hip-hop to become its own genre of music. Akala mentions griots¹, which, according to Patricia Tang, “have played a significant role in cultures throughout West Africa for more than seven centuries, serving as oral historians, praise-singers, musicians, genealogists, and storytellers” (Tang 79-80). Tang cites Cheryl Keyes as one of few who has critically examined the link between hip-hop music and African griots, what Keyes calls the ‘rap music-African nexus’ (Tang 82). Tang explains:

During the transatlantic slave trade, when many Africans (including griots) were transplanted to the Western world, they necessarily modified, reshaped, and transformed African systems of thought into their new contexts. Keyes (2002:21) calls this foregrounding (both consciously and unconsciously) of African-centered concepts ‘cultural revisioning,’ citing rap music performance practices as representative of this. (Tang 82)

In Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music, Mark Lewis

Taylor touches on the spirit’s need for liberation that is evident in the themes of many hip-hop songs. He extrapolates:

Whether it is hungered for, dreamed about, or celebrated in rituals new or old, a drive toward liberation is one of the spirit’s key characteristics. When rappers tell alternative stories while facing police brutality or prison warehousing of the racially stigmatized poor, depicting the struggle, survival and flourishing of oppressed communities, they conjure spiritual practices for these communities. (Taylor 119)

These sort of spiritual practices articulated in hip-hop music are similar to the practices enacted by enslaved Africans as a means of spiritual liberation and survival. Taylor explains:

¹ Griots can be found in many parts of West Africa, serving as storytellers, musicians, poets, historians—often have to memorize copious traditional songs and epics without error.

Afrodiasporic people and movements have often deployed religious and spiritual symbolics to articulate and strengthen their drives for liberation. This is especially evident in the ways West African spirituality gave rise to Vodou in the Caribbean...It is a religious practice that is embodied in dance and music and became, in part, a survival strategy in the sinister system of chattel slavery entrapment. (Taylor 120)

Similarly, hip-hop is used as a survival strategy for (specifically but not limited to) people of color all over the world facing oppressive, dehumanizing social conditions. Expressing oneself through hip-hop is a means of asserting one's agency and a source of empowerment in situations where one often feels powerless. It can be seen as a spiritually liberatory practice, much like Vodou, used to uplift the spirit in a way that both affirms and honors its endurance amidst seemingly insurmountable circumstances.

U.S. hip-hop originated in the South Bronx in the 1970s with dispossessed and marginalized Black and Latino youth who developed the elements of hip-hop culture such as rapping, DJing, b-boying, and graffiti—the four major components. First, it is important to discern the social, political, and economic conditions that facilitated the environment for hip-hop's birth. According to Daulatzai:

From the mid- to late 1960s on, as a result of repression, white flight, and the erosion of local tax bases due to corporate flight across borders, the 'city' was demonized to embody fear, danger, and crime within the mainstream imagination, all of which became code words in justifying a full frontal assault on the Black and Brown communities that lived there. (Daulatzai 92)

For a better sense of the socio-economic conditions in which hip-hop began, I look to Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. Chang states:

The South Bronx had lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs; 40 percent of the sector disappeared. By the mid-seventies, average per capita income dropped to \$2,430, just half of the New York City average and 40 percent of the nationwide average. The official youth unemployment rate hit 60 percent...If blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work. (Chang 13)

Not only was unemployment on the rise, but the rhetoric of ‘crime’ employed initially by Nixon and then Reagan sought to attack and suppress urban communities of color with several efforts to eliminate and silence any political movements or uprisings by such means as COINTELPRO, Nixon’s “law and order” mantras and Reagan’s “War on Drugs” and “War on Crime” campaigns. Daulatzai articulates:

Black discontent and political mobilization resulted in U.S. state-sanctioned repression that included huge cutbacks in education and infrastructure and drastic increases in funding the formation of an urban police state and the building of prisons. As a result, the prison population in the United States skyrocketed by 500 percent between 1970 and 2000, with the United States having a higher rate of prisoners per one hundred thousand of its population than any other country in the world. (Daulatzai 95)

In light of these conditions, it is easy to see how hip-hop came to be, not only as a genre of music but also a movement and a means of empowerment in the face of cataclysmic oppression, racism, and injustice. This is exemplified by the Zulu Nation,—a grassroots organization created by pioneering hip-hop DJ Afrika Bambaataa in an effort to make effectual change in his community. Through weekly held meetings, the Zulu Nation provided “an open forum to develop ways of eradicating the rising presence of drugs and violence that unleashed terror in some of New York’s most disadvantaged housing projects” (Watkins 23). According to S. Craig Watkins, “Hip hop’s real power and true significance, Bambaataa professes, resides in its capacity to empower young people to want to change their lives,” (22).

When the “Godfather” of U.S. hip-hop, Kool Herc emigrated from Jamaica to the South Bronx, he brought with him aspects of Jamaican sound system culture that he remembered seeing as a young boy when, at the time, he was too young to be a part of dancehalls, although he was enamored by them. With the help of his sister, he began throwing parties for youth who were too young to get into clubs as well as older people who wanted to have a good time. Soon

after, he started throwing block parties equipped with his powerful sound system, and he eventually learned to elongate and loop the break in songs, which facilitated the environment for rapping.

During this same historical period, British hip-hop also emerged within a particular social and political context. Hesmondhalgh and Melville note that there have been people of color living in Britain for hundreds of years, but that the majority of the current nonwhite population is the “result of postwar migration from Britain’s former colonies” such as Jamaica, India, and parts of Africa (Hesmondhalgh and Melville 88); it was also during this time period that many of the countries which many people immigrated from were gaining and asserting their independence from the British Empire. They further articulate:

Postwar migration to Britain was the result of labor shortages. Black immigrants were welcomed and given full citizenship rights as subjects of the British Commonwealth. Gradually, though, immigration policies became increasingly racist. Immigration figures declined significantly after the early 1970s. The vast majority of young black British people were born in Britain. As a result, a whole generation of migrants’ children are dealing with the experiences of being British and black. (Hesmondhalgh and Melville 88)

During the 1950s and 1960s, many of the countries that people of color immigrated from were gaining and asserting their independence from the British Empire, such as Jamaica (1962) and India (1950). Gilroy notes, “The mass of black people who arrived here [Britain] as fugitives from colonial under development, brought with them legacies of their political, ideological, and economic struggles in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Indian subcontinent, as well as the scars of imperialist violence,” (“Steppin Out of Babylon” 399). Not only were people of color subjected to oppression and racism in the former colonies of their origin, but they also faced racism upon arriving in Britain. Ceri Peach maintains that racial tension in Britain was evident as early as the following of the first World War. She states:

Race riots are not a new phenomenon in Great Britain. In the period after the first World War when there was competition for jobs in merchant ships between black and white potential crewmen, violence erupted in Cardiff and Liverpool (Little, 1947) and other dockland areas. In these riots, several blacks were killed. In 1958 there were riots against West Indians in Notting Hill and in Nottingham. (Peach 397)

As Margaret Thatcher became elected as Prime Minister in 1979, Anthony King notes that “[t]he government had been elected to cut taxes and interest rates, to slash public expenditure, to cut government borrowing, to reduce the rate of growth of money supply and, above all, to bring down the rate of inflation” (King 102). However, the reality of Thatcher’s Conservative government would have adverse effects. King continues:

Instead, between 1979 and the late months of 1981, taxation increased both absolutely and as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP), interest rates soared to record levels, public expenditures (like taxation) rose in both absolute and proportional terms...and the rate of inflation, far from falling in the first instance, actually doubled in the course of Thatcher’s first year in office, from 11 to 22 per cent...and unemployment rose seemingly inexorably, from 5 per cent of the labour force in June 1979, Thatcher’s first full month in office, to 12 percent in the period October-December 1981. (102)

“Thatcherism” in the U.K. mirrored “Reaganomics” in the U.S. in that poverty and high unemployment, specifically detrimentally affecting the Afro-Caribbean community, were major consequences of the Brixton Riot of 1981—itsself a product of such social conditions people of color faced along with a discriminatory police force. Clive Unsworth notes that a major complaint among West Indians is “of police harassment and abuse on the streets, utilizing the ‘SUS’ offence—Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act, 1824, now repealed, but partly replaced by Section 9 of the Criminal Attempts Act, 1981—and local powers of ‘stop and search’, national adoption of which has been urged by the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure” (Unsworth 69). These laws legally allow police to stop anyone, anywhere who is “suspected” of wrongdoing. Journalist Cindi John elucidates the conditions leading up to the 1981 Brixton Riot:

Many young black men believed officers discriminated against them, particularly by use of the 'Sus' law under which anybody could be stopped and searched if officers merely suspected they might be planning to carry out a crime. In early April, Operation Swamp - an attempt to cut street crime in Brixton which used the Sus law to stop more than 1,000 people in six days - heightened tensions. Unsubstantiated rumours of police brutality against a black man later led an angry crowd gathering to confront officers on the evening of 10 April for a few hours before the disturbances were contained. But an arrest the following night sparked off the rioting in earnest. (John, "The legacy of the Brixton riots")

As Femi Adeyemi notes, "Many problems bothering Black British of Afro-Caribbean decent were issues such as a racist police force, a discriminatory education system, a biased criminal justice system, and immigration laws. The combination of each of these factors demonstrates the role institutional racism has played in forcing Black British of Afro-Caribbean decent to take a second-class status in society," (Adeyemi, "Thatcher and Institutional Racism").

What often goes acknowledged is that before hip-hop took root in Britain, there was already an established, rich musical form of expression that was implanted from the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica. Hesmondhalgh and Melville articulate:

[T]he United Kingdom already has its own version of an emancipatory black practice [in sound system culture], a Caribbean-derived cultural formation with music at its epicenter that fostered black expressivity and organized and channeled critiques of institutional racism and neocolonialism. In other words, sound system culture did for black British urban populations what hip-hop did for African Americans. Many black British clubbers and consumers picked up U.S. hip-hop but incorporated it into their preexisting diet of reggae. (Hesmondhalgh and Melville 90)

Much like U.S. hip-hop artists, British Reggae artists often used their music to illuminate social, racial, and class issues, as well as issues of police surveillance and brutality that affected people of color in Britain. Wood demonstrates:

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s relations between black Britons and the police has deteriorated, leading to urban uprisings in cities such as Bristol, London, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and other areas of significant non-white settlement as communities reacted to a sense of being continually under siege by a combination of heavy handed policing, disproportionate under or unemployment, a lack of real opportunities, a

decaying infrastructure and racism. These were all topics of the lyrics of British reggae acts and would form an important part of the discourse of black British Hip Hop artists including London Possee. (Wood 181)

British reggae artist Smiley Culture's 1984 song "Police Officer" is a shining example of the racist nature of police harassment of black British citizens, which is very telling considering the nature of his death whilst in police custody in 2011. "Police Officer" is an example of racist stop and search procedures enacted by police. In the song, Smiley Culture depicts an incident where he gets pulled over by the police. The following is an exchange between Smiley and the officer:

'Well, Wha wha wha what's your name then son?'/My name Smiley Culture□/'Yeah, Where do you think you're coming from lad?'/From seeing me mother/'What's the registration number of the car then?'/I can't remember□/'What you got in the boot then son?'/A cassette recorder. Would you like to have a look?'/Shut your bloody mouth. We ask. You answer□/Now take the keys out of the car and step out of the motor□/Me and my colleagues have got a few questions to ask ya□/You'll be on your way as soon as we get an answer'. (Smiley Culture, "Police Officer")

Logic's 2011 song of the same name is an assertion that police murdered² Smiley Culture and that one person dies in police custody every week in Britain (Logic, "Police Officer").

What's difficult about researching and excavating the early history of hip-hop is that some of the first instances of recordings, shows, etc., are often not documented. As with the beginning of hip-hop in the U.S., hardly anyone could imagine that it would turn out to be such a popular and profitable genre of music, so much of British hip-hop's early history was either performed live or simply not recorded. However, it is my understanding that British hip-hop took root roughly in the early 1980s. Hesmondhalgh and Melville articulate that "[h]ip-hop in the United Kingdom was largely pioneered by DJs on the racially mixed 'rare groove' scene, a loose network of DJs and clubs with origins in the soul and R&B scenes of the mid-1970s whose

² The Metropolitan Police Service has come under suspicion after stating that during a drug raid of Smiley Culture's Surrey home, he died from a self-inflicted stab wound to the heart. Although the details of the incident are questionable, the IPCC investigation (Independent Police Complaints Commission) concluded that though the raid was 'flawed', it did not find sufficient evidence to pursue criminal charges against any of the four officers who conducted the raid.

musical milieu combined rare U.S. soul and jazz dance with slicker soul, disco and funk” (Hesmondhalgh and Melville 90). One key figure in British hip-hop is Tim Westwood, a DJ who’s not only promoted artists via his radio shows, but he also created his own record label. However, Lowkey has become critical³ of Westwood, mainly because of his live broadcasted shows from Camp Bastion in Afghanistan, seemingly promoting support not only for the British soldiers in Afghanistan but also for the occupation as well.

Unfortunately, hip-hop from the U.S. has arguably influenced U.K. hip-hop in ways that are not reciprocal. For example, many U.K. MCs, including Lowkey when he initially began rapping, adopted American accents, leaving their British accents behind. I have yet to hear an American MC use a British accent in the same way, besides Nikki Minaj as of late. This emphasizes the impact of America and American-made products on Britons. Although, Hesmondhalgh and Melville noted that “there have been, it is true, attempts to develop U.K. versions of rap and hip-hop that are strongly influenced by American versions, but that make reference, verbally and musically, to distinctive situations faced by Black and white Britons” (Hesmondhalgh and Melville 86). British youths have used hip-hop to help them make sense of their lives, which is rooted in their experiences that are relatively different than American youths. The majority of the nonwhite population in Britain were born there, although their parents or grandparents likely immigrated from former British colonies such as Jamaica, several countries in Africa, and India; so, an overwhelming majority of young people in Britain are forging identities and experiences as British citizens of color. On Akala’s “Fire in the Booth”, a freestyle segment of Charile Sloth’s BBC Radio 1 show, Akala touches on institutionalized racism he

³ In January 2012, Lowkey wrote an article for *Ceasefire Magazine* in which he articulated why he turned down an invitation to appear on Tim Westwood TV. Lowkey mentioned that it was Westwood’s implicit support for the military occupation in Afghanistan—he both visited and broadcasted his show from Camp Bastion, the principal base for British troops—that determined his decision.

faced as a young student. He states, “If you saw me age nine/Reading Malcolm, just fine/Teachers still treated me stupid/Students that couldn’t speak English they put me in groups with,” (Akala, “Fire in the Booth”). Lowkey asserts another form of racism he faces on a daily basis. On “Let Me Live”, Lowkey declares, “Can’t even bop through Oxford Circus/Without pointless coppers tryin to stop and search us,” (Lowkey, “Let Me Live”).

In *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the U.S.*, Tony Mitchell argues that “hip hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African-American culture; it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world” (Mitchell 1). In a similar vein, British hip-hop cannot be reduced to a mere extension or emulation of U.S. hip-hop. British youths have used hip-hop to help them make sense of *their* lives. One of British hip-hop’s pioneering groups, London Posse, debuted in 1987 and introduced England to their distinctly Black British identity with Caribbean heritage. London Posse member Rodney P, commenting on their distinct identity being reflected in their music, said, “We’re not Jamaican. We’re English born, with Jamaican heritage and we are going to do it in a different kind of style,” (Wood 180).

