An experience with language

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AN EXPERIENCE WITH LANGUAGE

by

Alexandra B. Cummings

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Abstract

An Experience with Language is a collection of genres designed to incorporate modern-day conversational language and slang for the purpose of tempting young adults into partaking in an involvement in reading—from Young Adult literature to the classic canonical texts. After having encountered numerous adolescents who claim to “not read”—a statement implying not that they are illiterate, but rather have little to no interest in reading—I wondered what, exactly, was contributing to this growing, nation-wide apathy towards literature. With a library or bookstore in every town, how is it possible that the percentage of those who read for pleasure has plummeted among all age groups from the mid-twentieth century until today?

With these—and endless other—questions in mind, I began researching the current trends in YA literature to determine the best methods for approaching adolescents; much of the process was spent writing creatively, in form of poetry, short story, and essay, to compose a body of short texts for young adults. I aimed to precisely depict, throughout all of the texts, the voices and vernaculars of the modern American young adult.

The research indicates that the decline in literacy scores among students is directly related to increasing distractibility due to technology; television, video games, music and cell phones require enormously less critical or conceptual thinking skills than reading of any sort. In attempt to offset this disparity, both Late Beginnings and “Pollutin’ the Airwaves” integrate those exact distractions—primarily text messages and rap music—to draw readers into material they would have otherwise been reluctant to read. A significant finding from the research proposes that, despite common
misconceptions, children who engage in text messaging amongst their peers generally display higher linguistic capabilities than those who do not. This suggests that text messages need not be feared by literate society, but rather utilized as a tool to actively involve readers with the language at hand.

In a culture where technology is paramount, those who previously spent their free time reading now have a horde of “easier” pleasurable activities, and it is not at all surprising that American literacy has suffered as a result; to counteract this, there must be an equally vigilant movement to reengage young adults in both reading and writing. It is my hope that An Experience with Language will serve as a starting point for this and similar discussions; without a solution, the problem of young adult (il)literacy will only expand exponentially over time.
Introduction:

An Experience with Language

“The trends among younger adults warrant special concern, suggesting that—unless some effective solution is found—literary culture, and literacy in general, will continue to worsen” (National Endowment xiii).

As an aspiring writer and editor, I found the creative thesis to be the utmost operative way to display the ardor for writing that has intensified throughout the duration of the English Master’s program. For this creative and critical project I framed my research around the formal constraints of creating literature that appeals to a precise age group—specifically those aged 16-24, whom I refer to interchangeably as adolescents and young adults. The genres included (poem, short story, and essay) are intended to provide a wide range of linguistic and literary techniques for an audience more familiar with the style and pace of the novel.

Countless children who once marveled over a trip to the library are in recent times amused only by cell phones, computers, and video games; though they may have been raised to appreciate the escape from reality that literature provides, the tedium of schoolwork and distractions of the modern world can cause disdain for the art of reading and writing. Although many authors have succeeded at creating novels that are relevant to young adults, it is the other, overlooked genres—poetry and short fiction—whose forms best suit the teenage mind.

The purpose of this thesis is to create a cohesive collection of poetry, prose, and essays that touch on topics such as modern social and psychological issues and sexuality, among other things, with the purpose of appealing to—and providing a somewhat revitalized style of literature for—teens and young adults who may be less interested in reading and writing. The texts intend to unite within the realm of an experience or
discussion with language; while plot, theme, and characters will be complex aspects of the prose and immensely open to interpretation, calling attention to the words themselves, and in effect, asking young readers to consider the journey rather than the destination.

The focus on teen and young adult literature stems from the belief that a deep connection to the written word is either nurtured or extinguished during this period of time. When the rebellion of young adulthood begins to rear its head, those who once completed their assigned reading with compliance, if not enjoyment, eventually greet any task that requires reading with disdain and annoyance. With the advent of websites such as Sparknotes and Wikipedia, students are able to effectively pass examinations and participate in class discussions without ever having read the text at hand. This scenario seems increasingly prevalent and without question needs to be addressed both inside and outside the classroom. A quick glance at the Sparknotes library reveals that the literature students are resistant to—and thereby in need of a study guide for—is generally less contemporary in nature, and therefore more difficult to understand. While it is important to keep these classic texts in the curriculum, they do not always incite the interest and deep, critical thought that is intended by the instructor. By providing material that young adults deem relevant or significant to their individual lives, they are less likely to experience the desire to “rebel against” the reading process.

The idea for this project was initially inspired by the current pervasiveness of text messaging among all ages. Even those with little to no interest in reading literature are quick to jump at the opportunity to “play” with language through text messaging. The question became—could integrating text messages into a literary text encourage non-readers better than the classics? And further—can typically rejected or avoided subject
matters bridge the gap between adolescents and lauded literature? From these inquiries, *Late Beginnings* arose. While there is no single answer for these questions, young adult literature (YAL) provides a unique means of getting young adults to think critically about language and literature—even if it is slightly less verbally advanced than texts they *should* be reading. Thomas Bean’s article "Using Young Adult Literature to Enhance Comprehension in the Content Areas," explains the way that YAL benefits academic skills on multiple levels: “Young-adult literature offers an excellent means of engaging adolescents in reading for pleasure, as well as exploring content area concepts in a fashion that is likely to maximize students’ comprehension” (Bean 2). Although “An Experience with Language” does not directly address pedagogical concerns, its purpose is to elucidate the need for a wider variety of YAL—not just prose, but also poetry, drama, essays, and other forms of genre—to be used both inside and outside the classroom.

With the prevalence of digital media in modern society, children and adults alike are encouraged to interact with electronic machines (television, computer, cell phone, etc.) instead of engaging in direct dialogue with one another. The article “Rap Universal” by K.C. Nat Turner illuminates the pervasiveness of technology in the lives of American adolescents: “Students’ patterns of Internet usage resembled their television usage, with the largest group of students (over 30%) reporting that they used computers and the Internet very often (49-70 hours per week) and 74% of the students reporting that they used it to do social networking or watch music […] videos on MySpace or YouTube” (Turner 618). Conversations are separated by time and space, nearly eliminating the need for interpersonal relationships. Literature, in essence, brings language “back to earth,” promoting critical thinking and the ability to interpret words personally and individually.
The brevity of poetry, both in line and overall length, appeals to the young reader because of its accessibility and speed of internalization. However, the conventional approach of poetry tends to only highlight the generally accepted classics—Shakespeare, Bronte, Longfellow, etc.—in which the subject matter and language is largely foreign to the American high school student. By maintaining literary traditions within the parameters of contemporary issues, I believe that the young reader will feel closer to, as well as more inspired by, the form of poetry as it differs from other genres.

By incorporating a mode of communication with which most Americans are familiar, they are perhaps more likely to consider their own use of language, words, and even interpersonal relationships. The structure of *Late Beginnings* is intended to appear as realistically as possible for readers who are familiar with text messaging. The study referred to by Plester, Wood, and Joshi was intended to examine the correlation between children’s literacy and their ability to understand textisms: “Thurlow (2003) examined over 500 older British teenagers’ text messages for content and communicative form. He concluded that the messages demonstrated adept and creative communicative ability, and did not demonstrate the corruption of language feared by many” (Plester, Wood, and Joshi 146). While many are concerned with the long-term effects of technology-based communication upon language skills, most research indicates that there exists no relationship between texting and lower reading levels; quite contrarily, the better one is at understanding abbreviated and/or misspelled text messages, the more advanced their literacy. "Exploring the Relationship Between Children's Knowledge Of Text Message Abbreviations And School Literacy Outcomes" portrays the malleability of language when used in instant messaging:
There is less judgment attached to text messaging than to other forms of writing—children can write as conventionally or unconventionally as they wish, with or without punctuation or capitalization, and all spellings are legitimate as long as the convention for ‘reading’ them is an established one that will enable to recipient to understand it. (Plester, Wood, and Joshi 156)

While every person chooses to utilize different abbreviations and acronyms—sometimes based upon with whom they are communicating—most textisms can be decoded by a cell phone user with moderate experience. As Plester, Wood, and Joshi note, it is only necessary for the recipient to understand the message’s meaning. They continue to dispel the common myths regarding literacy and text message usage by referring to the empirical data obtained in their study, saying: “This suggests that children’s use of textisms is not only positively associated with word reading ability, but that it may be contributing to reading development in a way that goes beyond simple phonologically based explanations” (Plester, Wood, and Joshi 155). If text messaging does not inhibit reading skills, but rather the contrary, has positive correlation to higher verbal reasoning scores, then it certainly deserves just representation in literature; it also obtains a power to ensnare young readers in the era of technology.

*Late Beginnings* ushers readers into an experience with poetry, thinking, and ultimately language by requiring them to be more creative in their interpretation of the text. Plester et. al reminds us that this may be, initially, challenging for readers unfamiliar with textisms: “Many, if not most textisms are essentially forms of phonetic abbreviation, as in the example of ‘2nite’ instead of ‘tonight’. To produce and read such abbreviations arguably requires a level of phonological awareness (and orthographic awareness) in the child concerned” (Plester, Wood, and Joshi 147). This suggests that one’s interaction
with text or instant messages can actually serve to benefit their linguistic comprehension across a spectrum of media. *Late Beginnings* can serve, at the very least, as an encouragement for young readers to have confidence in their own linguistic skills; when one is able to decode a line such as “don u mis hs,” with ease, they will be heartened to use the same analytical and linguistic proficiency when approaching classical texts.

Although individual phones display messages differently, the sequential, time-stamped messages look similarly to those on many devices. Text messages and instant messages (sent over the Internet) monitor and record time in a way that no other medium provides; users are able to communicate in real-time without having to respond instantaneously.

The ambiguous structure of *Late Beginnings* allows it to be paralleled to classic drama as well as poetry. As dialogue is typically the paramount element in drama, *Late Beginnings* can be used to discuss the process of creating active, true-to-life conversations in a condensed space. The interactions between multiple characters promotes discussion of changing voice; just as language is designed for its recipient, so too are text messages. One of many texts that is straightforwardly related to *Late Beginnings* is the play entitled “Translations” by Brian Friel, which, although it was written in the twentieth century, takes place in nineteenth century Ireland. The characters experience a barrage of miscommunications based upon their different uses of language; some characters speak English, some Irish, one is mostly mute; debauchery ensues as the witty dialogue highlights the shortcomings of and innate, individual connection to language. With minimal stage directions, “Translations” and *Late Beginnings* each permit an experience with spoken language and dialect; one is able to analyze the characters in
both based upon their unique voices and choice of words. This idea is literalized in the characters of Emily and Rachel in *Late Beginnings*. Despite being sisters, they communicate with disparate techniques; Emily prefers to text in complete sentences, in attempt to clearly demonstrate her thoughts, while Rachel, like many adolescents, texts in acronyms and short words. The question could be raised: how do the two modes of communication change the meaning or intent behind the messages? Similarly, how can a minute change in language drastically alter the topic’s purpose?

The piece entitled *Life Tripping* is a segmented short story that centers around the current issues of promiscuous female sexuality, religious and existential faith, and different forms of therapeutic healing. As the protagonist, Wren, sets out on a journey to reconcile her past and present, she decides to patronize a new-age past-life regression therapist who guides her through her so-called previous lives. When Wren enters a past life, she adopts the language of that time and culture. A question arises: do we use language as simply a tool for communication, or does language create the reality we perceive? Wren struggles with this idea as she considers the veracity of her past life experiences and regression sessions. Like much YAL, *Life Tripping* shadows the intimate yet prevalent social issues, allowing the reader to actively learn and question alongside the protagonist.

While the vocabulary of *Life Tripping* is by no means highly advanced, its conversational, true-to-life structure could be, dependent upon reading level, quite appealing to both adolescents and adults alike. The concept of past lives (and foreign language) asks the reader to consider, conceptually, the nature of apparent reality; do we use words to express reality, or rather, do words themselves *create* reality? Furthermore,
Life Tripping proposes that the reader reflect upon the length of a text and associated implications—can just as much be said in twenty pages as in two hundred, and how does length ultimately change what is being said?

The short sections allow readers to take the material at their own pace; although some may think that the brevity in media contributes to America’s shortening attention span, it has been proven that shorter literature is more likely to captivate non or infrequent readers’ minds. Lynn Rashid’s “When Less Is More” proposes that the length of short stories, among other things, is what makes them appealing to non-readers.