Similar to the U.S., British hip-hop initially failed to get the attention of mainstream media in favor of U.S. hip-hop, so the music mainly reached individuals through pirate radio stations, mixtapes, and live shows. Unfortunately, as with the popularity of mainstream American hip-hop, much of today’s mainstream U.K. hip-hop tends to promote consumerism, materialism, sexism, misogyny, violence, and hyper-masculinity. Although not a hip-hop feminist, M.K. Asante Jr. makes an excellent analysis of how and why these themes are articulated and perpetuated in hip-hop music. First, one must understand that the majority of record label executives are white, which is significant given that hip-hop started out in the hands

of people of color. Asante notes that “[b]efore, during, and after slavery, the white corporate political structure recognized that control over the Black image is not simply important to enslaving and oppressing Blacks, but absolutely central” (Asante Jr. 20). Controlling and censoring an artist’s content at will ensures that the dissemination of the aforementioned themes resides in the hands of white record label executives. This in no way dissolves the artist of any responsibility of perpetuating particular stereotypes; nevertheless, many artists are easily swayed by the promises of fame and fortune. I argue that because corporate funded MCs are in many ways pressured to produce and promote music with these kinds of themes, Akala, Logic, and Lowkey made the conscious decision to operate as independent artists. This not only reflects who they are as individuals, but also so as to ensure that *they* are the ones in creative and distributive control of their music and careers. This way of functioning directly goes against the belief that an MC has to be signed to a major record label in order to be successful or matter to people. Akala touches on the reasoning behind being an independent artist, and arguably his reasoning for creating his record label Illa State Records. The song “Out of the Box” is a tune by up-and-coming, London-based duo Native Sun—comprised of Sarina Leah and People’s Army member Mohammed Yahya—whose debut album 2012 *Indigenous Soundwaves* epitomizes spiritual activism⁴. The song is about the agency behind being independent artists. As an independent artist and People’s Army member himself, Akala is featured on the song. He asserts, “Out the box, we don’t like their dimensions/set by who, it’s like a death sentence/on all independent thought/To control the force, of our potential/Reduce us into nowt...All play the stereotype and they love us more/But we refuse, artists to the core,” (Native Sun, “Out of the Box”).

⁴ Native Sun’s 2012 debut album is comprised of themes such as environmental change, social justice, spiritual awareness, and equality, peace, and love among all of humanity.

Section Two: Artist Introductions

Akala is from North London and is of Jamaican and Scottish heritage. He says, "My mum's a white Scottish woman and my dad's a black Jamaican, so for my life not to be about bringing people together would almost be a contradiction in terms...I want to reach everybody but do it truthfully and honestly," ("Akala Biography", Akala: Official Website). Akala also mentioned on *RT News* what his music consists of:

I would say my music is social commentary. It continues in the traditions of, I suppose, African oral poets right through Jazz and Blues, up to Gill Scott-Heron, through Public Enemy, through Caribbean reggae and dancehall music trying to fuse all of that I've grown up listening to and being aware of my role as an oral poet, as hopefully a historian to some degree. (TheAlyonashow, "Akala: Music and Politics")

Listening to Akala's music, it's clear that he's a seasoned rhetorician and teacher. In fact, in 2008 he founded The Hip Hop Shakespeare Company in which he conducts educational workshops and theatrical and educational productions, educating young people about both hip-hop and Shakespeare in a way that intertwines the two and illuminates their commonalities; it is out of these endeavors that he encourages and challenges young people's creative capacity in ways that the adults in their lives may not, in ways that I wish I was encouraged as a child. Akala doesn't necessarily talk about spirituality explicitly, but his music combined with his other activist work, I argue, makes him a spiritual activist as well.

As a man of Iraqi and English heritage, Lowkey mentions, "I think the nature of my existence will always be political because one side of my family is from Baghdad and the other side of my family is from here [England]...Even just my name—Kareem Dennis. That's a cause for a conversation on both sides, amongst Arabs and British people who say 'why is your second name Dennis?'" (Lowkey, "Lowkey—Bringing politics back into music."). In an interview with journalist Jody McIntyre, Lowkey further spoke on how his existence has formed his worldview:

I cannot look at any situation as ‘us versus them’ because I am both but neither, I was just born as a human bridge. Neither here nor there. When you are put into that position, you have to assess everything from a human perspective first and foremost because, before race or ethnicity, you are simply human. My existence is in itself political and my music is the soundtrack to it. (Lowkey, “Lowkey: An Interview.”)

Lowkey was born and raised in London; however, in many of his songs he’s touched on the fact that he’s been made to feel like he is a foreigner in the country of his origin, in part because he is Muslim and has Iraqi heritage. The BNP (British National Party) is an example of a far-right political party that viciously condemns Islam, or what it refers to as the “‘Islamification’ of the U.K.” (“What is the British National Party?”, HOPE not hate). According to the “HOPE not hate” website, the BNP “rejects integration, equality and basic human and civil rights for people it describes as ‘non-indigenous’ or ‘civic British’ and claims to put the interests of ‘the British people’, by which it means white Britons, first” (“What is the British National Party?”, HOPE not hate). In 2009, Lowkey, in partnership with the anti-racist and anti-BNP group Love Music Hate Racism, released a song entitled “We Don’t Want Them”, a response to the BNP’s electoral successes in Britain. Being a far-right political party that advocates for immigrants and their descendants “return home” (British National Party, “Rebuilding British Democracy”), Lowkey offered a strong critique of the BNP and of foreign policy in Britain in general. He states, “Can’t blame immigrants for the state of the economy/Some come here from former British colonies/Some come here to escape British foreign policy/You make a mockery of democracy and equality,” (Lowkey, “We Don’t Want Them”).

Because he is perceived as Arab⁵ by most, he has been subjected to stop and search procedures by the police, accused of being a terrorist and encouraging terrorism—which is a post-9/11 and 7/7/07 bombings shift in racial profiling—arrested and had his house raided and

⁵ Although Lowkey is Muslim, because “Arab” is problematically conflated with “Muslim”, since 9/11, many Arabs and Muslims have been racially profiled as ‘terrorists’, stopped and searched, arrested for suspicion to commit terrorism, etc. Also, see Lowkey’s song “Terrorist?” for more on his perspective on the subject.

possessions seized simply because of his critiques of both the British and U.S. government's foreign and domestic policies and private military contractors, which can be found on songs such as "Obama Nation", "Terrorist? Pt. 2", and "Politics Remix". In December 2010 he was arrested and his house was raided, his face was placed on TV as a wanted person, and he maintains that his arrest was purely political and based on the content of his music (Lowkey, "Terrorist? Pt. 2"). Unfortunately, it is because of this and possible other factors that Lowkey decided in April 2012 to stop making music. His official statement asserts:

After many months of contemplation I have decided to step away from music and concentrate on my studies. Maybe at some point I will get back into it again but at this stage I feel I should direct my energy in different, more helpful directions. The ego is a destructive thing and I feel this business and these social networks in particular have a tendency to feed it in an unhealthy way... Thank you for all those who have supported me over the years. (agentofchange, "Lowkey: best wishes for the future")

Whatever the reason for his departure from making music, his absence is surely felt, but the music he has made has affected people, myself included, in ways that show just how influential, empowering, and spiritually enlightening his music is and can be. For his contribution to music and humanity, I am forever grateful.

Unfortunately, there is little public information about Logic. What is known is that he is of Caribbean heritage and from Brixton, a district in South London, and like Akala and Lowkey, has been subjected to many of Britain's racist policies and stop and search procedures, which are implied in his song "Welcome to England" from his *Listen* album. While does touch on issues such as racism classism, imperialism, and xenophobia, his music is underscored by a sense of love for humanity. Logic's music has emotional qualities to it, in a way that is deeply felt by listeners, whether about poverty, youth violence, or more ethereal subjects. In speaking on why he makes the kind of music that he does, Logic said, "I was raised around very conscious family,

consciously aware. My nan was takin me on demonstrations from young. My mum was very, very deep into black history and [a] spiritual guide, so basically my upbringing had a lot to do with it,” (tjtvUK, “Logic Interview”).

What makes these men influential is not just their individual endeavors but their collective efforts that encourage unity and love for one another, regardless of differences. For instance, they are all members of The People’s Army, a non-profit community organization, collective, and social movement founded by Lowkey and Logic in 2008, in which they participate in and promote activism, with the aim to unite individuals based on their common belief in the equality of all humanity as well as promote one another’s individuality. The People’s Army Facebook page states their principles and objectives clearly:

To energise the collective diversity of those of us willing to take determined responsible control of our own environment. To acknowledge our dutiful responsibility to nurture our culture. To facilitate activities that educate, politicise and provide guidance to our youth. (The People’s Army, “About”)

In an interview, Logic further articulates the aim and intention of The People’s Army:

The People’s Army basically is trying to push and promote a positive message through music, to encourage change within the society and within the environment we live in... what we’re tryin to promote and what we’re tryin to push in our music is not really gonna be signed to a label, a major label. They’re not really gonna grab that message and say, ‘Yeah, that can sell to the yutes.’ They’re gonna sell guns, and they’re gonna sell violence, and they’re gonna sell titties and sex. We’re not promoting that...I’ve always spat like this. I’ve always had this message in my music, so I’ve always known that I had to make my own platform and build my own fan base and build my own people and support without no help from anybody, apart from the people around me...The People’s Army’s a concept that was there before me and Lowkey ever sat down and said ‘People’s Army’...everyone knows that we’re supposed to come together, but we just put a little label on it. (djbonesandmr13, “Logic Interview”)

This movement connects individuals, both men and women, from various nationalities, ethnicities, abilities, sexualities, etc., constituting a movement for solidarity across axes of difference. Chandra Mohanty describes the practice of solidarity:

Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. (Mohanty 7)

It is my contention that The People's Army, as well as Akala, Logic, and Lowkey as individuals, aim to unite individuals based on their common belief in the equality of all humanity, as well as instill in each individual that s/he is a unique spirit that can never be duplicated.

I argue that it is precisely because of Akala, Logic, and Lowkey's unique perspective on global issues, their struggles around British citizenship, and their position as independent artists in the music industry that merits an in-depth analysis and contemplation of their music. They use their music to confront the intersections of racism, sexism, xenophobia, imperialism (both British and American), and war. Additionally, both the implicit and explicit spiritual themes in their music, such as recognizing the soul, *being* one's true self, critiques of the ego and the ways in which it manifests itself, and recognizing the oneness of humanity, is a crucial invoking of spirituality within hip-hop. In her book *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*, Leela Fernandes touches on the importance of acknowledging spirituality as a powerful tool for growth/transformation. She notes:

For simply invoking spirituality as a new metaphor or goal can neither circumvent nor transcend the hazards of power, domination, and hierarchy; a language of spirituality is as power-laden as any other traditional 'secular' or material language of power. To assume otherwise is to mistake spirituality for an esoteric abstraction devoid of material implications. (Fernandes 102)

In the next chapter, I aim to recuperate the spirituality that undergirds Akala, Logic, and Lowkey's music; a spiritual activism that I argue can enrich hip-hop feminism in a way that

makes clear that spirituality is accessible to anyone who is open to its transcending capabilities, and I will apply a womanist framework to analyze the spiritual themes in their music.

Chapter Two

Illuminating Hip-Hop's Spiritually Liberatory Disseminations

"They can keep the charts. All I want is your hearts."
-Akala, "Find No Enemy"

As defined by womanist Layli Maparyan, spiritual activism is "a set of practices designed to change 'hearts and minds' in ways that promote optimal well-being in individuals, communities, humanity as a whole, all livingkind, and ultimately Planet Earth" (Maparyan 117). The transformation or awakening of consciousness is a process whereby one begins to remember and become aware of their true self—their soul or spirit; this process also necessitates the acknowledgement of the ego and the changing of 'hearts and minds'. Eckhart Tolle writes, "An essential part of the awakening is the recognition of the unawakened you, the ego as it thinks, speaks, and acts, as well as the recognition of the collectively conditioned mental processes that perpetuate the unawakened state," (Tolle 7). The expression of the effects of this process on an individual level is often known as 'higher self' or 'higher consciousness'⁶.

The term *transformation* implies change in form or state, and *consciousness* refers to "the quality or state of being aware especially of something within oneself" and simply "awareness" ("consciousness", Merriam-Webster.com). So, transformation of consciousness conveys that a change in awareness occurs, but for those who are new to the knowledge and wisdom of the nonphysical (spiritual) realm, many questions may arise at this point. Questions such as,

⁶ The meaning and potential of one's 'higher self' can be ascertained in Sanaya Roman's channeled book *Spiritual Growth: Being Your Higher Self*.

“Awareness of what?”, “Where exactly does this transformation take place?”, “What are the effects of this transformation?” are valuable in the inquiry of spirituality and thus the nonphysical realm. Layli Maparyan provides a helpful understanding of spirituality in stating that “spirituality is an acknowledged relationship with the divine/transpersonal/cosmic/invisible realm” (Maparyan 5). The transformation of consciousness is a process that takes place within (the nonphysical realm) and often manifests itself in the physical world. If we understand ‘spirit’ to be an immanent aspect of living things, then metaphysically, that means believing that spirit pervades everything, and the transformation and awareness of consciousness manifests itself in one’s physical life. This understanding is similar to Paulo Freire’s notion of attaining *conscientização* or critical consciousness, in which one gains awareness of her/his reality as an oppressed ‘object’ thereby moved to alter their reality. When the oppressed attain critical consciousness, Freire asserts that “[t]he peasants now see themselves as transformers of reality (previously a mysterious entity) through their creative labor. They discover that—as people—they can no longer continue to be ‘things’ possessed by others” (Freire 174). In this chapter, I use Maparyan’s womanist framework to inform the textual analysis of Akala, Logic, and Lowkey’s music in order to illuminate why I argue that their musical practice constitutes spiritual activism.

Section One: Question Everything

There are infinite catalysts that cause the transformation of consciousness. Many of those catalysts involve asking questions and thus seeking answers to life’s questions. One who asks questions is essentially seeking education (knowledge and wisdom), often employing intuition as a means of attaining answers. Countless individuals are socialized to not ask questions, to accept what they’re told without the slightest bit of dissension. In spite of that, there is still an

abundance of people who are spiritually evolved enough to be able to assist those who have not yet reached their level of awareness. Eckhart Tolle exemplifies this notion when explaining the intention behind his book *A New Earth: Awakening to your Life's Purpose*. He asserts:

This book itself is a transformational device that has come out of the arising new consciousness. The ideas and concepts presented here may be important, but they are secondary. They are no more than signposts pointing toward awakening. As you read, a shift takes place within you. (Tolle 6)

Just as Tolle's book is intended to be a catalyst in the awakening and transformation of consciousness, so too, I argue, are Akala, Logic, and Lowkey's music.