Educators challenged to find high-interest/low-reading-level materials will find that the short story can be a perfect match for struggling and/or disinterested students. The selections below won’t demand the same time commitment a novel will, but their unusual characters and rousing plots will quickly engage readers as they appeal to their mature interests and tastes. (Rashid)

Rashid makes a critical note: that novels require an amount of time and commitment that many adolescents (or even non-reading adults) are hesitant to relinquish. Poetry, short stories, and essays all provide the opportunity for an experience with language with fewer figurative strings attached. Their length requires condensed, poignant language in order to convey the same, if not more, depth of meaning in a novel.

The themes discussed in Life Tripping provide a valuable link to many classic texts, whether novel or short story. For example, one could use the issues of sexuality and social self-worth to make Henry Mackenzie’s “The Man of Feeling” more navigable for the younger generation. Written in the mid-eighteenth century, “The Man of Feeling” might initially appear too strenuous for the non-experienced or disinterested reader. The language and sentence structure, archaic and verbose, requires a dedication that many adolescents are unwilling to give, and yet the length of the novel itself (98 pages) is...
attainable for even the most hesitant non-reader. Although the novel takes place over two-hundred and fifty years ago, one can easily observe the sociological similarities between then and now; men and women battle with the morality of sexuality today nearly as much as any time in the past.

“Pollutin’ the Airwaves:” An Analysis of Contemporary Rap from a Poetic Perspective seeks to highlight the various ways in which rap and poetry converge, as well as tackling the negative stereotypes perpetuated by critics of rap. The article “What they do learn in school: Hip-hop as a bridge to canonical poetry” explains that since its inception, rap has been criticized by opponents who claim it to be a poor role model for social behavior: “The response of conservative America has been to label the hip-hop artists as gangsters and blame them for instigating or inciting acts of violence in urban communities while the music has been written off as overly violent and sexual noise” (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 17). Admittedly, much rap contains images of violence and sexuality that are not appropriate for all ages; at the same time, its appeal to young readers provides a bridge from popular media to classical literature analysis. The article goes on to dismiss common assumptions of rap music as a “dumbing down” of inner-city youth:

Particularly, in the English classes, we began to notice that students who could critically analyze the complex and often richly metaphoric and symbolic hip-hop music they listened to and then effectively articulate that analysis, were failing to exhibit these same analytical skills in class when reading to canonical texts (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2).

It stands to reason that lyrical analysis skills are easily translated to canonical literature; one who is familiar with rap might have an easier time transitioning into literary analysis if they have come to understand ideas such as metaphor and simile through a medium
they appreciate. The same proficiency in language is necessary in comprehending complex lyrics and classic texts:

From a text such as Nas’ ‘Affirmative Action’ can be taught metaphor, irony, tone, diction, and point of view. Also, hip-hop songs and albums can be analyzed for themes, motifs, plot, and character development. It is very possible to perform a feminist or postmodernist critique of hip-hop texts. […] Once learned, knowledge of this language of interpretation can be applied to any text. A metaphor is the same whether for Nas or T.S. Eliot. (Morrell and Andrade 22)

Nas’ “Affirmative Action” is only one of many hip-hop classics that can be easily related to literary devices; examining a wide range of artists will assist students in being more accepting of a myriad of literary texts. “Pollutin’ the Airwaves” strives to show the innate resemblance of hip-hop music to poetry; adolescents will better understand poetry and poets from William Shakespeare to William Carlos Williams when viewed through this lens. The poem “Paterson” by William Carlos Williams displays much of the same poetic techniques as the song “Forever” discussed in “Pollutin’ the Airwaves”:

Before the grass is out the people are out
and bare twigs still whip the wind—
when there is nothing, in the pause between
snow and grass in the parts and at the street ends
—Say it, no ideas but in things—
nothing but the blank faces of the houses
and cylindrical trees […] (Rothenberg and Joris 360)

Williams uses loosely iambic structure, internal and external rhymes and alliteration, as well as rich metaphor to illustrate the need for the transformation in perception of poetry and language. The line “Say it! No ideas but in things” (Rothenberg and Joris 361) which is repeated within the poem utilizes the same active engagement with language displayed within much rap music; Williams is also directly addressing the reader like Lil Wayne and Eminem in “Forever.”
William Carlos Williams’ other, more minimalistic poetry can also be related back to *Late Beginnings*, in that each individual word holds immeasurable weight and meaning within the texts. From the poem “The Locust Tree in Flower,” for example, students could be asked to consider the significance of each word in relation to the poem as a whole.

Even Shakespeare can become more accessible after a discussion of rap and poetic techniques. If adolescents (or adults) are able to hear the rhythm and rhyme of Shakespeare’s’ poetry, regardless of vernacular, they will be more likely to comprehend the nuances of Shakespeare’s literature. There is a long, well-documented history of paving the way to complex thinking through the analysis of hip-hop; much has been written about relating Shakespeare’s writing to a contemporary audience by illustrating the similarities between sixteenth and twenty-first century poetry. An article from *The Times* in the United Kingdom discusses a group of schools who have incorporated popular song styling to classic texts in an effort to get students more involved in the discussion of outwardly antiquated literature. Students who take part in singing updated versions of Shakespeare classics—from Othello to Romeo and Juliet—ultimately recognize the multitude of likenesses in language, love, and societal constraints.

The ultimate goal of creating a progressive and contemporary compilation of texts that engage the young reader does not come from motivation for economic gain; but rather, the wish to inspire the youth who will eventually be responsible for continuing literary traditions by illustrating that not all literature is lofty, verbose, and socially irrelevant, as some would like to believe. Just as dialects differ from generation to generation, so does slang; not only is this to be an attempt at accurately depicting current
communications, but also encouragement to the youth of America to consider their own involvement in the language they claim to be distant from.

As in much literature, form is generally an extension of content. The decision to approach this project from multiple genres instead of a single one comes from the belief that form alters meaning; had Late Beginnings been written in dialogue instead of text messages, it would produce quite a different result. All four of the thesis texts are intended to be relatively brief—a characteristic designed for those who tend to lose attention when given something to read—and yet a continuation of An Experience with Language would include lengthier texts in additional genres, such as drama.

An Experience with Language strives to accurately portray, as closely as possible, contemporary slang and attitudes about pertinent social issues. Although hip-hop music may be disapproved of by a certain sect of Americans, “Pollutin’ the Airwaves” strives to illustrate the value of approaching rap from a poetic perspective; if music can transport one into an experience with literature and language, then surely it is an exceedingly advantageous and worthwhile medium. Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-hop and the Politics of Postmodernism repeats this notion of hip-hop as relevant education: “Hip-hop, far from being a simple object which a postmodernist project could `bring to light' or offer up as exemplary, is itself an active, ongoing, and highly sophisticated postmodernism—a postmodernism which in many ways has gone farther and had more crucial consequences than all the academic books on postmodernism rolled into one” (Potter 9). From teen pregnancy in Late Beginnings to the ever taboo female sexuality in Life Tripping, relevant, widespread cultural conversations will embolden readers to think critically about their own lives and more significantly, their relationship to language.
While writing for any specific age group creates unique problems for the author to address, young adult literature represents one of the most challenging genres to write in our electro-centric society; the techniques utilized within the creative texts to engage and stimulate the mind of the young reader may or may not be ultimately successful. At the same time, I hope that I will be able to continue considering the implications of young adult literature as I traverse into creative writing of a different sort, whether it is children’s stories or adult novels. I believe that focusing on writing itself, instead of writing with the audience in mind, will allow me to improve upon my craft.
**Late Beginnings**

Albany County, New York

**October 6th, 2011**

*SILENCE*

woke her.

*a piercing howl—*

flashing cerulean unable to permeate

her

*blood-matted blindfold*

of hair.

*Then, a familiar melody...*

1 (518) 256-1434  
Rachel Endres (3:19p): emmy r u ok?  
Rachel Endres (3:19p): where r u?  
Rachel Endres (3:20p): im sry em u hv 2 frgve me!  
Rachel Endres (3:20p): ill make it up 2 U em i promise. I love you.

**October 3rd, 2011**

*(Three Days Earlier)*

1 (518) 256-1433  
Rachel Endres (4:46p): How’s my baby girl ?  
1 (518) 256-1434  
Rachel Endres (4:46p): im fine...jus tired  
Emmy (4:47p): Ha ha ha. I meant Anna.  
Emmy (4:47p): What are you guys doing?  
Rachel Endres (4:47p): lol jk shes good we3n u out work  
Rachel Endres (4:48p): baby einstine  
Emmy (4:48p): It should be a short shift, 4-8 or 8:30. Do you mind? I really appreciate it.  
Rachel Endres (4:48p): noo not at all! I <3 spendin time w her.  
Emmy (4:49p): I know. If you want to take her out just grab the car seat from the garage. Sometimes she'll nap better in a moving vehicle.  
Rachel Endres (4:49p): don we all ;-) i saw it but the strap brok.  
Emmy (4:50p): On the car seat?  
Rachel Endres (4:51p): ya  
Emmy (4:52p): Shit. That’s okay, it was Tom’s younger brother’s old one anyway. Guess I need a new one…  
Rachel Endres (4:52p): i was jus g7na call tom n c if he wnts to com watch her while i go get a new 1 quick.
Emmy (4:53p): Aw, Rach, you don’t have to, they’re hard to pick. I’ll grab one on my way home.
Rachel Endres (4:57p): no its k. i still hav birthday $$ needs to spnd!!
Emmy (4:58p): You’re the best. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.
Working three days a week is not enough.
Rachel Endres (4:59p): u shuldnt b workin
Emmy (5:00p): I don’t want to, but I have to. Nothing’s free.
Rachel Endres (5:01p): k text me wen ur comin back!
Emmy (5:01p): Ok, let me know how it goes with the car seat. Thank you!!
Rachel Endres (5:02p): netime emmy. <3<3

1 (518) 256-1434
1 (518) 691-7906
Tommy (5:02p): chilln w Jared, u?
Rach (5:02p): wuts up?
Rach (5:02p): anna needs a new carseat, cn u come here?
Tommy (5:03p): y?
Rach (5:03p): so i can go get 1?
Tommy (5:04p): wut happnd to elis?
Rach (5:04p): can u jus come?!
Tommy (5:05p): im not gunna leave rite now but ill go to the store in a bit
Rach (5:05p): n then ull stop by?
Tommy (5:10p): no i was plannin on keepn the carseat…strappin up my friens when they wile out

1 (518) 691-7906
Tom Freedman (7:13p): I jus dropped off a new carseat with ur sis, but lemme know when ur on ur way home. I wana come see you.
1 (518) 256-1433
Em (7:14p): That’s great, thanks, babe. I’m glad you have time tonight :)
Tom Freedman (7:16p): me to. School n job search takes up so much time. I fuckin hate being broke. Hows work?
Em (7:16p): Slow. I can’t wait to get home.
Tom Freedman (7:17p): U sure u trsut rach with Anna?
Em (7:18p): Of course! She’s a natural. Don’t you?
Tom Freedman (7:20p): Yeh…but shes only 16…I just worry bout her when me or u arnt there.
Em (7:20p): And at 18 you’re that much more mature? I know…it’s hard. I want to be with her as much as you do, but we have lives to live, right?
Tom Freedman (7:22p): I guess. N f u, im a grown man compared to ur sister.

Em (7:22p): Having a kid does NOT make you a man. Especially you.

Tom Freedman (7:23p): U don just want to take Anna n go hide out? keep her protected from everythin?

Em (7:23p)(1/2): Every day. Unfortunately I realize that shielding her from life won’t do any good…my parents weren’t over protective, and we turned out okay :) She’ll grow up, see bad shit, make mistakes…but (2/2): we’ll be there for her.

Tom Freedman (7:24p): Your right. cept bout turnin out ok

Em (7:24p): Say what you want. Anna’s going to turn out great.

Tom Freedman (7:24p): us too

Em (7:24p): I hope so. I just want to make her happy.

Tom Freedman (7:25p): Me to. Text me when ur home?

Em (7:26p): I will. I love you, babe.

Tom Freedman (7:29p): i love u to babe

¤          ¤          ¤

1 (518) 330-5581

Antoinette Fischer (7:49p): Hey lady what are you doing tomorrow?

1 (518) 256-1433

Emily Endres (7:50p): Just hanging with Anna. What’s going on?

Toni Fischer (7:50p): Rickys having a party cuz his parents are going away. Cn u come? Plleeeaaassee i miss u so much!

Emily (7:51p): Haha I miss you, too. So much. I’d really like to, but I think I’m just going to stay home. I’m sorry…

Toni Fischer (7:52p): are you sure? Ill pick u up and bring u home!

Emily (7:53p): You’re sweet, but I can’t. Gotta be a mommy. Can you come over some day soon?

Toni Fischer (7:55p): yeah, I have work sat but ill call u sun pm?

Emily (7:56p): Sounds great. I’m so excited to see you!


Emily (7:58p): I love you, too. Have fun at Ricky’s!

Toni Fischer (7:59p): Thanks. ttys

Emily (8:01p): Later, love.

¤          ¤          ¤

1 (518) 256-1433

Em (8:39p): Home!

1 (518) 691-7906

Tom Freedman (8:45p): omw

¤          ¤          ¤
October 5th, 2011

1 (518) 256-1433  Em (3:23p): Could you pick up some formula on your way home from school?
1 (518) 691-7906  Tom Freedman (3:30p): im broke til weds can u ask ur mom
                      Em (3:32p): She just gave me fifty for diapers and I feel bad asking her for more. It’s our responsibility…not hers.
                      Tom Freedman (3:37p): shit…im sorry, im tryna find a job but its hard, u know
                      Em (3:38p): I know…it’s okay, just please try hard. My mom’s willing to help but only for so long. Have you asked Ricky about getting in down at his dad’s shop?
                      Tom Freedman (4:41p): rickys not talking to me… mad about his girl’s party last night.
                      Em (4:41p): What happened?
                      Tom Freedman (4:45p): Idk. I showed up with a group of our friends but she didnt seem happy to see us. I guess jareds ex had some problem with him bein there with ur sis.
                      Em (4:46p): I didn’t know Rachel went there with Jared. She didn’t get into a fight or anything, did she?
                      Tom Freedman (4:48p): Naw nothin went down they just asked us to leave, we left went back to jareds house, everything was cool.
                      Em (4:49p): Who drove? Was Rachel drinking, too?
                      Tom Freedman (4:50p): Only a lil. I took the wagon. 
                      Em (4:50p): She’s 16.
                      Tom Freedman (4:52p): Chill out em i was watching out for her. u were drinking at 16 to.
                      Em (4:52p): Are you leaving school soon? You should come over and see us.
                      Tom Freedman (4:53p): If jenkins lets us out of here by 530 ill be suprised.
                      Em (4:54p): What was it this time?
                      Em (4:58p): Tom?
                      Tom Freedman (5:00p): Sry he was looking @ me, jus didnt get to 6th on time, five min tops late. bullllshit.
                      Em (5:01p): I’d really appreciate it if you could let me know next time you’re planning to bring my kid sister on a binge.
                      Tom Freedman (5:03p): haha i was sober i swear
                      Em (5:04p): Screw you, getting high counts. Will you text me when you’re leaving? Me and baby miss your delinquent butt.
                      Tom Freedman (5:10p): yup…ill be leaving asap
                      Em (5:11p): I love you.
Tom Freedman (5:12p): love u to

Tom Freedman (4:48p): yo
Jared Dixon (4:50p): was good?
Tom (4:51p): nm man in detention...need a fave.
Jared (4:52p): ?
Tom (4:55p): if Emily hits u up cn u tell her that u invited her sis?
Jared (4:57p): y?
Tom (4:57p): cuz she gets mad jealous wen i chill w her sis...obv.
Jared (4:58p): sure, np. U playn em?
Tom (4:58p): Jeez man who u think i m?
Jared (4:59p): I kno who u r. N sumthin tells me ur stayin under
the radar n workin both of em
Tom (4:59p): Nooo not at all. Its a family affair ;)
Jared (5:00p): ur an ass

Emmy (4:50p): Did you go to Ricky’s with Tom?
Rachel Endres (4:51p): y?
Emmy (4:53p): Because he said you went with Jared and...I'm
having a hard time believing that. I thought you
hated Jared.
Rachel Endres (4:54p): I DOo!!!
Emmy (4:55p): Then why did you decide to go out drinking with
him?
Rachel Endres (4:56p): i did h8 him b4 but he invitd mee not tom
n i wnted 2 go
Emmy (4:56p)(1/2): Listen Ray, I know I’m not Mom but would
you please be careful? I know it’s normal and
all but I don’t really care to see my only sister
smeared across the
(2/2): pavement because of one stupid mistake.
Rachel Endres (4:56p): jeeezus MOM ur so dramatic
Emmy (4:57p): Oh thank you, I am a mom, maybe not yours, but I
love you to death.
Rachel Endres (4:57p): ily2
Emmy (4:58p): Sooo...be aware of who you’re going out with.
Don’t drink too much. Call me if you need a ride.
Please just be careful?
Rachel Endres ( 4:59p): u kno i will b <3
1 (518) 256-1433 Emily Endres (4:54p): Hey Jar, did you invite my sister to your house the other night?

1 (518) 905-2885 Jared Dixon (4:55p): Naw she jus came. W tom and ashley i think

Emily Endres (4:57p): That’s what I thought. Thanks, Jar.

Jared Dixon (4:58p): but i tol her it was a good idea to com

Emily Endres (5:00p): Oh. Same thing, I guess. Ttyl.

Jared Dixon (5:05p): L8r

 собирает материалы

Rach (4:54p): yd u tell emily about the party?

1 (518) 691-7906 Tommy (4:54p): i told her u went with jared…its all good.

Rach (4:54p): shiiiiit

Tommy (4:55p): what?

Rach (4:57p): call me l8r

Tommy (5:14p): I wuld call bt i cnt, im stuck in class. wats goin on?

Rach (5:14p): its fine, i told her i went w jared 2

Tommy (5:14p): and?

Rach (5:15p): she bileved me i guess i jus dont feel right bout lyin to my own sis…

Tommy (5:15p): I don either but were not lyin.

Rach (5:15p): ??

Tommy (5:16p): Im gunna tell her soon. It just hasn been the rite time.

Rach (5:16p): tell her what?

Tommy (5:17p): About the party. What really happened with Ricky…she gunna find out

Rach (5:17p): And?

Tommy (5:18p): And?

Rach (5:18p): hv u made up ur mind bout what ur gunna do?

Tommy (5:19p): I think we can work it out

Rach (5:19p): Who?

Tommy (5:20p): We can. All of us. Rach, I gotta go. Jenkins is gunna kill me if I keep txtin.

Rach (5:20p): Call me?

Tommy (5:20p): I will. Later.

 собирает материалы

Tom Freedman (6:15p): i just got home hun i gotta change but ill be there soon…u need nething?

1 (518) 691-7906

Tommy (6:16p): I guess not…unless your mom decided to bring home formula.

Tom Freedman (6:19p): lol no ill ask her for some money tho.

Any thing else?
Em (6:21p): Just you, love.
Tom Freedman (6:34p): Hey babe i need ur help
Em (6:35p): *Surprised.
Tom Freedman (6:36p): Shut up, i know she eats enfamil but theres so many kids.
Em (6:36p): I know, I should have told you. It’s Enfamil but it’s called Enfagrow Soy. So she doesn’t get too fussy…or gassy.
Tom Freedman (6:36p): tmi
Tom Freedman (7:03p): Im here let me in!
Em (7:03p): The door’s unlocked…we’re upstairs.
Tom Freedman (7:03p): k

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1 (518) 256-1434
Rachel Endres (11:03a): cn i ask u sumthin
Emmy (11:04a): Ask away, babe.
Rachel Endres (11:06a): if u kinda like a guy, n he has a gf…? Wut then???
Emmy (11:06a): I guess that depends on the guy. If you really love him or not, if he really loves you or not.
Rachel Endres (11:08a): n hw do u no?
Emmy (11:10a): If you’re in love with him?
Rachel Endres (11:11a): if he loves me
Emmy (11:11a): Well…you’ll just know.
Rachel Endres (11:11a): sara said its a red flag
Emmy (11:12a)(1/2): I suppose it is. Love is never easy, though, never black and white. But sometimes—once in a long while—they actually leave their girlfriends. It’s terrible, the whole situation, but I’ve (2/2): seen it happen before. A lot. It’s hard to trust anyone nowadays, isn’t it?
Rachel Endres (11:14a): fk that. u cnt b afraid of gettin hurt or itll always happen
Emmy (11:20a): That’s almost wise, little one.
Rachel Endres (11:21a): wat u do?
Emmy (11:22a): Just gave Anne a much needed bath. Wyd?
Rachel Endres (11:23a): w8n 4 lunch
Emmy (11:23a): Third period?
Rachel Endres (11:24a): 4
Emmy (11:25a): Not long, then :)
Rachel Endres (11:26a): don u mis hs?
Emmy (11:27a): Sometimes. Not when I’m busy with Anne, I’m just glad I can be with her. I don’t get those “send ‘em to daycare” moms.
Rachel Endres (11:28a): yea…she a mommys gurl. Shed be so sad w/o u
Emmy (11:29a): I think so, too. And if you’re happy with this guy then there’s your answer.
Rachel Endres (11:29a): b w/ him?
Emmy (11:30a): You have to. If your head and heart disagree it’s usually better to side with your heart.
Rachel Endres (11:30a): if u say so
Emmy (11:32a): I do. I’m about to go grocery shopping—text me if you’re bored?
Rachel Endres (11:34a): <3
Emmy (11:34a): <3 xo

1 (518) 691-7906 Tommy (11:30a): Will u meet me by my locker in 5?
1 (518) 256-1434 Rach (11:31a): idk if i can get out of bio
Tommy (11:31a): I wanna see u
Rach (11:32a): k ill try
Tommy (11:33a): ttys
Rach (11:35a): where r u?
Tommy (11:39a): comin now

1 (518) 691-7906 Tom Freedman (11:50a): Sry im in class
1 (518) 256-1433 Em (11:51a): I didn’t mean to bother you, I just wanted to know what you were thinking about for dinner.
Tom Freedman (11:52a): Whatever u want, babe.
Em (11:54a): All right. Can’t wait to see you tonight…
Tom Freedman (11:56a): Ill call u when im leavin here
Em (11:57a): Sounds good. Xoxo

1 (518) 256-1434 Rach (2:54p): were ru?
1 (518) 691-7906 Tommy (2:55p): smokin a j at nicks
Rach (2:56p): im telln her tnite
Tommy (2:58p): dont. I need to tell her. Nothings even happened.
We went to a party, we like to hang out. she knows this already
Rach (2:59p): dosnt kno we like each othr
Tommy (3:00p): Thats not true, we were friends since before me n her. I tell u i love u to ur face in front of her.
Rach (3:00p): not like that
Tommy (3:01p): It’s kinda the same, more or less.
Rach (3:02p): u hav 2 chuz btwn me n her. u cnt have both
Tommy (3:02p): Why?
Rach (3:02p): bcuz its not fair to me or her
Tommy (3:03p): Couldnt we just all...idk, love each other?
Rach (3:03p): iz that a joke??
Tommy (3:05p): No. I care about emily, but i care about u to.
Rach (3:06p): well u hav 2 pick
Tommy (3:07p): look mayb ur misunderstandin me.
Rach (3:08p): wouldn b the 1st time

1 (518) 691-7906  Tom Freedman (3:11p): im sry, but i gotta go to dinner w ur sis.
And i think its jus better to not tell her...i'll just screw things up n...I love
Anna...frist bove evrthin else.

1 (518) 256-1433  Em (3:12p): ??
Em (3:13p): Tell me what?
Tom Freedman (3:19p): Fml...cn we talk at the diner?

1 (518) 691-7906  Tommy (3:13p): shes gunna care, n i don wanna hurt her. look i luv
u lots but only as a frien. No more. can i call u
18r?
1 (518) 256-1434  Rach (3:16p): no...i mean...i don thnk we shood talk nemore. Im
glad u care so much bout em but u sad u cared about
me 2. i feel lk such a idiot.

1 (518) 256-1433  Emmy (3:14p): What the fuck is going on between you and Tom?
1 (518) 256-1434  Rachel Endres (3:15p): im sry, em...i need 2 tak 2 u. Wr r u?
Emmy (3:15p): Not answering my question. Anna and I are driving
to the diner to meet up with Tom. Maybe we can
talk when I'm done.
Rachel Endres (3:15p): nuthin happnd!
Emmy (3:16p): Well then what is he planning on telling me about?
Rachel Endres (3:16p): ...can we plzzz talk??
Emmy (3:17p): I can't believe you. How could you do this to me?
To Anna?
Rachel Endres (3:17p): emmy lisd i cn explan everything
Emmy (3:18p): Wh
Rachel Endres (3:18p): ??
Rachel Endres (3:19p): emmy??
Coming to her senses,

she attempted to scream;
    only a faint gurgle.

She gathered all of her energy to shake free the blindfold of hair.