Akala's 2010 album *Doublethink*, inspired by George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, hosted a number of thought-provoking and reflective tunes, but one in particular stands out as a song that is built with a foundation of inquiry and curiosity as well as love and concern for humanity. "What is Real" is a reflective inquiry into and critique of the tendency of a number of rappers to be preoccupied with materialism that in turn often negates intellectual and spiritual matters. Throughout the song, Akala goes back and forth between class and race analysis to further his argument, thus my analysis with reflect this movement. First, Akala touches on the belief system that many people, both people of color and white, from working-class and poor economic backgrounds take on. He attests, "When you talk about being from the hood, like we're glad/wear it proud, like it's a badge," (Akala, "What is Real"). Akala points out the way affluent people are conditioned to think and feel about their status in society. He says "like we're glad" inferring that it is as if working-class people are content on being abject and feel like they aren't meant to live abundantly. In the next few lines, in saying, "But I'll be damned if when I'm a dad /my kids won't have more than I had", he maintains that his children will grow up differently than he did

(Akala, “What is Real”). He goes on to insist that one’s economic status is not indicative of one’s true identity. He asserts, “Please don’t confuse your situation with identity/It’s not the same thing/You were pharaohs and scholars/Long before the day you were armed robbers,” (Akala, “What is Real”). Akala calls attention to the notion that people of the African diaspora, who constitute a significant portion of American and British rappers, are descended from pharaohs and scholars, titles that are bestowed on royalty and wise, revered individuals. In doing this, Akala elucidates that the labels attached to economic status, among others, shouldn’t get conflated with someone’s identity. Who someone is is a question only that person can answer, but one thing is clear—the answer is something that resides inherently within oneself.

Akala then offers listeners a critique of the hip-hop industry by using the example of U.S. artists’ preoccupation with materialism and consumerism, the effects of which are often conceit and egotism. He expounds:

But whatever, it’s dumb to be clever/better to act like your brain’s been severed
Like these American so-called artists/boastin about their latest garments
But the same labels make it very clear/They don’t make clothes for dark skin
Can’t you see they’re laughin/The question that I’m askin... (Akala, “What is Real”)

Within the same lines, he also critiques white supremacy and racism that emanates from many facets of U.S. and British society. He maintains that the very fashion labels rappers wear and brag about in their music is at the very least euro-centric and at its worst racist and white supremacist. Additionally, record label executives strive to force rappers into pre-determined and often de-humanizing roles so much so that many rappers willingly conform to these roles for the shallow, numb sake of making money, being famous, and thus keeping the ego in place.

Akala possesses a unique and effectual style of rapping in which he often employs satire as a method of peaking listeners’ interest in crucial subject matter. Below, he provides hard-

hitting class analysis as it specifically relates to black rappers, both American and British. He stresses:

Sorry if I don't dance enough/for the radio to play my stuff
And I got no girls in the video playin the silly ho no clothes shakin their butts
See, I thought rap was about content/I see now that's just nonsense
We judge MCs by the Bentleys/And how much they can have no conscience
How many chains can you wear and not care?/The cost was a village somewhere
Stones of baguettes slowly forget/This ain't the first time there were chains on your neck
No, it's much worse, choose to accept/Not that I'm vexed, just perplexed
Of course that's all us people do all day is pop champagne and have sex. (Akala, "What is Real")

While Akala touches on the fact that many rappers give rise to beliefs that hip-hop is primarily concerned with material wealth, scantily clad women dancing provocatively, and shallow lyrical content, he makes a parallel between rappers wearing expensive chains on their necks and African who were forced into servitude having chains on their necks. Here, he argues that rappers who assert themselves in such ways are strikingly similar to people who were enslaved, dehumanized, and forced to work for and entertain white people. Akala paints a picture of the past where white colonial rulers dominated people of color by literally forcing them (i.e. wearing chains) into servitude and dehumanizing roles for profit; he juxtaposes that with a picture of black hip-hop artists wearing million dollar chains, rapping about superficial content, and perpetuate stereotypes that make millions of dollars for the white record label executives who are knowingly exploiting rappers. He maintains that the difference is that rappers *choose* to conform to stereotypes created and aggrandized by white record label executives. Record label executives strive to force rappers into pre-determined and often de-humanizing roles so much so that man rappers willingly conform to these roles for the shallow, numb sake of making money, being famous, and thus keeping the ego in place.

Akala declares, “Yeah, hittin with knowledge cause we encore the ignoramus/You playin the stereotype so of course you’re famous/If for just one second you took your head from out your anus/You would see the motivation for your elevation,” (Akala, “What is Real”). His awareness of the hip-hop industry gives listeners insight into the motivating factors for the perpetuation of racial stereotypes and anti-black racism. M.K. Asante Jr. echoes Akala’s position further in saying that “before, during and after slavery, the white corporate and political structure recognized that control over the Black image is not simply important to enslaving and oppressing Blacks, but absolutely central” (Asante Jr. 20). If white people controlled the means of production of the black image—owning media such as television, radio, film, and news—then that ultimately means that they are in control of if or how stereotypes of people of color are portrayed. He continues, “Those that profited from slavery realized early on that their domination was contingent upon their control over how Blackness was portrayed⁷,” (Asante Jr. 20). Consequently, white male record label executives have an eerily similar stake in how black images are portrayed in the hip-hop industry.

We get to the crux of the song: the hook⁸. Akala poses several pertinent questions here. He inquires:

What is real? Is it how much you make in the dollar bills?/What is real? Is it how many you say you intend to kill?/What is real? Or is it something that I can truly feel?/Please tell me, please tell me, please tell me what is real. (Akala, “What is Real”)

⁷ D.W. Griffith’s 1915 silent film *Birth of a Nation* is an example of the perpetuation of racist stereotypes of black men. The male actors were actually white men wearing blackface, and the film portrayed black men as hyper-sexual, aggressive towards white women, and unintelligent.

⁸ A hook in music is often a phrase or series of phrases in the midst of a song that is usually intended to be catchy or easily remembered by listeners.

Here, Akala presents an ontological question. I take the question as a means of getting listeners to reflect on whether class hierarchies and racial stereotypes are permanent and fixed or fleeting as opposed to something that is immanent, something that exists inherently within oneself. It seems as though he's saying that everything people experience in the physical world is illusory in that even though people may perceive situations or conditions as 'real', in the grand scheme of things, it's all transient. These are the kinds of questions that are imperative to ask ourselves in order to gain clarity as it relates to the social construction of identity and existence—thus take part in the awakening and transformation of consciousness. In the next verse, Akala asserts, once again, the notion that rappers needn't be duped into basing their entire identity and value on their circumstances, social constructions of class and race, and the stereotypes that perpetuate them.

He poignantly posits:

Still, I got love for you, though it's very clear that you hate yourself/I'm just sayin don't fall for the crap/Bein from the ghetto don't make you more black/Also a fact this is bigger than the colour of your skin/It's a matter we're all in/Dumber you act, the bigger the cheer/The bigger the fool, the bigger career/It's about playin a role, the educated can't be controlled/It's about playin a role, the educated can't be controlled. (Akala, "What is Real")

Akala points out that "it's bigger than the color of your skin" in that when taking on a macroscopic view of society, the world, and the cosmos, one can see that while numerous people do suffer from racism, sexism, classism, etc., we are infinitely more than the labels that attempt to pin down exactly who we are. Akala then goes further in his commentary in saying, "We all play our positions/convinced that we are so different/accept these doctrines and this nonsense/so we take these options/without one second never questioning just what the cost is," (Akala, "What is Real"). The majority of society tends to play into roles that have been defined for them without every questioning why they give in or why humans have the tendency to treat one another in

such ways. If you've ever had a conversation with a child, you would agree that humans are naturally inquisitive beings, yet most of us are socialized from an early age to blindly accept what is given to us without question. The ego is so fragile that it needs to control, feel superior, and dominate another in order to stay in tact, but in order for one's true essence, the soul, to radiate, the ego needs to be challenged and put in its place. Akala's music is a substantial catalyst for someone who's open to the infinite possibilities that can occur in the awakening and transformation of consciousness.

The preceding song is not meant to be exhaustive of music that inspires and encourages listeners to 'question everything'. It is but one example of social commentary on Akala's part, but he, along with Logic and Lowkey, has a number of tunes that would fit in nicely with the theme of inquisition and/or critique of social conditioning, indoctrination, and many commonly held beliefs about the world, its people, and existence itself. These songs include but are not limited to: Akala's "God?", "Who's the Gangsta", and "Insert Truth Here"; Logic's "Tell Me Something", and "Spectator"; Lowkey's "Hand on Your Gun", "Tell Me Why", and "Terrorist?".

Section Two: Gender, Sexuality, and the Intimate

bell hooks notes the importance of men's roles in obliterating sexism and sexist oppression. She states, "Since men are the primary agents maintaining and supporting sexism and sexist oppression, they can only be successfully eradicated if men are compelled to assume responsibility for transforming their consciousness and the consciousness of society as a whole," (*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* 83). The songs within this section are specifically focused upon, though not limited to, the awakening and transformation of men's consciousness

regarding intimate relationships with women and sex as well as problematizing the socially conditioned sexism many men perpetuate on a daily basis.

The second song analyzed off *Doublethink* is Akala's "Face Down". This song is particularly poignant because it is concerned specifically with heterosexual men's promiscuity and their fixation with physicality and sex—gearing this song toward adult heterosexual men. Akala opens the first verse with a simple nudge into the subject at hand. He begins, "It amazes me all the things we would do to get it/Talk about it a little, next thing's forget it/It will rule your whole life if you let it/I don't believe that it's only every six seconds," (Akala, "Face Down"). Akala points out that, on one hand, men are often so determined to have sex that they would do nearly anything to get it, but on the other hand, they could easily switch to another subject of discussion or even someone else, indicating that men's pursuits of women tend to be superficial and ephemeral. He then warns that the pursuit of sex will consume men's lives if they let it, contrary to the commonly held, yet unproven, notion that men think about sex every six seconds.

Next, he contends, "Constant drone for those with testosterone/You know a dog gotta chase his bone," (Akala, "Face Down"). Akala compares men to drones, male honeybees whose main role is to fertilize the queen bee. He, again, employs his fiery satire to suggest that men often act like 'dogs' chasing their bone when it comes to sex. He continues, "Wherever it's thrown/However far from home", suggesting that many men have the tendency to cheat for the sake of having sex, and unfortunately, men are conditioned to act in such ways usually beginning around puberty (Akala, "Face Down"). Akala makes this point in the hook when he says, "Chasin the skirt since the playground", inferring that this behavior in heterosexual men may actually begin earlier than puberty (Akala, "Face Down"). Nonetheless, he proclaims:

Once blood starts flowin and hair starts growin/And curves start showing and we dip our toe in/Jump in both feet so deep we nearly drown/Got nothing to say unless it's aroused/Chasin it, gettin it, tasting it, excellent/Replacin it, textin it, look how I'm flexin it. (Akala, "Face Down")

Akala mentions that they 'nearly drown', so I take this to mean that men begin to become so enamored with, and yet often uneducated about sex that they is a myriad of outcomes that could occur: they could lose interest in or never even develop significant connections with women deeper than what sex can offer or they could be so entranced sexually that they have unprotected sex, causing them to contract sexually transmitted diseases or get someone pregnant, without regard for the repercussions of their actions.

I find several aspects of this song very intriguing. First, it's very rare in any genre of music that male promiscuity is even touched on much less problematized. Whilst there are numerous songs policing women's sexuality and adhering to the double standard that says men can behave however they wish but women cannot, Akala flips the script in a way that not only provides striking social commentary, but is also self-reflective in that he includes himself in his critique instead of merely 'calling out' other men. Second, he relates power struggles in men regarding sex and women to power struggles involving men in positions of power politically. Lastly, he not only problematizes men's preoccupation with sex, but also he attempts to steer male listeners down a more substantial, ethereal path of relating with women. Akala is making a feminist critique throughout this song, and although many hip-hop feminists have made similar critiques, his contribution could enrich hip-hop feminist literature in ways that few men have yet to do.

The second verse starts off with Akala explicating the various endeavors men take on for the purposes of attracting and sleeping with women. He declares:

I'm not sure if women know the things men do/Maybe you do, and you're just the same too/But it's the only reason that we go to the gym/Get a trim, and try do better him/It's why we study, just to get money/So when we step to you, you won't look at us funny/Even the stealin and drug dealins/The pressure to just look appealin/So you will look our way, and we can get the feelin. (Akala, "Face Down")

I appreciate that Akala doesn't assume that women behave in the same ways that men do, but he does suggest the possibility that women could act in similar ways as men. Regardless of who is implicated, the reality is that whoever treats people they are attracted to like mere pawns in the quest for sex is conforming to the played out, dehumanizing social conditioning which indoctrinates humans to view another, especially women, as objects rather than divine being worthy of reciprocity and spiritually fulfilling connections.

In Akala's 2012 mixtape, *Knowledge is Power Vol. 1*, he offers a black feminist critique of male social conditioning in his song "A Message". He asserts, "And I ain't sayin they're [women] perfect, they would admit they ain't/But they ain't doin 99% of the rape/Male supremacy got us thinkin it's cool/And women are just objects we do things to," (Akala, "A Message"). Furthermore, I do like that Akala offers insight into the male psyche in mentioning that men often feel pressured to be physically and materially attractive to women, albeit for the sake of having sex. Still, it is worth noting that men, especially poor/working-class and/or men of color, often exist as both oppressors and oppressed, despite separatist feminist rhetoric that suggests all men benefit equally from male privilege. Many often experience emotional turmoil not only because of their rigidly defined sex roles, but they also experience oppression based on race and/or socioeconomic class. Bell hooks extrapolates this sentiment further. She explains:

[W]orking men are fed daily a fantasy diet of male supremacy and power. In actuality, they have very little power, and they know it. Yet they do not rebel against the economic order or make revolution. They are socialized by ruling powers to accept their dehumanization and exploitation in the public world of work, and they are taught to

expect that the private world, the world of home and intimate relationships, will restore to them their sense of power, which they equate with masculinity. (*Feminist Theory* 121)

What's important next is that he maintains that he is in no way implicating women for men's behavior, which is important to point out because women often face sexism by men who ironically accuse them of being the very cause of their sexist behavior. He says, "And I'm not sayin that women are to blame/I'm just sayin if we didn't get us any unless we change," (Akala, "Face Down"). Here, Akala refuses to adhere to sexist ideology and instead espouses one that assumes responsibility for one's (specifically men's) own actions. Hooks elucidates this point further in saying, "Like women, men have been socialized to passively accept sexist ideology. While they need not blame themselves for accepting sexism, they must assume responsibility for eliminating it," (*Feminist Theory* 73).

In the last verse, Akala brings his message home with his commentary on the implications and repercussions of being so focused and driven by sex and physicality. He asserts, "Don't get me wrong I ain't knockin a bit of fun/I'm just sayin when you got a million sons/All over the gaff and you don't see one/You have to ask yourself 'is it really fun?'," (Akala, "Face Down"). Akala makes it clear that he's not against sex itself, but when men disregard safe sex for their own pleasure, often causing them to father many children, he urges them to ask themselves if it's really worth it. If one is willing to risk creating a child but not be willing to care for and nurture them, then the question of whether it's healthy for that person to be promiscuous needs to be asked. Akala also offers extensive insights into male promiscuity, but he necessarily reminds listeners, particularly men, that he doesn't intend to come off superior or enlightened. He declares, "And I ain't sayin I'm better fellas, I'm never/I'm just sayin imagine we used the energy instead of just...[hook]," (Akala, "Face Down"). Akala suggests that instead

of behaving superficially in regard to sex, he urges male listeners to envision what their life and relationships would be like if they used their energy in more knowledgeable, positive, and constructive ways. This song serves as an example of implicit spiritual activism in that by Akala critiquing male promiscuity and their fixation with sex, he is simultaneously pointing *away* from those states of being and pointing *towards* more sacred, metaphysical dispositions. This sort of discourse is desperately needed not just for the benefit of hip-hop music and hip-hop feminism, but also for humanity to evolve into more enlightened states of being.

The last song in this section fits in with the theme of inquiry but in a different way than the previous two. “I Don’t Need” is off Akala’s *Doublethink* album, but comes off more like spoken word poetry than a proper rap. Also, in this instance, Akala does more asserting what he does and doesn’t need in terms of partners and intimate relationships, impelling listeners to reflect on what qualities and needs s/he looks for. First, Akala starts off by asserting, “I don’t need for you to have long blonde weave down to your knees/I don’t need for you to have the latest Gucci shoes or Christian Dior dress,” (Akala, “I Don’t Need”). It’s important to note that Akala isn’t policing women’s choices to express themselves through their physical appearance or style of dress. Notice that he’s saying, “I don’t need” as opposed to “Don’t do this.” I argue that he is simply conveying that physicality and material possessions aren’t requirements that his partner has to fulfill. We can already see here in the beginning that he is resisting the dominant materialistic and superficial Western culture that conditions women to feel the need to change themselves in order to attract men and conditions men to focus on women being physically and materialistically attractive. He continues, “I don’t need, in fact I don’t want you to parade around in your underwear and booty shake for me in a video/I don’t need you to sing R&B,” (Akala, “I Don’t Need”). Again, while he’s not policing women’s behavior, he is asserting himself as an

artist with integrity who doesn't feel the need to have scantily clad women dancing in his videos, which goes against many of the dominant roles women play/have played in hip-hop culture. Also, while he's not against R&B, he maintains that he doesn't need women to feel like they have to play that role to be considered attractive or a potential partner.

What he says next is indicative of the type of relationship he seeks, one that reenvisions gender and sexual, intimate relationships with women. He says, "I don't need for you to be an independent woman and I don't want to be an independent man/But if we can get along, and laugh, and talk, and have sex, and dream, and laugh, and talk, and still like each other, then maybe, just maybe, we can depend on each other," (Akala, "I Don't Need"). Here, Akala insists on these often neglected qualities in intimate relationships—qualities that constitute a deep, meaningful, and I argue, soul satisfying and stimulating intimate relationship. The qualities he asserts here is indicative of an ethereal connection that is based on reciprocity, mutual respect, and recognition of one's wholeness and divine nature; the spiritual activism employed here provide both men and women with a blueprint with which to create, sustain, and nourish a healthy, consciousness transforming intimate relationship. Such a connection cannot be matched on the physical where everything is fleeting and shallow. To be clear, while he does mention sex, a connection on an ethereal level isn't void of sex; however, this type of connection implies a consciousness of sex as more than merely a physical act of temporary pleasure. Two people who connect on a soul level often have an understanding of sex as an exchange, communication, and intertwining of their energy which can allow for them to experience love in its purest form; it is beyond physical pleasure, and it has the potential to lead one another into a more transformed, higher state of consciousness. Such understandings are informed by my comprehension of sacred

sexuality and tantra as put forth by Pala Copeland and Al Link in their book *Soul Sex: Tantra for Two*. They explain:

Sexuality is a legitimate spiritual path. Tantra is a form of yoga. Yoga means union. Tantric yoga includes the union of sexuality and spirituality. Sex and spirit are not two separate aspects of our selves. On the contrary, spiritual lovemaking is one of the simplest ways for ordinary people to experience mystical connection—union with themselves, their partners, and the Divine. (Copeland and Link 15)

Akala then reverts back to women's physical appearance when he says, "I don't need to see your cleavage or your thighs/I'm still getting over your eyes and your smile/And I don't need any more distractions," (Akala, "I Don't Need"). Akala avows his preference for physical attributes such as one's eyes, which are often said to be "windows of the soul", and one's smile, which is often regarded as a powerfully engaging, telling attribute. He doesn't express disdain for women's cleavage or thighs, but again, Akala goes against the stereotypical obsession men often have for certain physical features in women. However, because of the nature of dominant images of women in the media and their impact on women, it would have been more intriguing had Akala interrogated the societal standards concerning beauty that women are expected to uphold. Nevertheless, a few lines later, he makes clear what he *does* look for in a relationship. He tells, "I do need stimulatⁱn conversation/It's like Dead Prez said, I need mind sex," (Akala, "I Don't Need"). Dead Prez is an American self-described 'revolutionary' hip-hop duo whose song "Mind Sex", off their album *Let's Get Free* which was released in 2000, resonates with many who long for a more in-depth connection than what casual physical sex can offer. Dead Prez advocates for intellectual exchange before sex, but my favorite lines come from Stic-man when he says, "See, I ain't got to get in your blouse/It's your eye contact that be gettin me aroused/When you show me your mind, it make me wanna show you mines/Reflectin my light when it shines/Just takin our time," (Dead Prez, "Mind Sex"). This is the type of exchange that

Akala advocates. Akala continues, “I do need to laugh with you/I do need to dream with you/I do need to be able to be honest with you/Maybe I’m getting old, but I’m findin that when you get to know women vertically, they can be incredibly interesting, inspiring creatures,” (Akala, “I Don’t Need”). I find Akala’s words especially intriguing here because of the vulnerability and spiritual maturity he exudes.

Many men, unlike Akala, do not have a platform for their thoughts and emotions. Indeed, many men are conditioned to withhold their emotions or act as if they don’t exist, which is incredibly detrimental since we are all naturally emotional beings. Akala touches on this notion on *Knowledge Is Power Vol. 1*. On “A Message”, he says, “Every man wanna be loved as much as women do/But we are men, who we gonna admit it to?,” (Akala, “A Message”). The very reason why Akala’s music constitutes spiritual activism is because of his staunch honesty and vulnerability. He serves as an example to men who feel in similar ways but who may need another man to tell and show them that it is okay to be open and honest with themselves and others and that it in no way signifies that they are “weak” or “less of a man”. Akala exemplifies this towards the end of “I Don’t Need”. He asserts, “Maybe I’m getting old, but I feel like it’s ok to be vulnerable, to be upset, to admit I ain’t the biggest, baddest, strongest man on the planet/And sometimes I feel inadequate/Maybe I’m getting old, but I just don’t need it anymore,” (Akala, “I Don’t Need”).

Akala is extremely intimate with listeners, which is not an easy task because it entails that oneself be completely exposed and vulnerable. He is admirable for his willingness to be vulnerable though, because intimacy is like an open door to one’s soul, and once that door is open, it allows for a soul-to-soul connection that, when experienced, transcends the limits of any connection the physical world can offer. Indian mystic Osho elucidates this concept in his book

Intimacy: Trusting Oneself and the Other. He states, “It [intimacy] is allowing the other to come into you, to see you as you see yourself—to allow the other to see you from your inside, to invite somebody to that deepest core of your being,” (Osho 37-38).

As Akala is intimate with listeners, he is essentially inviting and encouraging listeners to be intimate as well. He not only offers intimacy, but he also puts forth more spiritually liberatory notions of intimate relationships with women in a way that can awaken and transform consciousness in both men and women. Similar messages can be found in but are not limited to: Akala’s “A Message”; Logic’s “Feel It”; Lowkey’s “Special”.

Section Three: It’s All Relative

The songs within this section carry two distinct themes. Because individuals are all unique manifestations of Source, as individuals we experience the human life in numerous, often differing ways. These songs focus on calling attention to experiences as pain, suffering, poverty, violence, and many of the destructive (often man-made) conditions people face in life. Leela Fernandes warns of the risk involved in spiritual activism that doesn’t emphasize social justice issues. She asserts:

Forms of spirituality that do not include a confrontation with the terrors of poverty, social justice and the violence caused by American political and economic might—even while they might provide some forms of healing and growth—cannot in the long run provide the kind of transformation which the world as a whole and each of us as individuals needs. (Fernandes 111)

Although she refers to the U.S. here, I argue that the same can be said of Britain. While these men touch on the plight of many individuals around the world, they also highlight the relativeness of pain, suffering, and struggle. Everyone experiences these things on some level, but some

experience them on greater levels than others, and these songs serve to make that clear. At the same time, these songs serve to also make clear that regardless of our differences in experiences and identity, we are all ‘relatives’ within a larger humanity as interconnected species that derive from the same Source. Akala, Logic, and Lowkey put forth a worldview that is intended to harmonize and unify humanity by way of awakening/transforming individual consciousness, which is the foundation of spiritual activism. Maparyan demonstrates:

That the heart-mind nexus is the most effective locus of social or ecological change activity is the first premise of spiritual activism. The second premise is that everything is energy, and all social or environmental change is fundamentally changing energy. Spiritual activism acknowledges that we—humans—are energy changing machines, energy changing instruments, energy transformers. Spiritual activism is about manipulating energy—invisible energy and its visible manifestations...(Maparyan 117)

“We’ll Never Know” is a song off Logic’s 2011 *True Talk* album, produced by Last Resort, and it features fellow People’s Army members Big Frizzle, Maverick Sabre, and Akala. As you will see, Logic’s intervention is unique in that it is obvious that he’s knowledgeable and conscious about the world, its people, and social/political/economic systems, but he gives listeners just enough commentary to provide them with a general understanding of the subject at hand but also provokes them to pursue a more in-depth understanding for themselves. For instance, in the beginning he simply states, “Let me starts with the basic structures of a Western country/Imperialism it’s all about the money,” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). Without saying much, Logic says a lot here. He briefly extrapolates the framework of Western, often imperialist, entities such as the U.S. and Britain. This gives listeners the opportunity to expand on what Logic means here. He simply maintains that imperialist entities tend to invade and go to war with other countries because not only is war profitable, but also the exploitation of an invaded country’s natural resources, such as oil, is as well. So, in this song, Logic begins by asserting that

there are haves and have-nots. He continues, “While we moan and complain when it’s not sunny/Little kids hustle foods tryin to fill their tummies,” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). He highlights the privilege people are afforded in Britain, pointing out that the weather is many people’s cause for concern, whilst elsewhere in the world there are kids who just try to survive on a daily basis.

Logic proceeds to highlight the differences between people with Western privilege and those who are oppressed because of that privilege. He says, “And every kid’s seen a gun/When you go to places like Iraq and Afghanistan/While kids over here think that shootin’s fun/Kids over there shoot to protect their mums,” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). He paints two strikingly opposite pictures here, which is the intention of this song—to illuminate global inequalities between Western and non-Western countries and to highlight Western privilege. Logic shows just how different the realities of Western and non-Western are and can be because of global hierarchies of power and privilege. He notes that while many British, and American for that matter, kids glamorize and participate in role-playing shooter video games such as the *Call of Duty* series, protecting and arming oneself is a stark reality for many kids living in occupied countries/territories. Logic makes these distinctions not only to shed light on the type of oppressions non-Western people face on a daily basis, but he also foregrounds Western privilege which, like all privilege, tends to be inconceivable to those who benefit from it. Michael Schwalbe notes that when it comes to privilege, “[w]hat’s missing is an awareness that life is different for others. Not having to think about the experiences of people in subordinate groups is another form of privilege” (Schwalbe 604). So for instance, people with American or British privilege have the luxury of not having to think about how shooter video games like *Call of Duty* are a daily reality for many people. Logic goes on to further describe the destitution Afghani and

Iraqi kids face, the effects it has on their lives, and how relatively easy people in Britain have it in comparison. He affirms, “And over here we can’t claim real hardship/Trust me, we don’t really know what hard is/A hard life where your family’s starving/A hard life where your family is killed by the army/A life where you’re seen as a target/A life that you wish never started,” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). Since Western, imperialist entities like the U.S. and Britain are the ones doing the invading and occupying, never the ones on the receiving end, its citizens do not know what it feels like to be surrounded by such large-scale violence and oppression.

Still, in the next few lines, he illuminates the resiliency of the human spirit in the face of such injustice, in saying, “But they got big hearts, big smiles, and energy to make a change/I make music for them to play,” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). These two lines are but another example of spiritual activism in that not only does Logic recognize and affirm the pure, divine essence that is what we may call the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’, but he also states clearly that he makes music precisely for those who radiate their spirit in such uplifting ways. Also, Clarke, Dibben, and Pitts note that “[m]usic has long been recognized as a powerful means to elicit emotional responses, and as a channel for the sometimes unfocused and unarticulated emotions that people may feel in the face of shocking or bewildering situations” (Clarke, Dibben, and Pitts 6). Indeed, the emotional body is connected to the spirit insofar as it is expression of spirit, and I argue that Logic’s music, as well as Akala’s and Lowkey’s, is and can be a means for one’s expression that one is often unable to articulate alone. Like the title implies, “We’ll Never Know” is a message that encompasses everything Logic touches on. Big Frizzle supplies the hook in saying, “I said we’ll never know/Because the places we’ve grown/Ain’t nothin like what they know/Cos we’ll never know,” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). He is simply reiterating that people who live in the

West will 'never know' what it means to be oppressed in the kind of ways as Afghans, Iraqis, and everyone else who live in non-Western countries.

Akala brings this message home and provides a nuanced articulation of this subject. He starts off, "Ok, let me make clear my position/I know your estate feels like shit to live in/And watchin mummy graft to keep bailiffs from ringin/Is enough to make you wanna hit the block and start slingin," (Logic, "We'll Never Know"). He first begins with empathizing with the reality that many young, working-class and poor youth face daily. He recognizes that many young people feel pressured into selling drugs because their parent(s) is/are doing everything they can to pay their bills to keep collectors from continually harassing them. This is the unjust plight of many oppressed working-class and poor people living in Britain. Akala then relates this plight to his own life growing up. He states, "I've been there, no gas, no electric to the kitchen/Fridge cuts off, defrosts and starts stinkin," (Logic, "We'll Never Know"). Akala has been there, and this is what makes his message even more relevant. He is not merely preaching to the choir; he *is* the choir. And this is what makes the next few lines even more pertinent. He says, "Whether Gorbals in Glasgow, Mumbai, or Brixton/May not be the same shit but it is the same system," (Logic, "We'll Never Know"). In sending the message that 'we'll never know', these men do not in any way mean to say that people in Britain don't suffer or aren't oppressed. Akala is saying here that any one person's suffering is relative to that of someone else's, that suffering exists but on different levels. Paul Farmer points out that "[t]he world as we know it is becoming increasingly interconnected. A corollary of this fact is that extreme suffering...is seldom divorced from the actions of the powerful" (Farmer 378). Akala mentions Gorbals, which refers to a destitute area of Scotland (until recent redevelopment attempts), and in mentioning Mumbai and Brixton (a district in South London), Akala emphasizes that the circumstances may

be different in a given place, but it is essentially the same system of oppression and inequality that maintains those circumstances.

Still, he maintains, “But this is Britain. As hard as some of us have it/We’re still better off than 90% of the planet/And that is what you learn when you get to start travellin/Unravellin the bullshit that they are babblin,” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). He reverts back to the notion of suffering being relative to the next person’s, and he notes that his worldview has been altered and expanded because he’s been privileged enough to travel the world and develop it in a way that is inclusive, loving, and committed to the personal growth and healing of himself and the people he encounters, which is similar to the womanist worldview articulated in the ‘Feminist Epistemology’ section of this thesis. Akala dedicates his message to “the nameless, faceless millions that die every day, but don’t even get a funeral” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). He continues, “And we tell ourselves because where they were born/They are less worth, less intelligent or beautiful,” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). This is the kind of ‘us vs. them’ worldview that Akala is arguing against and that perpetuates the very inequality that is invoked within that worldview. He then argues, “Well, I don’t agree, they are you and me/And we are them, but we’re too blind to see,” (Logic, “We’ll Never Know”). The preceding lines are an explicit example of spiritual activism. Akala points to our Oneness, a Oneness that the ego is ‘too blind to see’ because it is divisive and selfish. Many people are so identified with the egoic state of being that they think labels such as ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘American’, ‘Jamaican’, ‘woman’, ‘man’, etc., is *all* that we are. This is the false sense of self that is created by the ego, by the ‘us vs. them’ worldview that neglects to see another, and thus oneself, in their totality. Spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle expounds on this understanding:

The stronger the ego, the stronger the sense of separateness between people. The only actions that do not cause opposing reactions are those that are aimed at the good of all. They are inclusive, not exclusive. They join; they do not separate. They are not for 'my' country but for all of humanity, not for 'my' religion but the emergence of consciousness in all human beings, not for 'my' species but for all sentient beings and of nature. (Tolle 290)

Simply put, the message in this song is aimed at 'the good of all' in that it is intended to awaken/transform listeners' consciousness, and an awakened consciousness allows individuals to recognize and feel the connectedness with one another. As Dr. Joseph Howell explains in *Becoming Conscious: The Enneagram's Forgotten Passageway*, "Consciousness naturally acknowledges that there is an inter-connectedness of all like which requires cooperation and interdependence between all life, and an interdependence of all life with its planet home," (Howell 7).