    Blaring sunshine, yet...

    silence.
“The MTV Generation: they sit, glued to television sets, mesmerized by online chat boards, addicted to video games. They shun books, reading only when necessary. In short, today's teenagers simply don't like to read” (Furi-Perry).

With the advent of digital communications such as cell phones and the internet, American teenagers spend much more of their free time attached to technology than engaging in reading and discussing literature for pleasure. The perceived need to be constantly connected via electronic devices has unequivocally contributed to an already declining attention to education and literacy rate among adolescents. Reading has become an increasingly neglected pastime, requiring an amount of focus and fortitude that adolescents often lack: “Activities that require intense, focused attention, such as reading novels, are decreasing among young people, while those that require the division of attention, such as instant messaging, are on the rise” (Levine, Waite, and Bowman 560). Popular activities that are done simultaneously such as instant messaging, text messaging, and emailing improve adolescent’s multitasking ability while inhibiting their aptitude to concentrate on one single task at a time. By utilizing the same modes of communication that distract young people from reading, writers, librarians, educators, parents, and other members of the literary community are able to help bridge the gap between technology and an understanding of standard English, literary conventions and theory.

The study conducted by Levine, Waite, and Bowman set to determine the correlation between adolescents’ literacy levels and their participation in instant messaging—real-time, two or more person internet chat rooms. What they discovered was that today’s adolescents are experiencing greater difficulty concentrating on single tasks than ever before: “Teens are reporting difficulty with concentrating on their
schoolwork, with 15-year-olds experiencing more difficulty concentrating than 10-year-olds” (Levine, Waite, and Bowman 561). It is not at all surprising, considering the variety of media available today, that reading is in competition with technology. According to the study, a student is more likely to avoid literature in favor of instant messaging or music: “Distractibility for academic tasks was significantly negatively correlated with reported frequency of reading books for pleasure and reading magazines and was significantly positively correlated with frequency of IMing and listening to music” (Levine et al. 564). The question then becomes: if IMing is detrimental to a young person’s reading habits, why include it in a text designed specifically for those young people?

The answer, although quite simple, might not appeal to conventional authors and educators: children without proclivity to literature can be drawn into a relationship with reading through less verbose, more manageable literature. The article entitled “Dude, That Book Was Cool': The Reading Habits Of Young Adults" written by Ursula Furi-Perry suggests that most children have a desire to read despite their individual skill levels. She believes that children and young adults sometimes reject classic literature that can be difficult to understand in favor of texts that relate to the experiences of their lives:

According to the ALA's New Directions for Library Service to Young Adults, while certain books and magazines may offer slightly lower vocabulary and linguistic levels, their appeal is likely to increase interest among teens who generally choose not to read in their free time. Teens who are nonreaders often will build better reading habits and a love for reading if they start with easier materials. (Furi-Perry)

The “easier materials” to which Furi-Perry is referring are largely young adult literature; generally shorter in length and simpler in comprehension level, young adult literature (YAL) is typically avoided in American classrooms in exchange for the classics. This
may prove counterproductive in the long run, as even less young adults are engaging in reading and writing than ever before.

The National Endowment of the Arts regularly releases scholarly studies or reports about the conditions and degeneration of American literacy throughout the past decades. What seems most crucial in the NEA’s report is the increasing need to address America’s weakening passion for the written word. According to the NEA’s 2004 article “Reading at Risk,” we are at a uniquely critical moment in history where, unless innovative measures are taken, “non-reading” children and adolescents will abandon literature for the remainder of their lives. The introduction states: “The trends among younger adults warrant special concern, suggesting that—unless some effective solution is found—literary culture, and literacy in general, will continue to worsen” (National Endowment xiii). The stakes here are high: declining child and adult literacy and the fate of the literary community, and yet the solution remains unclear. Is it possible to reconcile for decades of technologic obsession and return American youths’ concentration to the complexity of our language?

The NEA’s “Reading at Risk” also highlights the various medias that are in direct competition with literature: “A 1999 study showed that the average American child lives in a household with 2.9 televisions, 1.8 VCRs, 3.1 radios, 2.1 CD players, 1.4 video game players, and 1 computer” (National Endowment xii). For a study implemented over a decade ago, it goes without question that these numbers have increased. The article’s mention of the VCR (which, ten to twenty years ago, was the premier of new technology) illustrates the rapid rate at which technologies are evolving; I would not be stunned if today’s cell phones were to be viewed as antiquated technology by the year 2020. Along
with this increase in the prevalence of technologic devices comes a sharp decline in the frequency of literary reading among all age groups, genders, races and religions.

While all three age groups under age 45 dropped in percentage, for those adults 18 to 24 years of age, the literary reading rate decreased from nearly 60 percent in 1982 to 43 percent in 2002 – a drop of 17 percentage points. Young adults are reading much less than they used to. Making literary reading appeal to teenagers also appears to be a significant problem. (National Endowment 26)

While a drop of 17% in young adult reading rate may not appear staggering at first glance, it is likely that these numbers will only grow over time. The National Endowment for the Art’s 2007 article “To Read or Not to Read: a Question of National Consequence” further elaborates upon America’s low literacy levels from elementary school to college and beyond: “Although reading tracks closely with education level, the percentage of college graduates who read literature has declined” (To Read or Not To Read 8). Although it is consistent that the higher one’s education level, the more likely one is to read for pleasure, high school and college students are reading less today than the graduates of the twentieth century. “By the time they become college seniors, one in three students read nothing at all for pleasure in a given week” (To Read or Not To Read 9). While this may be due, in part, to the amount of assigned reading given to college seniors, the NEA’s study goes on to suggest that even assigned literature is ignored in favor of other, less challenging activities.

In 2004, 2005, and 2006, the majority of high school students read only minimally for class. In 2004, as we have seen, 70% spent 0-3 hours weekly on leisure reading. That year, 76% of high school students reported reading assigned texts or course materials for only 0-3 hours a week. (To Read or Not To Read 42)

Although a horrifying number of high school students are reported to have read minimally for pleasure, an even higher number reports spending negligible time on their
assigned homework. This statistic suggests, among other things, that students do have a
tendency to enjoy reading—they prefer reading individually chosen literature for pleasure
to those (classic) texts assigned by their teachers.

One shocking statistic provided by The National Endowment for the Arts states
that many American adults maintain a gut-wrenchingly low comprehension level similar
to that of their younger counterparts:

A 1995 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
shows that 45 percent of adults read at “prose literacy levels” one and two.
Rather than reporting a single illiteracy rate, NCES classifies adults into
five levels of literacy. People scoring at levels one and two probably do
not have the skills necessary to read many types of literature. (National
Endowment 15)

If even American adults are unable to read at advanced levels, what does that say about
the fate of our children? With nearly half of the population ignorant\ to the world’s
greatest literature, it seems only natural that future generations will encounter greater
difficulty in linguistic comprehension.

The text message poem arose from the idea that children and young adults are
more likely to engage in literature that specifically appeals to them. The constructed
format of Beginnings is an amalgamation of text messages, instant messages, and email;
while each phone presents text messages to the recipient in different ways, today’s youth
is accustomed to acclimating to these minute differences, and generally welcomes the
fast-paced back and forth between two people. Growing exponentially in popularity, text
messaging engages individuals in the formation of language while providing virtually
instantaneous social gratification: “According to a survey carried out last year by Nielsen,
Americans between the ages of 13 and 17 send and receive an average of 3,339 texts per
month. Teenage girls send and receive more than 4,000” (Ferguson). With twenty-four
hours in a day (a generous calculation, as not all twenty-four are spent awake) and an average of thirty days in a month, teenage girls send over 5.5 texts for every hour in the day. While this provides a great explanation as to why teenagers are spending less time reading and more time with technology, it contributes to the argument that adolescents will be significantly more likely to read if they are given topics that appeal to them.

Certain statistics suggest that texting is largely used as a peer-to-peer messaging system instead of universally used communication. Many teenagers report that the largest number of text messages sent are between friends as opposed to family:

Thus, over half of the participants (54.79%) used texting extensively with friends (i.e., 8 to more than 20 messages per day). Results for texting family revealed that 47 (19.2%) do not text family, 69 (28.2%) sent 1-5 messages per month, 65 (26.5%) sent 1-10 messages per week, 33 (13.5%) sent 1-7 messages per day, 7 (2.9%) sent 8-20 messages per day, and 2 (.8%) sent more than 20 messages per day. These results illustrate that texting is used with family members but to a much lower extent than with friends. (O’Connell 98)

Rather than use text messaging as an all-inclusive means of interaction, it seems as though adolescents recognize the varying appropriateness of this mode of communication; while some teenagers text excessively, the statistics from O’Connell show that others use it responsibly, or only when necessary.

What seems monumentally important to note is that, at least thus far, there is no viable correlation between text messaging and a lower capacity for literacy. Much to the contrary, studies show that young adults who are more interested in “textisms”—abbreviated words and acronyms used during texting—are generally higher scoring on the verbal sections of standard examinations. The study “Txt msg n school literacy: does texting and knowledge of text abbreviations adversely affect children’s literacy
attainment?” by Beverly Plester, Clare Wood, and Victoria Bell examines the currently unexplored relationship between text messaging habits and youth literacy. According to Plester, texting could potentially have a positive effect on young people’s reading habits: “In particular, there was a significant positive association between proportion of textisms used and the children’s verbal reasoning scores… indicating that those children whose text language was more densely abbreviated were those whose verbal reasoning scores were highest” (Plester, Wood, and Bell 139). It stands to reason that the more engaged one is with language—the more they are able to mold and understand words—the higher their literacy level will be. Furthermore, one’s fervor for words in general translates well from the phone to the page: “The enthusiasm for textisms, for the playful use of language that enables creating a variety of graphic forms of the same word, is highly related to the kinds of skills that enable scoring well on standard English language attainment measures” (Plester, Wood, and Bell 143). When one “decodes” a text message, they are learning to look at words from a different perspective; the misspelled words in text messages often carry quite different meanings than grammatically, punctually correct dialogue.

It also seems substantial to state, in relation to Beginnings, that the epidemic of texting while driving has been fatal for a great deal of individuals. Lisa Gardner addresses this issue in her article “Wat 2 Do Abt Txt’n & Drv’n (aka: What to do About the Problem of Texting While Driving?)” by explaining that unless drastic measures are taken, the number of deaths due to driving and text messaging will only increase: “The risk of a ‘crash or near crash event’ for those involved in text messaging was 23.2 times greater than for those who were not distracted while they were driving” (1). For
adolescents with little experience on the road, this number could realistically increase. She believes that while there is no single solution to this problem, social encouragement and regulation is likely the only way the situation will improve. If texting while driving becomes more socially unacceptable than it is today, then perhaps it will be taken more seriously or avoided altogether.

Gardner also reminds us that as cell phones and text messaging gain popularity, the number of messages sent each year will expand exponentially: “The number of SMS messages sent averaged 14.4 million in 2000; by the end of 2005, that average was 9.8 billion. Approximately 1.56 trillion text messages were sent in 2009, and that number is only expected to grow in 2010” (Gardner 3). This statistic leaves us at a critical literary crossroad; we can either embrace textisms and text messaging and use it as a bridge to other literature, or continue to look down upon it, effectively making it more taboo and as a result, more appealing to youth. I hope that Beginnings can function as a starting point for discussion of these issues and, at a minimum, engages both adolescents and adults by showing the linguistic creativity that text messaging provokes.
Life Tripping

Part I—Sleepless in Chicago

Prostitute on Thursdays—September 29th

I discovered therapy wasn’t working when I woke up and didn’t recognize the man snoring beside me. I wasn’t drunk, but the Xanax, Ambien, and Red Bull cocktail sufficiently dulled my better judgment. I crawled out from beneath the bedspread and threw a baggy sweatshirt around my bare shoulders as the Ambien haze began to lift. Jeremy? Jacob? Jeffrey? He told me his favorite band was the Guess Who, and, name or no name, I was hooked. Past that, I can’t remember much. He was a true gentleman, or he fucked me fast and hard and then passed out with his boxers at his knees. Either way, I awoke satisfied and slightly ashamed. It wasn’t that I didn’t know him—so many mornings smelled of stale, lustful, anonymous sex—one-night stands are my preference, and Jason would be gone before I had the chance to lie to him. What bothered me most was that my therapist might be right—I might be addicted to sex, and therapy and medication might not be enough to make me “better.”

Maybe I should have taken the hint when my psychiatrist suggested I start seeing someone else. “There’s something you’re not willing to talk about yet, Wren,” she explained, taking notes on her large, yellow steno pad, “and I can’t be of much help until you’re ready to think about it.”