In the last several lines, Akala further acknowledges these destructive egoic states of being. He says:

While some have everything, they ain't got shit/And we tell ourselves 'Well that's just how it is'/'There ain't enough to go around on this abundant planet'/Of course there is, it's just that some of us are ganits/And the habits we've developed that are so far divorced from the Source/We don't even stop to pause at the destruction everyday of chunks of the human family/It's just normal insanity. (Logic, "We'll Never Know")

Here, Akala touches on the divisiveness of much of humanity, which is a direct result of the complete identification with ego. He is intending to bring humanity into harmony with one another in pointing out 'the habits we've developed' (i.e. greed and selfishness) that have caused people to disidentify with and be unable to see the connectedness among fellow humans. Akala notes that this way of being has us 'so far divorced from the Source', meaning that somewhere in life, people become disconnected with their essence, which is derived from the same Source. This disconnectedness is the primary factor in why people can be/are so apathetic about the

plight of another's life. In Akala saying that "it's just normal insanity", he's pointing out how normalized this behavior is in the world, but he is also employing the power of the word to facilitate change. As Maparyan explicates:

Dialogue is the first move away from egocentrism and the first move toward universal oneness. As such, dialogue holds the capacity to be the most fundamental vehicle for energy transformation and transmutation, as it carries the power of the word. As condensed thoughtforms or symbols and signals of feeling, designed to encounter and affect the thoughtforms and feelings of their receivers, words are a basic tool of energy transformation. (Maparyan 58)

"We'll Never Know" is a shining example of the intention of this thesis; that is to recognize our individuality (oppression, privilege, and inequality included), whilst at the same time underscoring our connectedness.

Another noteworthy song is "Yours and My Children", which is but another song off Akala's *Doublethink* album and was inspired by his three month visit to Brazil. His interactions with children living in the violent, oppressive conditions of the favelas⁹ particularly brought about the message of the song. In the beginning, he admits, "Right here, dangerous idea/If we did this then we couldn't feel fear/If there's no fear, there's no control/If there's no control, someone's gotta let go," (Akala, "Yours and My Children"). Akala notes that the idea he is putting forth in this song, which as you will see, is centered around viewing another as yourself/part of the whole of humanity, is dangerous because if people were to truly believe that, then there would be no fear of another. Additionally, if we didn't fear one another, then we couldn't be controlled by it, or let anyone use fear as a mechanism of control.

⁹ A favela is a term for an impoverished or squatter settlement in Brazil. The documentary *Favela Rising* is useful for both gaining knowledge about the plight of children who live in Rio de Janeiro's favelas and also detailing the creation of the Afro Reggae movement—a grassroots development of Anderson Sá's intended to provide children living in favelas with education through music in an effort to cut down on teenage drug gangs and corrupt police violence.

Later, he contends, “Pilger can say it, so can Naomi Klein¹⁰/It’s free speech for them, that’s fine/Young black rappers should utter the same words/Utterly absurd,” (Akala, “Yours and My Children”). Akala simply points out here that ‘young black rappers’ should be able to provide the same kind of social commentary/analysis that journalists do. This is Akala no only asserting his agency, but he is also attempting to encourage other rappers to speak out about social/political/economic issues. Next, Akala provides critical analysis regarding race. This is important to note because it leads in to his main message. He says, “Even the fact I call myself ‘black’/Social conditionin and that’s a fact/The idea of races has no factual basis/It was made just to serve racists/To justify doin to some what couldn’t be done to others but they’re all of our sons,” (Akala, “Yours and My Children”). Akala brings up the fact that race is a social construct created to benefit some and disadvantage others, but he also articulates that regardless of race, every person on this planet is a member of humanity, essentially making all children our sons.

Akala then gets to the heart of the message in the next several lines. He maintains:

black or white, all of our sons/Muslim, Christian all of our sons/Look up in the sky, that’s all of our Sun/Last time I checked we only had one/So if some were superior, others inferior, based on exterior/Well then surely the Sun would note and fall into line/It would rain on your crops and not mine/Air would prefer to inhabit your lungs/Food would prefer the taste of your tongue/If that was the case then nature’s declared/Despite what we say, the world’s in fact fair. (Akala, “Yours and My Children”)

Here, Akala completely demolishes the logic that governs racism in exposing its absurdity through the use of rational thinking. No matter how one identifies (black, white, Muslim, Christian), nature doesn’t discriminate; it is humanity that egotistically discriminates against one another, against part of the whole. In critiquing racism in such ways, he is again pointing *away* from this limiting worldview and pointing *towards* a more just, spiritualized worldview that is

¹⁰ Akala refers to Naomi Klein, author of *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, in order to make it clear that journalists are not the one ones who can provide social/political commentary.

based on an understanding of humanity as interconnected beings. The hook leads to Akala's ultimate intended message. He states, "Kids in Iraq, yours and my children/Kids in Iran, yours and my children/Afghanistan, yours and my children/Even Sudan, yours and my children/Kids in Brazil, yours and my children/Police drive by the favela and just kill them," (Akala, "Yours and My Children"). I argue here that because humanity is ultimately connected by one Source, Akala tries to get listeners to see that regardless of where children live or how they identify, we should care about what happens to them, especially because many of them suffer because of man-made conditions like violence and poverty on a daily basis.

An awakened consciousness is guided by love, and I argue that the intention of this song is to awaken listeners to the Oneness that connects all life. In her book *All About Love: New Visions*, bell hooks reiterates the need for spiritual awakening in society. She articulates, "Living life in touch with divine spirit lets us see the light of love in all living beings. That light is a resurrecting life force. A culture that is dead to love can only be resurrected by spiritual awakening," (*All About Love: New Visions* 71). Akala's love for humanity shines through in this song, and the spiritual activism evident here is desperately needed in our society that is often devoid of love for one another. Love is a facet of spiritual activism that does the social change work needed to awaken/transform consciousness. Maparyan elucidates:

[L]ove is a transformative and highly motile energy that pervades personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal realms or dimensions of human experience. Self-love, interpersonal love, revolutionary love, and spiritual/cosmic/transcendental love are all interrelated and manifestations or emanations of the same underlying energy. This energy, intimately identified with the immanent energy of the Creator, is what does the real work of social change. Indeed, it is also the result of social change. It is what makes social change 'stick'. (Maparyan 49)

The songs within this section have demonstrated spiritual activism that is undergirded by a pure love for humanity that is exemplified by a genuine concern for individuals all over the world. The sort of awakening/transformation of consciousness that is and can be brought about among listeners involves cultivating and essentially a revival of the love and care for humanity that one's soul, or essence, is comprised of. Osho acknowledges the radiance of this state of being:

Love is a state of your consciousness when you are joyous, when there is a dance in your being. Something starts vibrating, radiating, from your center; something starts pulsating around you. It starts reaching people: it can reach women, it can reach men, it can reach rocks and trees and stars. (Osho 47)

I argue that these men radiate love for humanity through their music, which is emitted through speakers, into listeners ears and finally reaches and potentially awakens their true, loving essence. Many more songs with this similar theme include, but are not limited to: Akala's "Absolute Power"; Logic's "Call 4 Revolution"; Lowkey's "Cradle of Civilization", "Long Live Palestine", and "Relatives".

Section Four: Live Your Light

This section revolves around spiritual activism in its most explicit states. It is my contention that in order to change and better the world, one must be willing to transcend the limits of ego and (at least begin to) transform their consciousness to its highest state, or higher self. Maparyan asserts that "[c]hanged beings require a changed environment, and a changed environment is unsustainable without changed beings" (Maparyan 125). Since the mind, body, and spirit are inherently connected, spiritual activism assumes that all three comprise the inner work needed to see positive, sustainable changes in the physical world. This is precisely what

Mahatma Gandhi meant when he famously said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” Maparyan articulates the power of self-change in changing and co-creating the world:

We ourselves, as agents of change, become the bridge between inner and outer conditions; we *become* ‘the change we wish to see in the world’ by refining our ability to transform war and conflict into peace, violence and aggression into love and care, poverty into abundance and well-being, illness into health and vitality, and ecological destruction into ecological restoration and sustainability—first within ourselves, then in the world. (Maparyan 128)

Sanaya Roman illuminates the fulfillment that is possible when making these inner changes. She asserts, “Connecting with your innermost self allows you to bring your outer life into alignment with who you are deep within. You can then experience and express your true self throughout the day in your words, thoughts, feelings, and interactions with others,” (Roman xiv).

The ‘light’ that I refer to in the title of this section is in reference to the soul, spirit, higher self, etc., and when it is fully illuminated, can greatly affect other people, the world, and thus oneself. As Akala, Logic, and Lowkey live their respective light through their music, they encourage and empower listeners to do the same. This is one of the basic tenets of spiritual activism.

“I Still Believe” is sort of a continuation of Lowkey’s “I Believe”, which is a song from his 2008 debut album *Dear Listener*. It features Akala and Black the Ripper and comprises many of the elements needed for self-actualization, or at the very least, acts as a catalyst for one to begin down that path. Indeed, it suggests that Lowkey and Akala themselves are on the path toward self-actualization and intend on bringing along anyone who is open to the process. Lowkey begins with a simple spiritual invocation before his verse. He declares, “This is unity. This is the real versus the fake. This is the substance versus the image. This is the equality of all

versus the supremacy of some,” (Lowkey, “I Still Believe”). When referring to unity, two meanings arise. First, he could be referring to the coming together of these three British MCs for a common purpose. Second, that common intended purpose is to unify humanity through their music. In mentioning ‘the real versus the fake’ and ‘the substance versus the image’, Lowkey makes clear that not only is he speaking from his soul as a human being, but also as an MC he is presenting substantial, empowering and ultimately, self-actualizing content for listeners. He prides himself on his integrity and his unyielding worldview of ‘the equality of all’ as opposed to one that maintains a ‘supremacy of some’ belief system.

In the first verse, Lowkey contemplates what this song has the power to transform. He says, “This tune can touch you deep/What can it do for love and peace/Forget the color of your skin, we’re all just humans underneath,” (Lowkey, “I Still Believe”). He has a sense that music can be an effective means to reach one’s soul, and in that awareness he asks listeners to reflect on what impact this song can have on states of consciousness such as love and peace. Speaking directly to one’s soul is an efficient way of bringing about spiritual change. In his assertion that ‘we’re all just humans underneath’, Lowkey does not intend to negate the realities of racism; he does, however, seek to illuminate the commonality, the connectedness, which irrevocably ties humanity together.

He continues, “But we were conditioned to be ashamed of intelligence/Take pride in your brain, it’s your chain that’s irrelevant...Forget your wallet and your ride, what’s the contents of your mind,” (Lowkey, “I Still Believe”). Lowkey argues that intelligence is a quality that is to be desired instead of abashed, and he makes this clear because he understands that many people are made to feel insecure about their abilities, often a result of egoic acts of jealousy (which is many times caused by deep-seated feelings of lack within oneself). He also maintains that ethereal

connections are to be a source of one's confidence, in contrast to material possessions. Since the ability to learn and understand comes from inside oneself, it is a part of one's true essence—the soul.

In contrast, associating one's self-worth with one's material possessions is a farce; it is not who we *truly* are, yet ego convinces us that this false sense of self is who we actually are for the selfish sake of its eternal need for external satisfaction. Tolle argues that this incessant need for *more* is exactly how our consumer driven society works. He notes, "Paradoxically, what keeps the so-called consumer society going is the fact that trying to find yourself through things doesn't work: The ego satisfaction is short-lived and so you keep looking for more, keep buying, keep consuming," (Tolle 36). It is this understanding that compels Lowkey to warn, "You better listen when I tell, the television tricks you well/Don't let them dictate to you the definition of yourself/Cos when it's said and done the products are all irrelevant," (Lowkey, "I Still Believe").

The 'tricks' Lowkey mentions is elucidated again by Tolle:

The people in the advertising industry know very well that in order to sell things that people don't really need, they must convince them that those things will add something to how they see themselves or are seen by others; in other words, add something to their sense of self. (Tolle 35)

In Lowkey arguing for listeners to be self-defined, he is essentially imploring people to introspectively reflect on their essence and what it means to them. He makes clear that they only person with the answer is the same one asking the question. He then declares, "We are set to see a better dream, eventually will come/The equality of all and the supremacy of none/I believe," (Lowkey, "I Still Believe"). Lowkey valiantly adheres to a worldview that not only asserts 'the equality of all' which he applies to the present but that also conceives of a future in which superiority and inferiority are no longer accepted philosophies.

Akala takes the reins in the second verse and opens with his thoughts on what he's learned as a result of self-knowledge. He asserts, "I believe in truth, no matter who is speaking it/And of course I believe in justice, no matter who's receiving it/Believe in almost nothing I am told is the status quo/Cos histories show how the lies unfold," (Lowkey, "I Still Believe"). Akala affirms his belief in the equality of humanity—that every person *should* be treated equally but not that they necessarily are. Yet, he maintains that he is for truth and justice, regardless of who says it or who it serves. He also points out his reluctance to accept the world's existing conditions because if we were to take a step back and look throughout history, we could see that the state of humanity has gotten to its current point in evolution precisely *because* of people who rejected the status quo.

He goes on, "I believe we can use the term 'conspiracy theory' /To discredit inconvenient ideas without the slightest query/Not that they're necessarily correct, but the world we have created/Is one that's tamed to regurgitate hatred," (Lowkey, "I Still Believe"). Many people whose awakened consciousness has caused them to question the state of humanity regarding violence, war, poverty, etc., are often written off simply as 'conspiracy theorists' by those who tend to blindly accept what they're told without question. While Akala isn't arguing that everyone who questions the status quo is always accurate, he is implicitly encouraging listeners to do so. In stating that the world is 'tamed to regurgitate hatred', he implies that hatred is not our natural state of being—that we are taught to do so, most often from a very early age. This rhetoric is intended to awaken listeners to not only the state of humanity, but also to the capacity for change that resides within oneself. Akala, explicates, "But we the people can feel our consciousness is changing/So no matter how they brutalise they cannot restrain it/I believe that every child's a born genius/They're just taught how not to be and place barriers between us/I

don't believe in human nature, just conditioned behaviour/I don't believe your oppressor could ever would ever be your saviour," (Lowkey, "I Still Believe"). One who speaks about the awakening/transformation of consciousness could only know such truths if s/he is undergoing the process themself.

Because Akala has already undertaken this ongoing process, he is knowledgeable regarding what to say to encourage/ act as a catalyst for listeners who are or want to undergo this process. He contends that no matter who attempts to impede this process cannot do so because once the doorway to higher consciousness is opened, the power that resides within oneself to grow and evolve is too great to ever be controlled. Akala acknowledges this capacity that everyone inherently has within themselves, yet he points out that we are often conditioned to reject, subdue, and neglect our capacities that are most often because of forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism, and classism. Ultimately, the messages in this song are intended to promote self-determination, self-knowledge, and self-love—all of which are requisites for self-actualization.

"My Soul" is an ode to independent artists. While the majority of MCs, both British and American, tend to believe that to be relevant in the world of hip-hop means signing with a major record label, Lowkey maintains that MCs *can* and *do* exist and flourish on their own. What makes this song significant for listeners is that Lowkey serves as an example of how to uphold your individuality in a world that is filled with pressure to conform, to not be as you are but rather how you're expected to be. We first see how Lowkey preserves his integrity by refusing to compromise his music for material gain or notoriety. He begins, "They can't use my music to advertise for Coca-Cola/They can't use my music to advertise for Motorola/They can't use my music to advertise for anything/The truth, I guess that's the reason the industry won't let me in,"

(Lowkey, “My Soul”). In refusing to adhere to the common occurrence of an MC’s music being used for advertising when signed to major record labels, Lowkey keeps his principles in tact but does pay a price in the end because it is for that reason, along with the content of his music, that he doesn’t get much airplay.

Unabashed, he asserts, “Refuse to be a product or a brand, I’m a human/Refuse to contribute to the gangster illusion/Whether I’m number one, number two, or number three/I’m unique and there will never be another me/And there will never be another you/Be proud of who you are, don’t copy what the others do/They are not superior, you are not inferior/When we realise that, there’s gonna be hysteria,” (Lowkey, “My Soul”). In Lowkey’s fervent refusal to wear the mask that record labels often pressure artists to put on, he adamantly expresses the importance of being true to oneself. His soul is more valuable than any amount of fame or fortune, and what is so intriguing about his is that he disseminates many of the same messages as spiritual teachers and healers such as Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle, and Osho, but through hip-hop music.

Since numerous young people are more apt to listen to a rapper than these writers, Lowkey’s music serves as a well-equipped tool for sparking consciousness among today’s youth, Lowkey undoubtedly articulates a similar message concerning uniqueness and individuality as Osho. Osho conveys:

Just as your thumb makes a print, unique and individual—that type of thumb has never existed before and will never exist again, it only belongs to you, there will never be another like it—the same is the case with your being. You have a being unique and individual, incomparable; it has never been before, it will never be again, only you have it Celebrate it! (Osho 79-80)

Lowkey affirms listeners' essence and in doing so, takes part in spiritual activism in its most explicit forms. I view him as a wise brother figure who can offer solace to listeners who may not feel like there is anything special about them. He even proclaims that many people have been renewed and forever changed because of the uplifting and self-affirming nature of the message in his music. He remarks, "When they listen many have risen from the mental prison/That's why you don't see my face upon the television," (Lowkey, "My Soul"). Lowkey attests to the notion that his music can at least begin the process of self-actualization for listeners.

In fact, portions of this song are strikingly similar to one of Deepak Chopra's healing affirmations. Chopra tells listeners to affirm, "Today I will remind myself of the following ideas: My soul is fearless. My soul is beneath no one. My soul is superior to no one. My soul is equal to all. Today I will notice the power of my soul," (Chopra, "Empowerment"). In the hook, Lowkey asserts, "You might take my life, but you can't take my soul... You might take my freedom, but you can't take my soul," (Lowkey, "My Soul"). These words carry energy to the listeners who repeat this as they would any other affirmation. Sanaya Roman notes the power in repeating positive affirmations with intentionality. Roman says, "Affirmations become living energy when practiced with conviction and feeling, with a sense of your connection to your innermost self. Each affirmation carries within it the seed of a completely new consciousness. Even saying it one time brings to you a seed of new consciousness," (Roman xvii). If one repeats something about themselves enough, sooner or later they will have no choice but to believe it, whether positive or negative. "My Soul" serves as a tool to reinforce one's understanding that their essence is unique and to draw her/him closer to that essence in a way that brings about a higher consciousness.

Akala's "Find No Enemy" could be extensively analyzed and contemplated, comprising its own chapter. But here, I only focus upon the elements of the song that best fits with the theme

of 'living your light'. Nonetheless, it is worthy of listening to in its entirety. "Find No Enemy" is another song off Akala's 2010 *Doublethink* album, and fits in well with the other songs in this section because of its intimate, self-reflective message as well as its raw social commentary that urges listeners to reflect deeply on the insights presented. For instance, Akala initially professes in his ever satirical manner, "Apparently, I'm second generation black Caribbean and half white Scottish, whatever that means/See lately, I feel confused with the boxes/Cos to me all they do is breed conflict/It's not that I've lost touch with reality of racism, sexism, and nationality/Just to me, all seems like insanity/Why must I rob you of your humanity/To feel good about mine," (Akala, "Find No Enemy"). The labels we often use for ourselves as markers of identity are also used to discriminate against one another. The 'boxes' we identify with serve to divide humanity and create conflict more so than to unify. So, we can see here that Akala is critiquing the use of labels because of its divisive tendencies, much like Bob Marley in his song "War".

Akala further articulates, "It's all about crime/Dehumanising's how I justify 'em/So I must keep lyin bout the history of Africa/So I can live with the massacres/And repeat my mantra: Muslim, terrorist/So I can sleep at night as bombs take flight/Eyes open wide but I'm blind to the sight/Too busy chasin the perfect life," (Akala, "Find No Enemy"). He maintains that the labels one ascribes to so-called 'inferior' people are how white people historically justified not only racism but slavery; that's how forcibly removing millions of Africans from their land and families, treating them like three fifths a person was justified. It's also how many American and British people justify murdering 'terrorists' and invading countries like Afghanistan and Iraq—because 'they' aren't like 'us', so that makes them 'bad'. Additionally, he contends that people are 'too busy chasing the perfect life', in that we (American and British) are many times

so consumed with our own self-interests, which tend to be materialistic and superficial, that we fail to notice the suffering that so many around the world endure.

Akala continues, “And the working class keep ‘em uneducated/Truly educated man could never be a racist/To educate is to draw out what is within/Are we not all the same under the skin,” (Akala, “Find No Enemy”). Here, he states that if people were ‘truly educated’, we would know that humanity is more connected than labels would have us think and therefore wouldn’t discriminate against another because that would mean hating someone that is a part of you, indeed, a reflection of the Source that all of humanity derives from. The kind of education Akala mentions is ultimately meant for liberation because the very definition of education is, as Maparyan argues, “*e* (out from) *ducare* (to lead), literally, to lead the Inner Light out from within” (Maparyan 6). She continues, “This type of education would go far beyond the acquisition of information and knowledge, which are currently emphasized into the realms of wisdom, and ultimately, onward toward enlightenment,” (Maparyan 6). Akala elucidates what his education has taught him:

I got a heart like yours that pumps blood and oxygen/And insecurities a whole lot of
‘em/I’m scared like you, deep down/I really do care that the world’s not fair like you/But
I don’t even believe my own prayers like you/Chasin career goin nowhere like you/Lost
in a fog of my own insecurity/I hold myself up as an image of purity/And I judge
everybody else by the colour of their skin or the size of their wealth/But it’s not good for
my health/As the only one I every really judge is myself. (Akala, “Find No Enemy”)

The intimacy he creates with listeners here is a result of his willingness to be vulnerable, and his opening up to listeners is intended to create connections based on similar feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and struggle with ego. Ultimately, he argues that because humanity is connected to and are reflections of Source, when one judges another, they’re actually judging themselves,

and he knows it isn't healthy behavior because judging/discriminating against another is an indication that one feels a sense of lack, inadequacy, and/or hatred in oneself.

Akala goes on, "Though I pretend I'm in control of this mess/By inflatin my ego, puffin my chest/I see a weakness and I need to show strength/Or what we think strong is, cos if we're honest/Truth strength is the strength to be honest/And if I'm honest, I am just tired," (Akala, "Find No Enemy"). Here, Akala exemplifies the internal struggle people, especially men, face between being and acting from their essence, which is a composite of both masculine and feminine energies, and destructive egoic patterns. Being honest with himself entails that he be truthful about the things that causes conflict within himself and thus the world. For instance, he mentions, "Tired of everyday fillin up my car and knowin that I'm payin for the bombs in Iraq/Tired of pretendin it don't hurt my heart of/Wantin change not knowin where to start/Tired of listenin to all the conditionin/And all the forms that they got me fillin in," (Akala, "Find No Enemy"). Honesty and self-reflection to this degree allows one to come to terms with who s/he really is and what can be done to get more in touch with her/his true essence.

Next, Akala shifts gears and touches on hip-hop music. He says, "We complain about racism, elevate clowns/With their trousers down swingin their dick round/Maybe that is not quite literal/But everything they do is just as stereotypical," (Akala, "Find No Enemy"). He notes here that many hip-hop artists perpetuate stereotypes most often for the sake of selling records. The majority of the consumer population of mainstream hip-hop are young white males, so in order to sell their music and appease white male record label executives, many mainstream black hip-hop artists promote racist stereotypes in their music. Akala then sends an important message to listeners, "To my real fans, I feel your pain/And I get the messages, but don't complain/That we ain't got more fame/We're playin our part/They can keep the charts/All I want is your hearts,"

(Akala, “Find No Enemy”). Akala doesn’t care about topping the charts if it means sacrificing who he is and his integrity. I argue that all Akala wants are listeners who are not only true to themselves, but who also recognize and resonate with his music, which is undoubtedly and expression of his soul.

Then, Akala goes on to critique black hip-hop artists’ use of the n-word. He argues, “That blood-soaked word rappers still use/All it really shows is we still self-abuse/That was the word that was used to kill Kelso Cochrane and Emmett Till,” (Akala, “Find No Enemy”). It’s important to point out that Akala is not merely critiquing other rappers; he used to use the word himself in some of his earliest records. Akala mentions that the n-word is a racist epithet that was used to justify murdering numerous people of the African diaspora all over the world, but centrally in the U.S. and Britain. Therefore, the belief that using the n-word to refer to oneself is a form of self-hatred is something that Akala must have deeply reflected on and came to the conclusion that by using that word as a name for himself, he wasn’t truly loving himself. He later continues:

And it may sound like I’m bitter/But in fact truth be told, I am quite the opposite/I wake everyday and I’m overwhelmed/Just to be alive and be like no one else/And the sheer weight of the thought and space/Is enough to keep my little ego in place/All that we chance and try to replace/All along it was right in our face/The only way we can ever change anything is to look in the mirror and to find no enemy/The only way we can ever change anything, look in the mirror and to find no enemy. (Akala, “Find No Enemy”)

Akala makes clear that his message is given out of love and not bitterness—a love for himself, for his essence, and it is this understanding about who he really is that transcends the boundaries of labels and social conditioning that give rise to ego and self-hatred. He argues that the only way the world can change is if individuals treat their self with a sincere love for their essence. Once we treat ourselves with love and recognize our divine nature, only then can we

love and respect one another. Once we find not enemy within ourselves, then no enemy outside of ourselves can exist.

Logic's song "Just Be Yourself" is from his 2011 album *Listen*, and although the message is specifically targeted at young British MCs, it can absolutely be applicable to anyone who resonates with it. As one may determine from the title, the song's message is to be true to oneself regardless of another's expectations or chastisement thereof. The analysis of these lyrics will provide a better understanding of what it means to 'just be yourself' as it relates to British MCs.

Initially, Logic opens up with the hook which is sung by two young, talented girls names Leah and Page. They sing, "Just be yourself/Don't try to be what people want you to be," (Logic, "Just Be Yourself"). People, especially young people who are only just beginning to develop their sense of self, are repeatedly pressured into conforming into a mold that society says s/he should fit in, and because young people don't (usually) yet have a strong sense of who they are (i.e. their essence), they tend to succumb to the pressures of society and play a role that's not truly meant for them. In knowing this, Logic made this song that works to counteract societal pressure to conform.

He also acts as an example for young British MCs:

Cos the hip-hop in the UK is overgrowin/Some of us have lost the plot without knowin/Not showin you in your bars/You're only thirteen talkin about chicks and dough and cars/You just gotta laugh and look past all the gibberish/I don't talk about guns and drugs, but I live in it/I don't want no citizenship but born British/So I gotta show the world I'm straight spittin/I'm hittin topics that don't usually get touched/I only use my logic, and I admit it gets a bit too much/So don't rush, just take your time/Spit about you and your life/Don't get caught in the hype/Use your head to think right/See, I ain't tellin you it's only advice. (Logic, "Just Be Yourself")

He maintains that while the hip-hop scene in Britain is flourishing, some young MCs think that they have to rap about materialistic and superficial endeavors to get noticed and be popular. Logic contends that although he's surrounded by violence and drugs, he chooses to focus his energy on more uplifting messages, and although he didn't choose his British citizenship, he was born British, so his music reflects his life and perspective as a black British man. He also makes clear that the development of identity is a process, so he urges young MCs to let the process flow naturally and develop alongside their talent for rapping. Whatever makes them who they truly are is what they should make their music about. Music is often a means for people to escape from their everyday lives; it is a place where people are able to tell *their* truth, and Logic does just that. Still, like any seasoned teacher, Logic proclaims, "I ain't tellin you, it's only advice," (Logic, "Just Be Yourself"). This dispelling of patronization is important to tell young people, as they are oftentimes made to feel inferior to adults. It is out of love for people, young people in particular, that makes this song so poignant.

In the second verse, Logic stresses the importance of British MCs being true to themselves as individuals and as artists, especially in the face of the dominating influence of U.S. hip-hop:

I hear monotonous music every day from the US of A/Gettin played more than the homegrown UK/Do you think that they play our stuff?/Every now and then Dizzee maybe 21 seconds weren't enough/We gotta give people more of our music/And give them a bit of our culture and let them use it/However they choose/I wanna see an American guy movin in the way that we move/I treat my bars like the British news/ I aim to keep the whole world updated with facts/Words buildin up the points that I state in my tracks/I feel over relaxed, I feel focused/I know where I'm gonna go, where I'm gonna be/No hopeless gestures or negative thoughts. (Logic, "Just Be Yourself")

Unfortunately, the exchange of American and British music is without a doubt one-sided.

American hip-hop is and has been popular in Britain since the 1980s, so much so that many

British MCs negate or fail to develop their own personal style and individuality, opting for an emulation of American accents and styles. Hesmondhalgh and Melville support this claim by noting that “[i]n spite of the undoubted talent of many British hip-hop musicians, British rap has been marginalized and to some extent impoverished by an overreverential attitude toward U.S. rap, by the attempt to reproduce styles and languages developed in very different contexts” (Hesmondhalgh and Melville 87). In spite of this, Logic stays true to his spirit as an individual and as an artist, and it radiates throughout this song. He serves as an example to young British MCs that you can rap about your life and in your style in ways that are truthful and empowering, which ultimately has the potential to lead to not only the awakening of consciousness and self-actualization of oneself but of listeners as well.

“Everything I Am” is an especially poignant, heartfelt song from Lowkey’s latest, and possibly last, album *Soundtrack to the Struggle*. Self-explanatory, the song is a self-reflecting ode to Lowkey’s soul, his essence. Since Lowkey gained popularity among many young people around the world, he explicates in this song that people herald him as ‘role model’ and ‘advisor’, unwantingly elevating his status. This song is both a disavowal of such status and his contention of all that he actually is. This song is important for listeners who have the tendency to forget that artists, actors, celebrities, etc., are just humans who happen to be in the public eye.