Was she joking? “I tell you everything. I don’t know what I’m not telling.” Apparently this had been what she was waiting for, as she began to scribble faster. After she had finished writing, she flipped slowly through the pages in my manila file, trying to remember why she had such distaste for me from the very beginning.
Two weeks prior, she had revealed her suspicions. I was chronicling my most recent sexual escapade—a tryst with a married couple from the Chicago suburbs—when she interrupted. “And how do you feel about this…ménage trois?” Again, I questioned her sincerity. How do you feel about being an uptight, probing, medbot?

“I feel…fine. I enjoyed it.” More scribbling. “I mean, I…we really hit it off. They were…normal.”

“I see. Are you familiar with the term hypersexuality?”

More than you know… “I don’t think that—”

“It’s a common problem, even for women.”

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love sex…but…I’m not addicted to it.”

“You might feel that way, but if it interferes with your—”

“It doesn’t. I go to work, go out with friends…”

“And you don’t think your reliance on sexual attention could be problematic?”

Sex was the only thing that made life easier. “Not at all. I wish I could be a prostitute.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Maybe only on Thursdays or something. It’s not good to mix business with pleasure.”

A quick glance at her notes from September 12th and her memory was refreshed.

“I understand you’re honest with me, Wren, but I think there’s something even you aren’t aware of that’s affecting your behavior.”

If I wasn’t aware of it, how could I fix it? “What do you suggest?”

“I think some form of alternative treatment may be of help. I know a hypnotherapist,” she pulled a bright green business card from her desk and handed it to
me, “Jeanine Cramer. She specializes in recovered memory…very nice woman, very…modern.”

“Recovered memory?”

“Guided hypnosis. It’s…debated, but I’ve seen it be very useful. I’d call her and make an appointment today.”

“Will I still be meeting with you?” Hypnotherapists can’t prescribe drugs, otherwise I wouldn’t have asked.

“We can meet once every few months to evaluate your medication, but, I think you may want to begin looking for a new psychiatrist.”

I wasn’t the slightest bit insulted. “Okay, great.” I took one last look around the sterile, Berber-carpeted cave and headed for the door. “Thanks for the recommendation.”

The First Session—an Open Book—October 11th

It didn’t take long to get an appointment with Jeanine. Twenty-three years of practicing hypnotherapy out of her run-down bungalow with less than three regular patrons provided an unusually open schedule, and I jumped at the opportunity to try something new. My mother was a fan of this new age nonsense—lighting sage branches to purify our home’s energy, meditating on the back porch until midnight—it didn’t stop her from downing a bottle of Chantix last year. As far as I’m concerned, enlightened or not, we’re all fucked.

Jeanine liked to say that enlightenment was necessary for progression into new realities. “The soul’s journey is not a steady path,” a claw-like black acrylic nail rose to draw an arch in the space before her, “and modern science was not created to manage the inner workings of our post-physical consciousness.”
I tried not to laugh, “I guess I’d rather have a post-physical cigarette than worry about consciousness…”

She smiled coyly. Her garish accessories did nothing to conceal her omniscient mystery.

“May I ask you something, slightly personal?”

Isn’t that where we’re going? “Of course.”

“What’s your greatest fear?”

I had to think. “2012.”

“As in…Mayan Prophecy 2012?” I nodded. “Interesting…” She didn’t believe me.

“I’m not kidding. I thought the shit was crazy for the longest time. Everyone just wants their end to be special.”

“Are you afraid of dying?”

“Never. I’m more afraid of living…of being awake indefinitely.”

“Then what frightens you about 2012? If it’s really the end then everything will be…”

“Empty. That’s what scares me. What if I survive and everyone I know is gone?”

She paused, absentmindedly fingering a greying curl. Her olive eyes read mine. “I would like to do a past life regression. I find them, in certain situations, to be more effective than traditional recovered memory therapy.” She sensed my hesitation. “It’s quite simple, really…no different than normal hypnosis. Have you ever been hypnotized?”

The ass on that desperate housewife… “Only for relaxation. Guided meditation, that kind of stuff.”
“Exactly. That’s what we’ll be doing. Does that sound okay to you?” I heard my mother imploring me to let her read my palms. Despite my reservations, I trusted Jeanine, and was interested to see exactly where she was planning on taking me. Maybe this was the answer. “I’m down for anything.” She asked me to resituate myself on the striped loveseat adjacent to her rocking chair, to make myself comfortable. “Close your eyes…and allow your breathing to become even…calm. Notice each breath of air enter through your nose, travel down your throat, fill your lungs.” My heart rate slowed as the blackness around me dissipated, breathing slowly, in and out. “Feel every muscle from the tips of your toes to the top of your head…one by one…contract, and hold, then release. Allow your body to separate from your mind, from your soul. I want you to imagine a room.”

I pictured a bedroom. Spacious, meticulous, feminine…

“And the room can be filled with whatever you’d like…decorated however you imagine it to be. Maybe there’s a chair, or a blanket to sit down on…” The plush bed was just out of reach, but I could barely see it, but I knew it was there. “Do you see that?”

I turned and saw a thick wooden desk behind me, and noticed a brown leather-bound journal, open.

“Touch it.”

I read. ...et la fête avec mes filles était mieux que je pouvais espérer, mais, mon père...

I don’t know French.

“To your right is a staircase. Go to it.”

2012—Believe it or Not—October 16th
“So…what do you think it means?” My brother was generally less skeptical than I, and likened my first session to his interest in dream interpretation. We’d had weekly dates since my mother passed and he smelled worse than usual, of patchouli and ripe body odor.

“I don’t know, Eric, maybe that I should learn French?”

“Come on,” he took a joint from his shirt pocket and lit it. “If you could open your mind for just one second…”

“It’s open, all right, just not to bullshit.”

“This isn’t like Mom’s hocus pocus…I don’t think it’s bullshit. You should actually give it a try. See what you find.”

“It just seems so…contrived. Like, aren’t I just making this shit up? Isn’t it just whatever comes to my mind randomly based on—”

“—Maybe. Or maybe it’s not. You’ll never know if you don’t…I don’t know…let it do its job.”

“This is just weed, right?” His only reply was a playful glare. “I just…I try to see things for what they are, right?” He handed me the joint and grunted in agreement. “I try to…look at things logically, and realistically, and…people are so quick to believe whatever they’re told.” Reclining on the couch, he nodded, closing his eyes. “Are you still listening to me?”

“Of course, people are sheep, I’m just resting. I’m listening. Continue.”

“Well maybe that…hippie quack just mind-melds certain thoughts and then I think them. There has to be a simple explanation.”
A moment passed before his eyes burst open, “What’s with you and simple explanations? Who said anything in life is simple? What happened to the Wren who played Ouija with me…who…told me that everything was beyond our understanding? What happened to stocking up for 2012?”

“Oh, I’m still stocking up.” I’d planned everything that needed to be bought on a seasonal chart—batteries, Band-Aids, first-aid kit to be bought next spring; water, canned food, and a five month supply of Ambien to be gathered the coming summer.

“Nostradamus had it right?”

I recalled the stacks of books on Nostradamus my mother had collected over the past decade, now strewn across the backseat of my 2000 Jetta. I’d read them all thoroughly and discussed it with my father, who was even more analytical than myself, and ended exactly where I started—not believing. “Nostradamus didn’t know shit. He could have been talking about anything.”

“So you’re giving all the credit to the Mayan calendar?”

“Nope. None.”

“Then…what? What makes you so sure—”

“I’m not sure…I thought it was all bullshit, too, up until a few weeks ago. Dad forwarded me a link about this ‘Web Bot Project’…they made it back in the nineties, trying to predict future stock patterns.”

“And it worked?”

“Apparently. Only they changed it so it could predict everything,” Eric narrowed his eyes cynically, but I caught the glimmer of fear, “I know, it sounds crazy, I don’t
know how it works, something about collective subconscious,” he chuckled, “I’m serious! I guess it predicted 9/11, and Katrina, and the oil spill, and—”

“—dun dun DUN! Doomsday!”

“—the complete collapse of the US dollar beginning in 2009…”

“Some magic 8 ball.”

“It predicted the Dick Cheney hunting accident!”

“Fuck Dick Cheney. Let me get this straight…” he puffed on the joint a few times before handing it back, “you believe an internet program that says 2012’s going down, apocalyptic shit to the max, but you won’t listen to an…intuitive old woman—”

“—Quacker, intuitive old quacker—”

“—who’s just trying to help you solve your problems? I don’t get it.”

“The program said it can’t find a trace of human activity from the 21st of December until May 2013. Nothing. They say it’ll be a solar flare, or magnetic pole reversal…catastrophic.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but…don’t you think you’re being a little…superstitious?”

“There’s a big difference between being prepared—looking at the evidence and coming to a…safe…conclusion—and being gullible. I’ve got nothing to worry about if shit happens in 2012, I’ve been livin’ it up. I can’t say the same about…past lives.”

“I’m just sayin’, you can’t be afraid of what’s ahead or in the past, and as much as I hate to admit it…living the way you’ve been might not get you to the end of 2011.”

“Says the man who brings me marijuana.”
“Pot’s the least of our worries, Wrenny. I’m sure you were smokin’ doobs, or…tokin’ opium on les Champs-Élysées with the best of ‘em.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

I hoped he was.

The Second Session—Soul Searching—October 18th

“From the top of the stairs, you are able to see all the way down. Notice the color of the stairs…what they’re made from, how sturdy they are…” This staircase was not the wide, white staircase I had seen extending from the dainty blue bedroom; this time, I had begun in an entirely different room. Stark, empty. Hard, dark wooden planks lined the walls and floors, and the staircase that descended seemed unstable, and equally foreboding.

“And as you walk down each step, allowing your breathing to remain calm, even…you count backwards from ten, one number for each step. Ten…” I didn’t want to go, but my feet took control. “Nine…” The uneven stair wobbled beneath me. “Eight…” There’s no railing. “Seven…exhale…”

She encouraged me to take notice of my new surroundings—the earthen floor, handmade cedar table and stools, an empty clay pitcher. “Are you ready to tell me where you are?”

No. “Yes.”

“Make sure each inhale….exhale…is even. Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell when you are?”

“Long time ago.”
“Look out the window,” no window, but the door is open—tumultuous skies, dense forestry, “and tell me where you are.”

“America.”

“I see…and…who are you?”

I looked for a mirror, but saw none. Outside, the skies opened and a light mist blot out the sun, already half hidden by clouds. “I don’t know.” Jeanine sat in silence as I examined the cramped, unoccupied cabin. I knew I was myself, but not; I was in a home I’d never seen, but it was my own. The comfort merely disguised my sadness—I was alone, injured. A strange twinge in my left leg confirmed this, and it was only then that I became aware I’d been limping.

“Who are you?”

I glanced down at my hands, typically plainly manicured, to find two calloused, ruddy palms, jagged soil-lined fingernails. It didn’t take long for my fingers to reach a mat of stringy hair—a pile of dishwater strands where my waist-length, sepia mane had been. “I’m a man.”

“So you are…” her words began to blend together, yet I still understood, “and what’s your age?”

“42.” 41? No, my birthday was last month.

“Forty-two…forty-two…”

“I built this house.”

“All by yourself?”
“No…there was…” a crack of thunder in the distance, “everyone got sic—”

Before my tongue could complete the consonant, the cabin before me disappeared and I was left standing, naked, in the now-pouring rain. Jeanine could taste my desolation.

“It’s okay,” she cooed, “it’ll all be okay. Stay present…look around you. Who’s there? What do you feel?”

The icy rain pelted my bare body. “Guilt.”

“Are you about to…pass on?”

“How yet. A few more months, I think…” The rain changed to needles, boring straight through me. I may have screamed.

Jeanine remained silent for a minute, until realizing I had reached my limit.

“Close your eyes, and let it all disappear. Breathe rhythmically, deeply…you’re just fine, all right? You’re back at the bottom of the stairs…and as you breathe, slowly, you begin, counting each step…backwards from ten…”

F*** Me Gently—October 20th

I’ve never slept better. Came home from the appointment and just collapsed. No Ambien, no NyQuil. Two straight nights at seven hours a piece. Didn’t even have sex.

Still, I had to get out of my head. The longer I slept, the more I dreamt—horrifying, sweat-inducing worst-case scenarios, vibrant nostalgic scenes I’d never before witnessed. I decided to call Zach, who was always happy to bring me back down to earth.