Lowkey starts:

I am no role model, I am not Mr. Perfect/Been bitten a couple of times and I did deserve it/Every day livin and learnin through these written verses/My life is a sacrifice I wonder is it worth it?/People can change, I’m livin physical proof/I’m not important or special or different than you/To other people, I may seem like a good advisor/But to myself I feel like a dirty womaniser/I am just a man, I will never be a celebrity/That is a mantra I will cling to until the death of me. (Lowkey, “Everything I Am”)

While many elevate Lowkey to such a status that they feel he's a role model, he does not feel that way about himself. He makes mistakes like all humans so, and he learns from them through his music. Indeed, if one listened to some of his earliest material, one could see a bit of misogyny embedded in his lyrics, but he does make clear that he learned and grew from that, which is commendable and evident in his later work. Still, he struggles with feeling like a 'womanizer' even though many people seek out his advice. Lowkey's honesty and openness regarding his so-called flaws humanizes himself and allows listeners to view him as more than just a role model; it allows listeners to understand and appreciate his essence and not just the persona of 'Lowkey'.

He continues, "Preferably the aim is equality eventually/Don't relegate me below or elevate me above to you/Needless to say, in either place I'm uncomfortable/I greet you as your equal, simply a man/Your brother in humanity is everything that I am," (Lowkey, "Everything I Am"). Lowkey rightfully mentions that he feels uncomfortable when people elevate his status or place an inferior status on him. Both of these de-humanize the person on question; while it is widely accepted that labeling one inferior is without a doubt de-humanizing, when people elevate someone to celebrity status or that of similar stature, it also de-humanizes the person in question because it implies that s/he is *more than human*, thus not human at all. This way of treating one another only works to divide each other into such categories as inferior/superior and human/nonhuman, which keeps humanity in a state of disillusion regarding all that we *actually* are. Lowkey asserts that "your brother in humanity is everything that I am" (Lowkey, "Everything I Am"). This is the sort of message that can put humanity on the path of self-actualization, awakened consciousness, and evolution as a species, where every single individual is recognized as unique and a part of a co-creating whole.

Conclusion: The Illuminating Possibilities of Hip-Hop

In an interview Akala gave in 2012, he articulated the importance of music and the role it can and does play in society:

Music seems to be intrinsic to human existence; it's something that we spiritually need. The way we need sunlight, the way we need food, the way we need water...and a culture that treats music like this culture does is an unhealthy culture in my view; a culture that uses music to de-spiritualize people, to disconnect people from anything serious about life is..I just think it's very unhealthy. (VisionaryGuerillaz, "Unplugged")

This statement is in tandem with a pivotal question he raised in an article he wrote for *The Guardian* in October 2011. He stressed, "Is it too much of a stretch for people to believe that popular entertainment is not just about what will and won't sell, but also about what will and won't maintain particular states of consciousness?" (Akala, "It's a hip hop planet"). Hip-hop is more than just entertainment for the masses. Although entertainment is an element that goes into making a hip-hop records, it isn't the core. It is not my intention to police artists' creativity, but I've found that what humanity needs at this current point in our evolution is more emphasis on social commentary that seeks to educate and liberate; indeed, education is a means of liberation. It is important to emphasize listeners' individuality (their soul, essence, spirit, etc.), as well as the connectedness and oneness of humanity. The messages within the songs I have presented in this chapter contain these elements—elements that are intended to awaken/transform listeners' consciousness—acting as a catalyst in the process of self-actualization, and simply encouraging listeners to recognize both our individuality and our interconnectedness to humanity. There are many songs not covered section three that contain these elements as well; they include but are not limited to: Akala's "It's Not That Serious"; Lowkey's "I Believe" and "Just Shine". Acquiring these understandings are necessary for the growth and evolution of individuals and thus humanity and the world itself.

Chapter Three

Autoethnography

“Just be yourself. Don’t try to be what people want you to be.”
–Logic, “Just Be Yourself”

I chose to include autoethnography in this thesis primarily because I position myself as a subject within this research as opposed to an objective, unbiased researcher. One of the first things I learned in the Women’s Studies program in graduate school was that my perspective *matters*. I thought to myself if I was going to write a thesis, it would be concerning something I cared about, that I’m invested in. Autoethnography is a feminist methodological intervention in that it’s not only helped me make sense of my life and purpose, but I argue that it enriches this thesis by positioning myself within the research as a listener who’s been spiritually, mentally, and emotionally affected by Akala, Logic, and Lowkey’s music. Understanding a few of my pivotal life experiences will allow for a better understanding of why I felt the need to write such a thesis.

This autoethnography is a story of my life’s journey thus far; a journey that, although unique, is just a story; *my truth* of my life experiences as a young, white, Southern woman from Alabama who never felt like my home or identity was *really* who I was. Everyone has a story. In order for you to understand my perspective and reasoning for creating this thesis and my evolving relationship with British Hip-Hop, it is important to understand a few of the

experiences I've that that have shaped me as a human being and also the experiences that have helped me remember and illuminate my true essence—my soul.

In some way or another, I've always felt like I didn't quite belong. From an early age, I can remember feeling like I didn't belong in Alabama, like I wasn't meant to live there. Growing up, I've also often felt like I was born into the wrong family. Don't get me wrong, I love my family with all my heart, but the fact is, I'm extremely different than most members of my family. My parents would even tell you that. Because of these feelings I've had from an early age, I have, until fairly recently in my life, felt like I had to hide who I really was.

Do you remember, back to your childhood, moments that shaped the rest of your life? Often, for me those moments surface in flashes, pieces from my memory. But those flashes of reminiscence are so telling that I couldn't forget even if I tried. One instance in particular resulted in my awareness of race relations in the South. Becoming cognizant of the state of my environment at an early age caused me to be critically aware of anyone and everyone that I came into contact with from that moment forward.

In Alexandria, an extremely small town in Northeast Alabama, when you want to go swimming but don't want to drive to the beach, you always have the option of going to the dam. The particular dam my family and I visited was equipped with a beach area and picnic tables. People would often go to the dam on the weekend or summer holidays and barbecue. Growing up, I liked going to the dam because it was a little getaway from everyday rural life, which consisted of lots of farmland and not much else. My perspective on rural life could signal a change in the times, since my grandmother always comments on the fact that she only needed to be outside with her friends in order to have fun. But for me, I needed variety. After all, I am a

Gemini. The rural life that satisfied most people always seemed so mundane to me. I often stayed in my room and got lost in my own world with my most reliable companion—music. Listening to music, for me, was like an escape from Alabama, an escape from the world. A way of just *being*—without any judgment or ridicule.

As I previously mentioned, my memory tends to come back in flashes. The memory that stands out the most to me is when I was ten or so years old going on a visit with my family to the Ohatchee dam, the name reflecting the town it's located in. My family and I were driving down the gravel road entrance to the paved parking area next to the 'beach' as it was called. Looking back, the 'beach' was merely a large sandbox next to the water. While driving down the entrance, we passed several picnic tables that were individually situated under a covering. In driving passed those picnic tables, either my mom or step-dad made a comment that forever changed me. The question of who made the comment doesn't change the effect it had on my life.

Being from a small community, it is quite common to see someone you know almost everywhere you go within a ten-mile radius. So, when passing the picnic area, it didn't surprise me that my parents saw a woman that they knew who was barbecuing with some friends. The comment that startled me was what one of them said about the woman and the people she was with. Either my mom or step-dad said, "Look at that. That's disgusting and white trash." From what I can remember, the white woman was with two or three black men. What startled me about the comment was not so much that "race" was called into question. I had already recognized that people didn't all look the same (or were treated the same, for that matter), but rather the comment implied that it wasn't ok for people who look different to be or hangout together. I immediately said to myself, "Oh, so apparently they think that's not ok to do."

It wasn't until a few years ago that I learned that the term 'white trash' is not only a derogatory term usually hurled at poor or working-class whites or white people who don't conform to white supremacist stereotypes about themselves, but the term also implies that 'trash' is anyone who is non-white. Unfortunately, that is the trouble with social conditioning from an early age; I was being conditioned to believe that I was superior because I was white and that anyone who veered from that was inferior in some way. But for some reason—I'm convinced that it was my intuition speaking to me from my soul—I refused to accept that people who look different than me were not meant to interact, hangout, or be with one another. I am in no way saying that I was completely successful in subverting this inherited, racist identity, but that day at the dam was the first memory I have of my spirit overcoming my developing ego. Lucky for me, I was old enough to think independently and form (for the most part) my own opinions about the world and the people in it and not automatically inherit my family's mindset about interracial relationships. I never asked why a black and white person being together was "disgusting"; it was just implied by their difference in skin color, which my childish logic determined was absolutely ridiculous. From then on, I knew how my family felt about interracial relationships, but that feeling of disgust never transferred to me. I am now convinced that it was because who I really was—my essence, my soul—refused to accept that limited way of thinking and being.

That experience was my first glimpse into the racially tense environment in which I was to grow up. I came to learn that this tension was nothing new. After all, Alabama was the site of many violent, racially discriminatory acts that fueled the fire for the Civil Rights Movement. Literally less than a mile from where my dad lives in Anniston is the site of the 1961 freedom riders bus bombing, in which angry whites, many still in their Sunday best, threw a bomb onto the Freedom Riders' bus with them still in it (Gross, "Get On the Bus"). Luckily the riders were

able to escape alive, but not without injuries. The Freedom Riders, both black and white, were seeking to challenge Jim Crow segregation on interstate travel. The fact that they were met with such violent oppression so close to the place I call home is embarrassing to me. It's embarrassing because those behaviors and feelings of white supremacists that opposed integration and interracial relations are in complete contrast to my worldview. Alabama has a reputation for being overtly racist, sexist, and oppressive in various other ways, and because of this, I, until fairly recently, have found it difficult to convey who I truly am to anyone. This stems from the feeling of needing to hide who I truly am for fear of ridicule and the need for acceptance from others, especially my family. Clinical psychologist Dr. Joseph Howell maintains, "Sometime in childhood, we learned that being our vulnerable, naked, true self, brought ridicule and pain, so we clothed our nakedness with a false self," (Howell 76). For that reason, I found it difficult to deeply relate to anyone around me, and I often felt like an outcast in a place I was supposed to call home.

Growing up, my Maw Maw was a major influence in my life. I used to think everything she said was golden. She taught me my manners, learning to say "yes ma'am", "please", and "thank you". So imagine my predicament when I first heard her use the n-word. I knew it was a hateful word, so in her invoking this terribly racist term, it made me take a step back and question all the things she taught and said to me. For instance, growing up, and still to this day, when my Maw Maw felt stupefied, she would often use the phrase, "We'll I'll be John Brown" or even use "John Brown" as an expletive. I always thought it was funny that she would use a man's name in that way. That is, until I found out many years later who John Brown actually was. He was a white abolitionist who, in spite of his willingness to give his life in order to end slavery, was hanged for treason, and my grandmother was using his name in a derogatory

context. When I learned of who John Brown was, I was in a state of bewilderment at my grandmother, a woman whom I love and admire. It also strikes me as odd that she would spew such hatred given the experience that her Yugoslavian mother went through, being forced into a concentration camp by the Nazis toward the end of WWII. Knowing what discrimination and dehumanization her mother must have gone through, although my Maw Maw said she never discussed it, I thought to myself, “How could my Maw Maw be so racist?” Then again, I know race itself to be socially constructed and racism to be socially conditioned behavior that is ingrained in people from an early age, so someone must have taught it to her. I love my Maw Maw, and I also know that she does her best from the particular level of consciousness that she’s at, but I had to come to terms with the fact that her views regarding race and privilege are problematic and seriously flawed. By the time I was a teenager, I learned to question, albeit not aloud, the authenticity of my Maw Maw’s and the rest of my family’s beliefs. It has been only in the last few years that I’ve become conscious of what was taking place within me during my childhood: I recognized the identity I was supposed to inherit, but I tried my best to resist that identity because it conflicted with the worldview that inherently resided in my soul. Unfortunately, we all inherit ego-driven identities at some point in our lives, and I would soon be well on my way.

Ego & Hip-Hop Consumption

Howell calls one’s essence their ‘soul child’, and he claims that “[t]his child is our first self...our real self and forms the essential makeup of our soul” (Howell 178). Yet, as children grow up, our experiences cause us to suffer, although on various levels. He goes on to note:

An emerging ego becomes a protective covering for his vulnerable child soul. The ego becomes so well developed that the soul child gets completely covered over and is sealed

inside the protective covering of the false self. Eventually the covering becomes stronger and the major focus of the developing child. As essence of the person (their soul child), becomes obscured it can rarely shine through. One is so identified with his/her covering (the ego) that they think they are the covering. Identification shifts to the protective covering rather than staying with the soul child. With increased identification with the ego, the soul child goes to sleep and is forgotten. (Howell 179)

When I reached the age of thirteen, my ego became more prominent as I searched for an identity, something to cling to. And as I mentioned in the beginning, music has always been a large part of my life. I was often regarded as ‘different’ by peers and family members because my musical taste exceeded that of ‘normal’ teenagers. Like most teenagers, I did like Christina Aguilera and N’Sync for instance, but I also loved The Crew Cuts, Etta James, and Patsy Cline as well.

Listening to music was my refuge; it was often a means of escape for me from the arguing going on by my mom and step-dad or my mom and dad. It was around that time that my older brother Adam, who was about 14 or 15 at the time, started listening to hip-hop. Being the tagalong I was, I started listening to Tupac, Eminem, and Jay-Z just like him and his friends. I thought I was *the* stuff because I knew all the rap songs my brother knew. My earliest memory of listening to a hip-hop song was when I was on the school bus, on my way home from school. This older white girl who I rode the bus with was always singing or rapping some kind of song. That day, she happened to be rapping “What’s Your Fantasy?” from Ludacris’ 2000 debut studio album *Back for the First Time*. She was always acting provocative on the bus, talking about her sexcapades that my mother would have had a fit over if she knew what I was listening to, so it didn’t surprise me that she was rappin the kind of song she did. I had never heard such an explicit song before, but I was immediately intrigued by it. I didn’t understand a lot of the lyrics because I didn’t know much about sex at the time, but I definitely became interested, so it should come as no surprise that the first hip-hop album I bought was Ludacris’ follow-up album *Word of Mouf*.

It's very telling that the first two people to introduce me to hip-hop were white people—my brother, who represented the primary consumer of commercial hip-hop and a sixteen or so year old girl who was turned on by Ludacris' sexual content (which is no surprise because hip-hop is only one of the numerous ways that young girls are exposed to sexually explicit content/images at an early age). I thought I knew it all during my teenage years...and admittedly, well into my college days. I became rebellious against my parents; I would hide the fact that I interracially dated because I knew they didn't agree with it. I became more sexualized (not purely because of listening to and watching hip-hop videos, but it was a factor) and acquired more attention from guys because I was reassured many times, "You're not shaped like a white girl." I became more concerned with my physical appearance and physicality that I was starting to forget my true, pure essence. My ego had nearly fully taken over, and the music I listened was just a reflection of who I thought I was. It wasn't until many years later that I realized that what I thought I knew about hip-hop as a teenager was just its ego too. I started listening to hip-hop at the height of its commercialization, and for better or worse, it affected the way my generation spoke to one another, how we interacted with the opposite sex, how stereotypes were portrayed, and so on.