“I’m gonna hump you sweetly,” he answered, singing drunkenly, “I’m gonna…ball you discreetly!”

I hate Jack Black. “You know me too well! Are you close by?” He told me he’d be over within the hour. Hopefully sooner.
I didn’t even feel like having sex, but I don’t think he would have come otherwise. I can’t even say that I minded—two or three thrusts and I would forget all about the barren cabin and pouring rain and French diary. I settled myself into bed, waiting for him. Before long, a knock at my apartment door.

“ Took you long enough, ” I called out. Without greeting me, he walked to the bathroom and closed the door.

“You got anythin’ to drink?” He called, flushing the toilet.

“There’s beer in the fridge.” I heard it open, the clink and clang of bottles knocking together, and close, before Zach’s slender frame appeared in the moonlit doorway.

“How you feelin’, gorgeous?”

“You know, I’m thinking about making a serious living off of this.” He set his bottle on the nightstand and slinked between the covers next to me, pulling my hips to his.

“Sleeping with me?”

“Sleeping with whomever.” He kissed the back of my neck.

“You could…”

“Prostitution’s only illegal ‘cos it gives…” I turned to face him, eye to droopy eye, “us women…” I kissed him hard, then pushed him away playfully, “entirely too much power.” This fell beyond his inebriated comprehension, so he kissed me back.

After a few moments, he pulled me closer to whisper in my ear, “And then I freakin’ fuck you discreetly…and then I fuckin’ bone you completely…” Enough.
“Yeah, you know—I just remembered I have to wake up early for a meeting at work tomorrow.” The look on his face said he didn’t understand. “Can you leave?” I was willing to play their game to get what I needed, but this was too much degradation for one night. He stumbled out of my apartment without complaint, unaware of my rejection.

Once he left I was wide awake. Realizing it might be time to jump on the 2012 bandwagon was bad enough, but…reincarnation? It was out of the question—or at least it had been, until my normal dreamscape became interspersed with memories from lives I’ve never lived. The night after my second session, I dreamt of farming; I was pruning the potato plants, picking bright yellow apples from a nearby tree, when all of a sudden the tree turned into a mile-high skyscraper, wobbling, about to fall. I woke only seconds before it crushed me.

It brought to mind my snobby psychiatrist’s accusations—“something I’m not willing to think about”—but I knew there was nothing. Not from this life, at least, and that’s all I really have time for. There was nothing that I’d ever kept from her, and that’s what angered me the most. I told her about the years of physical abuse my sweet, passive mother chose to ignore, about the time I threw up all over my eighth grade teacher and got called Chunkamunks until my junior year of high school, how my father used to make me suck his cock. I told her everything. Even lies. When I worried that she didn’t believe me, I created more plausible problems that were entirely untrue—“I hate my thighs…won’t even think about wearing a bathing suit. Do you think I might have…body dysmorphia?”—maybe that would convince her I wasn’t completely off the deep end. I guess there’s nothing left to do but wait. When life and dreams and the past and the whole, limitless universe collide, you don’t need answers—and I don’t even know the
questions—you just have to hang on and see what happens…what’s real and what’s bullshit. Maybe Jeanine’ll help. Maybe she can’t. In the meantime, I need to get laid.

Part 2—Re-Awakening

The Jungle—October 29th

By the sixth session, I started to think of myself as an experienced past-life explorer. I’d been to France, India, and a land before countries existed. I was a boy, and then a girl again, an old man in loincloth, a hummingbird. That was the fifth session—flittering from ruby-necked lilies to sun-colored zinnias—and the first time I’d been nonhuman. Flying far above the untouched landscape, I saw no trace of civilization. When twilight came, I danced with her across lavender skies until midnight blue blanketed the earth. It was exhilarating.

I was everyone I’d never been and everywhere I ever knew, and I needed to see more.

Jeanine’s thick, wooden hoops clanked like wind chimes as she fluffed the paisley pillows for her patients’ low-sitting, threadbare loveseat. “Please…” she motioned that my temporary coffin was ready and I took my normal position, horizontal, facing the vibrant tribal tapestry and crimson sheet-draped window. A stream of golden light escaped past the thin curtain, illuminating a small, sparkling, onyx stone that sat on the corner of Jeanine’s cluttered desk. Jeanine followed my gaze. “Is there something you recognize?”

That was the troublesome part of spending half of my waking life in dreams—I recognized everything: a whiff of fresh whole milk and I was back in my dilapidated cabin, hands ruddy, alone; a clock tolling in the distance was my French school bell, and
I hadn’t remembered to grab my Latin books; in Jeanine’s paperweight, my lightless cave dwelling. The once-scrupulous lines between this life and my pasts had been obliterated, and it became harder to determine what was from memory, a different life, or pure fantasy.

“You know my last psychiatrist…” I needed to change the subject. Jeanine nodded. “First time I met her she asked me if I could ‘refrain from smoking’ in the mornings before our appointment…said she couldn’t stand the smell of smoke.” She inched a spotless glass ashtray in my direction. “No,” I laughed, “I’m fine, I don’t smoke inside, it’s just…how did she ever expect to have patients if she couldn’t stand smokers…or sex fiends? Who does she think goes to psychiatrists?”

“I don’t know, and you’re not a” she paused in disgust, “sex fiend. When you’re in a safe environment, judgment shouldn’t be a concern. I can see how her expectations seemed…unreasonable. So did you…” she leaned in with childlike interest, eyebrows raised, “not smoke before your appointments?”

“I tried at first, but…gimme a break. Sometimes our appointments were at 1, 2 in the afternoon. I know you’re not a smoker, but…believe me, morning’s impossible without a cigarette.” My eyes left hers and fell to the glass ashtray, the small stone. “I’m sorry…my mind’s just all over the place. Can we start? I’m ready.”

Jeanine rose leisurely from her armchair to turn on the sound machine in the corner by the door. Thunder, rain, bird calls. “Now you may have noticed…” Jeanine cooed, returning to her seat, “how easy it has become to leave this life and enter the past…” I didn’t need her to guide me; once I aligned my breathing, my mind began to slip away. I was in the jungle.
I was accustomed to the first feelings of a foreign body—the change in gait or height. Color. Species. What I could never appreciate was the distance I felt from my family; in most lives, I was alone. Today, I had a feeling, would be different.

Plodding through the wet underbrush, I stopped beside a trickling stream to wash the sweat from my eyes; the reflection of a young, sable warrior greeted me at the edge. Naked. My inky face layered with lines of bright red pigment, my ears pierced with thick plant stems, the sour smell of blood on my hands.

Still, I knew not where I was. My instinct was to scale the closest tree, and I did so with ease, slinking up the chipping bark like a gymnastics rope. Nearing the top, the dense jungle began to thin, clearing my vision of the open plain and forests beyond.

A voice I couldn’t understand wafted lyrically past my perch, “Can you tell me who you are?” She did not expect a response.

A think line of gray wisps rose above the treetops miles in the distance, signaling my home. It took only a short time until I entered the clearing of our camp. Five small mud-walled huts lined against the trees, encircling the fire enclosure, around which eight or ten sable, painted men sat, clicking and laughing. The last moments of sunlight shone through the canopy of trees; hubbub from inside the huts informed me that the women were preparing the evening meal. I swallowed hard; though the faces seemed familiar, I sensed danger.

“ÁOn! ḭq’x ní’ule?” My uncle called from the edge of the fire, asking to know where I’d been. I recognized the glint in his eye—I’d met this man before (or after). His tattoo-scared face fixed on mine, hunger in his lion eyes.

“Si’i Ohh,” I responded, annoyed, but he was not pleased.
“Nlu!ó q|á!h” I followed him, ashamed, past the other men, and onto a narrow trail away from our campsite. It was only wide enough for one, so he pushed me ahead, lecturing in tongue flicks and lip smacks. I hung my head, hearing my father’s harsh tone in my uncle’s rapid clicks. I should not have been gone for so long—how was I to tell the time?—and my uncle reprimanded me for acting beyond my rank.

“In’e!h qOh,” When you become a true warrior—a grown animal, he explained to me, puffing himself up like a bird of paradise, “!fa’ iqOl!’ nhl,” you will have the power to rule over others.

Until then, I was to pay for my disobedience.

“Áld’,” I begged, as he pushed me to the brush-covered ground, hovering above my pubescent nakedness.

“O’n!n ÷÷!og,” Do not be afraid. He seized my arm and flipped my slight frame face down in the dirt. “Ne’lu n/o÷f a…” You must do this to become a warrior…

The pain was too great to bear; my back was splitting in half.

When I finally came to, I was flailing hysterically on Jeanine’s sofa, drenched with sweat, crying. She swooped down beside me, tissues in hand, and wiped the wet hair from my eyes.

“Oh, Wren…” she managed between my sobs.

“I never…ever screamed,” I gasped for each breath, “I just lay there and…let him take advantage of me.”

“Your father?”

“Everyone…” I closed my eyes to see flashes of hundreds of men’s faces, “yes…my dad. I should have said something, shouted…told someone…”
“Darling…you can’t blame yourself. It wasn’t your—”

“It was ‘coz I could have stopped it, could have screamed no, and ran!”

Jeanine left my side and returned to her perch, idly twisting one of her chunky jeweled rings. I began to catch my breath.

“It’s like I’m giving them the power to—to control me.”

She leaned in as if this was the moment she had been waiting for, “Precisely, my dear. This is all in your control. Your subconscious. You must fight through these challenges, and grasp the reins of your future.”

A few minutes passed in silence as I attempted to comprehend exactly what Jeanine was telling me.

“You mean,” I almost couldn’t speak the words, “all this shit is in my head?”

“Well naturally, darling, where do you think any of it comes from? Me?”

My head swam as flashes of myself in past lives blurred into one image—my current self. My weak and sweaty face. Had all of this been solely my doing? Jeanine sensed my confusion and offered an even more disturbing explanation.

“I can’t say for certain one way or the other, but something tells me that our past lives are connected to our present subconscious. Perhaps your difficulties with men stem from turbulent relationships in previous lives.”

“You’re saying that I enjoy sex and hate men because of some made up journal entry? Some…fantasized rape scene?”

“The unconscious mind displays what it cannot understand. Perhaps the trauma has carried through.”
I was less convinced than ever. Had I created these past lives or did they create me? How could I hold power over something so significant? I had to get out of there.

“Look, Jeanine,” I tried to remain as respectful as possible to the woman who’d led me to this point, “I thought this was for real. I thought you were legit.” Her milky eyes gazed absentmindedly at the polished gray stone, and I became infuriated. I hastily grabbed my purse and twenty dollars from it and set it on the table next to the door. Was this all just a scheme for money? With my hand on the doorknob I turned back towards her to mutter, “Do past lives even fucking exist?”

Slamming the door behind me I barely heard her final whisper, “It’s all in the mind, you know.”

**Revelations**—October 31st

I decided then that would be my last of any form of therapy sessions. Jeanine had left me even more confused than when I began; I couldn’t decipher *this* life let alone any of my pasts. I knew I had to go one at a time. I told Eric about my last session with Jeanine; how I now questioned the veracity of all the past lives I’d experienced. My brother jumped at the opportunity to revel in my desolation as we smoked together on his back patio.

“So what about 2012 now, Wren? Still stocking up for the impending apocalypse?”

I couldn’t bear to tell him that in my post-session frenzy I had packed up my storage of canned goods and Band-Aids and batteries to be dropped off at the Salvation Army downtown. If something was going down in 2012, I didn’t want to be around to see it.
“Who knows what’s going to happen,” I responded, “in 2012, or twenty years, or two hundred years from now. Not me.”

“Why so tentative all of a sudden? What happened to,” he stood up from his seat at the wooden plank bench, mockingly puffed up his chest, and lifted his nose to the heavens, “a deep, celestial understanding of the past, present, and future?” I poked him hard in the gut and he doubled over dramatically, chuckling.

“I guess Jeanine did teach me something after all.”

“Oh yeah, astral projection?”

I shot him a warning glare but didn’t respond.

“Well what, then?”

I glanced around the sparse courtyard, contemplating how to word my answer, when a small, black stone caught my eye. “I think I just have to take this life one day at a time, instead of wondering what could have been or what will be. There’s no way to prove it, anyway.”

“You mean you think you made it all up? All those past lives?”

“Could be. Maybe she did. I don’t know.”

We spent the rest of our visit in silence, with nothing passing between us except the thin, smoking joint. I was grateful he didn’t push things further.

I guess that’s the catch to therapy or past live regressions or any type of treatment. You have to really believe in its power in order for it to work. For me, I couldn’t believe—at least not at this point. I need more solid, tangible evidence. Until then, I suppose I’ll just have to figure these things out for myself.
“Pollutin’ the Airwaves”:
An Analysis of Contemporary American Rap from a Poetic Perspective
(featureting Eminem, Lil’ Wayne, and Outkast)

“Hip-hop is poetry. Langston Hughes meets Das EFX. Drunken adjectives and smoked out sentences filled with sex, guns, violence, and lust. Hip-hop is the Black existence. Hip-hop is lyin’ ass ni*gas telling lies to eyes, ears, pockets and TV screens” (Woldu 29).

Similar to jazz in the 1920s and 30s and rock ‘n’ roll in the 50s, rap music of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been met with a great deal of skepticism and discontentment. Each genre, despite their vast differences, has been viewed as morally corrupt; opponents generally cite lustful sexuality, dissention from “upstanding” society, and animalism as the main reasons for rejecting these genres as youth-geared garbage. While jazz and rock ‘n’ roll have been accepted as legitimate, even conservative, styles of music, rap remains largely discounted as amoral by the conventional public. With the rampant success of pop stars such as Britney Spears, Katy Perry, and Usher, all of whom delegate the responsibility of writing their superficially shallow and lyrically bland hits, it is not surprising that there has risen an underground movement of artists who attempt to break stereotypes of pop music by paying more attention to the quality of their lyrics and melody than appealing to the mass of American teenagers. Though initially, one may see the blatant sexuality, greed, and disconnection with society that appears in rap music as an encouragement to deviate from social norms, a more thorough analysis of the lyrics suggests that rap is not the uneducated, profane genre that some believe it to be. By censoring rap music and labeling it uniformly as offensive, derogatory, or misogynistic, critics effectively perpetuate a stereotype that delegitimizes the artistic efforts of today’s subjected youth.
It is quite easy to compare the social response to Jazz in the 1920s with the rap of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, if only because they are denounced due to their “unrespectable” messages. A brief glance at the historical reception of jazz highlights the way in which less complex music is sometimes favored over songs that illicit contemplation. According to Thadeus Russell’s article “Is Rap Tomorrow’s Jazz?” it is both black and white citizens alike who have taken issue with genres such as rock and jazz. “In the 1920s, several civil rights leaders were so concerned about the sexual and violent content of popular blues and jazz songs that they established a record company to ‘undertake the job of elevating the musical taste of the race.’” Promoted by W.E.B. DuBois and A. Philip Randolph, two of the most important civil rights leaders of the 20th century, Black Swan Records pledged to distribute ‘the Better Class of Records by Colored Artists,’ which meant recordings of ‘respectable’ European classical music.” (Russell) The same sentiment is shared by challengers of rap music; “respectable” music should not emphasize our animalistic tendencies, but rather align itself with conventional European norms. Russell continues to connect the historical pasts of jazz and rap music by explaining the unique result of expression that does not align itself with the dominant majority: “Many scholars argue that the creators of jazz, blues, rock and R&B were great because of their willingness and ability to work outside European cultural forms and to speak about elements of the human condition that white artists would not, such as sex and violence” (Russell). While genres such as rap and jazz may be initially rejected because of their manifestations of sexuality or other “taboo” subjects, once the proverbial dust settles, they are praised for their dedication towards accurately representing the collective social concerns of their time.
What may come as a surprise is that many prominent black Americans, from whom the taboo genres originally came, express more displeasure with jazz and rap than their Caucasian counterparts. According to Russell, “There is a long but little-known history of African American leaders denouncing black popular music as self-destructive and an impediment to integration, a history that continues in the current campaign against rap.” What is most disturbing about this statement is Russell’s assertion that African American leaders are more concerned with integrating with white culture than promoting the autonomy and worth of their own people. While a peaceful, mutually respectful relationship between white and black Americans is wholesome in theory, it seems to require integration and assimilation only by the “other,” which in this case signifies African Americans.

Even the term “African American” keeps blacks at a distance from the dominant white culture. We (white Americans) do not usually refer to ourselves as British American, Italian American, or whichever nationality our ancestors came, but rather as Americans, with various ethnic backgrounds. “African American” implies that any person with dark skin is of African descent, regardless of their actual (Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, India, etc.) country of origin. Even Americans who are of Asian descent are generally referred to as “Asian” instead of “Asian American,” associating them as the “other” who is virtually unable to assimilate into western culture, rather than as the African American who must conform to European morals in order to be socially accepted. What would seem to be the most logical conclusion is to identify all Americans as African Americans, or plainly, Americans, or even all humans as African, as that is the continent of communal origin. While white Americans are more likely to collectively
engage in cannibalism than to hail themselves entirely as African, a reconfiguration of our term for black Americans does not seem to be out of the realm of possibility.

That being said, the movement for equality need not begin in a white girl’s academic rants, but in the voices of those black Americans in power today. By portraying rap music as an extension of the problems of inner-city youth, noted blacks contribute to rather than deter from ideas of infinite differences between races. Without falling victim to color-blind racism, it is necessary for prominent black Americans to embolden and promote members of their culture instead of judging artistic endeavors according to European standards. Thaddeus Russell explains how Al Sharpton, a Baptist minister and current talk show host, has wavered somewhat in his activism towards civil rights. Despite touting himself as a straight-shooting, equality-driven pillar of black American morality, many have criticized his motivations towards the advancement of black equality. According to Clarence Taylor’s book entitled Black Religious Intellectuals: the Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the Twenty-first Century offers a valuable preface to the discussion of black leaders and their responsibility to African Americans: “The Reverend Al Sharpton’s most vocal critics have painted him not only as an opportunist, ambulance chaser, and a media hound, but as a political radical who is to blame, in part, for the deterioration of race relations and for the raw exploitation of New York City’s African-American communities” (Taylor 116). To blame Sharpton for the decline of race relations in America today is quite the accusation, and yet it goes without question that Sharpton has used his position in political power to further subjugate his own race.
In “Is Rap Tomorrow’s Jazz” Thaddeus Russell similarly explains the ways in which Al Sharpton contributes to the idea of rap as a negatively charged form of personal expression:

Al Sharpton demanded that the Federal Communications Commission ban violent rappers from radio and television, and he launched a boycott against Universal Music Group, which he accused of ‘peddling racist and misogynistic black stereotypes’ through rap music. Sharpton expressed special concern about white perceptions of African Americans. Rappers and their corporate supporters ‘make it easy for black culture to be dismissed by the majority,’ he said, and the large white fan base "has learned through rap images to identify black male culture with a culture of violence.’ (Russell)

To claim that rap images alter white’s perception of the average black American presupposes that negative stereotypes are rampant within the genre; perhaps it is Sharpton himself who is encouraging certain blacks to remain unnoticed by the majority. Likewise, by assuming that all rap falls into the same category of “black degradation,” rife with the glorification of violence and the subjugation of women, Sharpton is guilty of the same racism he prescribes to white listeners of rap music.

While it is plausible that the violent and wealth-obsessed messages that can be gleaned from rap music affects others’ opinions of the race in general, it seems to be a dangerous assumption that all who listen to rap music perceive blacks to be misogynistic, money-hungry thugs. In his essay “Rap Music and the Decline of Culture,” Larry DeWitt elaborates upon his opinion that hip-hop glorifies misogyny and the subjugation of women. The most perplexing aspect of his article is his assumption that sexism is a thing of the past, and only rap music perpetuates its principles: “Have we learned no lessons from the feminist movement? When white men exploited women (often in hidden ways) in the past we were outraged, and we demanded that it stop. Now openly exploiting
women and treating them as sexual props in music videos appears to be acceptable if done by young black men.” (DeWitt)

DeWitt’s plea and consequent statement about the submission of women seems to ignore one simple fact: to say that “when white men exploited women (often in hidden ways) in the past we were outraged, and we demanded that it stop” suggests that misogyny and female degradation remain strictly in the past. The American majority might like to maintain the opinion that men and women are treated equally on all fronts, and yet this could not be further from the truth. Statistics on income inequality, the commercialization of beauty, and the commoditization of female sexuality all discount the notion that American men and women are treated equally. Women are held to different (and usually higher) standards of aesthetics, sexual conduct, morality, and conformity; a man with multiple sexual partners is a “stud” or “player,” a woman with multiple sexual partners is a “slut” and a “whore.” Similarly, some women feel obligated to “dumb themselves down,” stay slender (or curvy) and wear makeup in order to attract the opposite sex. Women make less money on average than men, regardless of level of education, and despite movements such as affirmative action women can be viewed as weak, emotional, and less valuable within the workplace. It seems significant to note that current statistics suggest women make approximately 20%-25% less than men in the same employment position. Perhaps more shocking is the fact that income disparity increases as level of education increases; there is a larger gap in the income of men and women with doctorates than those with high school diplomas (Statistics). Even if a woman manages to escape gender bias in the professional realm, it is absolutely certain
that she will encounter sexist thoughts and statements somewhere else. The playing field has never been even, and this is still extremely true of today.

Before jumping to conclusions about the morality of rap music, one must recognize that just as there are both uplifting or “positively themed,” and degrading or misogynistic films, television programs, and plays, so too is there a wide array of themes in modern rap music. The song “Bombs Over Baghdad” (B.O.B.) was written by the group Outkast, composed of hip-hop artists André 3000 (André Benjamin) and Big Boi (Antwon Patton), and was released, coincidentally, approximately a year before the September 2011 attack on New York City’s World Trade Towers. The upbeat, fast-paced lyrics are difficult to interpret entirely without reading them in black and white; the first verse begins six seconds into the song and ends only fifty seconds later, leaving many of the indecipherable words up to individual interpretation. What separates Outkast, and B.O.B. in particular, is the number of varied social issues that are commented upon in under one minute of music. While there are numerous contemporary references that might go unnoticed by the mass public, there are just as many poignant, significant opinions on the observable “surface” of the text. For ease of discussion, each line has been numbered:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Lyric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>In-slum-national, underground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Thunder pounds when I stomp the ground (Woo!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Like a million elephants and silverback orangutans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>You can't stop a train</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Who want some? Don't come un-pre-pared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I'll be there, but when I leave there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Better be a household name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Weather man tellin' us it ain't gon' rain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>So now we sittin' in a drop-top, soaking wet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>In a silk suit, tryin' not to sweat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Hits somersaults without the net</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
But this'll be the year that we won't forget
One-Nine-Nine-Nine
Anno Domini anything goes, be whatchu wanna be
Long as you know consequences, to give and for livin'
The fence is too high to jump in jail
Too low to dig, I might just touch hell
HOT! Get a life, now they on sale
Then I might cast you a spell, look at what came in the mail
A scale and some Arm and Hammer,
soul gold grill and some baby mama
Black Cadillac and a pack of pampers
Stack of question with no answers
Cure for cancer, cure for AIDS
Make a nigga wanna stay on tour for days
Get back home, things are wrong
Well not really it was bad all along
before he left adds up, to a ball of power
Thoughts at a thousand miles per hour
Hello, ghetto, let your brain breathe,
believe there's always more, ah! (Outkast)

One of the more intriguing lyrics appears on line fourteen, which reads “Anno
Domini anything goes, be whatchu wanna be” (Outkast). Here, Outkast is illuminating
the freedom of expression in the modern era, claiming that today’s society (Anno
Domini, or A.D.) embraces individual differences and encourages diversity unlike any
time in the past.

It is crucial to note that the only instance of the word “nigger,” which appears in
the twenty-fifth line as “nigga,” is self-referential. The line “make a nigga wanna stay on
tour for days” (Outkast) is clearly coming from the artist’s perspective; it is not the
“nigga” of the ghetto, but one who is an active performer. There is little to no negative
connotation associated with this instance of “nigga,” at least from the artist’s point of
view.

The final two lines act as the ultimate argument against rap music propagating
negative stereotypes of black Americans. André 3000 hails the inner city youth, “Hello,
ghetto,” as if he is speaking solely to them, and orders, “let your brain breathe, believe there’s always more” (Outkast). While the meaning of letting one’s “brain breathe” could be debated, it seems to be a desperate plea, encouraging troubled youths to open their minds to education, interpretation, and the possibility of a different future.

A conversation on the state of the modern hip-hop industry and its influence on American youth must include Eminem, the most well-known white rapper in the United States and beyond. Eminem, known by his legal name Marshall Mathers as well as multiple aliases such as Slim Shady, began rapping during high school in attempt to come to peace with his uprooted, unstable childhood (Eminem Biography). Having spent a significant period of time in the city of Detroit, Michigan, Eminem became familiar with the tropes of black American culture and the unique struggle of the lower class (Eminem Biography).