During my final years as an undergraduate in college, I became discouraged with hip-hop—its emphasis on physicality, sex, misogyny, and violence in particular—and stopped listening to it. During this time, I was also becoming dissatisfied with the person I had become. I had a string of unhealthy romantic relationships, a lack of self-worth stemming from those relationships, and still, I had a habit of hiding that little bit of light that shone through me in favor of a façade because I was fearful of what people would think of the 'real' me, even though at the time, I wasn't exactly sure who the real me was since I was so accustomed to suppressing

it. I didn't know it at the time, but I was about to undergo a process of self-actualization that would guide me in remembering my true self. In 2008, when I stopped listening to hip-hop, my friend introduced me to indie rock music since she knew I was very open-minded about new music. We started listening to the Arctic Monkeys, who were from Northern England, and absolutely loved their sound. After a while, I had read about the drummer and original bassist of the band becoming part of a collective, fusion band of indie rock and hip-hop called Mongrel, which also happened to consist of an MC named Lowkey. Honestly, I was hesitant to listen to what Lowkey had to say because, even though I had never heard any British hip-hop before, I was expecting the same kind of materialistic, hyper-masculine, stereotypical rhetoric that I heard from most mainstream U.S. hip-hop music. Little did I know that I was in for the awakening of my life.

The Awakening

The first song I heard of Mongrel's was called "The Menace" in which he critiqued President Bush, the "War on Terror", religion that is used to justify violence, imperialism and its effects in such a way that I had never heard before. In fact, I had never heard such rhetoric in any capacity, much less in hip-hop, before in my life. When I listened to it, it was as if the little American bubble I was living in had instantly burst. Until I had heard Lowkey's music, I had never even heard the word 'Palestine' much less knew about its people's plight. I felt so ignorant because I felt like he knew more about the U.S. and its policies, both foreign and domestic, than me, an American citizen. As I listened to more of his music, I felt like I had been on autopilot nearly my entire life and I was just beginning to wake up. Lowkey talked about thought-provoking concepts like child slavery, war for profit, and imperialism that interested me mainly because I didn't know much about anything that happened outside the U.S. Sure, I was well

aware of racism and sexism, but within the confines of the U.S. My white, American privilege that was driven by my ego blinded me so much so that I had only really been concerned with issues that affected me directly.

Soon, I began questioning *everything* I was ever told by people and saw on TV. But his music became much more than just a medium for learning about the American and British Empire and political/social/economic issues around the world; I was beginning a process of self-actualization and awakening my consciousness, remembering my true essence—my soul. For instance, in his song “Special”, he talks about both male and female promiscuity, the reasons behind it, and self-love/respect. The hook says, “If you don’t respect yourself, no one’s gonna respect you/So please respect yourself/If you don’t love yourself, nobody’s gonna love you/It’s a special kind of love/A special kind of love/A very, very special kind of love,” (Lowkey, “Special”). In the song, he hit a nerve with me because in it he encourages women to be proud of who we are on the inside and not just physically, and to have love for yourself. At the time I heard the song, I was struggling with myself because on one hand I was very successful at physically attracting guys, but on the other hand I was so unhappy with myself because I wanted (and deep down I know I deserved) much more than what physicality could offer me. I acted in those self-sabotaging ways because I didn’t truly love myself, for many reasons that are too revealing for my comfort. But that song acted as a sort of positive affirmation for me—it was like my therapy. I’ve always loved music and have known its power and potential, but I never imagined that a British man whom I’ve never met could have such a positive impact on my life just by listening to his music. After listening to his music, as well as Akala’s and Logic’s, it became clear to me that what I thought hip-hop was as a teenager was just its ego. What I knew as a teen was just the commercialization and materialistic, diluted version of a genre of music

and a movement that was once a tool for oppressed youth to speak out against their oppressor. Through Lowkey, Logic, Akala, and a few other British and American MCs, I learned the history of hip-hop, the conditions unto which it was created, and its essential nature: to empower the powerless. It was then that I recognized hip-hop's soul.

Who 'I Am'

Listening to these men's music along with another coinciding experience helped lead me down the path of awakening. During this time, I was taking one of Dr. Utz McKnight's classes. I had already taken one of his classes and loved it because of the fruitful discussions that were had, but in this class, he asked a question that help to lead me down the path I'm currently on, the path of remembering my true essence and ascending to my higher self. He once asked the class, "Who are you?" The question seemed simple for me at first. I'm usually not one to speak up in class, but I thought that if he called on me, I would at least know the answer. I would say, "I'm Alisha Epps. I'm a student, a daughter, and a lover of music,". But alas, every person that answered similar things got shot down. I can't remember his exact words, but I do remember him making it clear that those things are not who we actually are. Those are roles we fill and labels we have for ourselves, but they're not who we actually *are*. It was then that I panicked. If I wasn't those things, then who am I? I had no answer.

After several months of listening to Lowkey's and subsequently Logic and Akala's music, in realizing what I am not, I understood what I am. I've realized through the songs analyzed in chapter two, along with numerous others, that what was needed to recognize my true self, my soul, was to shed my ego. It's simple, yet complicated for those who aren't 'there' yet. All the labels I use to identify myself with are just labels; who 'I am' is more than words can

articulate. Tolle remarks that “defining yourself through thought is limiting yourself” (Tolle 90). Whatever you wish to call it, I believe myself to be made up of the same essence that every single person on this Earth is made up of, yet no one soul or human experience is the same, and if we understand that we all originate from the same Source, that we’re all essentially One—we can’t help but love and care for one another because we are but a reflection of another. This is the ultimate message I’ve gained from their music. Whether they know it or not, Akala, Lowkey, and Logic are spiritual activists because of the sort of spiritually enlightening/transforming messages that lie within their music. Howell states, however, that operating as our egos, or false selves, is actually necessary in order to obtain this particular level of consciousness. He stresses that the false self (ego) is necessary in order for us to “undergo the real purpose of life: remembering, returning to, and growing in our spiritual nature. We could not do this without the soul lessons and wisdom learned in the years of ego prominence” (Howell 77). I’m sure Akala, Logic, and Lowkey wouldn’t make the kind of music they do had they not been through much ego struggle and shedding, and I most certainly would not be at this particular level of consciousness on my life path had it not been for all the experiences that have led me *here*.

Conclusion

As I demonstrated, hip-hop is and can be a powerful means for empowerment. Through illuminating the history of both U.S. and British hip-hop, I have shown the ways in which young people can employ their agency through rapping and use it as a spiritually liberatory practice for themselves as well as listeners. I demonstrate the implicit and explicit ways in which Akala, Logic, and Lowkey's music reflects and promotes spiritual activism. I analyze the following themes within their music: self-love, being true to and honest with oneself, confronting male/Western privilege and oppression, critiques of the ego, and recognizing/remembering and developing one's true self. These themes illuminate the ways in which their music can bring about awareness and awaken and/or transform both men and women's consciousness.

While these men's activist struggle against imperialism, capitalism, and materialism is embedded within their musical promotion of self-actualization, equality, justice, and freedom for all of humanity, I also want to explore the extent to which we can view them as feminist allies. Unfortunately, because of how ingrained sexism and patriarchy can be in most men, no matter how hard they try to resist it, it still can manifest itself from time to time. For example, Lowkey's song "Something Wonderful" is both an insightful self-reflection concerning his relationships with the women in his life and how women are treated around the world in general and as a sort of declaration of how women should be treated. I appreciate his apology in the song when he says, "Certain things are too deep to put in a verse/Let me apologize to every single woman I've hurt/Or disrespected whether family members or ex's/I wanna make amends for however I left

it,” (Lowkey, “Something Wonderful”). I am grateful for Lowkey’s attempt to make a song that is intended to uplift women, speak publicly denouncing his past actions and the actions of many men towards women, and atone for his actions. Indeed, Akala makes a similar declaration on “A Message” saying, “I ain’t sayin I’m perfect, far from it/Chauvinistic pig but shit, I’m workin on it,” (Akala, “A Message”). However, my concern with “Something Wonderful” lies within the lines, “You’re judged as a man by everything you amount to/And the respect that you show the women around you/So think about that stuff when you diss her/That’s somebody’s daughter, somebody’s mother and somebody’s sister/I said think about that stuff when you diss her/That’s somebody’s daughter, somebody’s mother and somebody’s sister,” (Lowkey, “Something Wonderful”). While I agree that women should be treated with respect, the rhetoric of a degraded woman possibly being “somebody’s daughter, somebody’s mother, and somebody’s sister” is problematic. Women are much more than what we mean to other people (i.e. daughters, sisters, mothers), namely men. We are human beings, and that *alone* necessitates that we be respected. While I’m sure Lowkey didn’t intend to put forth such a patriarchal message, for me, the song is an indication that, as liberating and empowering as Lowkey, Logic, and Akala’s music can be, there must be a constant and consistent dialogue among men and women about what can be considered hurtful, harmful, oppressive, patriarchal, and/or sexist about either’s actions. This open, honest dialogue ensures that both women and men are actively engaged in the liberatory practices necessary for the transformation and evolution of one another’s consciousness.

It could be said that the future of explicit spiritual activism within hip-hop lies in the London-based duo Native Sun. The pair is the intertwinement of singer-songwriter Sarina Leah, who has African diasporic roots in the Caribbean, and bilingual, Mozambican born MC Mohammed Yahya. Their entire 2012 debut album titled *Indigenous Soundwaves* is the epitome

of spiritual activism within music. Their artist bio on ReverbNation is telling of the intention and vibe of their music, “Joining forces in 2010 Native Sun was born fusing Hip Hop and African rhythms with the aim of promoting a positive message of Universal Peace, Equality, Social Justice and Environmental Change,” (“Native Sun”, ReverbNation). I had the opportunity to meet these two vibrant souls at the 9th Annual Walter Rodney Symposium in Atlanta in the spring of 2012, where they served as guest performers. After having the opportunity to listen to their album in its entirety, it was clear that these two are indeed spiritual activists.

For instance, their song “Lightness Of Happiness” touches on the predicaments people find themselves in when feeling lost, depressed, and struggling to find a way out of what often turns out to be ego-driven, destructive patterns. Mohammed Yahya says, “Can a curse truly be a blessing in your perspective?/Sometimes we gotta struggle in order to learn the lessons/If you wanna build then be ready to destroy/The shackles of your mind and the ego you employ,” (Native Sun, “Lightness of Happiness”). What he mentions is a scenario that many people go through, myself included. There are times when one feels hopeless because of a particular life situation and becomes depressed and unhappy as a result. He urges listeners to alter their way of thinking about the situation, to stop letting the ego take over their lives. He continues:

I ask who could defend me from a world so unfriendly/ Guided by the truth to an energy within me/ Same energy reflect in beauty I see/ From the moon, to the stars, to the roots of a tree/ From the sun in the sky, to the breath inside me/ We’re vividly connected to a deeper reality/ So when we understand how related are we/ We can truly submit to our creator’s decree. (Native Sun, “Lightness of Happiness”)

Yahya depicts how humanity is connected to all living things and the cosmos. The same transformational and evolutionary capacity that lies within one individual lies within everyone and everything else in existence. It is when we understand this that we can truly understand our potential. Then, Sarina Leah serenades listeners with her powerfully melodic affirmation:

No one could really save me/It was down to me settin me free/I had the power/So I gave it a try/I let the tear fall from my eye/Feeling better, I surrendered/Spiritualness covered me, like an etheric rainbow harmony/All the pain and hurt were washed away/As I saw the day change from grey/To a blue sky, sunny rays/It was like angels from heaven watchin over me/I knew I'd be fine. (Native Sun, "Lightness of Happiness")

Sarina Leah lets listeners know that the power resides within us to change, grow, and evolve into the person we know we have the potential to be; if only we would surrender our ego, we could experience the immense joy of *being* our true self, our soul.

The kind of empowerment Akala, Logic, Lowkey, and Native Sun offers listeners is both refreshing and absolutely necessary in a world rife with pain, suffering, struggle, and violence. The spirituality and spiritual activism explored and illuminated in their music has the potential to lead listeners toward a path of consciousness awakening and transformation within oneself in such a way that necessitates change and evolution in one's physical life and thus the entire world. Our potential lies within us; we just have to remember and harness it.

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Appendix: Audio/Video Links to Music

Introduction

KRS-One:

“Hip Hop Lives”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FadzGGJiLTg>

Lauryn Hill:

“Superstar”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQHgUBJhAJI>

Chapter One

Akala:

“Fire in the Booth”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEOKgjoxoto>

“Knowledge Is Power”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOM96dqJwks>

Bob Marley & The Wailers:

“No Woman, No Cry”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGqrwn3q1oo>

Logic:

“Police Officer”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tvsul6eOYdY>

“Welcome To England”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f-3P8xGtxo>

Lowkey:

“Hip Hop Ain’t Dead”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKOrHAUULrI>

“Let Me Live”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-21j7HCjqs8>

“Obama Nation”—http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4OI0GUCI_A

“Politics Remix”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-wc5bsAh0M>

“Terrorist? Pt. 2”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuAOicBdPcI>

“We Don’t Want Them”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YKI8vudLdQ>

Native Sun:

“Out Of The Box”—<http://nativesunofficial.bandcamp.com/track/out-of-the-box-feat-akala>

Smiley Culture:

“Police Officer”—<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jOjZKDoo08>

Chapter Two

Section One:

Akala:

“God?”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mROqBPF82DA>

“Insert Truth Here”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLUECEUIuIA>

“What Is Real”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DdzuLTxVtM>

“Who’s the Gangsta”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlOnohWYfW0>

Logic:

“Spectator”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNIL3dyLAyk>

“Tell Me Something”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2U14hxSXJQ>

Lowkey:

“Hand on Your Gun”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBNeD57-RVg>

“Tell Me Why”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqL-A-WOpDw>

“Terrorist?”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmBnvajSfWU>

Section Two:

Akala:

“A Message”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdrojUHZ1TY>

“Face Down”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4E5EK05UlzM>

“I Don’t Need”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30eSB9cR0wM>

Dead Prez:

“Mind Sex”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwTNOxJXMYM>

Logic:

“Feel It”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICvmgywLzjg>

Section Three:

Akala:

“Absolute Power”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wr-g7nIBrw>

“Yours and My Children”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqoZ3zaMXjU>

Logic:

“Call 4 Revolution”— http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWVL_fsBxFA

“We’ll Never Know”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfKtIMSfAsQ>

Lowkey:

“Cradle of Civilization”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gA8G0xHknQ>

“Long Live Palestine”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p1CJwTNC9M>

“Relatives”— http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPGyFV6z_VQ

Section Four:

Akala:

“Find No Enemy”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjvUMr1-AAU>

“It’s Not That Serious”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzRE45ENGVU>

Bob Marley & The Wailers:

“War”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loFDn94oZJ0>

Deepak Chopra:

“Empowerment”— <http://www.amazon.com/Empowerment/dp/B001OFLSMY>

Logic:

“Just Be Yourself”— <http://logicpeoplesarmy.bandcamp.com/track/just-be-yourself>

Lowkey:

“Everything I Am”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwlL2U2B5aU>

“I Believe”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axLk3Ok9rUs>

“I Still Believe”— http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57U7qG_Nc1Y

“My Soul”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nN4eySIToGw>

Chapter Three

Lowkey:

“Special”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDd7rGUDy1M>

Ludacris:

“What’s Your Fantasy”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mq-Ru6kQhE4>

Mongrel:

“The Menace”— <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-58fUbnZSGo>

Conclusion

Lowkey:

“Something Wonderful”— http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3_2hJfhwro

Native Sun:

“Lightness of Happiness”— http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0K1UfUb_Yk