Marcia Dawkins’s “Close to the Edge: The Representational Tactics of Eminem,” illuminates the way in which she believes Eminem appropriates solely “black” methods of expression to profit in the largely black-dominated industry. She explains his rise to fame during the late twentieth century and the resulting wave of commercial demand:

Since his underground debut in 1996 Eminem skyrocketed from low-class Midwestern American obscurity into international fame and fortune, sold developed a clothing line called Shady Ltd, founded Shady Records, 8 Mile Style and Sirius Satellite radio station Shade 45. However, his unwillingness to sponsor products that do not directly shape his image, such as Apple’s I-Pod advertising campaign, reveals his awareness of and control over his commercial representation. (467)

Here, Dawkins asserts that because Eminem does not wish to market himself through commercial products of which he does not approve, he manipulates the music industry by
essentially choosing the image he wishes to portray. While I believe that his denunciation of and disinterest in Apple products bolsters his image as an underground figure, Dawkins criticizes Eminem’s rejection to participate in popular advertisements. She continues in her diatribe by explaining the ways in which Eminem’s “alter egos” expressed in his music are merely masks that allow Eminem to embody personalities that would not be accepted otherwise:

Second, Eminem uses additional alter egos to increase the distance between himself and his art, which is another dimension of his aura. At times that call for serious and contemplative biographical speech aimed at white males he refers to himself by his birth name, Marshall Mathers. At times when he negates or excludes hip-hop Others (e.g., homosexuals, women, himself, and other white men) he invokes humor and horror, often dresses in drag, and always inhabits his alter-ego pop music persona of Slim Shady. (470)

While it is true that Eminem assumes alternate identities in order to relate with various members of his audience, it is not simply a mode of disclosing himself while spouting hate-filled, homophobic, or misogynistic messages. The purpose of “Slim Shady” is, in fact, quite similar to the attraction to profanity in modern media; “Slim Shady” is allowed to express ideas with which Eminem is slightly uncomfortable, namely homosexuality, violence, and sexism. Slim Shady and everything he believes is riddled with the asterisks of censorship; he represents what American youths cannot express because it is socially unacceptable.

Far from believing his music to be a pillar of moral values, Eminem is cognizant of his taboo themes, which are often asking for a light-hearted laugh instead of a hate-fueled racially motivated uprising. In one of Eminem’s more risqué songs, “My Daddy’s Gone Crazy,” which features his young daughter, Hailie, he admits the illicit
nature of his music and expresses his understanding of those appalled by his profanity and raw, sometimes offensive, lyrics. The last lines of the song as rapped by Eminem are:

“And that’s pretty much the gist of it, parents are pissed, but the kids love it/ Nine millimeter, heater stashed, in two-seaters with meat cleavers/ I don’t blame you, I wouldn’t let Hailie listen to me neither” (EMINEM LYRICS - My Daddy's Gone Crazy).

While he concedes that his music is not meant for all ages, he does not refrain from using multiple profanities (approximately 27; mostly “fuck”) in a song alongside his underage child. The second verse contains nearly half of these instances of swear words as well as a myriad of crude sexual references (“cocks,” “pussy”) which, ironically, are intended to illustrate the tumultuous relationship between Mathers and his mother.

By analyzing Eminem’s lyrics as poetry one is able to see that the depth of his message extends beyond superficially shocking statements and profanity. For example, the song “Without Me” was released in 2002 shortly after Eminem reemerged in the hip-hop music industry and exemplifies his passion for intricately constructed lyrics.

Lil’ hellions, kids feelin' rebellious
Embarrassed their parents still listen to Elvis
They start feelin' like prisoners helpless
’Til someone comes along on a mission and yells, ‘Bitch!’
A visionary, vision is scary
Could start a revolution, polluting the airwaves. (Eminem-Without Me)

In the first two lines from “Without Me,” Eminem illustrates his lyrical musicality and reliance on traditional poetic norms with both assonance, consonance (“hellions” and “rebellious,” “embarrassed” and “parents”), internal and end rhymes (“Elvis,” “helpless”).
Without descending into an argument of preference, a comparison of the quality of lyrics from different rappers highlights the fact that, as in literature, artists expel varying amounts of consideration for language. Each individual word might not require as much contemplation in a novel as opposed to poetry, yet rap’s similarities and juxtaposition to poetry suggests that the specific language should be as (if not more) critical within the song than the base beat or melody. The song “Forever” by rap artists Drake, Lil Wayne, Eminem, and Kanye West allows for a parallel comparison of lyrical technique and a better understanding of modern interracial relations as each artist contributes one refrain to complete the song as a whole. A man in his early twenties, Drake should not be expected to rise to the level of artistic intellect that his older, more experienced counterparts attain. At the same time, his collaboration with other artists such as Lil Wayne and Eminem counters criticisms of racial tension and the propagation of false stereotypes. The chorus of the song, written by Drake, is repeated between the verses, interspersing the young Drake’s ambitions with the proven talent of his mentors: “It may not mean nothin’ to y’all,/ But understand nothin’ was done for me,/ So I don’t plan on stoppin’ at all,/ I want this shit forever, man” (Drake).

The refrain of the song “Forever” headed by Drake portrays a much simpler interpretation of the importance of overall quality and message. The chorus essentially explains that Drake feels responsible for his own success and plans to continue in the music industry for as long as he is able. Save one end rhyme (“y’all” and “all”) that is much more obvious than the other artists’ lyrics, Drake relies more upon the timbre of his voice than the significance of his lyrics. While the message conveys the motivation and persistence it requires to capitalize on artistic endeavors, it simultaneously inflates the
importance of fame and wealth by insinuating that Drake’s life, now more prosperous than his inner-city childhood, is nearly ideal.

The second verse of “Forever” by Lil’ Wayne (Dwayne Carter Jr.) heightens the poetic intricacy of the song by using more complex internal and external rhymes, multifaceted themes, and emotional concepts. Rather than utilize the song as an opportunity to claim his niche within the rap music community, Lil Wayne chooses to elaborate upon the “ups and downs of life” with which every person can relate:

Fresher than the harvest/ Step up to the target/ If I had one guess, then I guess I’m just New Orleans/ And I will never stop like I’m runnin’ from the cops./ Hop up in my car and told my chauffeur to the top./ Life is like a fucking rollercoaster then it drops./ But what should I scream for? This is my theme park./ My mind shine even when my thoughts seem dark –Lil Wayne (Drake)

Each line of Wayne’s verse connects linguistically with the next; his “flow” relies upon traditional poetic devices such as oblique or off rhymes (“harvest” and “target,” “chauffeur” and “rollercoaster,” “scream for,” “theme park,” and “seem dark”), assonance (“stop,” “cop,” “top,” “drops”), and quasi- iambic structure (“Life is like a fucking rollercoaster then it drops”). The last line appears to be a statement that elicits hope; even when Lil Wayne is faced with tremendous difficulties, he realizes that his salvation lies in his incomparable talent.

Eminem’s verse serves his usual musical purpose: bringing serious issues, shrouded in comedy, to the forefront of conversation. Without hearing the verse in real time accompanied by melody and beats it is arduous to entirely understand the song’s appeal. At the same time, Eminem’s lyrics evoke emotion whether heard audibly or read on the page in black and white. He explodes into the song:
The passion and the flame is ignited/ You can’t put it out once we light it./ This shit is exactly what the fuck I’m talking about when we riot./ You dealin’ with a few true villains/ Who stand inside of the booth truth spillin’/ And spit true feelings ‘til our tooth fillings/ come flying up out of our mouths, now rewind it! –Eminem (Drake)

By approaching these lyrics from a poetic perspective, it becomes apparent that Eminem is familiar with many traditional poetic devices, whether he is consciously aware of this or not. In the third, fourth, and fifth lines, we see repeated assonance—“you,” “few,” “true,” “who,” “booth,” “truth,” and tooth,” as well as alliteration—“true,” “truth,” “tooth.”

In the article "Close to the Edge: The Representational Tactics of Eminem," Dawkins contemplates the reasons behind Eminem’s widespread success. She refers to another scholar, Guevara, who posits that Eminem’s fan base is predominately white Americans: “Rap scholar Nancy Guevara attributes rap success such as Eminem’s to the minstrel-like quality of contemporary hip-hop: a series of ghetto-ized fantasy images useful only for advertising and entertaining white audiences” (Dawkins 467). Although it is true that a large portion of Eminem’s followers are white, this assertion does not accommodate for songs such as “Forever.” While it could be argued that Eminem’s participation in the song was strictly for his white audience—and that white adolescents would not be interested in the song were it not for him—the assumption copiously misrepresents and simplifies twenty-first century interracial interactions. Eminem himself counteracts these notions by stating that it is the black artists who bring white listeners to urban music, rather than the other way around:

It’s obvious to me that I sold double the records because I’m white. In my heart I truly believe I have a talent, but at the same time I’m not stupid. I know, when I first came out especially, being produced by Dre made it cool and acceptable for white kids to like me. In the suburbs, the white
kids have to see black people liking you or they won’t like you. You need that foundation of legitimacy. The Beastie Boys—they had respect from the hip-hop community, and that’s what made them. (Bozza “Eminem: The Rolling Stone Interview” 5) (Dawkins 468)

Despite critics’ belief that Eminem commodifies and reproduces “blackness” for the white public, it is clear that his respect for black artists outweighs his desire to make money. In order to align himself with his fellow black rappers, he affords himself the use of the word “wigger,” or “wigga” but does not, as most black rappers do, incorporate the word “nigger” into his music.

In his song ‘The Way I Am,’ Eminem reveals an alternative view of mainstream white America when he expresses frustration with being misunderstood by white people as a ‘wigger,’ or white nigger, and goes on to inform African-American hip-hop fans that he identifies closely with them and tries to understand their viewpoints without trying to be perceived as a black person. (Dawkins 477)

While some might perceive his utilization of the word “wigger” to be nearly as offensive as the original term, neither “wigger” or “nigger” maintain a static connotation in the minds of America’s youth.

In the article titled “A Brief History of the Word ‘Nigger’” published in Ebony magazine, the author explains how despite the modern reclamation of the term, the older generations in America cannot separate “nigger” from “nigga,” much less come to an agreement on who, exactly, is afforded the privilege of using the terms. “With, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, nearly one million words in the English language, we have options. How about ‘mah brutha’ or ‘mah man’ or ‘my friend.’ Using the ‘N-word’ today as seasoning in a conversation still leaves a bitter taste” (Brief History 200). Incidentally, the options we’re afforded include multiple slang words that have been added in the electronic version of the Oxford English Dictionary: jiggy, phat, bling bling,
chillax, bromance, and badass (Oh). While the author of “A Brief History” is entirely correct in his assertion that “nigger” cannot be used without dredging up the centuries of hatred associated with it, it is this argument specifically that suggests the evolution of the term is not lost on modern Americans. At the same time, his proposal to replace “my nigga” with ‘mah brutha’ or ‘mah man’ places black Americans in a position of inferiority by denying them the right to define their own language. Similarly, eliminating “nigger” or “nigga” through censorship can demonize black Americans, creating a more profane and taboo term than the “nigger” of the early twentieth century.

Oddly enough, Eminem does not use the word “nigger” or “nigga” in any of his rap songs; save one instance, he leaves the term solely for black use, believing it to be, in effect, a racial attack. “Wigger” effectively represents his downtrodden upbringing without inciting thoughts of slavery or the “black experience.” He does not seek to equate himself with black youth, but rather show the vast similarities between races. “His experiences as an outcast in low-income housing, as the child of an absentee father, and as the son of a mother who battled drug addiction bring him closer to mainstream America’s stereotypical version of African-American Otherness” (Dawkins 475). His appeal to all youth regardless of race suggests that his music does not seek to appropriate “blackness,” but rather truthfully and realistically portraying the hardships of living under the constraints of today’s society.

When used in the appropriate context, hip-hop and rap music provides an invaluable instrument for eliciting a deeper understanding of language—from metaphor and symbolism to motif and theme. Whether analyzing the scandalous styling of Eminem or the meandering poetics of Lil Wayne, rap should not be disregarded as a means of
discussing more complex literature; “Hip-hop music is [...] a viable literary genre worthy of serious academic contemplation” (Morrell and Andrade 22). Regardless of the widespread belief of conservative Americans that rap music is amoral, highly sexualized drivel, adolescent and young adult non-readers who enjoy hip-hop culture can be easily ushered into an appreciation of literature by being shown the visible similarities between rap and poetry.
Bibliography


